

# WORDS MATTER: INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE AS A PATHWAY TO ETHICAL COMMUNICATION AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

Language is a powerful social resource that shapes identities, relationships, belonging, and social values. As higher education institutions become increasingly diverse, inclusive language has emerged as an important dimension of ethical communication and global citizenship. This conceptual paper proposes a framework for understanding inclusive language as a pathway through which higher education English language education can contribute to respectful communication, intercultural competence, and responsible participation in diverse societies. Drawing on Critical Pedagogy, Identity Theory, intercultural communication, Global Englishes, and global citizenship education, the paper synthesises existing scholarship concerning language, identity, diversity, and social inclusion. The discussion considers gender-inclusive language as an important dimension of inclusive communication while recognising that inclusion also encompasses cultural, linguistic, and social differences. The paper proposes that English language classrooms should move beyond a narrow emphasis on linguistic accuracy and incorporate opportunities for students to critically examine how language represents identities, constructs relationships, and reflects social and cultural assumptions. The proposed framework connects language awareness, recognition of identity and difference, inclusive language practices, ethical communication, intercultural communicative competence, and global citizenship. Rather than treating inclusive language as a fixed set of linguistic rules, the framework conceptualises it as a reflective, ethical, and context-sensitive communicative practice. The paper argues that integrating inclusive language into higher education English language education can contribute to the development of learners who are linguistically competent, interculturally aware, and socially responsible. The framework provides a conceptual foundation for future pedagogical development and empirical investigation.

## 1. Introduction

Language is much more than a system for transmitting information. It is a central means through which individuals construct identities, establish relationships, express values, and participate in social life. The words people select and the ways in which they address, describe, and represent others can communicate recognition and respect; however, they can also reproduce assumptions, stereotypes, exclusion, and

marginalisation. For this reason, language has an important ethical dimension that deserves attention in education.

Higher education provides a particularly significant context for examining the relationship between language and inclusion. Contemporary universities bring together students and educators with diverse linguistic, cultural, gender, social, and educational backgrounds. Increased internationalisation, student mobility, digital communication, and the

widespread use of English as a lingua franca have further expanded opportunities for interaction across differences. Students are therefore expected to communicate not only within their own cultural and linguistic communities but also across increasingly diverse academic, professional, and social environments.

This changing environment creates a need to reconsider the objectives of English language education. Linguistic competence remains essential for academic achievement, employability, and professional communication. However, grammatical accuracy and vocabulary knowledge alone do not necessarily ensure respectful or effective communication across different cultures. A learner may produce grammatically accurate language while simultaneously relying on stereotypes or assumptions about another person or group. Similarly, a speaker may possess considerable linguistic knowledge but lack awareness of how a particular expression can be interpreted within a different cultural or social context.

Inclusive language provides one possible pathway for addressing this challenge. Universally understood, inclusive language refers to forms of communication that seek to recognise human diversity and avoid unnecessary exclusion, stereotyping, or marginalisation. Gender-inclusive language represents one important dimension of this area. However, inclusive communication extends beyond gender to include cultural, linguistic, social, and other dimensions of human difference.

Formato and Somma (2023), In their sociolinguistic examination of gender-inclusive language in Italy, Formato and Somma (2023) demonstrate that linguistic debates concerning gender cannot be separated from broader social and cultural developments. Therefore, language choices are not simply technical matters of grammar. They can reflect changing understandings of identity and social participation.

The educational dimension of inclusive language is important in this regard. Kosnick (2021) approached inclusive language from a pedagogical perspective and situated it within broader efforts to address diversity and inclusivity in the classroom. Such perspectives suggest that students can be encouraged to develop an awareness of language as a social practice rather than being taught isolated vocabulary items or grammatical structures.

This understanding is consistent with critical approaches to language education. Phipps and Guilherme (2004) bring political and critical perspectives to language and intercultural communication, emphasising the relationship between language, culture, identity, and power. Critical pedagogy challenges the assumption that education is simply a neutral process of transmitting knowledge. Instead, it encourages learners to question assumptions, examine social relations, and recognise how knowledge and communication are shaped by wider contexts.

