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ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN INDONESIA: NEGOTIATING TRANSMISSION AND TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

This study explores how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in Indonesia serves as a site of both cultural transmission and transformation. Using a qualitative design, it draws on document analysis of national curriculum policies and semi-structured interviews with EFL teachers, analyzed through a critical sociological lens. It examines how EFL teachers and policymakers navigate tensions between promoting global communicative competence and preserving national identity. The findings reveal that while EFL holds potential to foster critical thinking and intercultural dialogue, its transformative function is often constrained by moralistic and ideological imperatives embedded in curricular practices.

Keywords*: English Teachers, Cultural Values, Curriculum, , Qualitative Study, Recontextualisation*

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching embodies a complex intersection of global and local imperatives. As English continues to gain prominence as the dominant medium of international communication, its role in education has expanded beyond linguistic utility to encompass broader social and cultural implications. However, the way English is taught and situated within Indonesian schools remains deeply embedded in the nation's cultural, political, and moral frameworks (Fitria, 2025). EFL teachers, therefore, occupy a uniquely challenging position.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to examine how EFL teachers and policymakers in Indonesia navigate the dual imperatives of cultural transmission and transformation within national curriculum reforms. Specifically, it explores how teachers interpret their professional responsibilities in balancing the promotion of global communicative competence with the reinforcement of local moral and cultural values. The

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study investigates the extent to which EFL classrooms serve as spaces for critical thinking, ethical reflection, and intercultural dialogue—or instead, operate as mechanisms for reproducing dominant ideologies. In doing so, it highlights the tensions, possibilities, and limitations of EFL teaching as shaped by both policy expectations and sociocultural contexts. Despite policy aspirations for character education and global competence, little is known about how EFL teachers reconcile these competing imperatives in daily practice.

To frame this inquiry, it is essential to examine the broader sociological role of education as both a mechanism for preserving cultural continuity and a catalyst for social change. Broadly speaking, education plays both reproductive and transformative roles in society. It is shaped by cultural systems, including religion, politics, and social norms—while simultaneously being tasked with shaping them (Turiel, 2012). In countries like Indonesia, character education has been embedded into the curriculum as a response to moral and societal challenges such as corruption, intolerance, and youth delinquency (Qoyyimah, 2016). However, these reforms often emphasize moral preservation over critical engagement, revealing an underlying tension: should education, and by extension EFL, uphold traditional cultural values or act as a catalyst for change?

This dilemma is sharply felt in EFL classrooms. English inherently offers access to diverse worldviews, global discourses, and pluralistic values. Yet in practice, EFL teaching frequently emphasizes conformity with national moral narratives. As Siddiqui et al. (2025) observe, when English education prioritizes dominant local norms over intercultural dialogue or critical thinking, it becomes a vehicle for reproducing culture rather than transforming it.

Understanding this tension requires a look at how education is framed theoretically. Gilmore (2004) defines culture as a society's way of life and thought, encompassing language, values, and collective memory. Education, therefore, functions as a tool for both maintaining and negotiating cultural meanings. Bernstein (1990) refers to this as "symbolic control," where curriculum and pedagogy define what knowledge is considered legitimate and who is authorized to produce it. This process is never neutral. Instead, it reflects and reinforces prevailing ideologies and power structures (Tendo, 2021)

Sociological theorists have long highlighted education's role in cultural reproduction. Durkheim (1961) saw moral education as essential to societal cohesion.

However, Bourdieu & Passeron (1990) demonstrated that schooling often legitimizes the cultural capital of dominant groups, transforming inherited privilege into academic achievement. This critique helps explain the limited transformative potential of EFL in many Indonesian classrooms. While English could be used to introduce alternative perspectives, develop ethical reasoning, and engage students in critical inquiry, it is often reduced to grammar instruction or a vehicle for transmitting acceptable moral values. Values such as honesty, discipline, and respect—though important—can be narrowly framed in ways that discourage questioning and suppress engagement with complex or controversial global issues.

