CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the research background, problem identification, research limitation, research questions, research objectives, research significance, and definition of key terms related to the current study.

1.2. Research Background

The role of education in a student-centered learning approach is very important in forming a generation that is independent, creative and critical. In this approach, students become the center of the learning process, where they not only receive information passively, but are also actively involved in exploring knowledge, solving problems, and developing their skills. It is relevant to Safaruddin et al., (2020) who state that students-centered concern students' active involvement in the classrooms. According to Kaput (2018) student-centered learning approach provides space for them to learn according to their individual rhythm and learning style, allowing them to understand the material in greater depth. In addition, this approach helps students to take more responsibility for their own learning process, strengthens self-confidence, and fosters intrinsic motivation. Ultimately, student-focused education helps prepare them to become individuals who are ready to face real life challenges, as well as contribute positively to society.

The Indonesian government responded to the existence of student-centered learning which is considered as an important approach in forming a better human resource by introducing the Merdeka Curriculum. It is an educational framework that is more adaptive and flexible and intended to help students navigate this unpredictable environment (Mubarok et al., 2023). The emergence of Merdeka curriculum adopts the current trend related to deep learning approach focusing on developing students' critical thinking skills and deep understanding in a more holistic and students-oriented learning (Arina & Herlambang, 2025; Gunawan et al., 2025). It is signed by providing flexibility in learning, the Merdeka Curriculum allows students to learn according to their interests, needs and abilities (Astawa et al., 2017; Audina et al., 2023; Hamdi et al., 2022). This curriculum gives teachers the freedom to adapt teaching methods that are more relevant to students' conditions, as well as providing space for students to be more active in managing and exploring their own learning. Through this approach, students are encouraged to think critically, creatively and innovatively, as well as taking an active role in the learning process (Barlian et al., 2022; Cahyani et al., 2022; Dewi et al., 2023; Padmadewi et al., 2023). It indicates that Merdeka curriculum provides a wide opportunity for conducting students-centered learning by providing a chance for the teachers and students to adjust their interest, need, and learning environment with the learning objective that they want to achieve (Khomsah et al., 2023).

The emphasis of student-centered learning in Merdeka Curriculum is expected to be able to encourage students' learning engagement in the classroom. Learning engagement has been regarded as an important aspect in assessing the education process. It is mentioned that students who had low learning engagement tend to

have low learning achievement and inadequate qualifications (Mailok et al., 2016; Prawira et al., 2023; Ratnawati et al., 2024). Learning engagement is referred to students' active involvement in the teaching and learning process which commonly emerges due to high learning motivation and interest (Simbolon, 2021; Zen & Ariani, 2022). A high learning engagement reflects that the students are able to think critically, creatively, and innovatively in which they are able to show their thought or idea in the learning activities in their classroom (Artini & Padmadewi, 2021; Budiarta et al., 2023; Emawati et al., 2024). Therefore, the successful implementation of students-centered learning approach in Merdeka curriculum is determined by the students' engagement itself.

However, the implementation of current curriculum still brings an issue to the learning process particularly in English classroom. The transformation from the previous curriculum into Merdeka curriculum emerges a confusion among the English teachers to create or adapt an appropriate learning method (Wilson & Nurkhamidah, 2023). Most of the teachers are suggested to implement a learning method based on the students' characteristics to attract them to participate in the classroom or encourage their engagement. In fact, the confusion faced by the teachers becomes an obstacle for them to implement an appropriate learning method in which it can be a serious problem that affects students' learning achievement (Rahimah & Widiastuty, 2023).

Learning achievement is perceived as an inseparable component of educational assessment in which it reflects how good the learning process is conducted (Ananda, 2019; Charbi & Hartoto, 2017; Padmadewi et al., 2021; Wahyuni, 2020). It is argued that learning achievement is used as an indicator to measure how far is

learning objective achieved by the students (Silalahi et al., 2022). Mailok et al., (2016) even states that a learning achievement is intercorrelated with learning engagement showing the quality of learning process. It is assumed that learning achievement has a correlation with students' learning engagement in which it needs to be considered by the teachers in implementing a learning method into their classrooms.

