

# The politics and praxis of academic English: Toward antiracist language pedagogy

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Academic English has drawn criticism for its hegemonic status, and its dominance and legitimization as an “appropriate” language variety within academic and mainstream discourse communities have been problematized for stigmatizing home languages and dialects of multilingual and multidialectal students. However, students’ proficiency in academic language is cited as one of the critical factors affecting their academic success (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006); therefore, instructional support for multilingual and multidialectal students’ academic language development has been crucial to the educational agenda. The debate surrounding the politics of academic English and of the instructional practices geared toward developing multilingual and multidialectal students’ academic English proficiency has important pedagogical implications. Seeing value in the propositions on both sides of the debate, the authors of this article reflect on the implications of these propositions in classroom practice and seek ways to support multilingual students in their effort to develop their academic English proficiency without stigmatizing and suppressing their home language and dialect. The authors propose an integrated framework for antiracist language pedagogy that builds on critical inquiry, inclusive teaching, and a multiliteracies approach to academic language and literacy development.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In her keynote address at the 2021 American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) conference, Suhanthie Motha asked, “Is an antiracist and anticolonial applied linguistics possible?” By posing this question, Motha brought up the racialized history of the applied linguistics discipline and of English language teaching practices in a contemporary context that is marked by charges of systemic, institutionalized, and structural racism. Motha asked the educators and scholars in attendance to reflect on their roles and challenged them to grapple with the possibility that their work and practice might be complicit with or even advancing colonial reasoning and white supremacy. However, Motha’s thought-provoking and stimulating talk was delivered in what many would call “academic” English, which is characterized by technical and precise diction, conventionalized syntactic and grammatical structures, and formal register (Scarcella, 2003). Academic English has often been the dominant medium of communication as language scholars and educators around the world gather as a community to exchange ideas and share their work.

Challenged by Motha’s question, we explore the politics and the praxis of academic English in an effort to reevaluate our own beliefs, roles, and teaching practices in light of our backgrounds and lived experiences. Both of us are multilingual educators who learned English for academic purposes in non-English-dominant countries and later moved to the United States for academic and career pursuits. Both of us taught English in our home countries (Mongolia and Brazil) in the early stages of our careers. In our shared experiences of teaching academic literacy in U.S. public universities designated as minority-serving institutes for over a decade, we have worked with language-minority and international students with a variety of cultural, educational, and linguistic backgrounds as well as preservice and in-service teachers in U.S. secondary and post-secondary contexts. Similar to many language educators in the United States and around the world, we have been grappling with the existential question about our roles in (anti)racist and (anti)colonial English language teaching. We have been pondering how we can teach English for academic purposes (EAP) in a way that is antiracist and anticolonial.

Based on reflection on our teaching and a review of the relevant literature, we offer how we envision antiracist language teaching in this conceptual article. We propose an integrated framework for antiracist language pedagogy (ALP) that is built on three necessary components: critical inquiry, inclusive teaching, and the multiliteracies approach. We contend that conscientious implementation of the ALP framework in academic language and literacy curricula can promote an antiracist awakening in applied linguistics and English language teaching.

## 2 | CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING ACADEMIC ENGLISH

Academic English has drawn criticism for its hegemonic status. Yet it has been legitimized as an “appropriate” language variety in academic and mainstream discourse communities. Some scholars have problematized the hegemonic framing of academic English as a “standard” and dominant language variety as it stigmatizes students’ home languages and dialects (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Garcia & Solorza, 2020). For example, Flores and Rosa (2015) argued that language education that prioritizes academic English is “complicit in normalizing the reproduction of the white gaze by marginalizing the linguistic practices of language-minoritized populations in U.S. society” (p. 166). Further, Garcia and Solorza (2020) take a critical stance toward academic language, claiming that it “legitimizes the social and educational exclusion” of many

language-minority students (p. 1). These scholars share the sentiment that language practices of minoritized groups are devalued and underprivileged as a consequence of the prioritization of academic English in a formal schooling context.

