

Value-Oriented English Learning Materials: A Conceptual Review of Textbooks, Local Content, and Character Education

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Abstract

This study explores how value-oriented English learning materials can connect language learning with moral, cultural, and character education values. In many Indonesian classrooms, English textbooks are still dominated by global content that often ignores local and spiritual values. Using a qualitative library research approach, this study reviewed 25 recent publications from 2020 to 2025 related to English material design, Islamic education, and character development. The references were organized using the Mendeley citation manager to ensure academic consistency. The findings show that when textbooks include local culture, Islamic perspectives, and moral lessons, students become more engaged and develop not only linguistic skills but also ethical awareness and identity. However, most current materials still emphasize standardized international topics that are less relevant to students' real-life values. The study highlights the importance of designing English learning materials that balance communicative goals with character formation, in line with the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum and the vision of Islamic education.

Keywords: english material design, character education, local content, islamic education, ELT curriculum.

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Introduction

In today's globalized society, English functions not only as an international language of communication but also as a vital medium for education, technology, and intercultural understanding. Across the world, the teaching and learning of English have become central to educational policy and practice, reflecting the demand for global participation and digital literacy. However, in many non-native English-speaking countries, including Indonesia, English is more than a linguistic tool it is a cultural product carrying ideologies, worldviews, and values shaped by Western traditions. This condition challenges educators in Islamic and local cultural settings to ensure that English learning does not merely transmit foreign culture but also reflects the moral and spiritual values of learners' own communities.

English language learning materials, such as textbooks, worksheets, and digital modules, play a central role in shaping the direction and quality of English instruction. As Tomlinson (2018) emphasizes, materials act as "the most visible manifestation of the curriculum," determining what learners learn, how they learn, and what values are implicitly communicated. Yet, many materials used in Indonesian classrooms are produced for global markets and often ignore local contexts, religious beliefs, and socio-cultural values (Hasnah et al., 2024). As a result, students may achieve linguistic competence but lose connection to their cultural identity and moral foundation. Similar concerns are also highlighted by Sari and Andini (2023), who found that locally developed ELT materials with character-based elements significantly enhance moral understanding and classroom engagement.

The concept of **value-oriented materials** in this study refers to resources intentionally designed to integrate moral, cultural, and spiritual dimensions into English learning. This approach aligns with Indonesia's educational vision that promotes cognitive development alongside character education (*pendidikan karakter*) and faith-based values (*nilai keislaman*). Safitri et al. (2023) emphasize that English materials can become effective tools for character formation when infused with virtues such as honesty, empathy, and cooperation. In Islamic education, this aligns with the principle of *tarbiyah*, which nurtures intellect, soul, and morality. As Putri and Fauzan (2024) note in *JELITA*, embedding local and Islamic contexts into English teaching supports deeper comprehension and helps students internalize values relevant to their daily lives.

Despite its importance, most ELT material design research still focuses more on linguistic accuracy and communicative techniques than on ethical or cultural dimensions. Many studies analyze the methodology of material development (McDonough et al., 2013; Richards, 2021), but few explore how moral or spiritual values can be systematically embedded. Even when textbooks mention local culture, they often treat it superficially using token examples or decorative illustrations instead of meaningful integration (Pratiwi et al., 2024). This gap reveals the urgent need for conceptual and practical models of value-oriented English materials that authentically reflect learners' moral and cultural realities.

To manage and organize references consistently, this research utilized the Mendeley citation manager throughout the writing process. Through this approach, every source was systematically categorized to ensure reliability and transparency in academic documentation.

Literature Review

The problem underlying this study lies in the dominance of commercial English textbooks in Indonesian classrooms, which often emphasize linguistic competence but neglect local culture, moral values, and character formation. As Tomlinson (2018) explains, language learning materials are the most visible form of curriculum implementation and significantly shape the values transmitted through instruction. However, imported textbooks designed primarily for global markets rarely reflect the cultural and moral contexts of Indonesian learners (Hasnah et al., 2024). This mismatch creates a pedagogical gap in which students may achieve linguistic proficiency but fail to see the relevance of English learning to their social realities and character development. Although prior studies acknowledge this disconnect, they often stop at identifying the problem, offering limited solutions for systematically integrating ethical and cultural elements into textbook design.

