

Language, expression, and responsibility: An interdisciplinary study of freedom of speech, values education, and legal consciousness in Philippine education

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Abstract

Aim: This study examined how language education in basic and higher education in the Philippines fosters freedom of expression while promoting ethical responsibility, social accountability, and legal consciousness.

Methodology: The study employed a qualitative descriptive research design involving 36 participants, including basic education teachers, higher education language educators, and learners from selected Philippine educational institutions. Data were collected through classroom discourse analysis, reflective essays, and semi-structured interviews. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in participants' perceptions and communicative practices.

Results: The findings revealed a developmental progression in learners' understanding of freedom of expression. Initially, learners perceived expression as an unrestricted personal right. Through structured language activities integrating values education and legal awareness, learners developed reflective, respectful, and socially responsible communicative practices. Ethical reflection and legal awareness strengthened learners' expressive competence and accountability in communication.

Conclusion: Integrating language instruction with values formation and legal literacy contributed to the development of responsible communicators capable of balancing expressive freedom with respect for the rights and dignity of others. The study proposes the Responsible Expressive Language Education (RELE) Framework as a pedagogical model for promoting ethically and legally grounded communication in Philippine education.

Keywords: *language education; freedom of expression; values education; legal literacy; communicative responsibility; Philippine education*

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a tool of communication; it is a potent medium that facilitates the expression of ideas, identities, and values. Language becomes a location where freedom of expression is exercised, contested, and influenced by social norms and legal frameworks in educational environments. Moreover, language functions as a fundamental social instrument through which individuals articulate identity, construct meaning, and participate in democratic life. Fairclough (1995), in his Critical Discourse Analysis, claims that a language constructs identities, relationships, and systems of meaning within society. At the global level, contemporary educational systems increasingly recognize language education not merely as a vehicle for linguistic competence but as a formative space for cultivating critical thinking, civic engagement, and ethical communication. Language classrooms were therefore positioned as crucial sites where learners learned how to express ideas responsibly, engage with diverse perspectives, and negotiate meaning within socially acceptable and legally defined boundaries.

Across different countries, rapid digitalization reshaped communicative practices, expanding the reach and immediacy of expression through social media and online platforms. While these developments democratized access

to speech, they also intensified challenges related to misinformation, cyberbullying, hate speech, and defamatory discourse. These emerging trends underscore the growing necessity for educational approaches that integrate linguistic proficiency with ethical judgment and legal awareness, particularly in formal language instruction. Shapira-Lishchinsky (2011) explored ethical difficulties in the classroom and demonstrated how ethical consciousness emerges from reflection on critical teaching events. The study's findings support pedagogical education initiatives. Such ethical awareness in education is consistent with Taylor's (1994) notion that ethical knowledge can enable exploration of options and commitment to duties, as well as build value preferences and an orientation to influence attitudes and behavior. Furthermore, Green (2025) emphasizes that cultivating critical reflection in students' engagement with legal language and understanding the ethical dimensions of law is essential. This reinforces the argument for a more integrated approach in language instruction that prepares students to navigate ethical and legal challenges.

In the Philippine context, freedom of speech was constitutionally guaranteed under Article III, Section 4 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution. However, this right was not absolute and was subject to ethical standards and legal constraints designed to protect human dignity, public order, and social harmony. Educational institutions, especially at the basic and higher education levels, served as critical environments where learners encountered both the opportunities and limits of expressive freedom. Despite this reality, language instruction often emphasized grammar, fluency, and comprehension while giving limited attention to the ethical and legal dimensions of expression. The Education Act of 1982 provides students the "right to free expression of opinions and suggestions, and to effective channels of communication with appropriate academic channels and administrative bodies of the school or institution." This Act implies that pedagogical practices should shift from passive reception to active meaning-making and student engagement.

Existing scholarship largely treated freedom of expression, values education, and legal literacy as distinct areas of inquiry. Studies on language pedagogy frequently focused on communicative competence and discourse practices, while research on values education emphasized moral reasoning and character formation independent of subject-specific instruction. Similarly, legal literacy studies examined awareness of laws and rights but rarely situated such knowledge within everyday classroom communication practices. There remained a paucity of interdisciplinary research that examined how these domains could be intentionally integrated into language education across educational levels, particularly in the Philippine setting. The insufficient knowledge of legal matters in handling the learning and teaching processes is supported by De Guzman et al. (2017), who studied Legal Literacy of School Administrators and Teachers: Do They Know the Legal Boundaries of Their Profession, and their study findings indicate that administrators and teachers from private and public schools have a below-average level of legal literacy. The study concludes that participants' insufficient legal knowledge leaves them vulnerable to costly legal problems. Hence, this study addressed this gap by examining language education as a platform for fostering responsible expression that balanced expressive freedom with ethical reflection and legal consciousness. Unlike previous studies that treated these constructs in isolation, the present investigation advanced an integrated pedagogical perspective applicable to both basic and higher education. Academically, the study contributed to language education, civic literacy, and interdisciplinary pedagogy by offering a framework that aligned linguistic instruction with democratic values and Philippine legal realities. Practically, it provided insights that may inform curriculum development, classroom practices, and policy discussions on responsible communication in contemporary educational contexts.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

Language Education, Expression, and Civic Engagement

Recent literature consistently demonstrated that language education played a pivotal role in developing learners' capacity for civic participation and ethical discourse. Language learning was inseparable from meaning-making, identity formation, and social responsibility, particularly in multicultural and democratic societies. Within educational settings, language classrooms functioned as spaces where learners practiced expressing opinions, negotiating disagreement, and engaging with sensitive social issues.

