

Power Dynamics in EFL, ESL, ELF A Metaphorical Adaptation of the Newtonian System

Eric Sulindra^{1*}, Anastasia Nelladia Cendra¹, Tuti Hartani¹

¹Universitas Katolik Widya Mandala Surabaya, Indonesia

eric@ukwms.ac.id*

| Received: 07/03/2025 | Revised: 15/04/2025 | Accepted: 19/04/2025 |

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Abstract

Understanding the power dynamics among English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English as a Second Language (ESL), and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is critical to navigate balanced English language education framework and policies which in turns would equalize global communication needs and local cultures preservation. This paper explains how the metaphorical perspective works in the context of EFL, ESL and ELF power dynamics and how these powers relate to one another, creating a power dynamics equilibrium and influencing greatly the global Englishes. Using a conceptual paper design in nature, the paper employs a metaphorical perspective of Newtonian System as opposing forces balancing each other to analyze the power dynamics of EFL, ESL and ELF. The Newtonian System metaphor provides an appropriate framework to describe the power equilibrium in the dynamics. On one side, factors like socioeconomic influences, demographic shifts, language policy, act metaphorically as forces pushing the spread of English across diverse contexts. Countries with strong economic ties to English-speaking nations tend to adopt ESL or EFL, driven by necessity (metaphorical representation of Newton's first law of inertia). Simultaneously, the standard English paradigm acts as a force of conformity, reinforcing global norms and expectations around English usage, much like a gravitational pull, shaping the trajectories of EFL and ESL toward a fixed center of linguistic authority (metaphorical representation of Newton's second law). On the opposite side, resistance arises from localized cultures, native languages, and distinct educational policies that push back, creating a dynamic balance similar to Newton's third law of action and reaction. Future research can study extended contexts such as digital communication or postcolonial settings, to explore how local resistance adapts to globalization. Another possible further research are empirical investigations to recommend policy-making and teaching strategies that respect linguistic diversity while fostering global connectivity.

Keywords: Newtonian System Metaphor, EFL, ESL, ELF, dynamics power equilibrium

1. Introduction

The dynamics of English has created a complex inter-relation among English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Each serving distinct sociopolitical and functional roles. This linguistic dynamic reflects diverse forces that drive the adoption and adaptation of English across different regions. ESL manifests itself in previously colonized countries and regions where English is embedded in institutions and daily life (Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021; Lie, 2021; Tauchid et al., 2022), while EFL typically functions in countries where English is primarily taught for external purposes, such as trade, diplomacy, or academic advancement (Kachru & Smith, 2008; Poedjiastutie et al., 2021; Zein et al., 2020). ELF, meanwhile, has been existing within the context of English for international communication (Baker et al., 2024; Chen, 2023; Subandowo & Sárdi, 2023), where the focus is less on native-like proficiency and more on effective interaction between speakers of diverse linguistic backgrounds.

In recent years, there is an emerging shift in how these forms of English are perceived and used. Globalization, technological advancements, and intercultural communication needs are somehow directing this shift (Chau et al., 2022; Hillman et al., 2023; Tauchid et al., 2022), as English is no longer the language of its native speakers but a common medium for cross-context communication. The dynamics suggest that ESL, EFL, and ELF are engaged in an interplay, where factors—such as economic integration and international business—drive the spread of English (Ali & Salam-Salmaoui, 2024; Fang, 2024; Lie et al., 2024), while local cultural identities prevent linguistic homogenization and promote multilingualism (Baker et al., 2024; Chau et al., 2022; Hossain, 2024). The dynamics potentially create educational inequities, as students in EFL/ESL contexts often face pressure to conform to native-speaker norms, leaving their linguistic and cultural heritage behind (Chau et al., 2022; Lie et al., 2024). Without a proper understanding of these competing forces, policymakers and educators are in danger of reinforcing systemic inequalities, undermining efforts to foster inclusive, multilingual frameworks.

