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Values Education and the Hidden Curriculum of an English-Major Syntax Course in the Age of Generative AI

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Every syntax class conveys values to students through what it rewards and what it tolerates, whether or not values education is deliberately designed into it, and generative artificial intelligence (AI) has made it easier than ever to "look right". The key question for values education is therefore not whether it is present, but whether it is effective. This paper proposes the concept of evidential visibility. For values to be genuinely learned, two conditions must be met. First, the value must follow the same logic as a syntactic rule. Second, it must leave traces in students' work and be checked in assessment. On this basis, the paper outlines the features of effective hidden-curriculum education and the obstacles to it, and illustrates classroom practice with three examples: descriptive grammar, the Coordinate Structure Constraint, and competing analyses of ellipsis.

Keywords: hidden curriculum, generative AI, values education, syntax pedagogy, evidential visibility

Introduction

The values students acquire in classrooms come not only from what teachers explicitly teach but also from what classrooms reward and tolerate. Jackson (1990, p. 34) observed that many forms of reward and punishment seemingly based on academic achievement are, in fact, "more closely related to mastery of the hidden curriculum". Foreign-language classrooms are no exception. The crucial question is not whether a hidden curriculum exists, but what it actually consists of in specific contexts (Wang & Wang, 2022, p. 46). The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has made this question increasingly salient. Approximately 73% of surveyed undergraduates reported moderate or high levels of dependence on AI in English writing (Wu & Ji, 2026, p. 78), and the fluent and confident responses generated by AI are themselves subtly reshaping students' judgments about what constitutes a "good answer" (Yeung *et al.*, 2026).

However, values education in syntax courses is often treated as an "add-on". Concepts such as constituents, theta roles, and movement appear unrelated to values, and value statements are therefore frequently placed at the

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end of lesson plans, separated from disciplinary knowledge. Such an approach may formally include values education, but it remains difficult to determine how it actually influences students. Wang (2026, p. 2) argues that improving foreign language education requires moving interaction from merely "existing" to being of high quality. Similarly, the current challenge for values education is to move from "having values education" to achieving "effective values education".

This requires addressing two central questions: What constitutes effective hidden-curriculum education in syntax courses? How can such education be achieved? This study addresses these questions by identifying the characteristics of hidden curriculum in syntax courses, explaining why values can be acquired through syntax learning, and exploring how effective hidden-curriculum education can be realized in the context of artificial intelligence. The central argument of this paper is that effective values education requires evidential visibility.

Characteristics and Mechanisms of the Hidden Curriculum in Syntax Courses

To understand how syntax courses contribute to students' development, it is first necessary to examine what they implicitly teach, identify their characteristic features, and analyze the mechanisms through which values are acquired. Based on previous studies and teaching observations, hidden curriculum in syntax courses demonstrates the following characteristics.

The hidden curriculum is pervasive and runs throughout the selection of course content, teaching practices, and assessment methods in syntax courses (J. M. Wang & J. J. Wang, 2022, p. 48). The examples selected by teachers and the ways in which they respond to disagreements among students' analyses all convey particular value orientations. Even when teachers do not explicitly articulate such values, students still acquire corresponding messages through classroom practices.

Among these factors, assessment sends the most direct value signals. One student remarked that "the teacher gives a grade as long as the report is complete in format" (Wang *et al*., 2025, p. 31). Likewise, if a formally correct syntactic tree is sufficient to receive full credit, students may implicitly learn that "formal correctness matters more than sufficient evidence".

Generative artificial intelligence further intensifies this risk. AI systems can rapidly produce texts that are linguistically fluent, structurally complete, and expressed with confidence, creating a cognitive bias that equates "appearing correct" with being reliable (Zhai *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, even when course design emphasizes academic integrity and rigor, students may still regard "surface correctness" as the primary learning goal unless explicit requirements are established for evidence and reasoning processes.

