CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

In Indonesia, education has experienced significant reform, especially with the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum. This curriculum shifts the focus toward transforming teachers into autonomous professionals who have the freedom to adapt lessons according to their students' needs and potentials. The core aim is to foster essential 21st-century skills such as creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking. These skills are vital for students to thrive in the modern, rapidly changing society. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture (2021), the Merdeka Curriculum seeks to make learning more relevant to real-world situations and more personalized based on individual learning profiles.

However, implementing such innovative curricula depends heavily on student engagement. Student engagement is defined as the degree of active participation, involvement, and motivation that students display during learning activities. It is a multidimensional concept, carefully recognized as consisting of three main aspects namely behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Skinner et al., 2020). The behavioral aspect specifically pertains to the observable actions of students such as attending lessons, paying attention, completing tasks, and actively participating in discussions. This form of engagement reflects students' physical and behavioral involvement in learning activities. Emotional engagement relates to students'

affective reactions such as interest, enthusiasm, and a sense of belonging in the classroom, which influence their motivation and attitude toward learning. Cognitive engagement involves the mental effort and strategic approaches students employ to understand complex ideas and master skills.

These three dimensions are interconnected, with a high level of behavioral engagement often correlating with emotional and cognitive involvement. Such connection leads to meaningful learning experiences. Conversely, low behavioral engagement can hinder the achievement of learning objectives and the development of key skills outlined in the curriculum. Therefore, understanding and improving student engagement, especially at the elementary level, remains essential for realizing the goals of education reform like the Merdeka Curriculum. Focusing specifically on the fifth-grade classroom at SDN 1 Banjar Tegal, initial observations revealed that students displayed low levels of behavioral engagement during English lessons. Their participation was limited; they appeared unmotivated, passive, and disconnected from the learning process. According to the English teacher at SD Negeri 1 Banjar Tegal, several students had expressed boredom with the traditional learning methods used in class, which mostly involved lectures, textbook reading, and repetitive written exercises. These methods made students feel uninterested and unwilling to participate, especially during grammar or vocabulary activities. This lack of engagement became a barrier to achieving effective learning, as behavioral engagement plays a crucial role in helping students stay focused, involved, and persistent. To address this issue, more interactive and student-centered approaches are needed. Classroom Action Research (CAR) provides a practical way for teachers to identify

problems, try new strategies, and evaluate their impact directly in the classroom. Previous studies have shown that applying CAR with engaging learning methods can significantly increase students' behavioral engagement (Suparman, 2019; Putri & Yufrizal, 2020), helping them become more active, attentive, and motivated during lessons.

One promising solution to this issue is the integration of Design Thinking. This approach has been shown to significantly increase behavioral engagement by involving students in problem-based learning activities that foster empathy, collaboration, and iterative problem-solving. Several studies have demonstrated that Design Thinking can transform students from passive recipients into active participants in their learning process. Noel and Liu (2017) highlighted that it encourages students to take ownership of their learning through creative, human-centered problem solving, which naturally boosts motivation and participation. Additionally, participatory design activities in Design Thinking can develop students' confidence and social-emotional skills, making learning more relevant and engaging (Paracha et al., 2019). The effectiveness of Design Thinking in improving student engagement has also been supported by experimental and classroom action research. For example, Putri and Yufrizal (2020) conducted a CAR-based study and found that student engagement significantly improved after implementing student-centered strategies inspired by Design Thinking principles. Similarly, an experimental study by Nugroho (2021) revealed that students who were taught using a Design Thinking-based model showed higher levels of behavioral engagement, including increased participation, persistence, and attentiveness, compared to those in conventional classrooms.

The reason why Design Thinking is particularly well suited for this context lies in its core processes such as empathy, ideation, prototyping, and testing. These processes motivate students to be active participants. Its iterative nature means students continuously refine their ideas and solutions, fostering persistence and resilience. This approach aligns perfectly with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes cultivating autonomous, creative, and critical learners. Given these benefits, applying Design Thinking in classroom instruction offers an effective strategy for improving behavioral engagement in SDN 1 Banjar Tegal's fifth grade.

