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# Democracy & Education

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## Giving Power Its Due

### The Powerful Possibilities and the Problems of Power with Deliberative Democracy and English Language Learners

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#### Abstract

The use of deliberation with English Language Learners presents possibilities to both improve language learning, but also expand the potential for civics education for all students. In particular, this response examines the issue of power to extend Liggett's (2014) arguments for using deliberative democracy with English Language Learners and provides practical suggestions on how to address issues of power and improve civic education.

#### This article is a response to:

Liggett, T. (2014). Deliberative Democracy in English-Language Education: Cultural and Linguistic Inclusion in the School Community. *Democracy and Education*, 22 (2), Article 4. Available at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol22/iss2/4>

**E**NGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS (ELLs) have received little sustained attention in the field of civics education. This is a missed opportunity for both civics education and ELL education. In her feature piece, Liggett (2014) pointed toward the potential benefits that can arise for ELLs from engaging in deliberation. In this response, I focus on what civics education can gain through inclusion of ELLs in deliberation. I extend the conversation by pointing to two key issues that are highlighted when thinking about the intersection of civics education, deliberative democracy, and ELLs. The first issue is the connection between language and power. Civics education must be attuned to issues of power related to language, and the inclusion of ELLs in deliberative activities can highlight this and teach students about this relationship in the context of civics education. The inclusion of ELLs in deliberation, the second issue, also emphasizes the need for democracy to be viewed as a dynamic system and shows how using deliberative democracy as part of civic education

can provide opportunities for students to think about the potential for a better democracy for all people.

#### The Issue of Power

Liggett highlighted the important connections between language, power, and deliberative democracy. This echoes Young's (2001) early critique of deliberative democracy, in which she too identified deliberation as being intimately entwined with power. Deliberative democracy, because it requires defining what forms and styles of speech constitute deliberation, can limit the forms of acceptable discourse in ways that exclude people with less access to those

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means of discourse. The definitions of acceptable deliberative discourse are established by those with the power to do so. In their piece concerning deliberative democracy, Kadlec and Friedman (2007) asked, “How meaningful deliberation can be cultivated in a society plagued by complex and deeply rooted inequalities” (p. 1)? Some of the inequality issues related to language are highlighted when considering ELLs in the deliberative process. However, Kadlec and Friedman were also hopeful. They argued that issues of power that attend deliberative democracy can be addressed with attention to control, design, and change. To achieve the benefits Liggett described for ELLs that can come through deliberation, and to highlight the benefits to civics education generally that can result from the inclusion of ELLs, I illustrate ways that teachers can think about the concepts of control, design, and change to more effectively use deliberative democracy with ELLs in their classrooms.

### Control and Deliberative Democracy

A key issue in deliberative democracy is the relationship between power and control over, first, the agenda and, second, the format of the deliberation itself. Regarding the first, the importance of who controls the political agenda and how things are placed upon it has been examined in democratic policy theory (see, e.g., Kingdon, 1984) and in deliberative democracy (see, e.g., Bohman, 2000), but it has been largely neglected in the context of civics education. In the latest proposed guidelines for social studies standards, the College, Career & Civic Life Framework for Social Studies Standards, there is nothing that asks students to consider how political agendas are set. The structure of the inquiry arc does, however, empower students to experience a form of agenda setting within the classroom. An examination of agenda setting could fit under several of the indicators for Dimension 2 related to civics.

Giving attention to who controls the agenda for deliberation with ELLs increases the likelihood that ELLs will benefit from deliberation and provide learning opportunities about democracy and power for all students. Including ELLs in the agenda setting increases the chance for meaningful civic engagement and language development even more. If the deliberation centers on a topic of their choosing, they may bring greater background knowledge to the topics and be more motivated to learn new language skills and vocabulary in relation to the topic. In the context of literacy, choice has been connected with greater engagement and literacy outcomes. Although no similar research has been done in the context of deliberation, it is reasonable to assume that providing students with choice as it relates to the deliberation agenda is likely to increase engagement and outcomes.