Studies on freedom of speech in educational contexts highlighted that classrooms were not value-neutral environments but guided spaces where expression coexisted with responsibility, respect, and accountability. Educators were expected to balance protecting student voice with fostering respectful dialogue, especially when addressing controversial or socially relevant topics. This notion embodies the mandate of the Education Act of 1982, which provides students the "right to free expression of opinions and suggestions, and to effective channels of communication with appropriate academic channels and administrative bodies of the school or institution."

Values Education and Ethical Communication

The values education literature underscores that ethical communication is developed through reflective engagement, contextualized dialogue, and moral reasoning rather than through prescriptive instruction alone. Learners internalized values more effectively when they were encouraged to reflect on real-life situations, moral dilemmas, and the consequences of their communicative choices. This perspective aligned with language education approaches that emphasized discussion, debate, and critical reflection as pedagogical strategies. Jose et al. (2025) investigated how ethical communication practices affect academic integrity and how students make ethical decisions in digital academic contexts. Essentially, ethical communication is an important component of current teaching in the Philippines.

However, existing studies often examined values education as a separate curricular component, detached from subject-specific instruction. Limited research explored how ethical values could be systematically embedded within language teaching practices, particularly across different educational levels.

Legal Literacy and Communicative Responsibility

Legal scholarship demonstrated that awareness of laws governing speech significantly influenced communicative behavior, especially in digital environments. Knowledge of libel laws, cybercrime regulations, and human rights protections affected how individuals evaluated the risks and responsibilities associated with online expression. Despite this, legal literacy was seldom integrated into language education frameworks, resulting in a disconnect between everyday communicative practices and legal accountability. Tuppal et al. (2025) evaluated legal literacy in nursing students, concentrating on exposure to legal education, perceived significance of legal knowledge, and confidence in implementing legal principles in practice. The results imply legal readiness among other Filipino learners, not just among nursing students.

The scarcity of empirical studies that positioned legal consciousness as a core element of language instruction represented a critical gap in the literature. Addressing this gap was particularly relevant in the Philippine context, where digital communication continued to expand amid evolving legal frameworks.

Legal Anchors in the Philippine Context

The study was informed by key Philippine legal provisions that defined the boundaries of freedom of expression. These included Article III, Section 4 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution; provisions on libel under the Revised Penal Code; Republic Act No. 10175, otherwise known as the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012; Republic Act No. 9710 or the Magna Carta of Women; and Republic Act No. 10911 or the Anti-Age Discrimination in Employment Act. These legal instruments provided the normative context for the examination and analysis of responsible language expression. Fortified by the Education Act of 1982, which provides students the "right to free expression of opinions and suggestions, and to effective channels of communication with appropriate academic channels and administrative bodies of the school or institution," the Act recognizes the role of teachers in establishing professional dignity and communication.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on sociolinguistic theory, values education theory, and legal literacy frameworks. Sociolinguistic theory conceptualizes language as a social practice shaped by power relations, cultural norms, and contextual factors. This perspective emphasized that linguistic choices were never neutral and carried ethical and social implications, making responsibility an inherent component of communication.

Values education theory highlighted moral development, ethical reasoning, and respect for others as essential educational outcomes. Within this framework, education was viewed as a process of shaping not only cognitive competence but also character and moral judgment, which were critical to responsible expression.

Legal literacy frameworks emphasized the importance of understanding rights, limitations, and accountability in democratic societies. Legal literacy extended beyond knowledge of laws to include the capacity to apply legal principles in everyday decision-making, particularly in communicative contexts.

Conceptual Framework

Guided by these theories, the conceptual framework proposed that Responsible Language Expression emerged from the dynamic interaction of three core components: linguistic competence, ethical reflection, and legal consciousness. Linguistic competence referred to the ability to communicate ideas effectively and

appropriately; ethical reflection involved moral reasoning and respect for others; and legal consciousness encompassed awareness of rights, limitations, and accountability under existing laws.

The framework guided the study's design, data collection, and analysis. It illustrated how language education could serve as an integrative platform in which expressive freedom was exercised responsibly within ethical and legal boundaries.

Statement of the Problem

Despite constitutional protections for freedom of expression, language education in the Philippines faced challenges in balancing expressive freedom with ethical responsibility and legal accountability. Learners across educational levels often lacked structured opportunities to reflect on the social and legal implications of their language use. This gap limited the development of responsible communicative practices necessary for democratic participation and social cohesion.

