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Teachers' Perceptions of Integrating Values Education into English Language Teaching: A Systematic Review

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Abstract. Values education has gained increasing prominence in educational policy and has positioned English language teaching as a meaningful context for fostering learners' moral, social, and civic development. However, empirical research on how English First Language and English Second Language teachers interpret values education and the challenges they encounter remains conceptually fragmented. This systematic literature review synthesizes findings from 14 empirical studies (2015–2024) using Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses procedures and inductive thematic synthesis. Teachers across contexts rejected a value-neutral view of English language teaching and interpreted values education through four orientations: moral and character development, socialization and civic responsibility, intercultural and global engagement, and critical reflection and ethical inquiry. Moral and civic orientations predominated, while intercultural and critical dimensions were less explicitly articulated. A further distinction emerged between values education

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enacted as behavioral regulation and as transformative engagement with ethical and social issues. This suggests that attitudinal consensus across contexts should not be mistaken for shared practice. Five interrelated challenges were identified: conceptual ambiguity, insufficient pedagogical guidance, curriculum and assessment constraints, sociocultural sensitivity, and emotional demands on teachers. While the first four align with patterns in prior reviews, the absence of assessment frameworks for values-related learning and the emotional labor specific to value-oriented teaching represent comparatively under-examined dimensions. These findings suggest that the persistent policy–practice gap in values-oriented English language teaching reflects structural and affective conditions rather than teacher reluctance. The findings have implications for teacher education, curriculum design, and the development of values assessment frameworks.

Keywords: Values education; teachers' perceptions; challenges; English language teaching

1. Introduction

In an era marked by rapid social transformation and increasing global uncertainty, education is no longer expected to focus solely on transmitting academic knowledge, but also on preparing learners to navigate complex social, cultural, and ethical challenges. Schools and educational institutions worldwide are increasingly expected to equip learners with social and civic capacities for responsible participation in society.

Reflecting this shift, international policy frameworks advanced by the OECD (2019) and UNESCO (2020) have positioned values education as a central educational aim, emphasizing qualities including responsibility, adaptability, and empathy. In response to these emerging educational demands, a number of countries, including China, Singapore, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States, have increasingly integrated values education into their formal curricula to support students' moral development and responsible citizenship (González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2022; Lovat, 2017; Mohamad et al., 2019).

Within this policy landscape, values education has become an increasingly prominent focus in contemporary educational research. Scholars commonly define it as a deliberate effort to develop pedagogical approaches and institutional practices that foster students' positive, ethical, and pro-social inclinations and competencies (Berkowitz, 2011). Building on this view, scholars argue that

education inherently involves the transmission of values through both explicit instruction and the implicit norms embedded in school culture (Berkowitz, 2011; Thornberg, 2008). Values education is commonly conceptualized as an umbrella term encompassing related orientations such as moral education, character education, citizenship education, and intercultural and critical perspectives (Arthur et al., 2017; Berkowitz, 2011; Byram, 2020). These orientations are not merely terminological variations but reflect distinct educational purposes and pedagogical emphases.

Moral and character education, for instance, prioritize the development of individual virtues and behavioral dispositions (Berkowitz, 2011; Lickona, 1991). Citizenship education, by contrast, foregrounds civic participation and social responsibility (Biesta, 2009; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Intercultural and critical approaches shift the focus further toward engagement with cultural diversity, global perspectives, and ethical reflection (Byram, 2020; Crookes, 2013; Kramsch, 2014; Luke, 2012). This conceptual variation is analytically significant.

Different understandings of values education lead teachers to prioritize different goals, adopt distinct pedagogical approaches, and engage with curriculum expectations in varied ways. Yet existing research has rarely examined how these differing conceptualizations shape teachers' interpretations and enactment of values-oriented English language teaching (ELT) in a systematic way. How teachers interpret these distinctions is therefore a central question. Equally important is how institutional and curricular conditions shape what is enacted in classrooms, particularly in subject-specific contexts such as ELT.

Against this backdrop, ELT has increasingly been recognized as a salient context for value-oriented learning. Language classrooms provide access to texts and communicative practices that carry cultural meanings, ideological positions, and social concerns. These features create opportunities for learners to develop empathy, intercultural awareness, and ethical reflection (Byram, 2020; Kramsch, 2014). From a sociocultural perspective, research in applied linguistics shows that learners construct identities and moral positions through discourse, underscoring the ethical dimensions of language education (Eka Merliana et al., 2023; Ismail et al., 2022; Widodo, 2018; Yacob et al., 2022). Through text selection and classroom interaction, ELT can facilitate engagement with values such as respect, tolerance, and social responsibility. This has led to growing scholarly interest in values integration into language education (Ismail et al., 2022; L. Sun, 2023).

Yet the extent to which this potential is realized in practice depends on how teachers interpret and enact value-oriented aims, positioning teachers as central

agents in shaping classroom practice. Research on teacher cognition consistently demonstrates that teachers' beliefs and interpretative understandings shape how curricular aims are interpreted and enacted in classroom practice (Borg, 2003; Pajares, 1992). Within ELT, empirical studies show that teachers conceptualize values integration in diverse ways, influenced by personal value orientations, professional identities, and contextual factors such as curriculum mandates and institutional cultures (Al-Thani et al., 2025; Wong, 2025). In this review, teachers' perceptions are therefore conceptualized as interpretative understandings of the role and purpose of values education within ELT, rather than as affective attitudes or emotional responses to policy mandates (Borg, 2003; Pajares, 1992).

However, teachers' interpretative understanding alone cannot fully explain how value-oriented aims are realized in practice. From a curriculum enactment perspective, teachers are not passive implementers of policy but active interpreters shaped by institutional, curricular, and assessment conditions (Ball et al., 2011; Priestley et al., 2015). Their interpretative understandings function as mediating mechanisms through which policy expectations are selectively enacted. Teacher cognition provides a lens for understanding how teachers interpret values education, while curriculum enactment explains how such interpretations are negotiated and selectively realized in practice. These complementary perspectives therefore constitute the conceptual foundation of the present review.

Despite growing scholarly attention, existing research remains conceptually and geographically fragmented. Studies vary in how teachers' perceptions are defined, the values domains emphasized, and the instructional approaches considered appropriate (Lei, 2020; Munandar & Newton, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). More significantly, although many studies document positive teacher attitudes toward values education, few explain how interpretative understandings mediate the translation of policy aims into situated ELT practice. Reported challenges are also typically examined in isolation rather than as interconnected constraints on classroom enactment (Eka Merliana et al., 2023; Lei & Medwell, 2022; Lovat & Toomey, 2009).

