

## **Cultivating Democratic Values in ELT Classrooms**

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### **Abstract**

Institutions and democratic values come under a global threat, by which there is a pressing need to leverage education as a means of nurturing active, engaged citizens. This qualitative study examines how English language teaching (ELT) can be reimagined to foster democratic values and competencies among learners. Drawing on in-depth interviews and classroom observations across five rural secondary schools in Probolinggo regency, the research explores the perspectives and experiences of ELT educators implementing democratically-oriented curricula and pedagogies. The findings reveal how ELT classrooms integrating critical thinking exercises, intercultural communication activities, and civic engagement projects can empower language learners with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for effective democratic participation. Implications for teacher training, curriculum design, and ELT policy are discussed, highlighting the transformative potential of language education in advancing democratic principles worldwide.

**Keywords:** *ELT, democratic values, rural schools, global*

### **Introduction**

Democracy is in crisis. Across the globe, the foundations of open, pluralistic societies are being eroded by the rise of authoritarianism, nationalist populism, and anti-democratic forces. In the face of this democratic backsliding, the role of education in cultivating engaged, informed citizens have taken on heightened significance (Giroux, 2020; Biesta, 2020).

English language teaching (ELT), as a global enterprise serving over a billion learners worldwide, is uniquely positioned to contribute to this educational imperative. ELT classrooms provide a powerful platform for promoting the knowledge, skills, and dispositions associated with democratic citizenship. However, the field has yet to fully leverage this potential, with the majority of language programs remaining divorced from the civic realm (Osler & Starkey, 2018; Abdi, 2014).

This qualitative study aims to address this gap by exploring how ELT can be strategically designed to foster democratic values and competencies among language learners. Drawing on in-depth interviews and classroom observations across five diverse secondary schools, the research examines the perspectives and experiences of ELT educators implementing democratically-oriented curricula and pedagogies. The findings offer valuable insights for teachers, program designers, and policymakers seeking to harness the transformative power of language education in service of democratic renewal.

## **Educating for Democracy**

The scholarly literature on the intersection of language education and democratic citizenship is nascent but growing. Researchers have begun to explore how language learning can cultivate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions associated with effective civic participation (Byram, 2008; Helm & Dabre, 2018). Studies have highlighted the potential of ELT to develop critical thinking (Crookes, 2013), promote intercultural understanding (Helm & Dabre, 2018), and inspire civic engagement (Abdi, 2014).

However, the empirical evidence on the specific mechanisms and outcomes of democratically-oriented ELT remains limited. Much of the existing research has focused on theoretical frameworks or small-scale case studies, leaving a gap in qualitative explorations of ELT educators' perspectives and experiences in promoting democratic principles (Osler & Starkey, 2018).

This study aims to address this research lacuna by conducting an in-depth, contextually-grounded investigation of ELT programs across multiple national settings. By examining the experiences and insights of teachers implementing democratically-infused language curricula and pedagogies, it seeks to expand the scholarly understanding of how English language education can be leveraged as a tool for democratic empowerment.

Keddie and Churchill (2009) argue that in line with the goals of equity and justice, educating for democracy enables schools and teachers to make a difference in terms of connecting pedagogy to social change. According to Boyd et al. (2007), education for democracy is not only a matter of transforming knowledge, but also of promoting a humanly possible world. This holds the significance of teaching and learning practices for 'shaping the experiences and trajectories of students' lives' (Beaudry 2015, p. 29).

Teaching needs to be socially and culturally responsive in order to enable all students to reach high levels of learning and to be prepared for active and full participation in a democratic society (Beaudry 2015). This socio-cultural approach to teaching and learning encourages teachers to take account of such issues as community, diversity and equity in their teaching and provide students with more opportunities to reflect on personal life experiences related to those issues. Moll et al. (1992) acknowledge that teachers should have the ability to explore students' funds of knowledge and socio-cultural structures that exist in the democratic communities where students should live.

## **Method**

The study employs a qualitative approach to research within a case study design to investigate the implementation of democratically-oriented ELT programs. The research was conducted across five rural secondary schools in Probolinggo regency. The participants involved five secondary school ELT educators who had presumably experienced implementing democratically-infused language curricula and pedagogies. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a range of teaching experience and institutional contexts.

The study utilized a combination of in-depth interviews and classroom observations to gather rich, contextual data. Semi-structured interviews explored participants' perspectives, experiences, and challenges in promoting democratic values and competencies

through their ELT practice. Classroom observations provided insights into the implementation of democratically-oriented teaching and learning activities. The qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis, a systematic approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher coded the interview transcripts and observation notes, inductively generating themes that addressed the research objectives.

