Philosophical Foundations of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Education: Implications for English Language Teaching

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Abstract

This article aims to examine the philosophical foundations of the Merdeka Curriculum within the context of Islamic education and to explore their implications for English language teaching. The study focuses on selected philosophical orientations namely pragmatism, constructivism, and existentialism and considers their relevance to educational values commonly discussed in Islamic educational thought. A qualitative approach was employed through a literature-based study, drawing on policy documents, curriculum guidelines, and relevant philosophical and educational literature. The analysis suggests that the Merdeka Curriculum reflects philosophical tendencies that may support more contextual, dialogic, and learner-centered approaches to English language teaching, particularly in relation to communicative competence, the role of teachers, learning media, assessment practices, and student creativity. At the same time, the literature also points to potential limitations, including variations in teacher preparedness, unequal access to learning resources, and established evaluation cultures that may affect classroom implementation. The article implies that a reflective engagement with philosophical foundations especially when situated within Islamic educational perspectives may help educators approach the Merdeka Curriculum more critically, so that changes in English language instruction are not limited to technical adjustments but also involve broader shifts in educational orientation.

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum reform in Indonesia has been increasingly shaped by global educational challenges and the demand to prepare learners for the complexities of the twenty-first century (Erstad & Voogt, 2018). In response to these challenges, the Ministry of Education and Culture introduced the Merdeka Curriculum, which aims to provide greater flexibility in learning, encourage student autonomy, and support the development of competencies relevant to contemporary social, cultural, and

professional contexts (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020) (Sartono, 2020). Within this curriculum, English occupies a strategic position as a medium for global communication in academic, professional, and intercultural settings.

Despite its importance, English language teaching (ELT) in Indonesia continues to face persistent challenges. Various reports indicate that many students experience difficulties in achieving functional communicative competence, particularly in authentic and interactive contexts (Alfita et al., 2025; Fauziah & Fatayan, 2025). These challenges are often associated with pedagogical practices that remain teacher-centered, limited opportunities for meaningful interaction, and assessment systems that prioritize formal outcomes over communicative use. Consequently, curriculum reform alone does not automatically lead to substantive changes in classroom practice, especially when underlying educational orientations are not sufficiently examined (Supaat & Muslim, 2023).

In this context, it is important to recognize that the Merdeka Curriculum is not merely a technical or administrative framework, but is grounded in broader philosophical assumptions about learning, human development, and the purpose of education (Julianto et al., 2025; Miranti, 2024; Prayogi & Prihatin, 2024). Educational philosophy plays a significant role in shaping how curriculum principles are interpreted and translated into instructional practices. In the context of Islamic education, such philosophical reflection is closely related to humanistic values, character development, and the cultivation of reflective and responsible learners within a broader civilizational vision (Kassymova et al., 2025).

Several philosophical traditions are commonly identified as influencing contemporary educational reforms, including pragmatism, constructivism, and existentialism. Pragmatism emphasizes learning through experience and contextual relevance, suggesting that educational content should be meaningfully connected to learners' social realities (Hashemian & Heidari, 2013; Yaumas et al., 2023). Constructivism highlights the active role of learners in constructing knowledge through interaction and collaboration, as articulated by theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky (van der Veer, 2020; Wertsch, 2024). Existentialism, as discussed by thinkers such as Sartre and Kierkegaard, underscores individual freedom, self-understanding, and the search for meaning dimensions that are often linked to character education and personal development.

In the field of English language teaching, these philosophical orientations may offer conceptual insights into learner-centered instruction, communicative competence, collaborative learning, and creative language use. For instance, contextualized learning activities, group discussions, and reflective language tasks may align with these philosophical perspectives and support more meaningful language engagement (Sun & Looi, 2013; Tufiqurrahman & Junaidi, 2021; Wiliam, 2018). However, the extent to which such philosophical foundations are consciously understood and applied by educators remains varied, particularly in relation to teacher preparedness, resource availability, and established evaluation cultures.

