

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the study elaborates on the background of the study, research questions, purpose of study, scope of the study, and significance of the study as an outline of the importance of materials inside.

1.1. Background of The Study

In today's globalized world, being fluent in English has become essential for communication, accessing information and pursuing various career path. With the increasing interconnectedness of nations, the importance of English proficiency cannot be overstated. Whether it is for business, travel, or personal growth, having a strong grasp of the English language has become a fundamental skill for individuals worldwide. This heightened importance has placed reading front and centre as an essential skill for language learners, particularly in the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Those who excel at reading are often credited as being good learners, giving them more opportunities for global discourse, knowledge, and success.

However, according to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an international study to evaluate education systems worldwide by measuring the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students in participating countries, Indonesia's average scores in 2022 were lower in reading compared to 2018 (*PISA 2022 Results (Volume I)*, 2023). Indonesia's PISA reading

scores ranked 71st out of 81 countries with only 359 points, statistically below OECD standards of 476 points (*PISA 2022 Results (Volume I)*, 2023). This decline can be partly attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a shift from offline to online education (Wiguna et al., 2020).

The rise of the digital age and online learning has prompted the Indonesian education system to evolve, with the new curriculum, *Kurikulum Merdeka*, embodying this crucial connection. Designed to foster adaptability in a fast-paced world, *Kurikulum Merdeka* reflects the need for educational models to keep pace with national progress and societal shifts (Yamin et al., 2020). Indonesian education has significantly transformed with the advent of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, moving away from traditional methodologies. This educational framework places the student at the core, advocating for an engaging learning environment that fosters the development of personal aptitude (Indarta et al., 2022). This affords a fertile ground for the organic blossoming of inner force, promoting the unfurling of personal aptitudes. *Kurikulum Merdeka* emphasizes cognitive skills, problem-solving, creativity and cooperation which are essential for navigating complexities of the industry 4.0 era. As Jayadi et al. (2020) assert, this curriculum addresses the need for educational strategies that equip students with the necessary competencies to thrive in a rapidly evolving world characterized by technological advancements and complex problem-solving demands. The new *Kurikulum Merdeka* revitalizes learning in Indonesia by offering a focused and flexible approach, aimed at cultivating well-rounded students with strong character and competence. It features three key pillars; (1) Emphasis on the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* for character development and soft skills, (2) Prioritization of essential learning outcomes to

maximize efficiency, and (3) Differentiated learning adapted to individual student needs and local contexts (Fitria & Sukirman, 2023).

Crucially, the new *Kurikulum Merdeka* approach aligns with the principles of differentiated instruction (hereinafter referred to as DI). According to Tomlinson (2005), a preeminent figure in the field, differentiated instruction hinges on the principle that optimal learning occurs when educators tailor instruction to the diverse spectrum of student readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. Differentiated instruction unlocks the door to enriching learning experiences, nurturing each student's unique talents, maintaining steady progress, and celebrating the diverse spectrum of abilities (Pangestu & Rochmat, 2021). Moreover, DI provides a fertile ground for cultivating critical and creative thinking skills. By catering to individual learning styles and providing opportunities for students to explore different perspectives, DI empowers learners to analyze information critically, generate innovative ideas, and solve problems creatively. Although DI is prominent in the education field, teachers are still left with many doubts about how DI should be incorporated into the classroom and how potential challenges could be overcome (Van Casteren et al., 2017). Another main problem is the insufficient teaching materials and textbooks that act as a roadblock to effectively implementing differentiated instruction (Mengistie, 2020). Despite the need for diverse instructional materials, a lack of resources forces teachers to simply keep students in class without adequate learning tools. This resource scarcity unfortunately dampens student engagement and interest (Melesse, 2016).

To address the lack of differentiated instructional materials, junior high school teachers and researchers from the State University of Jakarta developed

MyEnglishStep (MES), a digital learning platform incorporating DI strategies. The digital learning platform is known as *MyEnglishStep* (hereafter called MES) and can be accessed via the following link; <https://www.myenglishstep.com/> MES fills this gap by providing engaging and blended learning materials (Maulidya et al., 2023). Whether learning solo or collaborating with classmates, students can improve their English through interactive activities and resources imbued with differentiated instruction.

Despite the breakthrough of MES, there are still shortcomings in its content. The existence of the differentiated instruction element in the materials is yet to be investigated and the content of MES haven't been adapted to the new *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Aiming to empower students, Indonesia's education ministry utilizes *Kurikulum Merdeka*, a curriculum emphasizing critical thinking and soft skills (Kemendikbudrsitek, 2022). However, specific skills from the new *Kurikulum Merdeka* like reading and viewing are not highlighted well within the MES platform. A key aspect of *Kurikulum Merdeka* is fostering reading and viewing skills, which go beyond just consuming text and visuals. The ability to read effectively is critical not only for success in English language learning, but also for any course that relies on English texts. In today's information age, this focus on reading needs to be complemented by strong viewing skills. Viewing involves actively analyzing information and messages presented (Huri et al., 2021). Both skills are essential for students to navigate the complex world of English language learning and succeed in subjects that utilize English resources. This equips students with the tools to navigate the complex information landscape of the digital age (Huri et al., 2021).

