

Character Education in Demand for the University EFL classroom

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Introduction

Every school, every teacher and every parent throughout the human history have been trying to provide the best education to their next generation. The aims of education are to help every student grow into an informed, responsible, and caring citizen for the society they live in. As advocated by Dewey (1916/2004), a leading figure of the progressive movement in the U.S. education during the 20th century, the goal of education is to teach students to recognize and value human differences and to learn to participate in a democracy in nonviolent ways. Although educators have long agreed that schools should produce socially engaged, healthy, happy citizens, consensus on how to achieve this goal is yet to be reached. When students are engaged in the traditional academic activities provided by schools, their social, emotional and ethical learning is often taking place on a scale less noted.

Social-emotional skills, or “emotional intelligence,” are a set of abilities that allows students to work with others, learn effectively, and serve essential roles in their families, communities and places of work (Elias et al.). Social-emotional learning takes place in a safe, caring environment in which students are encouraged to expose their vulnerability by taking risks to learn to “read” themselves and others. Longitudinal research shows that social and emotional competencies are predictive of children’s ability to learn and to solve problems nonviolently (Elias et al.). What is encouraging is that the vast majority of children, unless with severe autistic disorders, can learn to become more socially and emotionally competent (Elias et al.). Students of all ages need to learn how to handle and solve their social and emotional problems because their cognitive learning relies on their emotional stability and social adaptability.

Emotional stability entails proper management of one's emotions and, in a more optimistic term, a genuine feeling of happiness towards one's life. Recent development in positive psychology—a field of scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive (Seligman)—points to the direction that happiness indeed can be traced. According to Seligman, there are three routes to happiness: positive emotion and pleasure, engagement, and meaning. Research indicates that people who are content with their lives are those who orient their goals toward these three routes (Peterson, Park, & Seligman). When people are engaged in learning that is personally meaningful, they feel more emotionally positive, which in turn will anchor them for the quest of the learning. If the education we provide to our students allows them to develop their emotional maturity, students will be more ready to handle the various social demands readily surrounding them as well as the cognitive demands often put on by their academic authorities.

Essence of Character Education

Before the general recognition of a need to place character education into the school curriculum, children of pre-school ages normally receive much of their initial character education at home as they internalize the social rules or values passed on by their parents or significant others. Character education (or values education, moral education, ethics education) started out as a movement, in the mid-1980s across the United States, in response to a perceived character decline of the youth. The purpose is to uplift the declining moral development in youth (Mulkey). Before long, a wide variety of character education programmes were founded by national organizations or by local school districts. However, these programmes were carried out in primary education only (Leming).

Traditionally, most of the character education curriculum takes place in or prior to the elementary education. Some believe that by the time students enter college, their moral development has become stabilized, if not immutable. It is, to those

people, difficult and futile to instill any teaching of values. On the contrary, according to Kohlberg's six stages of moral development (Kohlberg), some people throughout their lives are unable to reach the final stage of the moral development. Young adults may have internalized most of the social expectations and values when they enter college. Their moral judgments are often shaky and vulnerable to various conditioning forces of their surroundings. Ethics instruction will help sustain their existing values and support continued growth of moral maturity.

Piaget's model of cognitive development also states that children progress through a series of hierarchical stages during which more mature development occurs in successive stages of thinking, each more complex than the previous stage (Piaget). More mature thinking is triggered by cognitive dissonance, which involves a "mind-boggling" situation and thus creates a disturbing state to the individual. Only by successfully balancing the cognitive disequilibrium can the individual regain the feelings of security. It is the experience of balancing a disequilibrating state that allows the individual to progress onto a higher level of cognitive maturity (Piaget). As such, presenting a moral dilemma (e.g., whether to steal a pricey drug to save one's dying son) to young adults in hopes of creating a cognitive dissonance in them serves the purpose of triggering their moral growth towards the next stage. For optimal development to take place, reminded by Shaaban, "motivating and cognitively challenging tasks must be infused into the course materials and be part of the interaction between teachers and students." (Shaaban 205)

Language Learning & Character Education

Language acquisition involves complicated processes in which individuals often need to go through many stages of learning. For example, students need to learn the specific mechanisms of the structure of the target language. While acquiring the language specifics, they also need to master the sociolinguistic rules associated with the proper usage of the language. All of these sociolinguistic rules help shape the learner's cultural knowledge of the target language. For any

individual learning a second language, the learning of the cultural rules is just as difficult, if not more so, as learning the language specifics. Their knowledge of the language specifics, in many ways, paves the way to learning the cultural rules, which in turn will complement further advancement of their language proficiency.