Cummins (2000) similarly emphasised the potential of transformative pedagogy in language education. From this perspective, language learning can become a space in which learners develop not only linguistic abilities but also a greater awareness of social and cultural realities.

The relationship between language, identity, and English is further highlighted by Norton (2015), whose work on identity and investment in English internationally demonstrates the importance of understanding language learning in relation to learners' identities and social positioning. English is not experienced by all learners in the same way; it can provide opportunities for participation while also being connected to questions of power, identity, and belonging.

The growing use of English across cultural and linguistic boundaries also makes intercultural communication increasingly relevant. Lee (2018), who examined computer-mediated intercultural communication in English education, highlighted the pedagogical challenges associated with developing meaningful intercultural communication. Such challenges are particularly relevant in contemporary higher education, where digital communication has become an integral part of academic and social interaction.

Fang and Baker (2021) further connect critical pedagogy in English language teaching with global Englishes and intercultural citizenship. This perspective challenges narrow assumptions about English language education and highlights the importance of preparing learners for communication within linguistically and culturally diverse environments.

At the broader institutional level, global citizenship is an important objective of higher education. Horey et al. (2018) identified higher education as a significant context for global citizenship education

and reviewed the empirical evidence associated with the concept. However, global citizenship cannot be understood solely as the ability to operate successfully in international environments. Jooste and Heleta (2017) provide a critical distinction between global citizenship and the production of globally competent graduates, drawing attention to broader questions of social responsibility and perspectives from the Global South.

Bosio and de Wit (2025) further connect global citizenship education with service to society, inclusion, and equity. Their discussion reinforces the idea that higher education has responsibilities that extend beyond the development of individual academic or professional competencies.

Against this background, this study proposes a conceptual framework connecting inclusive language, ethical communication, intercultural competence, and global citizenship in higher education. This study does not present an empirical investigation and does not claim findings from participants or field data. Instead, it synthesises existing scholarship and develops a theoretical and pedagogical proposition that can subsequently be examined through empirical research.

The paper is guided by three central questions:

1. How can inclusive language be conceptualized within higher education English language education?
2. How can critical pedagogy and intercultural communication support inclusive language practices?
3. How can inclusive language contribute conceptually to ethical communication and global citizenship?

The paper subsequently discusses these questions through a review of relevant literature and proposes a conceptual framework for integrating inclusive communication into higher education English language education.

## 2. Inclusive Language, Identity and Higher Education

Inclusive language is fundamentally concerned with the relationship between communication and social participation. It involves recognising that linguistic choices can affect how individuals and groups are represented and perceived. In educational settings,

this relationship becomes particularly significant because classroom communication contributes to students' experiences of belonging, recognition, and participation.

One of the most visible areas of inclusive language is gender. Languages contain structures and conventions that encode assumptions concerning gender. Historically, certain masculine forms have been used generically to represent groups containing people of different genders. Contemporary discussions of gender-inclusive language have questioned whether such conventions adequately represent diverse identities.

Formato and Somma (2023) demonstrated that gender-inclusive language must be understood as a sociolinguistic phenomenon rather than simply as a question of grammatical substitution. Debates surrounding inclusive language are connected to wider changes in the social understanding of gender and identity. This observation is relevant to higher education because students need opportunities to understand why language choice may carry social significance.

Therefore, an educational approach that treats inclusive language as a list of prohibited and preferred words may be insufficient. Such an approach can create compliance without necessarily increasing awareness. Students may learn to replace one expression with another without understanding the social reasoning for the change.

Kosnick (2021) provides a pedagogical perspective that places inclusive language within the broader context of diversity and inclusion education. This approach supports the argument that learners should be encouraged to reflect on language use and its relationship with social differences.