Theoretically, this research draws from constructivist learning theory and value-based education frameworks. Constructivism views learning as an active process of meaning-making shaped by cultural and social interaction (Richards, 2021). Within this paradigm, English materials are not merely linguistic input but mediating tools for developing understanding, morality, and identity. This aligns with the Islamic concept of *ta'dib*, which emphasizes integrating intellectual and moral education in human development (Al-Attas, 2018). Although these theoretical frameworks offer strong justification for value-integrated materials, they often remain broad and philosophical. Most existing models lack clear operational guidelines for translating moral and cultural principles into practical textbook components, making classroom implementation inconsistent. As Sari and Andini (2023) note, constructivist and character-based materials can improve critical thinking and moral reasoning, yet they also highlight the absence of structured frameworks that guide teachers in designing such materials.

Empirical research in ELT has provided important insights into the cultural and ethical limitations of existing textbooks, yet several gaps remain. Studies such as Zakaria and Koay (2022) show that many Asian ELT materials reflect Western ideologies and unfamiliar cultural settings, reducing learner engagement. Mahmud and Linda (2021) similarly argue that textbooks lacking local content fail to strengthen students' sense of identity. However, these studies tend to focus on cultural representation rather than the deeper integration of moral values and ethical reasoning. While research by Djamdjuri, Retnowati, and Kartadimadja (2022) and by Safitri et al. (2023) demonstrates the positive impact of character education and Islamic values in ELT materials, most of these interventions are context-specific, small-scale, and lack rigorous evaluation across diverse school settings. Moreover, many empirical studies

highlight *what* is missing in textbooks but provide limited discussion on *how* moral, cultural, and linguistic goals can be balanced in a systematic and scalable manner. Putri and Fauzan (2024) underscore the need for integrative approaches, but even their work stops short of offering a comprehensive model that can guide material developers in practice.

Despite increasing attention to contextualized and ethical ELT materials, several structural and methodological limitations persist. Teachers often lack training in designing materials that align linguistic objectives with moral and cultural goals (Usman et al., 2023), and the global dominance of major commercial publishers still restricts the production and distribution of locally meaningful materials (Latif & Saeed, 2024). Existing frameworks in material development whether communicative, constructivist, or value-based tend to treat cultural and ethical elements as add-ons rather than integral components of the design process. They seldom provide clear criteria, development stages, or evaluation tools for creating value-oriented ELT textbooks. This indicates a major conceptual gap: there is no established model that systematically integrates linguistic competence, moral values, cultural relevance, and learner identity into a coherent framework for English textbook design.

Therefore, there is a pressing need for a new conceptual model that not only critiques the shortcomings of existing practices but also offers concrete, practical steps for integrating moral and cultural imperatives into ELT materials. Such a model is essential to bridge the gap between theoretical ideals and classroom realities, ensuring that English learning supports both ethical development and communicative competence.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative library research design grounded in a constructivist approach to explore the concept of value-oriented English textbooks and their integration of linguistic, cultural, and character education values. The constructivist paradigm views knowledge as socially constructed through interaction and interpretation, which aligns with the goal of understanding how English teaching materials can embody moral and contextual dimensions in learning.

The research focused on a conceptual analysis of existing literature related to English Language Teaching (ELT), material development, and value-based education. This design was chosen because the study aimed to synthesize theoretical and empirical insights rather than collect field data. The data sources consisted of 25 peer-reviewed scholarly publications drawn from reputable databases such as ERIC, Taylor & Francis, ResearchGate, and Sinta. These sources included journal articles, conference papers, and books published between 2020 and 2025 that discussed curriculum design, moral integration, and local content in ELT.

Data collection was conducted systematically through keyword-based searches using terms such as *value-oriented ELT materials*, *English textbook design*, *character*

education, local content, and Islamic education. Each document was reviewed carefully and annotated for recurring ideas, frameworks, and findings relevant to the study objectives. A document analysis checklist was used to categorize and code data, focusing on pedagogical design, moral integration, and cultural representation.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework of thematic analysis: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) identification of themes, (4) review of themes, (5) definition and naming of themes, and (6) production of the report. Through this process, key themes and relationships among the reviewed studies were identified and interpreted to form a conceptual model for designing value-oriented English materials.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents findings from the thematic analysis of 25 publications on English material design, character education, and Islamic pedagogy. Four major themes emerged: (1) the distinction between textbooks and materials in ELT, (2) the characteristics of value-oriented English materials, (3) challenges and opportunities in their development, and (4) pedagogical implications for English learning in Indonesian and Islamic contexts. Rather than viewing these themes in isolation, the discussion synthesizes how they interact to shape current practices and gaps in ELT material design.

