

Progressivism Beliefs and Goals in English Learning and Teaching Related Merdeka Curriculum: A PRISMA-Guided Systematic Literature Review**Abraham Adiel Yudhawastu Pramudya ^{1*}, Ilza Mayuni ², Bambang Nur Alamsyah Lubis ³, Martjin Van Driel ⁴**¹ *State University of Jakarta, Indonesia*^{2,3} *University of Jakarta, Indonesia*⁴ *The Albeda College Rotterdam, Netherlands*✉ abrahamyudhas2@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

Progressivism, often associated with Deweyan “learning by doing”, democratic classrooms, and the primacy of learners’ interests, has re-emerged as an implicit philosophical foundation of Indonesia’s recent curriculum reform, particularly the Merdeka Curriculum and the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy. Yet empirical and conceptual evidence about how progressivism beliefs and goals are translated into English language teaching (ELT) across Indonesian schooling and higher education remains fragmented. This study, therefore conducts a PRISMA-guided systematic literature review (SLR) to synthesise progressivism beliefs (what teachers, curricula, and institutions assume about learning and learners) and progressivism goals (what outcomes are prioritised) in ELT related to the Merdeka Curriculum. Following a PRISMA-P-informed protocol, we applied a PICOC framework to develop search strings and eligibility criteria, and screened publications (2017–2025) from ScienceDirect, DOAJ, ERIC, Google Scholar, and Indonesian peer-reviewed journal portals. After de-duplication, title abstract screening, full text assessment, and quality appraisal using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), 27 studies were included for thematic synthesis. The review identifies five convergent themes: (1) learner agency and autonomy as a core belief and goal; (2) experiential and inquiry driven ELT through project/problem/task based learning; (3) authentic, formative, and performance based assessment practices; (4) character, civic, and intercultural formation aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile; and (5) teacher role transformation from knowledge transmitter to designer, facilitator, and reflective practitioner. However, the evidence also highlights persistent constraints teacher readiness, assessment literacy, resource inequity, and policy practice misalignment that weaken progressivist enactment. The novelty of this SLR lies in its explicit mapping of progressivism constructs to Merdeka Curriculum ELT practices, producing a practical framework for curriculum implementation, teacher education, and research.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia’s current wave of curriculum reform has intensified the demand for educational approaches that develop learners’ agency, creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking competencies widely associated with 21st-century learning and global employability. Policy documents framing the Merdeka Curriculum emphasize flexibility, differentiated learning, and meaningful learning experiences through projects and authentic tasks. In parallel, MBKM extends this ethos to higher education by expanding students’ learning rights beyond the study program

and by encouraging cross-disciplinary and community-based learning experiences. These reforms are also situated within broader concerns about learning outcomes and equity in international assessments, including the PISA 2022 cycle reported by the OECD, which has been widely used as a policy reference point for strengthening teaching quality and curriculum coherence (O.e.c.d, 2023). Within ELT, the Merdeka Curriculum is expected to shift classroom practice from content transmission to communicative, experiential, and learner-centered pedagogy that supports students' linguistic competence and character formation. However, translating curriculum philosophy into day-to-day ELT practice is not straightforward. Studies on early implementation report that teachers often interpret "merdeka" as administrative flexibility rather than as a coherent pedagogical stance, and many struggle to design projects, differentiate instruction, and implement authentic assessment aligned with curriculum outcomes (Rambe & Suganda, 2023; Tricahyati & Zaim, 2023). In higher education, MBKM implementation has similarly been described as uneven, with gaps in curriculum redesign, partnership ecosystems, and assessment systems to recognise learning that occurs outside the classroom (Irawan et al., 2022; Wahyuni et al., 2023).

Although the philosophical language of Merdeka Curriculum resonates strongly with progressivism, particularly Dewey's ideas about experience, inquiry, and democratic participation, the existing research base remains fragmented in at least four ways. First, many studies discuss Merdeka Belajar/MBKM primarily as a policy innovation without explicitly analyzing its philosophical foundations or operational definitions of "progressive" learning in ELT (Irawan et al., 2022; Kusumawati & Astuti, 2022). Second, papers that do engage philosophy tend to be conceptual discussions of progressivism or humanism, offering a limited synthesis of empirical evidence from ELT settings (Mustaghfiroh, 2020; Susilawati, 2021). Third, ELT-focused studies frequently examine isolated practices (e.g., project-based learning, contextual learning, or teacher readiness) but do not integrate these practices into a coherent map of progressivism beliefs (assumptions about learning) and progressivism goals (intended outcomes) within the Merdeka Curriculum (Rambe & Suganda, 2023; Tricahyati & Zaim, 2023). Fourth, prior reviews related to progressivism in Indonesian curricula are either limited to specific levels (e.g., elementary education) or do not apply a transparent PRISMA protocol and PICOC-guided search and screening procedures, which weakens replicability and cumulative knowledge building (Ramadani & Desyandri, 2022; Utami & Utari, 2023).

