

EXPLORING CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN INDONESIAN STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING (ELT)

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Submit, 07-12-2026

Accepted, 29-04-2026

Publish, 30-04-2026

ABSTRACT

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia has redefined the landscape of English Language Teaching (ELT) by emphasizing character development alongside linguistic competence. This study investigates how the curriculum promotes the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile faith and noble character, global diversity, cooperation, independence, critical thinking, and creativity within ELT contexts at the secondary school level. Employing a qualitative design, data were collected through textbook analysis, classroom observations, and interviews with English teachers across three junior high schools in East Java. Content analysis was applied to examine how character values were integrated into ELT materials and classroom practices. The findings revealed that while noble character and cooperation were strongly emphasized in both textbooks and teacher practice, global diversity and critical thinking received limited attention. Teachers adapted activities to contextualize character values, yet constraints such as exam-oriented culture and limited teacher training hindered deeper integration. This study contributes to the growing literature on ELT and character education, highlighting the need for balanced representation of character dimensions. Implications are provided for policymakers, teachers, and material developers to enhance the holistic goals of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Keywords: Character Development, ELT, Merdeka Curriculum, Pancasila Student Profile, Qualitative Study

INTRODUCTION

Indonesian education has growth significant transformation with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Freedom-to-Learn Curriculum). This curriculum aims to improve students' academic achievement and to nurture their

moral and social values in alignment with the Pancasila Student Profile (Suwarni, 2024), which places character formation as a key learning outcome. Within this framework, English Language Teaching (ELT) plays a particularly important role (Zamani & Ahangari, 2016). As a global lingua franca and a subject closely connected to cultural exchange, English offers rich opportunities to promote values such as openness to diversity, cooperation, and critical thinking (Zalli & Moisiu, 2024)

Despite these aspirations, integrating character development into ELT remains challenging. Previous studies show that textbooks and classroom practices tend to focus primarily on linguistic accuracy and communicative skills, while cultural and ethical dimensions are often underrepresented (Keguruan et al., 2025). In another side (Pasha et al., 2025) found that Indonesian ELT textbooks developed for the Merdeka Curriculum emphasize religious and moral values but offer limited attention to critical thinking and multicultural awareness. This imbalance may hinder the holistic vision of the Pancasila Student Profile, which requires the balanced development of students' moral, intellectual, and social competencies.

Character education in ELT is not simply about embedding moral messages in texts; rather, it involves pedagogical practices through teachers design meaningful tasks, facilitate classroom interactions, and encourage reflection (Harford & MacRuairc, 2008). However, many English teachers continue to face several constraints, including limited training in value-based pedagogy, exam-oriented teaching traditions, and a lack of instructional materials that align with the Merdeka Curriculum. To address these gaps, this study conducts a qualitative investigation into how character development is integrated into ELT under the Merdeka Curriculum. It specifically explores how the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile are reflected in textbooks, classroom practices, and teachers' perspectives. The study is guided by three research questions: (1) How are character values represented in ELT textbooks designed for the Merdeka Curriculum? (2) How do English teachers implement character development in their classroom practices? and (3) What challenges and opportunities do teachers encounter when promoting character education through ELT?

By answering these questions, the study aims to contribute to both theoretical and practical discussions on the intersection of ELT, curriculum reform, and character education. It underscores the importance of integrating linguistic competence with ethical and cultural values to prepare students to become proficient English users as well as responsible global citizens. Previous research has shown strong evidence that intercultural awareness contributes positively to students' communication skills and personal development (Roza et

al., 2024). Studies in international education contexts have found that students who receive intercultural instruction tend to show greater confidence when interacting with people from different countries,

LITERATURE REVIEW

Character Education and Its Relevance in ELT

Character education has been widely acknowledged as an essential component of holistic education (Pala, 2011). (Singh, 2019) defines character education as a deliberate effort to cultivate virtue, morality, and civic responsibility among learners. In the global educational discourse, character education is closely linked to the promotion of social-emotional learning (SEL), civic literacy, and ethical values. In the Indonesian context, character education has become a national priority in response to challenges such as juvenile delinquency, intolerance, and the erosion of cultural values.