Perhaps more important, another result of empowering ELLs to establish the deliberation agenda is the effect on non-ELL students in the classroom. With proper instructional support, this presents an opportunity to students to learn about issues that are less familiar, placing them in the position of needing to listen and evaluate new information and ideas as part of engaging in deliberation. Listening to others and understanding them are important civic skills, and focusing on topics not of their own choosing

provides an opportunity for students from the dominant language population to learn to listen to and understand other voices as part of the political process. In doing this, they can come to recognize their responsibility to become informed about issues that may have been invisible in their daily lives but that affect others in society. In addition, those members of the dominant group in society may come to understand the ways in which their lives are affected and entwined with others.

The second aspect of control in deliberation relates to who controls the format of deliberation. In addition to issues of power surrounding what is being deliberated (agenda setting), there are also issues of power surrounding how issues are deliberated. Kohn (2000) noted how “speech, an apparently universal, rational form of communication, is not necessarily a neutral terrain for mediating conflict since the choice of idiom already privileges certain speakers” (p. 413). Considering deliberation with ELLs highlights how language choice is reflective of power relations within a society and how certain groups are advantaged or disadvantaged by what is deemed acceptable language. Students can consider the way that the use of language in our current democratic system privileges certain people over others and the implications of that. However, in addition to providing students the opportunity to think about how language affects democracy, classrooms teachers can take steps to control the form of deliberation to mitigate the effects of the relationship between language and power.

Initially, teachers can make students aware of the ways in which students evaluate credibility of claims not just on content but on other factors as well. Olson (2011) noted that people accept claims

*for many reasons, including the quality and quantity of evidence adduced, the form in which it is adduced, who is presenting it, how credible they are and how sincere they seem to be (a determination that depends in part on subtle cues of self-presentation and comportment).* (p. 533)

One can easily see how language proficiency, grammar, and accents can affect the calculus that goes into determining the validity of claims being made in a deliberation. Making students aware of these judgments can be an important step in overcoming prejudices that affect students’ judgments about credibility. Imagine a classroom where ELLs and a student from the dominant language group work together to prepare for a deliberation, sharing with one another their positions and reasoning. As part of the deliberative exercise, they can choose to represent their own positions or that of their partners in a larger deliberation in class. Following the larger deliberation, they can reflect on the ways their counterparts took up their ideas and other ways in which the deliberation may have been affected by language.

Additionally, teachers can encourage a variety of forms of communication in the deliberation. Young (2001) advocated opening up deliberation to forms of discourse other than those that might normally be considered acceptable in a conventional political discussion or debate. Including and legitimizing stories and other more “informal” means of communication as

appropriate for the political arena benefits the political process and ELLs. This is beneficial for the political process as it allows for the inclusion of different forms of information and knowledge as evidence or support for a position. To the extent that the forms of communication enable or limit the content of the communication, it makes sense that broadening the acceptable forms of communication in a deliberation would expand the potential content of the deliberation. This benefits ELLs in that a broader acceptance encourages the use of language forms with which they may be more comfortable (reflecting perhaps the academic/conversational language distinction of Cummins [2000]). ELLs may feel more open to engaging in communication with the assurance that their contributions will not be disregarded simply because of their form. This is not to say that deliberations cannot or should not serve as contexts in which ELLs learn about a variety of language forms and develop proficiency in them. Rather, this idea recognizes that inclusion of a broad range of communication forms is likely to create the best context for deliberations that include ELLs.

## Design

Once teachers have addressed issues relating to control in deliberation, attention can turn to design. By focusing on how deliberations are designed, teachers can mitigate the potential for dominant language power dynamics to limit effective and inclusive deliberation. In so doing, teachers can foster an environment that provides the best possible learning opportunities for ELLs. The two aspects of design I highlight relate to the ways in which teachers can prepare students for deliberation by conducting pre-deliberations in ELLs' heritage languages and by providing sufficient opportunity for students to prepare for deliberations through research and self-reflection.