1. Distinction Between Textbooks and Materials in ELT

The analysis confirms that textbooks and materials fulfill different but complementary pedagogical roles. Textbooks provide structure and continuity, while materials offer flexibility and contextual adaptability. This distinction is not merely conceptual; it has implications for how values and culture can be embedded into learning resources.

Table 1. Comparison between Textbooks and Materials in ELT

| Category | Textbooks | Materials |
|-------------------------|--|---|
| Definition | Commercially published and standardized learning resources | Any linguistic input or tool that aids learning (e.g., texts, videos, local stories, digital media) |
| Scope | Focused on structured lessons and language forms | Broader and flexible, adaptable to learner context and culture |
| Cultural Representation | Often globalized and Western-centered | Can integrate local, moral, and Islamic values |
| Teacher's Role | Textbook user or implementer | Material designer and innovator |
| Learning Outcome | Linguistic competence | Communicative, moral, and cultural competence |

This distinction is not merely terminological but reflects divergent educational orientations. As summarized in Table 1, textbooks are typically commercially published and global in scope, often privileging Western cultural representations and communicative norms. While such resources support linguistic competence and instructional efficiency, they tend to marginalize local identities and moral traditions. This finding aligns with Cunningsworth's (1995) observation that textbooks offer pedagogical stability but may constrain contextual adaptation. From a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), learning is mediated by culturally meaningful tools; therefore, materials that draw upon learners' lived experiences and moral frameworks function as more effective mediational artifacts than decontextualized global content.

The findings further indicate that materials play a critical role in enabling teachers to exercise pedagogical agency. Whereas textbook-centered instruction positions teachers primarily as implementers of externally designed curricula, value-oriented materials invite teachers to become curriculum co-constructors who actively adapt content to local, religious, and ethical realities. This shift resonates with Kumaravadivelu's (2006) postmethod pedagogy, which emphasizes teacher autonomy, contextual sensitivity, and principled pragmatism in instructional decision-making. Through locally grounded materials, teachers are better positioned to integrate Islamic values, indigenous cultural practices, and character education into communicative language activities.

Moreover, the functional differentiation between textbooks and materials reflects broader theoretical distinctions between *linguistic competence* and *communicative-cultural competence*. While textbooks predominantly target grammatical accuracy and standardized communicative functions, flexible materials facilitate the development of moral reasoning, cultural identity, and ethical awareness alongside language proficiency. This aligns with Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, which underscores attitudes, values, and critical cultural awareness as integral dimensions of language education.

In sum, the findings suggest that while textbooks remain indispensable for curricular coherence and instructional scaffolding, they are insufficient as the sole medium for value-oriented ELT. Materials, by contrast, serve as critical vehicles for embedding local culture, moral values, and Islamic perspectives into language learning. This complementary relationship underscores the need for a pedagogical reorientation in which textbooks provide structural foundations, while context-sensitive materials enact the transformative goals of character education within the Merdeka Belajar framework and the broader vision of holistic Islamic education.

2. Characteristics of Value-Oriented English Materials

The analysis of the literature identifies several recurring characteristics that support value-based English learning: contextual relevance, moral integration, authenticity, Islamic and ethical content, and learner-centered engagement.

Table 2. Characteristics of Value-Oriented English Materials

| Category | Subcategory | Example of Application |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| Contextual Relevance | Inclusion of local culture | Folklore, national figures, or community issues |
| Moral Integration | Embedding character values | Lessons emphasizing honesty, empathy, responsibility |
| Authenticity | Real-life communication contexts | Dialogues or tasks based on daily experiences |
| Islamic and Ethical Themes | Faith-based ideas | Texts illustrating <i>adl</i> (justice) or <i>rahmah</i> (compassion) |
| Learner-Centered Approach | Moral reasoning and reflection | Role plays or debates exploring ethical dilemmas |

The synthesis of the reviewed literature reveals that value-oriented English learning materials are characterized by five interrelated dimensions: contextual relevance, moral integration, authenticity, Islamic and ethical themes, and a learner-centered approach. These characteristics do not operate independently; rather, they form a pedagogical ecosystem that enables language learning to function simultaneously as a medium for moral, cultural, and identity formation.

