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Article

English and global citizenship education: A critical examination of multilingual classrooms in the global south

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This study critically examines the intersection of English language teaching (ELT) and global citizenship education (GCE) in higher education (HE) through data from state-funded universities in the Global South (Colombia, Iraq, Thailand, and Vietnam). It examines how students, educators, and administrators perceive and engage with global and intercultural citizenship through the medium of English. Data were collected through 126 semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic and content analysis to identify cross-contextual patterns and context-specific interpretations. Participants described a two-fold experience in which English facilitated global academic, professional, and personal access and mobility, while generating concerns about the erasure of local identities and knowledge systems, framed by enduring forms of epistemic inequality, cultural hierarchy, and instrumental pressures reinforced by neoliberal frameworks. In response, many educators and learners challenged dominant Anglophone models by adopting decolonial pedagogies that emphasise ethical engagement, foster critical reflexivity, and reflect locally rooted practices. The study calls for reconfiguring GCE and ELT as interconnected domains of transformation that support inclusive, context-responsive, and socially engaged models of global citizenship within Southern HE settings.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, global citizenship education (GCE) has emerged as a prominent educational response to the growing interconnectedness of societies, economies, and cultures in the 21st century. Institutions such as UNESCO (2015) have advanced GCE as a transformative framework intended to cultivate learners' knowledge, values, and behaviours for fostering a

more inclusive, just, and peaceful world. Within this vision, GCE emphasises intercultural understanding, human rights, global justice, and ethical engagement. Yet, as its global prominence has grown, so too have critiques of its underlying assumptions, particularly regarding its entanglement with neoliberal agendas and neo-colonial power relations (Abdi 2015 ; De Costa 2022; Bosio 2024). Scholars argue that GCE, when uncritically implemented, risks reinforcing dominant global North epistemologies while marginalising localised, plural forms of knowledge, especially in the Global South.

In tandem with the discourse on GCE, the English language has solidified its status as a global lingua franca (ELF) and is now deeply embedded in the internationalisation of higher education (Jenkins 2014). As the default medium for transnational academic collaboration, publication, and student mobility, English is often positioned as essential for global engagement and participation. Furthermore, the English language teaching (ELT) classroom has been proposed as an ideal setting to incorporate GCE due to the inevitable focus on intercultural connections (Byram et al. 2017; Baker and Fang 2022; Baker et al. 2025c). However, this dominant role of English is not neutral. Scholars have increasingly critiqued the way English language education intersects with cultural hierarchies, Anglophone norms, and linguistic imperialism, particularly in contexts where English is introduced through externally driven educational reforms (Macedo 2019; Barnawi and R'boul 2023; Tupas 2024). These dynamics challenge the potential of ELT to act as a vehicle for truly critical or decolonial GCE. Recent scholarship has begun to interrogate the transformative potential of English within GCE from more ethical and decolonial perspectives, especially in multilingual, multicultural, and postcolonial contexts (Porto et al 2018; Bayyurt and Yalçin 2022; De Costa 2022; Baker et al. 2025c). From this vantage point, the English language is neither inherently oppressive nor liberatory, but rather shaped by its pedagogical implementation, sociocultural context, and the intentions of its users. As such, English can simultaneously empower learners with access to global knowledge and networks while also perpetuating inequalities and assimilationist ideologies. This ambivalence positions ELT—and, by extension, GCE within ELT—as a crucial space for negotiating identity, culture, and ethics in increasingly globalised learning environments.

Despite this growing body of work, there continues to be a lack of contextually grounded empirical research exploring how students, teachers, and administrators in non-Western higher education institutions conceptualise and enact GCE through English. Perspectives from institutions in the Global South remain underexplored, despite these being regions where English is rapidly expanding as a tool for internationalisation and where tensions between global aspirations and local identities are often most pronounced (Han et al. 2017; Pennycook and Makoni 2019; De Costa 2022). This study seeks to address this gap. Drawing on qualitative research across four state-funded universities in Colombia, Iraq, Thailand, and Vietnam, the study critically explores the roles of English in global/intercultural citizenship from the perspectives of the students, teachers, and administrators and the extent to which ELT can foster reflective, decolonial, and socially engaged global citizenship.

Literature review

Global citizenship education

At the most general level, global citizenship is viewed as an extension of citizenship beyond the national scale, emphasising individuals' links and responsibilities to local, national, and global communities (Gaudelli 2016). UNESCO's well-cited definition of global citizenship refers to it as 'a sense of belonging to a broader community and common humanity. It emphasises political, economic, social and cultural interdependency and interconnectedness between the local, the national and the global' (2015: 14). However, global citizenship has been criticised for potentially reproducing neo-colonial conceptions of citizenship which are orientated towards, and benefit, the Global North while ignoring or marginalising those in the Global South (Abdi 2015; De Costa

2022; Bosio 2024). Abdi argues that we must go beyond notions of global citizenship derived from Global North academic institutions and scholars. Instead, we need to co-construct our ideas in collaboration with those who are based in the contexts we are investigating. As Abdi writes,

> the current mono epistemicalizations of global citizenship education which are disempowering and de-culturing people in more ways that we can count here, should be redesigned and reconstructed with multi-locational knowledge and cultural pluralisms that can effectively and inclusively respond to the realities of lived citizenship contexts that are not fixed or static but are active and dynamically shifting as demanded by the contexts and relational categories that sustain them. (2015: 23)

Nonetheless, there remain tensions between neo-liberal conceptions of global citizenship which stress individual gains and networks, often for those who are already part of elite groups both in the Global North and beyond (e.g. international business and education), and more "ethical" approaches that emphasise social justice, diversity, and greater equality (Aktas et al. 2017; Bosio 2024).