Despite its potential, research on implementing Design Thinking in elementary education, especially within Indonesia, remains limited. Most existing studies focus on higher education or specialized fields, leaving primary education underexplored. To address this gap, this study adopts Classroom Action Research (CAR) methodology developed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). This method is suitable because it allows teachers and researchers to collaboratively design, implement, and evaluate interventions in iterative cycles. In addition, this study employs a mixed methods approach by combining qualitative data collected through CAR cycles with quantitative data. This integration allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the process and measurable outcomes of implementing Design Thinking to enhance students' behavioral engagement. Each cycle of CAR involves planning, action, observation, and reflection, which enables continuous adjustment based on real classroom conditions. This ongoing process ensures solutions are tailored specifically to the students' needs and contexts. Several studies have successfully applied CAR and experimental

approaches to measure the impact of Design Thinking on student engagement. For instance, Putri and Yufrizal (2020) demonstrated that applying student-centered methods through CAR increased behavioral indicators such as participation and persistence. Similarly, Nugroho (2021) conducted an experimental study showing that students exposed to Design Thinking-based learning exhibited higher levels of involvement and enthusiasm compared to those in traditional settings. These findings reinforce the relevance of using CAR as a framework for implementing innovative strategies in elementary classrooms.

The main goal of this research is to determine whether applying Design Thinking can enhance behavioral engagement during English lessons among fifth-grade students. Behavioral engagement here includes active participation, effective collaboration, and task completion. It is anticipated that involving students in hands-on, collaborative, and meaningful problem-solving activities will increase their motivation and active participation. Focusing on immediate classroom behaviors makes it possible to directly assess the impact of Design Thinking during instruction. The findings will provide practical insights that teachers can apply immediately to improve student involvement.

Additionally, in alignment with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum, this study aims to produce measurable and practical outcomes. It is expected that students will display increased levels of active participation, better cooperation, and greater task completion as a result of using Design Thinking. These outcomes will be directly observable during lessons and function as indicators of improved behavioral engagement. While longer-term effects such as increased motivation and deeper understanding are important, this research primarily emphasizes

immediate behavioral changes to offer instant, actionable insights for educators and policymakers.

In conclusion, this study aims to contribute both practically and theoretically to the improvement of primary education in Indonesia. By employing an appropriate research design, it seeks to generate valuable insights into how innovative instructional strategies such as Design Thinking can effectively foster behavioral engagement. These insights can inform future teaching practices, curriculum development, and educational policy, supporting the broader goal of effective curriculum implementation and active student involvement in Indonesian classrooms.

1.2 Problem Identification

Fifth-grade students at SDN 1 Banjar Tegal exhibit low engagement, particularly behavioral engagement in English classes, as evidenced by passive behavior during lessons, minimal participation in classroom activities, and frequent incomplete assignments. This lack of behavioral engagement is closely associated with monotonous teaching methods and limited opportunities for active learning, which hinder students' motivation and involvement (Santika & Putri, 2020). This issue was also confirmed through an interview with the English teacher, who explained that many students appeared uninterested and bored during English lessons, often showing reluctance to speak up or participate in group activities. The teacher noted that students tended to disengage when lessons followed a rigid, textbook-based format without interactive or hands-on components. Furthermore, the teaching approaches currently employed lack innovative and practical methodologies, such as Design Thinking, that have the

potential to address these behavioral engagement challenges. Teachers often face difficulties in implementing student-centered strategies that can effectively motivate and actively involve students in the learning process (Wang, Chai, & Koh, 2021). Additionally, there is insufficient empirical evidence regarding the application and impact of Design Thinking on student engagement, particularly behavioral engagement, within Indonesian elementary English classrooms. This gap underscores the necessity for classroom-based research to explore how Design Thinking can enhance behavioral engagement and improve learning outcomes in this specific context (Dewi & Saraswati, 2020; Henriksen, Richardson, & Mehta, 2020). Studies such as Putri and Yufrizal (2020), who conducted Classroom Action Research in an elementary school setting, found that integrating student-centered strategies inspired by Design Thinking significantly improved behavioral engagement, including increased participation and task persistence. Likewise, Nugroho (2021) conducted an experimental study and reported that students exposed to Design Thinking-based instruction demonstrated more active involvement and enthusiasm compared to students in traditional classrooms. These findings highlight the need to further investigate Design Thinking as a promising pedagogical approach in Indonesian elementary education through classroom-based interventions.