Although a growing body of research has examined the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and pedagogical strategies in English language classrooms, relatively limited attention has been paid to its underlying philosophical foundations, especially when viewed from the perspective of Islamic education. Existing studies tend to focus on practical or instructional aspects, while the philosophical assumptions that shape educational paradigms and values are less frequently explored (Htay et al., 2025; Okenova et al., 2025). This gap suggests the need for a more reflective analysis that situates curriculum reform within its broader philosophical context.

Therefore, this article aims to analyze the philosophical foundations of the Merdeka Curriculum and to explore their implications for English language teaching

within the context of Islamic education. By employing a qualitative literature-based approach, the study seeks to provide a conceptual understanding of how pragmatism, constructivism, and existentialism may inform ELT practices beyond technical adjustments. It is expected that this analysis may contribute to ongoing discussions on curriculum reform by offering a philosophical lens through which English language instruction can be understood as part of a broader educational and civilizational project.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative design based on document analysis and a literature review. This approach was selected to facilitate an in-depth examination of the educational philosophy underlying the Merdeka Curriculum and its implications for English language teaching. The primary sources consisted of academic literature on educational philosophy, official policy documents related to the Merdeka Curriculum, and scholarly works on English language education (Bozkurt et al., 2015; Engkizar Engkizar et al., 2023; Gergen, 2020; Pohontsch, 2019; Roller, 2019).

Document analysis focused on official publications issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia that outline the principles and structure of the Merdeka Curriculum. In addition, academic books and peer-reviewed journal articles discussing educational philosophy particularly pragmatism, constructivism, and existentialism were examined to establish a broader theoretical context. Relevant previous studies addressing the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum were also reviewed to identify reported instructional practices related to English language teaching.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and conceptual themes within the documents and literature. These themes were then interpreted through an educational philosophy lens to explore how philosophical principles are reflected in curriculum orientation and instructional implications. This analytical process enabled a systematic interpretation of philosophical assumptions embedded in the Merdeka Curriculum without relying on empirical classroom data (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Engkizar et al., 2025; Hassan & Duarte, 2024; Lawless & Chen, 2019).

Through this qualitative approach, the study emphasizes conceptual understanding rather than empirical measurement, aiming to provide a reflective analysis of curriculum philosophy and its relevance to English language teaching. The methodology is intended to support theoretical discussion and offer insights that may inform future pedagogical reflection and policy-oriented discourse.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Manifestations of Pragmatism in English Language Teaching

The analysis of policy documents and relevant literature indicates that pragmatism constitutes one of the philosophical orientations reflected in the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in its emphasis on contextualized and experience-based learning. In the context of English language teaching, this orientation is commonly associated with instructional practices that prioritize the practical use of language and its relevance to learners' everyday experiences.

One manifestation of pragmatic principles can be observed in the use of authentic learning materials. Several studies highlight the incorporation of real-life texts such as news articles, audiovisual media, and digital content as a means of connecting language learning with students' social realities. Previous research suggests that authentic materials may support learner motivation and help students perceive English as a functional tool for communication beyond the classroom (Marhamah, 2022; Sitanggang & Munthe, 2023; Wilkes et al., 2020). Within the

Merdeka Curriculum framework, such practices align with the broader goal of making learning more meaningful and context-sensitive.

Pragmatism is also reflected in the adoption of problem-based and communicative learning tasks. The reviewed literature indicates that English language instruction increasingly encourages collaborative activities, including group discussions and problem-solving tasks related to contemporary issues. These activities are intended to engage students actively in the learning process while fostering communicative competence. Studies such as Albaab et al (2025); Septiani (2022); Sukowati & Harjono (2023) report that problem-based approaches are associated not only with language development but also with the enhancement of collaborative and critical thinking skills, which are emphasized in the Merdeka Curriculum.

