Revisiting Curriculum in English Language Teaching: Conceptual Distinctions, Dynamics, and Indonesian Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an understanding of the concept of curriculum in English Language Teaching (ELT) by distinguishing it from syllabus and learning materials within the Indonesian context. The method employed a qualitative and descriptive analytical approach to synthesize key theories and national policies, explaining the curriculum as a product, process, and praxis. The findings showed the curriculum is positioned as a macro policy framework for educational philosophy, intended learning outcomes, content selection, methodology, and assessment. The syllabus translates the curriculum into structured learning sequences and teachable units. Meanwhile, the learning materials are put into practice in the classroom. Therefore, this study highlights the hierarchical and foundational relationships among these three terms by emphasizing their collaborative role to support communicative competence, intercultural awareness, and 21st-century skills. In short, the study provides a conceptualization for promoting autonomy, contextual relevance, and innovation in Indonesia's ELT practice.

Keywords: Curriculum, ELT, Syllabus, Learning Materials

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum becomes a central element of educational theory and practice. The curriculum guides alignment of learning goals, content, and assessment to achieve meaningful outcomes. In English Language Teaching (ELT), curriculum development plays a pivotal role in shaping communicative competence, intercultural awareness, and learner autonomy (Richards, 2017; Ismail et al., 2023). However, confusion often arises between curriculum, syllabus, and learning materials. These three terms are sometimes used interchangeably in research, policy, and classroom preparation. Furthermore, this conceptual ambiguity can result in fragmented instruction, misaligned objectives, and inconsistent learning experiences across educational institutions.

Several studies in the Indonesian context, particularly the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum, have brought renewed attention to the distinction among these constructs (Hanifa, 2024; Renandya, 2024; Wijayanto et al., 2025). The reform reflects teacher autonomy and contextual flexibility. It requires educators to interpret and adapt curriculum frameworks while maintaining coherence with national standards and guidelines. Yet, this flexibility also increases the demand for conceptual clarity. Teachers and curriculum developers must understand how the curriculum operates as a policy framework, how the syllabus translates it into teachable units, and how materials actualize it in practice. Misunderstanding these relationships may lead to gaps between policy expectations and classroom realities. It resulted in the weaknesses of the overall effectiveness of English instruction.

Accordingly, this paper aims to identify what distinguishes the curriculum in ELT from the syllabus and learning programmes, and the reasons why this distinction matters. Therefore, this paper seeks to analyze the three components of conceptual foundations, functional relationships, and pedagogical implications in modern ELT, particularly within the Indonesian context. By doing so, the chapter aims to strengthen theoretical understanding and support coherent curriculum design that connects educational vision, teaching practice, and learner experience.

METHODS

The paper employs a qualitative approach to explore the nature of curriculum in English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Indonesian context. This paper synthesizes theoretical perspectives, policy documents, and scholarly discussions to construct a comprehensive understanding of conceptualized, developed, and implemented curriculum in language education. The method used in this chapter can be categorized as a conceptual analysis combined with a documentary review. Conceptual analysis is applied to interpret and interrelate key theoretical ideas about curriculum, drawing on classical and contemporary frameworks such as those proposed by Tyler (1949), Stenhouse (1975), and Richards (2001, 2017). This enables the chapter to critically examine the curriculum as a product, process, and praxis, and to discuss its philosophy within the ELT domain.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Curriculum in Language Education

The concept of curriculum in language education has evolved in response to changes in educational philosophy, linguistics, and social context. In the early to mid-twentieth century, curriculum design was predominantly influenced by structuralist linguistics and behaviorist psychology. During this period, the curriculum was viewed as a blueprint for instruction, outlining a fixed plan that specified the knowledge and linguistic structures students were expected to master. This perspective reflected a product-oriented approach, where learning outcomes were predetermined and measurable, often focusing on linguistic accuracy and mastery of forms (Tyler, 1949).

The Nature of Curriculum in English Language Teaching (ELT)

The term curriculum has been defined in various ways. It depends on philosophical orientation, educational purpose, and disciplinary focus. Traditionally, the term "curriculum" referred to a course of study or a prescribed instructional plan. In Indonesia, the term curriculum is defined in national education regulations as a set of plans and arrangements

regarding objectives, content, learning materials, and methods. These definitions are used to guide the implementation of learning activities aimed at achieving specific educational goals (Permendikbud No. 20, 2016). This definition mirrors international conceptions that view curriculum as both a design and a process of organizing educational experiences (Richards, 2017). However, in modern academic discourse, curriculum extends far beyond a list of topics or materials, which represents the total learning experience that an institution intentionally organizes for its learners.