In English Language Teaching (ELT), character education is particularly significant. As an international language, English serves as a tool for communication and medium for cultural exchange. Scholars argue that ELT should not be confined to linguistic competence but must also cultivate intercultural competence and moral reasoning (Wahyudi, 2018) Integrating character education into ELT ensures that learners develop values such as respect, tolerance, empathy, and global awareness alongside language skills.

Achieving this integration is not without challenges. ELT materials, especially textbooks, often prioritize grammar, vocabulary, and communicative functions at the expense of moral and cultural dimension (Banaruee et al., 2023). This imbalance is evident in many Asian contexts, including Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language and curricular demands emphasize exam performance. As a result, character education is frequently underrepresented in ELT practice.

The Merdeka Curriculum and the Pancasila Student Profile

The Merdeka Curriculum, launched in 2021, is the latest reform in Indonesian education. It emphasizes flexibility, autonomy, and student-centered learning. At its core lies the Pancasila Student Profile, which articulates six key dimensions of character: 1) Faith, fear of the Almighty God, and noble character; 2) Global diversity; 3) Cooperation; 4) Independence; 5) Critical thinking; 6) Creativity (Kemendikbud, 2022). These dimensions are designed to align educational practice with the values of Pancasila, Indonesia's philosophical foundation. They emphasize the need for learners to become knowledgeable individuals, ethical, creative, and globally aware citizens.

Research on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum shows a positive reception among teachers, though challenges remain. (Khoiriyah et al.,

2022) argue that the curriculum successfully embeds peace and tolerance values in ELT materials, yet its operationalization in classrooms often depends on teachers' initiative and pedagogical skills. Similarly, (Yusri & Andriyanti, 2025) found that ELT textbooks under the Merdeka Curriculum ("English for Nusantara") highlight noble character and cooperation but provide limited representation of global diversity and critical thinking. This indicates a curricular-textual gap: while the official framework promotes balanced character education, the materials and classroom practices often highlight only selected values. Such gaps necessitate deeper analysis of how character development is being enacted in ELT practice.

Previous Studies on Character Education in ELT

A growing body of research has examined the integration of character education in ELT. Three main strands can be identified: a) Textbook Analysis. Numerous studies have analyzed ELT textbooks to examine the presence of moral and cultural values. (Rahmi, 2022) employed micro-semiotic analysis to demonstrate how Indonesian textbooks subtly represent values such as respect, responsibility, and harmony. in their study of Norwegian textbooks, found that indigenous cultures and intercultural competence were underrepresented.

Tho Seeth (2023) revealed that Indonesian textbooks often prioritize Western-oriented cosmopolitan values while neglecting local cultural identity. b) Classroom Practice Studies Other studies focus on how teachers integrate character education in practice. The role of teachers in mediating multicultural values during classroom discussions. Collaborative learning strategies in ELT fostered cooperation and empathy among students. However, challenges such as rigid curriculum demands and exam-oriented culture often limit teachers' ability to foreground character values. c) Policy and Curriculum Research Several studies examine education reforms and their implications for character education.

Renette et al. (2021) emphasized the need for balanced representation of honesty, environmental awareness, and independence across grade levels. These findings underscore the difficulty of translating policy ideals into classroom realities. Taken together, these studies highlight both opportunities and challenges for character education in ELT. While textbooks and curricula provide entry points for value integration, their effectiveness depends heavily on teachers' pedagogical practices and institutional support.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach to explore how the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile are incorporated into English Language Teaching (ELT) within the Merdeka Curriculum. A qualitative design was selected because the research focused on understanding how teachers interpret character-based curriculum goals and how these goals appear in everyday classroom practices.

Rather than relying on numerical measurements, the study aimed to capture real classroom interactions, teacher decision-making, and the meanings teachers assign to curriculum expectations (Creswell, 2017).

The research was conducted in three public junior high schools in Bima, West Nusa Tenggara (NTB): SMP Negeri 1 Madapangga, SMP Negeri 1 Woha, and SMP Negeri 1 Kota Bima. These schools were chosen because they represent different teaching conditions and provide a broad picture of how the Merdeka Curriculum is implemented across the region. English teachers from these schools participated in the study as they were directly involved in designing and delivering lessons aligned with the curriculum. Their experiences helped reveal how character values linked to the Pancasila Student Profile were understood and applied during English lessons.

