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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ANALYSIS OF HIGHER ORDER THINKING SKILLS (HOTS) AND CHARACTER EDUCATION VALUES IN ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS FOR GRADE X SEMESTER 1 IN CURRICULUM 2013 AND MERDEKA CURRICULUM

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**Abstract:** This study analyzes the integration of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and character education values in English textbooks for Grade X Semester 1 within Curriculum 2013 and the Merdeka Curriculum. Employing qualitative content analysis, this research utilized a checklist instrument based on the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (analyzing, evaluating, creating) and character education indicators (religiosity, nationalism, independence, integrity, cooperation). Data were collected from two textbooks officially issued by the Ministry of Education. The results indicated that the Merdeka Curriculum textbook incorporated a higher proportion of HOTS-based activities (45%) compared to Curriculum 2013 (32%), which remained dominated by LOTS. Regarding character education, both textbooks represented core values, yet the Merdeka Curriculum provides explicit alignment with the Profil Pelajar Pancasila. The findings suggest that the Merdeka Curriculum textbook is more effective in supporting 21st-century skills, although improvements in contextual task design are still needed.

**Keywords:** HOTS; character values; English textbook; Curriculum 2013; Merdeka Curriculum.

## Analisis Keterampilan Berpikir Tingkat Tinggi (Hots) Dan Nilai Pendidikan Karakter Pada Buku Ajar Bahasa Inggris Kelas X Semester 1 Pada Kurikulum 2013 Dan Kurikulum Merdeka

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis keterampilan berpikir tingkat tinggi (Higher Order Thinking Skills/HOTS) dan nilai pendidikan karakter dalam buku ajar Bahasa Inggris kelas X semester 1 pada Kurikulum 2013 dan Kurikulum Merdeka. Metode penelitian menggunakan analisis isi kualitatif dengan instrumen berupa lembar analisis berbasis Taksonomi Bloom revisi (menganalisis, mengevaluasi, mencipta) serta indikator nilai karakter (religius, nasionalis, mandiri, integritas, gotong royong). Data diambil dari dua buku ajar resmi terbitan Kementerian Pendidikan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa buku ajar Kurikulum Merdeka memuat lebih banyak aktivitas berbasis HOTS (45%) dibandingkan Kurikulum 2013 (32%) yang masih didominasi LOTS. Dari aspek nilai karakter, keduanya menampilkan nilai inti, namun Kurikulum Merdeka lebih eksplisit sesuai dengan Profil Pelajar Pancasila. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa buku ajar Kurikulum Merdeka lebih

mendukung keterampilan abad ke-21 meskipun masih diperlukan perbaikan pada desain soal kontekstual.

**Kata kunci:** HOTS; pendidikan karakter; buku ajar Bahasa Inggris; Kurikulum 2013; Kurikulum Merdeka

## INTRODUCTION

Education plays a crucial role in shaping students' intellectual and moral development. In Indonesia, the curriculum has undergone several reforms to adapt to the demands of the 21st century. The implementation of Curriculum 2013 (K-13) emphasized the scientific approach, integrated thematic learning, and character education. However, in response to various challenges, the Ministry of Education introduced the Merdeka Curriculum, which provides greater flexibility, promotes differentiated instruction, and integrates the *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5). Both curricula share the same vision of producing graduates who are competent, critical, creative, and have strong character values, but they differ in emphasis and implementation.

One of the main instruments in the successful implementation of a curriculum is the textbook. Textbooks are not only a source of knowledge but also serve as a guide for learning activities (Ur, 2009; Richards, 2015). In the context of English language learning, textbooks play a particularly important role because they provide structured exposure to the target language, cultural elements, and exercises that shape students' communication skills. Therefore, the content and quality of textbooks directly influence students' opportunities to practice Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and internalize character values.

Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) refer to the cognitive abilities that go beyond memorization and comprehension, encompassing the processes of analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Developing HOTS is essential to prepare students to deal with complex problems in real life, thus it has become a global educational priority. On the other hand, character education has been emphasized in the Indonesian educational system as a means of cultivating values such as religiosity, nationalism, independence, integrity, and cooperation, which are articulated in the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila*. These two aspects—HOTS and character values—must be integrated into textbooks to support holistic student development.