In response to this theoretical gap, the present review synthesizes peer-reviewed empirical studies (2015–2024) to examine how teachers' interpretative understandings shape values-oriented ELT and how contextual constraints influence its enactment. The review is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do EFL and ESL teachers interpret the role and purpose of values education in English language teaching?
2. What challenges shape or constrain the enactment of values education in English language teaching?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) design to synthesize empirical research on EFL and ESL teachers' perceptions of values education in ELT. The review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, which provide internationally recognized standards for transparency, replicability, and methodological rigor in systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021).

2.2 Search Strategy

A systematic literature search was conducted in August 2025 using two major academic databases: Scopus and the Web of Science Core Collection (WoS). Both databases provide broad coverage of high-quality peer-reviewed journals in the social sciences and education and are widely recognized as the leading citation databases in these fields (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). They also offer complementary coverage. Scopus provides broader international and regional indexing, while WoS is known for its rigorous selection criteria and established role in academic research evaluation (Martín-Martín et al., 2018). The combined use of both databases has been recommended in systematic review methodology to enhance search comprehensiveness and reduce the risk of missing relevant studies (Falagas et al., 2008).

Search terms were developed iteratively to capture four key conceptual domains: (a) English language teaching contexts, (b) teachers as research participants, (c) values-related educational constructs, and (d) perception-related constructs. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to combine keywords and their variants to ensure both sensitivity and specificity in retrieval. Terms within each domain were connected by OR to capture variation in terminology, while domains were connected by AND to ensure all four dimensions were represented in retrieved studies. The final search string was refined through pilot searches and adjusted to balance breadth and relevance.

In Scopus, the search was conducted using the TITLE-ABS-KEY field with the following string: (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("English-as-Foreign-Language" OR "English as a Foreign Language" OR EFL OR "English as a Second Language" OR ESL OR "language teaching" OR "language education")) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY (teacher* OR educator*)) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("values education" OR "moral education" OR "character education" OR "civic education" OR "citizenship education") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("teacher role")) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY (perception* OR understanding OR belief* OR conception* OR view* OR opinion*) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (implementation OR application)).

A parallel Topic Search was conducted in WoS using an equivalent combination of search terms adapted to the database's indexing conventions. Although broader terms such as language teaching and language education were included to maximize sensitivity, relevance to ELT contexts was ensured during screening. Database-level filters were applied to limit results to peer-reviewed journal articles, excluding dissertations, book chapters, and conference proceedings. The initial search yielded 400 records across the two databases prior to deduplication.

2.3 Screening and Eligibility Criteria

All retrieved records were exported to reference management software and deduplicated prior to screening. Study selection followed the PRISMA 2020 procedures (Page et al., 2021). Screening and eligibility decisions were conducted by the author following predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. To minimize potential selection bias, a subset of studies was cross-checked with a second reviewer at each stage. Studies were included if they (a) were published between January 2015 and December 2024; (b) were peer-reviewed empirical journal articles indexed in Scopus or WoS; (c) were published in English with full-text access; and (d) provided empirical evidence on teachers' perceptions, understandings, beliefs, or interpretations of values education within ELT contexts. Studies focusing exclusively on values education in general school settings without explicit reference to ELT were excluded.

Following title and abstract screening, 53 studies were subjected to full-text review. From 53 studies, 14 met all inclusion criteria and were retained for final synthesis (Figure 1). The relatively small final sample reflects the emerging and narrowly defined nature of empirical research at the intersection of values education, teachers' perceptions, and ELT, reflecting the emerging and narrowly defined nature of this research area. The high attrition rate is therefore consistent with the focused scope of the review and the current distribution of research within this area.

Data were extracted using a structured protocol aligned with the research questions, focusing on teachers' perceptions of the role and purpose of values education in ELT and the challenges associated with its integration. To support interpretation and comparison across studies, supplementary information was also extracted regarding study context, participant characteristics, research methodology, and conceptual framing. This approach is consistent with established recommendations for transparency and consistency in systematic review data extraction (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