Interconnected with global citizenship is GCE which UNESCO positions as aiming 'to be transformative, building the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that learners need to be able to contribute to a more inclusive, just and peaceful world' (2015: 15). The UNESCO (2015) guidelines go onto divide GCE into cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioural dimensions but with all areas focused on knowledge, understanding, responsibility, respect, and empathy with communities and issues from the local to the global. Although GCE can be a subject in itself (there is now an international GCSE qualification), it is also an approach designed to underpin all aspects of education, from science to the humanities and arts, as these areas are globally connected (Gaudelli 2016). Again, though, there are concerns that GCE may perpetuate colonial Global North representations of global issues, cultures, and societies, reinforcing false universalisms, stereotypes, and inequalities. For instance, Bosio advocates a critical approach to GCE, differentiating his "ethical GCE approach from the 'soft' liberal perspective, advocating for decoloniality and embracing diversity over neutral universal subjectivities" (2024: 8). Such a perspective, Bosio argues, 'empowers students to critically analyse their beliefs, perspectives, and identities within the complex framework of both national and international systems (decolonialism)' (2024: 18).

While GCE applies to all levels of education, it has received most interest in higher education (HE) due to the increasing internationalisation of HE over recent decades (Baker and Fang 2022; Baker et al. 2025c). Many large internationally orientated universities have diverse student and staff bodies and collaborate with other international institutions. Even in higher education institutions (HEIs) where the majority, or all, staff and students are local, they are often still expected to make international connections for teaching and research. This means that issues around diversity and intercultural communication across multiple scales, from local to national and global, are part of the agenda for most HEIs. Thus, global citizenship is an idea of high relevance to HE, with the idea of producing graduates who are global citizens able to study and work across nations and cultures an aim of many HEIs, and often explicitly incorporated into the curriculum (Killick 2013). Yet, there are concerns that global citizenship may fail to move beyond policy and marketing, may be treated superficially, or may be oriented towards the more neoliberal and individual goals discussed earlier (Aktas et al. 2017; Baker and Fang 2021). Furthermore, the connection between the internationalisation of HE and global citizenship may also be to the benefit of elite institutions, typically in the Global North, but also among elite groups in the Global South, acting as a further form of marginalisation for less globally connected and prestigious HEIs.

Global Englishes and GCE

Although, as noted above, GCE is relevant to all areas of education, language education has been proposed as a particularly suitable subject for developing global citizenship. This is because

language education is inevitably focused on 'other' cultures and international connections, with issues related to diversity, mediation, and intercultural communication already part of the subject matter (Byram et al. 2017; Porto et al. 2018). The most well-known approach is Intercultural Citizenship Education (ICE), which is characterised as:

1. Causing/facilitating intercultural citizenship experience, and analysis and reflection on it and on the possibility of further social and/or political activity, i.e. an activity that involves working with others to achieve an agreed end;
2. Creating learning/change in the individual: cognitive, attitudinal, behavioural change; change in self-perception; change in relationships with Others (i.e. people of a different social group); change that is based on a particular culture but related to the universal. (Byram 2008: 187)

As demonstrated, ICE shares many features with GCE, and the terms are used interchangeably in this paper due to their shared emphasis on engaging learners with communities and issues across local, national, and global contexts. Both ICE and GCE stress the importance of fostering cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioural development in learners. This development includes raising awareness and encouraging meaningful action. Furthermore, research across diverse language education contexts reinforces the need for contextualisation, as understandings of intercultural and global citizenship often differ across classrooms (e.g. Han et al. 2017; Sharkey 2018).

Given the well-established role of English as a global lingua franca and its extensive use in HE, often closely tied to internationalisation (Jenkins 2014), it is not surprising that the links between English language use/teaching and global/intercultural citizenship have begun to be explored in-depth (e.g. Fang and Baker 2018; Baker and Fang 2021). Empirical studies have demonstrated that for many students, English and intercultural citizenship are intertwined, with English often serving as the de facto language for intercultural communication and connections (Bayyurt and Yalçin 2022; Ra et al. 2022; Suzuki 2022; Boonsuk and Fang 2023). Furthermore, the development of both English proficiency and intercultural citizenship are often perceived as proceeding simultaneously. Yet, at the same time, there are ongoing issues with superficial and unsystematic approaches to GCE, both in HE in general and in ELT (Fang and Baker 2018; Baker and Fang 2021, 2022). There is also a continued orientation to Anglophone (e.g. USA and UK) linguistic and cultural norms in ELT, combined with global North approaches in GCE, which may disempower and marginalise many learners (De Costa 2022; Baker et al. 2025a, 2025b). Therefore, we believe that the rise of English in HE alongside the increased prominence given to GCE perspectives has the potential to both empower and disempower different groups of students. As such, further research is needed to explore the links between the two areas from a decolonial perspective that recognises potential power imbalances in how English and global citizenship are taught. Moreover, this is an issue of particular relevance to HE in the Global South, where English and Global Citizenship can create tensions between potential opportunities, on the one hand, and inequalities and the marginalisation of local languages and cultures, on the other hand.