According to Richards (2001), curriculum in language teaching involves the processes by which teaching content is determined, implemented, and evaluated within an educational system. Brown (1995) defines curriculum as "a framework within which teachers and learners operate to achieve desired educational outcomes". To broaden the view, Nunan (1988) describes curriculum as encompassing all the decisions about a language program's content, learning experiences, teaching methods, and assessment (Lander, 1995). Thus, Indonesia's curriculum embodies a philosophical and sociopolitical framework through which education seeks to cultivate competent, ethical, and globally aware citizens. Indonesian ELT curricula, such as the *Kurikulum Berbasis Kompetensi (KBK 2004)*, *Kurikulum 2013 (K-13)*, and the most recent *Kurikulum Merdeka,* sought to integrate linguistic, communicative, and character-based objectives (Abdullah & Akilah, 2020; Nababan, 2024; Tohamba & Ansyar, 2025). In line with the shifts in Indonesia's curriculum, Graves (2008) theorized that curriculum reflects a system's values, beliefs, and understanding of effective teaching and learning.

These definitions reveal that curriculum is not merely a document or a syllabus but a comprehensive plan and process that links goals, content, methodology, and assessment to achieve meaningful learning outcomes. In ELT practice, the curriculum serves as a guiding structure that translates language learning theory into classroom practice, ensuring coherence between educational aims, learner needs, and societal expectations.

Curriculum as Process, Product, and Praxis

The multidimensional nature of curriculum has been conceptualized in various ways, among which Stenhouse's (1975) framework remains foundational. Stenhouse (1975) distinguished three significant curriculum views: product, process, and praxis. Indonesia's curriculum reforms also reflect the evolving understanding of curriculum as product, process, and praxis.

1. Curriculum as Product

This view treats the curriculum as a set of objectives and outcomes to be achieved, often associated with technical models of curriculum design, where success is measured by how well learners meet predetermined goals (Grewal et. al., 2024). In Indonesia's earlier curriculum systems, particularly before 2004, curriculum design was highly centralized and prescriptive. It followed the curriculum model as a product, where national authorities predetermined objectives, content, and assessment standards. However, this rigid approach often limited teachers' creativity and learners' engagement, as it prioritized measurable results over communicative or contextual learning.

2. Curriculum as Process

In contrast, the process view focuses on what happens in the classroom, including interactions, decisions, and experiences that shape the learning process. Here, the teacher's role is not to transmit knowledge but to mediate learning through meaningful activities (Graves & Garton, 2017). The Kurikulum 2013 introduced elements that reflected the curriculum as a process. Integrating the scientific approach (observing, questioning, experimenting, associating, and communicating) leads to learning as an ongoing interaction between teacher, learner, and content. Teachers were encouraged to facilitate learning rather than dictate it, allowing the curriculum to unfold dynamically through classroom experiences. The process view acknowledges that curriculum cannot be fully pre-planned; it emerges dynamically through the process of teaching and learning (Stenhouse, 1975).

3. Curriculum as Praxis

The praxis perspective extends beyond product and

process by linking curriculum to ethical and social action. Curriculum as praxis involves reflection, critical inquiry, and the pursuit of social justice (Grundy, 1987; Micalay-Hurtado & Poole, 2022). The latest Merdeka Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) embodies the curriculum as praxis, frames teacher autonomy, contextual relevance, and reflective pedagogy. In other words, schools are granted flexibility to design learning experiences that respond to local cultures and learners' needs.

Viewing curriculum as product, process, and praxis highlights its complexity and fluidity. In practice, it is simultaneously a plan, an experience, and a form of reflective practice. As Richards (2001) notes, effective curriculum development in ELT requires striking a balance among these dimensions. In brief, this view combines structure and flexibility, planning and reflection, policy and practice.

Curriculum as a Dynamic System

In contemporary ELT, the curriculum is understood as a dynamic and adaptive system rather than a static product. It constantly evolves in response to changes in linguistic theory, educational research, learner diversity, and sociopolitical influences. Rather than a one-time design effort, curriculum development must be seen as a cyclical process involving ongoing evaluation and revision (Richards, 2017)

The dynamic nature of the ELT curriculum reflects the reality that language learning contexts are diverse, from formal school settings to global workplace communication. The current *Merdeka Curriculum* exemplifies this shift by granting schools greater autonomy to design contextual learning experiences suited to their local environment while aligning with national standards. This adaptability ensures the curriculum remains relevant and functional across different levels and settings.