Addressing these gaps matters for both theory and practice. Theoretically, clarifying how progressivism is conceptualized in ELT under the Merdeka Curriculum can strengthen the alignment between educational philosophy, curriculum design, and pedagogical models such as project-based and task-based learning. Practically, a systematic synthesis can inform teacher education, professional development, and assessment policy by identifying what enables or inhibits the enactment of learner-centered, experiential ELT across diverse Indonesian contexts. For policymakers and curriculum designers, the review can help specify implementable indicators of progressive learning that go beyond slogans, thereby supporting monitoring and improvement. Accordingly, this article aims to synthesize how progressivism beliefs and goals are represented and enacted in English learning and teaching related to the Merdeka Curriculum.

Two research questions guide the review:

1. What progressivism beliefs are articulated in the literature on ELT related to the Merdeka Curriculum?
2. What progressivism goals are prioritized, and how are they operationalized through ELT pedagogy and assessment?

The unique contribution of this study is threefold. First, it applies a PRISMA 2020-guided SLR design, supported by a PRISMA-P informed protocol, to provide a transparent and replicable synthesis. Second, it uses a PICOC framework to focus the review on ELT within the Merdeka Curriculum/MBKM context while allowing relevant comparative evidence from learner-centered pedagogy and progressive ELT practices. Third, it produces an explicit mapping framework that links progressivism beliefs and goals to concrete ELT implementation strategies (pedagogy, assessment, and teacher development), which have been largely absent in prior Indonesian-focused discussions.

Conceptual Framework

This review uses progressivism as a conceptual lens to interpret how the Merdeka Curriculum's policy language becomes pedagogical meaning in ELT. Progressivism is not treated as a single method but as a family of beliefs and goals that shape decisions about curriculum content, learning activities, teacher roles, assessment, and classroom relationships. To ensure conceptual clarity, this section outlines (a) core constructs of progressivism, (b) how these constructs align with contemporary learner-centered ELT, and (c) key design principles of the Merdeka Curriculum/MBKM that foreground progressivist orientations.

2.1 Core ideas of progressivism

Progressivism is commonly associated with the philosophical tradition of pragmatism and the educational writings of John Dewey. In this tradition, knowledge is viewed as provisional and action-oriented: it emerges from inquiry into real problems and is validated through its consequences in lived experience. Education, therefore, prioritizes experience, inquiry, and reflective thinking over rote memorization. The classroom is conceptualized as a miniature democratic community where learners practice participation, collaboration, and responsibility, and where the teacher designs environments that stimulate curiosity and problem-solving rather than merely deliver information. Contemporary scholarship continues to interpret Deweyan progressivism as a commitment to democratic educational purposes, the ethics of participation, and the idea that learning is fundamentally relational and situated (Tubbs, 2023). Dewey's legacy has also been discussed in recent reference works as a cornerstone of progressive education and curriculum reform, particularly regarding the centrality of experience and inquiry (Kirlin, 2021; Misak, 2018).

2.2 Progressivism beliefs and goals as analytical constructs

For analytical purposes, this review differentiates between progressivism beliefs and goals. Progressivism beliefs refer to assumptions about (1) learners (active agents with interests and prior experiences), (2) knowledge (constructed and usable), (3) learning (experiential, inquiry-driven, and collaborative), and (4) teaching (design and facilitation). Progressivism goals refer to intended outcomes, such as learner autonomy, problem-solving competence, democratic participation, creativity, and social responsibility. In curriculum studies, the distinction helps clarify why certain ELT practices, such as project-based learning, task-based learning, collaborative inquiry, and portfolio assessment, are considered progressivist: not because they are fashionable methods, but because they operationalize beliefs about learning and are directed toward goals beyond narrow test performance.

2.3 Progressivism in learner-centered ELT

In ELT, progressivism is often expressed through learner-centered and communicative pedagogies that position students as meaning-makers and language users. The construct of learner-centeredness, however, is frequently interpreted in diverse and sometimes conflicting ways across contexts (Bremner, 2021). Comparative research highlights that learner-centered reform is shaped by local norms, institutional incentives, and assessment regimes; when these conditions are ignored, learner-centered policies may produce superficial compliance rather than genuine pedagogical change (Bremner, 2020; Starkey, 2017). Systematic reviews of learner-centered pedagogy in low- and middle-income contexts indicate that teachers and students often perceive learner-centered approaches positively, yet objective evidence of learning impact is uneven, underscoring the need for context-sensitive implementation and rigorous evaluation (Bremner et al., 2022). Within ELT, progressivism beliefs and goals can be operationalized through several well-documented pedagogical families. First, project-based learning (PjBL) and project-based language learning encourage students to create products, solve authentic problems, and use language as a tool for meaning-focused collaboration. A review of PjBL in higher education found that affective outcomes (e.g., motivation and perceptions) are commonly reported, while measurement of cognitive and behavioral outcomes remains methodologically varied—an important caution for curriculum evaluation (Guo et al., 2020). Second, task-based language teaching (TBLT) aligns with progressivism by organizing learning around communicative tasks. A meta-analysis of TBLT implementation reported a strong overall

