CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the background of the study and formulation of the problem will be explored to provide insight into the context and urgency of the issue under study. Following this, operational definitions will be established to construct a conceptual framework for the research theories. Additionally, the aim of the research and its significance will be discussed, thus clarifying the research objectives and the benefits derived from this study.

1.1   Background of the Study

The curriculum is an essential part of the education system as it determines how teaching and learning will occur. According to the latest advancements in science, technology, and development, teaching and learning must be constantly inventive and dynamic (Kamila & RM, 2023). Therefore, changing the curriculum is necessary, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has accelerated scientific and technological progress, significantly impacting Indonesian education. Additionally, it has affected students' academic performance. Constantly changing policies regarding the implementation of teaching and learning during the pandemic have led to students experiencing learning loss. To address the recovery of learning loss following the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indonesian government developed a new curriculum known as *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Ndari et al., 2023).

In the middle of 2022, the *Kurikulum Merdeka* underwent a trial across all school levels, including elementary school. The Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) decree no. 052/H/KR/2022 (2022) specified that the trial took place in several selected schools. In early 2023, Kemendikbudristek initiated the registration process for schools interested in implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in the 2023/2024 academic year. According to Kemendikbudristek decree no.

0574/H.H3/SK.02.01/2023 (2023), the registration period occurred from February 6th to March 31st, 2023. Presently, the *Kurikulum Merdeka* is being implemented in up to 130,648 elementary schools.

The *Kurikulum Merdeka* emphasizes learning to suit the student's environment. Schools and teachers can design operational curricula and teaching modules to facilitate learning according to students' competency levels (Lubis & Priyadi, 2022). Compared to the previous curriculum, the *Kurikulum Merdeka* has many differences from the 2013 Curriculum. One of the differences is in teaching English to young learners (TEYL). In this curriculum, English was added as an elementary school subject after being removed from the 2013 Curriculum (Sulaiman, 2022).

The *Kurikulum Merdeka* is introduced in elementary schools for grades 1 and 4 based on the Kemendikbudristek decree 2774/H.H1/KR.00.01/2022 (2022). However, this implementation presents several challenges for teachers who teach English. The majority of elementary schools in Indonesia still delegate the responsibility of teaching English to classroom teachers, who typically have a background in Primary School Education (PGSD) rather than English education. Teachers are forced to grapple with a subject outside their expertise and are required to use the latest curriculum, which is deemed to necessitate significant adjustments. Additionally, teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) brings unique challenges, making the teacher's task more complex.

So far, previous research has yet to discuss the implementation of TEYL using the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in Indonesia. Previous research focused on implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka* at the elementary school level in the general scope. Based on the research by Wardani et al. (2023) and Ndari et al. (2023), implementing *Kurikulum Merdeka* in elementary schools results in several challenges for teachers. From the results of the previous research and the phenomena observed, it is necessary to conduct research exploring elementary school teachers' challenges in English teaching under the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

1.2   Formulation of the Problem

The problem formulation in this research is "What are the elementary school teachers' challenges in English teaching under *Kurikulum Merdeka*?"

1.3   Operational Definitions

1.3.1 *Kurikulum Merdeka*

Kurikulum Merdeka serves as the pedagogical foundation that affords elementary school teachers the freedom to organize a quality learning process adapted to the needs of students and the learning environment, particularly in English language teaching in elementary school.

1.3.2 Teaching English to Young Learners

Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) refers to teaching English to elementary school students who are still considered young learners. In this research, the teaching process is conducted by classroom teachers. The instruction is designed to meet the needs and characteristics of young learners and is specifically tailored to facilitate English acquisition for students whose first language is not English.

1.3.3 Elementary School

Elementary school is the first level of formal education in Indonesia that offers English language lessons under *Kurikulum Merdeka* for students aged five to thirteen years, encompassing grades one to six. Elementary school in Indonesia is divided into two phases: the lower and upper levels. English language lessons are concentrated in grades 1 and 4, representing these two phases, respectively.

1.4   Aim of the Research

The researcher determines this research objective to find out and describe specific information about elementary school teachers' challenges in English teaching under *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

1.5   Significances of the Study

1.5.1   Theoretical Significance

The *Kurikulum Merdeka* is a new curriculum. Thus, this research offers novel theoretical insights into implementing English language teaching in elementary schools under the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

1.5.2   Practical Significance

This research describes the challenges elementary school teachers face in teaching English under the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. By understanding these challenges, teachers and stakeholders can use this study as a reference to design effective English language teaching strategies for elementary schools under the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

1.5.3   Empirical Significance

The findings of this research provide deeper insight and understanding of the conditions and challenges elementary school teachers face in English teaching under the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.