Curriculum as a Sociocultural and Educational Construct

The curriculum is also a sociocultural construct, a product of cultural values, educational ideologies, and institutional goals. It appears that curriculum reflects what society deems necessary to learn and whose voices, identities,

and knowledge systems are prioritized (Apple, 1993; Marstaller & Amoakoh, 2023; Pennycook, 2001). Indonesia reflects its curriculum as a sociocultural and ideological construct that reflects the nation's educational philosophy and identity. In ELT, the curriculum is never neutral. The global dominance of English shapes the political economy of education and the cultural ideologies embedded in teaching materials. The ELT curriculum plays a dual role in multilingual societies: promoting access to global communication while preserving local linguistic and cultural identities (Graves, 2008).

Learner-Centeredness and Competence Development in Modern ELT Curriculum

Modern ELT places learners at the center of curriculum design. This learner-centered approach is grounded in constructivist and humanistic theories, which view learners as active participants who shape their own learning experiences (Nunan, 1988; Saleem et al., 2021; Thuy, 2025).

A learner-centered curriculum used in ELT positions learners as active participants who construct knowledge through engagement, collaboration, and reflection rather than passive recipients of information. The teacher becomes a facilitator and monitor in the classroom. Here, the learner-centered center becomes a curricular principle to integrate. The purpose is to create a comprehensive curriculum that prepares learners to communicate meaningfully, think critically, and participate actively in multilingual and multicultural environments.

Key Components of the ELT Curriculum

The English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum comprises interrelated components. It highlights how language learning goals are conceptualized, organized, taught, and evaluated. It encompasses objectives, learning experiences, teaching processes, and evaluation (Richards, 2001). The components are the philosophy of teaching, intended outcomes, content selection, methodology, and assessment strategies (Richards, 2017). They ensure that the curriculum is

not an abstract framework, but a coherent action plan that links theory to practice and aligns instructional efforts with educational goals (Richards, 2001).

Philosophy of Teaching

Within English Language Teaching (ELT), the teaching philosophy underpins educators' fundamental beliefs regarding the nature of language, the process of language acquisition, and the respective roles of teachers and students in this dynamic process. These philosophical stances, often derived from broader educational philosophies or psychological theories, are adapted into specific language teaching approaches.

Historically, ELT has been shaped by several key philosophies. Constructivism emphasizes shifting the focus towards learners actively building their understanding of language. This philosophy is revealed through authentic experiences and social interactions, where language is used to communicate and facilitate the social construction of meaning (Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, this philosophy underpins methods such as Task-Based Language Teaching (Willis & Willis, 2013) and modern Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in its practical applications.

Humanism emphasized the critical role of learners' emotional, social, and psychological needs, asserting that effective language learning occurs in a safe and positive environment where language serves as a means of self-expression (Krashen, 1985). Finally, functionalism, also heavily influenced by sociolinguistics, emphasizes that language is a social tool used to perform specific communicative functions in real-world contexts (Halliday, 1978). This perspective sees language instruction as equipping learners to use language for concrete social purposes, as exemplified by CLT (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Modern ELT adopts an eclectic approach, strategically integrating principles from Constructivism, Humanism, Functionalism, and Sociocultural theory. This synthesis promotes communicative competence, deep learning, and critical thinking, centered on the learner and the practical

application of language.

Intended Outcome

In English Language Teaching (ELT), intended outcomes precisely define the knowledge, skills, and attitudes learners are expected to acquire upon completing a given lesson, course, or program. Key intended outcomes in ELT typically encompass several interconnected dimensions. A paramount among these is Language Proficiency, which entails mastering core macro linguistic skills and developing comprehensive vocabulary, accurate grammar, and intelligible pronunciation crucial for real-world communication (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). In line with this, ELT aims for significant Cognitive and Affective Development to enhance higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis, evaluation, and creation, often facilitated through tasks (Bloom et al., 1964). Additionally, the development of Intercultural Competence is a critical outcome that moves beyond linguistic accuracy to equip learners with essential 21st-century skills, enabling them to navigate and utilize English effectively in diverse global and local contexts while appreciating varied cultural perspectives (Byram, 1997).

Content Selection

Content selection in English Language Teaching (ELT) involves the careful process of determining the specific linguistic items (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation), thematic topics, requisite skills, and relevant cultural information to be integrated into a language course or curriculum (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Rather than being an arbitrary process, this selection is typically guided by various theoretical considerations, pedagogical principles, and practical factors (Nunan, 1988). This includes Linguistic Content such as grammatical structures (e.g., tenses, conditional forms), essential vocabulary, and pronunciation features (e.g., specific sounds, stress patterns, and intonation) (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996).