There have been several studies conducted to address the issue of English(es) variations and the impact to the use of English in the L2 countries, the language policy, the linguistic understanding from diversity to multiplicity, and even up to the resistance to English under the name of nationality (Canagarajah, 2023; Sultana, 2022; Tupas, 2020). The study by Tupas (2020) explored the fact that some Englishes are more privileged than others because of political legitimacy and sociolinguistics factors. Another study conducted by Sultana (2022) highlighted how national identity is constructed and sustained nowadays, specifically in digital spaces both discursively and non-discursively. She also pointed out that static approach has been applied worldwide to language status and national identity (Sultana, 2022). Furthermore, Canagarajah (2023) defines pedagogy as expanding beyond the classroom and knowledge concerns to accommodate embodied affective, social, and cultural learning that draws from and transforms environmental and geopolitical spaces. All the three studies in general have tried to approach the dynamics of English education by upholding the issues of diversity, multilingualism and resistance powers coming from some factors such as the spirit of nationality. However, none have addressed the reality that in any possible schemes, the dynamics between EFL, ESL and ELF are undeniably existing and playing intervening roles to one another.

Therefore, this paper aims to reconceptualize the power dynamics among EFL, ESL, and ELF through the metaphorical lens of Newtonian physics. By mapping socioeconomic, cultural,

and institutional forces onto the metaphorical perspective drawn from Newton's laws of motion, the research seeks to explain how global pressures and local resistances interact to shape linguistic equilibrium. The framework provides a dynamic model for analyzing the push-and-pull between English's global dominance and the preservation of linguistic diversity, offering insights for equitable language policy and pedagogy. Hypothetically, this emerging dynamic has the potential to evolve into a power equilibrium between EFL, ESL, and ELF. Drawing on the metaphorical adaptation of Newtonian physics (Alonso-Blanco & Muñoz-Díaz, 2021; Sharma, 2024), this power equilibrium can be described as a system of forces balancing global and local linguistic needs. From a Newtonian perspective, ESL, EFL, and ELF can be visualized as objects in motion, influenced by external forces such as socioeconomic demands, language policy, and educational priorities. Each force either pushes English outward (global forces) or pulls it inward (local resistance), creating a dynamic balance of power.

1.1 The Original Concept of Newtonian System

Newton's First Law, commonly known as the Law of Inertia, states that an object at rest will remain at rest, and an object in motion will continue moving at a constant velocity in a straight line, unless acted upon by an external force (Sharma, 2024; J. Zhang et al., 2024). This means that any change in an object's motion, either moving, stopping, or changing direction, requires an external force for an intervention. Inertia is the property of an object resisting changes to its state of motion. The more mass an object has, the more inertia it has, meaning that it requires a greater force to change its motion. For example, a large bulldozer has significantly more inertia than a small bicycle, so it needs a lot more effort to cause it moving or to bring it to a stop.

Newton's Second Law states that the acceleration of an object is directly proportional to the net force acting upon it and inversely proportional to its mass (Alonso-Blanco & Muñoz-Díaz, 2021; D'Eleuterio & Heppler, 2016). This can be expressed by the equation $F = ma$ where: F is the force applied to the object, m is the mass of the object, and a is the acceleration produced by the force. This law points out that the more force applied to an object, the more it will accelerate, but the object's mass will moderate this acceleration. If two objects experience the same force, the one with less mass will accelerate more than the one with more mass. The greater the mass of an object, the less it will accelerate as a response to the force, because mass increases resistance to changes in motion. For example, pushing a small, lightweight shopping cart results in a speedy acceleration, but pushing a heavy, loaded cart with the same force will result in a much slower acceleration because of the cart's greater mass.

Newton's Third Law states that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction (M. & Lempriere, 2003; Sharma, 2024; J. Zhang et al., 2024). This means that whenever one object exerts a force on a second object, the second object exerts an equal but opposite force back on the first object. The forces are always equal in values but opposite in direction, and they occur simultaneously. Action-reaction pairs describe the reciprocal nature of forces. When someone pushes on an object, it pushes back with an equal force, even if one doesn't feel it. When a person jumps off the ground, his or her legs exert a downward force on the ground. Similarly, when a rocket launches, it expels gas out of its engines downward (action), and the reaction force pushes the rocket upward with equal force, allowing it to lift off.

1.2 World Englishes and Global Englishes

The concept World Englishes emphasizes that English exists in diverse forms across different sociolinguistic environments. It distinguishes between Inner Circle (native English-speaking countries), Outer Circle (post-colonial societies where English is a second language), and Expanding Circle (where English is learned as a foreign language) (Boonsuk et al., 2023; Kachru & Smith, 2008; Zein et al., 2020). The World Englishes approach helps theorize the power relations between these varieties of English and their users. Rather than viewing deviations from native English as deficiencies, this framework positions localized Englishes as valid, fully functional languages that reflect the social, cultural, and political realities of their users (Al-Kahtany & Alhamami, 2022; Ullah & Akram, 2023; Zeng et al., 2023). By challenging the primacy of Inner Circle varieties, World Englishes shifts the focus from a monolithic standard of English to a pluricentric view, whereby linguistic authority is distributed across multiple centers, each with its own norms and values (Low & Pakir, 2022).

