



Democratic Culture as a Learning Ecology in Higher Education: A Qualitative Case Study of Students' Political Literacy with Conceptual Implications for Early-Grade Indonesian Language Pedagogy

St. Haniah^{1*}, Tarman², Sulvahrul Amin³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar, Makassar, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study analyzes how democratic culture in the Sociology Education Study Program of Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar operates as a learning ecology that shapes students' political literacy. It also formulates conceptual, not experimentally tested, implications for early-grade Indonesian language pedagogy. **Methods:** The study used a qualitative case-study design involving 24 students from semesters 3, 5, and 7. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, three focus group discussions, participatory observations in four campus democratic arenas, and analysis of student-organization documents. Data were analyzed through Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model by moving from initial codes to categories and five themes. **Findings:** Democratic culture shaped political literacy through four connected processes: dialogue spaces that trained students to speak, listen, and evaluate arguments; deliberation and negotiation that strengthened participation when facilitation was equal but weakened it when symbolic domination occurred; management of cultural, identity, and political differences through communicative norms; and reflective verification of public and social-media information. The study also found barriers in the form of apathy, seniority, domination by organizationally active students, polarization, and procedural formalism. **Contribution:** The article contributes a democratic-communicative learning-ecology framework that connects political sociology, cultural sociology, and dialogic language pedagogy. Its pedagogical implication is limited to a conceptual model consisting of dialogic circles, mini-deliberations, diversity-text reading, peer-response writing, and class voice projects.



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INTRODUCTION

Democratic culture in higher education should not be understood merely as a normative value or institutional slogan. It is enacted through social practices in classrooms, student organizations, campus public forums, and social-collaboration activities. In these spaces, students learn democracy through direct experience: speaking, listening, contesting ideas, negotiating, making collective decisions, and managing differences. Therefore, democratic culture can be conceptualized as a learning ecology: a socio-pedagogical environment that shapes students' habits of thinking, communicating, and participating.

The empirical problem in the Sociology Education Study Program of Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar is that democratic spaces are available, but participation is not always equal. Some students speak confidently because they possess organizational experience, rhetorical ability, seniority, or social recognition, whereas others remain silent even when formal rules allow them to speak. This condition shows that democracy on campus cannot be examined only as procedure; it must also be read as culture, communication, and power relation (Bowyer & Kahne, 2020; Donbavand & Hoskins, 2021; Martínez-Bravo et al., 2022; Guess & Munger, 2023; Jati, 2024; Karolčík & Čipková, 2025; Irsyad et al., 2024; van der Wilt et al., 2021).

Previous studies on democratic learning and citizenship education have shown that student voice, classroom dialogue, and participatory decision-making can strengthen civic attitudes and political engagement (Bowyer & Kahne, 2020; Donbavand & Hoskins, 2021; Martínez-Bravo et al., 2022). Studies on political literacy have emphasized critical reading of public issues, media literacy, and the ability to verify information in digital environments (Guess & Munger, 2023; Jati, 2024; Karolčík & Čipková, 2025). Meanwhile, studies on early-grade Indonesian language pedagogy often focus on reading, writing, and oral communication (Irsyad et al., 2024; van der Wilt et al., 2021), but they rarely connect those skills to democratic values such as listening, turn-taking, reason-giving, respect for difference, and collective decision-making.

The research gap is therefore more specific than a general lack of studies on democracy and education. First, previous research has often treated campus democratic participation and political literacy separately. Second, the role of informal power relations such as seniority, symbolic capital, and organizational status in shaping students' willingness to speak has not been sufficiently connected to political literacy formation. Third, the translation of campus democratic practices into early-grade language-learning strategies remains underdeveloped and must be positioned as a conceptual implication rather than an empirical finding from elementary schools.

This study uses four theoretical lenses in an integrated way. Habermas (1984) is used to examine whether campus dialogue approximates a public-sphere-like space characterized by equality of participation, argumentation, freedom from domination, and orientation toward mutual understanding. Bourdieu (1991) is used to analyze how symbolic capital, social capital, habitus, and power relations influence who speaks, who is heard, and who feels legitimate in democratic forums. Geertz (1973) is used to interpret democratic culture as a system of meaning through which students understand difference and participation. Williams (1989) is used to view culture as a way of life expressed in everyday habits of speaking, listening, and responding to others.