Previous researches provide important insights, but also revealed limitations. Anasy (2016) and Marlina & Halimah (2020) found that most English textbooks used in secondary schools still emphasize LOTS (Lower Order Thinking Skills), with fewer activities that foster analysis, evaluation, and creation. Similarly, Sultan et al. (2023) and Pratiwi & Joko (2024) observed that while character values are present in textbooks, they are often implicit and not consistently integrated with learning objectives. These findings indicate a gap in existing literature: there has been little comprehensive comparison of English textbooks across different curricula—particularly between Curriculum 2013 and the Merdeka Curriculum—in terms of HOTS and character education.

This study seeks to fill that gap by conducting a comparative analysis of English textbooks for Grade X Semester 1, focusing on how HOTS and character values are represented. The research addresses the following questions:

1. How are Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) distributed in English textbooks under Curriculum 2013 and the Merdeka Curriculum?
2. How are character education values integrated within the two textbooks?

3. Which curriculum's textbook demonstrates stronger support for 21st-century learning skills?

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it enriches the literature on textbook analysis by combining the dimensions of HOTS and character education, which are rarely examined together. Practically, the results provide feedback for textbook writers, teachers, and policymakers to improve instructional materials so that they align with the goals of the national curriculum and the needs of learners.

The scope of this study is limited to two textbooks officially published for Grade X Semester 1, one representing Curriculum 2013 and the other the Merdeka Curriculum. The analysis focuses on reading passages, exercises, and activities included in these textbooks. It does not extend to classroom implementation, teacher practices, or student outcomes, which may represent constraints of the study. Nevertheless, the findings provide valuable insights that may guide further empirical research and curriculum development.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative content analysis with a descriptive-comparative approach. Content analysis was selected because the purpose of the study was to systematically identify and evaluate the representation of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and character education values in the content of textbooks. The comparative design was applied to examine similarities and differences between the Grade X Semester 1 English textbooks used in Curriculum 2013 and the Merdeka Curriculum. The primary sources of data were two official English textbooks published by the Indonesian Ministry of Education: Bahasa Inggris untuk SMA/SMK Kelas X Semester 1 for Curriculum 2013 and Bahasa Inggris untuk SMA/SMK Kelas X Semester 1 for the Merdeka Curriculum. As the research focused exclusively on documents, no human participants were involved; thus, demographic information, recruitment methods, or inclusion and exclusion criteria were not applicable in this context.

The instruments used in this study consisted of two checklists developed by the researchers. The first was a HOTS analysis checklist based on the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), which covered three major cognitive processes: analyzing, evaluating, and creating. The second was a character value checklist adapted from the Ministry of Education (Kemdikbud, 2022), which included five core values: religiosity, nationalism, independence, integrity, and cooperation.

The procedures of the study were carried out in several stages. First, all activities, exercises, and tasks contained in the textbooks were systematically identified and recorded. Second, each activity was classified into either LOTS (Lower Order Thinking Skills) or HOTS categories, depending on its cognitive level. Third, the activities were mapped against the indicators of character values to determine their integration within the textbooks. Finally, the overall distribution and patterns of HOTS and character values were compared between the two curricula. Data collection was conducted from June to August 2024. Each unit of the textbooks was carefully analyzed to ensure comprehensive coverage. To enhance reliability, the coding process was performed independently by two researchers, and the results were later cross-checked for consistency. Discrepancies in classification were discussed until consensus was achieved.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically frequency counts and percentages, to calculate the distribution of HOTS and character values across both textbooks. The findings were then presented in tables and figures for clarity, followed by qualitative interpretations to relate the results to the research questions and existing literature. Ethical considerations in this study were minimal since no human subjects were involved. Nevertheless, the researchers adhered to principles of academic integrity by citing all references properly and acknowledging the copyright of the textbooks analyzed. Ethical approval from an institutional review board was not required. The researchers declared no conflict of interest with the authors or publishers of the textbooks under analysis..