On the other hand, the Global Englishes framework further highlights the significance of linguistic diversity in promoting intercultural communication and understanding. As English continues to be used as a global lingua franca, it becomes crucial to acknowledge the various cultural contexts in which it operates. Global Englishes –is a term for covering the linguistic and sociocultural dimensions of global uses and users of English. It includes the areas of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), World Englishes, and English as an International Language (EIL) (Baker et al., 2024). The Global Englishes framework calls for a shift toward inclusive language policies that validate and promote diverse English forms, encouraging the recognition of local linguistic identities (Baker et al., 2024; Chau et al., 2022; McKinley, 2022). This inclusivity not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also promotes social justice by addressing the historical inequalities inherent in the global spread of English, thereby paving the way for a more equitable and culturally responsive approach to English language worldwide.

1.3 Linguistic Imperialism

Propounded by Robert Phillipson (Phillipson, 2006), Linguistic Imperialism highlights the dominance of English, especially in the Global South, as an extension of Western cultural and economic power (Phillipson, 2006; Ullah & Akram, 2023; Zeng et al., 2023). This theory is essential for analysing how the power of native English-speaking countries shapes the spread and usage of English globally.

By promoting native speakerism, linguistic imperialism solidifies a fixed power hierarchy where Inner Circle countries remain the custodians of “legitimate” English, relegating other varieties to positions of lesser prestige. This notion of fixed power dynamics (e.g., globalization, economic dependence) act to sustain the status of native Englishes as the centers of linguistic authority, while resistance from local languages is often subdued by systemic structures (Lie et al., 2024; Zein, 2018; Zein et al., 2020). Linguistic imperialism thus reveals how language becomes an instrument of power, dictating educational access, economic mobility, and cultural representation on a global scale, reinforcing the linguistic dependency of the Global South.

1.4 EFL, ESL and ELF

The status of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in many regions is also sometimes interconnected with the global influence of English-speaking Western powers—through trade,

media, and technology—They have indirectly spread English as a language of opportunity, which positions English as a significant tool for embracing more bargaining power in trading competition, getting more exposure through various media and more exclusive access to technology (Gagnier, 2023; Lie et al., 2024). For students and professionals alike, proficiency in English can provide access to competitive job markets, international business, and collaborations that require a high level of English proficiency.

English as Second Language is in use in the context where a region is applying English as the media for formal communication beside the local language (L1) usage (Baker et al., 2024; Kachru & Smith, 2008; Nelson et al., 2020). English as a Second Language (ESL) emerged as the primary medium for governance, education, and social mobility, establishing a linguistic divide that favored English-speaking elites and relegated native languages to lower status or informal domains. However, this practice can also lead to educational inequality, as students from less privileged backgrounds or those whose native language differs significantly from English may struggle to keep up, thereby exacerbating social disparities (Chau et al., 2022; Lie et al., 2024).

ELF concept looks at English as a global communication tool used among non-native speakers, often by passing native norms (Canagarajah, 2023; Kachru & Smith, 2008; Ullah & Akram, 2023). This framework challenges traditional notions of correctness and ownership of English. The concept of ELF helps frame the dynamic, fluid nature of power in global English usage. It disrupts the fixed model of influence from native speakers and acknowledges that the way English is used in international settings is driven by non-native speakers in diverse contexts. The concept is manifested through interactions in international business, academia, or diplomacy where ELF is used, spoken ELF interactions, studies on attitudes towards ELF in different cultures, and usage patterns in digital communications or social media (Kachru & Smith, 2008; Low & Pakir, 2022; Nelson et al., 2020). ELF allows speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds to engage with English on their own terms, challenging the traditional linguistic hierarchy by emphasizing communicative effectiveness over native-like proficiency.