In addition, the integration of digital media emerges as another pragmatic element in English language teaching. Advances in educational technology have enabled teachers to utilize digital platforms, language-learning applications, interactive videos, and online discussion forums to support flexible learning environments. Reports from international organizations, including UNESCO (2022), suggest that technology-enhanced learning may increase accessibility and allow learners to engage with language learning across diverse contexts. These developments are consistent with the pragmatic emphasis on adaptability and responsiveness to learners' needs (Graham et al., 2016; Schwab & Lew-Williams, 2016; Wilkes et al., 2020).

However, the literature also points to several challenges in the practical implementation of pragmatic-oriented instruction. Teacher readiness remains a recurring issue, as some educators continue to rely on traditional instructional models that emphasize memorization and grammatical accuracy. A survey reported by the Center for Educational Research (2023) indicates that a significant proportion of teachers still prefer conventional approaches, which may limit the full realization of pragmatic principles within classroom practice. This finding suggests that institutional support and professional development are necessary to facilitate pedagogical shifts aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum (Harris & Hofer, 2011; Kristanti et al., 2024; Latifah, 2023; Moslimany et al., 2024).

Overall, the findings indicate that the manifestation of pragmatism in English language teaching under the Merdeka Curriculum is reflected in efforts to promote contextual, communicative, and flexible learning practices. Rather than focusing solely on linguistic knowledge, these practices emphasize the functional use of language in real-world situations. This orientation supports the view that educational objectives extend beyond content mastery to include the preparation of learners for practical and social challenges in contemporary contexts.

Men's Roles as Husbands

From the perspective of Islamic teachings, men hold extensive responsibilities as husbands, which extend beyond formal or administrative roles and encompass profound moral and spiritual dimensions (Abdad et al., 2025). The role of a husband requires the capacity to lead the family with justice, wisdom, and a strong sense of responsibility, enabling the household to function as a harmonious social unit grounded in Islamic values. Husbands are regarded as protectors and guardians of the family, with responsibilities that include fulfilling economic needs, providing emotional support, and offering spiritual guidance to all family members (Suhaili, 2025).

One of the most fundamental responsibilities of a husband in Islam is the provision of *nafāqah* (financial support), which entails ensuring that the economic needs of the wife and children are adequately met. This obligation is emphasized in Surah Al-Baqarah (2:233), which highlights the fulfillment of basic family needs as an

integral part of the husband's trust. The responsibility of *nafāqah* is not limited to material provision alone, but also includes efforts to meet educational, health, and overall welfare needs of the family (Karim et al., 2018). By fulfilling this economic responsibility, husbands can foster a stable and harmonious family environment while preventing inequality or conflict within the household (Yakin & Ma'arif, 2025). Financial provision thus serves as a foundational pillar for maintaining family stability in accordance with Islamic values.

In addition to material responsibilities, the role of a husband also encompasses functioning as a life partner and companion to his wife. A husband is expected to cultivate open and effective communication, mutual support, and emotional closeness within the marital relationship (Mardiyah et al., 2025). This role underscores the importance of cooperation, mutual understanding, and respect between spouses, thereby fostering a harmonious household. A husband who effectively fulfills his role as a partner contributes to emotional stability within the family, strengthens marital bonds, and provides a positive example for children in developing healthy, empathetic social relationships (Watopa & Kasingku, 2025).

Furthermore, a husband's leadership within the household should be grounded in principles of justice and collective well-being. Decision-making should be balanced, inclusive of mutual consultation (*shūrà*), and free from unilateral or domineering practices. Just leadership encompasses various aspects of family life, including household management, the distribution of responsibilities among family members, and decisions that affect the welfare of the wife and children (Syahrizan & Siregar, 2025). Accordingly, the role of the husband extends beyond formal authority as head of the household to that of a moral and spiritual guide who nurtures and educates family members, ensuring that family life remains harmonious and aligned with Islamic values (Adib et al., 2024).