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Distribution of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)

The first focus of this study was the distribution of cognitive processes in the two textbooks, specifically the extent to which activities promoted Lower Order Thinking Skills (LOTS) and Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). Each activity, exercise, and task in the textbooks was carefully coded based on the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy, which classifies LOTS as remembering, understanding, and applying, and HOTS as analyzing, evaluating, and creating. By quantifying the proportion of activities in each category, it was possible to determine the relative emphasis placed on basic versus advanced cognitive processes.

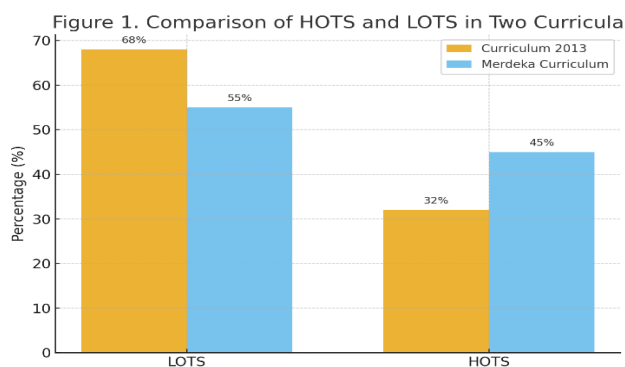
The analysis revealed clear differences between the two curricula. In the Curriculum 2013 textbook, the majority of tasks focused on LOTS. These tasks typically involved activities such as recalling vocabulary, identifying specific information in texts, answering comprehension questions, or practicing grammatical structures in controlled formats. While such tasks are essential for language acquisition, they tend to emphasize rote learning and procedural knowledge rather than critical or creative thinking. HOTS-based tasks were present but limited, usually appearing in the form of short essay writing, simple text analysis, or project assignments that encouraged students to evaluate or create content.

In contrast, the Merdeka Curriculum textbook displayed a stronger orientation toward HOTS. A larger portion of its activities required students to analyze texts, evaluate arguments, and create original responses. For example, reading passages were often followed by open-ended questions prompting students to express opinions, compare perspectives, or propose solutions to real-life problems. Writing tasks were designed to encourage creativity, such as developing personal narratives or drafting argumentative essays. Additionally, the Merdeka Curriculum textbook integrated project-based tasks that demanded collaboration, reflection, and problem-solving, all of which align with higher-order cognitive processes.

**Table 1**

Distribution of Thinking Skills in English Textbooks

Textbook	LOTS (%)	HOTS (%)
Curriculum 2013	68	32
Merdeka Curriculum	55	45



**Figure 1**

Distribution of HOTS and LOTS in Curriculum 2013 and Merdeka Curriculum Textbooks

The results show that the Curriculum 2013 textbook contained a larger proportion of LOTS-based activities (68%) compared to HOTS (32%). In contrast, the Merdeka Curriculum textbook demonstrated a relatively higher integration of HOTS (45%), reducing the dominance of LOTS (55%). This finding aligns with the objective of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes critical, analytical, and creative learning through project-based activities.

These results confirm prior studies by Marlina & Halimah (2020), who observed that English textbooks under Curriculum 2013 tended to prioritize lower-level cognitive skills such as recall, comprehension, and simple application. The Merdeka Curriculum appears to address this gap by providing students with more opportunities to engage in higher-level thinking. However, although the proportion of HOTS is greater in the Merdeka Curriculum, it still does not surpass 50%. This indicates that further improvements are necessary to ensure that HOTS becomes the dominant feature of learning tasks rather than an additional component.

### Integration of Character Values

The second objective of this study was to analyze how character education values were integrated into the two textbooks. The analysis focused on five key values emphasized in Indonesian education policy: religiosity, nationalism, independence, integrity, and cooperation. Table II summarizes the extent to which these values were represented in the English textbooks for Curriculum 2013 and the Merdeka Curriculum.

**Table 2**  
Character Values in Curriculum 2013 and Merdeka Curriculum Textbooks

Character Value	Curriculum 2013	Merdeka Curriculum
Religiosity	√	√
Nationalism	√	√
Independence	Partial	√
Integrity	√	√
Cooperation	Partial	√

The results show that both textbooks addressed all five character values, but there were notable differences in the degree of integration. In the Curriculum 2013 textbook, religiosity, nationalism, and integrity appeared more explicitly, often through reading passages that introduced moral lessons, patriotic themes, or moral dilemmas. However, the values of independence and cooperation were less consistently emphasized. These values were typically implied through group discussions or assignments requiring individual effort, but they were not always accompanied by explicit reflection or explanation of the value itself.