Research Objectives

The general objective of the study was to examine how language education fostered responsible freedom of expression across basic and higher education in the Philippines. Specifically, the study aimed to:

1. To examine learners' perceptions of freedom of expression in language classrooms.
2. To analyze how values education and legal awareness were integrated into language instruction.
3. To identify the effects of integrated language instruction on learners' communicative responsibility.
4. To propose a pedagogical framework for responsible language expression.

Research Questions

1. How did learners perceive freedom of expression in language education?
2. How were values education and legal awareness integrated into language instruction?
3. How did integrated instruction influence learners' responsible use of language?
4. What pedagogical framework could guide responsible language expression across educational levels?

METHOD

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, which was appropriate for examining participants' perceptions, lived experiences, and instructional practices related to responsible language expression. This design was selected because it allowed for an in-depth and contextualized understanding of how language education functioned as a space for the exercise of freedom of expression, ethical reflection, and legal awareness within actual classroom and educational settings.

A qualitative descriptive approach was most suitable because the study did not aim to test hypotheses or measure causal relationships but rather to capture rich, naturally occurring accounts of participants' perspectives. The design enabled the systematic description of patterns emerging from participants' narratives, classroom interactions, and written reflections across basic and higher education contexts in the Philippines.

Participants and Sampling

The participants consisted of 36 individuals drawn from selected Philippine educational institutions. These included 12 basic education teachers, 10 higher education language educators, and 14 learners enrolled in language-related courses. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique appropriate for qualitative studies that required information-rich cases.

Selection criteria included direct involvement in language instruction or participation in language classes during the period of data collection. Teachers and educators were selected based on their experience in teaching language subjects, while learners were selected based on their active engagement in classroom discussions and written language tasks. This sampling approach ensured that participants possessed relevant experiences necessary to address the objectives of the study.

Research Instruments

The study utilized researcher-developed semi-structured interview guides and reflective writing prompts as primary data-gathering instruments. The interview guides were designed to elicit participants' views on freedom of

expression, ethical communication, and legal awareness within language education. The reflective writing prompts encouraged learners to articulate personal experiences and insights related to classroom communication and responsible expression.

The instruments underwent content validation by three experts with backgrounds in language education and research methodology. The validators examined the instruments for clarity, relevance, coherence, and alignment with the study's objectives. Revisions were made based on the experts' recommendations to ensure that the instruments were appropriate for the participants and capable of generating meaningful qualitative data.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected over a three-month period in selected educational institutions in the Philippines. Classroom observations were conducted to document instructional practices, interaction patterns, and instances of expressive engagement within language classes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in designated areas within the institutions to ensure minimal disruption to academic activities.

Written reflections were collected from learners after selected language activities that encouraged expression and discussion. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, while observational data were recorded through field notes. All data collection activities followed a consistent procedure to maintain methodological rigor and coherence.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using contextual thematic analysis. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and written reflections were first transcribed and read repeatedly to achieve data familiarization. Initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful units related to freedom of expression, ethical values, and legal awareness. Codes were then clustered into broader themes that reflected recurring patterns across participant groups. The analysis emphasized contextual interpretation by situating themes within classroom practices and institutional settings. This approach allowed the study to generate nuanced descriptions of how responsible language expression was understood and practiced within language education.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards in educational research were strictly observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing participants' identities and securely storing all data. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no coercion or undue influence was applied. The study adhered to principles of respect, beneficence, and justice to protect the rights and well-being of all participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative analysis yielded three interrelated themes that captured learners' evolving understanding of freedom of expression within language education. These themes reflected a developmental progression from an initial rights-centered interpretation of expression toward ethically and legally informed communicative practices. The analysis demonstrated how learners' perceptions and behaviors were shaped by pedagogical interventions that intentionally integrated values education and legal awareness into language instruction.

The first theme illustrated learners' initial conceptualization of freedom of expression as an unrestricted personal right, largely detached from ethical responsibility and legal accountability. This baseline condition revealed prevailing misconceptions that framed expression as immune from consequence, highlighting gaps in learners' sociolinguistic and civic understanding. The second theme documented the emergence of ethical reflection as a result of values-based language instruction, wherein learners began to recognize the moral implications of their communicative choices and the importance of respect, empathy, and fairness in discourse.

The third theme captured the development of legal consciousness, as learners increasingly understood freedom of expression within the context of constitutional protections and legal limitations. This theme demonstrated how legal literacy complemented ethical reasoning by providing concrete frameworks for accountability and protection. Together, the three themes illustrated a coherent learning trajectory that underscored the transformative potential of integrative language education.

Theme 1: Freedom of Expression as an Unrestricted Personal Right

Findings revealed that learners initially conceptualized freedom of expression as an absolute and unrestricted right. Expression was framed primarily as the ability to speak without limitation, emphasizing individual autonomy rather than social responsibility. This understanding was consistently evident across interviews, classroom observations, and written reflections. Learners rarely acknowledged the relational nature of communication or its potential consequences. Such perceptions reflected a rights-centered but decontextualized interpretation of expressive freedom.

