

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an introduction to the research. In this particular research, the introduction covers the background of the study, research questions, objective of the study, scope of the study, significance of the study, state of the art, and definition of key terms. The explanations are presented as follows:

1.1 Background of the Study

Local wisdom and critical thinking skills have recently become central issues in English language learning and teaching. Local wisdom, which is part of a culture, is addressed in English language learning and teaching in Indonesia since Indonesians, especially the young generation of Indonesia, demonstrate the embrace of foreign cultures, which sometimes contradicts national values in terms of clothing styles, way of interactions with other, and so on. It caused the Indonesians' Eastern characteristics to fade, and they lost awareness of their national value and identity (Irwan et al., 2019). The degradation of Indonesian national identity can be seen from the change in fashion, deviant behavior, promiscuity, special day celebrations, and hedonism. Reckless consumption of foreign culture could complicate the situation even further if the issue remains untreated. One way to overcome this problem is by incorporating local wisdom into education (Irwan et al., 2019; Fath, 2022). This attempt will benefit the learners since the learners' background knowledge, including their cultural background knowledge, plays a crucial role in the language learning process. This is in line with Bao (2016), McKay (2003), Mukundan et al. (2016), and Tomlinson (2012) who suggest language teachers infuse the dimensions of the learners' cultural background in the learning materials. The infusion of cultural dimensions in learning materials helps learners enhance their cultural literacy and awareness (Oktarina et al., 2022). It also raises students' awareness of the importance of diversity and adaptability (Margana, 2009). Furthermore, cultural dimensions in language learning encourage students to develop their intercultural competence to be able to interact appropriately whenever, wherever, and whoever they

interact with (Byram, 2002). In sum, the infusion of cultural dimensions, including local wisdom, in English language learning and teaching is crucial for learners since they must be able to communicate, interact, and cooperate appropriately and acceptably in a multicultural setting, and also to maintain their identity.

Moreover, the interdependence of language and culture has long been a hot topic of discussion around the world. Since the 1900s, many scholars (Brown, 2007; Byram, 1991, 1994, 1997, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2012, 2016, 2017; Kitao, 1991; Kramsch, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2016; Lange & Paige, 2003; Moran, 2001; Risager, 2006, 2007) have attempted to examine the interrelationship and entanglement between language and culture to reveal the nature, importance, and place of culture in language learning. To illustrate the connection between language and culture, Brown (2007) explained that both a language and a culture are components of one another, and “the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture”. Furthermore, Capra (1996), an ecologist who also investigates human interaction with humans, other living things, and the environment, views language and culture as inseparable since social and cultural conventions provide the context of meaning that helps people understand the language used in communication. In his perspective, understanding the context during an interaction is inevitable as one of language’s crucial roles is to increase the human ability to cooperate. Capra (2002) also explained that since language involves the communication of meaning, an understanding of social phenomena become crucial. Moreover, UNESCO (2013) stated that “context has crucial influence over how language and behavior are interpreted”. These statements, both from Brown (2007), Capra (1996, 2002), and UNESCO (2013) clearly illustrate the interdependence of language and culture. It is in line with Kitao (1991) who explained that to be able to communicate well, including in an intercultural communication setting, learning a language solely is not enough. He argues that “cultural aspects of language and the cultural backgrounds of speakers of that language have to be understood as well”. The knowledge of a culture

provides insight into the language use. Then, as an important part of language learning and teaching, in his perspective, culture helps students to “understand the target language better, enhance international understanding, communicate better with people of different cultures, and understand their own culture better by studying other cultures”. Learners must be able to comprehend the message of the speakers and avoid misinterpretation between the speakers. Therefore, we can conclude that the interdependence of language and culture is undeniable.

In the context of English language learning and teaching in 21st-century education, it is widely acknowledged that language learners require the ability to use the language in a socially and culturally appropriate manner, not only grammatically correct. As it has become the ultimate aim of language learning, the ability to communicate effectively in the target language is an inevitable ability to be developed (Pennycook, 2017). Bao (2016) emphasizes that understanding the rules of a language is part of learning a language. Not stopping there, Nguyen (2017) inspired by Fenner (2000), explained that language education should provide opportunities for learners to gain cultural knowledge, awareness, and competence in both the target culture and their own culture. It is crucial for language learners since they must be able to communicate and cooperate with people from different countries and cultural backgrounds in this globalization era. UNESCO (1995) stated that “learning foreign languages offers a means of gaining a deeper understanding of other cultures, which can serve as a basis for building better understanding between communities and nations”. These emphasize that the intercultural competence element in language learning is crucial since when the learners interact with others, including those with different cultural backgrounds, they need to be able to communicate well, not only in terms of word choice but also in terms of understanding the time and the way to deliver the message (Moran, 2001; Byram et al., 2002; Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia, 2007; Kramsch & Zhu Hua, 2016; Ur, 2012). The infusion of intercultural dimensions fosters learner’s personal growth by promoting respect for language and cultural diversity in a multilingual and multicultural society, as well as assisting

learners in understanding their own competencies and development potential (Beacco et al., 2016). Therefore, English teachers and course designers need to infuse cultural elements into English language learning and teaching.

