



The Implementation of Character Education in Teaching English as a Foreign Language in SMA Cendana Pekanbaru

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Abstract

Character education has been widely promoted in Indonesian education policy; however, empirical studies examining how it is enacted in EFL classrooms at the senior high school level remain limited, particularly in terms of classroom-level practices and teacher interpretation. This qualitative case study investigates the implementation of character education in EFL teaching at SMA Cendana Pekanbaru, focusing on how values are enacted in practice. Data were collected from two English teachers through lesson plan analysis (n=12), classroom observations (n=6 sessions), and semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that character education is primarily integrated through (1) routine-based classroom management practices that reinforce discipline and responsibility, (2) teacher modelling and interactional feedback that promote respect and honesty, and (3) task-based activities that implicitly embed cooperation and perseverance. However, implementation remains surface-level, as teachers prioritize linguistic targets and rarely engage students in critical moral reflection. Given the small-scale, bounded nature of the study, the findings highlight how policy-level expectations are selectively enacted in classroom practice rather than fully realized. The study underscores the need for pedagogical support that moves beyond implicit integration toward more reflective and explicit character education in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Character Education; English as a Foreign Language (EFL); Moral Values.

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INTRODUCTION

Character education plays a vital role in fostering students' moral and social development, as it seeks to instil ethical values that guide both their personal and academic lives (Lickona, 1991). It is not limited to teaching right and wrong, but also emphasizes the development of habits such as responsibility, respect, honesty, and perseverance. These values are essential in shaping students into well-rounded individuals who can contribute positively to society. In the context of education, character formation is considered as important as cognitive achievement, since intellectual growth without moral grounding may lead to imbalanced development.

Character education has also been widely conceptualized in the literature as a multidimensional construct involving moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action (Lickona, 1991; Rest, 1986). Contemporary scholars further emphasize that effective character education requires not only the transmission of values but also the cultivation of students' moral reasoning and ethical decision-making skills (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008; Lapsley & Yeager, 2013). In school contexts, teachers play a central role as moral agents and role models whose behaviour significantly shapes students' character development (Lumpkin, 2008). Moreover, research has shown that whole-school approaches and structured programs tend to yield more consistent outcomes compared to fragmented or implicit efforts (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Berkowitz, 2011). Despite these theoretical advances, the practical enactment of character education often remains uneven, particularly in subject-specific classrooms such as EFL, where instructional priorities may differ.

Recognizing this importance, the Indonesian government has formally integrated character education into the national education system. Through Presidential Regulation No.

87 of 2017 on Strengthening Character Education (Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia, 2017), schools are required to incorporate character values across all subjects. This policy reflects a holistic approach to education, where character building is not treated as a separate subject but embedded within daily teaching and learning processes. Consequently, teachers are expected to integrate moral values into their instructional practices, including in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms.

In the context of EFL teaching, character education can be integrated through various strategies, such as selecting meaningful texts, promoting collaborative activities, and encouraging reflective discussions. Language learning provides opportunities for students to explore cultural values, express opinions, and develop empathy through communication. Therefore, EFL classrooms can serve as an effective medium for character development, as students engage with both linguistic and moral dimensions of learning. However, the integration of these elements requires careful planning and pedagogical awareness from teachers.

Despite the growing body of research on character education in Indonesian EFL contexts, existing studies largely focus on policy implementation, curriculum design, or general teacher perceptions (e.g., Nova, 2017). Limited attention has been given to how character education is actually enacted in classroom interaction, particularly at the senior high school level where academic demands are more intensive. Moreover, previous studies often rely on single data sources, such as interviews or document analysis, which provide limited insight into the alignment between planned instruction and classroom practice. As a result, there remains a lack of empirically grounded understanding of how teachers translate character education policy into day-to-day EFL teaching.

Many teachers acknowledge the significance of character education but face difficulties in translating policy into practice. One major challenge is the need to balance moral instruction with academic targets, particularly in subjects like English where language proficiency often becomes the primary focus. As a result, character education is sometimes treated as an additional component rather than an integral part of teaching. Given these challenges, this study aims to explore how senior high school teachers incorporate character education into EFL instruction. It focuses on identifying the types of character values emphasized in the classroom and examining the strategies used by teachers to integrate them into language learning activities. Furthermore, the study investigates the challenges teachers encounter in implementing character education, providing insights into practical constraints and potential solutions. By doing so, the research seeks to contribute to a better understanding of how character education can be effectively embedded in EFL contexts.