Furthermore, Merdeka curriculum expects students' learning achievement prioritizing students' communication skills. It means that the development of students' productive skills becomes the concern in assessing students' learning achievement. The productive skills cover students' writing and speaking in English (Wuntu et al., 2022). Speaking and writing are often perceived as students' primary means in communicating their ideas, thought, and knowledge meanwhile students' passive skills; listening and reading are usually perceived as the ability of how students comprehend the utterance (Astawa et al., 2017). Artini and Padmadewi (2021) argue that students' productive skills have a crucial role to determine students' learning achievement considering that productive skills dealing with how students to elaborate the concept or materials that they have learnt. Thus, assessing students' productive skills help the English teachers in obtaining their learning achievement.

Numerous innovative learning method has been explored in education field, one of them is Project-Based Learning (PjBL). It is found as a unique learning method found in the Merdeka Curriculum. PjBL modifies the paradigm of learning to be more dynamic and participatory, allowing students to be both creators and receivers of knowledge. Collaboratively, they create, carry out, and assess projects

that are pertinent to their educational setting (Hakimah, 2023). Project-Based learning (PjBL) provides students with a flexible learning process that is adapted to their skill level, enabling them to go deeper into themes and gain a better knowledge of the material (Rizki & Fahkrunis, 2022). Students' teamwork is improved by Project-Based Learning (PjBL). Through cooperative group projects, students develop their ability to assign tasks, communicate clearly, and cooperate to achieve a common objective. PjBL fosters students' essential skills for productive teamwork— sharing ideas, listening to others' viewpoints, and making concessions when i t i s needed.Furthermore, PjBL frequently incorporates real-world scenarios or problems, necessitating students to use their combined knowledge and skills to find answers. Students get better at working in teams and gain a deeper comprehension of the material and its real-world applications through this process (Hidayah & Muchtar, 2022).

The preliminary observation was conducted in the English classrooms for eighth-grade students at SMPN 1 Kediri. It was found that the English teachers implemented PjBL method that closely followed the syntax proposed by Hamidah et al., (2020), comprising: planning, implementing, and reporting. The implementation of PjBL was intended to encourage students to write and talk about recount text by involving them as active participants during the teaching and learning process. It was also found that there was no specially designed learning materials which were ready for PjBL activities. In other words, the teacher implemented PjBL occasionally, only when the topic from the curriculum was easier to be managed through PjBL activities. An evaluation needs to be conducted related to the implementation of PjBL activities in English classroom since the

method has been proven to improve students' English proficiency in general, or ability to communicate orally and in writing in particular.

In exploring the literature, many studies were found to explore the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL). Tafakur et al., (2023) studied about the effectiveness of project-based learning for enhancing students critical thinking skills using meta-analysis. It is found that project-based learning improves the students' critical thinking. Menggo et al., (2023) investigate the implementation of project-based learning in preparing students' interpersonal communication skills on speaking course. It is revealed that PjBL can strength the communication skills. Rati et al., (2023) investigate about HOTS-oriented e-project-based learning in improving 4C skills and science learning outcome of elementary school students. The study shows that the HOTS-orientedE-PjBL tools can improve 4C skills and science learning. Rosyida et al., (2020) study on how PjBL increases dedication awareness in disadvantaged areas for geography education students. Those studies reveal that the implementation of PjBL is effective in improving students' learning outcomes.

Considering the importance of PjBL in supporting the learning process, a team of researchers from Universitas Ganesha developed a book consisting of project-based learning activities for the schools who do not have adequate and structured learning activities (Artini, et.al, 2023). The book was designed innovatively by adapting project-based learning method which was more authentic allowing students to have the project relevant to their daily activities. In addition, the activities were designed to emphasize students' productive skills, such as; writing and speaking. It also provided a comprehensive guide for more meaningful and

contextual learning. The developed book were specialized for teaching English in Junior High Schools that had been validated by a number of expert judges. They judged the developed book by obtaining its content and media. The designed activities were categorized as a very good content meanwhile the display was categorized as a very good media. It showed that the book was ready to implement as PjBL activities for teaching English.

