

REVISITING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INDEPENDENT AND CAMBRIDGE CURRICULUM IN ENGLISH SUBJECT AT AN ISLAMIC PUBLIC SCHOOL IN BATAM

Arya Putra Lievi Darwan¹
Universitas International Batam

Serina Rajagukguk²
Universitas International Batam

Hilarius Raditya Priambada Purba³
Universitas International Batam

Reysa Vita Intan⁴
Universitas International Batam

Aryadarwans@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research seeks to explore the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum alongside the Cambridge International Curriculum in the English subject at MAN Insan Cendekia Batam, focusing specifically on the integration of Islamic values into teaching. Using a qualitative case study method, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and rubric evaluation to understand instructional techniques, evaluation methods, and value incorporation in depth. The results show that English educators successfully integrate the dual curriculum through the use of student-focused, practical activities like job application tasks and interview practice, which enhance communicative skills and personal growth. Islamic values were not just explicitly taught but also integrated seamlessly into classroom practices, promoting comprehensive development. In spite of obstacles like managing curriculum requirements, varying student skill levels, and relating global topics to local contexts, the research emphasizes effective strategies such as gradual scaffolding, teamwork in learning, and innovative lesson design. The research finds that intentional curriculum development and reflective instruction can facilitate the effective execution of dual curricula in Islamic public schools, enhancing both global preparedness and spiritual authenticity

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum, Cambridge International Curriculum, English Language Teaching, Curriculum Integration, Islamic Public School

INTRODUCTION

A curriculum aims to offer a comprehensive education that fosters students' intellectual, social, and personal development. According to Mahardhani et al. (2023), it should nurture critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and communication skills, while ensuring a thorough understanding of subject content. Curriculum development must be based on societal needs, preparing students for future careers and civic responsibilities. A systematic approach is essential, starting with clear objectives and lesson designs that support those goals. The ELT (English Language Teaching) curriculum in Indonesia aims to develop students' communicative competence in English, covering listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Under the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum), the learning approach is more student-centered, using project-based learning and differentiated instruction. The curriculum emphasizes contextual understanding, critical thinking, and global readiness. Teachers are encouraged to adapt materials to students' needs and local contexts, and to use authentic assessments that reflect real-life language use. The goal is to prepare students to communicate effectively in a global era.

In Indonesia highlight that the Merdeka Curriculum was developed to offer students flexibility in learning based on their interests and talents, making the process more meaningful and enjoyable. It also aims to reduce students' academic burdens and motivate teachers to be more creative and innovative in instructional design. Moreover, the Merdeka Curriculum aspires to shape students into independent, critical thinkers with high social sensitivity.

The rationale for developing the Merdeka Curriculum stems from challenges in Indonesian education, including poor performance in international assessments like PISA, which reveal that many students lack basic competencies in literacy and numeracy. There is also a significant disparity in educational quality across regions and socioeconomic backgrounds, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. The previous curriculum was considered overly dense and insufficiently focused on character development or essential 21st-century skills. Therefore, the Merdeka Curriculum aims to simplify content, restore students' learning rights, and prepare them for a rapidly changing world.

The integration of national and international curricula within the Kurikulum Merdeka aims to enhance the quality of education in Indonesia to meet global standards without abandoning national values. This approach enables the adoption of best teaching practices from abroad, such as project-based learning and authentic assessment, to equip students with 21st-century skills. At the same time, character building, local culture, and the values of Pancasila remain fundamental pillars. This initiative also responds to Indonesia's low performance in international assessments

and represents an effort to create a more relevant, inclusive, and adaptive education system in the face of changing times.

International curricula such as Cambridge into the national framework is considered crucial to enhance educational quality and global competitiveness. International curricula emphasize 21st-century competencies critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and digital literacy which are still underrepresented in the national curriculum.

The importance of integrating the Cambridge International Curriculum into Indonesia's national framework. Some study at SMP Muhammadiyah 12 GKB Gresik revealed that such integration fosters more meaningful learning and supports the development of key 21st-century skills. Integration is carefully planned through syllabi and lesson plans that align both national and international standards. Learning remains student-centered, promoting active and inquiry-based engagement. However, a major challenge is students' limited English proficiency, particularly in subjects like Math and Science. to address this, improvements in both teacher and student English competence, along with better learning materials, are necessary. (Andiono et al, 2025)

In the Indonesian context, educational values often reflect religious principles. In Islamic schools, for example, integrating Islamic values into the curriculum is essential Salsabila et al (2024) emphasizes that incorporating Islamic values helps nurture superior character by fostering honesty, discipline, and responsibility, which in turn enhances academic achievement. This aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum's goal of holistic character development. Integrating Islamic values strengthens character building and supports the formation of the Pancasila Student Profile.