positive effect across learning outcomes, while also noting the importance of needs analysis and sustained implementation cycles (Bryfonski & McKay, 2019). Third, authentic and formative assessment—such as portfolios, performance tasks, peer feedback, and criteria-referenced rubrics—connects assessment with real-world language use and supports learning as an ongoing process rather than as one-time testing (Wiliam, 2011, 2017). Systematic review evidence indicates that authentic assessment can foster key 21st-century skills (critical thinking, collaboration, and problem solving), although successful implementation depends on stakeholder buy-in and assessment literacy (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2024).

2.4 Merdeka Curriculum and MBKM as policy expressions of progressivism

The Merdeka Curriculum, introduced in stages within Indonesia’s education system, aims to provide schools and teachers with greater flexibility to adapt learning to students’ needs and local contexts. Key policy components include differentiated instruction, project-based learning through the “Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila” (P5), and the strengthening of literacy and numeracy across subjects. At the higher-education level, MBKM expands students’ learning rights and recognizes learning experiences beyond the campus through internships, community projects, research, teaching assistance, and other forms of experiential learning. Although these policy moves are often framed in administrative terms, several Indonesian scholars explicitly connect MBKM and Merdeka Belajar to progressive education, arguing that student autonomy, learning experiences, and contextual problem solving are central to the reform’s rationale (Mustaghfiroh, 2020; Ramadani & Desyandri, 2022; Susilawati, 2021). Taken together, progressivism offers a coherent lens for interpreting the Merdeka Curriculum’s aspirations for ELT: learning experiences are expected to be meaningful, contextual, inquiry-driven, and oriented toward holistic outcomes. The following methods section explains how the SLR was designed to systematically identify and synthesize evidence on these beliefs and goals.

METHODS

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) design. Unlike traditional narrative reviews, an SLR applies explicit, transparent, and replicable procedures for searching, screening, appraising, and synthesizing prior research to answer predefined research questions. We followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 reporting guideline (Page, McKenzie, et al., 2021; Page, Moher, et al., 2021). To strengthen methodological planning, the review procedures were pre-specified using the PRISMA-P 2015 protocol checklist (Moher et al., 2015; Shamseer et al., 2015). Because education SLRs are not always eligible for registration in PROSPERO, the protocol was not registered, but the main components (search strategy, eligibility criteria, screening steps, and synthesis plan) are documented in this article to ensure transparency.

3.1 PICOC framework

To operationalize the scope of the review and to translate the research questions into searchable concepts, we applied a PICOC framework (Population, Intervention/Issue, Comparison, Outcome, Context). PICOC is commonly used in evidence synthesis to clarify what evidence is being sought and to reduce ambiguity in search strings and inclusion criteria (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007). In this review, PICOC was adapted for education research as shown in Table 1.

| PICOC component | Operationalization in this review |
|-------------------------|--|
| Population (P) | EFL/ESL teachers, learners, and teacher educators; English departments/ programs; Indonesian schools and higher-education institutions implementing Merdeka Curriculum/MBKM. |
| Intervention/ Issue (I) | Progressivism beliefs and goals; learner-centered, experiential, inquiry-based, democratic pedagogy; ELT curriculum implementation related to Merdeka Curriculum/MBKM. |

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Comparison (C) | Where available: comparisons to prior curricula (e.g., 2013 Curriculum), teacher-centered approaches, exam-oriented practices, or non-progressivist philosophies (essentialism/perennialism). |
| Outcomes (O) | Mapped beliefs and goals; pedagogical practices (PjBL/TBLT/CLT, inquiry, differentiated instruction); assessment practices (authentic/formative); teacher readiness and professional learning; learner outcomes (agency, motivation, 21st-century skills). |
| Context (C) | Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum (schools) and MBKM (higher education), including policy documents, implementation studies, and ELT-specific literature (2017–2025). |

Table 1. PICOC framework for the review.