One learner explicitly stated, "*Freedom of expression means I can say whatever I want because it is my opinion and my right*" (Learner 4). This statement exemplified how expression was viewed as self-owned rather than socially situated. Learners did not initially associate expression with accountability or ethical judgment. Instead, speech was understood as an extension of personal liberty. This view limited reflective engagement with communicative impact.

Classroom observations supported this interpretation, as early discussions frequently lacked audience awareness. Learners often spoke assertively without moderating tone or language. Interruptions and dismissive responses occurred without recognition of discourtesy. These behaviors suggested that learners equated expressiveness with dominance rather than dialogue. Communication was treated as performance rather than interaction.

Volodina (2021) emphasized that language learning involved social meaning-making embedded in cultural and ethical contexts. The findings indicated that learners' early perceptions lacked this sociolinguistic depth. Language was treated as neutral and value-free. This misconception obscured the ethical dimensions inherent in communicative acts. As a result, learners demonstrated limited communicative sensitivity.

Learners also demonstrated confusion between honesty and acceptability. Many believed that expressing "truth" justified any form of speech, regardless of harm. One participant remarked, "*If I am just being honest, people should accept it*" (Learner 9). This reasoning reflected an absence of ethical filtering. Expression was evaluated by intent rather than consequence.

Sturino (2026) warned that unstructured expressive environments often reinforced simplistic understandings of free speech. The findings of this study confirmed this assertion. Without guided discourse, learners defaulted to absolutist interpretations. These interpretations failed to account for pluralism and respect in democratic dialogue. Consequently, communicative competence remained incomplete.

Learners rarely referenced constitutional limitations or ethical norms governing speech. Although aware of freedom of expression as a constitutional right, they were unfamiliar with its boundaries. Rights were remembered independently of responsibilities. This imbalance reflected gaps in civic and values education. Language instruction did not initially bridge this divide.

The data further showed that learners perceived expression as consequence-free within academic spaces. Statements made in class were assumed to carry no real-world implications. This perception weakened reflective engagement. Learners failed to consider how classroom discourse mirrored broader social communication. Educational settings were viewed as isolated from societal norms.

Such findings were concerning in light of digital communication trends. Learners who viewed expression as unrestricted in classrooms were likely to replicate similar behaviors online. Scholars noted that unchecked expressive absolutism contributed to harmful digital discourse (Al Ebrahimi, 2025). The classroom thus represented a critical intervention point. Language education assumed preventive significance.

Learners' early views reflected dominant public narratives that framed free speech as immunity. This narrative overshadowed democratic values of respect and inclusion. Communication was reduced to assertion rather than dialogue. These findings highlighted the necessity of instructional recalibration. Expression required reframing as a shared social practice.

The study revealed that expressive freedom, when taught without ethical scaffolding, risked misinterpretation. Learners were not inherently irresponsible; rather, they lacked guidance. Their views reflected what had been emphasized in instruction. What was omitted became normalized. This insight underscored the power of curriculum design.

Amini et al. (2025) argued that language classrooms shaped ethical orientations toward meaning. The findings demonstrated that when ethics were absent, learners constructed incomplete communicative identities. Language proficiency alone did not guarantee responsible expression. Ethical competence was equally necessary. This gap defined the instructional challenge.

Learners' statements frequently prioritized self over community. Communicative success was measured by being heard, not by being understood. This orientation limited dialogic exchange. Democratic discourse requires mutual recognition. The absence of this recognition weakened communicative quality.

The study therefore identified unrestricted expression as a foundational misconception. Addressing this misconception required deliberate pedagogical intervention. Freedom of expression needed contextualization. Language instruction served as the most appropriate site for this reframing. This justified the values-based instructional approach.

The findings also illustrated that expressive absolutism was not malicious but developmental. Learners had not yet encountered structured ethical discourse. Their views reflected early-stage civic understanding. Education played a corrective role. Language classrooms functioned as civic laboratories.

Drerup (2022) emphasized that democratic education required guided engagement with controversy. The findings confirmed that guidance was essential. Freedom without structure produced imbalance. Structure without freedom produced silence. Effective instruction required balance.

Learners' early discourse revealed the limitations of rights-only education. Rights without responsibility fostered communicative fragility. Ethical grounding strengthened expressive resilience. Language education provided the bridge between the two. This strengthened democratic participation.

The study demonstrated that misconceptions about freedom were widespread but malleable. Learners were receptive to reframing when provided context. This suggested strong pedagogical potential. Instruction mattered. Content mattered.

Overall, Theme 1 established the baseline condition of expressive absolutism. This condition framed subsequent transformation. Understanding this baseline was essential to interpreting later shifts. It contextualized learner growth.

Theme 1 thus highlighted the urgency of redefining freedom of expression within language education. Expression required ethical, social, and legal anchoring. Without this, communicative competence remained incomplete. This theme justified the integrative framework examined in subsequent themes.