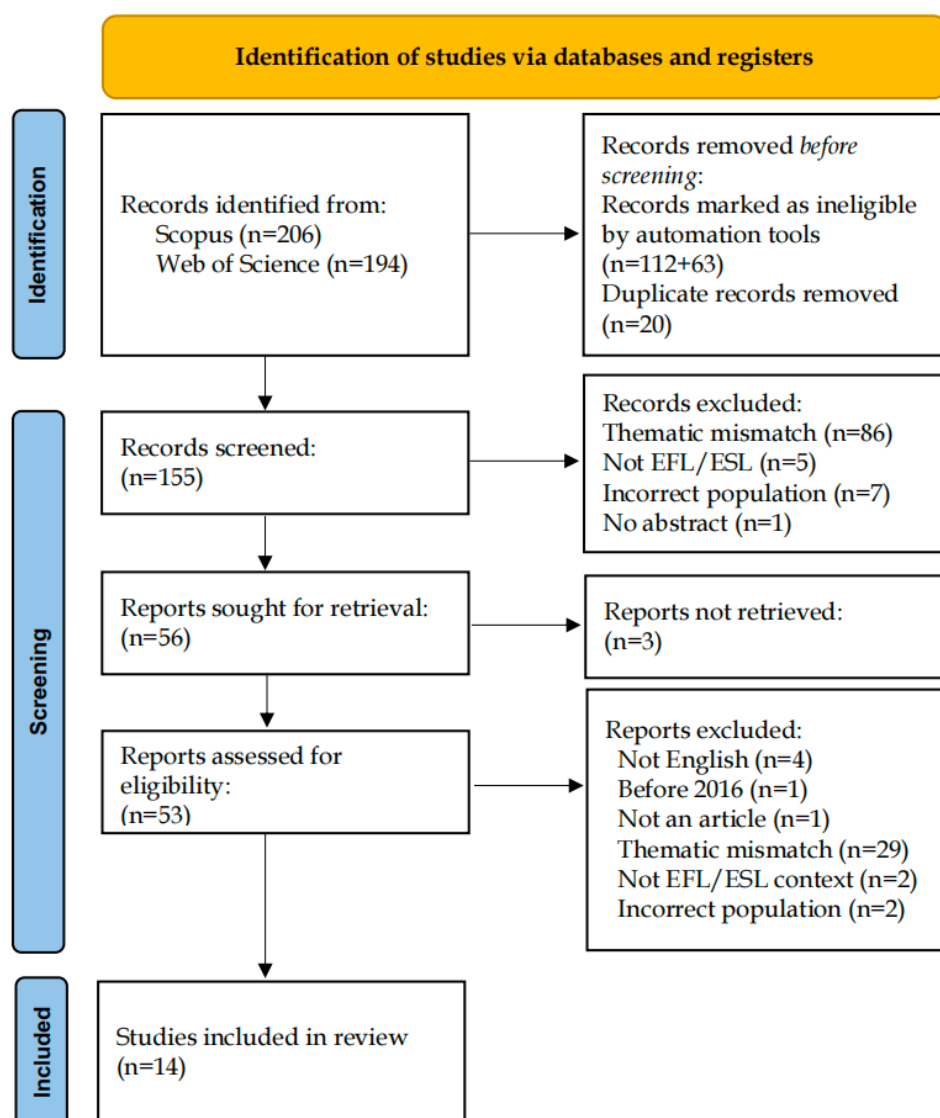


Figure 1: Flow diagram of data collection process based on PRISMA

Figure 2 presents the publication year distribution of the 14 included studies. Most studies (n=12, 86%) were published between 2020 and 2024, with three studies each appearing in 2020, 2022, and 2023 respectively. Two studies were published in 2021, and only one in 2024. Only two studies predated 2020, one published in 2016 and one in 2017. This temporal clustering suggests that scholarly interest in teachers' perceptions of values education in EFL/ESL contexts has grown considerably in the post-2019 period.

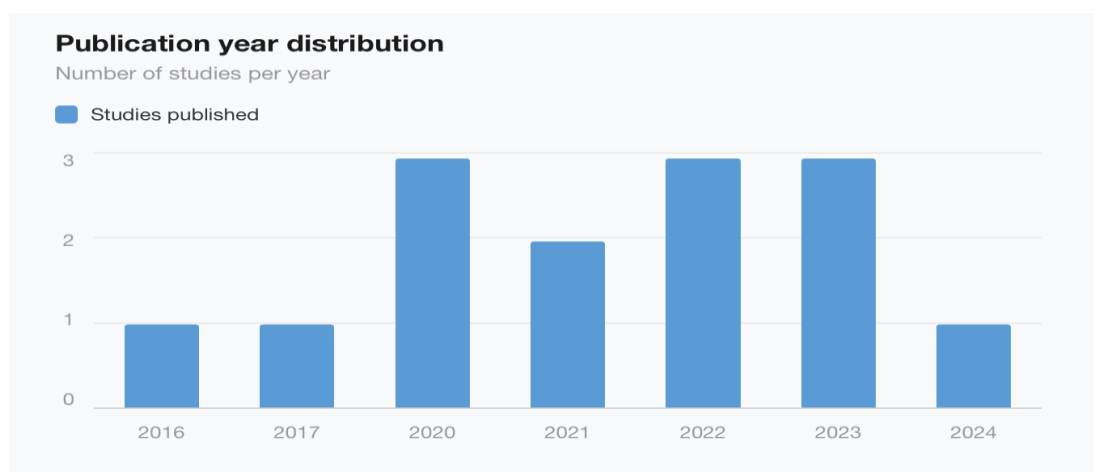


Figure 2: Publication year distribution

Figure 2: Publication year distribution

Figure 3 illustrates the geographic distribution of the included studies. The 14 studies originated from seven countries, with a strong concentration in Asia. China contributed the largest number of studies ($n=5$), followed by Indonesia ($n=4$) and Malaysia ($n=2$). Single studies were identified from South Korea, Thailand, Russia, and Pakistan respectively. The predominance of Asian contexts, particularly East and Southeast Asia, reflects growing scholarly attention to values education within EFL/ESL settings in these regions.

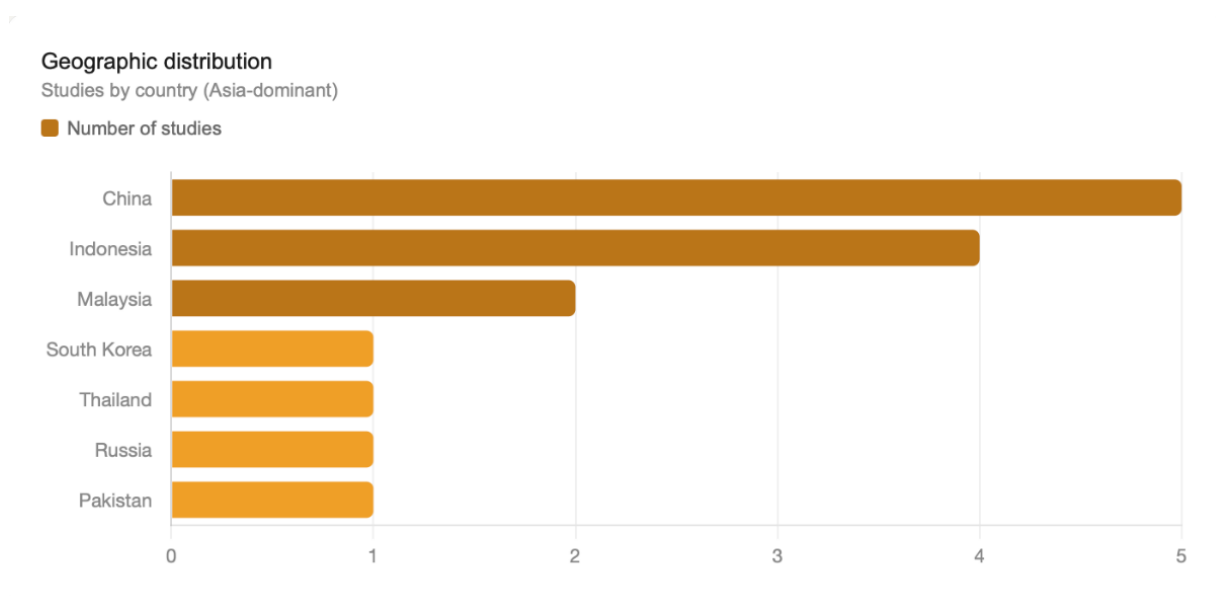


Figure 3: Geographic distribution

Figure 4 displays the distribution of research methodologies adopted in the included studies. Qualitative approaches were most prevalent (n=10, 71%), encompassing case studies, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations. Three studies (22%) adopted mixed methods designs combining survey instruments with qualitative data collection. Only one study (7%) employed a purely quantitative approach. The predominance of qualitative methods reflects the exploratory and interpretive orientation of research on teachers' perceptions and values-related practices in language teaching, where depth of understanding is prioritized over generalizability.

