



Rehumanizing English Language Teaching: A Philosophical Inquiry into Language-Making Beings and the Purpose of ELT

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Abstract

English Language Teaching (ELT) in many global and Indonesian contexts has long been dominated by technical-instrumental orientations, including grammar instruction, standardized test preparation, and utilitarian communicative competence for academic and economic mobility. These practices reduce language to a functional skill and overlook its deeper humanistic, moral, and philosophical dimensions. This conceptual article examines ELT through the philosophical notion of humans as language-making beings individuals who construct meaning, identity, and social reality through language. Drawing on humanistic educational philosophy, perspectives on linguistic rights, Maturana's theory of language and emotion, and contemporary critiques of exam-oriented ELT, the article argues that language education should serve as a process of humanization rather than technical training. The discussion highlights the need to reorient ELT toward moral imagination, hope, advocacy, and global citizenship. The article also situates these issues in the Indonesian ELT landscape, where exam-driven and native-speaker-oriented practices remain dominant, despite growing calls for multilingual justice. Ultimately, this paper proposes a conceptual framework for humanistic ELT that affirms learners' identities, supports ethical awareness, and promotes English as a medium for constructing meaningful social participation.

INTRODUCTION

In today's era of globalization, English Language Teaching (ELT) has expanded rapidly due to the increasing international demand for English proficiency (Azmi, 2022; Sari et al., 2024; Widiastuti et al., 2025). English has become a crucial asset for social, economic, and academic mobility, functioning not only as a tool for cross-cultural communication but also as an essential requirement for participation in global systems (Anton et al., 2024; Subhan, 2024). This trend is reflected in the growing emphasis on achieving utilitarian forms of communicative competence, particularly through standardized tests such as TOEFL, IELTS, and TOEIC.

However, the dominance of this technical-instrumental approach has raised several concerns. English education policies are frequently shaped by global political and economic agendas, positioning English as a neutral tool that is free from

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ideological implications (Dervin & Hahl, 2025). At the same time, (Zovko & Dillon, 2018) note that competency-based models of education tend to neglect humanistic dimensions such as character formation and the moral purposes of education. Yet the true aim of education extends beyond preparing individuals for the labor market; it should also cultivate critical thinking, social responsibility, and humanity.

Furthermore, (Römhild & Weik von Mossner, 2025) emphasize the need to integrate a pedagogy of hope into language classrooms. Through literary and imaginative approaches, ELT can help students envision more just and sustainable futures an orientation that stands in stark contrast to dominant exam-oriented practices that often generate anxiety and competition rather than optimism or transformative vision. In this sense, ELT holds the potential to become a space for developing ethical imagination rather than merely preparing learners for high-stakes testing.

Therefore, it is essential to reconsider the direction of global ELT so that its function extends beyond technical and utilitarian activity. ELT must be understood as a value-laden educational process that integrates cognitive, affective, and ethical dimensions, ultimately empowering learners to navigate global challenges in a humanistic manner not merely as linguistically proficient individuals (Luh & Liswahyuningsih, 2025; Ratni, 2024).

Fundamentally, language is not merely a technical tool for communication but an integral aspect of human existence. Humans use language not only to convey information but also to construct identity, shape reality, and build social relationships. In this sense, humans are language-making beings active creators and creations of language.

According to Bonnett and McDowell, the relationship between humans and the world cannot be fully understood through rational-instrumental frameworks alone; it must also account for how language connects humans with nature, experience, and existence. Language thus carries a profound philosophical role by shaping how individuals understand one another, relate to their environment, and make sense of the world.

Humberto Maturana reinforces this perspective by viewing learning, language, and emotion as inseparable (Burner & Porto, 2024). Maturana rejects the notion that knowledge is merely a transferable set of skills. Instead, he argues that language emerges from interaction, emotion, and contextual engagement. From this standpoint, language learning should be seen as a humanizing practice one that allows individuals to become whole subjects through social and emotional participation, rather than serving as passive receivers of linguistic skills.

The debate on humanism versus competency presented by Zovko and Dillon also highlights the risk that language education may lose its meaning if confined solely to narrow technical competencies. Personal development, critical awareness, and moral values must be treated as foundational elements of language education (Zovko & Dillon, 2018). Therefore, English education should not be limited to preparing students for the job market or international examinations; it must be regarded as a central component of shaping meaningful, responsible, and fully human individuals (Havita & Sa'diyah, 2024).