In contrast, the Merdeka Curriculum textbook integrated all five values in a more systematic and explicit manner. Religiosity was reinforced through activities encouraging students to respect cultural and spiritual diversity reflected in English texts. Nationalism was presented through contextual materials that linked English learning to Indonesian culture and identity, helping students value their national heritage while engaging with global perspectives. Independence was fostered by project-based tasks that required self-directed learning, such as writing portfolios, independent research, and creative assignments. Integrity was evident in exercises that asked students to reflect on honesty in communication and the ethical use of information. Finally, cooperation was explicitly embedded in collaborative tasks, peer assessments, and group projects, often tied to real-life scenarios that demanded teamwork and problem-solving.

These findings demonstrate that the Merdeka Curriculum aligns more closely with the government's vision of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila. By explicitly embedding character values in tasks

and activities, it creates clearer pathways for students to connect learning with moral and social development. This reflects the shift in curriculum design from a knowledge-centered to a learner-centered model, where character formation is integrated with skill development.

Previous research has shown similar patterns. Sultan et al. (2023) reported that the Merdeka Curriculum provides a stronger framework for character education compared to earlier curricula, while Pratiwi & Joko (2024) noted that Curriculum 2013 often left values implicit, relying heavily on teacher mediation to make them explicit. This suggests that while the Curriculum 2013 textbook offered opportunities for value-based learning, it placed greater responsibility on teachers to highlight and contextualize them. However, it is important to note that even in the Merdeka Curriculum, the integration of character values may not always translate into deep moral reasoning or personal reflection. In some cases, values are operationalized as checklist items or surface-level group tasks, which may encourage cooperation but not necessarily build empathy or ethical decision-making. Thus, while progress is evident, both curricula still face challenges in ensuring that character education moves beyond symbolic inclusion toward meaningful internalization by students.

Overall, the comparison suggests that the Merdeka Curriculum provides more consistent and structured opportunities for students to engage with the five core character values, supporting holistic education in line with 21st-century competencies. Nevertheless, further refinement is needed to encourage deeper integration of values into the learning process, ensuring that students not only practice values but also reflect critically on their significance.

### Comparative Quality of Textbooks

The third objective of this study was to compare the overall quality of the English textbooks under Curriculum 2013 and the Merdeka Curriculum in terms of their ability to support 21st-century learning. The comparison was made across four major aspects: learning orientation, emphasis on higher-order thinking, integration of character education, and contextualization of materials. A summary of these findings is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

Comparative Aspects of Curriculum 2013 and Merdeka Curriculum Textbooks

Aspect	Curriculum 2013	Merdeka Curriculum
Learning orientation	Scientific Approach	Differentiated & Project-based
HOTS emphasis	Limited, dominated by LOTS	Higher proportion of HOTS
Character values	Implicit, integrated indirectly	Explicit, aligned with Pancasila Profile
Contextualization	Less practical, more mechanical	More contextual and flexible

The findings reveal several key contrasts. The Curriculum 2013 textbook adhered to the principles of the scientific approach, which emphasized stages such as observing, questioning, experimenting, and concluding. This systematic framework offered clarity and structure, particularly for language beginners. However, the activities often remained mechanical, focusing heavily on form-based drills, controlled grammar practice, and literal comprehension. As a result, while the scientific approach ensured consistency, it did not always foster deep engagement or higher-order reasoning.

By contrast, the Merdeka Curriculum textbook reflected a more flexible design, influenced by differentiated instruction and project-based learning. Activities were more varied and adaptive to different learning styles. For instance, writing tasks invited creative responses, speaking activities involved role-plays and debates, and projects encouraged collaboration and real-life application. Such orientation better aligns with the demands of the 21st century, where adaptability, creativity, and communication skills are increasingly valued.