3.2 Information sources and search strategy

Searches were conducted for literature published between January 2017 and December 2025. The time window was selected to capture the most recent discussions and evidence around the lead-up to Merdeka policy reforms and their early implementation, while still allowing inclusion of relevant pre-policy literature on progressivist ELT practices used as conceptual comparators. We searched four major sources to balance international indexing and Indonesian open-access publication practices: (1) ScienceDirect (Elsevier) for international peer-reviewed articles; (2) DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals) for open-access journals, including Indonesian journals; (3) ERIC for education research indexing; and (4) Google Scholar to capture Indonesian journals not consistently indexed elsewhere. In addition, we manually checked the reference lists of included papers (backward snowballing) to identify relevant studies not captured by the initial search.

Search strings were built iteratively based on PICOC terms and pilot searches. Key terms included: "progressivism" OR "progressive education" OR "Dewey" OR "pragmatism"; combined with ELT terms such as "English language teaching", "EFL", "TESOL", "English curriculum", and policy terms such as "Merdeka Curriculum", "Kurikulum Merdeka", "Merdeka Belajar", "Kampus Merdeka", and "MBKM". A representative Boolean string used in ScienceDirect was: (progressivism OR "progressive education" OR Dewey OR pragmatism) AND ("English language teaching" OR EFL OR TESOL OR "English curriculum") AND ("Merdeka Curriculum" OR "Kurikulum Merdeka" OR "Merdeka Belajar" OR "Kampus Merdeka" OR MBKM OR Indonesia).

3.3 Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility criteria were defined before screening to reduce selection bias. Inclusion criteria were: (a) peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, or scholarly reviews; (b) published 2017–2025; (c) written in English or Indonesian; (d) explicitly addressed progressivism/progressive education/learner-centered philosophy and/or Merdeka Curriculum/MBKM in relation to ELT; and (e) provided empirical evidence, theoretical analysis, or implementation insights relevant to progressivism beliefs or goals. Exclusion criteria were: (a) non-scholarly sources (news, blogs without institutional authority); (b) studies unrelated to ELT (e.g., purely STEM curriculum without language component); (c) documents without accessible full text; and (d) duplicate publications.

3.4 Study Selection Procedure

The study selection followed PRISMA 2020 stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The initial search retrieved 512 records. After removing 96 duplicates, 416 records remained for title and abstract screening. A total of 340 records were excluded at this stage because they did not relate to ELT, did not address progressivism/learner-centered philosophy,

or did not involve the Merdeka Curriculum/MBKM context. Seventy-six full texts were assessed for eligibility; 49 were excluded with the main reasons being insufficient relevance to progressivism beliefs/goals (n = 18), not ELT-focused (n = 15), non-peer-reviewed/insufficient scholarly quality (n = 9), and inaccessible full text (n = 7). The final synthesis included 27 studies. Table 2 summarizes the PRISMA flow numerically.

| PRISMA stage | Records (n) |
|---|-------------|
| Records identified through database searching | 512 |
| Duplicates removed | 96 |
| Records screened (title/abstract) | 416 |
| Records excluded (title/abstract) | 340 |
| Full-text articles assessed for eligibility | 76 |
| Full-text articles excluded, with reasons | 49 |
| Studies included in qualitative synthesis | 27 |

Table 2. PRISMA flow summary (numerical).

3.5 Quality Appraisal, Data Extraction and Synthesis

To appraise methodological quality across diverse designs (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods), we used the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 (Hong et al., 2018). Each included study was assessed against design-specific criteria such as appropriateness of sampling, measurement, data analysis, and coherence between data and interpretation. Quality appraisal was used to support interpretive caution and to prioritize higher-quality evidence during synthesis; no study was excluded solely based on MMAT score because the review also sought to map conceptual discussions and policy interpretations.

A structured data extraction form was used to capture bibliographic information (author, year), education level (school/higher education), setting (Indonesia/other), research design, data sources, progressivism beliefs (conceptualized assumptions), progressivism goals (stated aims/outcomes), ELT pedagogical strategies, assessment approaches, and reported implementation challenges and enablers. Given the heterogeneity of study designs and outcomes, we used qualitative thematic synthesis rather than meta-analysis. Thematic synthesis involves systematic coding of findings and concepts across studies to generate descriptive and analytical themes (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Coding was conducted iteratively: first-cycle codes captured explicit statements about beliefs and goals; second-cycle codes clustered similar constructs into higher-order themes (e.g., learner autonomy, experiential inquiry, authentic assessment). The final themes were validated by checking whether they were supported by multiple sources and whether they coherently explained the relationship between progressivism and Merdeka Curriculum ELT implementation.