Identity is central to this process of socialisation. Language is one of the means through which individuals communicate who they are and how they position themselves in relation to others. Norton (2015) demonstrated the importance of identity in understanding English language learning and use. Learners' engagement with English is connected to their social identities, opportunities, relationships, and imagined communities.

Consequently, inclusive language education needs to acknowledge that students do not enter the classroom as culturally or socially neutral language

users. They bring their own linguistic histories, cultural experiences, identities, and assumptions. These experiences influence how they interpret language and communicate with others.

Higher education classrooms therefore offer an important space for developing awareness of linguistic representations. Students can be encouraged to examine questions such as the following:

- How does a particular expression represent people?
- What assumptions about identity are embedded in a linguistic form?
- Who is included and who might be overlooked?
- How might different audiences interpret the same expression?
- What alternatives could communicate the intended meaning more respectfully?

These questions transform inclusive language from a vocabulary exercise into an opportunity for critical language awareness.

### 3. Critical Pedagogy and Language Education

Critical pedagogy provides an important theoretical foundation for the proposed framework because it encourages educators and learners to examine education's social and political dimensions.

Phipps and Guilherme (2004) connect language and intercultural communication with political approaches, demonstrating that language learning is situated within broader relationships involving culture, identity, power, and social interaction. This perspective challenges the exclusive technical understanding of language education.

Cummins (2000) similarly presents the transformative possibilities of language education. A transformative approach recognises that language classrooms can provide opportunities for learners to engage critically with social realities, rather than simply acquiring linguistic forms.

This is particularly relevant to English language teaching in Japan. English has historically been associated with particular cultural and linguistic norms, and traditional approaches to English

education have sometimes privileged specific varieties or cultural perspectives. However, the global use of English has made communication among speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds increasingly common and necessary.

Bozkurt and Topkaya (2023) highlight the relevance of critical pedagogy in English language teaching. A critical approach encourages students to question assumptions and examine language in relation to society rather than viewing English simply as a neutral technical skill.

The implications of inclusive language are significant. If students are encouraged to critically examine language, they can begin to identify how ordinary expressions may reflect assumptions about gender, culture, identity, or social groups.

Critical pedagogy also changes the role of teachers. Rather than being the sole authority who determines the "correct" way to think about inclusion, teachers can become facilitators of informed discussions. Students can examine different perspectives and develop the ability to justify their linguistic choices.

This approach is particularly important because inclusive language can be contested. Different communities may prefer different expressions, and language practices change with time. Consequently, inclusive communication cannot always be reduced to a universal set of guidelines.

A critical pedagogy of inclusive language should therefore develop students' capacity to ask why a particular expression is used, what assumptions it may communicate, and how it may be received by different audiences.

### 4. Inclusive Language Pedagogy

Inclusive language pedagogy is an approach to language education that combines linguistic development with awareness of diversity, identity, and social responsibility.

The concept does not require inclusive language to become a separate subject matter. Instead, it can be integrated into existing English language teaching practices.

For example, grammar activities can use examples representing diverse individuals and social contexts. Vocabulary lessons can examine how occupational and social terminology represent gender and

identity. Speaking activities can focus on respectful disagreement. Writing activities can explore inclusive forms of reference in academic and professional communication.

This approach has two important advantages.

First, it preserves the central purpose of English language education: developing students' ability to communicate effectively. Second, it broadens the concept of effective communication to include social and ethical dimensions.

Inclusive language pedagogy should also avoid presenting students with the assumption that there is always a universally appropriate expression. Instead, learners can be taught to consider the context, audience, purpose, relationships, and cultural expectations.

This finding is consistent with the broader principles of intercultural communication. Communication involves negotiation between people who may not share identical assumptions regarding language and social interaction.

An inclusive language lesson could, therefore, involve a short communication scenario in which students compare different ways of expressing the same message. Students can discuss which expressions are more appropriate in particular contexts and explain their reasoning.

Such activities can develop linguistic awareness while encouraging reflection.

