

RECONCEPTUALIZING TEFL MATERIALS: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF DECOLONIAL, CULTURAL, AND ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) materials are increasingly viewed not only as pedagogical tools but also as ideological, cultural, and ecological artifacts that shape learners' understanding of language, identity, knowledge, and society. Despite this growing awareness, many EFL materials continue to privilege Western epistemologies, marginalize local knowledge systems, and provide limited attention to ecological concerns. This critical literature review synthesizes studies published between 2000 and 2025, with particular emphasis on recent scholarship from 2021–2025, to examine how decolonial, cultural, and ecological perspectives have been represented in TEFL materials research. Using thematic narrative synthesis, the review identifies several recurring themes: the persistence of Western-centered representation, uneven integration of local cultural knowledge, limited incorporation of ecological perspectives, and the emerging influence of digital and AI-mediated materials. Unlike previous studies that discuss these perspectives separately, this review integrates them into a unified framework grounded in epistemic justice, contextual relevance, and sustainability awareness. The study contributes a conceptual framework for transformative materials development and highlights implications for textbook design, teacher education, and future research, particularly in Global South contexts.

Keywords: TEFL materials; decolonial pedagogy; ecological literacy; cultural relevance; critical review.

INTRODUCTION

The global expansion of English has significantly influenced educational systems worldwide, positioning English as a language of academic participation, international communication, and socioeconomic mobility (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994). In EFL contexts, teaching materials play an important role in organizing linguistic input, classroom interaction, and cultural representation (Tomlinson, 2012). However, textbooks and instructional resources are not neutral tools. They also reflect particular assumptions about language, culture, identity, and knowledge (Apple, 1993; Gray, 2010).

Previous studies have shown that many TEFL materials privilege Western norms and perspectives while marginalizing local realities and indigenous knowledge systems (Shin, Eslami, & Chen, 2011; Setyono & Widodo, 2019). Such tendencies reflect what Quijano (2007) describes as the coloniality of knowledge, in which dominant epistemologies continue to shape educational discourse. From this perspective, teaching materials function not only as linguistic resources but also as instruments that reproduce social and cultural hierarchies.

In response to these concerns, recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized

three interconnected perspectives: decolonial approaches, culturally responsive materials, and ecological perspectives (Kumaravadivelu, 2016; Porto, 2021; Stibbe, 2021). Decolonial approaches question whose knowledge is represented and legitimized in teaching materials. Culturally responsive perspectives emphasize contextual relevance and identity affirmation, while ecological perspectives extend materials development toward sustainability awareness, environmental ethics, and eco-critical literacy.

Although research in these areas has expanded, the discussions often remain fragmented. Most studies focus on one perspective separately, with limited attention to how decolonial, cultural, and ecological dimensions intersect in TEFL materials development.

1.1 Research Contribution

This review contributes to the literature by proposing an integrated framework that connects decoloniality, cultural relevance, and ecological literacy as interdependent dimensions of TEFL materials development. In addition, the review incorporates recent scholarship (2021–2025) on eco-ELT, decolonial textbook discourse, Global South materials design, and digital sustainability pedagogies.

This study addresses the following questions:

1. How are decolonial perspectives represented in TEFL materials scholarship?
2. How is local cultural knowledge integrated into TEFL materials?
3. How have ecological perspectives been incorporated into TEFL materials?
4. What conceptual gaps remain in current scholarship?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURES

Research on TEFL materials has increasingly recognized that instructional resources are shaped by ideological, cultural, and ecological dimensions rather than functioning as neutral educational tools. Teaching materials influence how learners understand language, identity, and knowledge, while also reflecting broader social and political values (Apple, 1993; Tomlinson, 2012; Gray, 2010).

One major strand of scholarship focuses on decolonial perspectives in TEFL materials. Studies have consistently shown that English textbooks often privilege Anglophone norms and present Western culture as universal, while local knowledge systems receive limited representation (Shin et al., 2011; Setyono & Widodo, 2019). This issue relates closely to Quijano's (2007) concept of coloniality of knowledge, where dominant epistemologies continue to shape educational practices.

Kumaravadivelu (2016) argues that meaningful reform in English language teaching requires epistemological transformation rather than superficial multicultural inclusion. Similarly, Mignolo (2011) proposes the idea of "epistemic disobedience" to challenge colonial knowledge structures. Recent studies also indicate that even localized textbooks may still reproduce Western-centered discourse patterns (Widodo, 2018; Sihombing & Nguyen, 2022). Selvi (2025) further warns that decoloniality may become merely rhetorical if institutional structures remain unchanged.