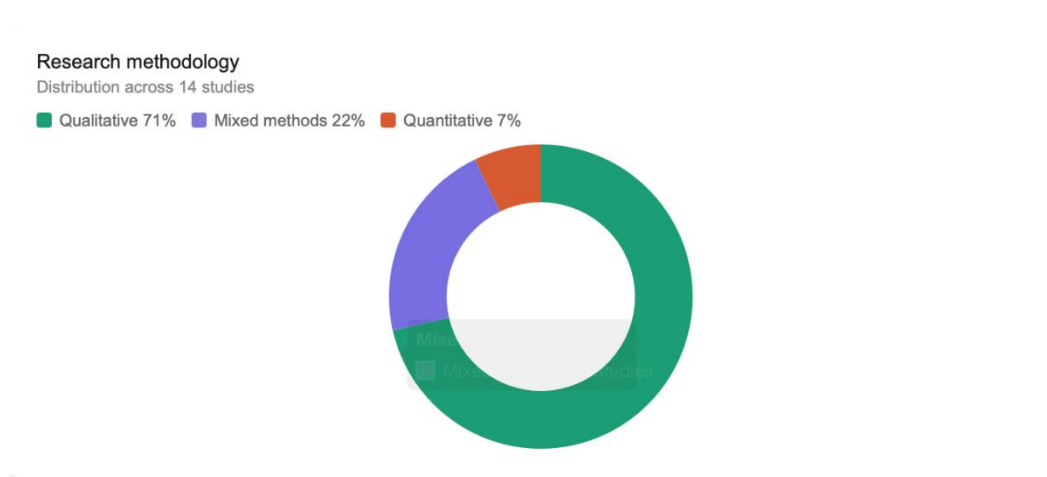


Figure 4: Distribution of research methodology

2.4 Data Synthesis

Given the conceptual and terminology variation across the included studies, a thematic synthesis approach was adopted (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Rather than imposing a predefined framework, the synthesis followed an inductive process in which codes were derived from the findings of primary studies. Initial coding involved identifying recurring ideas and patterns related to teachers' understandings, interpretations, and experiences of integrating values education into ELT. These codes were then iteratively refined and organized into higher-order themes that captured shared patterns across studies. This inductive thematic approach enabled the review to accommodate variation in conceptual framing while providing a systematic synthesis of teachers' perceptions and reported challenges.

3. Results

3.1 EFL and ESL Teachers' Interpretations of the Role and Purpose of Values Education in ELT

To address the research question 1, a thematic synthesis examined how teachers interpret the role and purpose of values education in ELT. Teachers' interpretations were multidimensional and often overlapped, so a mapping matrix (Table 1) was used to show theme distribution across studies. Across the literature, teachers rejected a value-neutral view of ELT and regarded values education as a legitimate dimension of English teaching. Their interpretations were consistently shaped by curriculum and policy expectations, which served as the primary reference point (Lei & Medwell, 2022; Qoyyimah, 2016; Sun & Buripakdi, 2023). However, the purposes teachers emphasized were not uniform. Four main orientations were identified: moral and character development, socialization and civic responsibility, intercultural and global engagement, and critical reflection and ethical inquiry.

Table 1: Mapping of RQ1 themes across the included studies (N=14)

Study (Author, Year)	Moral & character development	Socialization & civic responsibility	Intercultural & global engagement	Critical reflection & ethical inquiry
Qoyyimah (2016)	√	√		
Suryani (2017)	√			
Qoyyimah et al. (2020)	√	√		
Chung & Wei (2020)		√		
Asif et al. (2020)		√		
Bobunova et al. (2021)		√		
Sun (2021)			√	√
Noprianto et al. (2022)	√	√		
Lei & Medwell (2022)	√	√	√	
Yacob et al. (2022)			√	
Sun (2023)			√	√
Sun & Buripakdi (2023)			√	
Yeoh & Cheong (2023)				√
Seo & Lim (2024)				√

3.1.1 Theme 1: Values education as moral and character development

The most frequently reported orientation associated values education with moral and character development. Teachers described ELT as a space for nurturing learners' moral dispositions, personal discipline, and ethical conduct alongside language skills (Lei & Medwell, 2022; Noprianto et al., 2022; Qoyyimah, 2016; Suryani, 2017). Qoyyimah (2016) documented Indonesian EFL teachers' rejection of value-neutral ELT and their emphasis on teacher modeling as a key means of values transmission. Suryani (2017) reported that teachers prioritized discipline, politeness, and appropriate behavior as part of everyday instruction. Lei and Medwell (2022) reported that Chinese EFL teachers likewise viewed moral development as integral to English teaching.

However, a notable tension emerged in where teachers located the source of moral authority. In Indonesian Islamic schools, teachers grounded moral character in religious teachings, placing religiosity above the secular values prescribed by national policy (Qoyyimah, 2016; Qoyyimah et al., 2020). They saw themselves primarily as religious role models whose duty was spiritual formation. In the Chinese EFL context, by contrast, teachers' moral vocabulary was drawn from curriculum documents rather than personal belief systems, with character development understood through policy constructs such as 'humanistic values' (Lei & Medwell, 2022). Despite its apparent consensus across contexts, therefore, this orientation encompasses different conceptions of whose values should be transmitted and on what authority.

3.1.2 Theme 2: Values education as socialization and civic responsibility

A second orientation framed values education as serving socialization and civic purposes. Chung and Wei (2020) reported that teachers emphasized respect, cooperation, and socially appropriate behavior through group work and discussion of social issues. Asif et al. (2020) found that teachers highlighted social harmony and community responsibility, stressing equality and adherence to social norms. Similarly, Noprianto et al. (2022) showed that Indonesian EFL teachers understood character education not as the sole responsibility of individual teachers, but as a shared social project involving families, school leadership, the wider school community, and government support.

