

Global Paradigms to Local Contexts: A Historical Analysis of ELT Curriculum Models

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ABSTRACT

The English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum is a dynamic construct shaped by the complex interplay of global pedagogical paradigms and local educational contexts over time. Historically, ELT has progressed from the Grammar-Translation Method, which fostered the notion of accuracy and formalism, through Direct and Audiolingual Methods, guided by behaviorist psychology, towards Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which centered on interaction and communicative competence. More recently, post-method pedagogy has challenged the universality of prescriptiveness, advocating for flexibility, situational sensitivity, and understanding in curriculum design. Such theoretical principles have had a far-reaching impact on the reform of curricula worldwide, most notably in Indonesia, where, over the past three decades, the concept of ELT has undergone significant changes. The evolution of the structure-based curriculum (1994) to the competency-based KBK (2004), the flexible SB curriculum (KTSP, 2006), the Inquiry-based 2013 Curriculum (K13), and the current Merdeka Curriculum (2022–present) all represent attempts to strike a balance between global trends and national priorities. Ultimately, the study of global and Indonesian development underscores the importance of developing ELT curricula that are historically relevant, contextually specific, and adaptable to both worldwide education and local educational contexts.

Keywords: English Language Teaching (ELT), Historical Curriculum Development, Curriculum Models, Global Paradigms, Local Contexts

INTRODUCTION

The development and subsequent refinement of the English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum is not a static field, but rather a dynamic process, encompassing core functions (a stage in the development cycle in which educational activities occur). This theoretical review undertakes two primary analyses: Firstly, it investigates the fundamental worldwide trends that have shaped ELT course design over the years and then focuses the above analysis with attention on the local context in Indonesia.

1. The Global Evolution Of English Language Teaching (ELT) Curriculum

The history of English Language Teaching (ELT) learning curriculum presents a background of systematic development, shifting from an approach based on grammar and written translation to one that focuses on communication, learning needs, and real language use. These transitions are also indicative of the shifting intellectual, cultural, and social paradigms that are shaping educational practices worldwide. And in each stage of curriculum practice, from the nineteenth-century language-learning grammatical translation method to the post-method pedagogy developed in the twenty-first century, it can be discerned that theories of language learning, cultural expectations, and political landscapes have all shaped teaching and learning practices in English. These patterns of the past not only demonstrate the development direction of the field but also the dynamic interplay between theory and practice in curriculum planning.

The Grammar-Translation Method: Foundations of Formalism

The 19th-century Grammar-Translation Method characterized language instruction throughout Europe and more broadly. Based on classical practices, the method of teaching Latin and Greek involves memorizing the grammatical rules of these languages, translating literary texts, and

memorizing vocabulary lists by rote (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004). It operated on the assumption that language learning was more of an exercise in the brain, in the form of a mental discipline, rather than a communicative expertise.

In practice, lessons were teacher-centered and heavily text-oriented. Teachers explained the grammar rules in the learners' mother language, and students translated sentences from English into their native tongue and vice versa. For instance, students can be required to translate parts of Shakespeare or Dickens (or both), whose success might be judged according to grammatical accuracy rather than communicative ability. Oral practice was nearly non-existent, and learners frequently memorized paradigms and lists of irregular verbs to undertake exercises. According to Richards and Rodgers (2014), learners become skilled at parsing sentences but cannot engage in spontaneous conversation.

Although this style contributed to learners' reading and writing skills, it largely neglected their oral language. Richards and Rodgers (2014) assert that it "mirrored the dominant educational ethos of the era, placing focus on the written system of language and on the high standards expected in language use in the scholarly environment rather than practical application in instruction". Although it has some limitations, the Grammar-Translation Method provided a basic blueprint for formal ELT curricula and has helped shape, in part, the development of syllabuses until the twentieth century.

The Rise of Direct and Audio-Lingual Methods: Behaviorist Influences

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the deficiency of the Grammar-Translation Method led to the popularization of the Direct Method. This method encouraged immersion and oral use, as well as vocabulary and grammar lessons that took place in situ (Brown, 2007). Teachers were instructed to use only the target language as they would in naturalistic language acquisition. But the use of native-speaking teachers and small class sizes limited its implementation in the global practice.

The Direct Methods classroom featured teacher-student interactions where the teacher inquired in English, and the students had to reply in complete sentences. Vocabulary was

taught by adding items, images, or the like, and grammar would become more accessible by introducing students to patterns (rather than rules). An example would be that rather than explaining the past tense, a teacher would tell a story about an action in the past (“Yesterday I walked to school”) and prompt the student with a similar command line.