How, then, can such an implicit curriculum contribute to students' development? The key lies in returning evidence to the center of classroom practice. This does not require seeking resources beyond the discipline itself, because syntax is inherently a discipline centered on evidence. The fundamental methodology of generative syntax is to observe linguistic data, formulate hypotheses, test them against additional data, and revise the hypotheses accordingly (Carnie, 2023, p. 8). The following examples involving reflexive pronouns illustrate this process:

Example (1)

a. Bill kissed himself. (Carnie, 2023, p. 7)

b. *Bill kissed herself. (Carnie, 2023, p. 7)

c. *Gary and Kevin ran himself into exhaustion. (Carnie, 2023, p. 8)

Based on Examples (1a) and (1b), students may initially formulate the hypothesis that reflexive pronouns must agree with their antecedents in gender. However, Example (1c) serves as a counterexample, requiring the hypothesis to be revised into a more comprehensive generalization: Reflexive pronouns must agree with antecedents in both gender and number. Further data then motivate the addition of person agreement to the rule(Carnie, 2023, pp. 8-9). The improvement of the rule depends on evidence-based revision at every stage, while previous versions of the analysis are not simply discarded. Respect for evidence and willingness to revise are therefore embedded in the reasoning process itself.

It follows that the acquisition of values through syntax learning depends on two crucial factors. The first is structural alignment: The reasoning required by a syntactic rule and the behavior associated with a particular value follow the same underlying logic. Revising a rule in response to counterexamples is structurally analogous to revising one's own position in response to evidence presented by others. The second is visibility: Students' engagement with such values must leave observable traces in their coursework and be subject to assessment. For example, students may preserve earlier hypotheses, identify the sources of examples, and disclose whether artificial intelligence has been used. Together, these two factors constitute what this paper terms evidential visibility.

Effective Hidden-Curriculum Education

The hidden curriculum originates from the classroom's attitude toward evidence. Without altering disciplinary content, enabling values to be genuinely acquired through evidential visibility should be an ideal pathway for values education in syntax courses. Accordingly, effective hidden-curriculum education can be defined as a form of values education that is embedded in syntactic rules, made visible through students' coursework, and examined through assessment practices. It consists of three essential features (Figure 1).

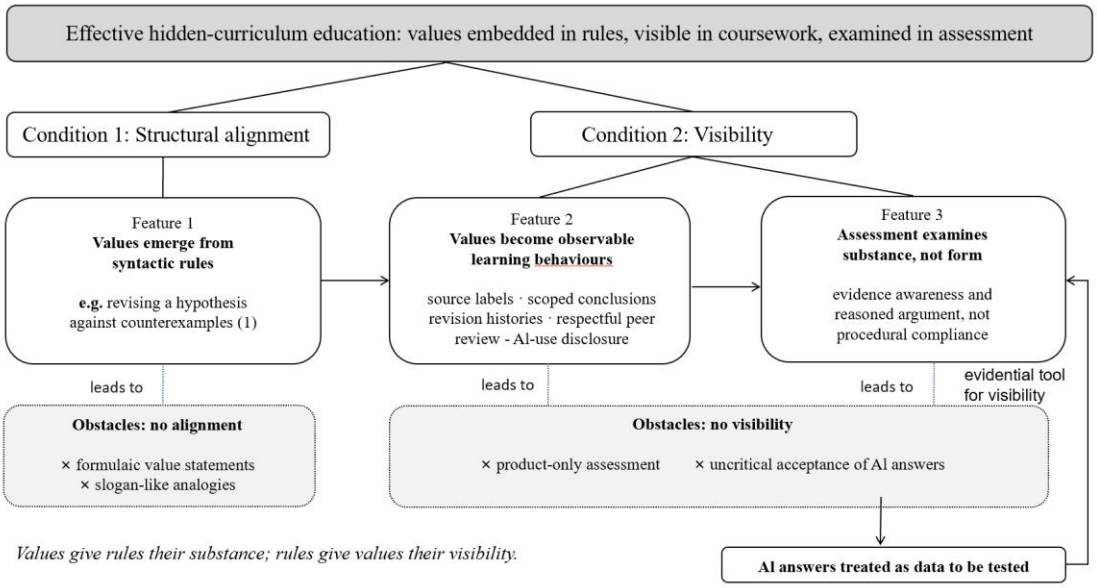


Figure 1. Features of and obstacles to effective hidden-curriculum education.