Teaching English as a second or foreign language used to focus mainly on the language and the cultural instruction, the two parts of which have already been a handful for all TESOL instructors around the world. Why is character education important or necessary in TESOL instruction? When a student starts with the English grammar or the vocabulary and gradually picks up the cultural elements of the language, s/he must also learn to appreciate the cultural differences between the target culture and his/her own. This inter-cultural appreciation stems from an ability to assume different perspectives, some of which may be contradictory to their own cultural rules. They learn to accommodate differences by taking on a totally different view of life.

By the same token, a student will not truly appreciate any cultural differences unless s/he has learned the value of respect. Respect for oneself and one's cultural heritage will help strengthen one's cultural identity while a respect for others, particularly those from another culture, will help the person to appreciate the differences. The value of respect, therefore, lies in its power to connect cultures and their peoples and allow them to develop a tolerant worldview towards those who may be physically or ideologically different from themselves. This universal virtue, respect for self and others, is at the core of character education across cultures and should be practiced in any age group.

The nature of character education is to sensitize students to the existing social rules and virtues while eventually nurturing their conscience towards the greater goods that help to sustain the society. One of the mission statements for character education is to develop responsible and caring students for the society. This coincides with one of the characteristics of a good language learner—learner autonomy—in that language learners need to assume responsibility of their own learning before any significant learning can occur. Therefore, nurturing students'

sense of responsibility in character education is accomplishing the same goal of learner autonomy in language learning.

Still another characteristic of a good language learner is to think critically in the target language. Critical thinking, by definition, is a way of reasoning that examines the inherent structure and logics of one's intellectual functioning. Critical thinking is considered the ultimate goal of education. Students, regardless of their ages or educational attainment, need to be exposed to an environment in which they learn to analyze the available resources, calculate their odds and make sensible decisions about their learning. For students learning a second language, they also need a similar environment in which they use their current language skills to advance their command of the language, understand the nuances involved in the language and eventually become capable of using the language to manage and think reasonably about their life choices. All of these tasks are cognitively demanding and thus require much guidance and help from the teachers. However, teaching critical thinking is by far the most challenging task because thinking takes time to mature, just as moral development would take a long time, for some their entire lifetime, to mature.

Cannon and Weinstein stipulated that moral reasoning entails critical thinking. Kohlberg also stated that "advanced moral reasoning depends upon advanced logical reasoning, which comes with continued cognitive development." Moral reasoning seems to come hand in hand with the development of logical reasoning. "Both critical thinking and moral reasoning require the analysis of issues, the synthesis of differing perspectives and bodies of information, and the evaluation of outcomes" (Weinstein). Any reasoning about ethics will not stand valid without a good foundation in logical reasoning, which makes the backbone of critical thinking. As pointed out by Lipman and Sharp, even children can be taught that there are reasons behind every ethical act. Ethical behavior must have sound reasons to back it up. In a sense, "ethical reasoning is logically valid moral reasoning" (Lipman & Sharp 2). Their proposition further affirms the strong relationship between one's cognition/critical thinking and moral/ethical reasoning.

A language learner will never achieve the top-notch state unless the learner is able to think critically in the target language. However, as found by Kohlberg, strong critical thinking capacity does not always result in high levels of moral reasoning. According to Kohlberg, most people are higher in cognitive development than they are in levels of moral reasoning. Young adults may have developed sufficient cognitive functioning upon entering college. Their moral reasoning power, however, may not have been fully cultivated. Nurturing their moral reasoning ability will help them advance their critical thinking power, which is highly valued in language learning.

Character Education in EFL contexts

The purpose of incorporating values education into the EFL classroom is to provide a content-based environment for students to learn the language as well as the ethics. As English expands to various parts of the world as a lingua franca, learning English as a second (ESL) or foreign (EFL) language has become a global necessity. However, unlike the ESL condition where students are able to access authentic language input and countless interlocutors as their learning resources, the EFL classroom has relatively less language input from its surroundings and limited interlocutors for its learners to practice the language with. EFL instructors, therefore, play a crucial role in providing their students with a climate conducive to the overall development of the language. EFL students may not enjoy as much of an all-English environment as their ESL counterparts do, but a learning environment filled with activities that are in line with the communicative approach will allow students to use the English language to perform meaningful tasks, which will in turn contribute to their language development.