RESULTS

Characteristics of included studies

Across the 27 included studies, publication output increased markedly after the introduction of Merdeka Belajar/MBKM as a national agenda, with the largest concentration appearing in 2022–2024. Most studies were situated in Indonesian education settings, although several papers used international learner-centered and assessment scholarship as the primary analytical frame for interpreting Indonesian reforms. In terms of education level, 16 studies focused on school-based ELT (primary to senior secondary), 9 studies focused on higher education (English departments or teacher education programs), and 2 studies examined cross-level policy implementation. Regarding methodology, qualitative approaches (case study, interviews, document analysis) were most frequent (n = 12), followed by quantitative survey designs (n = 9), and mixed methods designs (n = 6). The diversity of designs supports rich thematic synthesis, but it also explains why effect-size meta-analysis was not feasible.

| Characteristic | Summary |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Publication period | 2017–2025 (majority 2022–2024) |
| Total included studies | 27 |

| Characteristic | Summary |
|-------------------------|---|
| Education level focus | School ELT (n=16); Higher education/MBKM (n=9); Cross-level (n=2) |
| Methodological approach | Qualitative (n=12); Quantitative (n=9); Mixed methods (n=6) |
| Primary focus | Teacher readiness and beliefs; curriculum interpretation; PjBL/TBLT/CTL implementation; assessment practices; policy alignment. |

Table 3. Summary characteristics of included studies.

4.2 Thematic synthesis of progressivism beliefs and goals

Theme 1: Learner agency and autonomy as a foundational belief and goal

Across the literature, “merdeka” was most consistently interpreted as student agency – students’ right and capacity to make choices, express interests, and take responsibility for learning. Philosophically oriented studies argue that the Merdeka agenda reflects progressivism by positioning learners as active subjects rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Mustaghfiroh, 2020; Ramadani & Desyandri, 2022). In higher education, MBKM is framed as expanding learners’ agency through curriculum flexibility and experiential learning beyond campus boundaries (Irawan et al., 2022; Wahyuni et al., 2023). In school contexts, studies of early Merdeka implementation emphasise autonomy in classroom decision making, student voice in project design, and differentiated pathways aligned with learners’ readiness and interests (Rambe & Suganda, 2023). Psychological evidence from language learning research also supports the claim that perceived autonomy is closely linked to engagement, motivation, and sustained effort, which are necessary conditions for communicative language development (Aftab et al., 2019).

Theme 2: Experiential and inquiry-driven ELT through projects, problems, and tasks

A second theme concerns the instructional translation of progressivism: learning is expected to occur through experience, inquiry, and the construction of meaningful products. Multiple Indonesian ELT studies report the use of project-based learning (PjBL) as a signature practice under Merdeka, especially within Sekolah Penggerak contexts where P5 projects are institutionally promoted (Rambe & Suganda, 2023). Project-based ELT is portrayed as enabling integrated language skills (speaking, writing, multimodal composing) while also cultivating collaboration and creativity outcomes aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum and broader 21st-century skills discourse (Rambe & Suganda, 2023; Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2024). International syntheses complement these findings by showing that PjBL tends to yield strong affective gains (motivation, confidence), though measurement of cognitive outcomes varies and requires robust assessment design (Guo et al., 2020; Kokotsaki et al., 2016). Beyond PjBL, task-based language teaching (TBLT) also appears as a compatible progressivist approach because it organizes learning around authentic communicative tasks rather than around isolated grammar points. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that sustained TBLT implementation can produce strong effects across learning outcomes, particularly when supported by needs analysis and iterative implementation cycles (Bryfonski & McKay, 2019).

Theme 3: Democratic, collaborative, and context-responsive learning

Progressivism is not only about activity but also about social relations and democratic participation. Across the reviewed studies, collaborative learning is treated as both a belief (learning is socially constructed) and a goal (learners develop communication and collaboration competencies). This resonates with conceptual frameworks of student-centered education that emphasize shared authority, relational trust, and meaningful participation (Starkey, 2017). In the Indonesian policy context, the Pancasila Student Profile is frequently referenced as an overarching goal structure emphasizing faith and morality, global diversity, cooperation, critical reasoning, creativity, and independence, which mirrors progressivist concerns with holistic, civic-oriented outcomes. The reviewed ELT literature connects these goals to classroom practices such as peer interaction, group projects, and community-based learning tasks. However,

international evidence also warns that learner-centered reforms can be undermined when classroom authority structures remain rigid or when high-stakes exams dominate instructional time, leading to “symbolic” learner-centeredness rather than substantive change (Bremner, 2020; Bremner et al., 2022).

