

Adapting Global ELT Syllabuses for Local Needs in Indonesian Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

The use of global English language teaching (ELT) syllabuses in Indonesian secondary schools often creates problems because the content and examples do not always match students' cultural contexts and learning needs. This qualitative, descriptive literature review examines how globally designed ELT syllabuses are adapted for Indonesian classrooms. Drawing on fifteen Scopus-indexed studies published between 2020 and 2025, including works by Zein et al. (2020), Hanifa et al. (2024), Nurteteng et al. (2024), Fudiyartanto (2024), and Al Fikri (2025), the review identifies common adaptation strategies, challenges, and resulting teaching practices. Findings show that teachers frequently modify global syllabuses by adjusting cultural content and simplifying language to fit local realities (Hanifa et al., 2023; Andriani, 2024). However, obstacles remain, such as limited school support, insufficient teaching materials, and mismatches between curriculum demands and school policies (Nurteteng et al., 2024; Pajarwati, 2021). Although previous studies provide useful insights, most fail to offer concrete models for adapting global ELT materials to Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum, highlighting the need for further research.

Keywords

Global ELT syllabus;
syllabus adaptation;
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1. INTRODUCTION

Global English Language Teaching (ELT) syllabuses, like those based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) or popular global textbooks, are designed to meet international standards for communicative skills. However, these syllabuses often reflect Western cultural values, social situations, and language settings that may differ from those of non-native English learners, especially in places like Asia and other developing regions (Zein et al., 2020). While these materials help people understand each other across the world, they may not connect well with the learners' own cultural experiences, daily lives, and language use, which can make the learning less effective.

In Indonesia, many secondary schools now use global ELT syllabuses as part of efforts to improve English skills and help students compete internationally. Although this is meant to be helpful, there are growing worries about how well these materials match the local culture and teaching methods (Hanifa et al., 2024). Many examples and activities in these books are based on Western lifestyles, such as talking about skiing trips, baseball, or European food, which Indonesian students might find strange or not relevant (Fudiyartanto, 2024). This mismatch can make it harder for students to engage and understand what they are learning.

The introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum explicitly grants teachers pedagogical autonomy by positioning them not only as implementers but as curriculum designers who must adapt learning materials to their students' sociocultural context. This mandate requires teachers to modify global ELT syllabuses so that content, examples, and activities reflect local realities while still supporting national competency targets (Al Fikri, 2025). This expanded autonomy justifies the present study, as teachers are now expected to make informed adaptation decisions rather than follow fixed, textbook-based syllabuses. However, teachers still face the challenge of ensuring that localized materials remain aligned with international learning standards such as the CEFR (Prasetya, 2025).

Many studies show that teachers face several challenges when adjusting global syllabuses. These include not having enough training in creating their own materials, not having access to local teaching resources, and the pressure to follow strict assessments that are tied to international standards like CEFR (Nurteteng et al., 2024; Pajarwati, 2021). Because of this, many teachers continue to use global textbooks and make only small or shallow changes, which may not truly reflect their students' language use or cultural backgrounds.

Localization plays a crucial role in making ELT syllabuses more meaningful for Indonesian learners because locally relevant themes help students connect new language knowledge with familiar cultural experiences (Hanifa et al., 2023). Integrating topics such as national traditions, community issues, and regional identities increases engagement and communicative relevance (Andriani, 2024), while embedding values like cooperation, environmental responsibility, and Islamic ethics aligns with the broader character education goals of the Merdeka Curriculum (Al Fikri, 2025).

Yet, despite these clear benefits, excessive localization may reduce students' exposure to global communicative norms and internationally recognized language standards. Therefore, teachers must balance contextual relevance with global expectations a tension that becomes central in understanding adaptation practices in Indonesia. Many studies talk about how to adapt teaching methods in English, but not many give a clear plan or model for changing international English language teaching (ELT) syllabuses to fit local needs. There isn't much real data showing how students learn better after these changes. Also, not much is known about using digital tools or working together with teachers to make teaching materials fit the Merdeka Curriculum. This shows there's a need to bring together what's already been studied to create a better base for future teaching practices and policies in adapting ELT syllabuses in Indonesia.