Meanwhile, other scholars and educators stress the importance of supporting students to develop academic language skills for school success, college access, and career path (Brisk & Tian, 2019; Rose & Martin, 2012). In fact, students' proficiency in academic language is cited as one of the crucial factors affecting their academic success (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006). As school tasks become increasingly complex and academic, students often need to develop academic language skills, draw on various linguistic resources, and expand their linguistic repertoires for participation in a variety of literacy practices. Thus, providing instructional support for multilingual and multidialectal students' academic language development has been an important educational agenda. Generally, scholars who support the instructional focus on academic language development frame their argument from the perspective of providing access, ensuring equity, and advancing social justice. In this vein, Schleppegrell (2004) argued, "In the absence of an explicit focus on [academic] language, students from certain social class backgrounds continue to be privileged and others to be disadvantaged in learning, assessment, and promotion, perpetuating the obvious inequalities that exist today" (p. 3).

The debate surrounding the politics of academic English and of the instructional practices geared toward developing multilingual and multidialectal students' academic English proficiency has important pedagogical implications. By promoting academic English, are scholars and classroom teachers resisting the movement toward antiracist and anticolonial language teaching? On the other hand, would demoting and deprioritizing academic English perpetuate the inequalities that permeate society? These are challenging and paradoxical questions educators and classroom teachers at both secondary and postsecondary levels will have to grapple with as they position their teaching practices in a racialized context. Seeing value in the propositions put forward by scholars on both sides of the issue, we explore the implications of these propositions in classroom practice and seek ways to support multilingual students in their effort to develop their academic English proficiency without suppressing their home languages and dialects. The guiding questions of this article are as follows: What is an effective pedagogical approach that may meet this aspiration? What might an antiracist pedagogy of language and literacy development entail?

### 3 | THE POLITICS OF ACADEMIC ENGLISH

Academic English is a formal variety of English legitimized and accepted as a "standard" language of communication in academia and other powerful institutions such as government, the legal system, and science organizations. As the language of the educated and privileged class, academic English dominates education, scholarship, and science. Countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, where English is the dominant language, "have become the academic superpowers," attracting local and international students and scholars (Altbach, 2007, p. 2). These students and scholars often have to learn and master academic English to be able to successfully complete their studies and communicate in global English-speaking academic contexts.

The dominance and prioritization of academic English are often at the expense of other language varieties that are spoken by marginalized and minoritized communities. For many multilingual and multidialectal students, the language used in an academic context, which is reinforced in formal schooling, is distant from the language of their home or culture. This

distance and the schools' inability to bridge the cultural and linguistic distance create barriers for language-minoritized students and stigmatize the linguistic practices of their community and home environment. The prioritization of academic language and literacy development in a formal school setting often requires language-minoritized students to acquire and develop proficiency in linguistic practices exercised by the academic community, while marginalizing the rich and fluid linguistic resources of their communities (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Taking issue with the classification of some multilingual students as "long-term English learners," Flores and Rosa (2015) contended that placing these students in academic language development classes is a way of "molding them into white-speaking subjects who have mastered the empirical linguistic practices deemed appropriate for a school context" (p. 157).

The issue of perpetuating the white gaze and whiteness ideology is pervasive in a context where the teaching force is predominantly White (Matias & Mackey, 2016; Sleeter, 2017). Sleeter (2017), for example, argues that "the dominant ideologies and knowledge systems [are] based on White worldviews" in the U.S. secondary education context with a predominantly White teaching force (p. 162). In the words of Matias and Mackey (2016), "the hegemony of whiteness has so naturalized itself within the field of U.S. education that it goes undetected, despite the major implications it imposes on the educational equity of students of color" (p. 34). Noteworthy among such statements is Kubota's (2004) point that the naturalization and normalcy of Whiteness "are not inherent in the white race," but rather the White worldview is a social construction deeply and historically rooted in an imperialistic paradigm (p. 42). Thus, it is important to note that one doesn't have to be White in order to perpetuate the white gaze or the whiteness ideology. Connecting these perspectives to the teaching of academic language, Garcia and Solorza (2020) take a critical stance concerning the epistemological and ideological construct of academic language, claiming that the conceptualization of academic language as a specialized, autonomous entity produced by colonialism excludes linguistic practices of language-minoritized students.