Theme 4: Authentic and formative assessment as a condition for progressivist ELT

A fourth theme concerns assessment. Because progressivism emphasizes learning processes, reflective inquiry, and the application of knowledge in authentic contexts, assessment systems must move beyond one-time summative testing. The literature strongly highlights formative assessment and authentic performance tasks as progressivist assessment strategies. Seminal assessment scholarship defines assessment for learning as the use of evidence about learning to adapt teaching and support students’ next learning steps (Wiliam, 2011). More recent work highlights ongoing tensions between research and classroom realities, especially in exam-oriented systems (Wang, 2017; Wiliam, 2017). A systematic review of authentic assessment in higher education found that authentic assessment can support 21st-century skills development, but requires clear criteria, stakeholder training, and institutional alignment (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2024). In Indonesian ELT settings, teachers’ assessment literacy and workload constraints were repeatedly cited as barriers to implementing portfolios, rubrics, and peer/self-assessment at scale (Tricahyati & Zaim, 2023).

Theme 5: Teacher role transformation and implementation constraints

Finally, the literature repeatedly emphasizes that progressivist curriculum implementation depends on teachers’ interpretations, beliefs, and professional capabilities. Under progressivism, teachers are expected to function as learning designers who curate experiences, scaffold inquiry, and facilitate collaboration rather than as sole transmitters of knowledge. Studies of Merdeka implementation in ELT report that many teachers support the idea of student-centered learning but feel underprepared in designing projects, differentiating instruction, and conducting authentic assessment (Rambe & Suganda, 2023; Tricahyati & Zaim, 2023). At the university level, MBKM implementation also requires institutional curriculum redesign and partnerships, which shape whether experiential learning opportunities are meaningful or merely formalities (Irawan et al., 2022; Wahyuni et al., 2023). International literature on learner-centered reform similarly shows that the success of student-centered pedagogy depends on coherent policy signals, sustained professional learning, resource support, and assessment systems that reward inquiry and competence rather than rote reproduction (Bremner, 2020; Bremner et al., 2022).

4.3 Mapping progressivism to Merdeka Curriculum ELT practices

To make the synthesis actionable, Table 4 maps progressivism beliefs and goals to concrete Merdeka Curriculum ELT implementation strategies. The mapping is not a prescriptive recipe; rather, it functions as an analytic tool for diagnosing alignment across curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

| Progressivism belief | Progressivism goal | Merdeka Curriculum/MBKM design feature | Illustrative ELT operationalization |
|---|---|---|---|
| Belief: Learners are active agents with interests and prior experiences | Goal: Learner autonomy, self-regulated learning | Merdeka Curriculum feature: differentiated learning; student choice in projects | ELT operationalization: student-selected topics; choice of texts/media; learning contracts; autonomy-supportive teacher talk. |
| Belief: Knowledge is constructed through inquiry into real problems | Goal: critical thinking; problem solving | Merdeka Curriculum feature: project-based learning (P5); contextual learning | ELT operationalization: inquiry cycles; problem-based tasks; |

| Progressivism belief | Progressivism goal | Merdeka Curriculum/MBKM design feature | Illustrative ELT operationalization |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | authentic information search; argumentation and reasoning in English. |
| Belief: Language is learned through meaningful use and interaction | Goal: communicative competence; collaboration | Merdeka Curriculum feature: collaborative projects; community engagement | ELT operationalization: TBLT; collaborative writing/speaking; peer feedback; service-learning tasks. |
| Belief: Assessment should support learning and reflect real-world performance | Goal: 21st-century skills; performance competence | Merdeka Curriculum feature: authentic assessment; flexible evidence of learning | ELT operationalization: portfolios; performance rubrics; presentations; product evaluation; formative feedback routines. |
| Belief: Schooling should support democratic, civic, and character formation | Goal: Pancasila Student Profile; intercultural competence | Merdeka Curriculum feature: P5 values; global diversity orientation | ELT operationalization: intercultural projects; discussion of local-global issues; collaborative norms and classroom citizenship. |

Table 4. Mapping progressivism beliefs and goals to Merdeka Curriculum ELT implementation.

DISCUSSION

This review aimed to synthesise beliefs and goals related to progressivism in English Language Teaching (ELT) in the context of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum/MBKM agenda, using a transparent, PRISMA-guided procedure. The thematic synthesis indicates that, in the reviewed literature, progressivism is not merely an ideological label; rather, it is reflected in a cluster of pedagogical commitments (e.g. agency, experience, inquiry, collaboration and authenticity) that can be traced from policy language to classroom practices. However, implementation constraints demonstrate that progressivism is fragile: when teacher capacity, assessment systems and institutional support are misaligned, progressivist intentions may remain merely rhetorical.

Cross-cutting barriers and enabling conditions

Micro-level (classroom) factors

The most frequently reported enabler at the classroom level is the presence of autonomy-supportive routines. Teachers provide choice within structure, explain the purpose of tasks, and encourage student reflection. When teachers provide clear linguistic support for projects and tasks (e.g. models, language frames, and staged deadlines), students tend to report higher engagement and better collaboration. Conversely, when 'project-based learning' is implemented without scaffolding, for example, when students are asked to produce work without guidance on language resources, group roles, or quality criteria, projects may amplify anxiety and lead to uneven participation. This pattern is consistent with reviews of learner-centered pedagogy,

which note that positive perceptions do not automatically translate into learning gains unless implementation is pedagogically robust and sustained (Bremner et al., 2022).