Overall, the role of a husband in Islam emphasizes the need for balance between material responsibility, emotional support, and moral and spiritual leadership. These interconnected dimensions collectively form the foundation of a harmonious, just, and productive household. A husband who fulfills these roles effectively not only ensures the comprehensive well-being of his family but also plays a vital role in the formation of a civilized society (Nnubia et al., 2025), as strong and harmonious families constitute the fundamental units underpinning a stable, balanced, and just social order.

The findings regarding the manifestation of pragmatism in English language teaching suggest that the Merdeka Curriculum reflects a broader shift toward experiential and context-sensitive learning. From a philosophical perspective, this orientation resonates with Dewey's view of education as a process rooted in lived experience, where learning becomes meaningful when it is connected to real-life situations (Mustaghfiroh, 2020; Suhendi et al., 2021). In the context of English language education, the emphasis on authentic materials, problem-based tasks, and digital media may be interpreted as an attempt to bridge the gap between classroom instruction and practical language use.

However, the adoption of pragmatic principles in curriculum design does not automatically guarantee their effective realization in classroom practice. The literature indicates that pedagogical transformation depends largely on teachers' philosophical understanding of curriculum change, rather than on procedural compliance alone. When pragmatic approaches are reduced to technical strategies such as the mere use of projects or digital tools without a corresponding shift in educational orientation, the intended learner-centered outcomes may remain limited. This observation aligns with previous studies that emphasize the role of teacher beliefs in mediating curriculum implementation.

Within the framework of Islamic education, the pragmatic orientation of the Merdeka Curriculum may also be viewed through a humanistic lens (Alfian et al., 2025; Sirait et al., 2024). Contextual and experiential learning can support the development of responsible and reflective learners when aligned with ethical values and character formation. In this sense, pragmatism does not stand in opposition to Islamic educational principles, but may complement them by encouraging learners to apply knowledge meaningfully within social and moral contexts. English language learning, therefore, may function not only as a means of communication, but also as a medium for cultivating intercultural awareness and ethical engagement (Albshkar et al., 2025; Hamzah et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, the challenges identified in the findings point to structural and institutional factors that may constrain the philosophical aspirations of the curriculum. Limited professional development opportunities, uneven access to technological resources, and entrenched assessment practices can hinder the translation of pragmatic ideals into consistent instructional practices. These constraints suggest that curriculum reform should be accompanied by sustained support systems that address both pedagogical capacity and philosophical orientation (Herawati & Ainil Mawaddah, 2023; Zhao, 2023).

Overall, the discussion indicates that pragmatism, as reflected in the Merdeka Curriculum, provides a conceptual foundation for rethinking English language teaching beyond traditional transmission-based models. Its effectiveness, however, appears to depend on the extent to which educators critically engage with its philosophical assumptions and integrate them coherently into teaching practices. Future studies may consider examining how teachers interpret and negotiate these philosophical dimensions in diverse educational settings, particularly within Islamic education contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that the Merdeka Curriculum is underpinned by multiple educational philosophies namely pragmatism, constructivism, and existentialism that collectively inform its orientation toward learner-centered and humanistic education, including in the context of English language teaching. Pragmatism emphasizes experiential and contextual learning, constructivism foregrounds knowledge construction through interaction and collaboration, and existentialism underscores learner agency and personal relevance in the learning process. Together, these philosophical foundations suggest that English language instruction may move beyond technical language mastery toward meaningful, reflective, and socially situated practices. However, the effective realization of these philosophical orientations remains contingent upon teachers' pedagogical understanding, institutional support, and the alignment of assessment practices with process-oriented learning principles. Moreover, English within the Merdeka Curriculum serves not only as a communicative skill but also as a medium for global engagement and intercultural awareness. A reflective engagement with the curriculum's philosophical foundations may therefore support a more coherent educational approach, enabling English language teaching to respond to both local educational values and contemporary global demands.

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