Ultimately, the purpose of a curriculum is not only to provide foundational knowledge across subject areas but also to develop students' cognitive, emotional, social, and practical skills. Furthermore, it plays a vital role in transmitting cultural values, social norms, and societal expectations—helping students understand their societal roles and fostering essential interpersonal skills for citizenship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of international and national curricula in English Language Teaching (ELT) has become a significant trend in Indonesian education, particularly with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and the Cambridge International Curriculum. These curriculum models emphasize 21st-century competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication, which are seen as essential in preparing students for a globalized world (Ahsan, 2023; Mahardhani et al., 2023).

Studies by Andiono et al. (2025) and Shalihah et al. (2025) emphasize that integrating the Cambridge curriculum enhances student engagement and learning outcomes when carefully aligned with national standards. These integrations tend to follow a student-centered approach, involving active learning, inquiry-based instruction, and authentic assessments. However, a recurring challenge is the language barrier, especially for students studying subjects like Mathematics and Science in English. Teachers are often required to adapt or translate materials, which can dilute the learning objectives (Shalihah et al., 2025).

The Merdeka Curriculum, introduced to address inequities in educational access and quality, advocates for flexibility, differentiated instruction, and character education. Lathif (2023) noted that this curriculum is a strategic shift from the previous K-13 framework, aiming to reduce content overload and prioritize student independence, local wisdom, and Pancasila values. This move is also a response to Indonesia's subpar performance in international assessments such as PISA.

The inclusion of Islamic values in ELT is particularly crucial in Islamic public schools. Salsabila et al. (2024) and Hapsari (2020) argue that integrating moral and religious teachings into English instruction helps develop students' character while enhancing their academic motivation. These studies stress the role of teacher competence in designing lessons that not only meet global standards but also preserve cultural and religious identity.

Previous research has also pointed to pedagogical constraints when combining curricula. For example, Nugroho and Mutiaraningrum (2020) highlight that educators often struggle to balance content-heavy Cambridge objectives with the holistic goals of the Merdeka Curriculum, especially within the constraints of local educational infrastructure.

Furthermore, while numerous studies have examined these curricula separately, few have addressed their simultaneous integration in Islamic public schools. The unique intersection of global academic standards, national values, and religious education presents both opportunities and tensions in instructional design (Setiawan, 2023; Ahsan, 2023).

Collectively, the literature underscores the need for professional development, curriculum alignment, and contextualized pedagogy to ensure that the integration of both curricula fosters linguistic competence, global readiness, and moral development in a balanced and sustainable way.

ELT Curriculum in National and International Contexts

The English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum is essential in developing students communicative competence, covering the four macro skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In Indonesia, the Merdeka Curriculum represents a shift toward student-centered learning and promotes flexibility, critical

thinking, and differentiated instruction (Mahardhani et al., 2023). It emphasizes Project Based Learning (PBL), contextualized learning, and authentic assessment, aimed at preparing students for real-world communication and global challenges.

In contrast, the Cambridge International Curriculum introduces global competencies such as collaboration, critical thinking, and inquiry-based learning. This curriculum is structured and assessment-driven, aligning with international academic benchmarks. It fosters cognitive rigor and fluency in English across various content areas, including Math and Science (Andiono et al., 2025). The integration of these two curricula requires careful curriculum mapping and instructional alignment, ensuring that students meet both national character goals and international academic standards.

Teaching English for EFL Learners

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesia presents unique challenges, especially in integrating international content standards with local linguistic capabilities. According to Ahsan (2023), EFL instruction in secondary schools must balance the development of linguistic accuracy with the promotion of 21st-century skills. Effective EFL pedagogy involves scaffolding, interactive activities, and context-based teaching, particularly in environments where students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

Moreover, Nugroho and Mutiaraningrum (2020) emphasize the importance of adapting teaching methods to suit students' socio-cultural backgrounds, especially in Islamic schools. Strategies such as code-switching, contextual examples, and bilingual materials can help make the content more accessible. For dual curriculum implementation, EFL teachers need strong content knowledge, language proficiency, and intercultural competence to navigate between the Merdeka and Cambridge standards.