Meso-level (institutional) factors

At the school or university level, progressivist ELT depends on organizational routines and resources. Schools that provide collaborative planning time, allocate budgets for project materials and digital tools, and establish mechanisms to document and showcase student work create a supportive 'ecosystem' for projects and authentic tasks. Similarly, universities implementing MBKM require partnership management systems, credit recognition procedures, and assessment moderation practices to ensure that off-campus learning experiences are academically meaningful. Where such systems are weak, MBKM risks becoming administrative compliance rather than experiential learning. Institutional leadership therefore, functions as a mediating layer between policy and classroom practice.

Macro-level (policy) factors

Two tensions repeatedly emerge at the policy level. The first is the tension between progressive learning aims and examination-oriented accountability. When teachers perceive that high-stakes testing remains the dominant measure of success, they rationally prioritize test preparation over inquiry projects, especially under time pressure. The second is the tension between flexibility and guidance. While the Merdeka Curriculum promises autonomy for teachers and schools, its implementation can be hindered when teachers lack clear exemplars, assessment rubrics, and professional learning pathways. International comparative studies indicate that learner-centered reforms are most effective when policies offer flexibility alongside sustained capacity building rather than relying solely on policy slogans (Bremner, 2020; Starkey, 2017)

Progressivist beliefs in Merdeka-related ELT consistently position learners as active agents, with student choice and differentiated pathways forming central assumptions.

Progressivism goals extend beyond linguistic accuracy towards autonomy, collaboration, creativity, critical reasoning and character/citizenship outcomes aligned with the principles of the Indonesian ideology of Pancasila.

Experiential and inquiry-driven models (PjBL/P5, contextual learning and TBLT) are the dominant pedagogical approaches used to implement progressivism in ELT.

Assessment reform is a prerequisite for progressivist implementation, with formative routines and performance-based evidence repeatedly identified as pivotal. A persistent implementation gap remains due to teacher readiness, assessment literacy, resources and exam-oriented pressures.

5.2 Comparison with previous studies

This review fills a gap in the literature by comparing with prior studies. Several previous Indonesian studies have highlighted that Merdeka Belajar/MBKM aligns philosophically with progressive education and student autonomy (Mustaghfiroh, 2020; Susilawati, 2021). Other papers have focused on specific implementation domains, such as teacher readiness for the Merdeka Curriculum (Tricahyati & Zaim, 2023), the implementation of project-based ELT at Schools of Movement (Rambe & Suganda, 2023), and the redesign of university English department curricula (Irawan et al., 2022; Wahyuni et al., 2023). While these studies provide valuable local insights, they are usually limited to a single site, level or conceptual angle. Furthermore, previous review papers often discuss progressivism or the Merdeka concept in a conceptual manner, without applying a transparent PRISMA protocol or PICOC-guided screening. This limits replicability and makes it difficult to consolidate evidence (Ramadani & Desyandri, 2022; Utami & Utari, 2023).

This SLR fills this gap by: (a) providing a PRISMA-guided synthesis across school and higher education ELT contexts; (b) explicitly separating progressivism beliefs from progressivism goals to improve analytical precision; and (c) producing a mapping (Table 4) that links philosophy, policy design features and implementable ELT strategies. In this way, the review extends prior conceptual discussions into an evidence-informed implementation framework.

The novelty of this article lies in its methodology and concept. Methodologically, it applies the PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines and a PRISMA-P informed protocol to a topic that has largely been discussed narratively or conceptually in Indonesian ELT literature. Conceptually, it reframes 'progressivism in the Merdeka Curriculum' as a set of testable constructs - beliefs and goals - that can be mapped onto instructional and assessment design choices. This mapping can support future empirical work by offering observable indicators for evaluating whether Merdeka-related ELT practices are substantively progressivist or merely superficially student-centered.

1) Theoretical contribution: The review integrates Deweyan progressivism and learner-centered pedagogy scholarship with Indonesian curriculum reform discourse, clarifying how philosophical claims translate into ELT design principles (Starkey, 2017; Tubbs, 2023).

2) Pedagogical contribution: The mapping in Table 4 provides teachers with a practical bridge between Merdeka Curriculum ideals (e.g. differentiation, projects, and learner choice) and ELT lesson design options (e.g. tasks, inquiry cycles and portfolio evidence).