The raciolinguistic ideologies associated with language (Flores & Rosa, 2015) have often been linked to a deficit view toward multilingual and multidialectal students' languaging practices. For example, Garcia (2020) problematized academic English or, as she called it, the language of "white monolingual middle class people," arguing that the focus on this language construct contributes to viewing bilingual students as "deficient" as their complex translanguaging practice "does not fit the constructed canons" (para. 7). The languages of minoritized communities have been stigmatized even as the knowledge system of the powerful, or what is deemed as modern science and scholarship, is valued and prioritized (Garcia, 2020). These critical views toward the dominance and prioritization of academic English illuminate the ideologies and the power underlying this academic language and shed light on how the linguistic practices of language-minoritized students are subjugated in a context of formal schooling.

The critical views toward academic English have prompted some scholars and educational linguists to reconceptualize the construct of academic language, proposing alternative framing such as *language architecture* (Flores, 2020), *language of ideas* (Bunch & Martin, 2020), and *academic languaging* (Semiante & Tian, 2021). Flores (2020) proposed a framework of "language architecture" to challenge the traditional conceptualization of academic language, which, as he contends, frames "the home language practices of racialized communities as inherently deficient" (p. 24). Flores (2020) admits that students as language architects "are not free to simply do whatever they want" as they "must adhere to general parameters in order to successfully complete their tasks" (p. 25). However, in a context of standards-based education at both secondary and postsecondary levels, the parameters students need to adhere to are often narrowly set.

Similarly, Bunch and Martin (2020) proposed to shift the focus from academic language to “language of ideas,” which they defined as “the use of any and all linguistic resources students bring to bear on the engagement in and completion of an academic task, no matter how far from ‘literate’ language it is” (p. 6). But at the heart of the instruction are disciplinary content and the communicative tasks that are crucial in doing academic work. The language-of-ideas perspective moves away from the dichotomous framing of language as academic or nonacademic and turns to various ways of expressing disciplinary content with particular attention given to the communicative tasks that students engage in and the existing linguistic resources that they bring to the table. Bunch and Martin, however, acknowledged the importance of developing a command of language and acquiring specific linguistic structures that are common in disciplinary content.

In response to the contentions toward academic language, the term *academic languaging* has been suggested as a way to move away from the prescriptive and exclusionary framing to a more holistic view of language use (Sembiante & Tian, 2021). The addition of the *-ing* suffix, though it might seem a minor morphological tweak, alludes to the practice and theory of translanguaging that postulate “a unitary linguistic repertoire” rather than separate language systems as a linguistic resource used for meaning making (Vogel & Garcia, 2017, p. 1). By embracing the dynamic and fluid languaging practices of multilingual speakers, the translanguaging theory challenges linguistic hierarchies. The term *academic languaging* then not only signifies a heteroglossic perspective that foregrounds the dynamic and fluid languaging practices of multilingual students but also embraces the functionally integrated use of the existing linguistic repertoire to engage in academic tasks.