### **Findings and Discussions**

The thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed several key insights into how ELT educators cultivate democratic citizens in their classrooms: (1) Critical thinking and problem-solving; participants emphasized the importance of incorporating activities that challenge students to think critically, analyze multiple perspectives, and engage in collaborative problem-solving (Crookes, 2013). (2) intercultural understanding and dialogue; participants highlighted the value of using language learning to foster cross-cultural awareness, empathy, and communication (Helm & Dabre, 2018). (3) Civic engagement and social action; participants described how they integrated project-based learning, service-learning, and other forms of civic engagement into their ELT curricula (Abdi, 2014). (4) Challenges and constraints; teacher participants also discussed various challenges in implementing democratically-oriented ELT, including lack of institutional support and resistance from students or parents (Osler & Starkey, 2018).

The findings of this qualitative study illuminate the ways in which ELT educators are leveraging language learning to cultivate democratic values, skills, and behaviors among their students. By integrating critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and civic engagement into their curricula and pedagogies, these teachers are empowering learners with the competencies necessary for effective democratic participation. These insights hold important implications for policymakers, education administrators, and ELT practitioners seeking to reimagine language education as a tool for democratic renewal. Promoting democratically-oriented ELT not only benefits individual learners but also contributes to the collective strengthening of civil society and democratic institutions (Giroux, 2020; Biesta, 2020).

The participating teachers also indicate that their responses to the matter of deliberative democracy in the classroom cluster around several issues: accommodating students' proposals for how the classroom works and runs, widening students' participation, and establishing a relationship with the parents of their students.

These responses illustrate a democratic strategy to involve students in making important decisions. Beyer (1996) argues that involving students in decision making can be the primary avenue to students' commitment to responsibility, hard work and diligence. 'If classroom members cannot arrive at negotiated agreements about issues, they will have a difficult time sharing power' (Roche 1996, p. 31). In other words, cooperation in making decisions could encourage shared respect and empathy amongst students and teachers within classrooms to promote effective teaching and learning.

In addition, these teachers encapsulate the ideals for encouraging students to participate more actively in learning, in this respect, through the provision of freedom to choose and develop critical thinking. Freedom to choose and critical awareness to challenge authority are integral to help maintain the democratic account of a classroom (Schubert & White 1998;

Roche 1996). Both enable teachers to explore student creativity and help students become critical viewers of society, viewers who see realities socially and culturally (Schubert & White 1998).

However, the study also underscores the challenges and constraints that educators face in implementing such approaches, highlighting the need for systemic support, professional development, and a shift in educational paradigms. The advent of constraints potentially limits the development of students' capabilities to learn the values of democracy. These constraints include the lack of school facilities and adequately credentialed teachers in rural schools.

The lack of school facilities and appropriately qualified staff members due to an unfair distribution of resources can potentially limit the expansion of students' capabilities to learn democracy. Sen (2009) is aware of the significance of resources in achieving functionings, despite his view that mere availability of resources does not guarantee achieved functionings. Hence, Sen (2009) creates a connection between resources and freedom (opportunities). This connection can be a tool for anticipating possible constraints that are embedded in conversion factors (Sen 2009; Nambiar 2011).

Sen (2009) suggests three conversion factors that envisage a possibility to restrict or encourage the conversion of resources into functionings: personal characteristics (e.g. intelligence, physical health, mental handicap), social characteristics (e.g. social norms, cultures, government policy) and environmental characteristics (e.g. the provision of public goods and facilities) (see also Robeyns 2005; Walker 2006b; Nambiar 2011). Hence, comments from the participants indicate constraints which are embedded within the conversion factor of environmental characteristics. If the government does not provide adequate learning facilities and professionals in rural schools, there could be constraints impeding the development of students' capabilities to achieve outcomes they have reason to value.

## **Conclusion**

As the world grapples with the erosion of democratic norms and institutions, the role of education in cultivating active, engaged citizens has taken on heightened significance. This qualitative study has shed light on how English language teaching, when strategically designed to integrate critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and civic engagement, can make a meaningful contribution to this democratic imperative.

By empowering language learners with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions associated with effective democratic participation, ELT can serve as a powerful lever for advancing democratic values and principles worldwide. As the global community seeks to reinvigorate and safeguard open, pluralistic societies, the insights from this research offer a compelling roadmap for harnessing the transformative potential of language education in service of democratic renewal.

The research also notes some constraints that potentially limit the development of students' capability to actively participate in learning the values of democracy. With the findings and constraints, further research is needed to explore the long-term impact of democratically-infused ELT programs and to investigate effective strategies for scaling and adapting these practices across diverse contexts.

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