Along with the attempt to support language learners to have intercultural competence, in the context of English language teaching in Indonesia, the Government of Indonesia in the learning outcomes statement of English language learning in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* clearly stated that one of the aims of English language learning is “to develop intercultural competence to be able to understand and appreciate the perspectives, practices, and products of Indonesian and foreign cultures”. By understanding other cultures and their interactions with Indonesian culture, the government believes that the students will be able to develop a deep understanding of Indonesian culture, strengthen their identity, and appreciate differences. To achieve this goal, the Government of Indonesia developed the English language curriculum in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* by referring to the framework published by the Council of Europe called the Common European Framework of References for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR). The Council of Europe (2001), in the CEFR document, emphasizes the importance of 'intercultural awareness', 'intercultural skills', and 'existential competence' and introduces the 'Intercultural Dimension' into the aims of language teaching. The essence is to assist language learners in being able to interact on equal terms with speakers of other languages, as well as to be aware of their own and their interlocutors' identities. Further, it is hoped that these will help people to be successful in communication and in managing human interactions in diversity (Council of Europe, 2001). As the position of the intercultural dimensions in the English language curriculum in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* becomes clear, therefore, English language learning and teaching infused with cultural elements is an inevitable need in Indonesia.

In the development of learning materials infused with cultural dimensions, it is critical to consider the students' backgrounds. To address students' backgrounds, emotions, experiences, and culture, learning materials and activities should incorporate elements of their native culture (Bao, 2016;

McKay, 2003; Mukundan et al., 2016; Tomlinson, 2012). The learning materials can be designed in various forms including textbooks, storybooks, and so on. These kinds of materials are interesting, easy to understand, engaging, and fostering students' critical thinking skills (Lubis et al., 2023). Besides, Prasetyo (2016) suggested several folklore-based activities including storytelling, character discussion, story continuation, and value identification. These activities foster social interaction and critical thinking. Furthermore, as the students' cultural understanding developed, they understood how to interact with humans in cultural diversity. Thus, it is critical for language learners.

The infusion of intercultural dimensions also fosters students' critical thinking (Byram, 1997; Moran, 2001; Gómez-Rodríguez, 2018), which is one of the crucial skills in 21st-century education and also one of the intended outcome in the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Along with the development of cultural awareness of the learners, the ability to think critically also developed as the learning and teaching process provided the learners with texts containing cultural dimensions that encourage learners to analyze, relate, and compare particular groups' ways of life to be able to understand and respect cultural diversity (Byram, 1997). Critical thinking skills hold crucial roles in these kinds of activities. It improves learners' ability to process information effectively and thoroughly (Mohseni et al., 2020). According to studies, exposing students to a variety of tasks allowed them to improve their reading comprehension and critical thinking skills to various degrees (Arifin, 2020). Din (2020) argues that critical reading entails responding to what is read critically. It is the process of connecting what you read to your values, attitudes, and standards. Since it is beneficial for learners in the 21st century, the researcher incorporates critical thinking skills in the English reading materials.

However, although the Indonesian Government in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* clearly stated that intercultural competence and critical thinking skills are included as the intended learning outcomes of English language learning in Indonesia, there are no descriptions or concrete examples for teachers on how to assist students in developing intercultural competence and critical thinking skills. The curriculum was designed as a standard-based curriculum and

addressed the intended outcomes as the starting point of curriculum development (Muslim & Sumarni, 2023). In this case, Richards (2013) explained that this type of curriculum demand teachers to hold crucial roles as course designers and be responsible for providing appropriate learning and teaching materials to support the learners to meet the intended learning outcomes. Furthermore, to date, the number of authentic materials that have been translated into English and can be used for students' reading activities is limited. Thus, learning materials infused with local wisdom is inevitable to help learners to develop their intercultural competence, critical thinking skills, and their reading skills as well since the PISA scores published by the OECD (2018), Indonesia ranks 72 out of 77 countries in reading skills, indicating that Indonesian students read less than students from other countries.

Several scholars have conducted research to investigate the infusion of cultural dimensions, especially local wisdom, into English language learning and teaching. These research have been conducted from the elementary up to higher education level.