Another important area concerns cultural relevance in TEFL materials. Culturally responsive pedagogy emphasizes the integration of local knowledge, values, and identities into language learning materials to enhance learner engagement and identity affirmation (Widodo et al., 2018; Suryani, 2022). However, scholars distinguish

between symbolic localization and transformative localization. Symbolic localization refers to the superficial inclusion of local elements, such as names or traditions, without changing the dominant epistemic framework. Transformative localization, in contrast, positions local knowledge as central to the learning process. Empirical studies suggest that many TEFL materials still rely on symbolic rather than transformative localization. Setyono and Widodo (2019), for example, found uneven representation of multicultural values in Indonesian EFL textbooks. This indicates that contextual relevance often remains limited.

Ecological perspectives in language education have also gained increasing attention. Drawing on ecolinguistics and ecological approaches to learning, scholars argue that language education can support sustainability awareness and eco-critical literacy (Stibbe, 2021; Van Lier, 2004). Cristovão et al. (2022) demonstrate that environmental discourse in EFL textbooks can foster critical awareness of ecological issues, while Setyowati et al. (2022) show that environmental themes can support writing development. Nevertheless, ecological integration in

TEFL materials remains limited and fragmented. Sustainability topics are often presented as isolated themes rather than integrated principles guiding materials design (Suwandi et al., 2024).

More recently, scholars have begun examining digital and AI-mediated materials in TEFL. Digital platforms and artificial intelligence offer opportunities for adaptive learning and broader access to diverse content. However, they also raise concerns about algorithmic bias, epistemic inequality, and environmental sustainability. Compared to other areas, research on digital and AI-mediated materials remains relatively underdeveloped and requires further critical investigation.

Overall, the literature demonstrates growing interest in decolonial, cultural, ecological, and digital perspectives in TEFL materials. However, these discussions often remain separate from one another. This review addresses the gap by proposing an integrated framework that positions decoloniality, cultural relevance, and ecological literacy as interconnected dimensions of TEFL materials development.

METHODS

This study employed a critical qualitative literature review using thematic synthesis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Relevant sources were collected from major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar.

The search process used several key terms, including:

- decolonial pedagogy in ELT
- cultural representation in EFL textbooks
- ecological literacy in language education
- sustainable materials development
- eco-pedagogy and English teaching
- Global South textbook design

Publications from 2000–2025 were screened, with particular emphasis on recent Scopus-indexed studies published between 2021 and 2025.

The inclusion criteria consisted of:

- studies focusing on English teaching materials;
- empirical, conceptual, or review studies;
- studies addressing decolonial, cultural, or ecological dimensions in TEFL materials.

The screening process involved reviewing titles, abstracts, and full texts to determine relevance. Selected studies were then coded according to recurring themes, including Western representation, cultural localization, ecological integration, and digital or AI-mediated materials.

To improve analytical consistency, themes were compared across studies during the coding process. Thematic patterns were subsequently synthesized into broader conceptual categories that informed the development of the proposed framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Western-Centric Representation and Decolonial Critique

A dominant theme in the literature concerns the persistence of Western-oriented representation in TEFL materials.

English is frequently presented through Anglophone lifestyles, values, and epistemologies (Gray, 2010; Matsuda, 2017). As a result, Western knowledge is often positioned as normative, while

alternative epistemologies receive limited recognition.

Kumaravadivelu (2016) argues that decolonizing English teaching requires epistemological transformation rather than superficial multicultural inclusion. Similarly, Mignolo (2011) emphasizes the need for “epistemic disobedience” to challenge colonial knowledge structures.

Recent studies continue to highlight these concerns. Selvi (2025) critiques the institutionalization of decolonial discourse, arguing that decoloniality risks becoming rhetorical without structural change. Sihombing and Nguyen (2022) also identify tensions between coloniality and emerging decolonial perspectives in Indonesian textbooks.

Widodo (2018) further demonstrates that many textbooks continue to reproduce subtle colonial assumptions through discourse structures, even when localized content is included. These findings suggest that meaningful decolonization requires more than diverse representation; it also demands reconsideration of whose knowledge is treated as legitimate.