In Indonesia, ELT continues to be dominated by structural and technical approaches. Instruction often focuses on grammar mastery, competency-based curricular requirements, and exam preparation. Consequently, English is frequently treated merely as an academic or vocational asset such as a prerequisite for further study, scholarships, or employment requiring TOEFL/IELTS/TOEIC certification (Azzahra & Sya, 2024; Estrini, 2021).

Additionally, the desire to achieve native-speaker standards remains strong. Assessment practices often prioritize accent, vocabulary, and stylistic features as

primary indicators of success, thereby neglecting the humanistic dimensions of language education. Research on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) within the Indonesian context reveals similar issues. When native-speaker norms become the sole benchmark, linguistic injustice emerges. Indonesian English lecturers have therefore advocated for a more inclusive paradigm, positioning English as a space for linguistic justice, identity recognition, and humanization in learning (Codó, 2018; Qoyyimah et al., 2023).

Although English holds significant academic and economic value in Indonesia, there remains a noticeable gap in understanding its role as part of the broader process of humanization. This discrepancy highlights the need to reimagine ELT practices in Indonesia so they align more closely with principles of linguistic justice and humanistic educational values.

Notably, ELT research both nationally and globally continues to be dominated by practical–technical concerns such as teaching methods, learning strategies, and assessment practices. Although such studies remain valuable, they often reinforce instrumental perspectives. Philosophical literature, by contrast, has long emphasized humanism, linguistic rights, and cosmopolitanism as foundations for more meaningful and equitable educational aims. Yet ELT discourse rarely touches upon the philosophy of humanity or the ontology of language.

There remains insufficient engagement with the idea that language is part of the human essence that humans, as language-making beings, use language to construct identity, social relations, and interpretations of the world. This conceptual gap must be addressed. A philosophical reconsideration is necessary to link human nature and the ontology of language with the goals of English language education. In doing so, ELT can move beyond purely technical practice and become a humanizing process one that develops learners who are not only linguistically competent but also value-conscious, identity-aware, and socially responsible within a diverse global society.

METHODS

This article is based on a conceptual literature review rather than empirical research. Its primary aim is to reconsider the position of English Language Education through the philosophical lens of human nature and the ontology of language. The study employs a critical–philosophical analytical approach, which involves examining key ideas from relevant literature, comparing underlying arguments, and integrating them into a reconstructed conceptual framework (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2025; Biesta, 2023; Burner & Porto, 2024; Engkizar et al., 2023, 2024; 2025; Hamzah et al., 2025; Wekke et al., 2024). This approach moves beyond descriptive summarization and seeks to interrogate assumptions, expose conceptual gaps, and synthesize new theoretical insights regarding the humanistic foundations of ELT.

The analytical process consisted of three main stages. First, the researcher identified core themes across the selected literature, including humanism, linguistic rights, the ontology of language, and critiques of instrumental ELT. Second, these texts were compared to determine points of convergence, divergence, and conceptual gaps in existing discussions. Finally, the insights were integrated into a new philosophical interpretation of ELT one that frames language education as a process of humanization rather than merely technical skill acquisition. Through this conceptual process, the article aims to articulate a theoretically grounded perspective that situates English Language Teaching within broader discussions of human development, identity formation, and ethical engagement.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Global Conditions of ELT

In global practice, English Language Teaching (ELT) continues to be dominated by technical–instrumental approaches. Instruction is largely oriented toward grammar mastery, achieving high scores on international standardized examinations such as TOEFL, IELTS, and TOEIC, and developing utilitarian forms of communicative competence. English is often regarded primarily as an economic tool that facilitates employment mobility, academic advancement, and global competitiveness.

The article *Justifying the Position and Implementation of English* highlights that the dominance of English in educational policy is frequently framed as neutral, although in reality it is deeply intertwined with political and economic agendas. Such dynamics risk marginalizing linguistic diversity and reinforcing linguistic hierarchies.