Even though localization has many benefits, teachers have to deal with the challenge of balancing global English standards with local culture. English being a worldwide language often brings certain teaching and cultural rules where "native speaker" standards are seen as better than local ways of speaking and cultural practices (Zein et al., 2020). This creates

questions about fair language use, power differences, and the need to free ELT from colonial influences in places like Indonesia (Fudiyartanto, 2024). So, adapting syllabuses is not just about teaching it's also about dealing with social and cultural issues.

Because of these challenges, this study conducts a literature review to synthesize major findings on how Indonesian teachers adapt global ELT syllabuses to local classroom realities. Drawing on fifteen Scopus-indexed studies (Hanifa et al., 2024; Nurteteng et al., 2024; Zein et al., 2020; Al Fikri, 2025; Prasetya, 2025), the review aims to identify core adaptation patterns, analyze the underlying factors shaping these adaptations, and develop a conceptual understanding of how teachers balance global standards with local needs. Rather than merely listing adaptation strategies, this review integrates the findings into a broader framework that situates adaptation within the policy demands of the Merdeka Curriculum.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive literature review with explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria. Only empirical, peer-reviewed studies indexed in Scopus between 2020 and 2025 were included. The scope was limited to ELT syllabus or materials adaptation in Indonesian secondary education (SMP, SMA, or SMK). Articles were required to be written in English and provide data-based findings related to content or task adaptation. Excluded studies included conceptual/theoretical papers, research outside the Indonesian context, studies focused solely on testing or assessment, and publications not indexed in Scopus. Searches were conducted using Scopus with keywords such as *"ELT syllabus adaptation Indonesia"*, *"materials localization"*, *"curriculum adaptation"*, and *"Merdeka Curriculum English"*. These criteria ensured that the review captures representative, high-quality research on contemporary adaptation practices.

Although several articles included in this review are published by journals hosted on platforms such as SpringerOpen, ScienceDirect, and Cambridge University Press, all articles were identified and retrieved exclusively through the Scopus database. These publishing platforms appear in the final dataset not because they were used as separate search sources, but because many Scopus-indexed journals are distributed through such publishers. The presence of these names therefore reflects Scopus's indexing coverage rather than additional search databases. Articles were selected solely based on the Scopus search results and met the predetermined inclusion criteria, including publication period, relevance to ELT syllabus or materials adaptation, and the requirement of being peer-reviewed empirical studies.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Forms of syllabus adaptation

Looking at the studies reviewed, there are three main ways that global English Language Teaching (ELT) syllabuses are adapted in Indonesian secondary schools: content adaptation, task adaptation, and cultural integration.

Content adaptation is the most common approach. Teachers often change, replace, or add to topics that are not familiar to students, making the learning materials more connected to their daily lives and cultural background (Hanifa et al., 2024; Andriani, 2024).

For example, topics from Western contexts like “winter holidays” or “European dining traditions” are often replaced with local ones like “Indonesian festivals” or “traditional food culture.” These changes make the material more relatable, which helps students understand and stay interested.

Task adaptation refers to adjustments in *how* learning activities are carried out, differentiating it from content adaptation, which focuses on *what* learners’ study. While content adaptation modifies topics, examples, or cultural references, task adaptation reshapes activity structures, procedures, and interaction patterns to suit students’ proficiency levels, time constraints, or classroom resources. Examples include simplifying complex communicative tasks, restructuring group work, or redesigning role-play procedures to ensure they remain achievable and relevant to learners.

Teachers adjust communication tasks from global textbooks to match students’ language ability, available classroom resources, and time limits (Nurteteng et al., 2024). Activities that need a lot of complex language or advanced thinking are simplified into easier formats like role plays, group talks, or real-life dialogues. These changes let students practice communication in practical situations without being too overwhelmed by language challenges or unfamiliar culture.

Cultural integration is the third form, showing teachers’ increasing understanding of the importance of including local values and ethics in English lessons. Studies show that teachers often include Islamic moral values, awareness of the environment, and regional identities in their lessons to make learning more meaningful in both language and ethical terms (Al Fikri, 2025; Prasetya, 2025). This form of adaptation makes the syllabus more local and supports broader educational aims, such as character building and moral development, as promoted in the Merdeka Curriculum.