This study addresses this gap by examining the classroom-level implementation of character education in EFL teaching at SMA Cendana Pekanbaru. Specifically, it investigates (1) the character values reflected in instructional practices, (2) how these values are enacted through classroom interaction, and (3) the challenges teachers encounter in integrating them into language instruction. By employing a qualitative case study design with triangulated data from lesson plans, classroom observations, and teacher interviews, this study offers a micro-level analysis of how character education is interpreted and enacted in practice. Given its focus on two teachers within a single institutional context, the findings are analytically bounded but provide in-depth insights into the complexities of implementation in Indonesian senior secondary education.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design to explore how character education is implemented in senior high school EFL classrooms (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Two English teachers from SMA Cendana Pekanbaru participated in the study. Teacher 1 (T1) with ten years experience and master degree in education background and teacher 2 (T2) with five years experience and bachelor degree in English education. Thematic analysis was selected due to its flexibility in identifying patterns across qualitative datasets and its suitability for examining socially constructed phenomena such as classroom practices (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nassaji, 2015; Tracy, 2013).

Data Collection Methods

Participants

Participants were selected purposively based on their active involvement in EFL teaching and experience implementing character education.

Observation

A total of six classroom observations (each 90 minutes) were conducted using a non-participant observation approach. Field notes were recorded using a structured observation protocol focusing on teacher-student interaction and value integration.

Interviews

Two semi-structured interviews (45–60 minutes) were conducted with each teacher. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and conducted in Bahasa Indonesia.

Document Analysis

A total of 12 lesson plans were analyzed using a coding framework based on character education indicators.

Trustworthiness

Credibility was ensured through triangulation and member checking. Dependability and confirmability were supported through an audit trail and peer debriefing.

Ethics

Participants provided informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study.

Data Analysis

The study follows Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2014) interactive model for qualitative data analysis:

1. Data Condensation: Filtering relevant information from lesson plans, observations, and interviews.
2. Data Display: Organizing themes related to character values, teaching strategies, and challenges.
3. Conclusion Drawing: Identifying patterns and deriving insights on the effectiveness of character education in EFL teaching.

Triangulation was used to ensure validity by comparing findings from multiple data sources (Patton, 2015). Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis followed several iterative stages. First, all interview transcripts, observation field notes, and lesson plan documents were read repeatedly to achieve data familiarization. During this stage, initial notes were taken to capture emerging patterns related to character education practices.

Second, open coding was conducted by assigning descriptive labels to meaningful segments of the data. These initial codes included, for example, "deadline reminders," "group participation," "teacher modelling," and "student passivity." Coding was performed manually to maintain close engagement with the data. Third, the codes were grouped into broader categories through a process of constant comparison across data sources. Similar codes were clustered into potential themes such as discipline, responsibility, respect, and cooperation, as well as implementation patterns (implicit vs. explicit) and contextual challenges. Fourth, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal consistency and clear distinctions between categories. At this stage, data excerpts from interviews, observations, and documents were re-examined to confirm that each theme was supported by sufficient evidence.

Finally, the themes were defined and organized in relation to the research questions. To enhance credibility, the coding results were discussed with a peer reviewer (peer debriefing), and selected findings were verified with participants through member checking. An audit trail was also maintained to document coding decisions and theme development throughout the analysis process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Character Education Values in EFL Classrooms

The analysis of lesson plans ($n = 12$), classroom observations ($n = 6$), and teacher interviews revealed that character education was integrated into EFL instruction through

several recurring values. However, rather than encompassing a broad range of values, the data consistently pointed to four dominant themes: discipline, responsibility, respect, and cooperation.

1. Discipline and Responsibility as Routine-Based Practices

Discipline and responsibility were primarily enacted through structured classroom routines and task management practices. Lesson plan analysis indicated that both teachers consistently included procedural components such as opening routines, attendance checks, and assignment deadlines.

Classroom observations further showed that these routines were systematically reinforced. For instance, in Observation 2, Teacher 1 began the lesson by reminding students of submission deadlines and classroom rules:

"Please submit your assignment before we start. If you are late, it will affect your score" (Observation 2).