4.2 Local Cultural Knowledge and Contextual Relevance

Another major theme concerns the integration of local cultural knowledge

into TEFL materials. Many scholars advocate incorporating local wisdom, indigenous perspectives, religious values, and community practices into English learning materials (Widodo et al., 2018; Suryani, 2022).

However, the literature distinguishes between symbolic and transformative localization. Symbolic localization involves inserting local names, customs, or cultural symbols without changing the broader discourse structure. Transformative localization, by contrast, positions local knowledge as an epistemic foundation for learning.

Studies indicate that many TEFL materials still rely on symbolic localization. Setyono and Widodo (2019) found uneven representation of multicultural values in Indonesian textbooks, while Suryani (2022) reported that integration of local wisdom remains inconsistent.

These findings suggest that contextual relevance requires deeper epistemic repositioning rather than surface-level adaptation.

4.3 Emerging Ecological Perspectives in TEFL Materials

Ecological perspectives represent a growing but still underdeveloped area in TEFL materials research. Drawing on

ecolinguistics (Stibbe, 2021) and ecological approaches to language learning (Van Lier, 2004), scholars argue that language education can contribute to sustainability awareness and eco-critical literacy.

Cristovão et al. (2022) demonstrate that environmental discourse in EFL textbooks can encourage eco-critical awareness. Similarly, Setyowati et al. (2022) show that environmental education can support critical writing development.

Despite these developments, sustainability remains more thematic than structural in many materials. Environmental topics are often presented as isolated units on pollution, recycling, or climate change rather than integrated principles informing content selection, task design, and discourse representation (Suwandi et al., 2024).

As a result, ecological integration in TEFL materials remains emergent rather than transformative.

4.4 Digital and AI-Mediated Materials as an Emerging Frontier

A newer strand of research focuses on digital and AI-mediated materials. Recent scholarship suggests that digital technologies may both reproduce and challenge colonial and ecological assumptions in language education.

AI-generated materials can provide adaptive learning opportunities and broader access to diverse resources. However, they also raise concerns related to algorithmic bias, representation, epistemic inequality, and environmental sustainability.

Compared to decolonial, cultural, and ecological discussions, this area remains less developed. Future research is therefore needed to examine how digital and AI-mediated materials can support more equitable and sustainable TEFL practices.

INTEGRATED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This review proposes a three-dimensional framework for TEFL materials development.

Decolonial Dimension

The decolonial dimension includes:

- epistemic justice;
- plural Englishes;
- knowledge diversification;
- critique of colonial discourse.

Cultural Dimension

The cultural dimension includes:

- contextual relevance;
- identity affirmation;
- integration of local wisdom;
- community-based meaning-making.

Ecological Dimension

The ecological dimension includes:

- sustainability awareness;
- eco-critical literacy;
- environmental responsibility;
- relational ethics.

These dimensions should jointly inform:

- content selection;
- task design;

- discourse representation;
- materials evaluation.

Rather than functioning separately, the three dimensions are interconnected. Decoloniality without ecology risks anthropocentrism, while ecology without decolonial critique may reproduce dominant Western sustainability discourse. Similarly, cultural relevance without epistemic critique may remain merely symbolic.

CONCLUSIONS

This review demonstrates that TEFL materials continue to be shaped by Western-centered assumptions, while the integration of cultural and ecological perspectives remains uneven. Existing scholarship shows growing awareness of decoloniality, contextual relevance, and sustainability in language education, yet these perspectives are often discussed separately.

To address this gap, the study proposes an integrated framework

grounded in epistemic justice, contextual relevance, and sustainability awareness. This framework offers a pathway toward more inclusive and transformative TEFL materials development, particularly in Global South contexts.

The review also highlights the need for future research on digital and AI-mediated materials, especially regarding issues of representation, ecological sustainability, and epistemic equity in language education.

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APPENDIX

Author	Focus	Perspective	Key Findings	Gap
Phillipson	Linguistic imperialism	Decolonial	English tied to power	Materials focus limited
Kumaravadivelu	Decolonial ELT	Decolonial	Calls epistemic transformation	Empirical models scarce

Setyono & Widodo	Indonesian textbooks	Cultural	Uneven multicultural representation	Transformative localization weak
Cristovão et al.	Environmental discourse	Ecological	Eco-literacy potential	Structural integration lacking
Suwandi et al.	Ecoliteracy textbooks	Ecological	Gaps remain	Evaluation tools limited
Selvi	Decolonial critique	Decolonial	Institutionalization tensions	Practice unclear