3.2. Teacher factors

Teacher-related factors play a decisive role in shaping the depth and quality of syllabus adaptation under the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge, familiarity with adaptation principles, and confidence in making autonomous curricular decisions strongly influence how far they modify global materials. Those with higher methodological literacy such as understanding how to redesign tasks, calibrate difficulty levels, or embed cultural content to conduct more substantive adaptation rather than superficial changes. In contrast, teachers with limited training in material development often remain dependent on textbook-driven instruction, resulting in minimal or surface-level localization. Moreover, teachers’ beliefs about English whether they prioritize native-speaker norms or value local communicative practices also shape adaptation decisions. This belief dimension becomes particularly significant in the Merdeka Curriculum era, where teachers are explicitly encouraged to contextualize content without abandoning global competency expectations.

3.3. Influencing factors

At the school and policy levels, structural conditions significantly mediate teachers’ adaptation practices. Resource availability including access to technology, supporting teaching materials, and professional development opportunities either enables or restricts teachers’ ability to create localized ELT materials. Schools with strong academic cultures,

collaborative teacher communities, and supportive leadership tend to generate richer adaptation practices, whereas schools with limited resources or rigid administrative requirements often constrain such innovation.

The Merdeka Curriculum itself provides autonomy in principle but offers limited operational guidance on *how* teachers should adapt global syllabuses to local contexts. As a result, many teachers struggle to balance this autonomy with the requirement to maintain alignment with national competencies and global standards such as the CEFR. The institutional pressure to prepare students for standardized assessments further complicates adaptation, leading some teachers to prioritize exam-focused content over locally relevant modifications. Another important thing is the curriculum rules. The Merdeka Curriculum lets teachers be creative and flexible in their teaching, but it does not give much help on how to change global English language teaching syllabuses into something that fits local needs (Al Fikri, 2025). This makes it hard for teachers to balance being creative with following national standards.

Also, the need to meet global standards adds another layer of difficulty. Teachers are expected to match their teaching with international standards like the CEFR, but they also have to consider the different languages and cultures of their students (Fudiyartanto, 2024). This puts them in a tough spot between following global standards and respecting local differences.

3.4. Outcomes and challenges

Fifteen studies from Scopus show that changing school lesson plans has caused some good results in education, but there are still problems that are not solved yet.

On the good side, when lesson plans are changed to match students' culture, surroundings, and beliefs, students get more involved in class, understand lessons better, and feel more excited to learn. When materials show real-life situations, students can connect them to their own experiences, which makes it easier for them to understand difficult language ideas.

But there are still problems. One is that there are not enough lesson plans made for local areas, so teachers have to change materials by themselves without help from the school or shared resources. Another problem is that teachers aren't trained well enough to create materials that match their students' culture or use adaptation techniques in a consistent way. Plus, schools often push teachers to follow strict exams or tests that are based on global standards, which makes them avoid making changes that don't fit those exams, like using local content (Pajarwati, 2021).

This means that while changing lesson plans in Indonesia has worked in some ways, it's still not done well everywhere. To make it work better, there needs to be support from schools, teamwork among teachers, and rules that allow using local content as a proper teaching method.

4. CONCLUSION

Adapting English Language Teaching (ELT) materials from around the world to fit the local situation in Indonesia is important but also quite difficult. The results of this study show that teachers are key people who help connect international teaching methods with the local

culture and society. They use different ways to adjust lessons, like making the content more relevant, making tasks easier to understand, and including local values and ethics. These efforts aim to make learning more meaningful for students. However, this process is often limited by things like not enough support from schools, not enough training for teachers, and the strong influence of international language standards that might not take local education needs into account. So, successful adaptation needs more than just teacher creativity it also needs an environment that supports and encourages new ideas and flexibility.

Looking ahead, long-term changes in the curriculum should be based on complete plans that take into account the many different cultures, languages, and policies in Indonesia. Future studies should develop and test practical models that help teachers integrate global ELT principles with local contexts under the Merdeka Curriculum. One promising direction is the Project-Based Contextual Adaptation Model (PBL-CAM), which combines project-based learning with locally relevant themes while maintaining alignment with CEFR-based indicators. This model could offer structured steps for teachers to adapt content, tasks, and assessments without sacrificing global communicative goals. Implementing such models would facilitate collaboration among teachers, material developers, and policymakers, ensuring that ELT in Indonesia remains both globally competitive and locally grounded.

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