Meanwhile, *Humanism vs. Competency* addresses a broader shift in education from humanistic models to competency-based frameworks. As a result, language education is increasingly reduced to a technical enterprise, where personal development, critical awareness, and moral dimensions are neglected. Education, which should ideally assist learners in becoming whole and reflective individuals, is frequently narrowed to mere skill acquisition for global recognition.

The instrumental nature of dominant ELT practices is further critiqued in *The Case for Hope in Language Education*. Contemporary learning environments are often shaped by anxiety and competition, particularly in relation to high-stakes international exams. Yet language classrooms have the potential to foster hope, imagination, and ethical orientation through literature and socially engaged texts.

Thus, the global condition of ELT faces a fundamental critique: technical and economic dimensions are emphasized, while humanistic dimensions remain underdeveloped. As a result, English education often loses its philosophical potential as a means for cultivating whole persons who are value-conscious and capable of contributing to a more just global society.

Philosophical Foundation: Humans as Language-Making Beings

Language is an essential component of human existence not merely a medium for sending messages. Humans construct reality, identity, and social relationships through language. For this reason, human beings can be understood as language-making beings: subjects who shape and are shaped by language in interaction with others and their environment.

The article *Humanism vs. Competency* warns of the risks inherent in education systems overly focused on technical competencies, which tend to neglect the humanistic dimension of language. From a humanistic lens, language education is not merely the transmission of skills, but a formative process that shapes the whole person. This view aligns with the Greek tradition of *paideia* and the German tradition of *Bildung*, both of which regard education as a pathway toward self-development, reflection, and moral responsibility.

Bonnett and McDowell's *Nature in Our Experience* demonstrates that human beings understand themselves and the world through language because human experience is relational. Language is not simply a communicative bridge; it is a medium that opens a space for relating to nature and lived experience. Reducing language to a technical instrument therefore erases its deepest existential significance.

A similar critique emerges in *Key Insights on Learning, Language, and Emotions*, which challenges traditional views that treat language as a transferable skill passed from teacher to learner. Instead, language is shown to emerge from relational processes involving emotion, social interaction, and cultural context. This means that learning a language is fundamentally learning ways of being human in relation with others.

These perspectives are closely related to issues of linguistic rights. If language is part of human existence, then the right to access, use, and be valued in one's language constitutes a fundamental human right. English education that focuses narrowly on native-speaker norms while neglecting linguistic diversity runs contrary to the principles of humanization.

Thus, this philosophical foundation clarifies that English education should not be viewed merely as technical training. Through the lenses of humanism, *paideia*, *Bildung*, and linguistic rights, language becomes a core medium for shaping individuals who can understand themselves, others, and the world in meaningful ways.

The Humanization Dimension in Language Education

Language education should be viewed as a space for humanization where moral awareness, empathy, and critical citizenship are cultivated not merely as technical training aimed at acquiring communicative skills. In this context, language becomes a liberating force that helps learners move beyond reductionist views and empowers them to participate actively in society.

The Case for Hope in Language Education emphasizes the importance of pedagogical approaches that introduce a language of hope into the classroom. Through literature such as the solarpunk genre language learning can help students imagine more just and sustainable futures, transforming the classroom from a site of exam anxiety into a space for critical and imaginative reflection.

Similarly, Learning Languages of Hope and Advocacy argues that language is a tool for accompaniment and social action, not merely an instrument for communication. A human-rights-oriented and sustainability-oriented approach enables students to learn the language of hope and the language of advocacy, fostering awareness of global issues such as environmental crises, social injustice, and discrimination. Thus, language education equips learners not only with technical competence but also with moral agency to navigate real-world challenges.

By integrating language of hope and advocacy, language education becomes a site of empowerment. Learners are not only encouraged to “master” linguistic skills but also to use language as a means of personal and societal transformation. This constitutes the core of humanization in language education: forming individuals who are not only linguistically capable but also morally grounded, socially empathetic, and committed to justice.

The Indonesian Context

English language teaching in Indonesia remains heavily focused on grammar, technical skills, and preparation for internationally standardized tests such as TOEFL, IELTS, and TOEIC. This reflects the same instrumental orientation seen globally, where ELT is framed as a pathway to academic advancement and economic opportunities, such as degree completion, scholarships, and employment.

