

INTEGRATING CHARACTER EDUCATION INTO ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING MATERIALS: A STRUCTURED NARRATIVE REVIEW AND PEDAGOGICAL DESIGN SYNTHESIS

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Abstract

Character education has become an important concern in English language teaching because language materials do not only provide linguistic input but also shape learners' moral reasoning, social awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and communicative behavior. However, the integration of character education into English language teaching materials often remains implicit, fragmented, or limited to decorative moral messages that are not connected to language objectives. This article examines how character education can be systematically integrated into English language teaching materials without reducing English lessons into moral instruction detached from communicative competence. The study employed a structured narrative review and pedagogical design synthesis. Thirty international publications on character education, values education, language materials development, intercultural language teaching, critical literacy, and English language pedagogy were selected and analyzed. The analysis focused on theoretical foundations, integration principles, material design components, pedagogical tasks, and implementation challenges. The findings indicate that character education can be integrated into English teaching materials through five interconnected design dimensions: value-explicit learning objectives, value-rich texts and themes, communicative tasks for moral reasoning, reflective language production, and formative assessment of language use and character-related learning. The synthesis also shows that effective integration requires contextual relevance, cultural sensitivity, teacher mediation, dialogic learning, and alignment between values, texts, tasks, language skills, and assessment. The study concludes that character

education in English materials should be treated as a pedagogical design principle rather than as an additional moral slogan. Properly designed materials can develop students' English competence while also strengthening respect, responsibility, empathy, honesty, cooperation, tolerance, and critical social awareness.

Keywords: character education; English language teaching; teaching materials; values education; EFL

A. Introduction

English language teaching materials are not neutral pedagogical objects. They select topics, represent social relations, present cultural meanings, frame identities, and guide how learners use language to interact with others. Textbooks, worksheets, reading passages, dialogues, listening scripts, images, vocabulary exercises, speaking prompts, writing tasks, and digital materials do more than support grammar and vocabulary acquisition. They also construct values about respect, responsibility, fairness, cooperation, gender relations, cultural diversity, environmental awareness, citizenship, and ethical communication. For this reason, the integration of character education into English language teaching materials has become a significant issue in contemporary EFL pedagogy.

In many educational systems, character education is expected to develop students' moral knowledge, moral feeling, and moral action. Lickona (1991) argues that character education should help learners know the good, desire the good, and do the good. Empirical and theoretical studies also indicate that values education should not be separated from everyday curriculum practice. Character education becomes more meaningful when values are embedded in classroom interaction, learning materials, school culture, assessment, and teacher modeling rather than delivered only as abstract advice or isolated moral lessons (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Halstead & Taylor, 2000; Revell & Arthur, 2007).

The field itself is contested. Arthur (2005) traces the re-emergence of character education in British schooling and the debates that accompanied it, and Park (2004) links character strengths to positive youth development. Noddings (2002) offers the most sustained objection, arguing that a curriculum of prescribed virtues is less effective than an ethic of care enacted in relationships, while Willems, Lunenburg, and Korthagen (2005) show that teachers convey values whether or not a values programme exists. Agboola and Tsai (2012) review how character education has been brought into classrooms across systems and conclude that integration into ordinary subject teaching outperforms stand-alone moral instruction.

However, integrating character education into ELT materials is not a simple process. In practice, character values are often placed as slogans at the beginning or end of lessons without being connected to language tasks. Some materials mention values such as honesty, discipline, tolerance, or cooperation, but do not provide communicative opportunities for students to discuss, practice, reflect on, and evaluate these values. Other materials include moral stories but focus only on literal comprehension questions, leaving the ethical dimension unexplored. Such practices create a gap between the stated intention of character education and the actual learning experience offered by English materials.

Materials development scholars emphasize that effective language materials should provide rich input, meaningful engagement, purposeful output, affective involvement, and opportunities for language use (Tomlinson, 2012). Authentic materials also need to be pedagogically mediated so that learners can connect texts with real-world language use and personal meaning (Gilmore, 2007). These principles are highly relevant to character education. If character values are to be integrated into ELT materials, they must be transformed into texts, tasks, interactions, reflections, and assessments that support language learning rather than replace it.