Empirical studies underscore the enduring impact of structural inequalities on educational outcomes. Stahl & Mu (2024) found that academic success is still closely tied to socioeconomic status. Classroom norms tend to reflect middle-class expectations, marginalizing those from different backgrounds. In EFL contexts, this can manifest in the privileging of Western or urban linguistic models and behaviors, subtly alienating rural or marginalized students and reinforcing class-based divides.

Yet education also carries a deeply emancipatory potential. Freire (1970) famously critiqued the "banking model" of education and proposed a dialogic pedagogy that cultivates critical consciousness. Likewise, Gadamer (1975) framed learning as a hermeneutic process of self-formation through encountering the other. These ideas are particularly relevant to EFL teaching, which inherently involves engaging with foreignness, difference, and new ways of understanding.

Recent empirical research validates these philosophical insights. Fakazlı (2021) and (Panthi (2023) show that Freirean approaches in multilingual classrooms enhance empathy and intercultural understanding. Meşeci Giorgetti et al. (2017) argue that participatory pedagogy revitalizes civic culture, while Lundell (2025) demonstrates that critical pedagogies in EFL settings enable students to challenge neoliberal assumptions and imagine alternative futures.

However, as Foucault (1977) cautions, schools are deeply embedded in disciplinary systems that normalize surveillance, ranking, and conformity. Even well-intentioned reforms can be co-opted by institutional logics that stifle dissent. In the digital age, educational technologies and AI pose new threats. Nyaaba et al. (2024) argue that despite

promising access and innovation, AI tools often reproduce Western epistemologies and marginalize local knowledge systems. Roe & Perkins (2024) further emphasize how global inequalities are replicated through algorithmic control.

For EFL teaching in Indonesia, these critiques are highly relevant. English education is often aligned with Anglo-American norms, from textbooks to assessment rubrics, shaping students' understanding of what counts as "proper" language and knowledge. Teachers—often trained within national ideological frameworks—may hesitate to introduce controversial global themes or foster open-ended discussions. The result is that EFL classrooms can mirror broader patterns of symbolic control rather than serve as spaces of genuine inquiry.

Gowda (2015) warns that when education is reduced to preservation, it becomes complicit in cultural stagnation. To resist this, EFL must become a site for moral imagination, the ability to empathize across difference and to question inherited assumptions. This includes nurturing critical dispositions such as curiosity, intellectual humility, and openness to otherness.

Such a shift requires more than curricular reform; it calls for a rethinking of pedagogy itself. EFL teachers need to be empowered not merely as language instructors but as facilitators of ethical dialogue, intercultural understanding, and critical inquiry. As Dewey (1916) argued, education must preserve valuable traditions while renewing them through reflective, participatory learning. Similarly, Gadamer (1975) conceptualised education as a dialogical and hermeneutic process, rooted in tradition but continually reinterpreted through engagement with others.

Despite growing interest in the cultural dimensions of EFL education, there remains a significant gap in understanding how teachers mediate between transmitting local cultural values and promoting global communicative competence. This gap is especially evident in contexts like Indonesia, where EFL teaching is shaped by both moral imperatives and international language standards.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study explores how the tension between conservative cultural reproduction and progressive cultural transformation is manifested within the nation's curriculum

recontextualisation processes. The research traces educational policy developments from the early 2000s onward, a period marked by recurrent curricular reforms and ideological negotiation. Because education is an inherently political institution, one through which diverse agents seek to impose their values upon society, the central question guiding this inquiry concerns whether Indonesian education functions primarily as a means of transmitting culture or transforming it.