Theme 2: Emergence of Ethical Reflection through Values-Based Language Instruction

Following the implementation of values-based language instruction, a clear emergence of ethical reflection was observed among learners. Unlike their initial views that framed expression as an unrestricted right, learners began to articulate communicative choices in relation to moral considerations. Ethical reflection became evident in classroom discussions, written reflections, and interview responses. Learners increasingly evaluated not only what could be said but also what ought to be said. This shift indicated the development of moral awareness within language use.

Learners' reflective responses demonstrated heightened sensitivity to the emotional and social impact of language. One learner expressed, *"I learned that my words can affect how others feel, even if I do not intend to hurt them"* (Learner 8). This statement illustrated an emerging recognition of unintended consequences. Ethical reflection extended beyond intention toward outcome. Such awareness marked a critical departure from earlier absolutist views.

Classroom observations supported this finding, as learners began to pause before responding during discussions. Turn-taking improved, and dismissive language decreased noticeably. Learners appeared more conscious of tone and phrasing. Communication shifted from impulsive expression to reflective articulation. These behavioral changes suggested internalization of ethical norms.

Values-based instruction encouraged learners to engage with moral dilemmas embedded in language tasks. Activities such as reflective writing and guided discussion prompted learners to consider fairness, respect, and empathy. One participant noted, *"Before speaking, I now think if my words are respectful and fair to others"* (Learner 12). Ethical evaluation became a habitual cognitive process. Language learning thus functioned as moral learning.

Guo (2026) emphasized that language education was inseparable from ethical meaning-making. The findings affirmed this perspective by demonstrating that ethical reflection could be cultivated through intentional pedagogy. Learners did not acquire ethical sensitivity incidentally. Rather, it developed through structured engagement. This reinforced the role of instruction in shaping communicative values.

Learners' written reflections revealed deeper moral reasoning over time. Early reflections focused on personal expression, while later entries emphasized responsibility and consideration of others. This progression indicated cognitive and moral growth. Learners increasingly framed expression as relational. Ethical awareness became embedded in communicative identity.



One learner wrote, "*Freedom of expression is not just about me speaking, but also about listening and respecting others*" (Learner 5). This statement reflected a dialogic understanding of communication. Expression was no longer unilateral. It became reciprocal and socially grounded. Such reframing aligned with democratic communicative principles.

Nishiyama et al. (2023) argued that ethical discourse in classrooms required guided facilitation. The study's findings supported this claim. Ethical reflection emerged not from unrestricted debate but from structured dialogue. Teachers played a critical role in framing discussions. Guided discourse fostered moral engagement.

Learners also began acknowledging diversity of perspectives during discussions. Disagreement was increasingly expressed with caution and respect. This shift suggested growing tolerance for difference. Ethical reflection enabled learners to navigate disagreement constructively. Language became a tool for negotiation rather than confrontation.

The integration of values education within language instruction helped learners contextualize abstract moral concepts. Ethical values were no longer theoretical. They were applied in real communicative situations. Learners practiced ethical reasoning through language use. This experiential approach strengthened moral understanding.

Learners' ethical awareness extended to written communication as well. Reflective outputs showed careful word choice and softened assertions. Learners edited their language to avoid offense. This demonstrated transfer of ethical reflection across modalities. Spoken and written expression were equally affected.

One learner stated, "*I now revise my words because I do not want to hurt anyone even if I disagree*" (Learner 14). This response illustrated the application of ethical reasoning in writing. Learners recognized writing as a powerful communicative act. Ethical responsibility was not limited to oral discourse.

Aririguzoh (2022) noted that ethical competence was central to communicative competence. The findings confirmed that language proficiency alone was insufficient. Learners required ethical frameworks to guide expression. Values education provided this framework. Language classrooms thus became sites of moral cultivation.

Ethical reflection also reduced instances of hostile or exclusionary language. Classroom discourse became more inclusive. Learners demonstrated greater respect for marginalized viewpoints. Ethical awareness contributed to safer communicative spaces. This had implications for classroom climate.

Learners increasingly recognized that freedom of expression entailed responsibility toward others. This understanding countered earlier absolutist beliefs. Expression was reframed as a social act with moral weight. Learners began to self-regulate speech. External enforcement became less necessary.

Nunner-Winkler (2023) emphasized that ethical discourse prepared learners for democratic participation. The findings supported this claim. Learners practiced respectful disagreement and reasoned dialogue. These skills were transferable beyond the classroom. Language education contributed to civic readiness.

The emergence of ethical reflection demonstrated that values education did not suppress expression. Instead, it refined communicative quality. Learners continued to express opinions but did so thoughtfully. Ethical grounding enhanced clarity and respect. Expression became more meaningful.

The findings challenged assumptions that ethical instruction limited freedom. On the contrary, learners reported feeling more confident in expressing ideas responsibly. Ethical awareness reduced fear of offending others. Communication became intentional rather than reactive. This fostered expressive maturity.