Within this orientation, teachers differed in how they grounded their civic understanding. Chinese EFL teachers framed civic values through national curriculum expectations (Lei & Medwell, 2022). By contrast, Thai teachers in a articulated civic values through the concept of the 'common good,' reflecting a more philosophically grounded understanding (J. Chung & Wei, 2020). Asif et al. (2020) revealed further variation. Chinese EFL teachers associated civic aims with

collectivism and patriotism, while Pakistani teachers interpreted similar aims through religious frameworks. Although socialization and civic responsibility was widely shared as an orientation, it was understood differently depending on national, cultural, and institutional contexts.

3.1.3 Theme 3: Values education as intercultural and global engagement

Some teachers understood values education in terms of intercultural awareness and global engagement. In these studies, ELT was seen as a medium for exposing students to different cultures and perspectives (Lei & Medwell, 2022; Sun & Buripakdi, 2023; Yacob et al., 2022). Yacob et al. (2022) reported that teachers used culturally varied texts to foster empathy and respect for diversity. Sun and Buripakdi (2023) found that teachers linked values education to global citizenship, emphasizing learners' awareness of global issues and openness to different perspectives.

This orientation appeared less frequently than moral or civic ones. Teachers tended to treat intercultural understanding as secondary to moral or civic aims (Lei & Medwell, 2022). Sun and Buripakdi (2023) similarly noted that while teachers were aware of global citizenship as a concept, their understanding remained general and not clearly distinguished from other educational goals. This suggests that intercultural and global engagement has not yet become a well-defined value orientation in many teachers' professional thinking.

3.1.4 Theme 4: Values education as critical reflection and ethical inquiry

A smaller group of studies described education as enabling critical reflection and ethical inquiry in ELT. Teachers in these studies saw its purpose not as transmitting established norms, but as developing learners' capacity to question social inequities and engage with ethically complex issues (Seo & Lim, 2024; Sun, 2021; Yeoh & Cheong, 2023).

Sun (2021) found that Chinese EFL teachers viewed English teaching as a space for engaging students with human rights issues and social injustice. Sun (2023) documented an EFL teacher who used English lessons to develop students' critical awareness and ability to question dominant narratives. Seo and Lim (2024) described a Korean EFL teacher who regarded discussing racism as essential to English teaching. Yeoh and Cheong (2023) reported that Malaysian ESL teachers recognized the importance of addressing gender stereotypes in classroom texts and viewed gender equality as a legitimate concern within English education.

This perspective was typically linked to individual teachers or specific courses rather than institutional frameworks. Notably, these studies all employed in-depth qualitative case designs (Seo & Lim, 2024; Sun, 2021, 2023), and the limited visibility may partly reflect methodological choices. Nonetheless, its low frequency indicates that critical understandings of values education in ELT remain emergent.

Across these four orientations, a further contrast emerged in how teachers oriented the purpose of their values work. In some studies, values integration served primarily to regulate student behavior and reinforce classroom norms; in others, it aimed to develop learners' ethical reasoning and social engagement. This contrast cuts across the four themes and is examined further in Section 4.1.

3.2 Challenges Shaping and Constraining the Enactment of Values Education in ELT

The diversity of interpretations identified in Section 3.1 had direct implications for the enactment of values education in ELT. Across the reviewed studies, the main challenges did not arise from outright rejection of values education. Instead, they concerned the conditions that made value-oriented teaching difficult to define, implement, assess, and sustain in language classrooms. These conditions operated at conceptual, pedagogical, curricular, sociocultural, and affective levels. Five interrelated challenges emerged from the synthesis, namely conceptual ambiguity, insufficient pedagogical guidance, curriculum and assessment constraints, sociocultural sensitivity, and emotional demands on teachers, as mapped in Table 2.

Table 2: Mapping of RQ2 themes across the included studies (N=14)

Study (Author, Year)	Conceptual ambiguity	Insufficient pedagogical guidance	Curriculum & assessment constraints	Socio-cultural sensitivity	Emotional demands
Qoyyimah (2016)		√	√		
Suryani (2017)			√		√
Qoyyimah et al. (2020)		√	√		
Chung & Wei (2020)		√	√		
Asif et al. (2020)	√	√	√		
Bobunova et al. (2021)		√			
Sun (2021)					
Noprianto et al. (2022)		√			

Study (Author, Year)	Conceptual ambiguity	Insufficient pedagogical guidance	Curriculum & assessment constraints	Socio-cultural sensitivity	Emotional demands
Lei & Medwell (2022)	√	√	√	√	√
Yacob et al. (2022)					
Sun (2023)	√		√	√	
Sun & Buripakdi (2023)	√		√		
Yeoh & Cheong (2023)	√	√		√	
Seo & Lim (2024)	√	√	√	√	√

3.2.1 Theme 1: Conceptual ambiguity constraining enactment

Conceptual ambiguity emerged as one challenge shaping the enactment of values education in ELT. In some studies, teachers had difficulty articulating what moral values meant in relation to English lessons. Asif et al. (2020) found that teachers in China and Pakistan had difficulty articulating what ‘moral values’ meant in relation to English lessons and could not define the aims of values education. In other contexts, teachers understood values of education but struggled to distinguish it from existing educational aims. Lei and Medwell (2022) reported that Chinese EFL teachers recognized values education as part of the national curriculum, yet found it difficult to separate values-related objectives from educational or linguistic goals.

A third form of difficulty emerged where values education was framed through unfamiliar constructs. Sun and Buripakdi (2023) found that Chinese primary school teachers had never encountered the concept of global citizenship education and could not operationalize a construct entirely new to them. In this case, the challenge was not confusion but conceptual absence. These three forms of difficulty, definitional uncertainty, boundary ambiguity, and conceptual unfamiliarity, indicate that conceptual ambiguity varies in nature depending on how values education is framed within specific policy and curricular contexts.

3.2.2 Theme 2: Insufficient pedagogical guidance

A more frequently reported challenge was the lack of pedagogical guidance, professional training, and usable resources. Across most studies, teachers described values education as an expectation without corresponding support. Teachers relied on personal beliefs, intuition, and experiential knowledge when

addressing values in English classrooms (Asif et al., 2020; Qoyyimah, 2016). Lei and Medwell (2022) reported that teachers felt uncertain about designing lessons that integrated values while maintaining language objectives. Chung and Wei (2020) found that teachers in Thailand lacked confidence in applying a values-oriented framework, even when they agreed with its aims. Similarly, Noprianto et al. (2022) found that Indonesian EFL teachers viewed character education as an important curricular expectation, yet reported that this demand was not accompanied by clear direction, sufficient training, or sustained institutional support for classroom implementation. This pattern was consistent across EFL and ESL settings.