Teachers can further introduce authentic examples from workplace communication, university correspondence, the media, advertisements, and digital platforms. Students can identify inclusive and exclusionary tendencies and consider how language can be revised.

In this way, inclusive language becomes connected to real-world communication, rather than being treated as an abstract classroom topic.

## 5. Intercultural Communication and Global Englishes

The relationship between inclusive language and intercultural communication is particularly important in English education.

Intercultural communication requires individuals to interact with people whose cultural assumptions,

linguistic resources, and communicative practices may differ from their own. Effective intercultural communication, therefore, requires more than grammatical competence.

Lee (2018) demonstrates the relevance of computer-mediated intercultural communication in English education. Digital environments create opportunities for interaction across geographical and cultural boundaries but also introduce pedagogical challenges. Students may encounter unfamiliar communication styles, cultural references, forms of politeness, and interpretations of meaning.

These challenges are increasingly relevant to university students, whose academic and professional communication frequently occurs through email, online learning platforms, social media, video conferencing, and other digital environments.

English functions as an important medium in such interactions. The speaker and listener may have entirely different first languages and may use different varieties of English. This makes it necessary to move beyond the assumption that successful communication requires complete conformity to one linguistic or cultural model.

Fang and Baker (2021) connect the critical pedagogy of Global Englishes with intercultural citizenship. Their perspective is important for the present framework because it positions English education within a world in which English is used by diverse communities for various purposes.

From this perspective, students need to develop the ability to negotiate meaning and differences rather than simply reproducing predetermined linguistic norms.

Inclusive language contributes to this process. When learners consider how their words may be interpreted by people with different identities and cultural backgrounds, they develop a form of intercultural awareness.

The relationship can therefore be conceptualized as follows:

**English language competence + critical language awareness + intercultural awareness = more responsible communicative practice.**

This proposition does not suggest that inclusive

language automatically produces intercultural competence. Rather, it suggests that inclusive language education can provide one pedagogical context in which intercultural competence is developed.

## 6. From Communicative Competence to Ethical Communication

Traditional language teaching has prioritised communicative competence. Students must be able to express their ideas clearly, understand others, and participate effectively in academic and professional interactions.

However, communication can be effective in a narrow functional sense while simultaneously creating social problems. A message can successfully transmit information but simultaneously communicate disrespect, stereotyping, or exclusion.

Therefore, the proposed framework distinguishes between functional communicative competence and ethical communication.

Ethical communication in this study refers to communication that recognises the dignity of others and involves consideration of how linguistic choices affect relationships and participation. It includes respect, empathy, responsibility, awareness, and contextual judgement.

Inclusive language is relevant because linguistic choices are part of the ethical process.

For example, a university student writing to an international colleague needs to consider not only whether the email is grammatically correct, but also whether its tone is respectful and understandable within the relationship. Similarly, a student participating in a multicultural classroom needs to consider how disagreements can be expressed without dismissing another person's cultural or social perspective.

This suggests that English language education can include an ethical dimension without becoming detached from the language learning.

Academic writing, professional communication, presentations, discussions, and group work provide opportunities to develop ethical communication.

The goal is not to make students afraid of incorrect language use. Rather, students should become more

confident in recognising and responding to uncertainty appropriately.

For example, when unsure of how an individual wishes to be addressed, respectful communication may involve asking rather than assuming. This represents a communicative skill as well as ethical practice.

## 7. Global Citizenship in Higher Education

The proposed relationship between inclusive language and global citizenship becomes clearer when global citizenship is understood as more than just international competence.

Horey et al. (2018) demonstrate the breadth of scholarship surrounding global citizenship and higher education. Their scoping review indicates that global citizenship has become an important area of higher education research.

However, this concept requires critical consideration. Jooste and Heleta (2017) distinguish global citizenship from the narrower objective of producing globally competent graduates. This distinction is important because students may possess international knowledge and communication skills without necessarily developing a strong sense of social responsibility or commitment to inclusion.