First, in the research surrounding language, deliberation, and power, some authors have suggested that various subgroups in society should conduct their own deliberations prior to deliberating with others (particularly with the dominant groups) in society. Fraser (1990) proposed "subaltern counterpublics" as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses" (p. 67). Like the groups identified by Fraser as benefitting from forming subaltern counterpublics, ELLs face powerful barriers to entering the deliberative discourse due to language and, at times, social position. Providing ELLs with the space to develop their positions on topics prior to deliberation with others and providing the opportunity to become firmly rooted in their positions and stories will enrich the deliberative discourse for all involved. When ELLs engage in "inventing and circulating counterdiscourses," they are, in essence, recreating their own knowledge and stories in the language that reflects the dominant discourse. In a similar vein, Addis (2007) found potential in having each linguistic groups engage in deliberation in its own language prior to and in preparation for engaging in deliberation in the dominant language.

The second aspect of design that can benefit ELLs who engage in deliberative democracy is the provision of adequate time to conduct research and engage in self-reflection for the deliberation. This may seem obvious, and it is an important practice for all

students engaging in deliberation, but overlooking adequate preparation for the deliberation can be particularly harmful to ELLs. Deliberation involves substantive communication around an issue of societal interest. Depending on ELLs' language development, they may or may not be familiar with the terms of discourse surrounding the issue. Without adequate opportunity to become familiar with the issue and discourse, there is the risk that ELLs will be marginalized in the deliberation or that the deliberation will not engage deeply with the topic at hand. Providing focused instruction and scaffolding for ELLs in preparation for deliberation can alleviate some of the potential problems.

In addition, deliberation necessarily involves moral and ethical judgment. Revealing one's opinions as part of a deliberation can feel risky for any student as the deliberation may involve the questioning of one's moral and ethical perspective. In addition to this risk that all students take, ELLs may feel as though they are at a greater risk of being misunderstood in the explanation of their moral and ethical perspectives. For this reason, it is particularly important to provide ELLs with the opportunity to reflect on the moral and ethical foundations of their perspectives as part of the preparation for sharing with others in deliberation.

## Change

Kadlec and Friedman (2007) identified thinking about change as a way of mitigating the problems that arise with power and deliberation. Deliberation is not just a means of reaching decisions about society's problems—it is also a means of thinking about change to the democratic system itself. The deliberative process affords students the opportunity to examine democracy as a dynamic system that is constantly evolving to best embody society's understanding of rule by the people. Engaging ELLs in deliberation provides opportunities to highlight problems in democracy and imagine change. A key part of creating those opportunities is to engage students in reflection about the issues of deliberation, democracy, and change.

After students engage in deliberation, it is important that they are given the opportunity to reflect on the deliberative process. Students should be encouraged to think about ways in which language constrained or enabled deliberation. All students, including ELLs, can critically examine the ways in which issues of power and language are intertwined in deliberation and in democracy. Ultimately, students can continue to deliberate about the ways the democratic system could change in order to be more adequately reflect society's interpretation of democratic ideals. Indeed, deliberative democracy's viability as a political idea depends on the willingness of participants to use deliberation to revisit what it means to deliberate and in what ways competing visions of democracy are reflected in the political system.

Education policy about language acquisition and civics education has had a long history of using language to assimilate immigrant groups into a set of "American" values. Using deliberation with ELLs and engaging in this type of reflection ensures that civics education and language acquisition challenge the notion of a static and agreed-upon set of American ideals and highlight how the United States is a dynamic society that is constantly revising

understandings and expectations of what are, on the surface, shared values. Inclusion of ELLs in deliberative democratic exercises opens up the possibility of engaging in critique of the democratic system and a conversation about what democracy could look like.

## Conclusion

The use of deliberative democracy with ELLs holds great potential for all students because it provides opportunities to consider issues of language and power in democracy. However, in order for the benefits of deliberation to be realized, these issues need to be considered and planned for by teachers. In addition to the issues highlighted in this piece, there are other issues surrounding the use of deliberative democracy with ELLs that prompt further consideration about the relationships between language, power, and democracy.<sup>1</sup> By highlighting the benefits of using deliberation and providing some practical considerations for teachers looking to use deliberations with ELLs, it is my hope that this conversation will continue—both with further critique as well as with new ways that deliberative democracy can be used in the classroom for the benefit of all students.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> For example, there are questions about whether the concerns of a person can be fully communicated and understood when the communication must be done in a language other than the person's first language. The degree to which one believes that is possible depends on issues beyond the scope of this paper relating to how one understands the nature of language and how closely connected the content of communication is to its form.

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