Although these alternative ways of reconceptualizing the term *academic language* address critical issues related to the linguistic practices of multilingual and multidialectal students, they seem to address only the tip of the iceberg without much treatment of the deeper systemic and structural barriers confronting multilingual students. For example, one of the most pressing barriers that multilingual students encounter in a largely monolingual U.S. education system, at both secondary and postsecondary levels, is meeting the rigid criteria of assessments of all sorts that have a direct effect on their career path and success. Within the standards-based education system, high-stakes assessments and tasks are given in academic English and norm-based monolingual criteria are in place to measure students' academic language and literacy skills. Within such a system, multilingual students who haven't developed proficiency in academic English continue to be marginalized, excluded, and restricted in their access to college and career opportunities. Lee (2016), for example, challenged the translanguaging pedagogical orientation to writing, questioning “whether the translanguaging turn aligns with or contradicts the principles of social justice” when teachers and programs continue to use monolingual, academic norms and standards to evaluate students' writing (p. 175). This brings us to the paradoxical nature of linguistic social justice, which perhaps is the root of the contention between those who support academic English instruction and those who reject it. It is important to consider Lee's point that both positions “represent well-intentioned desires to promote student learning, [and thus] both can be considered inherently invested in the promotion of their own means to linguistic social justice” (p. 179).

#### 4 | THE PRAXIS OF ACADEMIC ENGLISH LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

Perhaps a point that scholars on the opposite sides of the issue may agree on is that there is a need for a collective effort to meaningfully support multilingual students in their endeavor

to expand their linguistic repertoire. Language educators recognize the value of helping students become language users who are able to make linguistic choices strategically. In a multicultural pluralistic society in which multilingual students “shuttle between communities and enjoy multiple memberships” (Canagarajah, 2002, p. 35), strategic use of language or what we can call *tactical languaging* for effective communication is a desirable skill. Strategic language users who are conversant with distinct language conventions employ tactical languaging when engaging in linguistic practices of the discursive communities they shuttle between. They are aware of their audience and the rhetorical situation and tactically make linguistic choices to negotiate meaning in different communicative contexts. Access to and participation in academic communities and disciplinary discourses entail being well versed in the linguistic practices of these communities. Thus, instead of rejecting academic English, we need a way to support students in their effort to become well versed in academic English while upholding the rich linguistic practices of their homes and communities. Encouraging this freedom of linguistic shuttling is an important pedagogical goal that aligns with the principles of linguistic diversity and social justice.

Recent scholarship on culturally sustaining systemic functional linguistics (CSSFL) has studied how to center the dynamic cultural and linguistic practices of minoritized students while supporting them in “building up their rhetorical, civic and academic repertoires within their new cultural context” (Harman & Burke, 2020, p. 18). As implied by its name, CSSFL draws on culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) advocated by Paris and Alim (2014, 2017) and systemic functional linguistics (SFL) proposed by Halliday (1994) to foster linguistic pluralism, to shift toward heteroglossic language practices, and to raise critical language awareness while simultaneously encouraging students to expand their linguistic repertoire to meet the language demands of academic and disciplinary practices. The goal of CSP is to find effective ways to support and sustain the dynamic and rich linguistic practices of marginalized communities while creating spaces for students to engage in critical inquiry into the power associated with language and the ways linguistic practices marginalize or are marginalized (Paris & Alim, 2014). While CSP foregrounds cultural sustenance and critical awareness in instructional practices, SFL has been used as an analytical tool to support students' understanding of linguistic features of discourses. SFL has been increasingly used to analyze the language features of academic texts and unpack the disciplinary content, examining how language is used for construction of this content. Merging these two distinct approaches is an attempt to foster a more inclusive language education that addresses both the raciolinguistic ideologies of linguistic practices and the linguistic needs of multilingual and multidialectal students to engage in academic discourses.

Recent studies on CSSFL-based/informed pedagogy have reported a transformative effect on students' engagement in literacy activities (Cavallaro & Sembiente, 2021; Harman & Burke, 2020; Humphrey, 2021). For example, Harman and Burke (2020) showed that engaging multilingual students in creative and critical literacy practices using the CSSFL framework that integrates multimodal remixing and reflection literacy helped students position themselves as agentic civic participants, immerse themselves in the process of knowledge construction, and develop deeper understanding of the world around them. In addition, Humphrey's (2021) study found that CSSFL-informed pedagogy in science learning helped teachers bridge students' existing linguistic repertoire with the language demands of the curriculum tasks and the science content. Further, Cavallaro and Sembiente (2021), who explored the implementation of CSSFL pedagogy in a middle school reading class, reported that CSSFL pedagogy facilitated students' metalinguistic awareness as well as their active engagement in the literacy tasks and their creative ways of interweaving different languages and modalities.