In the mid-twentieth century, structuralists came to characterize linguistic thought. Structural linguistics, particularly as developed by Bloomfield, influenced the Audiolingual Method (ALM), which came to dominate, especially in the United States, during the 1940s and 1950s. Rooted in behaviorist psychology, ALM stressed habit formation with drills, pattern practice, and reinforcement (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Language was viewed as a collection of structures to be mastered, rather than a vehicle of communication. While ALM yielded observable results in the short term, it failed to create meaning, leaving many learners with a sense of futility when they attempted to use the language authentically.

The students listened to model dialogues and repeated them together in ALM classrooms, which involved substitution drills (substituting a word in one sentence with another while maintaining a certain level of grammatical accuracy). Language labs became prevalent, with learners rehearsing pronunciation and intonation through the use of audio recordings. Mistakes were immediately corrected, according to behaviorist doctrine, because mistakes would lead to the development of bad habits. Although students demonstrated accuracy in formal situations, they struggled to apply these skills to real-life scenarios.

The Communicative Language Teaching: Embracing Interaction

By the 1970s, dissatisfaction with traditional structural approaches led to the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). A related work from Hymes (1972) on communicative competence, CLT represented a paradigm shift toward language as social action, rather than a formal structure of rules and systems. This curriculum was then more content-based than form-based, involving activities/tasks, and role-plays (as well as other authentic materials). Canale and Swain

(1980) provided definitions of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence within their framework of communicative competence.

To take place in CLT classrooms, CLT classrooms emphasized pair work, group-based activities, the process of group exercises, discussions, simulations, and problem-solving sessions. In contrast to rephrasing sentences, learners spent time engaging in meaningful activities to generate meaningful questions, rather than simply repeating sentences, such as plotting a trip, interviewing someone, or devising a real-life scenario. Teachers were facilitators, and learners negotiated meaning, using it with others to practice fluency and gain experience, employing it as facilitatory language. The error correction was sometimes only postponed; instead, the emphasis was much more on the effectiveness of the communication. Textbooks incorporated dialogues, actual literature, and information-gap exercises that involved real texts and information-gap activities, encouraging student agency and discussion among them.

CLT similarly altered the way curriculum learning is conducted worldwide and helped spawn innovations, including task-based language teaching (TBLT). Nunan (2004) emphasizes that CLT-inspired curricula aim to develop and facilitate authentic conversations to cater to L2 and language teaching in learners' actual life contexts. Tensions, however, arose when adopting CLT in various socio-cultural settings, particularly in areas where examination-based educational systems prioritized precision over fluency.

Toward Post-Method Pedagogy in the 21st Century: A Contextual Turn

The hegemony of CLT gave way to critical perspectives questioning the universality of the single method as the twenty-first century began. Kumaravadivelu (2001, 2006) introduced the concept of post-method pedagogy, which emphasizes the need to move beyond reliance on prescriptive methods used by teachers, thereby acknowledging the complexities of local situations. Instead, he offered three tenets of methodology: particularity, which entails an understanding

of local sociocultural and institutional context; practicality, which invites teachers to produce and theorize about their own practice; and possibility, deriving from critical pedagogy to promote learner empowerment while critiquing social inequities.

In this way, post-method pedagogy enables teachers to define their own methodologies, rather than attempting to apply imported models to their teaching. For instance, in multilingual classrooms, teachers might integrate CLT exercises with translation when necessary or incorporate students' culturally relevant knowledge into the dialogues. Critical pedagogical tasks, for example, debates in a local social system, are embedded to connect a language learning process to acts of citizenship. Curriculum designers are now frequently working to localise syllabi to meet local requirements, marrying international trends (such as digital literacy and academic English) with contextual aspects (for instance, exam regimes, cultural demands, and societal institutions) to the curriculum design environment.

This shift to post-method pedagogy represents a significant reorientation in the design of ELT curricula. Instead of presenting a consistent set of practices to be followed, however, the developers of curriculum are often advised to adapt methods to learn from, and within, the specific learning outcomes of the particular students' educational goals, social contexts, the students' cultures, and their respective needs and social challenges of any given place. Similarly, Holliday (2005) reiterates that it is essential to resist cultural imperialism in language education and that local educational curricula should support our national identity while also relating to the global English language.