Therefore, global citizenship involves questions concerning how individuals participate in diverse communities and respond to differences.

Bosio and de Wit (2025) connect global citizenship education with societal service, inclusion, and equity. Their perspective reinforces the idea that higher education has responsibilities that extend beyond individual achievements.

Communication is central to these responsibilities. Students participate in communities through language use. They negotiate disagreements, collaborate on projects, interact with colleagues, communicate online and participate in public and professional environments.

Consequently, communication can be regarded as an everyday global citizenship site.

A student does not need to travel internationally to encounter differences. Multilingual and multicultural university classrooms already provide opportunities for students to communicate across

social and cultural boundaries.

Therefore, inclusive language offers a practical mechanism for bringing global citizenship into everyday classroom practice.

Instead of teaching global citizenship solely as an abstract concept, educators can ask students to consider how they communicate with people with different experiences and perspectives.

## 8. Proposed Conceptual Framework

Drawing together the literature discussed above, this paper proposes a conceptual framework in which inclusive language operates as a pathway connecting English language education with ethical communication and global citizenship.

The framework consists of six interconnected dimensions.

### 8.1 Language Awareness

The first dimension is awareness that language carries social meaning. Students recognize that words do more than communicate literal information and can also communicate assumptions concerning identity, culture, relationships, and belonging.

### 8.2 Recognition of Identity and Difference

The second dimension involves recognizing that individuals possess diverse identities and experiences. This dimension draws particularly on the relationship between language and identity highlighted by Norton (2015) and on sociolinguistic perspectives concerning gender-inclusive language.

### 8.3 Inclusive Language Practices

The third dimension involves applying this awareness to linguistic choices. Students consider whether their language unnecessarily excludes stereotypes or marginalizes others.

Inclusive language at this stage remains context sensitive. The objective is not mechanical replacement of words but informed communicative choice.

### 8.4 Ethical Communication

The fourth dimension involves considering the

interpersonal consequences of language. Students develop awareness of respect, dignity, empathy, responsibility, and appropriate interaction.

### 8.5 Intercultural Communicative Competence

The fifth dimension extends these principles to interactions across cultural and linguistic differences. Students learn to negotiate meaning, recognize alternative perspectives, and respond appropriately to unfamiliar communicative practices.

### 8.6 Global Citizenship

The final dimension connects communication with wider social participation. Students use their linguistic and intercultural abilities to participate responsibly in diverse communities.

The proposed relationship can therefore be represented as:



The framework is conceptual rather than causal. The arrows represent a proposed relationship among educational processes rather than empirically established causal effects.

## 9. Integrating the Framework Into English Language Education

The proposed framework can be integrated into higher education English language classrooms through existing pedagogical practices.

### 9.1 Classroom Materials

Teaching materials can be examined for unnecessary stereotypes or limited representations of gender, culture, occupations, and social identities. Materials can incorporate diverse names, contexts, professions, communities, and perspectives.

This does not mean that every teaching text needs

to represent every possible identity. Rather, the overall curriculum should avoid repeatedly presenting one narrow representation as universal.

## 9.2 Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary activities can examine how words and expressions represent social groups. Students can compare gendered and gender-neutral occupational terms and discuss how terminology changes across contexts.

The purpose is to develop awareness rather than simply prescribe one form.

## 9.3 Grammar Teaching

Grammar activities can incorporate inclusive examples without compromising grammatical objectives. Pronouns, possessives, agreement, and reference can provide opportunities to discuss how English represents individuals and groups.

## 9.4 Speaking and Discussion

Discussion activities can be designed around topics involving cultural difference, social identity, communication, and global interaction. Students can practice disagreement strategies, clarification, turn-taking, and respectful response.

The teacher can emphasize that respectful disagreement is an important communication skill.

## 9.5 Academic Writing

Academic writing provides opportunities to discuss inclusive reference to individuals and groups. Students can examine how scholars describe communities and populations and how terminology influences representation.