Based on this gap and theoretical integration, this study aims to analyze how democratic culture within the Sociology Education Study Program functions as a learning ecology that shapes students' political literacy through dialogue, deliberation, negotiation, power relations, and management of differences. It also formulates conceptual implications for early-grade Indonesian language pedagogy.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case-study design located in the Sociology Education Study Program, Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar. The study was conducted during one academic semester, with interviews, FGDs, observations, and document analysis carried out sequentially so that emerging themes from early data could guide subsequent observations.

The informants consisted of 24 students from semesters 3, 5, and 7: 12 male and 12 female students. They were selected through purposive sampling to represent diverse experiences, including organizationally active and non-active students, members of HMPS Sociology Education, the Faculty Student Executive Board, the University Student Executive Board, and student activity units.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, focus group discussions, and documentation. Example guiding questions included: What makes a class or forum feel democratic? Who usually speaks in discussions and why? How do students respond to different political or cultural opinions? How do students verify information from social media? What communication habits should be introduced to young learners? Observations were conducted in four democratic arenas and focused on speaking opportunities, turn-taking, patterns of domination, facilitator intervention, response to disagreement, and references to social-media information. Documentation involved student-organization rules, meeting notes, activity reports, and forum regulations.

Data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) interactive model. Initial codes included open dialogue, lecturer facilitation, passive students, organizational seniority, rhetorical confidence, verification of information, tolerance, polarization, and procedural formalism. These codes were condensed into categories: dialogue space, deliberation and power relations, management of difference, political literacy practice, and pedagogical translation. A data-display matrix compared interview, FGD, observation, and document evidence across semesters and arenas.

Ethical considerations included voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymization of informants through codes such as W-01 and W-23, and careful positioning of the researchers so that participants did not feel academically pressured. Because the study did not collect data from elementary teachers, elementary students, or early-grade classrooms, the pedagogical section is explicitly presented as a theoretical-conceptual implication rather than a tested empirical result.

RESULTS

The findings are organized into five themes and read across semester level, student role, and democratic arena. The first theme is campus dialogue space as a democratic learning ecology. Students understood democratic culture as a campus atmosphere that provides speaking opportunities for all students, not only those active in organizations. However, dialogue spaces were not evenly distributed. Observation showed that triggering questions from lecturers opened discussion, but participation remained uneven because several students waited for more active peers.

The second theme is deliberation, negotiation, and power relations. Students became more willing to speak when lecturers or forum leaders regulated participation evenly. Conversely, domination by certain actors weakened others' courage. Small-group discussion before plenary presentation helped normally passive students speak because the risk of public error was lower. Organizationally active students tended to lead arguments, while non-active students participated more when speaking turns were structured.

The third theme is tolerance and management of cultural, identity, and political-preference differences. Students viewed difference as normal when forums maintained communicative norms that respected all parties. Organizational documents supported democratic norms by stating that every member had the right to express opinions politely. Thus, tolerance existed as both formal rule and everyday practice, but it depended on facilitation.

The fourth theme is political literacy as practice. Students viewed political literacy as the ability to understand issues and verify information, not merely to follow political news. Observation showed that students were more responsive when topics were connected to everyday social issues and social-media information.

The fifth theme concerns barriers and conceptual pedagogical translation. Barriers included apathy, seniority, domination by active students, polarization, and procedural formalism. In relation to early-grade Indonesian language learning, the data do not prove classroom effectiveness in elementary schools. Instead, they provide conceptual principles: teachers can become dialogue facilitators who cultivate listening, turn-taking, simple reason-giving, respectful disagreement, and collective decision-making from early schooling.