Methodology

Context and population

This qualitative study is part of a larger mixed methods (Creswell 2015) project that explored the role of English and TESOL in universities from Latin America, the Middle East and Southern Asia (Baker et al. 2025b). The four participating universities, *Southern Thai University, Southern Iraqi University, Southwestern University in Colombia and Central Vietnamese University*,[1] are located in countries where English has expanded rapidly, becoming the international language of choice in HE national policies. The four sites feature diversity in language, culture, ethnicity, religion, gender, class, as well as rural and urban populations (Table 1). All institutions are state-funded,

Table 1. Demographic information of students.[a]

Category	Colombia	Vietnam	Thailand	Iraq	Total	Per cent of total responses
Gender/biological sex						
Female	265	205	335	230	1,035	64.6
Male	287	47	73	116	523	32.7
Others	0	1	42	0	43	2.7
Ethnicity						
Majority ethnic group	424	247	432	300	1,403	87.6
Minority ethnic group	116	6	18	0	140	8.7
Don't know/none	12	0	0	46	58	3.6
Language						
Majority L1	550	248	212	316	1,326	82.8
Minority L1	2	5	238	26	271	16.9
Socioeconomic status						
Lower	521	167	405	150	1,243	77.6
Higher	28	86	45	115	274	17.1
Don't know/none	3	0	0	81	84	5.2
School location						
Urban	471	102	102	170	845	52.8
Rural	81	151	348	157	737	46.0

[a]Not all students responded to all questions, so totals do not make 1,601.

with a majority of students coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Within these universities, English is central to policies of internationalisation and globalisation as it is considered a key to academic advancement, global knowledge and intercultural communication.

The initial study surveyed 1,601 students from the institutions to provide background demographic information (Table 1, see Baker et al. 2025b). This study then used qualitative interviews (Talmy and Richards 2011) to examine the experiences and perspectives of students, English teachers, and program administrators regarding the role of English in fostering global/intercultural citizenship in universities. Purposive sampling was employed to capture the diversity of participants, including gender diversity, socioeconomic status, and differing course levels among teachers and students. Specifically, socioeconomic status was assessed through a combination of self-reported income bands, parental occupational background and geographic location, allowing us to identify participants from working-class and low-income households as well as those from more socially and economically privileged backgrounds. Likewise, administrators from various academic programs across the universities were selected to examine the role of English within their respective programs and disciplines. Each institution followed internal ethical protocols, ensuring informed consent, the right to withdraw, and the preservation of anonymity. Table 2 presents the distribution of interview participants by university, totalling 126.

Data collection and analysis

The project spanned approximately 24 months, with data collection conducted over 12 months. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from each group (teachers, students, and administrators) to explore issues related to ELT and learning, including global/

Table 2. Participants of the study.

Sites	Students	Teachers	Administrators	Total
Southern Thai University	15	9	6	30
Southern Iraqi University	16	12	7	35
Southwestern University in Colombia	9	9	8	26
Central Vietnamese University	21	11	4	35

intercultural citizenship. Students were asked about their understanding and experiences related to intercultural citizenship, including whether they had learned about other cultures, communicated across differences, or reflected on global and local identities in their English classes. While not all participants were familiar with the term itself, interviewers used paraphrasing and context-based prompts to explore related ideas. Similarly, teachers shared their views on intercultural citizenship and described the pedagogical strategies they employed to integrate intercultural and global themes into their teaching. Administrators, on the other hand, shared their perceptions of intercultural citizenship and the extent to which the university was or was not preparing students for it. Interviews, which were conducted in the majority of the L1 language of each setting, were audio-recorded, transcribed, and then translated into English.

The interviews were analysed using thematic and content analysis techniques (Miles et al. 2014) to identify patterns, themes, and key insights within the data. The coding scheme combined top-down codes derived from the research questions and bottom-up codes that emerged from the data (Miles et al. 2014). Coding schemes were collaboratively designed by the research team to maintain consistency in analysis. However, site-specific emergent codes were also incorporated as they arose from the data. The ultimate goal was to deliver a 'thick description' of each research setting, drawing on multiple groups and capturing insights at various levels. This included the experiences and opinions of the students, the perspective of teachers as planners and implementers of the syllabus, and the views of administrators as overseers of institutional strategies and policies.

The study aimed to reach validity and trustworthiness by incorporating the voices of the three major actors in the implementation of English in educational institutions. Thus, issues of validity and reliability were addressed through data source triangulation, which involved comparing and contrasting the experiences and opinions of students, teachers, and administrators to identify and validate key themes across the data. The integration of a balance of insider (students, teachers, administrators, and researchers from each site) and outsider perspectives (external researchers) strengthened the trustworthiness of the study. Transparency and reflexivity were ensured by clearly outlining the researchers' roles, specific characteristics of each site and potential influences, and audit trails.