## 9.6 Professional Communication

Students can analyze emails, reports, notices, applications, and workplace conversations. Activities can address appropriate forms of address, respectful tone, cultural expectations, and audience awareness.

## 9.7 Digital Communication

Given the importance of online interaction, students can analyze examples of social media communication, discussion-board posts, online

meetings, and digital correspondence. They can examine how the absence of facial expressions and other contextual cues may affect interpretation.

These activities can help students understand that inclusive communication is relevant beyond the physical classroom.

## 10. The Role of the Teacher

The successful implementation of inclusive language education depends partly on the teacher's role as facilitator.

Teachers do not need to present themselves as authorities in every aspect of identity or culture. Instead, they can create learning environments in which students are encouraged to ask questions, listen to different perspectives, and reflect on their assumptions.

This approach is consistent with critical pedagogy. The classroom becomes a space for dialogue rather than one-way transmission of predetermined answers.

Teachers can also model inclusive communication in their own classroom language. The ways educators address students, construct examples, respond to mistakes, and facilitate discussions provide students with implicit lessons about communication.

Teacher education therefore has an important role. Professional development can introduce teachers to:

- gender-inclusive language;
- intercultural communication;
- critical language awareness;
- Global Englishes;
- inclusive classroom practices;
- strategies for managing sensitive discussions; and
- approaches to respectful disagreement.

Such professional development should also recognize that teachers themselves operate within particular cultural and institutional contexts.

## 11. Inclusive Language and the Diverse University

The university can be understood as both a linguistic and social environment. Students communicate with lecturers, administrative staff, peers, international students, visiting academics, employers, and wider communities.

Institutional communication consequently influences the experience of inclusion.

University websites, forms, policies, announcements, emails, learning-management systems, promotional materials, and classroom resources all use language to communicate institutional values.

If inclusion is understood as an institutional objective, attention to communication becomes relevant beyond English language classrooms.

However, this does not mean that universities should impose rigid linguistic requirements on every interaction. An overly prescriptive institutional approach could create anxiety or reduce meaningful engagement with the underlying principles.

A more productive approach would involve developing awareness and providing guidance while allowing for contextual judgement.

Students can be encouraged to understand why inclusive communication matters and to develop the confidence to make appropriate decisions in different situations.

## 12. Theoretical Contribution

The central conceptual contribution of this study is the proposed connection between inclusive language and global citizenship through ethical and intercultural communication.

The existing literature provides an important foundation for each part of this relationship.

Formato and Somma (2023) demonstrated the sociolinguistic significance of gender-inclusive language. Kosnick (2021) connects inclusive language with diversity and inclusion pedagogies. Phipps and Guilherme (2004) established critical approaches to language and intercultural communication. Cummins (2000) highlighted transformative possibilities in language education, while Norton (2015) demonstrated the importance

of identity in understanding English language learning and use.

Lee (2018) provides a relevant perspective on intercultural communication in English education, particularly in digitally mediated environments. Fang and Baker (2021) further connect critical pedagogy, global Englishes, and intercultural citizenship.

At a broader level, Horey et al. (2018) established the importance of global citizenship in higher education research, while Jooste and Heleta (2017) provided a critical perspective on the relationship between global citizenship and global competence. Bosio and de Wit (2025) connect global citizenship education with inclusivity, equity, and service to society.

The proposed framework brings these strands together by positioning inclusive language as a practical educational path.

This conceptualization shifts inclusive language away from a narrow understanding of linguistic etiquette. Instead, it positions inclusive communication as part of critical language awareness and social participation.

Therefore, the framework proposes that English language education can contribute to global citizenship by developing students' ability to communicate internationally and by developing awareness of how communication affects identity, belonging, and participation.

## 13. Implications for Theory and Practice

This framework has implications for educational theory and practice.

