

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Background

In the 21st century, English language learning in primary school should emphasize not only the mastery of fundamental language skills but also the development of broader competency like critical thinking. As a global lingua franca, English enables students to access a wide range of international information, interact with global communities, and prepare for future academic and professional challenges (Fiedler, 2022). Critical thinking value is increasingly crucial in today's fast-changing and information-saturated world. Students are expected to analyze, evaluate, and make thoughtful decisions that are essential in navigating information, solving problems, and become lifelong students (Herlinawati et al., 2024). According to this perception, the goal of English teaching in primary schools should go beyond linguistic proficiency and include developing students' cognitive, social, and emotional growth. In other words, students' learning should result in the mastery of the content knowledge (cognitive competence), abilities to interact and socialize (social competence) and develop positive attitudes and good character (emotional growth).

While the content knowledge and interaction can be directly affected by the curriculum implementation, the development of positive attitudes and good characters need special attention and strategies. Good characters refer to acceptable universal and local values that build someone's quality as a person. In Indonesian education system, particularly in the primary school levels, referred to *Peraturan Menteri Pendidikan Dasar dan Menengah Republik Indonesia Nomor 10 Tahun 2025 Pasal 4*, there are Graduate Profile (*Profil Lulusan*) values, encompassing eight essential dimensions that must be achieved by the end of each educational level: (a) faith and piety toward God Almighty, (b) citizenship, (c) critical thinking, (d) creativity, (e) collaboration, (f) independence, (g) health, and (h) communication. As part of the larger study, this research focused on critical thinking that is crucial to ensuring that students develop

not just as intellectually competent individuals, but also as morally grounded citizens aware with their social responsibilities (Poniam, 2025).

According to the 2022 PISA results, more than 99% of Indonesian students were only able to answer questions categorized in Level 1–3, which are associated with lower-order thinking skills (LOTS). In contrast, fewer than 1% could correctly answer Level 4–6 questions, which require higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) such as critical thinking, reasoning, and evaluating information. For example, in the reading domain, 74.5% of students remained at Level 1, and only 0.8% achieved Level 4–6. This gap highlights the urgent need to embed critical thinking into early education to better equip Indonesian students for 21st-century challenges and global competitiveness (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). Thus, English learning should be as far away as possible from rote memorization learning and prioritize interactive learning (Utami & Mahardika, 2023). For instance, student-centered activities, student participation, and using the English language in real world contexts. Unfortunately, many classrooms still struggle with inadequate access to classroom resources (including technology or other materials), students' limited proficiency in English, and the lack of engaging media to support meaningful learning. Interview sessions conducted with English Teacher in Singaraja reported that primary school EFL teachers face challenges using textbooks due to lack of teaching and media, limited access to improved digital media and lack of students' English ability to engage students effectively and efficiently.

Bilingual exposure, is considered as an important piece in solving these challenges. Regular and consistent exposure, in classroom discussions, digital storybooks, or bilingual media, to both Indonesian and English was shown to help students understand language better, increase their confidence, and become more engaged using English in everyday interactions (Mahayanti et al., 2024; Nuranisa et al., 2025). Bilingual learning promotes cognitive flexibility, allowing students to efficiently process content while linking ideas together across languages. This interaction is even more powerful when used with technology-based learning resources particularly through media with distinct media that also involve forms of narratives, visuals and interactive platforms. Notably some media represent digital bilingual

storybooks. These bilingual digital storybooks provide contextualized input relevant to young learners' preferences, development, and learning needs. For example, some interactive story apps and reading platforms are both shown to increase student engagement and provide opportunities to support 4C skill development in English language classrooms (Nurhidayat et al., 2024). Since reading will help students to interpret a meaning, connect ideas, and consider the message to enhance understanding (Indrayani et al., 2024), this combination could help to support language learning but also learning as cognitive development and character building, especially in the form of critical thinking.

In response to the increasing demands for global competency and character-based education, the Indonesian government has implemented curriculum changes aimed for enhancing the quality of learning, including teaching of English at the primary school level. Starting from the 2013 curriculum implemented a scientific approach with five stages: watching, questioning, experimenting, associating, and communicating. The objective was for these five stages to enhance students' analytical and critical thinking (Maghfirah et al., 2023). The 2013 curriculum anticipates a more comprehensive and balanced learning process, emphasizing the holistic development of students through knowledge building, attitude, and skill enhancement (Azita et al., 2023). Many teachers, however, indicated that implementation challenges came from inadequate professional development, heavy content, lack of resources, and not having clear procedures. The evaluations remained generally standardized and teacher-centered, which discouraged critical thinking and individual student development.