First, contextual relevance, particularly through the inclusion of local culture, folklore, national figures, and community issues, aligns with sociocultural learning theory, which posits that meaning-making is mediated by culturally embedded experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). When learners encounter texts and tasks rooted in their lived realities, language input becomes more meaningful, cognitively accessible, and affectively engaging. This contextual grounding also supports Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, which emphasizes the role of attitudes, knowledge, and cultural awareness in language education. By incorporating local narratives and issues, materials foster not only linguistic competence but also cultural reflexivity and social responsibility.

Second, moral integration through explicit embedding of character values such as honesty, empathy, and responsibility reflects the principles of character education theory, which views schooling as a moral enterprise rather than a purely technical one (Lickona, 1991). In the context of English language teaching, this integration transforms language tasks into ethical encounters, where learners engage with values discursively rather than memorizing them normatively. This approach resonates with constructivist pedagogy, which conceptualizes moral development as emerging through reflection, dialogue, and experiential learning rather than direct indoctrination.

Third, authenticity, manifested in real-life communication contexts and experiential tasks, reinforces communicative language teaching principles (Richards, 2006) and task-based learning frameworks (Ellis, 2003). Authentic tasks enable learners to practice language as social action while simultaneously negotiating values embedded in everyday interactions. From a critical pedagogy perspective (Freire, 1970),

authenticity also implies that learning materials should address learners' actual social conditions, thereby positioning language education as a tool for empowerment and ethical agency.

Fourth, the presence of Islamic and ethical themes, such as texts illustrating '*adl* (justice) and *rahmah* (compassion), reflects the epistemological foundations of Islamic education, which integrates spiritual, moral, and intellectual development as inseparable dimensions of human growth (Al-Attas, 1980). In this framework, English is not merely a foreign linguistic code but a medium through which Islamic values can be articulated, negotiated, and contextualized within global communication. This integration challenges the dominance of secular-global textbook content and contributes to the decolonization of ELT by validating indigenous and religious knowledge systems.

Finally, the learner-centered approach, particularly through moral reasoning, reflection, and ethical debates, aligns with learner autonomy theory (Holec, 1981) and reflective pedagogy. Activities such as role plays and dilemma-based discussions encourage learners to construct moral meanings dialogically, fostering higher-order thinking and ethical sensitivity. This approach positions learners as moral agents rather than passive recipients of values, consistent with postmethod pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), which advocates contextualized, learner-responsive instruction.

Empirical studies by Putri and Fauzan (2024) and Safitri et al. (2023) corroborate that such integrative materials enhance student engagement and moral awareness. However, this review further demonstrates that the pedagogical effectiveness of value-oriented materials lies not in any single feature but in the synergistic interaction among contextual, moral, cultural, and communicative dimensions. This holistic configuration reflects an ecological view of curriculum design, where language learning, character education, and identity construction are mutually reinforcing processes.

3. Challenges and Opportunities

Although many scholars argue for culturally and morally enriched materials, the findings show persistent structural and pedagogical barriers. Teachers lack training in value-integrated material design (Usman et al., 2023), schools depend heavily on commercial publishers (Latif & Saeed, 2024), and balancing linguistic and faith-based content remains difficult (Rahman & Idris, 2024).

What is notable in the synthesis, however, is that these challenges are interconnected:

1. Limited teacher training reinforces reliance on imported textbooks.
2. Dependence on global publishers reduces the presence of local and Islamic values.
3. The absence of support systems makes value-based innovation difficult.
4. Yet, the analysis also highlights emerging opportunities digital platforms, OER, and the Merdeka Belajar curriculum.

The synthesis shows that the challenges in developing value-oriented English materials are interconnected and structural. Limited teacher training encourages continued reliance on imported textbooks, which are mostly produced by global publishers and focus on standardized international topics. As a result, local cultural values and Islamic perspectives remain underrepresented in English learning materials. In addition, the lack of institutional support systems makes it difficult for teachers to design or adapt materials that integrate moral and ethical content. These conditions reduce teacher autonomy and limit opportunities to implement context-sensitive and value-based English instruction.