Theoretically, it expands the understanding of communicative competence by emphasising the relationship between linguistic ability and ethical responsibility. It also connects areas of scholarship that are sometimes treated separately: gender-inclusive language, critical pedagogy, intercultural communication, global Englishes, and global citizenship education.

Practically, the framework suggests that inclusive communication does not require major curricular restructuring. Existing English language activities can be adapted to incorporate greater attention to identity, representation, audience, context, and cultural differences.

This means that learning outcomes could include elements of critical language awareness and intercultural communication alongside conventional linguistic outcomes for curriculum developers.

For teachers, this means using classroom interactions and teaching materials as opportunities for reflection.

This means developing the ability to make informed linguistic choices rather than simply memorising language rules.

For institutions, this means recognising that communication contributes to the wider culture of inclusion.

This approach may be particularly relevant to higher education institutions preparing graduates for increasingly interconnected workplaces. Professional communication frequently involves collaboration with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, graduates require not only technical expertise but also the ability to communicate appropriately across different cultures.

## 14. Challenges and Considerations

Although the proposed framework offers potential benefits, several challenges must be addressed.

First, inclusive language can be a contested area. Different communities may hold different preferences regarding terminology and forms of address. Therefore, educators should avoid presenting inclusion as a simple universal formula.

Second, students may initially perceive inclusive language as unrelated to English learning. Teachers must demonstrate how it connects directly to communication, audience awareness, professional interaction, and intercultural competence.

Third, discussions involving identity and culture can become sensitive. Teachers need appropriate strategies for facilitating respectful dialogues and managing disagreements.

Fourth, educators may possess different levels of familiarity with inclusive communication. Therefore, professional development is important.

Finally, inclusion should not be limited to symbolic linguistic changes. Language is one dimension of a broader institutional culture. Inclusive

communication should therefore be accompanied by wider efforts to create equitable and respectful learning environments.

These challenges do not undermine the proposed framework's effectiveness. Instead, they reinforce the need to approach inclusive language as a reflective practice rather than a rigid checklist.

## 15. Proposed Directions for Future Research

As this study is conceptual, the framework requires future empirical investigation.

Future studies could examine university students' awareness of inclusive language and investigate how students from different academic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds understand the concept.

Research could also investigate teachers' perspectives on incorporating inclusive communication into English language curricula. Classroom-based research could examine the effectiveness of specific pedagogical activities designed to develop critical language awareness.

Another important direction concerns the relationship between inclusive language and intercultural competence. Future researchers could develop instruments to examine whether students who demonstrate greater awareness of inclusive communication also demonstrate particular dimensions of intercultural communicative competence.

The relationship between inclusive communication and global citizenship also warrants empirical examination. Future studies could explore whether classroom interventions addressing inclusive language contribute to students' awareness of social responsibility, inclusion, and participation in diverse communities.

Digital communication is another important area of research. As university students increasingly use digital platforms for academic and social interactions, future research should examine inclusive language practices in online learning environments, social media, email, and computer-mediated intercultural communication.

Finally, greater attention should be paid to the Sri Lankan and wider South Asian higher education contexts. Much of the conceptual discussion surrounding inclusive language, global citizenship, and intercultural communication has emerged from

international scholarship. Local research could examine how these concepts interact with multilingualism, cultural diversity, and the specific social realities of universities in South Asia.

Such empirical research could test, refine, extend, or challenge the relationships proposed in this conceptual framework.

## 16. Conclusion

Traditionally, language education has focused on developing linguistic knowledge, grammatical accuracy, fluency, and communicative competence. These are essential objectives. However, the increasing diversity of higher education environments requires a broader understanding of communication and its social implications.

This conceptual paper proposes inclusive language as a pathway through which higher education English language education can contribute to ethical communication, intercultural competence, and global citizenship.

The argument begins with the recognition that language participates in the construction of identity and social relationships. Gender-inclusive language illustrates this relationship particularly clearly, but inclusive communication extends beyond gender to encompass cultural, linguistic, and social differences.