Overall, Theme 2 illustrated a significant transformation in learners' communicative orientation. Ethical reflection became integral to language use. This transformation was pedagogically induced rather than incidental. Instruction played a decisive role. Values-based language education proved effective.

Theme 2 therefore, demonstrated that ethical reflection was a critical mediating factor in responsible language expression. Through guided instruction, learners developed moral awareness that shaped communicative behavior. This theme bridged the transition from expressive absolutism to accountable communication. It prepared learners for the development of legal consciousness discussed in the subsequent theme.

Theme 3: Development of Legal Consciousness and Responsible Expression

The findings revealed a gradual yet substantial development of legal consciousness among learners following the integration of legal contexts into language instruction. Initially unfamiliar with laws governing speech, learners began to recognize that freedom of expression operated within defined legal boundaries. This shift was evident in interviews, classroom discussions, and reflective writings. Legal concepts previously perceived as abstract became relevant to everyday communication. The emergence of legal awareness marked a critical stage in responsible language expression.

Learners increasingly referenced legal accountability when evaluating communicative situations. One participant stated, *"I did not know that posting something harmful online could be considered a legal offense until we discussed cybercrime laws"* (Learner 6). This response illustrated a transition from ignorance to applied understanding. Legal knowledge was no longer theoretical. It informed communicative decision-making.

Classroom observations demonstrated that learners actively applied legal concepts during discussions. References to libel, discrimination, and cyber-related offenses emerged organically when analyzing scenarios. Learners began questioning whether certain statements violated legal protections. This behavior indicated internalization of legal norms. Language instruction thus functioned as a conduit for legal literacy.

Kumari (2024) emphasized that language use was shaped by power relations and institutional norms. The findings supported this assertion by showing how legal frameworks influenced communicative choices. Learners recognized that speech carried authority and consequences. Legal awareness reshaped how power was negotiated through language. Expression became more deliberate.

Learners' written reflections further demonstrated growing legal consciousness. Many explicitly acknowledged accountability in both face-to-face and digital communication. One learner wrote, *"I now understand that freedom of expression does not protect speech that harms others"* (Learner 13). This statement reflected a refined understanding of rights and limitations. Legal boundaries were no longer perceived as arbitrary.

Black (2021) argued that democratic education required explicit discussion of limits to freedom. The findings confirmed that legal discussions enhanced learners' civic understanding. Rather than silencing expression, legal awareness clarified acceptable discourse. Learners expressed ideas with increased confidence. Knowledge of limits reduced uncertainty.

The study found that legal instruction demystified the consequences of irresponsible speech. Learners no longer viewed laws as distant or punitive. Instead, they recognized laws as protective mechanisms. Legal frameworks were seen as safeguarding dignity and fairness. This reframing altered learners' attitudes toward regulation.

One learner articulated this shift by stating, *"The law is not there to stop us from speaking, but to protect everyone"* (Learner 2). This response indicated a mature understanding of legal purpose. Freedom and regulation were no longer viewed as oppositional. Learners perceived balance rather than restriction.

The integration of legal awareness also influenced peer interactions. Learners became more cautious in using labels or stereotypes. Discussions reflected sensitivity to discriminatory language. Legal consciousness encouraged inclusive communication. Classroom discourse became more respectful.

The findings aligned with studies emphasizing the importance of legal literacy in digital communication contexts (Singgih, 2025). As learners increasingly communicated online, understanding cyber-related laws became essential. Legal awareness extended beyond academic settings. It informed real-world behavior.

Learners demonstrated increased ability to evaluate communicative risk. Statements were assessed not only for ethical implications but also for legal consequences. This dual evaluation strengthened responsible expression. Learners exercised self-regulation. External enforcement became secondary.

Economou et al. (2023) noted that institutional norms shaped language practices. The study extended this view by showing how legal norms explicitly influenced language use. Learners recognized institutional authority embedded in law. Communication was no longer value-neutral. It was norm-governed.

Legal consciousness also enhanced learners' critical thinking. Learners questioned sources, intent, and impact of messages. This was evident during discussions on misinformation and online discourse. Legal awareness supported analytical engagement. Language learning became interdisciplinary.

One learner reflected, *"Before sharing opinions online, I now ask if it can harm someone or violate the law"* (Learner 11). This response demonstrated behavioral change. Legal knowledge translated into practice. Awareness influenced action.

The study found that learners did not perceive legal instruction as threatening. Instead, they reported feeling more secure in expressing ideas. Knowing legal boundaries provided clarity. Expression became purposeful. Confidence increased alongside responsibility.

Dwomoh and Johnson (2025) emphasized that civic readiness required understanding both rights and responsibilities. The findings confirmed this assertion. Legal consciousness completed the ethical framework developed earlier. Together, ethics and law shaped communicative competence.

The development of legal consciousness also reinforced democratic values. Learners recognized that laws ensured fairness and equality in expression. This understanding promoted respect for pluralism. Communication became more inclusive. Democratic dialogue was strengthened.