First, there are research conducted by Ratminingsih et al. (2020) and Yermiandhoko et al. (2023) in the elementary school level. Ratminingsih et al. (2020) conducted experimental research to investigate the effect of local culture-based storybooks on Buleleng Regency elementary students' reading competence and the size of the effect of the treatment. The result shows that the combination of pictures and text presented in the storybook was helpful for the students to comprehend the text. Another interesting finding is that the insertion of local culture could help the students to easily understand the content of the story. Both groups, experimental and control eventually found that learning English containing Balinese local culture was easier. On the other side, Yermiandhoko et al. (2023) developed a hand puppet drama video infused with East Java local wisdom for fourth graders. The students' response test shows positive results. Three experts, including material, language, and media experts, validated the developed local wisdom-based hand puppet drama videos in this study and classified the hand puppet drama video as Very Proper. Although research conducted by Ratminingsih et al. (2020) and Yermiandhoko

et al. (2023) was conducted at the elementary school level, no one of them fills the gap. Ratminingsih et al. (2020) investigated local wisdom in elementary schools. However, this research employed experimental studies to investigate the effect of local wisdom-based materials on sixth graders in Buleleng Regency, Bali. Meanwhile, Yermiandhoko et al. (2023) did not develop English reading materials. They developed a hand puppet drama video for sixth graders. Therefore, they do not fill the gap and there is still room for researchers to conduct this research.

Second, Nambiar et al. (2018), Nambiar et al. (2020), and Anggraini et al. (2022) have investigated local wisdom in English language learning and teaching at the junior high school level. Nambiar et al. (2018) investigated the impact of a supplementary reading module that integrated with local culture to improve students' communicative ability and cultural awareness in Terengganu - Malaysia. The result of the study implied the improved cultural knowledge and awareness of local content did provide learners with ideas to harness which subsequently leads to improved communicative ability. Further, Nambiar et al. (2020) conducted a local culture-based longitudinal English language reading program in a secondary school in Malaysia. After three years of exposure to the local content, a survey was carried out among teachers and students to examine the impact on students' skill development and confidence in using the English language. The findings revealed an enhanced understanding of how the module utilization impacted the development of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills in English among these students. The responses obtained from the teachers and students alike depicted the students' skills that were sharpened, attributable mainly to their increased level of confidence. On a similar level of education, Anggraini et al. (2022) conducted a content analysis study to investigate the folklore types in Indonesian EFL textbooks for junior high schools. This study revealed that Indonesian EFL textbooks for junior high school contain 5 types of folklore including fables (9,3%), fairytales (15,1%), folktales (33,3%), legends (36,3%), and myths (6%). All of them are originally from Indonesia, Vietnam, Serbia, Germany, and Japan. In addition, Lubis et al. (2023) also investigated

local wisdom in English language learning and teaching in Indonesia, but in a wider range of ages. They are involved teenagers and adults in the age range of 12 to 25. They conducted a program namely English Language Immersion: Local Wisdom-Based Reading Material in Medan. From this research, they found that the participants, including teenagers, English lecturers, a linguist, and a cultural practitioner, perceived that the English reading materials infused with local wisdom were interesting, easy to understand, engaging, and fostering critical thinking. However, Although Nambiar et al. (2018) and Nambiar et al. (2020) developed a module and a language program, this research was conducted in junior high school in Malaysia. Furthermore, Anggrani et al. (2022) also conducted research in junior high schools and only focused on the analysis of the content of Indonesian EFL textbooks. Then, Lubis et al. (2023) also did not develop English reading materials. Therefore, no one of the researchers has touched the gap which means the chance for the researcher is still open.

Third, Oktarina et al. (2022) conducted studies at senior high school level. They developed instructional reading materials for Palembang – Tourism-Destination that are effective for students enrolled in a Travel Agent Study Program at one vocational school in Palembang. The field test results revealed that the established texts had a high potential for impact, with 79.16 percent of students achieving the required passing grade. As a result, it is reasonable to believe that the established product can be used as a reading product in the classroom. However, although this research developed local culture-based English reading materials, the materials were developed for senior high school students especially vocational school majoring in travel agent study program. Thus, it does not fill the gap.