## 5 | A FRAMEWORK FOR ANTIRACIST LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

Drawing on the debate and scholarship discussed above, we propose a framework for antiracist language pedagogy (ALP) that integrates critical inquiry, inclusive teaching based on humanizing pedagogy, and the multiliteracies approach (Figure 1). An important tenet of the ALP framework is that the three components—critical, inclusive, and multiliteracies—are enacted in tandem toward a goal to create equitable learning opportunities for diverse students with different cultural, educational, and linguistic backgrounds. When devised carefully, instructional practices based on the ALP framework can create effective and equitable learning opportunities that not only attend to the linguistic needs of multilingual students for academic literacy but foster cultural and linguistic pluralism and critical language awareness. What do critical inquiry, inclusive teaching, and the multiliteracies approach entail? We discuss these components based on theory, research, and practice, elucidating the importance of each component in language classrooms.

*Critical inquiry* can foster students' critical language awareness and cultivate their analytical thinking skills. Although emphasized in the CSP framework (Paris & Alim, 2014), it is often overlooked in pedagogical approaches in the context of multilingual students' literacy development. For example, much of the research and practice informed by the CSSFL framework focuses on valuing and leveraging varied linguistic practices of multilingual students' home and communities and misses the critical component of CSP. This could be the case because many EAP scholars hold a pragmatic attitude that finds the mastery of academic discourses more significant and relevant than developing critical awareness (Canagarajah, 2002). Alim (2005), however, contended that critical language awareness is of paramount importance to “confront the issue of language discrimination and marginalization in schools and society” and, therefore, educators need to “help students read not just the *word* but also the *world*” (p. 29).

Critical language awareness can be fostered through engaging students in critical discourse analysis (Rogers, 2011). For example, research around the linguistic profiling project (Baugh, 2003) has informed educational practice to engage marginalized students in critical inquiry by raising two important questions: “How can language be used to maintain, reinforce,

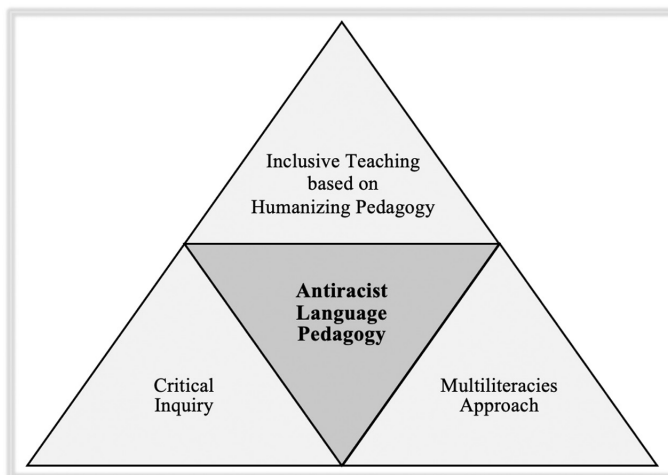


FIGURE 1 A Framework for Antiracist Language Pedagogy

and perpetuate existing power relations?” and “How can language be used to resist, redefine, and possibly reverse these relations?” (Alim, 2005, p. 28). Engaging students in critical inquiry and interrogating the position, power, and underlying ideology associated with language and literacy practices can help students “become more conscious of their communicative behavior and the ways by which they can transform the conditions under which they live” (Alim, 2005, p. 28). The importance of this critical component is hard to ignore in a contemporary context given that teaching academic English without critically examining its raciolinguistic implications may continue to perpetuate the marginalization of the linguistic practices of minoritized students (Semiante & Tian, 2021). Thus, providing spaces for students to examine how language is used in different communicative contexts and to interrogate how language is used in overt and covert ways to exclude, marginalize, and oppress should be an important educational goal of language education.

