LITERARY AND LANGUAGE STUDIES

Decentering the Canon: Critical Language Pedagogy and Translingual Practice in Literature Education

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Published November 2026

Abstract

This paper explores the theoretical framework and operational mechanics of subverting established canons within language, literature, and pedagogy. Standardized linguistic norms, Eurocentric literary curricula, and transmission-style instructional models frequently reinforce structural inequalities, linguistic imperialism, and cultural marginalization. Addressing the systemic inertia of language education, this study proposes an integrative model grounded in Critical Language Pedagogy (CLP) and critical literacy. It examines how de-centering standardized dialectal varieties—such as Standard American or Standard British English—and integrating non-canonical, translingual, and anti-colonial texts can empower marginalized voices in the contemporary classroom. Through a synthesis of contemporary classroom methodologies, code-meshing practices, and critical discourse analysis, the paper argues that subverting standard practices shifts student engagement from passive reception to active, critical agency. Ultimately, this paper outlines actionable strategies for educators to challenge institutional hegemony while maintaining analytical depth and academic rigor.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy; canonical subversion; linguistic hegemony; translingualism; decolonial literacy; counter-narratives; institutional reform

1 Introduction

1.1 The politics of standardized knowledge

Educational frameworks in language and literature have historically privileged standardized dialects and canonical texts under the guise of objective meritocracy and academic rigor. However, these institutionalized standards often function as mechanisms of social stratification that delegitimize non-dominant linguistic identities, indigenous epistemic traditions, and alternative literary histories. “Subverting the standard” is not a call for intellectual anarchy or the abandonment of structure; rather, it is a deliberate, reflective critical practice that interrogates the power dynamics embedded in textual selection and prescriptivist grammar. By positioning language as a dynamic site of struggle and literature as an evolving, polyphonic dialogue, educators can cultivate environments where students critique rather than passively internalize ideological norms.

2 Theoretical foundations

2.1 De-centering hegemonic paradigms

The theoretical apparatus of canonical subversion rests at the intersection of critical theory, sociolinguistics, and post-colonial studies. Rather than viewing language as a fixed code, critical theories frame language usage as a socio-political performative act.

2.2 Linguistic empire and prescriptivism

Prescriptivist models perpetuate "monoglossic" assumptions—the belief that languages exist as pure, bounded systems, and that deviation represents cognitive or cultural deficit.

2.3 The epistemic canon

Literary canons historically construct a curated worldview that normalizes western, middle-class, and patriarchal perspectives while treating peripheral works as merely contextual or dynamic "additions".

3 Literature survey: Mapping the critical shift

A. Foundations of Critical Pedagogy: Works stemming from Freire (1970) and Giroux (2011) establish that education is inherently political, urging classrooms to transition from "banking models" to dialogic, problem-posing environments where learners act as co-creators of knowledge.

B. Linguistic Hegemony and Language Ideologies: Scholarship by Canagarajah (2013) and García (2009) challenges monoglossic ideologies, advocating for translingual practice, translanguaging, and code-meshing over rigid, monolingual standard-language enforcement.

C. Decolonizing the Literary Canon: Theoretical frameworks from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) and bell hooks (1994) highlight how traditional canons perpetuate coloniality, calling for the radical inclusion of counter-narratives and indigenous epistemic traditions.

D. Critical Literacy in Classroom Settings: Contemporary applications by Janks (2010) show how analyzing power, identity, access, and redesign within everyday texts allows students to deconstruct systemic bias in language and literature curricula.

4 Problem statement

4.1 Institutional resistance to pedagogy

Despite widespread theoretical consensus regarding the democratic benefits of diversity and critical thinking, secondary and tertiary language and literature curricula remain heavily constrained by Eurocentric canons and prescriptivist standards. Standardized assessment metrics, high-stakes testing, and administrative risk-aversion continue to penalize linguistic variation and marginalize non-canonical texts. Consequently, students from non-dominant backgrounds experience systemic alienation, while the broader educational apparatus fails to equip learners to critically navigate an increasingly complex, globalized world.

5 Gap analysis

5.1 Disconnects between theory and practice

A. Theory vs. Classroom Execution: While critical pedagogy is extensively theorized in academic literature, there is a pronounced shortage of concrete, empirical frameworks showing how educators can implement subversive methods without running afoul of rigid institutional mandates.

B. Isolation of Academic Subfields: Research typically addresses linguistic prescriptivism within sociolinguistics or canonical critique within literary theory separately, lacking an integrated model that unifies language instruction directly with literary subversion.

C. Assessment and Grading Misalignments: Traditional rubric metrics systematically prioritize standard dialect mastery and conventional argumentative structures over critical analysis, creating a profound structural barrier for educators attempting to adopt subversive methodologies.

6 Methodological framework: Strategies for canonical subversion

To move subversion from abstract theory to daily classroom practice, educators must implement structural interventions across three core domains:

A. Textual Re-centering (Literature): Juxtaposition of canonical texts with contemporary counter-narratives (e.g., pairing Shakespeare's *The Tempest* with Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest*) to make visible the ideological assumptions of the classic text.

B. Linguistic Fluidity and Code-Meshing (Linguistics): Permitting and encouraging students to integrate their native dialects, vernaculars, and home languages alongside academic register in formal writing, treating style as a rhetorical choice rather than a rulebook.

C. Deconstructing Assessment (Pedagogy): Transitioning toward critical rubric negotiation, process-oriented portfolios, and self-assessment models that evaluate analytical depth and rhetorical effectiveness rather than linguistic conformity.

7 Future directions and pedagogical re-imagining

Sustaining critical practice requires moving beyond individual classroom interventions toward systemic institutional reform. Future research must examine the scalable impact of translingual grading models, teacher preparation programs that explicitly train educators in decolonial methodologies, and collaborative curriculum building with local communities. Furthermore, as digital media and generative AI reshape textual production, critical literacy frameworks must adapt to help students interrogate the algorithmic standards and technological biases currently shaping global communication.

8 Conclusion

8.1 Reclaiming the classroom as a transformative space

Subverting the standard in language and literature education is essential for building inclusive, democratic, and intellectually rigorous learning environments. By challenging the authority of monopolistic canons and prescriptivist norms, critical practice allows students to see language and literature not as static sets of rules to obey, but as living tools for agency, social critique, and self-

expression. Bridging the gap between critical theory and institutional testing mandates requires sustained empirical work, revised assessment practices, and cross-disciplinary curricular innovation. Implementing these changes ensures that classrooms remain active spaces for critical thought, diverse perspectives, and genuine human liberation.

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