Then, the Merdeka Curriculum was introduced in 2022 by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology to address the problems of the previous curriculum. It provides a more adaptable, student-centered, and contextual constructivist approach for learning (Kemendikbudristek, 2024). The Merdeka Curriculum promotes for personalized learning environments through differentiated instruction, expanded learning content, and a transition to project-based and comprehensive assessment methods. According to Azita et al. (2023), it encourages teachers to modify resources, learning environments, and class pacing according to the

interests, developmental stages, and cultural backgrounds of the students. A paradigm change is essential to transition teachers from a textbook-dependent framework to one that fosters creativity, reflection, and contextual learning, which is vital for effective implementation. A fundamental element of the Merdeka Curriculum is the Graduate Profile (*Profil Lulusan*). English language learning is expected to contribute to the development of these dimensions by enhancing students' communication skills and helping them become globally aware, morally grounded, and adaptable individuals.

Supporting this, it is necessary to implement Deep Learning approach. The shift to Deep Learning in Indonesia's current educational landscape is a crucial part of the response to the demand for more meaningful, reflective, and applicable learning in the 21st century. Deep learning is an educational environment that moves away from in-depth student understanding of content through knowledge application in a variety of contexts, that is of mindful, joyful, and meaningful learning. Deep learning refers to educational context places more emphasis on in-depth understanding by students in applying knowledge in various contexts that goes beyond rote memorization and repetitive drills (Kemendikbudristek, 2025). Unlike traditional teacher-centered context, where the student is a passive recipient of knowledge, deep learning encourages the student to actively engage through exploration, discussion, and critical thinking. In this way, deep learning directly aligns with the Graduate Profile value of critical thinking.

Additionally, deep learning supports the development of 21st-century skills, especially the 4Cs including, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity are all essential competencies in nowadays globalization and rapidly changing world (Herlinawati et al., 2024). In classroom practice, deep learning in English education can be applied through the use of project-based learning, inquiry-based tasks, and storytelling that require students to connect new knowledge with their existing experiences. For example, rather than merely translating or memorizing vocabulary, students may be asked to create story, engage in role-plays related to real life situation, or collaborate to solve real-life language problems. These strategies do

not only foster linguistic development, but also character growth and cognitive flexibility in creating learning more transformative and sustainable.

Students in primary school (ages 6–12) are naturally curious, energetic, and thrive in contexts that offer physical movement, sensory stimulation, and social interaction (Meisani, 2022). As young learners are different from adults, teachers must be conscious of their specific characteristics, which are as follows: 1) Learning by doing, 2) High interest and curiosity in something, 3) Having the ability for indirect learning, 4) Unable to think abstract but good at imitating, 5) Talking a lot and being creative with limited vocabulary and grammar, 6) Possessing the ability to comprehend meaning and develop meaning and own world of imagination, 7) Exhibiting limited focus, preferring to engage in playing and learning through enjoyable activities (Slattery & Willis, 2001; Scott & Ytreberg, 2004 as referenced in Aslamiah, 2022).

Among the age range of primary school students, Grade 5 learners (aged 10–11 years) are considered developmentally appropriate for learning activities that involve more complex thinking skills. Based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development, students at this age are transitioning into the concrete operational stage, in which they begin to develop logical thinking and are capable of understanding cause-and-effect relationships, although still grounded in concrete contexts (Hayat et al., 2024). This stage makes them more cognitively ready to engage in reflective and structured thinking processes, such as critical thinking. Grade 5 is also an ideal level because students have developed basic literacy skills in both Indonesian and English, making it possible to introduce more cognitively demanding tasks, including bilingual story engagement with character education components.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) strategies such as story, pair work, and role-playing also appropriate with this age group because they fit into young learners' natural desire to communicate and play (Lestari & Margana, 2024). Young learners naturally love to listen and enjoy stories. For them, the use of Indonesian can be used, but over time, the frequency can be reduced. By reading stories, students can develop reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Moreover, teaching English through story has several benefits. For instance, giving examples of natural language,

make children learn the language in context, and also make children making them happy with reading activities. In line with the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum and the value of Critical Thinking, teacher must utilize teaching strategies that not only provide language skills but also elevate the level of learning engagement. The combination of character education and critical thinking in narrative context helps to better scaffold students' linguistic competency and level of critical thinking.

Technology serves as a very useful media in supporting this strategy. In this digital era, the use of technology in English language learning enhances effectiveness by incorporating audio-visual, animations, and interactive games that align with students' attention spans (Pitriyah & Sulistyaningrum, 2024). Since young learners nowadays are digital natives and often better at using smartphones and tablets than adults (Wachidaturrohman & Afifi, 2025), teachers must respond with creating digital learning media that not only help students improve their digital literacy, but also teach their critical thinking. Therefore, the digital storybook is suitable for grade 5 students. Compared to traditional printed storybooks, digital storybook is easy to use, more accessible, the digital format is already familiar with them, and also engaging (Ratminingsih et al., 2025). However, teacher also need to mastering the use of digital technology to make this alternative platforms guide students toward age appropriate and meaningful content (Padmadewi et al., 2023).