In conclusion, the global evolution of the ELT curriculum from the 19th century to the present reveals a dynamic interplay between language theories, pedagogical practices, and sociocultural forces. However, the language systems used in the past prioritized formality and accuracy; approaches like CLT and post-method pedagogy, on the other hand, foregrounded communication, context, and critical awareness. The curriculum in the twenty-first century is adaptive, meaning that educators are encouraged to develop programs that are

practical, applicable, and have potential in the specific context of a learning situation. By recognizing these historical developments, educators and curriculum designers can respond adequately to the challenges arising from what this essay is calling "global" English teaching and create lessons that are meaningful and transformative in the local context, in particular in the situation on the ground in Indonesia that will also be covered in the next part.

2. Historical Developments of the ELT Curriculum in Indonesia

The curriculum is an organized learning plan that specifies the values, experiences, knowledge, and abilities that learners are expected to gain during their time in education. The curriculum serves as a guide for teachers, who are responsible for running the class, planning lessons, selecting materials, and evaluating students. A well-developed curriculum provides critical thinking materials, fosters creativity, and promotes character development, in addition to academic content to be taught in the classroom. Generally, a curriculum is viewed as an overview of the teaching and learning process, ensuring that learning objectives align with social demands to encourage students to contribute more to their communities.

Curriculum development is likewise a complex undertaking. This is because every learner is unique. Teaching a large number of learners also becomes somewhat more complicated when we consider what teachers should do when instructing them. Because learning should be something learners should acknowledge (to know), learners could apply in real life (to do), to establish identity (to be), and to make it become a habit that will form a harmonious life (to live together) (Novasyari & Choirunnisa, 2021). It means that education should not only provide the students with theoretical knowledge but also practical skills, personal character, and social awareness. In this sense, the curriculum serves as a bridge between academic content and real-life competencies, preparing learners to become active, responsible, and adaptable members of society.

As time passes, countries periodically modify their

educational systems, as education is viewed as a key indicator of a nation's success. A country will demonstrate the right development with proper planning of its curriculum, especially if it adjusts students' skill levels over time. Indonesia, as an archipelagic country, has undergone numerous curriculum changes to ensure that education is spread equally across the nation. However, achieving equal education throughout Indonesia is considered challenging due to geographical and cultural differences, limited infrastructure, and an insufficient distribution of teachers, which hinders access to education in all regions of Indonesia. Therefore, the government must continually adapt its strategies to ensure that students in remote areas receive the same quality of education as those in urban centers.

These challenges underscore the importance of continually developing a curriculum that not only addresses equity in education but also responds to global demands. Thus, the curriculum in Indonesia is experiencing significant improvement to fulfill international requirements. Education nowadays requires students to engage with global society, as it is becoming increasingly interconnected beyond national borders. This implies that Indonesia should align its educational curriculum and materials with global standards to ensure equal access across the region. The English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum is a notable example of this alignment, having undergone significant changes over the past three decades.

In recent decades, the ELT curriculum in Indonesia has undergone substantial changes that reflect the nation's educational aspirations, social environment, and external influences. Here, English is viewed as a foreign language, and the curriculum undergoes continuous revisions to ensure that students develop four language skills, enabling them to participate in global society. The curriculum is a crucial factor in achieving educational goals (Abidin, Retnaningrum, Parinussa, Kuning, Manoppo, & Kartika, 2023). Abidin et al. (2023) also highlight that changes in the curriculum occur as part of a learning design that will affect the process and outcomes of education in Indonesia.

The changes from the 1994 curriculum's structure and

grammar-focused approach to the latest Merdeka curriculum, introduced since 2022, demonstrate the country's effort to balance conventional teaching methods with the newest techniques, such as technological ones. This essay aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the evolution of the ELT curriculum in Indonesia over time, highlighting its key features, benefits, limitations, and broader implications for teaching and learning.

As stated by Saukah (2016), the 1994 English syllabus was developed as an update to the 1984 syllabus, which had been the previous English curriculum for Indonesia's Lower and Upper-Level Secondary Schools. The integration of a communicative approach into the syllabus framework and communicative syllabus is a key characteristic of the updated version. The 1994 curriculum emphasizes structural language teaching, utilizing materials structured around vocabulary lists and grammar rules. English is viewed as a discipline where students are expected to understand linguistic patterns and forms, rather than as a means of communication. Grammar and translation exercises were typically the primary focus of the lessons, and students were required to memorize vocabulary lists to pass exams.