*Inclusive teaching* values diversity, promotes inclusion, and fosters meaningful and relevant learning that is accessible to all students. These principles of inclusive teaching are based on humanizing pedagogy that not only values student interests and perspectives but validates their lived experiences, cultural identities, and emotional needs (Salazar, 2013). Humanizing pedagogy, as envisioned by Freire (1970/2000), is a transformative approach in which “the method ceases to be an instrument by which the teachers can manipulate the students, because it expresses the consciousness of the students themselves” (p. 69). Hence, inclusive teaching based on humanizing pedagogy is in alignment with an important goal of CSP to uphold, support, and sustain diverse cultural and linguistic practices while ensuring access to and opportunity for dominant linguistic practices (Paris & Alim, 2014). In fact, CSP strives to foster linguistic and cultural pluralism by opening up spaces where students can participate in a variety of literacy practices (Paris & Alim, 2017). In attending to the linguistic needs of multilingual students for the demands of academic writing and discourse, teachers can leverage their existing linguistic resources, draw on their cultures, and connect learning to their lived experiences.

An effort toward inclusive pedagogy is reflected in the youth participatory action research (YPAR) initiative, which has gained popularity in the U.S. educational context in an effort to revolutionize education through youth-led research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). At its core, YPAR seeks to advance inclusive education through youth-centered conceptualization and youth-led research to transform academic scholarship. It promotes young voices and bridges community practices with school curriculum, involving students in formal research on an issue that matters to them and their communities. By doing so, a YPAR-based literacy curriculum strives to create an inclusive learning environment where diverse voices of students are valued. Using approaches such as YPAR not only situates learning in a meaningful and relevant context but gives students an opportunity to fully participate in the learning process, which is integral in inclusive teaching.

*The multiliteracies approach*, which was introduced by the New London Group (1996), requires using multimodal and multigenre pedagogical practices. Multimodality involves strategic and innovative use of a rich and varied semiotic repertoire that complements linguistic resources. Integrating multimodality in language pedagogy is particularly important as technological inventions and convenient access to digital tools are shaping how we communicate and construct knowledge. In the contemporary digital environment, being literate expands beyond an ability to read and write; it requires competence to discern ways in which “different modalities are combined in complex ways to create meaning” (Snyder & Bulfin, 2008, p. 21). A multimodal approach is beneficial to multilingual students for its potential to facilitate understanding and expression of conceptual and linguistic knowledge and bridge the language differences of students who have diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Integrating multimodality promotes



multiliteracies by fostering multiple ways of doing literacies through different types of communication channels and participatory approaches.

Multigenre pedagogy, a related element of the multiliteracies approach, aims to support students' literacy development by exposing them to diverse discourse patterns of different genres (Rose & Martin, 2012). These patterns can correspond to different social purposes. But when not checked for bias, genre pedagogy can reproduce dominant practices and reinforce deficit perspectives of multilingual students of color (Accurso & Mizell, 2020). Therefore, an antiracist multigenre pedagogy should include community countertexts alongside dominant ones and increase focus on interpersonal meanings to analyze racializing dimensions of texts (Accurso & Mizell, 2020). In general, the multiliteracies approach can advance critical and inclusive pedagogy by adding multimodal semiotic resources for classroom learning and by promoting multiplicity of genres, considering students' diverse life experiences, cultural identities, and ways of communicating in an increasingly diverse and globally connected world (Kim, Ramos, Chung, & Choi, 2020).