In Indonesia, several studies have explored the use of storybooks for character education, for instance, Hati et al. (2025) developed instructional materials in the form of digital storybooks to teach Pancasila to Grade 4 students. Similarly, Ferdiantini et al. (2023) created a storybook based on Arja local wisdom to instill the "Global Diversity" dimension of the Pancasila Student Profile. Another study by Ratminingsih et al. (2020) and Salsabila and Sunaryati (2024), focused on designing picture storybooks aimed at enhancing students' independence as part of Pancasila character education. Additionally, Umar et al. (2023), initiated a promising study on needs analysis of the following research about bilingual-based digital storytelling to support the development of the Pancasila Student Profile in primary students. These findings reveal that while previous efforts have attempted to incorporate elements of digital

storybook, character education, and bilingualism. However, there is very limited study that focus on the creation of a digital bilingual storybook that is not only supports English language acquisition but also embeds the character value of critical thinking aligned with the Graduate Profile for grade 5 students. For that reason, this study not only fills the gap of previous research but also makes a real contribution to learning English along with character development.

Considering this research gap, the creation of a digital bilingual storybook based on Graduate Profile especially the critical thinking value becomes an appropriate solution. Storybooks are a very popular learning media, particularly for young learners, because they present language in a meaningful context with engaging content. By reading stories, learners can learn new vocabulary, language structures, and basic comprehension in a way that is reflective of real communication situations, and also encourage their imagination, and emotional involvement (Darmawan & Wuryandani, 2022; Pujiani et al., 2023). As for critical thinking value, inserting character values into the story itself invites students to engage in reflection, analysis, and making choices. When designed with interactive and bilingual features, it will support the students in learning new vocabularies, which supports language acquisition. A digital bilingual storybook offers a blended opportunity for students to integrate different aspects of their learning experience as well as character values development.

Based on the identified gaps and previous studies, the main focus of this research is the creation of a digital bilingual storybook specifically designed for Grade 5 students, which integrates English language learning with the Graduate Profile value of critical thinking. This product combined both Indonesian and English to support students' bilingual exposure and comprehension, while embedding moral and character values within meaningful story contexts. The story reflects real-life context that support students to reflect, analyze, and make decisions. Therefore, fostering critical thinking as part of the Graduate Profile. The digital format featured interactive visuals and easy-to-use tailored to suit the cognitive and linguistic needs of upper primary students. This approach is expected to help learners engage with English naturally, while also

internalizing critical thinking value in a way that is enjoyable, reflective, and developmentally appropriate.

1.2. Problem Identification

While there is an increased focus on 21st-century learning and character education with the Merdeka Curriculum, the development of bilingual digital learning media to enhance the process of learning English in Indonesian primary schools remains limited. In line with deep learning principles which emphasize conceptual understanding, reflective thinking, and real-world application, English instruction for children requires interactive, meaningful, and age-appropriate media. Additionally, the results of preliminary interviews with English teachers reported that primary school EFL teachers face challenges using textbooks due to lack of teaching media, limited access to improved digital media, and lack of students' English ability to engage students effectively and efficiently. Furthermore, teaching media currently focus only on English instruction, but rarely combine both English and character education particularly critical thinking in a coherent, engaging, and appropriate form. Thus, this study addresses the lack of bilingual digital learning tools that help students learn both language and character simultaneously. The digital bilingual storybook developed in this research was designed not only to support classroom learning but also to be accessible for independent reading, empowering students to engage with English and critical thinking values in a joyful, independent learning experience.

1.3. Limitations

This research is limited in scope to the insertion of the critical thinking value as part of the Graduate Profile. It was created in the form of digital storybook. The data was gathered through interviews and document study in primary school in Singaraja, as well as the expert judgment evaluation sheets that was completed by two senior lecturers and two experienced primary English teachers. Furthermore, the target audience for this product is limited to a specific level of education, exclusively for Grade 5 students in primary school.

1.4. Research Question

From the background of the study, several research questions can be concluded as follows.

1. How is the critical thinking value inserted into a digital bilingual storybook in English language learning in Grade 5?
2. How is the prototype of digital bilingual storybook with the insertion of critical thinking value for English language learning in Grade 5?
3. What is the quality of the digital bilingual storybook with the insertion of critical thinking value for English Language Learning in Grade 5?

1.5. Research Objectives

This research has several objectives, including as follows.

1. To describe how the critical thinking value inserted into a digital bilingual storybook in English language learning in Grade 5.
2. To describe the prototype of digital bilingual storybook with the insertion of critical thinking value for English language learning in Grade.
3. To assess the quality of the digital bilingual storybook with the insertion of critical thinking value for English Language Learning in Grade 5.

1.6. Research Significance

This research is expected to provide significance in two aspects as follows.

Theoretical Significance

This research is expected to contribute to the development of theory in the integration of critical thinking value in both English language learning and character development, as well as the application of digital media in fun and interactive bilingual learning.

Practical Significance

➤ For teacher

This research might provide significant advantages for teachers by presenting a digital bilingual storybook as an innovative and interactive learning media by

integrating technology as well as the integration of bilingual content and critical thinking value, teachers are able to deliver learning materials in more interesting and relevant to students' real-life situation. Thus, at the same time increase students' activeness in learning.

➤ For future study

The results of this study might provide empirical data for further related research, especially in the creation of bilingual learning media with the integration of digital technology in learning English that is innovative, interactive, and inserting Graduate Profile values for primary school student.

