

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This beginning chapter mainly covers some subchapters: background of the study, problem formulation, research objectives, significance of the study, and definition of key terms.

1.1 Background of The Study

Education has been seriously compromised due to the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily online learning. A number of investigations have revealed that challenges of online learning have a solid contribution to students' lost learning. For instance, in a study by Barrot et al. (2021), it emerged that even though students valued the utilization of online learning right through the pandemic period, just over half of them believed that the traditional classroom environment was more efficient compared to online learning. This thought was based on the finding that the home environment was unsuitable for learning. Additionally, several obstacles to online learning encountered by students, including technology literacy and competency, still became barriers to this kind of learning. Despite that issue, the shift between online learning resulted in poor teaching and learning, anxiety, and other mental health and physiological issues emerged, with a study discovering that the relationship between COVID-19 contagion concerns and depression was mediated by self-efficacy (Barrot et al., 2021; Alesi et al., 2023).

Despite the damage caused by online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, other factors, such as enriching the life of the nation is a constitutional mandate of the 1945 Constitution and global competitiveness, trigger the urgency to immediately incorporate 21st-century learning into the curriculum, especially

by means of Project-Based Learning (PjBL). Therefore, in 2021, *Kurikulum Merdeka* was introduced by The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. Circular Number 0574/H.H3/SK.02.01/2023 regarding registration of independent implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* academic year 2023/2024 also strengthens the position of this curriculum in the Indonesian educational system. That regulation is about the independent implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which is a choice for educational institutions based on their respective readiness. The fundamental idea of establishing this curriculum is to prepare students facing the challenges of the 21st century by encouraging and enhancing students' critical thinking, creativity, and entrepreneurship. English language instruction, as one of the components of this new curriculum, is also identified as a crucial area for innovation with a primary focus on developing activities and methods that align with the objectives of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

PjBL is recognized to align with this curriculum since it encourages students to work on real-world projects that demand them to apply English in an authentic context, work together among peers, and develop problem-solving and communication skills. Retrieving from the previous study by Sasson et al. (2018), Shin et al. (2021), and Belagra & Draoui (2018), it has been revealed that PjBL is a promising approach to boosting students' target language proficiency, critical thinking, computational thinking, as well as their learning autonomy and motivation. Furthermore, PjBL can encourage the development of problem-solving abilities, which are crucial in this period. Students participating in PjBL receive exposure to challenging topics, recent issues, or difficulties that call for analysis, evaluation, and solution-finding (Markula & Aksela, 2022). Lastly, PjBL is recognized for cultivating students' ownership of their education and involvement in learning. They are the ones who are responsible for their comprehension improvement since they are offered an active role and freedom

to decide and investigate interest-related topics inside the project (Harmer & Stokes, 2016).

Even though *Kurikulum Merdeka* is currently being integrated and PjBL is seen as a suitable approach to succeed in this curriculum, there are still issues in the development of PjBL activities specifically addressed and designed for junior high school within the framework of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. That phenomenon is seen from the fact that the execution difficulties experienced by teachers because current procedures frequently restrict students to a small selection of project topics (Cintang et al., 2018). Additionally, based on the preliminary observation, the current situation shows that teachers find it challenging to design projects that encourage students' collaboration, effective communication, creativity improvement, and speaking activity. Therefore, they need some guidance and example in integrating PjBL. Teachers must invest a significant amount of time and energy in developing the topics and incorporating PjBL in English lessons. There are plenty that have to be considered, such as planning and preparation, implementation, English language learners, and benefits (Shin et al., 2021). Consequently, there is a demand for comprehensive and specialized PjBL learning activities that complement *Kurikulum Merdeka*'s objectives and are created specifically for junior high school students with unique characteristics, needs, and interests. This gap becomes the current study concerned with developing PjBL activities that fit junior high school profiles.

The previously mentioned studies are also in line with the preliminary observation. According to the early studies, it is noticeable that the present classes of 9th-grade pupils is not fully adhering to and integrating *Kurikulum Merdeka* as they are still working under the preceding one. The aforementioned observation highlights a notable deficiency in research, suggesting a lack of congruence between the planned curriculum and its practical execution. The lack of full integration presents a significant obstacle to achieving *Kurikulum*

Merdeka's objectives. In addition, previous studies only focused on the effectiveness of PBL and its perspective. Consequently, it is vital to address this gap through the creation and execution of PjBL initiatives that are specifically designed to align with the updated curriculum. The primary objective of this study is to bridge the existing knowledge gap by presenting a viable solution through the development of PjBL activities addressed to 9th-grade students for the upcoming academic year. Through this endeavor, the research seeks to facilitate teachers in selecting PjBL activities based on their needs.

This current study's key concern is the need for PjBL learning sources that align students' critical thinking, creativity, and collaborative abilities (Guo et al., 2020; Almulla, 2020a), as they are in line with *Kurikulum Merdeka's*. The currently available learning activities might not fully immerse students in real-world situations, promote peer or group collaboration, or offer opportunities for relative and iterative processes, as previous observations discovered that teachers inform they rarely integrate PjBL in the class due to a lack of available PjBL activities choices. This gap emphasizes the requirements that educators have to offer real PjBL activities that incorporate student-driven methodologies, inquiry-based learning, collaboration, reflection, critique, and revision, as well as the application of technology in language learning.

In light of this development, the current study is about conducting research and development regarding PjBL activities addressed for junior high school students that align with the goal of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct this research, as it has been discovered that instructors offer students a limited number of project topics due to their limitations on this approach (Baghoussi & Ouchdi, 2019). The main goal of this study is to develop activities regarding project-based learning. Considering the depth and breadth of the research and development that will be carried out, the study is designed for

one semester. It emphasizes developing a project-based activities product prototype. The problem statements are presented as follows.