One study provided contrasting evidence. Bobunova et al. (2021) compared ESL teachers in Russia who used revised Bloom's taxonomy as a structured framework with those who relied on self-designed methods. Teachers with the framework reported more successful values integration, while over half of those without it reported difficulty organizing their instruction. This suggests that the challenge lies not in teachers' willingness but in the availability of structured tools. Without such tools, values integration also required substantially more individual preparation effort (Qoyyimah et al., 2020).

3.2.3 Theme 3: Curriculum and assessment constraints

Examination-oriented curricula and limited instructional time constrained values education, though the nature of this constraint differed across systems. In the Chinese context, the Curriculum Standards (2022) required cultivating humanistic values, yet the high-stakes examination system rewarded linguistic knowledge and test performance. Teachers reported that values-oriented approaches cannot help students pass examinations (Lei & Medwell, 2022), and as a result embedded values implicitly to avoid compromising exam preparation. Seo and Lim (2024) reported comparable pressures in Korea.

In Indonesia, the constraint concerned selection rather than examination pressure. Teachers reported difficulty choosing from a mandated list of eighteen values, leading to inconsistent implementation (Qoyyimah, 2016). In Thailand, teachers had more autonomy but still perceived tension between language teaching and values cultivation within fixed syllabi (Chung & Wei, 2020). A further constraint concerned teacher's reliance on prescribed textbooks. In several studies, classroom instruction was closely organized around mandated materials, and values-related content not represented in textbooks was rarely addressed during regular teaching (Qoyyimah, 2016; Sun, 2021; Sun & Buripakdi, 2023). Teachers reported that existing English textbooks did not naturally support values

integration and offered limited space for critical or intercultural content (Sun, 2021; Yeoh & Cheong, 2023).

Beyond these curricular constraints, the absence of assessment criteria for value-related learning posed an additional challenge. Even where teachers integrated values, they lacked tools or standards for evaluating whether such learning had occurred. Chung and Wei (2020) reported that teachers hesitated to assess students' moral development, perceiving such evaluation as potentially inappropriate. Without measurable outcomes, values-related aims were difficult to justify as instructional priorities, reinforcing their marginal position in language-focused curricula.

3.2.4 Theme 4: Sociocultural sensitivity

Several studies identified sociocultural sensitivity as a challenge when teachers engaged with values associated with gender, race or social justice. Yeoh and Cheong (2023) reported that teachers acknowledged overlooking gender stereotypes in classroom texts and expressed limited confidence in addressing gender-related values. Similarly, Sun (2023) noted that teachers adopted indirect or selective approaches when engaging learners with sensitive social topics. Seo and Lim (2024) found that a Korean EFL teacher experienced discomfort and uncertainty when addressing racial inequality, despite recognizing its importance. A distinct dimension concerned tensions between competing value systems.

Qoyyimah et al. (2020) reported that Indonesian EFL teachers in Islamic schools experienced conflict between the national Character Education Curriculum, which prescribed secular values, and the religious expectations of their school communities. Teachers resolved this tension by placing religiosity above secular policy mandates, resulting in selective implementation of the national curriculum. Asif et al. (2020) found a comparable pattern in Pakistan, where religious expectations shaped which values teachers considered to address in classrooms. These findings indicate that sociocultural sensitivity extends beyond discomfort with controversial topics to include structural tensions between the value frameworks teachers are expected to implement and those endorsed by their communities.

3.2.5 Theme 5: Emotional demands on teachers

A fifth challenge concerned the personal and affective demands that values-oriented teaching, including emotional readiness, tolerance for moral ambiguity, and the ability to manage affective responses under uncertainty. The most clearly form of emotional demand concerned teaching ethically sensitive content. Seo and Lim (2024) documented a Korean EFL teacher who experienced apprehension and

emotional labor when introducing discussions of racism, worrying that her own subjectivity might shape students' interpretations. Suryani (2017) found that teachers needed to practice emotion regulation when students communicated aggressively through digital media.

A second form concerned the perceived social and professional risk of engaging with values content. Lei and Medwell (2022) reported Chinese EFL teachers anticipated potential controversy when addressing values-related topics and experienced values work as carrying greater reputational risk than other dimensions of language instruction. This was not rooted in a lack of pedagogical knowledge but in the exposure inherent in taking a visible stance on values-laden content before students, colleagues, and institutional stakeholders. A related pattern was observed by Yeoh and Cheong (2023), who found that Malaysian ESL teachers expressed limited emotional readiness to manage the discomfort and potential controversy associated with discussing gender stereotypes, which weakened their sense of professional efficacy.

Overall, these accounts suggest that values-oriented ELT poses challenges that go beyond pedagogical knowledge and instructional technique. It also places personal and emotional demands on teachers, who must handle morally complex content amid uncertainty, limited preparation, and potential scrutiny.

4. Discussion

This discussion interprets the findings from Sections 3.1 and 3.2 through a curriculum enactment perspective. This perspective views teachers as active interpreters of policy and curriculum expectations, and sees their practices as shaped by institutional, curricular, and assessment conditions (Ball et al., 2011; Priestley et al., 2015). From this perspective, values education in ELT is not a straightforward process of policy implementation, but a situated and negotiated practice in which values-oriented aims are selectively interpreted and enacted within specific contexts.

4.1 Teachers' Interpretations of Values Education in English Language Teaching

The four orientations identified in Section 3.1 were not equally visible in teachers' accounts. Moral and civic purposes were articulated most frequently, whereas intercultural and critical purposes appeared less often. This uneven visibility does not suggest that intercultural or critical work is absent from classrooms. Rather, it reflects how values education is defined in policy, framed in research, and captured by different study designs.

One explanation lies in the interpretive resources available to teachers in their professional contexts. Across studies, teachers tended to understand values education through pedagogical and institutional frameworks that were already familiar to them (Mohamad et al., 2019; Thornberg, 2008). This pattern is consistent with research on teacher cognition, which shows that teachers' understandings are shaped not only by policy intentions but also by practical concerns and contextual demands (Borg, 2003; Pajares, 1992). When values-related aims align with routine classroom responsibilities, they are more easily recognized, named, and integrated into language teaching.