A moral dilemma presented in class can easily place EFL students in a situated learning context in which they have to, first of all, understand the problem in the target language. Then they need to activate their world knowledge to come up with the possible solutions. When considering each solution, they are debating, either

within themselves or with a partner/group, for or against a certain position. Students will learn, when engaged in dialogues with one another, how to clearly state their position and how to respectfully listen to others' opinions. When participants in a dialogue agree with each other, they learn the value and rightness of reaching a consensus; when they disagree, they learn about the alternative perspectives and how to withhold their judgment (Nord & Haynes). The subtlety and nuances of using a foreign language to conduct such verbal communication is tremendously demanding on the EFL learners. And because students are using the English language as a vehicle of communication to perform a cognitive act, the learning climate created by EFL teachers has become an authentic, content-based learning environment.

Teachers and schools, instead of dogmatizing or indoctrinating students as a form of preaching, are no more than facilitators of change who guide their students through moral issues and encourage students to reach their own conclusions based on informed and reflective reasoning. According to Leming & Yendol-Hoppey, young adults generally do not appreciate dogmatic preaching of ethics in the curriculum and believe that direct teaching has little effect on their moral development. Students also become intimidated as they recognize that there is some higher morality that is better than their own.

Teachers do not take on any dogmatic or didactic roles. Neither should teachers nor schools use religion as the basis of moral education because any "politicized religion," as witnessed in places like Indonesia, Ireland, and Lebanon, would only create more resistance and resentment (Shaaban). By developing in students the reasoning skills and a critical attitude that will help them detect biases in all written and spoken texts, the EFL learners are guided towards advancing their language knowledge as well as making sensible decisions by considering all sides of an issue without being prejudiced against those whose views are different from theirs. Ultimately, the goal is to create students who possess the basic moral virtues of a "global ethic" (Brown 23-24), which include honesty, respect for others, care for the environment, tolerance in pluralistic societies, responsibility, and integrity, etc.

Incorporating values education into the EFL curricula provides stimulating learning because moral issues in general stir controversy and invite learners to engage in meaningful dialogues to sort out the layers of the controversy. One important principle to bear in mind, as pointed out by Shaaban, is whose values should be taught. This is particularly relevant to the EFL classroom in which many values of the English-speaking cultures can come in direct conflict with those of the residing cultures and, thus, indirectly challenging the learner's cultural identity. Efforts must be made to avoid creating a "linguistic imperialism," in the words of Phillipson (27), by promoting only the mainstream values of the English-speaking societies. Shaaban suggests that nurturing of some universal values, such as honesty, integrity, respect, and responsibility be called for in the early stages of moral education and that reflective reasoning for ethical deeds and informed decisions be aimed at in the later stages of the development.

Overview of Various Curriculum Designs of Character Education

The current paper will examine five notable programmes of character education, four of which have received wide recognition over the years for their contributions in the primary education in the United States. The fifth programme, proposed by Shaaban, is the only framework designed for ESL/EFL application.

The *Philosophy for Children* program (Lipman 1987; Lipman 1998) consists of a K-12 curriculum and, since its inception in 1970, has employed a pedagogy called "the community of inquiry," which has its roots in Socrates for the approach of asking a series of questions that lead one to examine the validity of one's opinion or belief (Elkind & Sweet). "The community of inquiry" involves the claim that deliberative and collaborative communities are exceptional in their ability to foster critical, creative, and caring thinking, leading to sounder reasoning, understanding, and judgment.

The usual model in *Philosophy for Children* is the text-as-model. As children take turns reading the text aloud, they raise comments and questions, which will be

put on board for discussion. The classroom discussion serves as a platform of “distributed thinking” (Lipman 1998, 277) in that the members of the class answer one another’s questions, emulate others’ questions, build on one another’s inferences, and furnish each other with examples and counterexamples, and so on. Distributed thinking can also be referred to as “shared cognition” (Lipman 1998, 277) when a number of different individuals are engaged in a particular instance of thinking that involves many causally or logically connected mental acts. If these mental acts are spread out among the individuals present, the thinking load will be reduced for each individual so as to accomplish more complex reasoning. Lipman (1995) suggests that ethical reasoning be based on sound logical thinking and that effective moral education should cultivate children’s ability to conduct critical and careful ethical inquiries.

The Heartwood Institute’s “*An Ethics Curriculum for Children*” (1992) is a read-aloud, multicultural, literature-based approach to teaching children ethical values (attributes of character) in Grade One to Six. The curriculum is organized around seven universal values: courage, loyalty, justice, respect, hope, honesty and love. The goals of the curriculum are stated in general terms with a primary focus on helping children develop a structured system of values, ethics and morals; helping children develop ethical standards based on multicultural understanding; providing reference points for common cultural and ethical choices; and providing an “anchor” for children in universally common virtues. An evaluation of the Heartwood curriculum, conducted by Leming, shows that the curriculum had a positive effect on cognitive outcomes. Programme children at all grades demonstrated higher levels of ethical understanding than control students.