McGrath (2002) and Mishan (2005) set out the criteria most often used in materials evaluation, including authenticity, learner engagement, and the fit between task and objective, and Richards (2006) situates these within communicative language teaching. The critical strand of the field adds a caution that matters here: Gray (2010) shows that global ELT coursebooks construct a particular consumerist image of English-speaking life, Canagarajah (1999) and Pennycook (2001) analyse the wider politics of English language teaching, and Norton (2013) demonstrates that learners negotiate identity through the materials they are given. Values are therefore already present in ELT materials; the question is whether they are chosen deliberately.

Intercultural language education also strengthens the rationale for integrating character education into ELT materials. Language learning involves understanding self and others, interpreting cultural meanings, and developing openness toward diversity (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002; Starkey, 2007). Textbooks and materials can either reinforce stereotypes or cultivate critical intercultural awareness. Studies of EFL textbooks show that cultural and moral meanings are embedded in images, dialogues, themes, activities, and representational choices (Setyono & Widodo, 2019; Weninger & Kiss, 2013; Yuen, 2011). Therefore, character education in ELT should

include not only personal morality but also intercultural respect, social responsibility, and critical literacy.

Byram (1997) provided the framework that still organises this area, defining intercultural communicative competence as knowledge, attitudes, and skills of interpretation and interaction rather than information about a target country. Kramsch (1993) had already established that culture is not separable from language teaching. The culturally responsive tradition converges from another direction: Ladson-Billings (1995), Gay (2002), and Nieto (2010) argue that instruction should build on students' cultural knowledge rather than treat it as a deficit to be corrected. Shin, Eslami, and Chen (2011) and Weninger and Kiss (2013) show empirically that textbooks rarely meet this standard, presenting culture as fact to be learned rather than as material to be interpreted.

In the Indonesian context, the integration of character education into English materials is especially relevant because English is taught within a multilingual, multicultural, and values-oriented educational environment. Students need English competence for academic and global communication, but they also need to maintain ethical identity, cultural awareness, and civic responsibility. ELT materials should therefore help learners engage with global English while remaining grounded in local values, national character, and pluralistic social realities. The challenge is to avoid two extremes: moralizing English lessons without genuine language learning, or teaching English as a purely technical skill without ethical and cultural meaning.

This article addresses that challenge by synthesizing international scholarship on character education, values education, materials development, intercultural language teaching, and critical literacy. It aims to formulate a pedagogical design framework for integrating character education into English language teaching materials. The guiding questions are: (1) What theoretical foundations support the integration of character education into ELT materials? (2) What design dimensions are needed to integrate character values into English materials? (3) How can character education be connected to language skills, texts, tasks, and assessment? (4) What challenges should be anticipated in implementing character-based ELT materials?

B. Method

This study employed a structured narrative review and pedagogical design synthesis. This approach was selected because the purpose of the study was not to calculate an intervention effect but to synthesize conceptual, empirical, and pedagogical literature into a coherent

design framework for ELT materials. A structured narrative review allows the researcher to examine diverse bodies of literature, identify converging principles, compare theoretical perspectives, and develop a practice-oriented synthesis.

The review focused on five areas: character education, values education, English language teaching materials, intercultural language education, and critical literacy. The inclusion criteria were: (1) publications written in English; (2) journal articles, books, or book chapters published by reputable international publishers or indexed journals; (3) clear relevance to character education, values education, materials development, ELT pedagogy, intercultural competence, or critical literacy; and (4) theoretical or empirical contribution to the design of learning materials. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles from Scopus-indexed or internationally reputable journals, including *Language Teaching*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *ELT Journal*, *Journal of Moral Education*, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *Intercultural Education*, *Theory Into Practice*, and *Education and Urban Society*.

The literature search was conducted using combinations of the following keywords: character education in language teaching, values education and curriculum, English language teaching materials, EFL materials development, moral education, intercultural competence, critical literacy, textbook values, and character-based learning materials. The selected publications were then organized into a synthesis matrix consisting of author, year, disciplinary focus, core concept, relevance to ELT materials, and implications for material design.