Findings

Roles of English in global/intercultural citizenship

English was widely recognised as a gateway to fostering participants' individual intercultural networks and creativity, academic development, economic prospects, and international networks. For instance, they (e.g. VietnameseStudent2, ThaiStudent5) emphasised that learning English enabled them to connect with global communities and adopt more inclusive perspectives.

Extract 1

English has brought me closer to the knowledge of the world. Knowing English, I have more opportunities to travel abroad to explore the world and learn about other countries and cultures. (VietnameseStudent2)

Extract 2

I personally think English has changed my mindset. It allows me to see the world more broadly, and I have become the kind of person like, not to judge others. (ThaiStudent5)

The participants perceived English as a crucial resource for expanding their horizons and fostering openness towards other cultures. For them, learning English not only enabled access to global knowledge and opportunities for intercultural engagement but also contributed to personal growth. It allowed them to develop broader worldviews, challenge their previous assumptions, and adopt more inclusive and non-judgemental perspectives when interacting with people from diverse backgrounds.

A core theme that emerged was that English is perceived as a defining attribute of global citizenship (Extract 3).

Extract 3

The Thai language is what you speak with Thai people in 77 provinces, but what you might need to use to communicate with people all over the world is English. … So, if you want to be a global citizen, one of the characteristics you should have is the ability to speak English. (ThaiLecturer3)

ThaiLecturer3 positioned English as a global means of communication, contrasting it with the Thai language, which was perceived as limited to communication within national borders. For this participant, being a global citizen required the ability to speak English, which was viewed as a crucial means of interacting with people from different countries and participating in global communities.

Similarly, for the Iraqi participants (Extracts 4 and 5), English was positioned as the '*key*' (IraqLecturer3) or '*language for communication in the world*' (IraqAdministrator2), essential for expanding one's citizenship beyond national borders and engaging with global communities. While English proficiency was seen as important, even limited knowledge of the language was perceived as valuable in bridging communication gaps and connecting with other academic and non-academic communities across the world (IraqLecturer3).

Extract 4

To understand other cultures and societies, English serves as the key. For example, knowing just a few words can help bridge communication gaps. (IraqLecturer3)

Extract 5

Citizenship is a local concept, but when you say global, this means how you transform your citizenship beyond your national borders. This requires you to have English as a language for communication in the world. (IraqAdministrator2)

Furthermore, the role of English in fostering participants' intercultural awareness has been further identified in Vietnam (Extract 1, above) and Colombia (Extract 6).

Extract 6

World citizens, in this case, I see it as the person who manages to have contact with other cultures. Who manages to have that knowledge of other cultures? Who manages to engage in cultural exchange. Who manages to travel. In this case, English serves as a mandatory tool to be a citizen and to be able to have that kind of exchange. (ColombianLecturer7)

The Vietnamese and Colombian participants viewed English, and often English alone, as a "mandatory tool" for gaining access to global knowledge, engaging in cultural exchange, and exploring

the world beyond their immediate environment. For them, being a global citizen was closely associated with the ability to use English to connect with other cultures, participate in international communication, and navigate diverse cultural settings.

While English is positioned as key to global achievement and connections, the following extracts provide evidence of participants' critical awareness of the role of English in negotiating self-other identity. For the VietnameseStudent3 (Extract 7), the need for English for global interaction must not come at the cost of self-identity.

Extract 7

To become a global citizen, first we need to be competent, professionally competent. We are good at our job. And of course, we need language proficiency, English for example, to have a tool for global communication, to talk with people from other countries, so we can become global citizens. Yah, and we need to have our own identity. (VietnameseStudent3)

While acknowledging the importance of English for global communication, VietnameseStudent3 also emphasised that becoming a global citizen requires more than just language proficiency; it also requires professional competence. Additionally, there was a need to maintain one's local identity and values when engaging with global communities. Rather than seeing English as a threat to local culture, the participant's statement, 'Yah, and we need to have our own identity', resists the assimilationist force potentially associated with the global dominance of English.

In addition, some participants critically consider the links between culture, identity and language. In reflecting on how language works as a carrier of individuals' identity, a Thai administrator (Extract 8) expresses that they can effectively express their identity through the English language, using their voice, tone, facial expressions, and gestures. This highlights an extended multimodal view of communication, enabling speakers to convey cultural and personal meaning through an additional language. Similarly, ColombiaLecturer2 (Extract 9) voiced the need to critically challenge cultural hierarchies by adopting critical pedagogies for acknowledging individuals' 'cultural and identity baggage'.

Extract 8

[…]. They can effectively express their identity through the English language, using their voice, tone, facial expressions, and gestures […]. (ThaiAdministrator1)

Extract 9

[…] each person comes with a cultural and identity baggage that can be conveyed through the use of language […] Thinking about my case and at the initial levels, let's say that the first thing that should start to be developed at the cultural level is: We have to do, like, a work of, I don't know if breaking beliefs, sometimes traditional, regarding what culture is and the hierarchical order that exists in the cultural context […]. (ColombiaLecturer2)

This reflection highlights how the participant perceived language as a medium through which individuals convey their own culture and identity in communication and learning contexts. At the same time, the participant called for a critical pedagogical approach that involves 'breaking beliefs', particularly traditional views about culture and the existing hierarchical order that privileges certain cultures over others. However, the hesitant tone expressed through phrases like 'I don't know if' also reveals uncertainty or possible resistance when it comes to challenging deeply rooted cultural assumptions within educational settings.