Methodology

In contemporary English Language Teaching (ELT), an eclectic methodological approach is generally favored. This methodology is used as a guidance style of learning and teaching. For communicative competence, several methodologies commonly used include the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. This approach remains a foundational methodology globally, focusing on developing learners' communicative competence to use English effectively and appropriately in real-life contexts (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The manifestation of this approach can be achieved through student interaction, the use of authentic materials, and a focus on meaning-making; furthermore, it is also informed by the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach. Learning occurs most effectively when students complete meaningful tasks requiring the target language to achieve a specific outcome (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2013). Lastly, the Genre-Based Approach (GBA) is used to teach students to master particular text types (genres) by understanding their social purpose, schematic structure, and characteristic linguistic features (Feez, 1999).

Assessment Strategies

Assessment strategies in English Language Teaching (ELT) are generally categorized by the scope of what they measure (discrete linguistic items versus integrated skills) and the timing of their occurrence (formative versus summative evaluation). This categorization provides a framework for understanding diverse approaches to evaluating language proficiency and learning progress.

The Relationship Between Curriculum, Syllabus, and Learning Materials

Understanding the relationship between the curriculum, syllabus, and learning materials is fundamental for building coherent English Language Teaching (ELT) practices, as these concepts are interconnected within the general framework and are applied in explicit classroom practices. The relationship is distinguished from the macro, meso, and micro levels. At the

macro level, the curriculum determines why the subject is taught and what broader communicative capacities learners should achieve over time. At the meso level, the syllabus translates these curriculum outlines into pedagogical plans for one subject, determining what to teach and how to organize it. In the Indonesian context nowadays, the syllabus is in the form of a course plan emphasizing the more specific goal regarding the topic or materials in each meeting, time allocation, suggested activities, and assessment system of the ATP (*Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran*). At the micro level, in classroom implementation, learning materials are the concrete realization of the curriculum and syllabus, encompassing lesson plans, teaching modules, textbooks, digital media, and classroom tasks that support teaching and learning. The teaching and learning practice can be flexible to suit the classroom conditions and learners' needs.

The syllabus role is a bridge between policy (macro) and practice (micro). The syllabus has developed from a structural to a notional-functional and task-based model in the EFL context. Nowadays, it has prioritized meanings and communicative functions for the outcomes (Ratri et al., 2025). It integrated macro-skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Therefore, the syllabus serves as a guide for planning courses and materials within a broader system of rules in the academic environment (Gauthier, 2025). The syllabus is a content statement that provides systematic selection and sequencing of linguistic and skill-based content, offering an overview of classroom learning activities, assessments, and other relevant details, while emphasizing communication throughout the learning process.

According to the practice, learning materials are the operational manifestation of a syllabus in practice, with concrete realization. The materials presented through lesson plans, units of work, modules, and textbooks scaffold meaningful communication with practical, authentic, and multimodal resources (Hanifa et al., 2024). However, the materials are not only textbooks or preparatory texts, but can also encompass all resources that facilitate language learning. In accordance, the teacher adapts the materials to align with learners' needs and contextual realities for instruction,

curriculum demand, and professional agency (Garay Abad & Hattie, 2025). In the classroom, learning materials consist of several components: explicit instruction of objectives and activities, as well as providing input resources that expose students to various types of language input, such as texts, audio, and video. Alongside this, teachers conclude the learning activities to practice communication and emphasize the assessment and feedback mechanism.

The relationship between curriculum, syllabus, and learning materials forms a hierarchy, progressing from policy to practice. The curriculum provides the general framework in blueprint education; the syllabus transforms it into teachable units, and learning materials bring those units to life in classroom implementation. This alignment reflects the principle of constructive coherence among objectives, instruction, and assessment regarding the learning goal, which supports communicative competence and contextual relevance in ELT.

In the Indonesian context, this alignment is utilized in the Merdeka Curriculum, which is currently being implemented. Teachers are given greater autonomy to design local syllabi and adapt materials using local features and contextualization. Adapting global materials to local contexts enhances engagement and cultural relevance for the learners (Hanifa et al., 2024; Ratri et al., 2025). Consequently, the relationship among curriculum, syllabus, and learning materials must be viewed as dynamic and context-sensitive rather than linear or prescriptive. The relationship of these terms enables the consistency, relevance, and quality in English language education.

The Distinction Matter
The Function of Curriculum

The curriculum in ELT serves as the foundational structure for the entire educational process, extending beyond a simple list of topics to function as a comprehensive master plan. As a blueprint for instruction, its primary role is to ensure that all teaching activities are precisely aligned with broader educational objectives, defining the necessary language skills

(e.g., listening, speaking), components (e.g., grammar, vocabulary), and communicative functions. It dictates content selection, sequencing, and pacing, often promoting specific pedagogical approaches, such as CLT or TBLT, to achieve these goals.