Data were collected through textbook analysis, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. The textbook analysis examined how character values were presented in the materials used by teachers. Classroom observations were carried out to see how teaching activities, student engagement, and teacher–student interactions reflected the targeted character values. Semi-structured interviews provided deeper insights into teachers’ reasoning, challenges, and experiences in integrating the Pancasila values into their lessons.

The collected data were analysed using content analysis. The researcher reviewed textbooks, observation notes, and interview transcripts before coding the data to identify recurring patterns related to the six characters dimensions: faith and noble character, global diversity, cooperation, independence, critical thinking, and creativity. These codes were then organized into themes that described how character values appeared in both the ELT materials and classroom practices, as well as areas where the integration was less visible.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were applied. Triangulation was used by comparing findings from different data sources and methods. Member checking was carried out by sharing preliminary interpretations with participating teachers to confirm accuracy. Throughout the research process, detailed notes were kept to maintain transparency regarding data collection and analysis steps.

FINDING

The findings of this study are organized around the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile, which serve as the core framework for character development in the Indonesian Merdeka Curriculum. These six dimensions are: faith and noble character, global diversity, cooperation, independence, critical thinking, and creativity. Each of these dimensions represents a moral and intellectual quality that the curriculum seeks to foster through English Language

Teaching (ELT). To explore how these values are implemented in practice, the study employed three key sources of data: the English for Nusantara textbook as the official instructional material, classroom observations of eighteen English lessons across several schools, and in-depth interviews with nine English teachers. These data sources provided a comprehensive understanding of both the designed and enacted curriculum, as well as teachers' perceptions of character development within ELT contexts.

Representation of Character Values in English for Nusantara Textbooks

The English for Nusantara textbooks, officially adopted under the Merdeka Curriculum, serve as the primary learning material for English Language Teaching (ELT) at the junior high school level. Analysis of the Grade 7 textbook revealed that character education is embedded implicitly rather than taught as a separate component. Values are conveyed through topics, dialogues, illustrations, and short reading passages that reflect moral and social messages aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile.

The six core dimensions faith and noble character, global diversity, cooperation, independence, critical thinking, and creativity were found to be unevenly represented. The most dominant theme was Faith and Noble Character, which appeared twelve times in the text, mostly through images and moral lessons emphasizing respect, politeness, and responsibility. For instance, Chapter 1 portrays students raising the national flag, symbolizing patriotism and civic duty; Chapter 3 models polite expressions and respect toward elders; and Chapter 4 illustrates environmental cleanliness as moral discipline.

Conversely, Global Diversity was the least represented dimension. Only two instances were identified: a picture of Indonesian students wearing traditional attire from various ethnic groups and a short passage on international foods. Neither provided cultural comparison or critical reflection. The textual analysis reveals that the textbook promotes moral and civic character more than intercultural or intellectual growth. The content remains largely didactic and nationally centered, with minimal emphasis on global citizenship, reflective dialogue, or creative exploration. This imbalance suggests that while the Merdeka Curriculum aspires to holistic character formation, its main learning materials still reflect traditional moral instruction rather than transformative character education.

Implementation of Character Development in ELT Classrooms

Observational data and teacher interviews indicate that teachers actively attempt to integrate character education into their English lessons, though the depth and methods vary significantly across contexts. Character instruction typically occurred through three main strategies: moral reminders, behavioral modeling, and value-linked contextualization of English topics. In many classrooms, teachers included short moral commentaries during lessons. For

instance, a rural teacher (T7) emphasized the moral meaning of greetings, explaining:

“When you greet someone, you show respect. Respecting others is part of our noble character.”

Similarly, an urban teacher (T2) reported linking classroom activities with civic rituals, such as flag ceremonies, to reinforce discipline and respect:

“Every Monday, we have a flag ceremony. I sometimes use English phrases to remind students about respect for the nation.”