These three pedagogical strategies—critical inquiry, inclusive teaching, and the multiliteracies approach—are necessary and inseparable components of the ALP framework. A harmonious integration of all three ALP components is pivotal to achieving a higher goal of creating equitable learning opportunities for diverse students. Enacting critical, inclusive, and multiliteracies pedagogy based on the ALP framework in the language and writing classroom requires ways of rethinking assessment and grading practices. If classroom assessment practices continue to adhere to the dominant discursive standards and remain unchallenged and unchanged, multilingual students will continue to be marginalized. In connection with this, Lee (2016) stresses the importance of theorizing and considering ways of adapting assessment in light of emerging practices. Thus, revamping assessment and grading practices in the implementation of the ALP framework is imperative.

Now that we have conceptualized what antiracist language pedagogy might look like, we turn to how we can apply this framework to our teaching and what actions we as language educators can take. We contend that the conscientious implementation of the ALP framework in language and literacy classrooms undergoes an iterative cycle of decisive actions (Figure 2). We can start by analytically reflecting on our current practices to see if they align with ALP and to discern how our teaching practices contribute to (anti)racist and (anti)colonial language teaching. Based on our reflection, we can critically review our instructional materials and resources to determine how and whether they contribute to equitable learning opportunities. The next steps are to creatively redesign course materials based on the ALP framework and to mindfully enact the ALP-based instructional practices. These steps should be followed by comprehensive evaluation for efficacy and equity. The cyclical nature of these steps indicates that this iterative process should be repeated as new situations emerge.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Motha (2021) concluded her keynote address stating that antiracist and anticolonial applied linguistics is possible but not inevitable, implying that it requires a concerted effort. Decentering academic English, upholding varied linguistic practices of marginalized communities, and raising critical consciousness and awareness of the privilege and power associated with language is an important step toward the possibility of antiracist and anticolonial language pedagogy and literacy practice. For this challenging endeavor, a collective effort is necessary. As Sembiente and

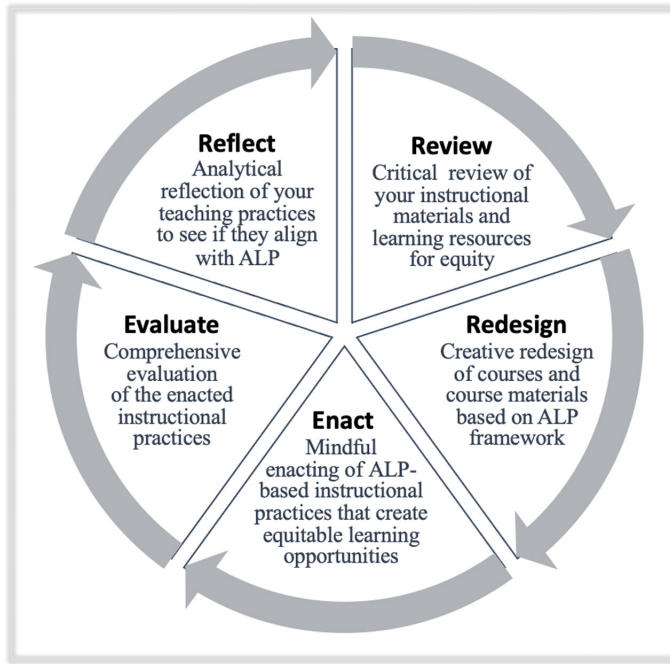


FIGURE 2 Iterative Steps to Implementing ALP Framework

Tian (2021) pointed out, “It is crucial that we don’t allow ideological and sociocultural battles to separate educators from the important work of facilitating students’ language development” (p. 104). So can we as language educators teach academic English in a nonprejudicial or nondiscriminatory manner? According to Wei (2021), we can if we consider current raciolinguistic ideologies and practices when implementing curriculum, designing syllabi, and selecting methodological approaches. We have been called to reevaluate our roles in upholding equity and social justice, and in order to do so we must adopt a critical, inclusive, and multiliteracies pedagogical approach as the means to achieve an antiracist and anticolonial English language teaching. An antiracist and anticolonial language pedagogy is possible when we critically reflect on our practices and when we take decisive action toward our collective effort of advancing equitable language education.

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