Critical pedagogy provides an important foundation for this approach because it encourages learners to examine the relationship between language, identity, culture, and power. Intercultural communication extends this perspective by focusing on communication across differences, while global Englishes highlight the changing linguistic realities within which English is used. Global citizenship education provides a broader social context by connecting higher education with inclusion, equity, participation, and responsibility.

The proposed framework integrates these dimensions through six interconnected stages: language awareness, recognition of identity and difference, inclusive language practices, ethical communication, intercultural communicative competence, and global citizenship.

The framework does not suggest that inclusive language should adhere to a rigid set of linguistic rules. In contrast, it proposes that students should develop the awareness and judgement required to

make respectful and context-sensitive communicative choices.

English classrooms can play an important role in this process. Through classroom materials, vocabulary activities, grammar exercises, speaking tasks, academic writing, professional communication, and digital communication activities, teachers can create opportunities for students to reflect on the relationship between language and social interactions.

This approach does not replace traditional language education. Rather, it expands its purpose. Students continue to develop the linguistic knowledge required for academic and professional success while learning to consider the social consequences of their communicative choices.

Ultimately, inclusive language can be understood as being more than just terminology. It is a means through which learners can practice recognition, respect, reflection, and responsible participation in the community. In an increasingly interconnected higher education environment, these capacities are relevant not only for effective communication but also for the broader educational purpose of preparing students to participate in diverse societies.

Therefore, the central proposition of this paper is that words matter because communication is connected to identity, belonging, participation, and responsibility. By integrating inclusive language with critical and intercultural English language education, higher education institutions can create opportunities for students to develop not only stronger communicative abilities but also greater awareness of their responsibilities as participants in an interconnected world.

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#### Appendix 1: Proposed conceptual framework

**Table 1:** Proposed pathway from inclusive language to global citizenship

| Stage                                               | Description                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Language Awareness                               | Developing awareness of how language choices can communicate meanings, values, assumptions, and social attitudes.                       |
| 2. Recognition of Identity and Difference           | Recognizing that individuals have diverse identities, cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives.                              |
| 3. Inclusive Language Practices                     | Applying language practices that avoid unnecessary exclusion, stereotyping, discrimination, and cultural insensitivity.                 |
| 4. Ethical Communication                            | Using language responsibly to promote respect, empathy, dignity, and equitable participation in communication.                          |
| 5. Intercultural Communicative Competence           | Developing the ability to communicate appropriately and effectively across cultural and linguistic differences.                         |
| 6. Responsible Participation and Global Citizenship | Encouraging learners to participate responsibly in diverse social contexts and contribute to more inclusive and respectful communities. |

**Source:** Author's conceptualization based on the literature reviewed in this paper.

**Appendix 2: Pedagogical application of the proposed framework**

| <b>Framework Stage</b>                           | <b>Possible Classroom Application</b>                                                                                        | <b>Intended Learning Outcome</b>                                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Language Awareness                               | Analyze examples of language used in academic, professional, and everyday contexts.                                          | Students recognize how language choices can influence meaning and social interaction. |
| Recognition of Identity and Difference           | Discuss how identity, culture, gender, language, and social background may influence communication.                          | Students develop awareness of diverse identities and perspectives.                    |
| Inclusive Language Practices                     | Identify and revise potentially exclusionary, stereotypical, or culturally insensitive expressions.                          | Students develop practical strategies for using more inclusive language.              |
| Ethical Communication                            | Engage in role-plays, discussions, and collaborative tasks involving respectful communication.                               | Students practice communicating with empathy, respect, and sensitivity.               |
| Intercultural Communicative Competence           | Use intercultural scenarios and case-based activities to explore communication across cultural differences.                  | Students develop greater awareness of intercultural communication strategies.         |
| Responsible Participation and Global Citizenship | Discuss social issues and complete collaborative activities that encourage responsible participation in diverse communities. | Students connect language learning with ethical participation and global citizenship. |

**Source:** Author's conceptualization.