Such examples show that teachers interpret ELT as a medium for moral cultivation, not just linguistic training. However, the pedagogical approach remains primarily teacher-centered, relying on direct explanation rather than interactive discussion or reflective inquiry. Students are typically expected to absorb moral messages rather than critically engage with them..

Another finding concerns contextual variation. Teachers in urban schools, often exposed to professional development programs, incorporated communicative tasks with moral themes for example, group discussions on responsibility or politeness in social media communication. Meanwhile, teachers in rural or suburban areas focused more on disciplinary values, such as obedience, cleanliness, and respect. Despite these contextual differences, all teachers demonstrated a commitment to nurturing students' moral integrity, indicating that the ethos of character education is strongly embedded in Indonesian ELT culture.

In summary, classroom enactment reflects a faith-based and normative orientation, aligning with the Merdeka Curriculum's moral foundations but offering limited space for critical reflection or intercultural understanding. The results support Lickona's (1991) principle that character education must move beyond moral instruction toward moral reasoning and autonomous virtue.

Challenges and Opportunities in Promoting Character Education through ELT

While teachers showed enthusiasm for integrating character education, they also encountered multiple pedagogical and structural challenges. The most frequently mentioned barriers include: (1) limited textbook coverage of global and reflective values, (2) time constraints within the English curriculum, and (3) insufficient training in character-based and intercultural pedagogy.

Teachers often expressed that the textbook materials were too narrow to support meaningful discussion of moral or global issues. As rural teacher (T4) explained:

“The book only shows Indonesian culture. To talk about global diversity, I have to find my own materials, but sometimes there is not enough time.”

This highlights a systemic issue where curricular expectations exceed resource support. Teachers are expected to cultivate six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile, yet the textbooks provide minimal scaffolding beyond moralistic examples.

The study also identified opportunities. Teachers' moral commitment, religious motivation, and close relationship with students serve as strong foundations for integrating values into learning. Many teachers personalize character education through storytelling, local proverbs, or moral reflections related to everyday contexts. This reflects the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on teacher autonomy and contextualized learning. If supported through ongoing professional development, such practices could evolve into more dialogic and student-centered forms of moral pedagogy.

Ultimately, the findings indicate a policy–practice gap: while national curriculum frameworks promote character education as central to ELT, implementation depends heavily on teachers' initiative, creativity, and moral conviction. To achieve the curriculum's holistic vision, future reforms should emphasize (a) teacher training in value-based pedagogy, (b) textbooks rich in intercultural and reflective content, and (c) assessment systems that recognize moral reasoning and civic engagement as key learning outcomes

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study help explain how the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile are integrated into English Language Teaching (ELT) under the Merdeka Curriculum. When connected with recent theories on character education, curriculum implementation, and intercultural learning, the results show that some progress has been made, but the integration of values is still uneven and not yet fully aligned with the aims of the curriculum.

The first major finding relates to the representation of character values in the English for Nusantara textbook. The textbook strongly highlights values such as respect, politeness, responsibility, and other moral qualities linked to faith and noble character. This pattern is similar to what recent textbook studies have found in Indonesia for example, (Deri Supriatna, 2025) report that Indonesian textbooks tend to focus on moral and civic messages rather than critical thinking or intercultural understanding. At the same time, current character education research, such as (Hasbi et al., 2023) and (Hidayat & Septiandi, 2025), argues that modern character education should help students think critically, act responsibly in diverse societies, and work creatively with others. The limited presence of global diversity and critical thinking in the textbook suggests that the material still follows a traditional, moralistic approach instead of a more reflective and global one. This also supports (Qodriani & Kardiansyah, 2018), who found that ELT

textbooks in Indonesia often do not include activities that invite deeper reasoning or cultural exploration.

The second finding concerns how teachers integrate character values in their English lessons. The study shows that teachers try to introduce values through reminders, behavioral examples, and connections between lesson topics and everyday life. This is supported by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which explains that students learn values through social interaction and teacher guidance. However, the way values are taught is still mostly teacher-centered, meaning that students rarely discuss moral issues, compare viewpoints, or think critically about real situations. Recent studies such as (Mukhamedaly et al., 2024) and (Samudra Kushariyadi et al., 2024) emphasize that character education is more effective when students are encouraged to reflect, ask questions, and make sense of values on their own. The patterns found in this study are also similar to the findings of (Dhari & Maisarah, 2025) who note that English classes in Indonesia often expect students to follow rules rather than develop their reasoning skills.