This practice was not merely procedural but functioned as a mechanism for instilling responsibility. Teacher 1 explained in the interview:

"I always emphasize deadlines because I want them to be responsible for their work, not only in English but also in their daily life" (T1 Interview).

Similarly, Teacher 2 required students to maintain learning journals, where they recorded vocabulary and summarized lesson content. This activity was observed in multiple sessions and described as follows:

"At the end of the lesson, students wrote new vocabulary and short reflections in their notebooks" (Observation 4).

This finding suggests that discipline and responsibility were not explicitly taught as abstract values but embedded in repetitive classroom practices.

2. Respect through Teacher–Student Interaction

Respect was primarily enacted through interactional patterns between teachers and students. Rather than being explicitly stated in lesson plans, respect emerged in how teachers modeled communication and managed classroom discourse. Observation data showed that both teachers consistently used polite language and encouraged students to listen to peers. For example:

"Listen first to your friend, don't interrupt. After that, you can give your opinion" (Observation 3).

This interactional norm was reinforced during group discussions, where students were expected to wait for their turn and respond respectfully. Teacher 2 emphasized this in the interview:

"I always remind them to respect others' opinions, especially when they disagree. That's important in discussion activities" (T2 Interview).

These findings indicate that respect was largely transmitted implicitly through teacher modelling rather than explicit instruction.

3. Cooperation through Task-Based Activities

Cooperation was observed mainly in group-based learning activities. Both teachers frequently used pair work and group discussions as part of their instructional strategies. In Observation 5, students worked in groups to complete a reading comprehension task:

"Students were divided into groups of four and asked to discuss the main idea of the text before presenting it to the class" (Observation 5).

During these activities, teachers monitored group interaction and occasionally intervened to encourage participation:

"Don't let one student do all the work. Everyone must contribute" (Observation 5).

Teacher 2 explained the rationale behind this approach:

"Group work is not only for learning English but also for teaching them how to work together" (T2 Interview).

This suggests that cooperation was intentionally embedded in task design, although not always explicitly framed as character education.

4. Limited Presence of Higher-Order Moral Reflection

Although several character values were observed, the data showed limited evidence of deeper moral or ethical reflection. Lesson plans rarely included explicit objectives related to moral reasoning, and classroom discussions were primarily focused on language comprehension.

For example, while students engaged in reading and discussion tasks, there was little evidence of critical engagement with moral issues:

"The discussion focused on answering comprehension questions rather than exploring the values in the text" (Observation 6).

Teacher 1 acknowledged this limitation:

"Sometimes I want to discuss values more deeply, but we don't have enough time because we need to finish the material" (T1 Interview).

This indicates that character education remained largely at the level of behavioural reinforcement rather than reflective learning.

B. Implementation of Character Education

The findings demonstrate that character education was implemented through both explicit and implicit approaches, although implicit integration was more dominant.

1. Implicit Implementation

Most character values were conveyed indirectly through teacher behaviour, classroom management, and task structures. Teachers rarely labelled activities as "character education," but values were embedded in daily practices.

For example:

In classroom practice, several routine instructional strategies serve as practical vehicles for embedding character values. For instance, enforcing deadlines plays a crucial role in fostering students' sense of responsibility, as it requires them to manage their time, prioritize tasks, and be accountable for their work. Similarly, managing turn-taking during classroom interactions promotes respect, as students learn to listen attentively, wait for their opportunity to speak, and acknowledge others' contributions. In addition, the use of group tasks encourages cooperation by requiring students to collaborate, share ideas, and work collectively toward common goals. These practices illustrate how character education is seamlessly integrated into everyday classroom activities, allowing students to develop essential values alongside their language skills.

This aligns with Teacher 2's statement:

"We don't always say 'this is character education,' but we include it in our teaching activities" (T2 Interview).

2. Explicit Implementation

Explicit integration was less frequent and usually occurred during brief reminders or instructions. For instance:

"You must be honest when doing your assignment, don't copy from your friend" (Observation 1).

However, such explicit references were sporadic and not systematically planned in lesson objectives.

C. Challenges in Implementation

The data revealed several challenges that constrained the effective integration of character education.