“*Building Decision Skills*” (BDS), an integration of the Institute for Global Ethics’ ethical decision-making curriculum into the community service programs in high schools (Leming), is a one semester, 10-lesson middle school/high school-level curriculum designed to develop students’ awareness of the need for sound ethics and to teach a language and method for reasoning about ethical dilemmas. After introducing the core values, the curriculum shifts students’ focus from reasoning

about “right versus wrong” dilemmas to reasoning about “right versus right” decisions (e.g., truth versus loyalty; self versus community; short term versus long term; justice versus mercy). Students will practice the decision-making techniques with scenarios provided in the curriculum as well as with real-world scenarios that may arise in the community service activities.

The *Unified Studies* (Williams, Yanchar, Jensen & Lewis), a high school programme not formally designed to teach moral principles or character lessons, eventually contributed to substantial character growth of its students. Graduates over 20 years old were interviewed (N = 106) and completed a questionnaire (N = 204). Findings suggest that the programme teachers helped students develop character attributes by providing a desirable character education environment; helping students develop an appreciation and respect for others and the environment. The success of the programme can be understood in terms of teachers’ willingness to encourage students to take responsibility for their lives and their learning through modeling of high character values, use of an integrated and experiential curriculum, and the employment of a dialogical perspective on active education. Despite a lack of explicit character education curriculum in the Unified Studies programme, the emphasis is on recognizing people, caring, empathy, love, respect, and social interaction that both the teachers and students strive to live up to.

The last model to be reviewed is a framework proposed by Shaaban for incorporating moral education into the ESL/EFL classroom. Shaaban’s framework consists of seven parts: (1) Message, (2) Language Skills, (3) Methods, (4) Activities, (5) Outcomes, (6) Resources, and (7) Assessment (205-213).

The first part, Message, refers to a core value that a language teacher would like to emphasize (e.g., respect for self and others). The teacher then draws for comprehensible input from various content areas such as literature, social studies, art etc. Using the materials of various content sources, the teacher helps students perfect their Language Skills, be it conjugating a verb form, achieving reading comprehension, or analyzing the text. While focusing on the language learning, the teacher also utilizes teaching techniques such as cooperative learning, dialogue, explanation,

and modeling—Methods, the third component of the framework—to conduct the target lesson. These teaching methods lend themselves directly to the “Activities” that can be used in class, including identification, simulation, film-viewing, guest presentations, and mini-research projects. The fifth part of the framework, Outcomes, refers to the desired effects on students. Students are encouraged to approach difficult moral dilemmas by means of researching the issues, discussing ideas with others, reflecting on the results of their research, and finally making informed decisions. Resources, the sixth component of the framework, point to a wealth of materials that ESL/EFL practitioners can call upon for use in class. The world of technology has made students’ involvement in community service only a mouse-click away. Using e-mail, for example, to publicize a community event or to address care for a community shelter is among ways to build a direct link between community service and students’ social-emotional learning. For EFL students, their participation in the local community events will enable them to get hands-on experience and inform their English-speaking friends the local happenings.

Finally, the last part of the framework, Assessment, reminds teachers to adopt authentic, performance-based, and integrative assessment measures that resemble real life moral dilemmas, situations, and issues. Specific techniques such as observation checklists, dialogue journal writing, self-and peer-assessment, objective tests, written essays, research papers, conferences, and presentations are all valid assessment means and easy to administer as well.

Discussion

The framework proposed by Shaaban is meant for both ESL and EFL settings. Most of the suggestions will work equally well in both conditions except that the community service in EFL condition is not as English-oriented as that in ESL condition. However, the embedded nature of moral education remains eminent. Also, the ESL classroom may enjoy a higher diversity in students’ language and cultural backgrounds, which will enrich and energize the group dynamics of a class. The

EFL classroom, on the other hand, may have a more monolingual student body that comes from the same culture and, more than often, an instructor who is a non-native English speaker but highly proficient. In a scenario like this, instructors in the EFL setting carry a mission stronger than ever to create an English-laden environment for their students to experience the language first hand.

It is extremely important that, when integrating moral education into the EFL curriculum, teachers do not simply become indoctrinating agents of the dominant values of the English-speaking world. Instead of going beyond language teaching into spreading 'linguistic imperialism', as Phillipson (27) put it, the EFL teachers shoulder the challenge of introducing a moral agenda that is "blind" to any language or cultural boundary. This is particularly relevant for EFL teachers in Taiwan, which in recent years has witnessed a rising population of immigrants from Southeast Asia via inter-racial marriage or imported labor (Chang). Taiwan is on its way to becoming a multi-cultural society. Students in Taiwan, while learning English as a foreign language, need to learn to embrace the multiplicity within the society.