1.2 Problem Formulation

Based on the above background, the problem formulation in this research is formulated as follows:

- 1.2.1 What is the specification of PjBL activities needed for teaching in English classes of grade 9 of SMP N 1 Singaraja to support the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka*?
- 1.2.2 How is the prototype of Project-Based Learning activities designed to support *Kurikulum Merdeka* in the 9th-grade students of SMP N 1 Singaraja?
- 1.2.3 What is the quality of the developed prototype of project-based learning activities for teaching English in SMP N 1 Singaraja?

1.3 Research Objectives

Based on the previous problem formulation, the research objectives of this study are listed as follows:

- 1.3.1 To analyze the specification of PjBL activities needed for teaching in English classes of grade 9 of SMP N 1 Singaraja to support the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka*.
- 1.3.2 To describe the prototype of Project-Based Learning activities designed to support *Kurikulum Merdeka* in the 9th-grade students of SMP N 1 Singaraja.

- 1.3.3 To examine the quality of the developed project-based learning activities for teaching English in SMP N 1 Singaraja.

1.4 Significance of The Study

The significance of the study is separated into two sections, namely theoretical and practical benefits. The following is about to examine each of them.

1.4.1 Theoretical Benefits

This study has significant theoretical implications, especially for English language teaching and curriculum development. By examining the possible applications of PjBL to align with *Kurikulum Merdeka's* objective, this study seeks to contribute to enriching literature on innovative pedagogies and enriching activities development methods that enhance the quality of EFL learning at the junior high school level. Furthermore, this study is expected to offer insight regarding understanding the application of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in English language teaching and how it can be aligned congruently with current pedagogical practices.

1.4.2 Practical Benefits

The practical benefits of this study are addressed to the interested party, starting from teachers, students, and other researchers.

- Benefits for Teachers

The study's findings can provide information regarding their teaching practices by informing innovative activities for PjBL that correspond with *Kurikulum Merdeka's* objectives. The finding has the potential to aid educators in developing effective lesson plans

that can foster 21st century learning while improving students' language proficiency.

- **Benefits for Students**

The result of this study can assist students in strengthening their English language proficiency and other soft skills necessary for modern workforce success. Students can actively collaborate with their classmates, develop problem-solving skills, and become involved in authentic language use by integrating PjBL. This leads to more motivated and engaged students in language learning activities.

- **Other Researchers**

This study might be also useful as a guide for future studies who share an interest in developing PjBL activities to support the integration of *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

The key terms of this study are explained here. The conceptual definition refers to defining key terms based on established theory. Meanwhile, operational is related to the definition corresponding to the study context. This section looks into each of them.

1.5.1 Conceptual Definition

a. Project-Based Learning (PjBL)

PjBL is a student-centered pedagogy believed to occupy an engaging classroom approach in which students are demanded to explore real-world challenges and problems in order to acquire a more thorough comprehension (Markula & Aksela, 2022). PjBL emphasizes that students proactively get involved in projects that are beneficial both

personally and professionally significant. PjBL calls for the teacher to energize the learning situation by encouraging student collaboration as they research, decide, and address project-related difficulties (Almulla, 2020b). In terms of facilitating deeper learning, it is also necessary to set up an assessment system that fosters awareness, reflexivity, and a critical spirit (Maros et al., 2021).

b. *Kurikulum Merdeka*

It refers to an educational program that is applied in Indonesia. It is attempted to raise the standard of learning to an advanced quality. In addition, this curriculum aims to improve the execution of the educational process and revive Indonesian education. A growth mindset – the idea that intelligence and skills can be acquired through effort and commitment- is fundamental to this curriculum. The curriculum seeks to be more student-centered, emphasizing creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking. For the purpose of gaining an extensive comprehension of the design and implementation capability, this curriculum has been researched. Furthermore, the integration of this curriculum has also been investigated in relation to the digitalization of education (Riyan Rizaldi & Fatimah, 2022).

c. *Activities Development*

Activities development has emerged as the procedure of creating instructional resources that facilitate the learning process. In the framework of PjBL, activity development entails designing and producing resources that will enhance the PjBL process and aid students in developing their creative problem-solving skills, which commonly occurs in group work. Furthermore, it covers students' involvement in decision-making. Hence, it can give them a sense of ownership over the project (Artini et al., 2018).

1.5.2 Operational Definition

a. Project-Based Learning (PjBL)

In the current study context, PjBL represented the instructional strategy utilized in English classes in junior high school to implement *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Furthermore, learning topics were crafted to make sure they matched this strategy. In addition, the PjBL activities were designed by considering the needs of the targeted school by using the ADDIE model. Hence, the prototype was designed and planned to adhere to the needs of the targeted school, SMP N 1 Singaraja.

b. *Kurikulum Merdeka*

For the purpose of this study, *Kurikulum Merdeka* referred to a particular educational framework adopted by SMP N 1 Singaraja. This was marked by offering freedom to students in terms of learning what they were interested in. Moreover, based on the result of the document analysis, it was found that the school already integrated the latest textbook that fit the current curriculum approach.

c. Activities Development

This term aligned with the production of PjBL-developed activities specifically for the English lessons at SMP N 1 Singaraja. The activities prototype was designed based on the eight stages from Hamidah et al. (2020) starting from choosing the project topic, pre-communicative activities, asking essential questions, designing the project plan, creating a project timeline, finishing the project, assessing the project results, and finally evaluating the project.