3. Islamic Value Based Education

In the context of Islamic public schools such as MAN Insan Cendekia Batam, English language teaching is not merely a linguistic endeavor but also a medium for character and moral education. Islamic value-based education aims to instill virtues such as honesty, responsibility, respect, and discipline values that are central to *akhlakul karimah* and the Pancasila Student Profile (Salsabila et al., 2024). These values are embedded through classroom interactions, content selection, and assessment practices.

According to Hapsari (2020), integrating Islamic values into English instruction requires teachers to be intentional in their lesson design choosing culturally relevant texts, using moral-based themes, and encouraging reflective practices among students. This approach aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on holistic development and complements the global orientation of the Cambridge Curriculum by grounding students in their religious and moral identity.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to investigate how English teachers at MAN Insan Cendekia Batam integrate the Merdeka Curriculum and the Cambridge International Curriculum, with an emphasis on incorporating Islamic values. A case study design is particularly suitable for gaining a deep understanding of complex educational phenomena within their real-life context (Creswell & Poth, 2020; Yin, 2020). This methodological choice is supported by Shalihah et al. (2025), who explored the implementation of the Cambridge curriculum in an Islamic junior high school and used a similar case study framework to reveal how international standards were adapted to local religious values. Data in the current study were collected through semi-structured interviews, rubric analysis, and document analysis. This triangulated strategy is consistent with Ahsan's (2023) qualitative research on integrating 21st-century skills into English instruction, where interview and document data were used to identify teacher strategies and classroom practices. Rubric analysis, in particular, provided insights into how English learning outcomes were assessed, especially in terms of balancing linguistic competence and character development. This aligns with findings by Nugroho and Mutiaraningrum (2020), who emphasized the importance of assessment tools that reflect both academic and moral dimensions in Islamic schools. Document analysis, which focused on lesson plans and curriculum mapping, was guided by the model used by Hapsari (2020), who investigated the integration of character education into English syllabi. To interpret the data, thematic analysis was conducted, enabling the identification of recurring themes related to curriculum integration, instructional methods, and the embodiment of Islamic values. This analytic approach reflects techniques used by Lathif (2023), who examined curriculum adaptation in religious schools using Miles and Huberman's coding framework. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied triangulation, member checking, and thick description to validate findings and provide contextual depth. Altogether, this research method offers a comprehensive and grounded view of how dual curriculum integration is operationalized within an Islamic educational environment.

In this study, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and rubric analysis to explore how English teachers at MAN Insan Cendekia Batam implement the integration of the Merdeka Curriculum and the Cambridge International Curriculum while incorporating Islamic values. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with English teachers to gain in-depth insights into their instructional planning, teaching strategies, and the challenges they face in balancing the objectives of both curricula. This method is widely used in educational research to allow participants to elaborate on their experiences while still addressing core research questions (Lathif, 2023). In addition to interviews, rubric analysis was

employed to examine the assessment instruments used by the teachers. The rubrics were reviewed to understand how competencies from both curricula—such as language proficiency, critical thinking, and character education—were evaluated in practice. This method provided insight into how Islamic values were reflected in performance criteria and learning outcomes, supporting earlier findings by Shalihah et al. (2025), who noted the importance of culturally relevant assessments in dual-curriculum settings. The integration of interviews and rubric analysis strengthens the validity of the research through data triangulation, as recommended by Ahsan (2023), who emphasized the importance of using multiple qualitative data sources in studies on curriculum implementation. This approach aligns with previous studies by Nugroho and Mutiaraningrum (2020) and Hapsari (2020), which highlighted how classroom-level evidence and teacher perspectives together offer a holistic view of instructional effectiveness in Islamic schools. Altogether, these methods provide a rich and contextualized understanding of how curriculum integration is practiced and assessed at MAN Insan Cendekia Batam, here in this table are the several question that we ask for teacher in interview based on curriculum topic and supported by references, and were recorded (with permission from english teacher) to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data.

Table 1. Teacher Interview Instrument Grid

NO	Research Focus	Indicator	Interview Question
1	Curriculum Goals	Relevance to student needs	What are the main objectives of the current curriculum?
		Focus on holistic development	How do these goals benefit students?
		Clarity of learning objectives	Are the objectives clearly stated in the planning?
2.	Curriculum Relevance	Connection to real-world skills	How does the curriculum prepare students for future careers?
		Integration of Islamic values into curriculum content.	In what ways does the current curriculum reflect or support Islamic values in the learning process, especially in English lessons?
		Adaptability to global trends	Do students feel the content is relevant to life outside school?
3	Student Interest	Alignment with career goals	What subjects are most meaningful to you?
		Personal relevance	How does the curriculum support your aspirations?
		Subject choice flexibility	Can students choose content based on interests?