First, effective hidden-curriculum education requires values to emerge from syntactic rules themselves rather than being externally attached to disciplinary knowledge. Values should not originate from isolated words or predetermined slogans in textbooks; instead, they should arise from the operational logic and derivational processes of linguistic rules. Example (1) embodies the value of "revision" not because the text explicitly expresses this idea, but because the rule itself develops through processes of identifying problems, adjusting hypotheses, and refining explanations.

Second, values must be transformed into observable learning behaviors. Only when students identify the sources of examples, specify the scope of their conclusions, preserve revision histories, engage in evidence-based peer evaluation focused on arguments rather than individuals, and transparently disclose their use of artificial intelligence can values be transformed from classroom concepts into practical norms (Perkins *et al.*, 2024).

Third, assessment should examine whether these behaviors genuinely reflect evidence awareness and rational argumentation rather than merely checking whether formal procedures have been completed. Otherwise, practices such as citation and record keeping may become new forms of procedural compliance, causing values education to fall into the trap of "surface correctness". As Corbin *et al.* (2025) argue, merely declaring assessment principles cannot guarantee effective evaluation; changes must be incorporated into the structure of assessment tasks.

Therefore, neither discussing values without grounding them in disciplinary rules nor teaching rules without leaving behavioral evidence constitutes effective hidden-curriculum education. The former becomes an externally imposed slogan, while the latter leaves values internalized but unverifiable.

The realization of effective hidden-curriculum education also requires avoiding several factors that undermine its effectiveness. These problems include formulaic value statements repeated regardless of course content, slogan-like analogies that connect values and disciplinary knowledge merely through shared terminology, assessment practices that focus only on final products, and uncritical acceptance of AI-generated answers (Zhai *et al.*, 2024, p. 2). The first two problems fail to establish structural alignment between disciplinary knowledge and values, whereas the latter two fail to make the learning process and evidential basis visible.

Among these problems, slogan-like analogy is particularly representative. For example, by extending the concept of prototype categories to claim that "by analogy, teachers can guide students to strive to be exemplary students" (Wen, 2021, p. 76, our translation), the connection between the concept and values education is established only through the shared word prototype. Students are neither able to verify this connection nor practice it, which corresponds to what J. M. Wang and J. J. Wang (2022, p. 44) criticize as "forced association". Likewise, evaluating only final products and blindly accepting AI outputs allow completed products to replace learning processes and fluent expressions to replace evidence-based reasoning. However, artificial intelligence should not be viewed merely as an obstacle. When AI-generated responses are treated as linguistic data requiring verification, they can instead become an important tool for promoting evidential visibility.

Classroom Implementation of Evidential Visibility

Both syntax and generative artificial intelligence rely on the principle of "verification": Syntactic rules must be tested against linguistic data, and AI-generated responses become reliable only after careful examination. By

integrating these two forms of verification, evidential visibility can be effectively implemented in classroom practice.

The basic procedure is as follows: Each lesson begins by identifying syntactic rules from textbook data, followed by an exploration of the values structurally corresponding to these rules. Students then demonstrate their engagement with these values by leaving observable evidence in their assignments. At the final stage, artificial intelligence is introduced into the classroom: Students provide AI with the same linguistic data and use the syntactic principles they have learned to evaluate AI-generated analyses. This process develops students' capacity to make evaluative judgments about AI outputs (Bearman *et al.*, 2024). The following three examples from Carnie (2023) illustrate this approach, with the student responses provided only as task demonstrations.

Example (2) Descriptive Grammar and Respect for Linguistic Diversity

a. I expect to more than double my profits. (Carnie, 2023, p. 29)

b. *I expect more than to double my profits. (Carnie, 2023, p. 29)

Prescriptive grammar tells speakers how they should speak, whereas descriptive grammar records how speakers actually use language and must be tested against speakers' intuitions (Carnie, 2023, p. 8-9). If the prescriptive rule against split infinitives is applied to change Example (2a) into Example (2b), speakers may reject the resulting sentence. The value structurally corresponding to this distinction is respect for linguistic diversity: describing how people actually speak rather than ranking speakers according to external standards.

In classroom practice, students may ask AI whether Example (2a) is acceptable. If AI "corrects" the sentence according to prescriptive rules, students can use Example (2b) as additional evidence to evaluate its judgment. In their assignments, students may then transform a prescriptive rule into a descriptive formulation beginning with expressions such as "in the given data…".