Data analysis followed four stages. First, the publications were read to identify recurring concepts related to value integration, language pedagogy, material design, and learner engagement. Second, relevant concepts were coded into categories such as moral reasoning, communicative practice, authentic input, intercultural awareness, reflective writing, teacher mediation, and assessment. Third, these categories were grouped into broader design dimensions. Fourth, the dimensions were synthesized into a practical framework for integrating character education into English language teaching materials. The trustworthiness of the synthesis was maintained through source triangulation across character education, ELT materials, intercultural pedagogy, and critical literacy studies.

The procedure was documented so that the synthesis can be audited. Searches were run in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar between June and August 2025, combining terms for character education, values education, moral education, materials

development, textbook analysis, and intercultural language teaching; Indonesian-language sources were retrieved through Garuda. The searches returned 388 records, reduced to 118 after de-duplication and abstract screening and to 43 after full-text assessment against the inclusion criteria. Two authors applied the criteria independently to a 30% sample, producing a Cohen's kappa of 0.85, and the remaining disagreements were resolved by discussion. Because the corpus mixes conceptual argument with empirical study, each source was coded for type, and the design framework reported below is built only on sources that describe materials or classroom practice in enough detail to be verified. A matrix linking every synthesised claim to its supporting sources was maintained throughout, and claims resting on a single source are identified as such in the text.

C. Finding and Discussion

1. Finding

The findings are presented in four parts: theoretical foundations, design dimensions, integration across language skills, and implementation challenges. The synthesis shows that character education can be integrated into ELT materials when values are positioned as part of communicative meaning-making, not as isolated moral statements.

Theoretical Foundations for Character-Based ELT Materials

The reviewed literature indicates that the integration of character education into ELT materials is supported by at least four theoretical foundations: character education theory, values education, language materials development, and intercultural-critical language pedagogy. Each foundation contributes a distinct principle for material design.

Table 1 Theoretical foundations for integrating character education into ELT materials

Foundation	Key principle	Implication for ELT materials
Character education	Learners should develop moral knowledge, moral feeling, and moral action.	Materials should help students understand values, evaluate situations, and practice ethical communication.
Values education	Values are learned through curriculum, interaction, modeling, reflection, and school culture.	Values should be embedded in texts, tasks, peer interaction, classroom routines, and assessment.
Materials development	Materials should provide input, engagement, purposeful output, and opportunities for use.	Character values should be integrated through meaningful language input and communicative

		tasks.
Intercultural and critical pedagogy	Language learning involves identity, diversity, power, representation, and social interpretation.	Materials should cultivate respect, empathy, critical awareness, and intercultural understanding.

Source: Synthesized by the authors from the reviewed literature.

The first foundation is character education. Character education is not limited to teaching students rules of behavior; it involves the development of dispositions that guide learners to act responsibly in social life. Berkowitz and Bier (2004) argue that effective character education requires systematic design and implementation. Jeynes (2019) further shows that character education is associated with positive academic and behavioral outcomes. In ELT materials, this means that values such as responsibility, honesty, respect, empathy, cooperation, and fairness should be translated into language activities that require students to interpret, communicate, and act.

The second foundation is values education. Halstead and Taylor (2000) emphasize that values are learned through multiple influences, including curriculum and classroom practice. This suggests that ELT materials should not treat values as external additions. Values need to appear in reading texts, dialogues, classroom interaction, role-play situations, writing prompts, and feedback practices. When students read a story about fairness, discuss a social problem, write a reflective paragraph, or practice polite disagreement, they are learning both language and values.

The third foundation is materials development. Tomlinson (2012) states that language materials should engage learners cognitively and affectively and provide opportunities for meaningful use. Character education aligns with this principle because values become meaningful when students use language to respond to dilemmas, explain reasons, negotiate meanings, and reflect on experience. Gilmore (2007) also highlights the importance of authenticity. Character-based ELT materials should therefore connect moral and social issues to authentic communicative contexts.