Another dimension of quality relates to the emphasis on higher-order thinking. As shown in the previous section, Curriculum 2013 largely relied on LOTS-oriented activities, which may help students develop foundational knowledge but provide fewer opportunities for critical or innovative thinking. The Merdeka Curriculum, however, incorporated more HOTS activities, requiring learners to analyze texts, justify arguments, and produce original work. This demonstrates a shift in pedagogical philosophy, aiming to prepare students not only as language users but also as problem-solvers and reflective thinkers.

The integration of character values also highlights a qualitative difference. Curriculum 2013 embedded values in subtle or indirect ways, often leaving the responsibility to teachers to emphasize moral lessons. The Merdeka Curriculum took a more explicit stance, aligning activities with the Profil Pelajar Pancasila and directly encouraging values such as cooperation and integrity through collaborative projects and reflective tasks. This makes the learning process not only cognitive but also affective, reinforcing the holistic development of students.

Finally, in terms of contextualization, Curriculum 2013 textbooks often presented abstract or decontextualized examples, such as dialogues and passages that were grammatically accurate but detached from students' everyday experiences. Conversely, the Merdeka Curriculum sought to situate English learning within authentic and relatable contexts, such as discussing contemporary issues, digital communication, and local-global connections. By making tasks more relevant to students' realities, the Merdeka Curriculum increases the likelihood of meaningful learning transfer.

These comparisons suggest that while Curriculum 2013 provided structure and consistency, it risked reducing learning to a procedural exercise. The Merdeka Curriculum, in contrast, represented a pedagogical shift toward flexibility, contextual relevance, and holistic student development. This aligns with global trends in education reform, which advocate for competence-based curricula that emphasize both skills and values (Richards, 2015; Susanto, 2022).

Nevertheless, neither textbook is without shortcomings. The Merdeka Curriculum textbook, although richer in HOTS and contextualization, still featured tasks that were repetitive or lacked sufficient scaffolding for lower-proficiency learners. Similarly, the Curriculum 2013 textbook, while limited in HOTS, ensured gradual progression and structured practice that may benefit struggling students. Thus, each textbook exhibits unique strengths and weaknesses, suggesting that teachers must exercise professional judgment in adapting and supplementing materials to maximize learning outcomes.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Although this study provides valuable insights into the representation of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and character education values in English textbooks, several limitations must be acknowledged to ensure a balanced interpretation of the findings.

First, the scope of data was limited to two textbooks for Grade X Semester 1, one representing Curriculum 2013 and the other representing the Merdeka Curriculum. While this selection allowed for an in-depth comparative analysis, it does not capture the full range of English textbooks used at different grade levels, across various publishers, or in other subjects. As a result, the generalizability of the findings is restricted, and caution should be taken when applying the conclusions beyond the specific textbooks analyzed.

Second, the study employed a qualitative content analysis with a focus on frequency counts and percentages. While this approach provided useful quantitative indicators of the presence of HOTS and character values, it may not fully reflect the depth or quality of the tasks. For instance, two tasks may both be categorized as HOTS, but the cognitive challenge and authenticity of those tasks could differ significantly. This limitation suggests that future studies should adopt more nuanced coding schemes or combine content analysis with qualitative thematic analysis to capture the complexity of task design.

Third, the study did not investigate classroom implementation. Textbooks are only one component of the teaching–learning process, and the way teachers use them can significantly influence their effectiveness. In some cases, teachers may adapt LOTS-based tasks to become more analytical, or conversely, they may simplify HOTS-based tasks due to time or resource constraints. Without classroom observation or teacher interviews, it remains unclear how the textbook content translates into actual teaching practices and student learning outcomes.

Fourth, this study did not assess the impact on students’ achievement or character development. While the presence of HOTS and character values in textbooks is promising, it does not automatically guarantee that students will develop these competencies. Future research should therefore include empirical studies that measure the relationship between textbook design, classroom practices, and student outcomes, possibly through mixed-methods approaches combining content analysis, classroom observations, surveys, and performance assessments.

Finally, the study was conducted within the Indonesian educational context, which is shaped by unique cultural, social, and policy frameworks. Although the findings may resonate with broader discussions on textbook quality and curriculum reform, they should be interpreted cautiously when applied to other educational systems with different priorities and structures.