Collectively, English was widely perceived by participants as a vital resource for facilitating global communication, accessing knowledge, and engaging with cultural diversity. Across contexts, English was described as '*the key*' (IraqLecturer3), '*a mandatory tool*' (ColombianLecturer7), and '*a defining attribute of globality*' (ThaiLecturer3), necessary for connecting with people across borders

and participating in global communities. However, participants also emphasised that being a global citizen is not solely about language proficiency, but equally about '*having our own identity*' (VietnameseStudent3) and recognising '*cultural and identity baggage*' (ColombianLecturer2) associated with language in navigating global spaces. These reflections highlight the ambivalent role of English in ELT; while it enables global belonging and mobility, it also raises critical concerns about cultural preservation and identity negotiation.

English and education for critical global citizenship

The study also revealed participants' critical engagement with the role of English in fostering global citizenship, interculturality, and ethical responsibility. While English was seen as an important tool for global communication, participants across the diverse contexts under study emphasised that global citizenship goes beyond language proficiency. Their narratives shed light on how ELT can become a transformative space for decolonial engagement, intercultural dialogue, and critical reflection on social justice.

For instance, participants highlighted the need to integrate diverse cultural perspectives into ELT practices. ColombianLecturer6 (Extract 10) employed the metaphor of 'explore more neighborhoods' as a pedagogical strategy to move beyond monocultural perspectives and to foster students' understanding of both global engagement and local issues.

Extract 10

If I want to describe my neighbourhood… I can't just stick to my neighbourhood. I have to explore more neighbourhoods and see how neighbourhoods are different here and there. (ColombianLecturer6)

This reflection illustrates how the participant viewed intercultural learning as a process of moving beyond the familiar and engaging with cultural differences. The metaphor of 'explore more neighbourhoods' captures the idea that ELT should not be limited to a single cultural perspective but should encourage students to look outward, compare, and appreciate cultural diversity. In this sense, understanding both global engagement and local issues becomes essential in shaping students' identities within an interconnected world.

Similar concerns were echoed in the Thai context, where English proficiency alone was viewed as insufficient for cultivating global citizenship. ThaiAdministrator2 (Extract 11) stressed that awareness of global issues is a crucial dimension of global citizenship beyond mere language use.

Extract 11

Some people we see are active in language, but if they don't care about global issues, they wouldn't be considered global citizens… If something happens in a foreign country, they also care… This can be considered global citizenship awareness. (ThaiAdministrator2)

For the participant, global citizenship requires not only the ability to communicate across languages but also the capacity to care about and engage with global issues. In this sense, ELT was seen as an entry point for global interaction, but it needed to be supported by critical reflection and awareness of global-local dynamics to foster a deeper sense of global citizenship.

ColombianLecturer2 (Extract 12) offered a distinct perspective by critically reflecting on the limitations of the 'global village' metaphor. This reflection reveals the gap between the idealised discourse of a globally connected world and the lived realities of people in specific local contexts, particularly the continued sense of distance and disconnection, despite technological access.

Extract 12

[…] However, I still feel that, at least on this side of the world, here in my country, this idea is not as true or evident […] the notion of being able to work from home with people in Japan, for example, still feels mysterious […] This opens a very interesting window for communication and intercultural relations. But do I feel like

a citizen of the world? I don't believe so. All of this is still a process that takes time; people need to be made aware and encouraged. (ColombianLecturer2)

While English and digital technologies provide access to international communication, ColombianLecturer2 pointed out that developing a true sense of global citizenship requires more than technological tools. It is a gradual process that involves raising awareness, fostering intercultural understanding, and addressing regional disparities that may limit individuals' ability to fully experience global belonging.

Alongside Colombia, in Thailand and Iraq, global citizenship-oriented pedagogies were reported as being underdeveloped within ELT, although efforts were made at the individual level to integrate global topics in the classroom.

Extract 13

Even though we encourage students to learn English, the curriculum still focuses too much on grammar and passing exams. There's little space to talk about real global problems or intercultural experiences. Sometimes, I feel like we are preparing them for a test, not the world.'

(ThaiLecturer4)

Extract 14

The curriculum does not support intercultural or global citizenship. Students remain focused on rote learning, […] [but] in my teaching, I aim to introduce global topics alongside English to help students broaden their cultural understanding. (IraqiLecturer3)

This reflection highlights the challenges of promoting GCE within an educational system heavily focused on memorisation and exam-oriented practices. Despite these structural constraints, ThaiLecturer4 and IraqiLecturer3 suggest ELT could still be used creatively to introduce global issues and intercultural perspectives. By integrating such topics alongside language instruction, the lecturer sought to expand students' cultural awareness and encourage them to think beyond their immediate local context, positioning English learning as a window to global understanding.