The results challenged misconceptions that legal literacy constrained freedom. On the contrary, learners expressed greater willingness to participate in discussions. Legal clarity reduced fear of repercussions. Expression became informed rather than inhibited.

Overall, Theme 3 demonstrated that legal consciousness was a crucial component of responsible language expression. When integrated into language instruction, legal literacy enhanced ethical reasoning and communicative confidence. The interaction of language, values, and law proved transformative.

Theme 3 completed the developmental trajectory observed in the study from unrestricted expression to ethical reflection and finally to legally informed communication. This progression underscored the importance of interdisciplinary language education. Responsible expression emerged as a learned competence shaped by pedagogy, not assumption.

Taken together, the three themes revealed a clear progression in learners' understanding of freedom of expression, moving from expressive absolutism to responsible and context-aware communication. Initially, learners emphasized individual rights without consideration of social or legal consequences. Through guided instruction, this perspective was gradually reshaped by ethical reflection and reinforced by legal consciousness, resulting in more deliberate, respectful, and accountable language use.

The synthesis of findings demonstrated that responsible language expression emerged from the dynamic interaction of linguistic competence, ethical reasoning, and legal awareness. Values-based instruction cultivated moral sensitivity, while legal literacy clarified the boundaries within which expression could be exercised safely and democratically. Rather than constraining expression, the integration of ethics and law strengthened learners' confidence and communicative maturity, enabling them to participate more meaningfully in classroom and societal discourse.

Overall, the results affirmed that language education served as a critical platform for civic and moral development. By intentionally aligning language instruction with values education and legal frameworks, the study addressed gaps in previous research that treated these domains separately. The integrated approach demonstrated in this study provided a model for fostering responsible communicators capable of exercising freedom of expression with discernment, respect, and accountability.

The Responsible Expressive Language Education (RELE) Framework

The Responsible Expressive Language Education (RELE) Framework was proposed as a pedagogical guide that positioned language instruction as a critical site for cultivating socially responsible communicators within the Philippine educational context. Anchored on the integration of expressive competence, values formation, and legal literacy, the framework conceptualized language education not merely as skill acquisition but as a formative process that shaped ethical judgment, civic awareness, and accountable communication. RELE addressed the increasing complexity of communicative environments, particularly in multicultural, democratic, and digitally mediated contexts.

At the core of the RELE Framework was the principle that freedom of expression was inseparable from responsibility. Expressive competence referred to learners' ability to articulate ideas clearly, confidently, and appropriately across oral, written, and digital modes. Values formation emphasized ethical reflection, respect for diversity, empathy, and moral reasoning as essential components of communication. Legal literacy provided learners with an understanding of constitutional rights, legal limitations, and accountability mechanisms governing speech, ensuring that expression was exercised within protective and democratic boundaries.

The framework proposed that responsible language expression emerged from the dynamic interaction of these three domains rather than from their isolated treatment. Language classrooms were envisioned as guided spaces where learners practiced expression while simultaneously engaging in ethical deliberation and legal awareness. Through reflective discourse, contextualized language tasks, and discussion of real-life communicative scenarios, learners developed the capacity to balance self-expression with respect for the rights, dignity, and welfare of others.

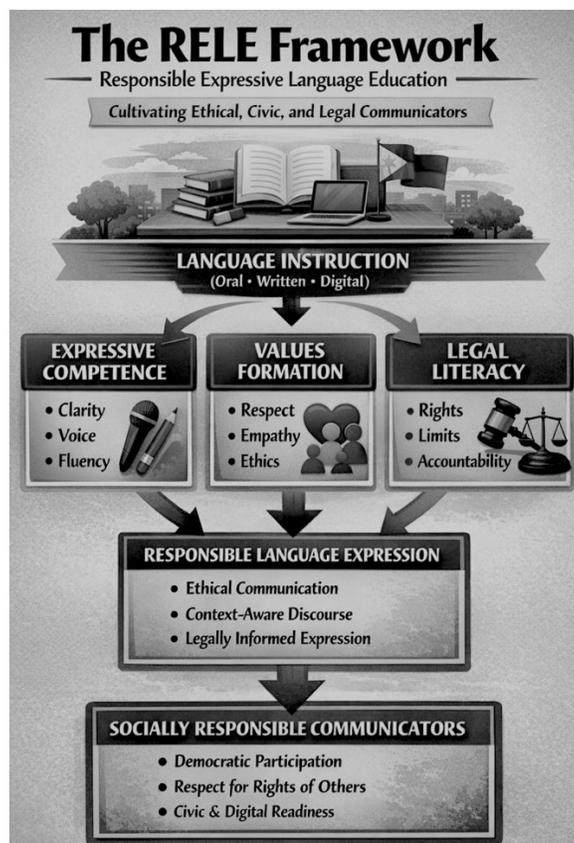
In the Philippine context, the RELE Framework was particularly relevant given the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech alongside existing legal safeguards such as libel laws, cybercrime regulations, and anti-discrimination statutes. By embedding these legal realities within language instruction, the framework promoted civic literacy and empowered learners to navigate communicative spaces responsibly. Legal awareness was reframed not as a constraint but as a protective structure that sustained democratic participation and social harmony.