Example (3) The Coordinate Structure Constraint and Integrity as Wholeness

a. I liked Mary and John. (Carnie, 2023, p. 381)

b. *Who did you like Mary and ____? (Carnie, 2023, p. 381)

Because conjuncts in a coordinate structure cannot be extracted individually, Example (3b) is unacceptable. The value structurally corresponding to this constraint is integrity in the sense of wholeness: Just as a coordinate structure cannot be interpreted by isolating only one part, academic citation should not selectively extract only favorable information from a source or an AI response while ignoring its conditions and context.

Students may use the Coordinate Structure Constraint to evaluate AI's judgment of Example (3b). In their assignments, when citing AI-generated outputs, they should provide complete information about the AI system, the prompt used, and the original response.

Example (4) a. Debate Over Ellipsis Analysis and Rational Engagement With Disagreement

b. Calvin will strike himself and Otto will [VP ____] too. (Carnie, 2023, p. 458)

The interpretation of Example (4b) as "Otto strikes Calvin" supports the LF-copying analysis, whereas other data provide support for the PF-deletion analysis. Carnie does not reach a definitive conclusion, stating: "I'll leave it up to you to decide which camp you fall into" (Carnie, 2023, p. 461). The value structurally corresponding to this case is rational engagement with disagreement.

In peer evaluation, students should first reconstruct their classmates' analyses and evidence before presenting alternative views. Their analysis reports should include competing explanations, with each

accompanied by its limitations. If students revise their positions due to new evidence, they should preserve their original analysis and explain the reasons for revision.

Although the three examples involve different values, they share the same underlying mechanism: Values originate from syntactic rules, AI-generated responses serve as data requiring verification, and learning outcomes consist of observable and assessable behaviors. With sustained implementation of this approach, several changes may emerge in syntax courses.

First, course design will shift from adding values from outside toward generating values from within. Each week, a value derived from the syntactic rule being taught can replace generic value statements detached from disciplinary content (Wang & Wang, 2022). Although this approach requires teachers to invest more effort in theoretical analysis during preparation, it does not increase classroom time, because values are already embedded in syntactic reasoning itself. Explaining rules becomes a process of revealing how values emerge.

Second, relationships among teachers, students, and artificial intelligence will be transformed. AI will no longer be treated as an object to be excluded or as an authority to be accepted without question, but as a potentially fallible "third party". Its outputs, like textbook examples, should be regarded as linguistic materials requiring verification, while syntactic analysis provides the tools for evaluation, revision, and validation. Previous research also suggests that AI does not simply enhance or diminish learner agency; rather, it reshapes how such agency is enacted (Zou *et al.*,2026).

Third, the role of teachers will shift from value transmitters to designers of evidence-generating learning environments (Wang, 2026). Teachers' primary responsibility is not to directly deliver values, but to design tasks that require students to leave traces of their reasoning and to model academic reflection by making their own arguments and revision processes visible.

Finally, assessment practices will shift from outcome-oriented evaluation toward evidence-oriented evaluation. Rather than focusing on whether final products appear "correct", assessment will examine the evidence supporting conclusions, the reasoning processes involved, and the trajectories of revision (Corbin *et al*., 2025). In this way, assessment becomes not merely a tool for grading but a mechanism for facilitating value internalization.

Conclusion

Whether or not syntax courses explicitly incorporate values education, they inevitably transmit values implicitly. Beginning with the characteristics of hidden curriculum, this study argues that the acquisition of values through syntax learning depends on two essential conditions: structural alignment and visibility, which together constitute the concept of evidential visibility. Effective hidden-curriculum education therefore originates from syntactic rules, is realized through observable learning behaviors, and is supported by assessment practices that examine the substance of evidence rather than merely its formal presence.

By integrating the evidential tradition of syntax with generative artificial intelligence, this approach provides a feasible pathway for implementing hidden curriculum through existing teaching materials. It also transforms artificial intelligence from a potential obstacle into a source of linguistic data that can be critically examined and verified. Whether and how students ultimately internalize these values, however, requires further

empirical investigation through learning portfolios, reflective journals, classroom observations, and other forms of evidence-based research.

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