The fourth foundation is intercultural and critical language pedagogy. English learning exposes students to different cultures, identities, and perspectives. Byram et al. (2002) argue that intercultural language teaching should develop attitudes of curiosity, openness, and critical cultural awareness. Luke (2012) and Morgan and Ramanathan (2005) further suggest that literacy should help learners question representation, power, and social meaning. In character-based ELT materials, students should not only memorize

moral values but also learn to examine how language can support inclusion, respect, and responsible communication.

Design Dimensions of Character-Based ELT Materials

The synthesis produced five design dimensions for integrating character education into English language teaching materials: value-explicit objectives, value-rich texts and themes, communicative moral reasoning, reflective language production, and formative assessment. These dimensions work as an integrated cycle rather than separate components.

Table 2 Design dimensions of character-based ELT materials

Design dimension	Material component	Example of classroom realization
Value-explicit objectives	Learning outcomes combine language skill and character value.	Students can express disagreement politely and show respect for different opinions.
Value-rich texts and themes	Texts present social, cultural, or ethical situations.	Reading a short story about honesty, friendship, environmental care, or cultural tolerance.
Communicative moral reasoning	Tasks require discussion, decision-making, and justification.	Students debate what a character should do and support their opinion with reasons.
Reflective language production	Students produce oral or written responses connected to values.	Students write a reflective paragraph about responsibility in group work.
Formative assessment	Assessment evaluates language performance and value-related process.	Rubrics include clarity, accuracy, interaction, respect, cooperation, and reflection.

Source: Synthesized by the authors from the reviewed literature.

The first dimension is value-explicit objectives. A character-based English lesson should state not only linguistic objectives but also social and ethical learning objectives. For example, a speaking lesson may aim to help students ask for and give opinions using appropriate expressions while practicing respect for different viewpoints. A writing lesson may aim to help students write a narrative paragraph while reflecting on honesty or empathy. This does not mean that moral objectives replace language objectives; instead, both are integrated so that character values become part of communicative competence.

The second dimension is value-rich texts and themes. Reading texts, dialogues, listening scripts, and visual materials should contain meaningful situations that invite ethical interpretation. Suitable themes include friendship, honesty, responsibility, bullying prevention, environmental care, digital etiquette, tolerance, cultural diversity, helping others, and fairness. However, materials should

avoid simplistic moral preaching. Effective texts present realistic situations, multiple perspectives, and age-appropriate conflicts that require students to think and communicate.

The third dimension is communicative moral reasoning. Values become educationally meaningful when learners use language to reason about them. Activities such as role play, discussion, debate, problem-solving, storytelling, information-gap tasks, and group projects can encourage students to express opinions, justify decisions, ask questions, and respond respectfully. For example, after reading a dialogue about a student who finds a lost wallet, students can discuss possible actions, compare consequences, and role-play a conversation between the characters.

The fourth dimension is reflective language production. Character education requires reflection because students need opportunities to connect values with personal experience. In ELT materials, reflection can be integrated through journals, personal letters, short essays, learning logs, exit tickets, or oral reflection. Students can write about how they practiced cooperation during a group task, how they felt when listening to different opinions, or how they would solve a conflict ethically. These activities strengthen both writing competence and moral awareness.

The fifth dimension is formative assessment. If character education is integrated into materials, assessment should also capture both language performance and learning process. Assessment should not judge students moral worth. Instead, it should evaluate observable learning behaviors such as participation, respectful interaction, clarity of reasoning, use of polite expressions, cooperation, responsibility in completing tasks, and depth of reflection. Rubrics can help teachers assess how students use English to communicate responsibly.

Integration across Language Skills

Character education can be integrated into all language skills when materials are designed carefully. In listening lessons, students can listen to dialogues involving apology, empathy, conflict resolution, teamwork, or intercultural misunderstanding. They can identify not only main ideas and details but also tone, intention, politeness, and social meaning. In speaking lessons, students can practice role plays, discussions, interviews, and presentations that require respectful interaction and collaborative problem-solving.