1. Curriculum and Time Constraints

Both teachers emphasized that limited instructional time was a major barrier. EFL lessons were primarily oriented toward achieving linguistic competencies.

"We have to follow the syllabus, so sometimes character education is not the main focus" (T1 Interview).

Observation data supported this claim, showing that most class time was devoted to grammar explanation and task completion.

2. Student Engagement and Perception

Students did not always perceive character education as relevant to language learning. During observations, some students showed limited engagement in activities requiring reflection or discussion.

"Some students were passive and waited for answers instead of participating actively" (Observation 3).

Teacher 2 noted:

"Students are more interested in getting the correct answer than discussing values" (T2 Interview).

3. Limited Pedagogical Support

Teachers reported a lack of training and guidance on how to integrate character education effectively.

"We know it is important, but we don't have clear guidance on how to teach it in English class" (T1 Interview).

This resulted in reliance on intuitive and experience-based practices rather than structured pedagogical approaches.

Table 1. Themes of Character Education Integration and Supporting Evidence

Theme	Indicators	Data Source	Empirical Evidence
Discipline	Enforcement of classroom rules; adherence to deadlines	Observation; Interview	"Please submit your assignment before we start. If you are late, it will affect your score" (Observation 2); "I always emphasize deadlines because I want them to be responsible" (T1 Interview)
Responsibility	Completion of tasks; independent learning practices	Observation; Lesson Plan; Interview	Students recorded vocabulary and summaries at the end of lessons (Observation 4); Lesson plans included individual assignments; "I ask them to write what they learn every week" (T1 Interview)
Respect	Turn-taking; polite interaction; listening to peers	Observation; Interview	"Listen first to your friend, don't interrupt" (Observation 3); "I remind them to respect others' opinions" (T2 Interview)
Cooperation	Group work; shared participation	Observation; Interview	Students worked in groups to discuss texts (Observation 5); "Don't let one student do all the work" (Observation 5); "Group work teaches them how to work together" (T2 Interview)
Implicit Implementation	Values embedded in routines and interaction	Observation; Interview	Character values conveyed through classroom management and teacher modeling; "We include it in our teaching activities" (T2 Interview)
Explicit Implementation	Direct verbal instruction of values	Observation	"You must be honest when doing your assignment" (Observation 1)
Curriculum Constraints	Focus on linguistic targets; limited time	Interview; Observation	"We have to follow the syllabus" (T1 Interview); Class time dominated by grammar instruction (Observation 6)
Student Engagement Issues	Passive participation; limited reflection	Observation; Interview	"Some students were passive" (Observation 3); "Students are more interested in correct answers"

Theme	Indicators	Data Source	Empirical Evidence
Lack of Limited training; Pedagogical absence of Support guidelines		Interview	(T2 Interview) "We don't have clear guidance on how to teach it" (T1 Interview)

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that character education in EFL classrooms is predominantly embedded in everyday teaching practices rather than delivered through explicit moral instruction. Teachers tend to incorporate values through routines, classroom management, interactional norms, and task design. This suggests that character formation is treated as an implicit component of the learning process, where students are expected to absorb values organically while engaging in language activities. Such an approach reflects a practical response to the realities of classroom instruction, where language learning objectives often take precedence.

This tendency toward implicit integration reflects what Berkowitz and Bier (2005) describe as a "hidden curriculum" approach, where values are conveyed indirectly through classroom norms and teacher behaviour rather than explicit instruction. While such approaches can be effective in shaping behaviour, they may lack the intentionality required for deeper moral development (Berkowitz, 2011).

This pattern aligns with previous research highlighting that teachers frequently adopt implicit strategies when integrating character education. One major contributing factor is curriculum pressure, which limits the time and flexibility needed for direct moral instruction. As a result, teachers prioritize linguistic competencies while embedding values subtly within classroom procedures, such as enforcing punctuality, encouraging participation, and fostering respectful communication. These practices demonstrate that character education is not absent, but rather integrated in ways that may not always be visible or formally articulated.