The research adopts a qualitative design, drawing upon semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The primary documents include Indonesia's Education Acts, curricular policy guidelines, and teachers' lesson plans. Interviews and observations were conducted to explore how EFL teachers recontextualise official policies in classroom practice. The participants consisted of six senior EFL teachers from public secondary schools in East Java, selected for their experience in implementing national curriculum reforms. Each teacher participated in two interviews—conducted before and after the observation sessions—with each interview lasting approximately one hour. In addition, three classroom observations were conducted for each teacher in their regular teaching settings, allowing for a situated understanding of pedagogical practices. Data were thematically analysed. Data were thematically analysed with reference to existing literature on curriculum recontextualisation, educational values, teachers' belief systems, and policy enactment frameworks (Bernstein, 1990; Ball et al., 2011). The coding process began with open coding of interview transcripts and observation notes, followed by axial coding to identify patterns and thematic relationships. Themes were refined through iterative comparison across data sources. To enhance trustworthiness, member checks were employed, and coding decisions were discussed with peer reviewers familiar with the research context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding

Dual Curriculum Goals: National vs. Universal Values

Analysis of Indonesian education policy documents, such as the 2013 Character Education Policy and the National Education System Act, reveals a dual moral agenda. Teachers are expected to embed both national values (e.g., patriotism, nationalism,

religiosity) and universal values (e.g., honesty, independence, respect) into lesson plans. Table 1 outlines the mandated character values from the Ministry of Education (Kemendiknas, 2011).

Table 1. Outlines The Mandated Character Values From The Ministry Of Education

Number	Values to Insert in Lesson Plan
1	Religiosity
2	Honesty
3	Tolerance
4	Discipline
5	Hardworking
6	Creativeness
7	Independence
8	Democratic
9	Motivation to learn
10	Patriotism
11	Nationalism
12	Supportive
13	Love to read
14	Peace-maker
15	Friendliness
16	Environmental awareness
17	Social awareness
18	Responsibility

Source of data: Indonesian Ministry of Education (Kemendiknas, 2011)

This dual value system exemplifies what Durkheim (1961) described as the moral evolution of human solidarity, from the intimacy of the family, through the collective consciousness of the nation, to the ethical universality of humanity. These spheres, he argued, are not discrete but cumulative: "phases of one's moral evolution, stages that prepare for and build upon one another" (p. 74). Within this framework, Indonesia's character education policy can be read as an effort to reconcile moral particularism with universal humanism; nurturing civic identity grounded in national heritage while simultaneously cultivating moral sensibilities attuned to the global community. It aspires, in other words, to educate citizens who are both locally rooted and cosmopolitan in outlook.

The second document to analyse is the *Act of the Republic Indonesia on National Education System.* Beyond national and universal values, religion occupies a profoundly influential position in Indonesia's educational philosophy. Far from being an auxiliary component, it forms one of the principal moral foundations upon which the entire system

rests. The centrality of religion is explicitly articulated in the *Act of the Republic of Indonesia on the National Education System*, issued by the Ministry of National Education:

> *National Education functions to develop the capability, character, and civilization of the nation for enhancing its intellectual capacity, and is aimed at developing learners' potentials so that they become faithful and pious to one and only God; who possess morals and noble character; who are healthy, knowledgeable, competent, creative, independent; and as citizens, are democratic and responsible (Act of the Republic Indonesia on National Education System)*

This passage makes clear that *religiosity* is not treated as a private matter of faith but as a public virtue and an official goal of education. The integration of "faithful and pious to the one and only God" into the national education mandate signals that moral and intellectual development are conceived as inseparable. To be "educated" in the Indonesian context, therefore, entails not merely the acquisition of knowledge or civic competence, but the cultivation of spiritual consciousness. In this sense, religion becomes both the moral compass and the legitimating framework for educational aims.

EFL Teachers as Value Transmitters

The data analysis suggests that EFL teachers in this study often act as agents of cultural transmission, foregrounding values that are embedded in the moral codes of the local and national context, particularly honesty, respect, and religiosity. This inclination is especially evident in teachers' attempts to address real-life moral concerns that they see as relevant to Indonesian society today.