FINDING

1. Effectiveness of Curriculum Implementation in MAN Insan Cendekia

The observation and teacher interview at MAN Insan Cendekia Batam demonstrated that the integration of the Merdeka Curriculum and the Cambridge International Curriculum in English instruction is effectively implemented. The English lessons observed were well-structured, purposeful, and learner-centered. Students actively participated in activities such as creating job application letters, role-playing interview simulations, and giving peer feedback. These tasks reflected a clear application of communicative and task-based English Language Teaching principles, where all four language skills were integrated into meaningful contexts. Furthermore, the students displayed a high level of confidence and fluency in using English, indicating that teaching strategies in this EFL setting had succeeded in fostering communicative competence. The curriculum goals were also clearly aligned with real-world skills and character development, as classroom routines included both academic tasks and the embodiment of Islamic values, such as prayer, respect for others, and discipline. This suggests that the school not only aims for language proficiency but also for spiritual and moral growth among students.

2. Challenges in Curriculum Integration

Despite the overall success, several challenges were identified during the observation and interview. One of the most prominent challenges was the need to balance two curricula Merdeka and Cambridge each with different structures, goals, and demands. Teachers must ensure that students achieve both national and international standards within limited instructional time. Another difficulty lies in addressing students' diverse proficiency levels in English, which requires differentiated instruction and additional effort in classroom management. Moreover, while Islamic values were visibly present in the classroom environment, there remains a challenge in consistently integrating these values into all lesson content, especially when dealing with global themes from the Cambridge curriculum. Teachers are expected to creatively contextualize international material without compromising the integrity of religious and cultural values. This demands high pedagogical skill and flexibility.

3. Best Practices Observed

Several best practices emerged from the observation at MAN IC Batam. One of the most notable was the use of real-life simulations, such as writing CVs and conducting mock interviews, which helped students connect language learning with

future career opportunities. The teacher also employed a variety of strategies that balanced global and local content, making lessons more relatable while maintaining international quality. The use of pair and group work encouraged collaboration, critical thinking, and student autonomy. Additionally, classroom behavior reflected strong character formation, as students listened attentively, respected their peers during presentations, and practiced digital discipline. These behaviors were not directly taught as separate lessons but embedded naturally through routine, reflecting the integration of Islamic value-based education. The teacher's strategy of gradually shifting from basic daily communication topics to more complex, professional themes also showed a clear progression in the curriculum. This structured scaffolding allowed students to develop their skills incrementally while aligning with both curriculum frameworks. Overall, these practices highlight how effective planning, moral integration, and contextualized instruction can create an English language learning environment that prepares students for both global engagement and spiritual responsibility.

DISCUSSION

1. Effectiveness of Curriculum Implementation in MAN Insan Cendekia

The implementation of the integrated Merdeka and Cambridge curricula in English language instruction at MAN Insan Cendekia Batam demonstrates a high level of effectiveness in promoting communicative competence and real-world language use. The project-based tasks observed such as CV writing and mock interviews reflect the learner-centered design emphasized in the Merdeka Curriculum. These activities not only support linguistic development but also equip students with practical communication skills relevant to future career contexts. This aligns with Mahardhani et al. (2023) and Ariqa et al., (2021), who emphasized that the Merdeka Curriculum is designed to nurture higher-order thinking skills and contextual application of language. The Cambridge framework, on the other hand, complements this with structured global standards that promote inquiry, critical thinking, and digital literacy (Andiono et al., 2025) and (Mardhiyatuzakiyah et al., 2023). The integration of both curricula, therefore, creates a dynamic learning environment where students engage actively with English in meaningful ways.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of the curriculum implementation is evident through the alignment of teaching practices with the principles of differentiated learning and learner autonomy, as encouraged in the Merdeka Curriculum (Notanubun, 2025). Teachers provide varied learning experiences that cater to students' interests and readiness levels, allowing them to take ownership of their learning. This is supported by the findings of Nisrina et al., (2025) who argue that the success of Merdeka Curriculum lies in its emphasis on flexibility and student agency, encouraging meaningful engagement and collaboration.

The integration of the Cambridge curriculum reinforces this through its emphasis on performance-based assessments and international benchmarks. According to Irsyad et al., (2024) the curriculum encourages reflective learning and provides globally recognized frameworks that enhance students' academic readiness for higher education. In the context of MAN IC Batam.