Critiques from Indonesian English lecturers, as described in ELF and Multilingual Justice in English Language Teaching Practices: Voices from Indonesian English Lecturers, underscore the need for a more just, contextualized, and humanistic ELT paradigm in Indonesia. Instead of positioning native-speaker norms as the primary benchmark, they advocate for recognition of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), where diverse varieties of English are accepted as legitimate rather than viewed as deficiencies.

These perspectives reveal tensions between dominant ELT practices and the goal of positioning English language learning as a space for humanization, linguistic justice, and identity formation. Thus, the Indonesian context affirms the urgent need to shift ELT paradigms so that English is not merely a measurable competence but a medium for fostering critical awareness, social solidarity, and appreciation for linguistic diversity.

Conceptual Implications for ELT

Drawing from philosophical insights and contextual realities, English language teaching needs to be reorganized under a new paradigm: humanization-based ELT. In this framework, learners are not merely “competency machines” expected to master grammar, vocabulary, or exam standards but are recognized as language-making beings who construct identity, social relations, and meaning through language.

This framework emphasizes the integration of moral, humanistic, and social dimensions into the ELT curriculum. Rather than focusing exclusively on technical standards, curricula should aim to: Develop moral and ethical awareness, for example by incorporating global justice and solidarity issues into instructional materials. Respect linguistic rights and diversity, recognizing ELF varieties as legitimate rather than inferior to native-speaker norms. Foster global citizenship, encouraging learners to use English as a tool for engaging with global issues from human rights to environmental concerns.

These goals can be operationalized through the careful selection of critical and contextually relevant learning materials, pedagogies that promote collaboration, imagination, and advocacy, and assessment practices that consider attitudes, values, and social orientation not merely linguistic performance. Thus, a humanization-based ELT paradigm offers a new direction for English language education: no longer a mere “economic tool” for global mobility, but a medium for developing individuals who are competent, critical, and responsible global citizens.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual study has examined English Language Teaching (ELT) through a philosophical–humanistic perspective, highlighting the limitations of the dominant technical–instrumental paradigm that continues to shape global and Indonesian ELT practices. The widespread emphasis on grammar mastery, standardized testing, and utilitarian communicative competence reflects a narrow view of language as an economic tool, rather than as an essential dimension of human existence. Such orientations overlook the deeper moral, emotional, and existential functions of language in shaping identity, meaning-making, and social relationships. By positioning humans as language-making beings, this article has argued that language is not merely a neutral instrument of communication but a fundamental medium through which individuals construct reality, negotiate identity, and participate in social life. Insights from humanistic educational traditions, Bonnett and McDowell’s reflections on relational experience, and Maturana’s theory of language and emotion demonstrate that language learning is a deeply human process rooted in relationality, embodiment, and ethical engagement. These perspectives call for an ELT framework that restores the human dimension of language education.

The article also explored the potential of hope-oriented and advocacy-oriented pedagogies to enrich ELT. These approaches encourage learners to engage critically with global issues, develop moral imagination, and envision more just and sustainable futures. When integrated into ELT, they transform the classroom from an exam-driven space into a site for ethical reflection, empowerment, and social participation. The Indonesian context exemplifies the challenges and possibilities of this reorientation. Although ELT in Indonesia remains highly exam-focused and influenced by native-speaker norms, there is growing awareness among educators of the need for multilingual justice, identity affirmation, and inclusive pedagogies. This provides fertile ground for adopting a humanistic ELT model that recognizes learners’ linguistic rights and respects their diverse cultural and linguistic identities.

The conceptual implications of this framework suggest the need for a more humanistic, just, and reflective ELT paradigm, supported by curricula that integrate:

Moral and ethical awareness embedding issues of sustainability, justice, and social responsibility into language learning. Recognition of linguistic rights and diversity acknowledging and legitimizing diverse forms of English (ELF) rather than enforcing native-speaker norms. Development of global citizenship utilizing English as a medium for engagement with global humanitarian and environmental concerns. Overall, this study argues for a reconceptualization of ELT as a process of humanization rather than technical skill acquisition. A humanistic ELT aims to form learners who are not only linguistically proficient but also critically aware, ethically responsible, and capable of meaningful engagement in a complex, interconnected world. Reframing ELT in this way opens new possibilities for educational practice ones that honor the full humanity of learners and position English as a medium for building relational, ethical, and transformative futures.

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