Dodik, for instance, connects value education to the nation's socio-political condition:

> *"I notice our nation suffers from transgressions done by our leaders. I think there must be something wrong with our education. I tend to stress 'honesty' also 'respect' as I notice corruption cases and a lot of internal conflicts around our societies."* (Dodik)

This statement reflects a clear use of value transmission to correct perceived moral decay in society. Rather than treating English merely as a vehicle for linguistic competence or global outlook, Dodik integrates moral instruction into his teaching, responding to local challenges such as corruption and disunity.

Similarly, Edi's approach underscores the strong influence of religious belief and familial piety:

> *"I want to remind them about how deep their mother's love is. As Muslims, we believe that surga di telapak kaki ibu (heaven is under your mother's feet). We have to revere our parents. I want them to bear this in mind."* (Edi)

Edi's selection of values reflects religious-cultural continuity, drawing directly from Islamic teachings and traditional familial ethics. His message, while emotionally resonant, is aimed at reinforcing hierarchical moral orders rather than fostering critical engagement with diverse values. This approach aligns with the transmission model of moral education, where teachers act as custodians of inherited belief systems.

While English as a subject may formally embody global or transformative aspirations (see Siddiqui et al. (2025), teachers participants' pedagogical enactment frequently supports the continuation of dominant cultural and religious norms. The introduction of moral values is also evident in teachers observed classes. Rather than disrupting the status quo or promoting cosmopolitan competencies, ELT in these cases is adapted to affirm values that are already entrenched in the sociocultural fabric of Indonesian society.

The prominence of religiosity was reinforced by the majority of teacher participants in this study, particularly evident in teacher participants' pedagogical orientation. When they asked to confirm this practice in their observed classes, they stated:

> *"…we can use any occasion to teach religious values. I think teaching those values in classes is more effective than when we have to just write the values in our lesson plan."(Budianti)*
>
> *"...I might teach everything, including giving such reprimands for them to perform prayers. Hence, I could teach many things, not only English."(Gita)*
>
> *"I personally, and it is commonly believed that students' strong faith will inevitably guide whatever students do. With iman yang kuat (strong faith), their attitude must be good and honest. …" (Dodik)*

The excerpts reveal a clear disjunction between formal curricular documentation and actual classroom practice, highlighting a form of teacher agency in moral instruction. Although religious values were not formally listed in her lesson plan, as required by the national character education policy, Budianti's intentional integration of those values in her teaching indicates that her personal moral framework serves as a guiding force in curriculum enactment.

Rather than positioning the lesson plan as a definitive script, Budianti views the classroom as a moral space open to spontaneous value transmission, particularly in relation to religious teachings. Her statement also underscores a broader cultural assumption: that religious values are implicitly embedded in all educational content, and thus need not be constrained by the formal curriculum. This reflects what Bernstein (1990) might describe as

the dominance of the *local pedagogic recontextualisation field,* where teachers' socio-religious identities influence their interpretation of national policy.

Discussion

An examination of the 2003 Educational Act reveals that national, universal, and religious values collectively shape the moral foundation of Indonesia's education system. Although these three categories are presented as equal within the formal policy framework, their implementation in schools reveals a practical hierarchy in which religious values often overshadow civic and universal ideals. This hierarchy becomes especially visible in the pedagogic field, where teachers mediate curriculum goals through personal moral beliefs. Rather than functioning as neutral agents of policy, teachers act as cultural filters who recontextualise national educational aims in line with their own convictions and local norms (Ball et al., 2011). As a result, a curriculum originally designed to foster pluralism and inclusive moral development often serves to reinforce dominant religious worldviews.

Teachers' lesson plans demonstrate a clear understanding of the requirements outlined in Indonesia's Character Education Policy, including the mandate to select and integrate three or four values from a list of eighteen national and universal character traits. In English language classrooms, these selected values initially reflect abstract or globally relevant principles such as honesty, creativity, and independence—values aligned with the policy's goal of cultivating global citizenship (Qoyyimah, 2016). However, classroom observations and teacher interviews reveal a significant gap between the planned and enacted curriculum. Despite listing universal values in planning documents, many teachers emphasise religious norms during instruction, privileging them over broader civic or intercultural perspectives.