Such pedagogical efforts often involved challenging monolingual and monocultural framings of ELT. VietnameseLecturer2 (Extract 15), for example, reflected on using classroom discussions about endangered languages to encourage students to critically engage with linguistic and cultural diversity.

Extract 15

There is a lesson on endangered languages and cultures, and based on that topic, I introduced other cultures and tried to make my students understand and develop an interest in different countries. We also talked about whether everyone in the world should simply speak one language. (VietnameseLecturer2)

VietnameseLecturer2 highlights how ELT classrooms can serve as spaces for raising students' critical awareness of linguistic diversity and cultural preservation. By connecting the topic of endangered languages to broader discussions about global linguistic uniformity, VietnameseLecturer2 encouraged students to reflect on the importance of maintaining multiple languages and cultures, rather than accepting the idea of a single global language. Such pedagogical practices fostered students' curiosity about different countries while promoting respect for cultural and linguistic differences as essential aspects of global citizenship.

This critical engagement with language and culture extended beyond the classroom. ThaiAdministrator1 (Extract 16) highlighted how everyday intercultural encounters within the university environment provided students with experiential learning opportunities to cultivate

their sense of global citizenship. These encounters went beyond language to include cultural practices and lived experiences.

Extract 16

> Yes, and lecturers from different backgrounds also have different cultures, not just languages. In fact, it's not just lecturers—we used to have kids representing more than ten countries here before the COVID-19 pandemic. They were from China, Africa, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Food cultures, lifestyles, and dress codes also helped the kids learn about being global citizens through these cultural experiences. (ThaiAdministrator1)

ThaiAdministrator1 illustrates how exposure to diverse cultures within the university, through food, lifestyle, dress, and interaction with peers from different countries, created informal yet powerful spaces for students to learn about and experience global citizenship. For ThaiAdministrator1, developing global citizenship was not solely confined to formal classroom instruction but was embedded in everyday intercultural engagement, allowing students to recognise and appreciate cultural diversity in their immediate environment.

Beyond classroom practices, participants also framed global citizenship not as a fixed curricular component but as an ethical responsibility grounded in everyday social realities. This ethical stance was further reflected in the participants' critiques of the neoliberal framing of education. ColombianLecturer2 (Extract 17), for instance, advocated for an educational model that promotes critical self-awareness and highlights the interconnectedness between one's local context and wider global dynamics.

Extract 17

> *However, education has to transform you as a person. And that transformation has to be for the better. I have to become aware of my reality, the reality of my surroundings, and how my reality influences other realities and is influenced by them. You can't live in the bubble where most people live. That tiny world where I have control; that's not the world. In that sense, if education focuses in that direction, it can indeed create better individuals, it can bring about a significant transformation. Otherwise, we will continue to train for jobs, teaching subjects that one will eventually use to go out and work. That is a very narrow vision of education. (ColombianLecturer2)*

This reflection underscores a strong critique of a narrow, skills-driven vision of education that focuses solely on employability. Instead, ColombianLecturer2 emphasised that education should lead to personal transformation by cultivating students' critical awareness of their local realities and their interconnection with the wider world. In this view, education, including ELT, is not just about preparing students for the job market but about enabling them to move beyond their 'tiny world' and become socially engaged, reflective, and ethically responsible individuals. This transformative potential of ELT was also echoed in the Vietnamese context. VietnameseLecturer3 (Extract 18) reflected on how even skill-oriented classes, such as reading, could create opportunities for students to critically reflect on the notion of global citizenship.

Extract 18

> *I teach Reading skills, and via reading passages in the course, I can integrate content and advice to help students become global citizens or just simply become successful people and achieve success in what they do. For example, we read a passage about 'Lost in Translation.' I asked my students how they defined the term and what it meant to be a global citizen. And we had a discussion about global citizenship. (VietnameseLecturer3)*

By inviting students to define terms like 'global citizen' and relate them to their own experiences, VietnameseLecturer3 actively transformed a reading activity into a dialogic space for exploring global issues, intercultural understanding, and students' aspirations in a globalised world.

Here, ELT becomes not just about acquiring skills but about cultivating reflective and socially aware learners.

In brief, English was perceived as essential for facilitating access to global knowledge, interaction, and engagement with diversity. However, participants consistently emphasised that global citizenship is not solely about speaking English but about the ability to 'explore more neighbourhoods' (ColombianLecturer6), foster 'awareness of global issues' (ThaiAdministrator2), and develop 'critical self-awareness' (ColombianLecturer2). These perspectives highlight a productive tension within ELT: while English offers opportunities for global belonging and expanded horizons, it also risks reinforcing narrow, utilitarian, and neoliberal views of education if reduced to a skill for employability alone. Ultimately, participants reframed English not as an endpoint but as a starting point, a means to foster 'ethical responsibility' (ColombianLecturer1) and cultivate global citizens who are not only linguistically competent but also socially aware, critically literate, and grounded in their local realities while connected to global concerns.