1.3 Research Limitation

This study is limited to investigating the implementation of Design Thinking to enhance behavioral engagement specifically in fifth-grade English classes at SDN 1 Banjar Tegal. Rather than merely examining the impact, the study aims to observe the improvement in students' behavioral engagement

throughout the intervention process. It focuses on how students increasingly participate, interact, and involve themselves in classroom activities as a result of iterative Design Thinking-based instruction. The scope is deliberately narrowed to behavioral engagement and does not extend to other dimensions such as cognitive or emotional engagement, nor does it assess broader academic achievements or long-term outcomes. Although behavioral engagement has been widely examined in educational research (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Skinner & Belmont, 1993), studies that explicitly explore behavioral engagement improvements in the context of elementary-level English learning particularly in fifth-grade classrooms remain scarce. Most engagement-related research emphasizes older learners in secondary or higher education, leaving a significant gap in primary school contexts (Dewi & Saraswati, 2020; Hapsari, 2022). To contribute to this underexplored area, this research applies Classroom Action Research (CAR) as a practical framework to identify problems and test solutions within an actual classroom setting (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Supporting this approach, several experimental studies have shown that Design Thinking-based strategies can lead to measurable increases in student engagement. Nugroho (2021), for example, found that elementary students exposed to Design Thinking tasks demonstrated higher behavioral engagement compared to peers in conventional classrooms. Likewise, a study by Utami & Sari (2022) reported improved student involvement, participation, and collaboration after applying problem-based learning integrated with Design Thinking. These findings reinforce the potential of Design Thinking to improve engagement in primary English classrooms.

1.4 Research Questions

1.4.1 What is the perceptible improvement in behavioral engagement resulting from the incorporation of Design Thinking in fifth-grade English classes at SD N 1 Banjar Tegal?

1.4.2 How is Design Thinking implemented in fifth-grade English classes at SD N 1 Banjar Tegal to improve students' behavioral engagement?

1.5 Research Objective

In line with the identified research problems, the objectives of this study are:

1.5.1 To evaluate the perceptible improvement in students' behavioral engagement resulting from the implementation of Design Thinking in English learning activities. This objective focuses on assessing how the incorporation of Design Thinking enhances students' participation, collaboration, and task completion, thereby providing measurable indicators of improved behavioral engagement as a direct result of the instructional approach.

1.5.2 To explore and describe the process of implementing Design Thinking in fifth-grade English classes at SDN 1 Banjar Tegal. This objective aims to investigate how the stage of Design Thinking empathy, definition, ideation, prototyping, and testing are partically applied in the classroom, including the adaptations made to meet the specific needs and learning charateristics of fifth-grades students.

1.6 Research Significance

1.6.1 Theoretical Significance

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of how Design Thinking can be integrated into elementary education, specifically in the context of English language learning. By examining the process and impact of Design Thinking on student engagement-especially behavioral engagement-this research expands existing knowledge on the effectiveness of innovative, student-centered instructional models. The findings are expected to provide new insights into the theoretical foundations of Design Thinking in primary education, highlighting its potential to foster participation, collaboration, and motivation among young learners. Furthermore, this study supports the development of engagement theory by providing empirical evidence on how specific teaching approaches can influence student involvement in real classroom settings (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Brown, 2022).

1.6.2 Practical Significance

a) For Educators

This research offers practical benefits for teachers and school practitioners by providing evidence-based strategies for implementing Design Thinking in English classes. Educators will gain concrete examples of how to adapt the stages of Design Thinking (empathy, definition, ideation, prototyping, and testing) to suit the needs of fifth-grade students. The study's findings will help teachers create more interactive, engaging, and student-centered learning environments, address challenges in fostering participation and collaboration, and refine their instructional practices to improve student outcomes.

b) For Students

The application of Design Thinking is expected to directly benefit students by increasing their engagement, motivation, and active participation in English learning. By involving students in meaningful, collaborative, and creative activities, this approach aims to make English lessons more enjoyable and relevant to their real-life experiences. Enhanced engagement can lead to improved learning outcomes, greater self-confidence, and a more positive attitude toward English as a subject.

c) For Future Research

This study provides a foundation for further research on innovative teaching methods in primary education. The findings will offer valuable insights for future researchers interested in exploring the impact of Design Thinking or similar approaches on student engagement and learning outcomes in various contexts. By documenting the process, challenges, and outcomes of implementing Design Thinking in a real classroom, this research can inform the design of future studies, support comparative research across different subjects or grade levels, and contribute to the ongoing development of best practices in education.