Table 1. Democratic-Communicative Assessment Indicators

Indicator	1	2	3	4
Listening	Often interrupts	Begins to wait	Consistently waits	Waits and summarizes
Expressing opinions	Silent/unclear	One word/sentence	1–2 clear sentences	Clear with simple reason
Respecting differences	Mocks/rejects	Passive tolerance	Uses polite language	Gives space to peers
Collective decision	Not involved	Involved if asked	Actively proposes	Helps agreement

DISCUSSION

Campus dialogue spaces form the foundation of democratic learning ecology. From [Habermas's \(1984\)](#) perspective, dialogue spaces approach a mini public sphere only when students can express opinions, listen to arguments, and construct mutual understanding under relatively equal conditions. Thus, the quality of deliberation must be assessed not merely by the existence of discussion but by equality, freedom from domination, rational argumentation, and shared understanding.

[Bourdieu's \(1991\)](#) concepts of symbolic capital and social capital sharpen the interpretation of power relations. Organizational experience, seniority, rhetorical confidence, and social recognition become forms of capital that allow certain students to speak more often and be taken more seriously. Small-group discussion becomes pedagogically important because it temporarily redistributes that capital by creating safer spaces for passive students.

[Geertz \(1973\)](#) helps explain that students' interpretation of difference determines whether difference becomes a learning resource or a source of conflict. [Williams \(1989\)](#) adds that culture is a way of life visible in daily habits: waiting for turns, responding politely, allowing disagreement, and accepting minority opinions. Democracy in this study appears in three layers: procedure, culture, and pedagogy.

Political literacy emerges as reflective practice. Students define political literacy as checking the truth of information, recognizing interests behind public discourse, and avoiding the uncritical circulation of hoaxes ([Chambers, 2021](#); [Hopp et al., 2020](#); [Horner et al., 2021](#)). Political literacy therefore grows through repeated democratic experience, not only through formal explanation about politics.

The implication for early-grade Indonesian language pedagogy is conceptual rather than empirical. The campus data suggest democratic-communicative principles that can be translated into age-appropriate language activities: dialogic circles, mini-deliberations, critical reading of diversity texts, peer-response writing, and class voice projects

(Irsyad et al., 2024; van der Wilt et al., 2021). These activities require further testing in elementary classrooms before they can be claimed as empirically effective.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that democratic culture in the Sociology Education Study Program of Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar functions as a learning ecology that shapes students' political literacy through dialogue spaces, deliberation, negotiation, management of differences, and reflection on information. Democratic culture shifts students' understanding from merely following political news toward verifying information, evaluating arguments, and participating responsibly.

The theoretical contribution of this study is the formulation of democratic culture as a learning ecology that connects public-sphere dialogue, symbolic power relations, cultural meanings, and everyday democratic habits. The methodological contribution lies in the use of multi-arena qualitative evidence. The practical contribution is a conceptual democratic-communicative pedagogy for early-grade Indonesian language learning.

The study has limitations. Its empirical data come only from higher education students in one study program, not from elementary teachers, early-grade students, curriculum implementation, or classroom experiments. Therefore, claims about Indonesian language pedagogy are conceptual recommendations, not tested findings. Future research should involve elementary teachers and students and test the effectiveness of the proposed activities.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

A1 designed the study, developed the political sociology framework, and served as corresponding author. A2 developed the implications for early-grade Indonesian language pedagogy. A3 strengthened the cultural sociology analysis and qualitative data interpretation. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors used AI-assisted writing tools to support language refinement, structure alignment with the journal template, and bilingual drafting. The authors reviewed, edited, verified the data, and take full responsibility for the manuscript content.

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***St. Haniah Correspondence Writer)**

Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar

Jalan Sultan Alauddin Nomor 259, Kelurahan Gunung Sari, Kecamatan Rappocini, Kota Makassar, Sulawesi Selatan, 90221

Email: haniah@unismuh.ac.id

Tarman

Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar

Jalan Sultan Alauddin Nomor 259, Kelurahan Gunung Sari, Kecamatan Rappocini, Kota Makassar, Sulawesi Selatan, 90221

Email: tarman@unismuh.ac.id

Sulvahrul Amin

Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar

Jalan Sultan Alauddin Nomor 259, Kelurahan Gunung Sari, Kecamatan Rappocini, Kota Makassar, Sulawesi Selatan, 90221

Email: sulvahrul@unismuh.ac.id