Richards (2017) and Norton & Buchanan (2022) describe the curriculum as policy-driven. This curriculum shapes the overall philosophy, structure, and standards of English education. Within the ELT context, its function is to promote vertical coherence (continuity of skill development across grades). Moreover, it also supports horizontal coherence with integration with other subject areas and real-world competencies to foster academic language proficiency. This prevents fragmented teaching and ensures the learner's experience is cumulative and well-integrated. In the *Kurikulum 2013* and *Merdeka Curriculum*, the role of the teacher shifts from being the sole transmitter of knowledge to becoming a facilitator and designer of learning experiences (Kemdikbudristek, 2022). The curriculum emphasizes learner engagement, critical thinking, and the use of authentic communication tasks that reflect real-life language use. Furthermore, the curriculum specifies communicative, cognitive, and intercultural goals to ensure that language learning extends beyond grammar mastery, encompassing critical thinking and global citizenship.

The curriculum establishes constructive alignment through the principle of Outcome-Based Education (OBE). It mandates that all teaching, learning, and assessment activities focus on achieving measurable communicative competencies, shifting the focus from what the teacher covers to what the learner can do (Biggs & Tang, 2014). In this view, the curriculum is not static but a living guide that continuously connects educational objectives with learning evidence. When alignment is weak, students may pass tests yet fail to achieve communicative competence; when alignment is strong, every classroom activity contributes directly to the desired outcomes. This alignment in Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum is particularly critical because teachers are given greater freedom to design local syllabi and materials. That autonomy can only succeed if teachers understand how to interpret and

implement the curriculum faithfully while adapting it creatively.

The Role of Curriculum

The roles of curriculum are multifaceted for stakeholders. For policymakers, the curriculum is crucial for educational reform and standardization. It establishes a common goal and quality assurance across the school, providing the necessary direction to ensure national consistency. At the institutional level, the curriculum is the key document for guiding program development, resource allocation, scheduling, and staff requirements.

Moreover, for teachers, the curriculum serves as a structured instructional guide, providing a flexible framework to implement, interpret, adapt, and enrich it according to learners' needs and contexts (Graves & Xu, 2000). Lastly, for learners, the curriculum serves as a transparent roadmap, clarifying objectives, learning expectations, and assessment criteria.

Several studies in Indonesia reaffirm the importance of distinguishing curriculum, syllabus, and learning materials. The goal is to achieve coherent English Language Teaching (ELT). Renandya (2024) emphasizes the integration of *Merdeka Belajar* from Merdeka curriculum principles, requiring teachers to move beyond textbooks and use the curriculum as a guide for learner-centered innovation. Here, the learning focused on skills and avoiding textbook-driven learning. Hanifa et al. (2024) highlight the adaptation of English materials to local contexts. This adaptation helps maintain curricular integrity while enhancing engagement. Meanwhile, Wijayanto et al. (2025) demonstrate that digital English resources aligned with the *Merdeka Belajar* framework increase learner motivation and comprehension.

This finding explains why this distinction is essential. When teachers mix these three terms, teaching often prioritizes coverage of material over competency. It will lead to inconsistency between schools. Conversely, a clear distinction ensures cohesion and clarity of objectives in the teaching process. As a result, recognizing these differences strengthens

professionalism and reflective teaching, positioning educators as active interpreters of the curriculum who bridge national goals with meaningful learning experiences in the classroom, an essential foundation for high-quality, transformative English language education in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

Curriculum in English Language Teaching (ELT) is not merely a list of topics or prescribed content. It is a comprehensive and dynamic framework that unites educational philosophy, intended outcomes, content, pedagogy, and assessment into a coherent system. The distinction between curriculum, syllabus, and learning materials is not only theoretical but essential for effective practice. The curriculum operates as the macro-level policy blueprint; the syllabus translates this framework into structured instructional units; and learning materials bring these designs to life in the classroom.

Recognizing these distinctions ensures constructive alignment between objectives, teaching, and assessment, promoting both coherence and creativity in English instruction. In the Indonesian context, especially under the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers' ability to interpret and adapt the curriculum determines the success of learner-centered education. When educators understand curriculum as product, process, and praxis, they move beyond textbook-driven instruction toward reflective, empowering teaching that integrates global communicative competence with local values. Ultimately, distinguishing between curriculum, syllabus, and learning programmes strengthens professionalism, supports policy reform, and enhances the transformative potential of ELT in nurturing competent, critical, and culturally grounded learners.

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