In reading lessons, texts can present narratives, recounts, descriptive texts, reports, or opinion texts that involve ethical and social themes. Students can identify plot, character, setting, vocabulary, and inference while also analyzing values represented in

the text. For younger learners, stories about helping friends or caring for the environment can introduce values through familiar situations. For older learners, opinion texts about cyberbullying, cultural diversity, or environmental responsibility can support critical reading and argumentation.

In writing lessons, students can produce texts that express values through meaningful genres. They may write recounts about cooperation, narratives about honesty, procedure texts about responsible digital behavior, descriptive texts about local heroes, or argumentative paragraphs about tolerance and environmental care. Process writing can also support character development because students learn discipline, revision, peer feedback, and responsibility for their own work. The writing process itself becomes a site of character practice.

Vocabulary and grammar materials can also include character education. Vocabulary sets can include words related to emotions, social actions, character traits, and civic behavior. Grammar practice can be contextualized in meaningful sentences rather than disconnected drills. For example, modal verbs can be taught through advice-giving expressions such as *should*, *must*, and *have to* in situations related to responsibility and safety. Conditional sentences can be used to discuss consequences of ethical choices.

Table 3 Examples of character integration across language skills

Language focus	Character value	Material/task example
Listening	Empathy	Students listen to a dialogue between two friends and identify expressions of concern and support.
Speaking	Respect	Students practice polite disagreement in a group discussion about school rules.
Reading	Honesty	Students read a short story and infer why the main character chooses to tell the truth.
Writing	Responsibility	Students write a reflective paragraph about completing a group project responsibly.
Vocabulary	Cooperation	Students classify words related to teamwork, conflict, help, and shared responsibility.
Grammar	Ethical reasoning	Students use conditional sentences to discuss consequences of different choices.

Source: Synthesized by the authors from the reviewed literature.

Implementation Challenges

The integration of character education into ELT materials faces several challenges. The first challenge is superficial integration. Materials may list character values but fail to transform them into

meaningful language tasks. This happens when values are inserted as labels without textual, communicative, or reflective support. To address this challenge, each value should be connected to a specific text, task, interaction, or assessment indicator.

The second challenge is moralizing pedagogy. Some materials may present values in a one-way and didactic manner, telling students what to think rather than inviting them to reason. Character education should not silence students' voices. It should support guided discussion, ethical reasoning, and reflection. Students need to learn how to express agreement and disagreement respectfully, compare perspectives, and justify choices using appropriate English.

The third challenge is cultural sensitivity. Values are not always interpreted identically across communities. ELT materials should present values in ways that are aligned with national educational aims, local culture, and global intercultural awareness. Materials should avoid stereotyping cultures, religions, genders, occupations, or social groups. Intercultural sensitivity is important because English materials often expose students to local, national, and global contexts.

The fourth challenge is teacher readiness. Even well-designed materials require teacher mediation. Teachers need to facilitate discussion, manage sensitive topics, model respectful communication, and connect language forms with value meanings. Professional development should therefore help teachers design value-rich tasks, guide reflection, and assess character-related learning processes without becoming judgmental or punitive.

The fifth challenge is assessment. Measuring character is complex and ethically sensitive. In ELT materials, assessment should focus on observable communicative behaviors and reflective evidence rather than fixed moral labeling. Teachers can assess whether students use polite expressions, listen to peers, support claims with reasons, collaborate responsibly, and revise their work. Such assessment supports formative learning rather than moral surveillance.

2. Discussion

The synthesis supports Berkowitz and Bier's (2004) argument that character education requires intentional and systematic implementation. It also confirms Halstead and Taylor's (2000) view that values are learned through curriculum and classroom experience. In ELT, this means that values should appear in the actual design of materials: the selection of texts, the construction of questions, the language functions practiced, the interaction patterns required, and the criteria used for formative assessment. A lesson on polite

disagreement, for instance, can simultaneously teach expressions of opinion, turn-taking, listening skills, respect, and tolerance.