2. Method

The paper is basically a conceptual paper which adopts the methodology of constructing a conceptual framework (Jaakkola, 2020). The type of research was a conceptual one (Jaakkola, 2020; Varpio et al., 2020), synthesizing existing theories of linguistic imperialism, World Englishes, and Global Englishes, integrating interdisciplinary insights from physics (Newtonian System) to construct a metaphorical model. The approach is in line with recent phenomena of decolonial and translingual perspectives in applied linguistics (Canagarajah, 2023; Tupas, 2020; L. J. Zhang, 2022), emphasizing dynamic, non-hierarchical understandings of language use. A conceptual framework justifies why a particular study should be conducted. The conceptual framework (1) describes the state of known knowledge, usually through a literature review; (2) identifies gaps in our understanding of a phenomenon or problem (Varpio et al., 2020).

The design is a conceptual research design, aiming at developing a conceptual framework to analyze the power dynamics among English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English as a Second Language (ESL), and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). The research steps follow a three-phase conceptual framework development (Varpio et al., 2020):

1. **Theoretical Synthesis.** It is a systematic review of literature on EFL, ESL, ELF, and linguistic power dynamics was conducted, focusing on post-2020 studies to incorporate contemporary debates (e.g., digital communication, decolonial pedagogy). The key theories include Phillipson's (2006) linguistic imperialism (Al-Kahtany & Alhamami, 2022; Zeng et al., 2023), Kachru's (2008) World Englishes model (Alkateeb, 2023; Marlina, 2023), and Baker et al.'s (2024) Global Englishes framework.
2. **Metaphorical Modeling:** Building on interdisciplinary precedents (Sharma, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024), Newtonian physics was operationalized as a metaphorical lens. Newton's three laws of motion were mapped onto sociolinguistic forces (e.g., globalization as inertia, local resistance as counterforce). This phase included validating the metaphor's relevance through comparative analysis of case studies (e.g., India, France, South Africa).
3. **Equilibrium Analysis:** The synthesized model was applied to theorize a "power equilibrium" between global and local linguistic forces. This involved critiquing static hierarchies and proposing a dynamic balance informed by translanguaging theory (Chau et al., 2022; L. J. Zhang, 2022) and recent work on linguistic resilience (Hackert et al., 2024).

Therefore, this paper attempts to provide some theoretical foundation on the dynamics of English status, what are the determining factors and how the dynamics take place. Then, the paper also conceptualizes the dynamics among the multiple status of English, EFL, ESL, and ELF, borrowing a metaphor of Newtonian System, and propose a power equilibrium concept utilizing the metaphor to describe the concept of power dynamics among EFL, ESL and ELF.

To ensure validity, the metaphorical model was cross-checked against other empirical studies on language policy outcomes (e.g., South Africa's multilingual education reforms; (Obiakor, 2024)) and digital communication trends in multilingual context (Sultana, 2022). The limitations include the metaphor's internal reductionism; however, this has been mitigated by explicitly expressing and framing that the conceptual analysis is merely a tool for conceptual clarity rather than predictive accuracy.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Newtonian Dynamics Metaphor in Linguistic Power Equilibrium

Borrowing a metaphor concept from Newton's laws of motion, this perspective conceptualizes the relationship between EFL, ESL, and ELF as operating under predictable forces and counterforces. Socioeconomic factors, language policies, standard English paradigms, and the teaching of English as a subject can be seen as "external forces" driving the spread and dominance of English globally. Resistance to this force comes from local languages, sociocultural identities, and national education policies, which counterbalance the gravitational pull of global English standards. Newton's laws provide a metaphorical conceptual framework for understanding the constant push and pull between global and local linguistic forces. Each law illustrates a different aspect of the constant push and pull between these forces in language usage.

3.2 A Metaphor from Newton's First Law (Law of Inertia)

An object at rest will stay at rest, and an object in motion will stay in motion unless acted upon by an external force. Drawn into linguistic context, this law metaphorically implies that once

a language dynamic—such as the dominance of English in a country (EFL/ESL)—is established, it tends to persist unless disrupted by external factors. Inertia manifests in the way English maintains its global status in education, politics, and business. However, local languages, once dominant in certain regions, also exhibit inertia, resisting the influence of global languages like English. Newton's first law suggests that once the balance between a global and local language is established, it is unlikely to change unless significant external forces (e.g., policy changes, economic shifts, or cultural movements) disrupt the status quo. Countries may continue promoting local languages in education and media unless global economic or technological forces create a compelling reason to adopt English more fully.