Discussion

The findings reveal a recurring tension in how English is perceived within ELT and GCE in higher education. Most participants viewed English as essential for accessing global knowledge, seeking international opportunities, and advancing personal growth. They noted that English allowed them to engage with international communities, adopt broader perspectives, and develop openness and non-judgemental attitudes (Extracts 1–3). This view is consistent with the literature, which describes English as a global lingua franca and a tool for intercultural citizenship (Jenkins 2014; Baker and Fang 2022; Baker et al. 2025c). However, English was also described as a 'defining attribute' of global citizenship (Extracts 3–6), reflecting an instrumentalist, neoliberal framing that connects global citizenship with economic and academic mobility (Aktas et al. 2017). While participants acknowledged these perceived advantages, they also expressed concerns about maintaining personal and cultural identity in global contexts (Extracts 7 and 8), with one participant explicitly critiquing entrenched cultural hierarchies and dominant norms (Extract 9). Following critical perspectives from Bosio (2024) and Abdi (2015), they emphasised the importance of maintaining cultural distinctiveness while engaging with international communities. This dual perspective reflects ongoing ambivalence: while English increases access and creates opportunities, it can also reinforce cultural hierarchies and encourage uniformity in conceptions of global citizenship if adopted without critical reflection. In response, participants supported educational approaches that are ethical, sensitive to local contexts, and inclusive of diverse identities. They called for policies and practices that enable meaningful global engagement without diminishing cultural specificity. These findings align with arguments in the literature that challenge neoliberal and Anglophone-dominated models, calling for more inclusive approaches to GCE that promote social justice (De Costa 2022; Bosio 2024).

Participants critiqued dominant approaches in English language education that frame multilingual learners as deficient and uphold hierarchical norms (Extracts 8–9, 15–16). This view aligns with Global Englishes literature on Anglophone normativity, which challenges the prioritisation of native-speaker models and rigid linguistic standards (Rose and Galloway 2019). While only one participant explicitly questioned the notion of a single global language (Extract 15), others implicitly challenged linguistic uniformity by emphasising identity expression through English (Extract 8), critiquing cultural hierarchies (Extract 9), and valuing intercultural engagement through diversity (Extract 16). Together, these perspectives align with critical approaches to intercultural citizenship education that resist homogenising ideologies in language learning (Byram 2008; Baker and Fang 2022). Relatedly, they rejected exam-oriented curricula (Extracts 13–14, 17) that reflect neoliberal policies, which reduce language learning to economic goals (Block 2013). Rather than accepting deficit labels, participants promoted critical reflection and advocated for educational practices centred on co-constructing knowledge (Extracts 15–18). Their responses reflected the

principles of transformative ELT, which prioritise engagement and active participation over rote instruction (Sifakis 2019). From this perspective, English was not seen as a neutral medium, but rather as a mechanism that can reproduce inequities across both global and local contexts. Participants from Thailand and Iraq further described institutional and societal conditions that limited access to English and opportunities for global citizenship (Extracts 13–14). These accounts support critiques that global citizenship narratives often assume mobile and privileged learners while overlooking structural barriers (Aktas et al. 2017; Bosio 2024). These insights reflect broader concerns that internationalisation in higher education can reinforce exclusivity, especially in Global South contexts. In response, participants called for more inclusive and contextually grounded approaches to language education that recognise material inequalities and avoid presenting English as a universal solution to these issues.

This tension is most evident in institutions where students come from lower socioeconomic or rural backgrounds, as seen across the study sites (Table 1). Their engagement with English was influenced by systemic disparities in access, recognition, and institutional support (Baker et al. 2025a, 2025b). The findings reveal the limitations of dominant GCE narratives that overlook both material and symbolic inequalities embedded in English language practices. Although global organisations such as UNESCO promote GCE as a transformative vision, this discourse often rests on the assumption of a mobile, cosmopolitan learner with unimpeded access to global opportunities. These accounts suggest that global citizenship is not universally attainable, but is negotiated within systems marked by historical and social inequalities. This interpretation aligns with literature cautioning that when GCE is framed within uncritical Anglophone paradigms, it may reproduce the colonial logics it seeks to challenge (Abdi 2015; Bosio 2024).

Turning to English and education for critical global citizenship, teachers and students in this study responded to these dominant logics by reimagining ELT as a space for critical reflection and ethical engagement. Participants, especially educators in Colombia and Vietnam, described pedagogical strategies that included activities exploring endangered languages, examining cultural hierarchies, and linking classroom texts to global sociopolitical concerns (Extracts 10–18). These practices reflect what Sifakis (2019) identifies as transformative ELT, which emphasises the co-construction and contestation of knowledge rather than the passive transmission of content. Participants were not passive recipients of externally imposed curricula. Educators in this study adapted their teaching to incorporate critical content, including topics such as endangered languages and intercultural discussions, even when institutional curricula prioritised memorisation and exam preparation (Extracts 10–18). These efforts represented individual acts of agency aimed at creating space for ethical dialogue and critical engagement within otherwise restrictive systems. However, participants noted that these approaches were rarely supported through institutional policies or formal teacher preparation programs (Extracts 13–14). This lack of alignment between classroom-level initiatives and broader structural conditions is consistent with literature in critical ELT and intercultural citizenship education, which emphasises that lasting change depends on coherence between pedagogical efforts and institutional frameworks (Byram et al. 2017; Sifakis 2019).