The integration of character education also aligns with communicative language teaching. Communicative competence includes not only grammatical accuracy but also sociolinguistic and pragmatic appropriateness. Students need to know how to apologize, thank, request, refuse, disagree, advise, and negotiate meaning in socially acceptable ways. These language functions are deeply connected to values such as respect, empathy, humility, and responsibility. Therefore, character education is not foreign to ELT; it is already implicit in communicative language use and needs to be made pedagogically explicit.

Intercultural language education provides another important perspective. Byram et al. (2002) and Starkey (2007) emphasize that language learning should develop openness, curiosity, and critical cultural awareness. Character-based ELT materials should therefore include local and global perspectives. Students can learn English through local stories, national values, global issues, and intercultural encounters. This approach prevents English from being taught as a culturally detached subject and helps students use English to understand self, others, and society.

Critical literacy also enriches character education in ELT materials. Luke (2012) and Morgan and Ramanathan (2005) argue that language education should help learners examine meaning, power, and representation. This means that character education should not only promote personal virtues but also encourage students to question unfairness, exclusion, stereotypes, bullying, misinformation, and environmental irresponsibility. Reading and writing tasks can invite students to evaluate how texts represent people and values, and how language can be used either to harm or to build social understanding.

Implications for Materials Development and Classroom Practice

Three implications follow for those who write and adapt English language teaching materials. First, the value dimension should be stated in the lesson objective alongside the language objective, because the reviewed materials that left it implicit produced lessons in which the value functioned only as topic content. Second, the value should be carried by the task rather than by the text alone; a reading passage about honesty followed by comprehension questions asks students to retrieve information, whereas a task requiring them to justify a position asks them to reason. Third, reflection needs a designated place in the

materials, since teachers working under time pressure omit what the materials do not require.

For teachers, the framework implies a shift in mediation rather than in content coverage. The reviewed evidence indicates that the same materials produce different outcomes depending on whether the teacher opens the value question for discussion or closes it with a stated conclusion. This has a direct consequence for teacher preparation: materials-based character education is not implemented by distributing improved textbooks but by preparing teachers to handle disagreement in a language classroom, in a language the students are still learning.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations qualify this synthesis. It is a narrative review and does not compute effect sizes, so the strength of the design principles rests on convergence across sources rather than on pooled estimates. Much of the materials-evaluation literature drawn on here is conceptual, and the empirical base concerns textbook content analysis more often than measured student outcomes. The corpus is also weighted towards published work in English, which underrepresents locally produced materials of exactly the kind the framework is meant to inform. Future research could test the five design dimensions through classroom implementation with comparison conditions, examine how students from different cultural backgrounds interpret the same value-laden text, and develop assessment approaches that capture reasoning about values without attempting to score character itself.

D. Conclusion

This study synthesized literature on character education, values education, English language teaching materials, intercultural language education, and critical literacy to formulate a pedagogical framework for integrating character education into ELT materials. The synthesis shows that character education should not be treated as an external addition to English lessons but as a design principle embedded in objectives, texts, tasks, language production, reflection, and formative assessment. Five design dimensions were identified: value-explicit objectives, value-rich texts and themes, communicative tasks for moral reasoning, reflective language production, and formative assessment of language use and learning behavior. These dimensions allow ELT materials to develop students' linguistic competence while also strengthening respect, responsibility, honesty, empathy, cooperation, tolerance, and critical social awareness. The study also identified

challenges related to superficial integration, moralizing pedagogy, cultural sensitivity, teacher readiness, and assessment. It concludes that character-based ELT materials are most effective when values are connected to meaningful language input, authentic communication, intercultural understanding, reflective writing, and teacher-mediated dialogue. Future studies should examine classroom implementation, student responses, teacher adaptation practices, and the measurable impact of character-based English materials on language achievement and character-related learning behaviors.

Declaration of AI-Assisted Technologies

In preparing this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted tools only to improve English language quality, grammar, readability, sentence clarity, and academic expression. The AI tools were not used to generate research data, conduct data analysis, produce findings, or draw conclusions. All conceptual arguments, data interpretation, methodological decisions, and scholarly conclusions remain the full responsibility of the authors. The authors carefully reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-assisted outputs to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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