Character education in Taiwan, however, remains mostly in primary education (邱惠玲；陳埤淑；林世斌；洪紫原、陳世佳) or secondary education (李琪明，2004b；洪紫原；程峻). Despite many comprehensive, philosophic reviews of character education by the local researchers (沈六；李琪明，2004a；黃德祥、洪福源), applications in the post-secondary education, particularly under the EFL condition, are scarce (葉美利、顏麗珠、洪麗卿). The EFL teachers in Taiwan, in addition to teaching the English language to enhance their students' global competitiveness, assume a crucial role in breaking the cultural boundary between the Taiwanese culture and the immigrant cultures by adopting moral lessons of multi-cultural ethics. As advocated by Brown, the moral agenda introduced to the classroom should promote "global interdependence, humane treatment of all people, tolerance, the abolition of ethnic and gender discrimination, equitable economic systems, and commitment to peace." (23-24)

Along the same line of promoting a tolerant world view, teachers' commitment to providing a nurturing, open learning environment is crucial to the success of any

moral education programme. As witnessed in the *Philosophy for Children* program (Lipman 1987; Lipman 1998), by forming a community of inquiry in class to encourage ethical reasoning among students, an EFL teacher can create a safe environment that allows students to expose their vulnerability and to acknowledge their prejudice, if any. College students, although no longer children, can still benefit from such a protecting environment in which their reasoning skills can grow from strength to strength. The *Building Decision Skills* program (Born) is especially helpful for young adults to practice reasoning between “right versus right” (e.g., justice versus mercy) while advancing their language skills as well. Through literature reading, writing, observing, debating, role-play, simulations, and the use of statistical data, students work together to develop skills in problem solving, critical thinking, and decision making.

Because EFL contexts potentially lack an overall English-speaking environment outside the classroom, EFL teachers need more preparation and training in problem-posing methodology and curriculum design. The training course could introduce teachers to the use of effective techniques for presenting a moral issue; for developing critical thinking; for detecting biases; for exploring intercultural appreciation, and so on. The cross-cultural appreciation is particularly relevant to the EFL condition in that the residing country may be linguistically and culturally homogeneous and students may lack the intercultural sensitivity to detect their own ethnocentrism towards other cultures. It is imperative that EFL teachers become agents of positive change in their societies through providing their students with a rich, non-judgmental learning environment that allows them to grow into knowledgeable, responsible, tolerant, socially pro-active citizens.

When teachers empower their students by granting them the freedom of expression, honoring different views and, more importantly, avoiding any dogmatic preaching, they are sending a clear message to their students that ethics education is not about imposing a superior standard of morality, but about developing critical thinking and humanitarian values that help promote sensible decision-making and peaceful coexistence in pluralistic societies.

Conclusion

The current paper reiterates the demand of incorporating character education into the college English coursework in the EFL context. EFL instructors, unlike their ESL counterparts, face the challenge of surrounding their students with an English-oriented environment. It is proposed that the university EFL classroom will especially benefit from the inclusion of moral education in that the controversial moral issues render themselves ideally as content-based situations for students to nurture their reasoning skills. Goals of teaching English as a foreign language are to be reframed to prioritize not only academic learning of the language, but also social, emotional, and ethical competencies of the students, as reminded by Cohen. The purpose of practicing values education in the EFL curriculum is not to declare any teacher's moral supremacy. Instead, the emphasis is for teachers to create an accommodating, nurturing environment for students to explore moral ambiguities of life while at the same time respecting the autonomy of the students. It is hoped that, in so doing, students will be immersed in meaningful tasks so as to gradually develop not only their linguistic skills, but also their social awareness, emotional well-being, critical thinking, and a tolerant world view.

Shaaban proposed a comprehensive framework of implementing moral education into the ESL/EFL curriculum. The framework calls for adopting a "global ethic" to teach universal values such as attributes observed in the Heartwood Institute's *An Ethics Curriculum for Children* program—respect, honesty, love, courage etc. Without much modification, the framework can easily serve as pedagogical guidelines for all EFL practitioners. The plausibility of incorporating character education in the university EFL classroom is thus highly confirmed. The issue remains how to properly prepare EFL instructors to become facilitators of change, not only for their students but also for themselves, so that all are encouraged to become informed global citizens, who embrace rather than fight out their differences in their pursuit of the well being of the mankind.

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