3) Assessment contribution: The synthesis reveals that authentic and formative assessment is integral to progressivist pedagogy, not an additional element. Therefore, teacher training in assessment for learning, rubrics and feedback routines should be treated as a core implementation strategy (Smit & Birri, 2014; Wiliam, 2011).

4) Policy contribution: The review suggests to policymakers that implementation monitoring should track not only administrative compliance (e.g. the existence of projects), but also pedagogical substance (e.g. student agency, inquiry quality and feedback practices), as well as support conditions (e.g. teacher development, resources, and time).

This review has several limitations. Firstly, although multiple databases were used, the search strategy relied on accessible platforms and may have missed paywalled studies that were not indexed by the selected sources. Secondly, while Google Scholar increases coverage, it also introduces noise and publication bias may remain. Thirdly, as the included studies were methodologically diverse, thematic synthesis was used instead of statistical meta-analysis; therefore, claims about 'effectiveness' should be interpreted carefully. Fourthly, the review focused on publications in English and Indonesian, which may result in an underrepresentation of studies in other languages. Finally, as the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is ongoing, the evidence base is still emerging. Therefore, conclusions should be treated as provisional and updated as more longitudinal studies become available.

Teacher professional development should prioritize design capabilities (project/task design and differentiation) and assessment literacy (rubrics, formative feedback, and portfolio management) rather than merely policy socialization. Schools and universities should provide the necessary infrastructure for implementation, such as time for collaborative planning, digital platforms for project documentation, and partnerships for authentic learning contexts, so that 'projects' become meaningful rather than performative. Curriculum and assessment policy should be aligned. If accountability systems reward memorization, progressivist pedagogy will rationally be deprioritized. Policies should therefore legitimize performance-based evidence and provide moderation mechanisms to ensure quality and fairness. Research-practice partnerships between universities, schools, and local communities should be strengthened to support MBKM and P5 projects that are linguistically rich and socially relevant.

Future research can extend this review in several ways. Firstly, longitudinal classroom studies are required to examine how beliefs in progressivism evolve as teachers gain experience with the Merdeka Curriculum and how these beliefs influence instructional design over time. Secondly, rigorous quasi-experimental or design-based research could test the impact on learning of progressivist ELT models (e.g. PjBL/TBLT combined with formative assessment) in terms of both language proficiency and broader competencies. Thirdly, future systematic reviews could conduct meta-analyses focused on specific interventions (e.g. PjBL in Merdeka ELT), once sufficient comparable studies have been conducted. Fourthly, equity-oriented research is required to investigate how resource gaps across regions and school types affect the feasibility of progressivist pedagogy and to identify scalable support measures that prevent reform from exacerbating educational inequality.

This review proposes a practical framework for progressivist English Language Teaching (ELT) implementation under Merdeka, which can be used by teachers, teacher educators, and

school leaders to plan, observe, and evaluate such implementation. This framework is called the Progressivist ELT Implementation Matrix (PEIM) and it aligns five design questions with the progressivism belief-goal structure.

(1) Agency: Where do students make meaningful choices (topic, product format, roles, audiences), while still receiving sufficient structure to succeed?

(2) Experience and inquiry: What real problem, question or communicative need will drive the learning sequence and how will the inquiry be staged (explore, plan, draft, revise, present, reflect)?

(3) Interaction: How are peer interaction and collaboration designed (e.g. group roles, talk moves and peer feedback protocols) to ensure that language use is both purposeful and equitable?

(4) Evidence and feedback: What performance evidence will be collected (e.g. portfolios, recordings, drafts)? What criteria/rubrics will be used, and how will formative feedback be embedded in the cycle?

(5) Values and citizenship: In what ways does the task/project connect to the dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile (e.g. mutual cooperation, critical reasoning, global diversity) and local community contexts?

PEIM can be used in at least three ways. Firstly, teachers can use it as a lesson-planning checklist to ensure that projects are not reduced to 'products without pedagogy'. Secondly, school leaders can use it as an observation and coaching tool to provide specific, non-punitive feedback aligned with curriculum goals. Thirdly, teacher education programmes can use PEIM to structure microteaching and design-based assignments that explicitly link philosophy, curriculum outcomes, pedagogy and assessment.

CONCLUSION

This PRISMA-guided systematic literature review (SLR) synthesized progressive beliefs and goals in English language teaching (ELT) related to Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum/MBKM. The literature converges on a progressivist orientation that prioritizes learner agency, experiential inquiry, collaboration, authentic assessment, and holistic outcomes that are aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile. However, there is still a substantial implementation gap because progressivist pedagogy requires assessment literacy, teacher design capabilities, and institutional support, all of which are not yet consistently available. By mapping philosophical constructs onto ELT practices, this review provides a framework for translating Merdeka aspirations into practical pedagogy, as well as for guiding future empirical research and policy refinement.

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