However, the developed activities have not been investigated to find out how it effects students' English learning achievement and engagement. It is important to obtain the effect of project-based learning activities on students' English learning achievement and engagement to optimize the English learning process considering that there are still many teachers who do not implement project-based learning structurally. In addition, investigating students' perceptions are also essential. It is mentioned that students' perception reflects the quality of activities implemented in their classrooms (Bahar, 2016). It is added that perceptions hold a significant role on students' learning achievement and engagement in which how they perceive a particular activity or media influencing their behavior on achieving the learning target and participation in the classrooms (Farah & Al-Hattami, 2023; Li et al., 2022). Therefore, the current study intends to investigate the effect of PjBL activities that have been developed in the previous study on the eight-grade students' English learning achievement and engagement at SMPN 1 Kediri. It also obtains students' perceptions to strengthen the findings related to the effect on students' learning achievement and engagement in which the learning achievement is referred to students' writing and speaking skills.

1.2. Problem Identification

The implementation of Merdeka Curriculum demands teachers to conduct a learning process that leads students to be more critical, creative, communicative, and innovative. The successful implementation of Merdeka Curriculum is reflected on students' engagement and achievement since both of those components are perceived as inseparable aspects to measure the education quality. The preliminary observation was conducted at SMPN 1 Kediri which shows a relevant condition to the current issue. It is found that the English teachers who teach the eighth-grade students implementing Project-Based Learning (PjBL) barely without any assistance of learning materials or media. However, an optimal implementation of PjBL can be conducted with an innovation as what has been conducted by the previous study, Artini et al., (2023) who develop a book consisting of PjBL activities purposed for eight-grade students. The activities were developed based on PjBL principles with the emphasis of productive skills; writing and speaking to fulfil the demand of Merdeka curriculum related to students' communication skills. In order to find out whether it is effective or not for innovating PjBL in teaching English, the current study is conducted to find out the effect of PjBL activities on students' engagement and achievement through the implementation of the book designed in PjBL activities. The students' perceptions are also investigated as a reflection of the developed activities.

1.3. Research Limitation

The limitation of this study is that it focuses exclusively on SMPN 1 Kediri, analyzing the effects of implementing project-based English learning activities on the learning engagement and achievement especially writing and speaking skills for 8th-grade students, as well as examining the students' perception of these activities.

This research uses products from a previous study which focused on a project-based learning approach (Project-Based Learning or PjBL). This product was developed through in-depth studies and field trials by a previous research team, with the aim of optimizing the application of PjBL in the educational environment. And in the book there are four skills and in this research the focus is on speaking and writing skills in line with the activities in the book. This research, therefore, not only continues the development of previous research, but also enriches the findings with further analysis regarding the impact and effectiveness of PjBL in modern learning.

1.4. Research Questions

Based on the background above, the research questions in this research are:

1.4.1. Is there any significant effect of the implementation of project-based learning (PjBL) activities on the learning engagement of 8th grade students in English classroom at SMPN 1 Kediri?

1.4.2. Is there any significant effect of the implementation of project-based learning (PjBL) activities on the learning achievement of 8th grade students in English classroom at SMPN 1 Kediri?

1.4.3. Is there any simultaneous effect of the implementation of project-based learning (PjBL) activities on the learning engagement and achievement of 8th grade students in English classroom at SMPN 1 Kediri?

1.4.4. What are the 8th grade students' perceptions on the implementation of project-based learning activities in English classroom at SMPN 1 Kediri?

1.5. Research Objectives

Based on the research questions that have been formulated, the objectives of this research are:

1.5.1. To analyse whether or not there is a significant effect of the implementation of project-based learning (PjBL) activities on the learning engagement of the 8th grade students in English classroom at SMPN 1 Kediri.