Participants' narratives also revealed intersectional patterns of marginalisation that influenced their experiences with English language learning. Participants across all four contexts reported that their engagement with English and intercultural learning was limited by structural and contextual barriers (Extracts 10–14). These included rigid curricula, limited opportunities for intercultural interaction, and misalignment between global expectations and local conditions. Many also noted the difficulty of implementing critical teaching practices in systems focused on standardisation and compliance (Extracts 14, 17). Together, these factors constrained their access to meaningful global learning experiences. As Kubota (2011, 2020) and Banegas and Evripidou (2021) suggest, ELT often excludes learners whose identities fall outside dominant sociolinguistic norms, including those defined by race, religion, gender, sexuality, or socioeconomic status. When GCE fails to engage with these intersections, it does more than fall short of its transformative potential. It risks aligning with the very structures of exclusion it claims to oppose. A significant

contribution of this study is its challenge to externally imposed definitions of empowerment and global citizenship. The research affirms a decolonial orientation that emphasises epistemic plurality by focusing on meanings and practices situated within local contexts (de Sousa Santos 2014). From this perspective, language education must contest the authority of Anglophone norms while responding to the lived realities of learners. In this study, participants framed global citizenship through values of care, ethical responsibility, and collective awareness. For example, some highlighted the importance of engaging with international issues and cultivating empathy toward global events, suggesting that language learning should foster ethical sensitivity beyond communicative competence (Extract 11). Others conceptualised intercultural engagement as a process of expanding one's understanding of unfamiliar cultural contexts—not only recognising difference but learning from it—thereby reinforcing the need to situate global citizenship in both local and global realities (Extract 10). Participants also stressed the importance of maintaining one's own cultural identity and resisting the pressure to assimilate into dominant global norms, particularly in contexts shaped by linguistic and cultural hierarchies (Extracts 7–9). Their responses challenged instrumentalist interpretations that reduce global citizenship to English fluency or international mobility.

The study provides evidence for reorienting English language education toward socially responsive and politically conscious practices within Global South higher education. Rather than positioning English as inherently liberating or oppressive, the research emphasises that its function is conditioned by pedagogical frameworks, institutional policies, and broader socioeconomic dynamics. The question is not whether English should be included in education, but under what conditions its instruction can challenge colonial legacies, interrupt neoliberal instrumentalism, and promote equitable and inclusive learning. This requires pedagogical approaches that move beyond native-speaker norms and reductive measures of success, instead recognising students' multilingual repertoires, affirming diverse identities, and engaging with local and global knowledge systems (Álvarez Valencia and Wagner 2021; Baker and Fang 2022; De Costa 2022; Canagarajah 2023). When informed by ethical responsibility, critical inquiry, and collective engagement, ELT can contribute to forms of global citizenship that embrace difference as a foundation for solidarity and justice, in line with decolonial perspectives that challenge the universalist framing of English and expose its entanglement with colonial histories (Mignolo 2012; Jordão 2019; Pennycook and Makoni 2019; Barnawi and R'boul 2023; Tupas 2024).

Conclusion

This study explored the ways in which English is conceptualised and enacted concerning global and intercultural citizenship across four state-funded universities in Colombia, Iraq, Thailand, and Vietnam. These institutions exemplify the complex tensions surrounding the global circulation of English and the construction of global citizenship in higher education in the Global South. The findings indicate that while English is widely seen by students, educators, and administrators as a resource for international mobility and intercultural engagement, it is also encountered as a contested terrain defined by asymmetries in power, identity, and access. Participants emphasised that meaningful global citizenship involves more than linguistic competence. It must also reflect ethical responsibility, cultural awareness, and acknowledgement of diverse epistemologies.

The study also challenges dominant narratives that frame English as a neutral or inherently empowering force. Instead, it demonstrates how prevailing ELT practices are rooted in Anglophone, monolingual, and neoliberal logic. These practices can reproduce structural inequality, marginalise nondominant users, and uphold symbolic hierarchies tied to coloniality. Participants' critical reflections reveal the limitations of GCE when operationalised within such frameworks. Yet their practices also point to the potential of English classrooms to serve as spaces for cultivating political consciousness, fostering ethical dialogue, and promoting epistemic inclusion. Through attention to context-specific experiences, this study contributes to the growing call for decolonial, multilingual, and socially responsive approaches to ELT. It affirms the need to

dismantle native-speakerist assumptions, develop pedagogies that honour learners' full linguistic repertoires, and embed GCE in relationally responsive practices relevant to local contexts. Moreover, it highlights how educators and students exercise agency in reconfiguring English as a medium of critical inquiry rather than assimilation.

In light of the continued expansion of English in higher education across Global South, low- and middle-income contexts, this study calls for institutional reorientation that prioritises equity and embraces epistemic plurality. Achieving this vision requires more than theoretical critique. It also depends on structural reforms recognising linguistic diversity, supporting educator autonomy, and giving a meaningful place to local ways of knowing within global learning environments. When informed by these values, ELT can contribute to developing global citizens who are linguistically capable, ethically engaged, critically reflective, and connected to their sociocultural contexts.

Note

[1]Pseudonyms are used for all sites.

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