A second explanation lies in conceptual overlap and research framing. In ELT, intercultural aims are often discussed through constructs such as respect, empathy, openness to difference, global competence, or global citizenship (Byram, 2020). Critical aims are often framed through constructs such as power, equity, and social issues (Crookes, 2013). These constructs involve value-related dimensions, but they are not always explicitly labeled as values education. As a result, similar classroom practices may be described using different terminology (Asif et al., 2020; Sun, 2023; Sun & Buripakdi, 2023; Yacob et al., 2022).

In addition, methodological differences influence what becomes visible. Qualitative studies are more likely to capture reflective, interpretive, and critical dimensions of teacher thinking, whereas survey-based studies tend to foreground broader and more general orientations (Borg, 2006). This is particularly relevant for intercultural and critical orientations, which may be enacted through subtle pedagogical choices and sustained curricular design (Byram, 2020). The lower visibility of intercultural and critical orientations may therefore reflect the way such practices are framed and measured rather than their absence in practice.

These explanations help account for the uneven visibility of the four orientations across the reviewed studies. However, the findings also reveal important variation within the most visible orientation itself. Teachers who articulated moral and civic purposes did not understand them in uniform ways. The following discussion examines three dimensions of this variation: pedagogical purpose, sources of moral authority, and degree of interpretive specificity.

The first dimension concerns pedagogical purpose. Within the moral-civic orientation, the reviewed studies reveal a distinction that the thematic categories alone do not fully capture. In some studies, values education served primarily to regulate behavior and maintain classroom order. Qoyyimah (2016) found that values were linked to discipline, proper behavior, and attentiveness. Noprianto et al. (2022) showed that Indonesian EFL teachers justified character education

largely as a response to students' moral decline and lack of respect. In other studies, values education was framed as a space for reflective and socially oriented learning. Sun (2021, 2023) reported teachers engaging students with global human rights issues, social injustice, and ethical dilemmas. Seo and Lim (2024) documented a teacher whose students developed civic agency by proposing social action plans to address racism. In these studies, values-oriented ELT aimed to develop learners' ethical reasoning and readiness for social engagement. These contrasting patterns suggest that similar value labels can support different pedagogical purposes.

The second dimension concerns the sources from which teachers drew their interpretations. Asif et al. (2020) is instructive on this point. Although the study found no statistically significant differences between Chinese and Pakistani teachers in their general support for values education, differences emerged in how values-related aims were framed. Chinese teachers tended to interpret civic purposes through collectivism and patriotism, whereas Pakistani teachers drew more strongly on religious perspectives. This indicates that teachers do not simply reproduce policy language. Rather, they interpret values education in relation to local norms, institutional expectations, and professional identities.

The third dimension concerns the degree of interpretive specificity. In several studies, teachers' understanding remained at the level of broad support for value-oriented aims without clear pedagogical articulation of what such aims required in practice. Lei and Medwell (2022) found that Chinese EFL teachers agreed with the humanistic aims of the Curriculum Standards, yet positioned themselves largely as implementers rather than as agents who could shape how values entered their teaching. Similarly, teachers in Sun and Buripakdi (2023) recognized the relevance of global citizenship education but understood it in broad terms that did not translate into clear curricular decisions.

By contrast, some studies documented more specific and self-directed interpretations. The Korean teacher in Seo and Lim (2024) demonstrated a strong sense of professional agency and responsibility. Similarly, teachers in Sun (2021, 2023) articulated values-related aims through clearly defined content choices and pedagogical intentions, particularly in relation to global issues such as human rights and social justice. What distinguished these teachers was not simply their endorsement of values education, but the degree of specificity in how they understood its purposes and requirements. This contrast suggests that the precision with which teachers conceptualize values education may be as important as their support for it in principle.

Overall, the findings indicate that teachers do not share a single, stable understanding of values education in ELT. The uneven visibility of the four orientations reflects both the interpretive resources available to teachers and the way research frames and captures their practices. Within the most visible orientation, teachers' interpretations further varied in pedagogical purpose, in the sources of moral authority they drew upon, and in the degree of specificity with which they conceptualized values integration. These differences help explain why values education takes different forms across contexts and provide an important basis for understanding the constraints on its enactment.

4.2 Teachers' Challenges Constraining the Enactment of Values Education in English Language Teaching

This section examines the conditions that constrain the enactment of values education in ELT. The five challenges identified in Section 3.2, namely conceptual ambiguity, insufficient pedagogical guidance, curriculum and assessment constraints, sociocultural sensitivity, and emotional demands on teachers, do not operate as isolated difficulties. Rather, they form an interconnected set of structural, contextual, and affective conditions that shape how values-related aims are prioritized and enacted in practice.

Conceptual ambiguity is a central constraint because it limits the development of clear pedagogical guidance. As discussed in Section 4.1, teachers' interpretations of values education varied in specificity, and many expressed broad support for values-oriented aims without a clear pedagogical understanding of what these aims required in practice. This pattern is consistent with findings in the wider values education literature, where the lack of shared conceptual frameworks has been identified as a persistent obstacle to coherent implementation across subject areas (Lovat & Toomey, 2009; Muzakkir et al., 2022).

When the purposes and scope of values education remain underspecified at policy and curricular levels, teachers are left to interpret its boundaries on their own, often drawing on familiar institutional frameworks (Thornberg, 2008). This ambiguity constrains pedagogical planning and also makes it more difficult to establish assessment criteria for values-related learning, an issue discussed further below. From a curriculum enactment perspective, these conditions are better understood as features of the institutional environment than as shortcomings of individual teachers (Ball et al., 2011; Priestley et al., 2015).

Closely related to this conceptual challenge is the lack of pedagogical guidance and professional preparation for value-oriented teaching. As the findings in Section 3.2 indicate, teachers were often expected to integrate values without

corresponding instructional models, training, or structured support. This pattern extends findings from previous reviews of values education, which have identified insufficient teacher preparation as a widespread challenge (Hadi et al., 2025; Mohamad et al., 2019), by showing that the same gap persists specifically within ELT across both EFL and ESL settings.

The contrast reported in Bobunova et al. (2021) further suggests that the challenge lies less in teachers' willingness than in the availability of usable pedagogical tools. Without systematic preparation that addresses both conceptual and practical dimensions, teachers are left to rely on individual effort, which contributes to heavier workload and uneven enactment. This challenge is distinct from conceptual ambiguity. Teachers may understand what values education involves in principle yet still lack practical models for enacting it within language-focused instruction.