In this curriculum, English learners are not focused on real-time application. Real-time application is not emphasized for English language learners in this curriculum. They pay attention to how each word should be spoken accurately and correctly. This has advantages and disadvantages. Despite having an extensive vocabulary list in their brain, learners' English language skills are limited because they lack support from their surroundings, which makes them not confident enough to communicate in English with their classmates. To put it another way, learners frequently gained theoretical knowledge of English rather than practical skills in using the language.

The introduction of the Competency-Based Curriculum (KBK) in 2004 marked a significant shift in Indonesia's educational system. As explained by Fitriani and Afrilianti (2025), the 2004 curriculum, commonly known as KBK, is a competency-based curriculum designed to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, values, attitudes, and

interests of student participants in accordance with their competencies. KBK offered a greater emphasis on student-centered learning and communicative ability than the previous curriculum, which was more content-oriented, because it not only asked students to understand the materials but also to build the abilities they might use.

This meant that rather than just learning vocabulary and grammar rules, students are learning English to have meaningful communication in practical situations someday. As a result, KBK reflected a larger worldwide movement in language instruction that emphasized learner autonomy and practical ability. In the KBK curriculum, students are more likely to utilize what they already know, compared to the 1994 curriculum, where students tended to struggle with applying the knowledge they had learned. This curriculum adjustment offers students the opportunity to develop their skills more comprehensively. This suggests that modifying the curriculum is one of the most effective strategies for educating the country's youth.

In the 2006 School-Based Curriculum (KTSP), teachers and schools now have more flexibility to modify the curriculum to suit their local environment. This curriculum provided teachers in English lessons with the opportunity to select resources and teaching strategies that best suited their students, to establish a more successful learning environment. Each school in the KTSP system is empowered to modify its own curriculum in detail in accordance with the Content Standard, Passing Standard, and the other two components of the government-designed Standard Competence (SK) and Basic Competence (KD) framework (Chaira, 2016). With the regulations of this curriculum, it is easy for teachers to adapt to students' circumstances. For example, students in Jakarta will have different competencies than students from Kendari, and vice versa. Schools have the freedom to help their students achieve targets according to their abilities.

The difficulty of this method lies in the fact that different schools had varying resources and quality teachers, resulting in variations in the success of implementing the curriculum. Students at the same level don't have the same skills because of these disparate objectives. However, in the view of Darma,

Suwarno, and Mulyadi (2018), English teachers did not encounter any significant difficulties when creating lesson plans (RPP) based on the KTSP curriculum. Teachers had little trouble devising learning plans. Therefore, even though every school has different aims, this curriculum does not prevent teachers from creating lessons for their students.

The implementation of a scientific approach, which includes observing, questioning, experimenting, associating, and communicating, has been highlighted in the 2013 Curriculum (K13). This curriculum encouraged students to create knowledge through inquiry and discovery actively, rather than relying on rote memorization. Character education was also heavily integrated into the curriculum to develop moral values and social responsibility in addition to intellectual growth. K13 requires teachers to create learning activities that promote higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), such as problem-solving and critical thinking. This is expected to engage students more deeply with the material and help them improve their understanding.

According to Rahimah and Widiastuty (2023), K13 prioritizes competency-based education, honors student recognition, and emphasizes a contextual approach to learning. In the context of English language learning, K13 emphasizes the development of mastery in four language skills: reading, speaking, listening, and writing. This indicates that the government has raised its expectations for skills. Unlike the previous curriculum, K13 allows students to prioritize each of the four language skills. Students can learn a wide range of English materials within this curriculum, rather than focusing solely on one skill. This is important for learners because it enables them to develop their potential fully.

The latest curriculum, introduced by the education policy, is the Merdeka Curriculum (2022–present). It emphasizes adaptability, project-based learning, and the integration of the Pancasila Student Profile, enabling students to demonstrate their progress in knowledge in P5 (Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila). Unlike the previous curriculum, Merdeka gives educators and schools greater freedom to contextualize educational resources, one of which is the introduction of distance learning, also known as

Pembelajaran Jarak Jauh (PJJ). Here, teachers are encouraged to create more flexible classes that make them relevant to the needs of students and the wider community. Wilson and Nurkhamidah (2023) stated in their research that teaching English under the Merdeka Curriculum provides teachers with more opportunities to develop their English materials, making them relevant to students' varying levels of understanding, based on references from various sources, including textbooks and the internet.