#### ***Future Directions***

To address these limitations, future research should consider expanding the scope to multiple textbooks across grade levels and subjects, as well as incorporating diverse publishers to capture variations in quality. Employing longitudinal studies could also shed light on how the integration of HOTS and character values evolves over time as curricula are revised and implemented. In addition, combining textbook analysis with classroom-based research—such as teacher interviews, lesson observations, and student focus groups—would provide a more holistic picture of how textbooks influence teaching and learning in practice.

Furthermore, future studies could explore cross-national comparisons, examining how other countries integrate HOTS and character education into their language textbooks. Such research would not only highlight best practices but also situate the Indonesian experience within global trends in education reform. Finally, researchers should investigate strategies for enhancing the design of textbook tasks, particularly by embedding more authentic, contextual, and inquiry-based activities that can better support students’ higher-order thinking and moral reasoning.

Overall, while this study marks an important step in understanding the comparative strengths and weaknesses of English textbooks under Curriculum 2013 and the Merdeka Curriculum, it also opens multiple pathways for future research that could enrich theoretical perspectives, inform policy decisions, and improve classroom practices.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study set out to analyze the representation of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and character education values in Grade X English textbooks under Curriculum 2013 and the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings revealed several key differences. First, the Curriculum 2013 textbook was dominated by LOTS-based tasks (68%), with HOTS making up only 32% of the content. In contrast, the Merdeka Curriculum textbook demonstrated a more balanced approach, integrating 45% HOTS and 55% LOTS. This suggests that while both curricula still prioritize lower-order skills, the Merdeka Curriculum has made notable progress in incorporating higher-order tasks that better prepare students for the demands of 21st-century learning.

Second, both textbooks embedded the five character values identified by the Ministry of Education—religiosity, nationalism, independence, integrity, and cooperation. However, the integration differed in quality. The Curriculum 2013 textbook tended to present character values

implicitly, relying heavily on teacher mediation to make them explicit, while the Merdeka Curriculum textbook integrated these values more directly and systematically, often linking them to real-life contexts and explicitly aligning them with the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila*.

Third, when comparing the overall quality of the two textbooks, the Curriculum 2013 textbook showed strengths in structured organization and systematic scaffolding through the scientific approach, but it often promoted mechanical and decontextualized tasks. On the other hand, the Merdeka Curriculum textbook emphasized flexibility, project-based learning, and differentiated instruction, making it more responsive to diverse learners and contemporary educational needs. Despite these advantages, certain tasks in the Merdeka Curriculum remained surface-level, suggesting that further refinement is needed to ensure deeper engagement with both HOTS and character education.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it enriches the body of knowledge by providing a comparative perspective that integrates cognitive and affective dimensions of textbook analysis. Practically, it offers insights for textbook authors to design more balanced and meaningful learning materials, for teachers to adapt and supplement textbooks with activities that promote critical thinking and character development, and for policymakers to refine curriculum guidelines that encourage the integration of 21st-century competencies. At the same time, this study acknowledges certain limitations. It was limited to two textbooks for Grade X Semester 1 and relied primarily on content analysis without classroom validation. Therefore, the findings should not be overgeneralized across all textbooks or contexts. Looking ahead, future research should expand the scope to include multiple textbooks across grades and subjects, conduct classroom-based studies to examine how teachers and students interact with textbook tasks, and employ mixed-methods approaches to link textbook design with student learning outcomes. Cross-national comparisons could also provide valuable insights into how different education systems balance cognitive skills and character education in language learning.

In conclusion, while both textbooks contribute to the development of students' language competence and moral values, the Merdeka Curriculum textbook demonstrates greater potential in fostering higher-order thinking and holistic character formation. However, achieving the full vision of 21st-century education requires continuous improvement, not only in textbook design but also in teacher training, curriculum policy, and classroom practice. This study therefore underscores the importance of aligning content, pedagogy, and values to prepare students as critical thinkers and responsible citizens in a rapidly changing world. Future research should extend the analysis to a wider range of textbooks, incorporate classroom-based studies, and explore the relationship between textbook content and students' actual performance. Such research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how curriculum reforms translate into practice and contribute to improving educational quality in Indonesia.

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**Analysis of Higher Order Thinking Skills (Hots) and Character Education Values in English Textbooks for Grade X Semester 1 in Curriculum 2013 and Merdeka Curriculum**

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