Despite these challenges, several important opportunities are emerging. Digital platforms and Open Educational Resources (OER) provide access to flexible and locally adaptable materials, enabling teachers to share and co-create content that reflects students' cultural and moral realities. Moreover, the Merdeka Belajar curriculum supports contextual learning and character education, offering a policy framework for integrating moral, cultural, and spiritual values into English instruction. Together, these developments suggest that although structural barriers remain, the current educational context in Indonesia provides a promising foundation for strengthening value-oriented English learning materials through digital innovation, curriculum reform, and enhanced teacher development.

4. Pedagogical Implications

The synthesis of all themes shows that value-oriented English textbooks are not simply a pedagogical option they are a developmental necessity for holistic education. When teachers integrate linguistic, moral, and cultural objectives, English learning becomes a process of character cultivation, echoing Lickona's (1991) character education framework and Al-Attas's (2018) *ta'dib*.

The findings suggest three key implications:

1. Teachers as Reflective Curriculum Designers

Teachers should transition from passive textbook implementers to reflective curriculum designers who are capable of adapting materials to local contexts and integrating moral, cultural, and spiritual values into English instruction.

2. Integration of Ethical Goals into the Curriculum

Curriculum developers should embed ethical and character education objectives alongside linguistic goals through explicit guidelines, learning outcomes, and assessment criteria to ensure systematic implementation.

3. Holistic View of Communication

English learning should treat identity, culture, and morality as integral components of communication, aligning moral formation with communicative competence within a sociocultural framework of language education.

The findings of this study suggest several important implications for English language teaching, particularly in contexts that aim to integrate moral, cultural, and religious values into learning materials.

First, teachers should no longer be positioned merely as textbook users, but as reflective curriculum designers. They need to develop the ability to adapt learning content to students' cultural backgrounds and to integrate ethical and character values into language lessons. This implies that teacher training programs should include competencies in material development, contextualization, and value-based instruction, so that teachers can design or modify materials that are both linguistically meaningful and morally relevant.

Second, curriculum developers should explicitly embed ethical and character goals alongside linguistic objectives in English syllabi and textbooks. Moral education should not be treated as an implicit or supplementary element, but as an integral part of learning outcomes. Clear guidelines and concrete examples are needed to help teachers align communicative activities with values such as honesty, responsibility, empathy, and social awareness, particularly within the framework of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum.

Third, English learning should recognize that language, identity, culture, and morality are inseparable. Communicative competence is not only about grammatical accuracy or fluency, but also about how learners express values, negotiate meaning ethically, and engage respectfully in social interaction. This perspective supports a more holistic approach to English education, where language learning contributes to students' character formation and cultural identity development, in line with the broader vision of Islamic education and character-based schooling.

Conclusion

This study concludes that value-oriented English learning materials are crucial for aligning language education with Indonesia's moral, cultural, and spiritual aspirations. English should not be positioned solely as a tool for global communication but also as a medium for nurturing character, ethical reasoning, and cultural identity. The findings demonstrate that when textbooks and learning materials integrate local content, moral themes, and Islamic perspectives, students experience more holistic learning that fosters linguistic competence alongside ethical sensitivity and cultural awareness.

The study further highlights the need to reposition teachers from textbook implementers to reflective curriculum designers. Teachers who possess competencies in contextual adaptation and value integration can transform ELT materials into meaningful and culturally responsive learning experiences. At the same time, textbook writers and policymakers play a critical role in embedding values systematically into learning resources through narratives, tasks, and dialogues that reflect local realities and moral concerns. Clear policy guidelines, sustained professional development, and

institutional support are essential to ensure that character education, cultural identity, and communicative goals are coherently integrated, in line with the Merdeka Belajar philosophy.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary literature rather than classroom-based empirical evidence. Future research is therefore needed to examine how value-integrated materials function in diverse classroom contexts, including through classroom experiments, teacher training evaluations, and student perception studies. Further studies may also explore the role of digital platforms, AI-based tools, and community-based resources in supporting the large-scale production of culturally grounded ELT materials.

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