In Permendikdasmen No. 13 of 2025, the key point of the ministerial regulation is that there will be no changes to the current curriculum, which means that teachers will continue to use the K13 curriculum, with the Merdeka Curriculum as the primary reference. This regulation also prioritizes a Deep Learning approach to improve students' critical thinking, encouraging them to be reflective and think contextually, as if they truly understand the concepts. Changes have been implemented in this curriculum to enhance the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum, including the strengthening of in-depth learning methodologies, the integration of project-based and cross-curricular learning, and the reduction of excessive academic burdens. Furthermore, the Merdeka Curriculum was officially positioned as a component of Indonesia's national framework for early childhood education to secondary education, as outlined in Permendikbudristek No. 12 of 2024, issued by the Ministry of Education. Character development, digital literacy, and more contextualized learning objectives are also included in this new framework.

Additionally, the Merdeka Curriculum supports student learning enhancement through the use of technology. This curriculum emphasizes student collaboration to encourage cooperation across subjects, including showing students how English relates to real-world problems. English Language Teaching in the Merdeka Curriculum also aims to develop students' global thinking while maintaining their sense of national identity, simultaneously improving their Indonesian language skills. In the Merdeka Curriculum, students can learn English according to their interests, skills, and future goals. It is hoped that students will learn the language in a way that is relevant and motivating for them, rather than being limited by

a uniform and boring methodology. Furthermore, this curriculum introduces the integration of 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (4Cs), which are necessary for students to succeed in a global world.

The Merdeka Curriculum offers a comprehensive approach to cultural understanding, complementing language skills, and enables students to develop a deeper understanding of national knowledge and international perspectives throughout their English learning process. Lastly, assessment methods in this curriculum have shifted from relying on standardized tests to more adaptive and formative strategies, including portfolios, reflective journals, and group projects. These improvements make English teaching in the Merdeka Curriculum more dynamic, student-centred, and adaptable to contemporary educational demands.

Thus, it is the journey of Indonesia's curriculum. It is believed that with so many changes, students will be better equipped to handle the technological advancements of today. There is a strong possibility of changes to the curriculum in the future, and it will significantly influence ELT. This, however, remains inevitable. Indonesia's curriculum changes demonstrate the government's commitment to improving the educational system.

On the other hand, the government itself does not always have to change the curriculum. Frequent changes can be inconvenient, as they often necessitate unnecessary adaptation. Apart from the teacher, the students should also modify their materials and strategies to adapt to the classroom teaching process more frequently.

English teachers are required to continually develop effective methods to optimize the teaching and learning process, meeting societal demands. This includes shifting from traditional grammar-based instruction to more communicative, student-centred, and technology-integrated methods. However, despite the obstacles posed by the changes to the curriculum, it continues to have a broad influence on how English is taught and learned throughout Indonesia. Curriculum changes can be a sign that educational progress

must be handled carefully because it is a long-term journey. Ultimately, however, all these factors point to the same goal: Indonesia's betterment.

CONCLUSION

Between the 1880s and the 1910s, the English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum underwent a process of constant negotiation between the international perspective of teaching and the reality of education around the world. Early pedagogy, in the form of Grammar-Translation and Audiolingual Methods, was rooted in principles of correctness, rote memorization, and a formal grasp of structure; these constructs represent the intellectual/psychological paradigms of this time period. The post-1970s emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) marked a significant shift in focus, emphasizing interaction, fluency, and real-world communication. In contrast, the rise of post-method pedagogy in the twenty-first century highlighted key aspects such as adaptability, contextual appropriateness, and teacher autonomy. These global phenomena have led to changes in curriculum development in Indonesia, where the following reform regimes, from a structurally sound 1994 curriculum, competency-based KBK (2004), flexible KTSP (2006), inquiry-driven K13 (2013), to the current Merdeka program, illustrate Indonesia's attempts to accommodate international standards to national policy. Every revolution indicates an increasing focus on learner autonomy, context as an essential element of their learning, and 21st-century proficiency in critical thinking, cooperation, and creativity. In summary, the evolution of the ELT curriculum serves as a testament to the fact that language education must be effective, and to achieve this, it needs to be historically informed, situated locally, and globally responsive. In Indonesia and beyond, such a balance is necessary to ensure that ELT not only builds linguistic proficiency at a critical point in the learner's development but also enables students to acquire skills throughout their lives, thereby fostering lifelong learning and active global citizenship.

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