Differences across the three school contexts also highlight issues described in recent curriculum theory. (Sommarström et al., 2021) argue that curriculum implementation depends heavily on teacher agency, professional development, and local school conditions. This study found the same pattern: teachers in city-area schools were more likely to use interactive and communicative methods, while teachers in semi-urban and remote schools focused more on discipline and simple moral messages. These differences show that the integration of the Pancasila Student Profile is shaped not only by the curriculum but also by access to resources and training. This supports findings by (Simbolon et al., 2025) and (Zaenab et al., 2024), who note that teachers need continuous support to carry out the Merdeka Curriculum effectively.

The third important finding relates to challenges in promoting character education through ELT. Teachers reported three main obstacles: limited textbook content, lack of time, and limited training in character or intercultural pedagogy. These challenges are consistent with recent research such as (Salma et al., 2024) and (Pratiwi et al., 2023) showing that many Indonesian teachers feel the materials do not provide enough support for teaching values beyond moral behavior. Time pressure also makes it difficult to go beyond quick reminders or simple examples. This aligns with studies by (Olivant, 2015) and (Tsai et al., 2018), which show that exam-related pressures often reduce teachers' ability to create reflective or creative learning activities. The lack of professional development is another concern. (Phuong & Vo, 2019) explain that teachers in Southeast Asia often rely on personal beliefs instead of structured approaches when teaching values, because training in this area is limited.

Even with these challenges, the study found several positive opportunities. Many teachers are strongly committed to helping students develop good character. They also use local stories, cultural wisdom, and personal experiences to make values meaningful. According to (Longobardi et al., 2021), strong teacher student relationships play an important role in shaping students' character. The Merdeka Curriculum gives teachers freedom to adapt lessons, which matches Freire's view (updated 2020 edition) that meaningful learning should come from students' real-life experiences. With proper training such as workshops on intercultural communication, reflective dialogue, or creative character tasks teachers could move from simple moral instruction to deeper, more student-centered character education.

The results show a clear policy-practice gap. While the Merdeka Curriculum promotes six characters dimensions, including global, creative, and critical aspects, both the textbook and classroom practices focus mainly on traditional moral values. To reduce this gap, curriculum developers need to provide richer materials, policymakers need to ensure continuous teacher training, and schools need assessment approaches that value not only language skills but also moral reasoning, empathy, and civic engagement. Strengthening these areas will help ELT contribute more effectively to the formation of well-rounded, principled, and globally aware students an outcome that reflects the true vision of the Pancasila Student Profile

CONCLUSION

This study explored how character development, as framed by the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile, is represented and enacted within English Language Teaching (ELT) under the Merdeka Curriculum. Using qualitative methods document analysis of the English for Nusantara textbook, classroom observations across three different school contexts, and teacher interviews the study revealed an uneven pattern of character integration. The findings demonstrate that faith, noble character, and cooperation are the most prominently represented values. These dimensions are embedded in both textbooks and classroom practice, reflecting their cultural resonance with Indonesia's traditions of religiosity and collectivism. Teachers actively reinforced these values, often through moral reminders and group-based tasks.

By contrast, global diversity and critical thinking were minimally represented. The textbook provided little intercultural content and few opportunities for higher-order thinking, while classroom practices tended to emphasize rote recall over analysis or reflection. Independence and creativity appeared moderately but often in symbolic or limited forms, such as visuals of self-reliant students or craft-based projects. Teachers recognized the importance

of these values but admitted challenges in implementation, including reliance on textbooks, limited training, and entrenched exam-oriented habits.

The study concludes that while the Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to integrate character education into ELT, its enactment remains selective and uneven. Strong emphasis is placed on values that are culturally familiar and easily reinforced, while values requiring innovation, intercultural awareness, or critical engagement receive less attention. This imbalance risks producing students with strong moral and cooperative dispositions but insufficient global orientation and critical reasoning skills.

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