Curriculum structures and textbook dependence further reinforce these constraints. Previous reviews of values education have highlighted insufficient teacher preparation, examination-oriented curricula, and reliance on prescribed materials as persistent challenges across educational settings (Hadi et al., 2025; Muzakkir et al., 2022). Within ELT, textbooks play a particularly influential role. When classroom instruction is organized around mandated materials, as reported in several studies (Qoyyimah, 2016; Sun & Buripakdi, 2023), values-related content that is absent or only selectively represented in those materials is less likely to be addressed in regular teaching.

In addition, the limited representation of intercultural and critical content in textbooks (Sun, 2021) further narrows the scope of values-related learning. This is especially significant in examination-oriented systems, where classroom time is closely aligned with assessable content. Such patterns illustrate how curriculum design can narrow the space for values-oriented work regardless of teacher support for it. The absence of assessment frameworks constitutes a further structural constraint. Teachers in the reviewed studies expressed uncertainty about how to evaluate students' moral or character development and often lacked formal criteria for doing so (Chung & Wei, 2020). As Chung and Ho (2025) argue, this difficulty is related not only to the perceived subjectivity of values, but also to the lack of institutional frameworks for evidencing values-related learning across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions.

In ELT, this has particular consequences because linguistic progress is supported by established assessment systems, whereas value-related learning is not. Without recognized ways of evaluating such outcomes, values education is more likely to

remain peripheral. Although this issue has been noted in recent reviews of character education (Hadi et al., 2025), its implications for subject-integrated values education in ELT have received limited sustained attention.

Sociocultural sensitivity presents an additional challenge at both individual and institutional levels. Teachers reported discomfort when engaging with topics such as gender, race, and social justice, particularly where these issues were socially or politically contested. Tensions also emerged between secular policy expectations and religious or local value frameworks (Qoyyimah, 2016; Qoyyimah et al., 2020). These tensions are not easily resolved through technical measures such as clearer guidelines or improved assessment tools. Rather, they reflect broader differences in how values are defined, negotiated, and legitimized within specific cultural and institutional settings (Lovat & Toomey, 2009). In this sense, selective implementation may represent a pragmatic response to competing expectations rather than a lack of teacher competence.

The findings also point to the emotional demands associated with value-oriented teaching. Research on teacher emotion in ELT has documented how teachers manage workload, classroom relationships, and institutional pressures (Peng et al., 2023). The present review identifies a more specific form of emotional labor arising from the nature of values-oriented work itself. Value-related teaching may expose teachers' own moral positions, create a sense of professional risk, and increase workload rather than reduce it. Seo and Lim (2024), for example, reported that a teacher was concerned about how her own views might shape students' understanding of racism.

Lei and Medwell (2022) found that Chinese EFL teachers viewed values integration as riskier than other dimensions of teaching, especially when controversial content was involved. Qoyyimah et al. (2020) further showed that using values education for classroom management could add to teachers' responsibilities. These findings suggest that values-oriented teaching requires not only pedagogical competence, but also emotional readiness and institutional support that are often insufficiently addressed in teacher preparation. The findings discussed in this section indicate that the challenges identified in this review are structural, contextual, and effective in nature. They do not arise from a lack of teacher support for valued education, but from the conditions under which teaching takes place. These conditions help explain why value-oriented aims, even when widely endorsed, are not consistently enacted in practice.

4.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This review is subject to several limitations. First, the findings are based primarily on teachers' self-reported perceptions. Most of the included studies relied on interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups, with only limited use of classroom observation data (Bobunova & Notina, 2021; Noprianto et al., 2022; Qoyyimah, 2016). As a result, teachers' reported interpretations and practices may not fully correspond to what occurs in classrooms. This limitation reflects a broader issue in the field, where practice-level evidence on values education in ELT remains limited.

Second, the reviewed studies are concentrated in Asian contexts, with no representation from Western European, North American, South American, or African settings. This geographic concentration limits the generalizability of the findings. The challenges identified in this review, such as examination-oriented curricula and tensions between secular and religious value frameworks, may be especially characteristic of the contexts represented in the sample. Whether similar patterns occur in settings with different curriculum structures, assessment systems, and cultural traditions remains an open question.

Third, the review included only English-language publications indexed in Scopus and the WoS. Relevant studies published in other languages or in regional journals may therefore have been excluded. In addition, the final sample of fourteen studies, while appropriate to the focused scope of the review, limits the breadth of the evidence base. The use of thematic synthesis also involves interpretive judgment in coding and theme construction, which may not be fully replicable.

Despite these limitations, the review provides a systematic account of how values education is interpreted and constrained within ELT. Future research should extend this line of inquiry across a wider range of educational and cultural settings, with particular attention to classroom-based evidence and the role of structured professional development in supporting values-oriented teaching.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review synthesized empirical studies published between 2015 and 2024 to examine how EFL and ESL teachers interpret values education in ELT and what challenges shape its classroom enactment. Based on fourteen studies conducted in Asian EFL and ESL contexts, the review reveals a persistent gap between policy-level support for values-oriented ELT and its actual pedagogical realization.

Two main conclusions emerge from the review. First, teachers generally rejected a value-neutral view of ELT and regarded values education as a legitimate part of English teaching. Their perceptions clustered around four overlapping orientations: moral and character development, socialization and civic responsibility, intercultural and global engagement, and critical reflection and ethical inquiry. However, these orientations were not equally visible across studies, and similar policy language was interpreted differently across contexts. This suggests that teachers do not simply implement policy, but actively interpret it through local curricular, cultural, and moral frameworks.

Second, the enactment of values education was shaped by five interrelated challenges: conceptual ambiguity, limited pedagogical guidance and teacher preparation, curriculum and assessment constraints, sociocultural sensitivity, and emotional demands on teachers. This review highlights two dimensions that have received less sustained attention in the ELT literature. The absence of assessment frameworks emerged as a structural problem rather than a merely technical one, while the emotional demands of value-oriented teaching surfaced as a distinct dimension of teachers' work. These findings indicate that uneven enactment is not mainly a matter of teacher reluctance, but of structural and affective conditions surrounding classroom practice.

Overall, the review suggests that future research should include more practice-based evidence and evidence from a wider range of educational and cultural contexts. Teacher education, curriculum design, and policy need to provide clearer guidance, stronger pedagogical support, and more workable approaches to assessing values-related learning and respond to the emotional demands of addressing sensitive issues. Without progress in these areas, values-oriented ELT is likely to remain an aspirational policy direction rather than a systematically enacted pedagogical practice.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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