Unfortunately, there's a significant gap between the available resources in the MES platform and what's truly needed, especially regarding fostering reading, viewing skills, and compliance with DI principles. Many materials lack real-world relevance, fail to capture students' attention, and don't provide personalized learning approaches specifically aligned with developing these skills. This gap limits students' potential to fully grasp these crucial abilities and hinders effective implementation of DI in the classroom (Bondie et al., 2019). Additionally, the platform's potential to foster critical and creative thinking skills requires further exploration. For that reason, the researcher is interested in analyzing the gap to fulfil the needs of learners. The new MES has the potential to personalize learning experiences by considering students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This personalization can be achieved through differentiated instruction strategies, which cater to individual needs. The research aims to investigate the suitability of the MES platform for implementing these strategies and facilitating customized teaching approaches. Ultimately, the goal is to foster an inclusive and supportive classroom environment that encourages critical thinking, problem-solving, and creative expression. This research aims to analyze the gap between the old and new MES, focusing on how the platform can be improved to support differentiated instruction, and enhance students' reading and viewing skills, and cultivate critical and creative thinking abilities.

1.2. Research Questions

This research aims to identify the key differences between the old MES and the new MES through a gap analysis that considers DI elements. The following research questions guide the study:

- 1.) How does the new MyEnglishStep (MES) infuse differentiated instructions to develop the students' reading and viewing skills?
- 2.) How does the new MyEnglishStep (MES) foster critical and creative thinking processes through its reading and viewing activities?

1.3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to analyze the gap between the previous and new MES, focusing on reading and viewing materials that incorporate DI strategies. The study aims to assess the platform's alignment with Kurikulum Merdeka's vision and explore how online learning platforms can effectively cater to diverse learners.

1.4. Scope of the Study

This study focuses on analyzing the initial MES platform's materials to determine their DI strategy and alignment with Kurikulum Merdeka's reading and viewing aspect. The analysis will utilize a gap analysis with a consideration from the teachers' feedbacks from Focus Group Discussion (FGD) using the framework by Strickland (2007) focusing on various aspects, including the thematic areas

covered, DI infused content focus, language complexity, task engagement, and most importantly, the potential for integrating DI strategies.

The gap analysis will gather valuable feedback on how MES materials can be improved to facilitate the effective use of DI strategies. By analyzing the findings from the initial teacher feedback analysis, the study will identify areas where MES materials already align with DI principles within the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, as well as any existing gaps or shortcomings to enhance the effective use of these strategies. This comprehensive approach will provide valuable insights for further developing MES materials to create a more inclusive and differentiated learning experience that aligns with the goals of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. This research also benefits the determining of *Kurikulum Merdeka* alignment with classroom practices, particularly for teachers and students in rural areas with limited access to e-learning programs. The focus is on the impact of the new MES and its integration with the new curriculum in these contexts. The findings will identify areas where MES materials align with DI principles and where improvements are needed. This research also assesses *Kurikulum Merdeka*'s alignment with classroom practices, particularly in rural areas with limited access to e-learning programs.

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study aims to propel advancements in effective educational practices by examining the integration of DI strategies within authentic digital learning materials and web-based technologies aligned with the *Kurikulum Merdeka*

framework. The significance of this study is divided into two categories, that is theoretical significance and practical significance.

1.5.1. Theoretical Significance

This research has the potential to significantly improve the use of differentiated instruction within the new MES, making it a more effective tool for both teachers and students, particularly in rural areas. By leveraging MES's advantages as an e-learning platform tailored for EFL classrooms, the research can bridge gaps in student understanding caused by limited information access.

1.5.2. Practical Significance

In examining the practical benefits of this research, it is important to consider the perspectives of different stakeholders, as outlined in the following sections:

1. Benefit for researchers:
2. The research contributes to future e-learning initiatives by providing insights into DI models' unique potential post-pandemic. It aims to streamline classroom material resources based on student and teacher backgrounds, ultimately promoting a more inclusive learning environment through DI.
2. Benefit for teachers:

The study provides guidance and resources for teachers to enhance the variety of their classroom materials. The gap analysis table clarifies the differences between the previous MES and the new MES, allowing teachers to effectively implement it in their classrooms.

3. Benefit for students:

By integrating DI within the new MES and employing gap analysis, the research helps students identify their preferred learning styles. The MES platform offers various learning tools to cater to these styles, specifically focusing on written text in this research. Additionally, the open-access nature of the website ensures students have easy access to all class materials.