1.5.2. To analyse a significant effect 0f the implementation of project-based learning (PjBL) activities on the learning achievement of the 8th grade students in English classroom at SMPN 1 Kediri.

1.5.3. To analyse a simultaneous effect of the implementation of project-based learning (PjBL) activities on the learning engagement and achievement of the 8th grade students in English classroom at SMPN 1 Kediri.

1.5.4. To describe the 8th grade students' perceptions on the implementation of project-based learning activities in English classroom at SMPN 1 Kediri.

1.6. The Research Significances

This research is expected to provide both theoretical and practical benefits to improve thequality of learning.

1.6.1. Theoretical significance

The study's theoretical contribution is to improve the process of creating materials based on research to help junior high school students learn English as a foreign language more effectively.

1.6.2. Practical significance:

The practical advantages of this study target various stakeholders, including teachers, researchers, and students.

a. Benefits for Teachers

This study is expected to contribute knowledge for the English teachers in implementing Merdeka curriculum by encouraging students' learning engagement as a manifestation of students-centered learning and improving students' learning achievement. The English teachers are able to use the project-based learning activities to conduct students-centred learning and emphasis students' writing and speaking skills as the learning achievement mentioned in Merdeka curriculum.

b. Benefits for Students

The results of this study will be applied in classrooms, where students will be givenadditional opportunities to interact with English through projects, making learning more real-world and contextual. Consequently, this will improve and demonstrate theirproficiency in English.

1.7.   Definition of Key Terms

1.7.1. Conceptual Definition

1.7.1.1. Project-Based Learning

Implementing the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) technique leads to improved student engagement. Hamidah (2020) stated that Project-Based Learning (PjBL) or Project-Based Learning is a learning method where students are actively involved in the learning process through working on projects that are relevant to real life. This enhancement is attributed to the PBL method's ability toencourage students to share and discuss knowledge and information. By actively participating in the project, students not only deepen their understanding of the subject matter but also develop problem-solving skills and critical thinking. Students can exchange ideas and perspectives in a collaborative learning environment that is fostered by the interactive nature of PBL, which enhances theirlearning process (Almulla, 2020).

1.7.1.2. Student Learning Achievement

The primary goals is to investigate how project-based learning activities affect the eight-grade students' learning achievement. The learning achievement is recognized as an ability or knowledge that a person has successfully acquired after following a learning or training process (Lesmana & Rokhyati, 2020).

1.7.1.3. Student Learning Engagement

Connell (1991) states that engagement means how students behave and are also emotionally involved in students' active involvement in doing a task. Student engagement is a term used to describe the extent to which students are involved in

the teaching and learning process in an educational environment. This covers a wide range of things, from active participation in class, engagement in discussions, and motivation to learn, to attendance and focus during lessons. The level of student engagement is often considered an important indicator of learning effectiveness, as engaged students tend to learn better and have better academic outcomes overall

1.7.2. Operational Definition

1.7.2.1. Project-Based Learning

Operationally, Project-Based Learning is referred as learning activities implemented for teaching 8th grade students in which the students are taught by using the book that has been designed previously by Artini, et.al., (2023) which consists of PjBL activities. The students are actively involved to work in a project mentioned in the book as a way to encourage their engagement which affect their learning achievement as well.

1.7.2.2. Students' Learning Achievement

Students' learning achievement is defined as a benchmark used to assess the implementation of PjBL to teach English for 8th grade students at SMPN 1 Kediri. The learning achievement investigated in this study is referred to the speaking and writing score of the students in recount text. The scoring was based on the analytical rubrics for assessing speaking and writing developed by Ulker (2017) and Knoch (2011) (see Appendix 1).

1.7.2.3. Student Learning Engagement

Students' learning engagement is investigated as the active involvement of the 8th grade students during the English learning process conducted at SMPN 1 Kediri in which it is taught by using PjBL activities. Students' engagement in this study was examined through engagement questionnaire which was adapted from Fredircks et. al (2004) (see Appendix)