One obvious example is happening in France, where English remains an influential global language for business and diplomacy, yet French persists as the dominant language in education and government due to cultural and historical inertia. French language policies, such as the *Toubon Law* (Van Der Jeught, 2016, 2023), which mandates the use of French in official contexts, act as a force maintaining this status quo. Despite globalization, French resists the spread of English in many public spheres, demonstrating linguistic inertia.

3.3 A Metaphor from Newton's Second Law (Force and Acceleration)

Newton's second law put the acceleration of an object as directly proportional to the force applied and inversely proportional to its mass. The equation goes like this: $F=ma$. Metaphorically, the mass can represent the entity of English language, its current influence to the local setting such as how much English is used by the local community (the community can be a city, a province, a region, a country, a nation). The acceleration can represent the acceptance rate of English language in the respective community. Basically, if those two aspects are multiplied or coexist, they would bring the force to push the spread of English language in a particular community.

Drawn from the metaphor of Newton's Second Law, the formula can also be interpreted this way: the spread of English (or any global language) depends on the strength of the external forces pushing it (e.g., globalization, economic power, international communication) and the resistance from local languages and cultures (mass). The greater the force pushing English, the more it accelerates, but this acceleration can be slowed by the "mass" of local resistance, which may include strong cultural ties, national identity, or effective language policies.

An example of this metaphorical concept is what has been happening (in the linguistics context) in India. English's acceleration as a dominant language has been driven by its integration into education, technology, and global business (Fang, 2024; Gagnier, 2023). However, there is significant local resistance (the "mass") from regional languages like Hindi, Tamil, and Bengali, which are also supported by local language policies and cultural pride (Hackert et al., 2024). Thus, the acceleration of English in India is moderated by the heavy "mass" of India's diverse linguistic landscape. The spread of English is not uniform; it accelerates rapidly in places where economic forces and international communication needs outweigh the cultural or political attachment to local languages. In contrast, regions with strong local linguistic and cultural identities can slow down the adoption of English or limit its scope (e.g., to certain sectors like business or academia). This dynamic leads to varying degrees of English adoption across countries.

3.4 A Metaphor from Newton's Third Law (Action and Reaction)

The law said that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. The linguistic implementation of the metaphorical concept is when English spreads as a global language, it triggers resistance from local linguistic communities and policymakers, creating a push-pull dynamic. The more aggressively English is promoted as a global or official language, the stronger the reaction from local forces aiming to preserve cultural identity, regional languages, or national autonomy in language choice. This can be seen in movements to promote linguistic diversity, anti-colonial language policies, or even linguistic purism. As an example, in South Africa, English is widely used in business, government, and education. However, the promotion of African languages such as Zulu, Xhosa, and Afrikaans in education and public life is a reaction against the dominance of English and the legacy of colonialism and apartheid (de Swaan, 2023; Obiakor, 2024; van Zyl et al., 2023). As English continues to be used in high-status domains, there is an opposite force pushing for the inclusion of indigenous languages to maintain cultural identity and ensure social equity.

This metaphorical concept suggests that any attempt to promote a global language like English will encounter pushback from local communities that seek to protect their linguistic and cultural heritage. These reactions can result in policies that emphasize bilingualism or multilingualism or in efforts to develop local languages in sectors traditionally dominated by English (e.g., media, technology). This action-reaction dynamic ensures that English, while influential, will coexist with local languages in a complex, often contentious balance.

4. Conclusion

This Newtonian System metaphor provides a hypothetical model of conceptual frameworks for describing how global and local linguistic forces interact in shaping the spread and use of English worldwide, particularly as countries navigate the tension between global communication needs and the preservation of linguistic identity. The equilibrium among English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English as a Second Language (ESL), and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) over the next few decades will likely be determined by a resultant-forces of globalization, technological advancements, and sociopolitical trends. The implications of reaching equilibrium between EFL, ESL, and ELF suggest a future where language practices become more inclusive, adaptable, and pragmatic. English usage will focus on enabling effective communication across diverse global contexts rather than strict adherence to native norms. This concept of power dynamics equilibrium from the metaphorical concept of Newtonian perspective would promote multilingualism, learner autonomy, and cross-cultural competence, ultimately making English a tool for inclusivity and global collaboration.

Future research and studies could fill in the gap where exploration upon the dynamics of English status in different place, time and context, whether the dynamics features are different from one another. Quantitative research on how different area context such as geopolitics, socioeconomic condition and cultural aspects would influence the power dynamics are also possible.

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