2. Challenges in Curriculum Integration

Despite its strengths, the integration of the dual curriculum presents several challenges. One major issue is the complexity of aligning the two frameworks, each with different goals, pacing, and pedagogical approaches. Teachers must manage the demands of both curricula within limited instructional time while ensuring that students meet the learning outcomes of each. According to Izakiyah, (2024) teachers in dual curriculum schools often experience tension between the rigorous academic content of the Cambridge curriculum and the flexibility of national frameworks, requiring strategic planning and prioritization.

Another challenge arises from the variation in student proficiency levels. Teachers need to differentiate instruction to support learners who may be struggling with either content or language. In EFL contexts, this often means employing additional scaffolding or supplementary materials, which increases the teacher's workload. Moreover, integrating Islamic values into globally oriented materials such as those from Cambridge requires a high level of contextualization. Fauzan Ismael, (2022) and Setiawan (2023) explains that balancing religious identity with global perspectives requires teachers to have deep cultural understanding and pedagogical creativity.

Furthermore, professional development becomes a crucial factor in the successful integration of dual curricula. Many teachers require continuous training to stay updated with both the Cambridge and Merdeka curriculum demands. Without adequate support, educators may struggle to deliver lessons effectively, leading to inconsistencies in classroom instruction. As highlighted by Anggraini, (2025), insufficient training opportunities often result in a reliance on traditional methods, which may not align with the learner-centered and inquiry-based approaches emphasized in both curricula.

In addition, the assessment systems of the two curricula often differ significantly. The Cambridge curriculum emphasizes analytical thinking and global benchmarks, while the Merdeka curriculum prioritizes character development and formative assessment. This divergence creates difficulties in designing unified evaluation methods that accurately reflect students' competencies across both systems. According to Kumalasari & Mukaromah, (2024), such discrepancies may confuse students and undermine their motivation if the learning goals appear inconsistent or contradictory.

Lastly, institutional constraints, such as lack of resources and administrative support, can further complicate integration efforts. Limited access to teaching materials, digital tools, and curriculum-aligned textbooks may hinder the full implementation of both programs. Schools must also navigate bureaucratic challenges when aligning the dual curriculum with national educational standards and accreditation requirements. These systemic issues underscore the need for policy-level coordination and school-based innovation to ensure that integration is both feasible and sustainable (Surajjiah et al., 2023).

3. Best Practices for Integrated Curriculum in Islamic Schools

Several best practices observed at MAN IC Batam can serve as models for other Islamic schools implementing a similar dual curriculum. One effective approach was the use of progressive, theme-based instruction, starting from everyday communication topics and gradually moving to more complex, academic, and career-oriented language tasks. This gradual progression helps students develop their language proficiency in structured stages, consistent with effective EFL pedagogy (Nugroho, Mutiaraningrum, 2020) and (Rohmah et al., 2023).

In addition, the incorporation of character values was not done in isolation, but infused seamlessly into classroom routines and tasks. For example, students were taught to respect one another during presentations and work collaboratively during interviews, reflecting Islamic values in action. This practice exemplifies a holistic education model where character and language skills develop simultaneously (Herlinda et al., 2023).

The use of contextual, real-world materials, combined with interactive methods such as peer feedback, group projects, and teacher-student reflection, further enhanced student motivation and engagement. The teacher's ability to balance digital tools (e.g., projectors, online documents) with face-to-face interactions ensured that the technology remained a support system, not a replacement for communication. These strategies align with best practices for modern curriculum design, where learning is personalized, interactive, and values-driven (Isroani & Huda, 2022).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the integration of the Merdeka Curriculum and the Cambridge International Curriculum in English instruction at MAN Insan Cendekia Batam demonstrates a balanced and effective approach that supports students' linguistic proficiency, critical thinking, and character development. The findings reveal that English teachers are able to align national and international curriculum goals through student-centered learning, real-world tasks, and the incorporation of Islamic values. These values are not merely taught as separate moral lessons but are embedded into daily classroom interactions, contributing to students' holistic

growth. Despite facing challenges such as balancing the demands of two distinct curricula, addressing varied levels of student English proficiency, and contextualizing global content to align with religious principles, teachers have shown creativity and flexibility in their instructional strategies. Best practices such as progressive task scaffolding, collaborative learning, and the integration of digital tools further enhance student engagement and achievement. This case study suggests that with thoughtful curriculum planning and reflective teaching, Islamic public schools can effectively implement dual curricula that prepare students for global competitiveness while nurturing their moral and spiritual integrity.

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