

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a comprehensive description of the study. It includes the background, formulation of the problem, operational definitions, aim of the study, and significance of the study.

1.1. Background of the Study

A country's literacy rate is an important indicator of its overall quality. This is because a country's ability to grow is strongly correlated with its literacy rate. Literacy has become an essential activity because it refers to a person's ability to read, write, speak, count, and comprehend information to solve difficulties encountered in everyday life (Oktariani & Ekadiansyah, 2020; Rusli, 2023). Although literacy is commonly defined as the ability to read, write, speak, and count, this study focuses on the ability to read. In the concept of literacy, reading is interpreted as an ability to comprehend, evaluate, use, and interact with written language to participate in society, achieve objectives, and expand knowledge and potential (Koyuncu & Fırat, 2020). In their article, Damaianti et al. (2020) also explained that reading is considered in the context of literacy as an attempt to comprehend, apply, reflect on, and engage with a variety of texts to achieve the goal of increasing someone's knowledge and potential as well as their capacity to participate in society. With that said, even though literacy is the most important part of reading, the definition of literacy also covers many more aspects, both for learning and life.

However, Indonesia came in 61st place from 72 countries in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey. It is also ranked 60th out of 61 participating countries based on data from the 2016 Central Connecticut State University survey of the world's most literate nations conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD). In addition, the reading proficiency of students in Indonesia ranks 45th out of 48 countries according to the 2011 Progress International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) test results (Susanto, 2019). This brings to consideration that reading literacy is urgent.

Considering the understanding of reading literacy, Syamsuri and Bancong (2022) argue that reading literacy is one of the most essential skills in education. Reading literacy, related to reading activities, can be characterized as an activity to acquire knowledge or understand information conveyed through written language. Following this statement, Audina et al. (2020) also stated that reading is a process of obtaining information to understand the significance or meaning of the text read. Because reading is getting information to understand the text's importance or meaning, reading has become a valuable way to learn new things for students who participate actively in academic activities, especially for language learners. This is consistent with Harmer (2007) viewpoint, which states that reading activities benefit language learners. Given the situation, significant efforts need to be made to improve literacy levels through reading activities in Indonesia, especially in the context of the educational system.

The government made a policy called Emancipated Learning (*Merdeka Belajar*) to support the importance of literacy through reading activities in the educational system. Emancipated Learning (*Merdeka Belajar*) is a policy introduced by Indonesia Minister of Education and Culture Decree No. 3 of 2020. Sholeh et al. (2023) state that the essence of the government's emancipated learning programs is to investigate students' ability to create and improve the quality of learning independently based on their passion. Implementing emancipated learning or *merdeka belajar*, which states about independent learning, is also related to the Merdeka curriculum. According to Fathurrahman et al. (2022), in the Merdeka Curriculum, students must learn independently, be independent of their educational environment, and choose their study method. Not only that, Nugraheny et al. (2023) also provide a view that Merdeka itself is a situation where teachers and students have the freedom to innovate and learn independently and creatively in the process of teaching and learning activities. The concept of emancipated learning (*Merdeka Belajar*) is a topic of interest in educational research and pedagogy.

The phenomena of literacy through reading activity in emancipated learning is offered in one of the junior high schools in Tasikmalaya, West Java, Indonesia. Literacy activities that are being implemented in schools include the

School Literacy Movement and P5 activities. In these activities, students are given the freedom to read through books, and they do review activities to help them understand the information from the reading. In addition, literacy through English reading activity has been widely used in several grade levels, including grade 7. Based on a pre-interview with one of the English teachers at the school, she stated that she uses several English reading activities to help improve students' literacy levels. Literacy in English learning activities is implemented by providing learning activities that focus on reading activities, whether it is by reading through a textbook or from reading books that students bring independently. In addition, she also stated that each student in the class has a different level of literacy understanding, especially in understanding a reading text presented using English. This different literacy level is due to the various backgrounds of students' previous English language learning (Preliminary Interview, November 4th, 2023). Thus, it is necessary to conduct research related to literacy through reading activities in emancipated learning because it can reflect how they understand and experience it. In addition, according to the Minister of Education and Culture Policy No. 23 of 2015 about character cultivation, literacy is the most important consideration in developing the *Merdeka* curriculum (Sitohang et al., 2023). It is also explained that the program conducts literacy activities that encourage character development and the growth of literate individuals.

Researchers have recently investigated literacy through reading activities (Cahya et al., 2020; Khofiyya et al., 2023; Noveliana & Ghani, 2022). Some of these studies explain the importance of teachers implementing reading activities in schools on students' literacy skills. However, research related to the perspective of implementing English reading activities in the classroom to improve students' literacy is still under-researched (Fisher & Frey, 2008). Therefore, this study focuses on knowing more perspectives, both from teachers and students, regarding the implementation of literacy through English reading activities because the reality of the low level of literacy in Indonesia must be a concern, especially in the implementation of literacy in the emancipated learning or *Merdeka belajar*.

1.2. Formulation of the Problem

The researcher asks the following research question based on the abovementioned background: “What are teachers’ and students’ perspectives of literacy through English reading activity in emancipated learning (*Merdeka Belajar*)?”

1.3. Operational Definitions

The researcher presents multiple definitions to ensure the words used in this study are understood. These definitions are explained as follows:

- 1.3.1. **Perspective of teacher and students in literacy:** Perspectives refer to the lenses or viewpoints of teachers and students in implementing literacy through English reading activities in emancipated learning
- 1.3.2. **Literacy:** Literacy is defined as a person’s ability to grasp, evaluate, and apply information from multiple sources that interact with multimodal texts implemented through reading activity in emancipated learning.
- 1.3.3. **Reading Activity:** Reading activity involves aspects of reading to get and understand information from a text that is implemented by teachers and students in an English subject in emancipated learning in an emancipated curriculum. This activity involves the ability to comprehend a written text to achieve reading literacy.
- 1.3.4. **Emancipated Learning:** Emancipated learning, or *Merdeka Belajar*, implemented by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek), is defined as a self-directed and autonomous approach to acquiring knowledge and skills. In its implementation, emancipated learning gives teachers and students to innovate independently in teaching and learning activities in an emancipated curriculum (*kurikulum merdeka*).

1.4. Aim of the Research

The research aims to investigate teachers’ and students’ perspectives on literacy through English reading activities in emancipated learning (*Merdeka Belajar*).

1.5. Significances of the Study

The following contributions are expected to result from this research:

1.5.1. Theoretical Contribution : This study aims to provide information and knowledge about literacy through English reading activities in emancipated learning (*Merdeka Belajar*) from the perspectives of teachers and students.

1.5.2. Practical Contribution

- a. Teachers: Teachers can use the results of this study as a reference in teaching literacy through English reading activities in emancipated learning (*Merdeka Belajar*).
- b. Learners: The results of this study are expected to be useful for students in improving their literacy levels through English reading activities in emancipated learning (*Merdeka Belajar*).
- c. Readers: This research can be used as input for readers who are interested in related matters to expand knowledge about literacy in teaching and learning English reading activities in emancipated learning (*Merdeka Belajar*).

1.5.3. Empirical Contribution: This research provides an empirical contribution for the researcher into literacy in English reading activities in emancipated learning (*Merdeka Belajar*).