Pedagogically, the RELE Framework guided curriculum design, instructional strategies, and classroom discourse practices. It encouraged educators to integrate ethical questioning, values-oriented reflection, and legal contextualization into language lessons without diminishing communicative creativity or learner voice. Instead,

expression was strengthened through clarity, accountability, and respect, resulting in more meaningful and socially responsive communication.

Overall, the Responsible Expressive Language Education Framework contributed to the discourse on interdisciplinary pedagogy by demonstrating how language education could serve as a platform for ethical, civic, and legal formation. The framework provided a practical and theoretically grounded model for educators and institutions seeking to cultivate learners who exercised expressive freedom with discernment, responsibility, and respect for others' rights.

Figure 1. Responsible Expressive Language Education (RELE) Conceptual Framework



The RELE Framework illustrates how responsible language expression emerges from the dynamic interaction of expressive competence, values formation, and legal literacy within language instruction. The framework positions language classrooms as sites for ethical, civic, and legally grounded communication, leading to the development of socially responsible communicators.

Alignment of the RELE Framework with Results and Emerging Themes

The Responsible Expressive Language Education (RELE) Framework was directly grounded in the empirical findings of the study and aligned explicitly with the three major themes that emerged from the analysis.

Alignment with Theme 1: Freedom of Expression as an Unrestricted Personal Right

Theme 1 revealed learners' initial perception of expression as an absolute and consequence-free right. This finding corresponded to the absence of ethical and legal dimensions in learners' communicative understanding. Within the RELE Framework, this stage reflected expressive competence without values formation and legal literacy, resulting

in expressive absolutism. The framework addressed this gap by positioning expressive competence as necessary but insufficient when isolated from ethical and legal grounding.

Alignment with Theme 2: Emergence of Ethical Reflection through Values-Based Instruction

Theme 2 demonstrated that values-based language instruction facilitated ethical reflection, respect, and empathy in communication. This transformation aligned with the values formation component of the RELE Framework, where learners began to evaluate expression in terms of moral responsibility and social impact. The framework conceptualized this stage as the ethical refinement of expressive competence, enabling learners to engage in respectful and dialogic discourse.

Alignment with Theme 3: Development of Legal Consciousness and Responsible Expression

Theme 3 highlighted learners' growing awareness of legal boundaries governing expression, including accountability in digital and public communication. This finding aligned with the legal literacy component of RELE, which completed the developmental trajectory by contextualizing ethical expression within constitutional and legal frameworks. The framework illustrated how legal consciousness reinforced ethical reasoning and strengthened communicative confidence rather than restricting expression.

Collectively, the three themes validated the RELE Framework's central premise that responsible language expression emerged only when expressive competence, values formation, and legal literacy operated in interaction rather than in isolation.

Conclusion

The study concluded that integrating language education with values formation and legal awareness contributed to the development of responsible communicators across both basic and higher education levels. Learners' evolving understanding of freedom of expression—from an unrestricted right to a socially accountable practice—highlighted the transformative potential of language instruction when ethical and legal dimensions were intentionally embedded.

The findings affirmed that language education extended beyond the acquisition of linguistic skills and served as a critical avenue for fostering civic literacy, ethical judgment, and legal consciousness. By situating expressive freedom within clear moral and legal contexts, the study demonstrated how language classrooms could promote respectful, reflective, and responsible communication aligned with democratic principles and Philippine legal frameworks.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and the RELE Framework, the following recommendations were proposed:

1. Language educators may integrate expressive competence, ethical reflection, and legal awareness into classroom instruction to foster responsible communication across oral, written, and digital modalities.
2. Curriculum developers may adopt the RELE Framework as a guide in designing interdisciplinary language curricula that embed values education and basic legal literacy within language learning outcomes.
3. Teacher education and professional development programs may incorporate RELE-oriented training, equipping educators with strategies for facilitating guided discourse on ethical and legally sensitive issues.
4. Future researchers may utilize the RELE Framework as an analytical lens in examining responsible language expression across different educational levels, disciplines, and digital communication environments.

Policy Implications

From a policy perspective, the RELE Framework offered implications for strengthening civic and values-oriented education in the Philippines. Educational policymakers may consider explicitly recognizing language education as a vehicle for civic, ethical, and legal formation, rather than limiting it to linguistic skill development. Embedding RELE principles within national curriculum standards may promote consistent and responsible communicative practices across educational institutions.

Furthermore, policies supporting digital citizenship, responsible online communication, and human rights education may be operationalized through language instruction guided by the RELE Framework. By aligning constitutional freedoms with ethical responsibility and legal accountability, the framework contributed to policy efforts aimed at fostering democratic participation, social harmony, and inclusive discourse in both physical and digital spaces.

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