This tension is not unique to Indonesia. Several Asian nations, such as Malaysia, India, and Pakistan, face similar challenges. Religion, while serving as a unifying principle of national identity, also complicates efforts to engage with global modernity and multiculturalism. In these contexts, the curriculum becomes a site of negotiation between faith and reason, tradition and modernity, and national belonging and international participation. Indonesia's case thus exemplifies a broader regional dilemma: how to harmonize spiritual conviction with the intellectual openness required by global citizenship (see also Siddiqui et al. (2025).

The findings of this study affirm that education in Indonesia serves both to reproduce dominant cultural values and, potentially, to transform them. At the policy level, educational reform efforts attempt to incorporate a balance between conservative religious interests and more progressive, universalist goals, drawing on expert input from scholars and research institutions (Fearnley-Sander & Yulaelawati, 2008). However, these idealised goals often become diluted or redirected in practice. In the classroom, teachers interpret and implement curricular aims based on their own religious beliefs and the expectations of their communities. This process reflects what Jeffers (2011) and Macdonald (2003) describe as the inherently political nature of curriculum. Educational reform does not take place in a vacuum but within ongoing cultural negotiations.

Participants' comment illustrates how religious beliefs not only shape pedagogical priorities but also influence how official policy is enacted in daily classroom practice. The findings are consistent with broader patterns of religious conservatism among teachers in Indonesia. The PPIM study conducted by Hasan (2009), which surveyed 500 teachers from both public and private schools across Java, found that many teachers resist pluralism and express a strong preference for conservative religious interpretations. Although that study did not focus specifically on English language teachers, my research suggests that a similar pattern exists within EFL contexts. Rather than facilitating intercultural understanding or promoting global perspectives, English language teaching often becomes another avenue for reinforcing religious norms and values.

To interpret this phenomenon, Bernstein's (1990) concept of recontextualisation provides a useful theoretical lens. Curriculum policy is not merely implemented by teachers but is actively reshaped by them through moral, cultural, and emotional filters. As Ball et al. (2011) argue, the enactment of policy involves translation rather than replication. In Indonesia, this translation frequently leads to a narrowing of curriculum aims, transforming pluralistic ideals into more singular religious narratives.

Philosophically, this points to a fundamental tension in moral education: the tension between formation and reflection. When moral instruction becomes merely transmissive, anchored in fixed religious doctrine, it risks curbing the development of students' critical and dialogical capacities. On the other hand, a purely secular or relativistic approach may lack the coherence needed to foster shared values. The challenge, then, is to reposition

religiosity within a broader, reflective moral framework—one that invites both faith and inquiry to coexist (Turiel, 2012).

In sum, the Indonesian classroom emerges as a microcosm of broader cultural negotiations between modernity and tradition, reason and belief, authority and autonomy. Teachers are not simply conveyors of state policy but moral agents who shape the everyday moral experience of students. They stand at the crossroads of cultural preservation and transformation, making decisions that determine whether education functions as a mirror of inherited values or as a catalyst for social change.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in Indonesia is shaped by a complex interplay between cultural transmission and transformation. While national curriculum policies promote a balance of universal, national, and religious values, classroom practices often lean toward the reinforcement of dominant moral and religious norms. Teachers act as powerful recontextualisation agents, frequently prioritising religious instruction over critical, civic, or intercultural learning—even when official lesson plans include more global or pluralistic aims. This disjunction reveals a persistent gap between policy aspirations and pedagogical realities.

By focusing on how EFL teachers navigate curriculum reforms, this research contributes to critical discussions on language education and moral pedagogy in culturally complex societies. It highlights the need for policies that are not only inclusive in intent but also executable in practice. For EFL to fulfill its transformative potential, reforms must support teacher agency, encourage dialogic pedagogy, and foster classroom cultures that value critical inquiry and ethical reflection. Indonesian EFL classrooms, if reimagined with these priorities, can become spaces where tradition is not only preserved but critically engaged for a more pluralistic and reflective future.

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