However, a notable finding of this study is the limited range of character values consistently enacted in the classroom. While educational policies often promote a comprehensive set of moral and character values, in practice, teachers tend to focus on a narrower selection. Specifically, discipline, responsibility, respect, and cooperation emerge as the most frequently observed values. These are typically linked to maintaining classroom order and ensuring the smooth execution of learning activities, making them more immediately relevant to teachers' day-to-day instructional needs. From a theoretical perspective, this narrow focus may indicate a preference for performance-related values that support classroom management rather than the broader moral competencies emphasized in character education frameworks (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008). As a result, higher-order dimensions of character, such as moral judgment and ethical reasoning, receive less attention in everyday instructional practices (Rest, 1986).

This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that without structured opportunities for reflection, students may not progress beyond surface-level understanding of values (Lapsley & Yeager, 2013). Reflective engagement is essential for transforming externally regulated behaviour into internally endorsed moral principles. Furthermore, the absence of explicit instructional strategies may reflect limited pedagogical preparation among teachers, as noted in prior studies highlighting the need for targeted professional development in character education (Pala, 2011; Marshall et al., 2011). Teachers often rely on intuitive practices rather than research-informed approaches, which can limit the effectiveness of value integration.

Incorporating such approaches aligns with Dweck's (2006) concept of a growth mindset, which encourages students to view moral and personal development as an ongoing process. Additionally, structured interaction and collaborative learning have been shown to positively influence student behaviour and classroom climate (Parker et al., 2010), reinforcing the importance of intentional design in character-based instruction.

The selective emphasis on these particular values reveals a gap between policy expectations and classroom realities. Educational frameworks may advocate for the development of broader ethical competencies, such as empathy, integrity, and critical moral

reasoning, yet these are less evident in actual teaching practices. This discrepancy suggests that while policy documents present an idealized vision of character education, teachers adapt these expectations to fit the constraints and priorities of their instructional context. Consequently, some values are marginalized or overlooked altogether.

Another important finding is the absence of structured opportunities for moral reflection within classroom activities. Although students may demonstrate appropriate behaviors, there is little evidence of guided reflection on why such behaviors are important or how they relate to broader ethical principles. This indicates that character education, as currently implemented, tends to focus on observable behavior rather than deeper cognitive and moral engagement. Students are encouraged to “act” in certain ways, but not necessarily to “think” critically about those actions.

This behavioral orientation points to a limitation in the current approach to character education. Without reflective practices, such as discussion, journaling, or critical inquiry, students may not develop a deeper understanding of values or the ability to apply them in diverse contexts. Character education risks becoming procedural rather than transformative, emphasizing compliance over internalization. Therefore, there is a need for pedagogical strategies that actively engage students in ethical reasoning and personal meaning-making.

In response to these challenges, educators could consider integrating more reflective and dialogic activities into EFL instruction. For example, language tasks can be designed to include moral dilemmas, role-plays, or discussions that encourage students to articulate and evaluate their values. Such approaches not only support language development but also promote critical thinking and ethical awareness. By making character education more explicit and reflective, teachers can move beyond surface-level behavior and foster deeper moral development.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. As a small-scale case study, the findings are context-specific and cannot be generalized to all EFL classrooms. The observed practices are influenced by particular institutional, cultural, and curricular conditions. Nevertheless, the study provides valuable insights into how character education is selectively enacted in real classroom settings. It highlights both the potential and the limitations of current practices, offering a foundation for future research and pedagogical innovation in integrating character education more effectively within EFL.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the literature by providing a classroom-level analysis of how character education is enacted in EFL teaching through multiple data sources. The findings demonstrate that character values are primarily integrated through routine practices, teacher modelling, and task-based activities, but often remain implicit and limited in depth. Given that the study is based on two teachers within a single school context, the findings are not intended to be generalized but rather to offer context-specific insights. Future research should involve a larger sample and explore how explicit pedagogical strategies can enhance students’ moral engagement in EFL classrooms.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that EFL teachers adopt more interactive and contextual teaching strategies to effectively integrate character education into language learning. Schools and educational institutions should also promote stronger collaboration among teachers, administrators, and stakeholders to support the implementation of character values in classroom practices. In addition, professional development programs and teacher training should provide practical guidance on how to incorporate values such as discipline, honesty, respect, and perseverance into language instruction. Further studies are encouraged to examine the long-term effects of character education on students’ behaviour, language learning outcomes, and overall academic performance.

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