Fourth, research in higher education have been conducted by Upa & Mangalik (2018), Mahardika (2018), and Sulistyowati & Surachmi (2020). Upa & Mangalik (2018) investigated the effectiveness of using Sulawesi folktales in the teaching of reading comprehension for the fourth-semester students of the English Language Education Study Program students in Sulawesi. The findings indicate that Sulawesi folktales in the teaching of

reading comprehension improve students' reading comprehension. Meanwhile, Mahardika (2018) attempted to develop English teaching material for the students of the Hinduism Education Department of IHDN Denpasar. The study revealed that incorporating local cultural material in English language learning aids students by reducing foreign nuance and stress levels, confirming the notion that familiar material is beneficial for students. Then, Sulistyowati & Surachmi (2020) explored English Education Department students' understanding of moral values in the local narratives constructed during genre writing activities at Muria Kudus University. The study reveals that students are aware of the generic narrative text structure, including orientation, complication, and resolution, but there are still unclear distinctions between each step in some writing. However, research conducted by scholars above also does not fill the gap. Research conducted by Upa & Mangalik (2018) was conducted in higher education and did not develop English reading materials. The research conducted by Mahardika (2018) attempted to develop English teaching materials for higher education levels and the materials developed in this research not only focused on reading, but also on speaking, listening, and writing. Further, Sulistyowati & Surachmi (2020) utilized local narrative text in writing activities at the higher education level. There are no English reading materials developed in this research. Thus, no one of the research fills the gap.

Previous related research has shown that the infusion of cultural dimensions in English language learning and teaching has a positive impact and is responded to positively. But, to date, research in this area is still scarce.

Furthermore, although there have been several studies conducted related to English language learning infused with cultural dimensions in Indonesia, the number of studies is still very small. In fact, to date, as far as researchers are aware, research focusing on designing English reading teaching materials for fourth graders in elementary schools infused with local wisdom and critical thinking skills based on the *Kurikulum Merdeka* has not been conducted yet. Therefore, this research is proposed as an attempt to fill the gap.

This study will be arranged in five chapters. The first chapter, containing an introduction to the research, is divided into the background of

the study, research question, objective of the study, scope of the study, significance of the study, state of the art, and definition of key terms. In this chapter, the writer exemplifies briefly the whole content of the research. The second chapter of this study is a review of the literature. The second chapter goes over all of the terms used in this study, including the conceptual framework. The third chapter describes the methodology used in this study, including the research design and method, setting, data, data source, instruments, data collection, and analysis procedures. Next, the fourth chapter elaborates on the findings and discussions of the study. Lastly, the fifth chapter provides the conclusion and recommendation of the study.

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the statements of the problem, four research questions aim to meet the objectives of this study. The research questions were formulated as follows:

1. To what extent are the existing English reading materials for fourth graders infused with local wisdom and critical thinking skills?
2. How are the procedures of infusing local wisdom and critical thinking skills in Designing English reading materials for fourth graders?
3. How is the design of local wisdom and critical thinking skills-infused English reading materials for fourth graders?
4. How are the readability and validity of local wisdom and critical thinking skills-infused English reading materials for fourth graders?

1.3 Purposes of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to design English reading materials for fourth graders infused with local wisdom and critical thinking skills. It also presents the sub-purposes of the study as follows:

1. To analyze the extent to which the existing English reading materials for fourth graders are infused with local wisdom and critical thinking skills.
2. To describe the procedure of infusing local wisdom and critical thinking skills in Designing English reading materials for fourth graders.

3. To develop English reading materials for fourth graders based on local wisdom and critical thinking skills.
4. To find out the readability and validity of local wisdom and critical thinking skills-infused English reading materials for fourth graders.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study aims to infuse local wisdom and critical thinking skills in designing English reading materials for fourth-grade students of elementary school. The product of this study is a module containing local wisdom and critical thinking skills-infused English reading materials. The learning materials were infused with local wisdom and critical thinking skills for fourth graders. The local wisdom infused in the learning materials includes Indonesian cultural products, practices, perspectives, communities, and persons. These elements of local wisdom are infused in the form of short and simple texts and illustrated stories. At the same time, critical thinking skills are also infused into the learning materials. The learning materials were designed by referring to the Phase B learning outcomes in the Kurikulum Merdeka and Pre-A1 level of CEFR which are suitable for fourth graders.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The ultimate objective of this study is to generate valuable insights that can be used to improve the future quality of English language teaching and learning. There are two significances:

1. Theoretically; All elementary school English teachers and educators are directed to obtain the results of this study. Theoretically, this study provides the development of English reading materials characteristics and the philosophy behind critical thinking skills and cultural dimensions descriptors;
2. Practically; the results of the study must be essential to education institutions, other researchers, students, and English teachers. This study will assist English teachers in designing classes that are suited to the needs of their students. As a result, students may be able to accelerate their studies.

This can be used as a guide for other researchers conducting related studies, as well as educational institutions pursuing to improve their teaching standards. However, larger-scale observations are still needed.

1.6 State of the Arts

Infusion of the cultural dimension in English language learning and teaching materials is one of the most effective strategies and widely used in the twenty-first century. A number of studies revealing the benefits of cultural dimension in English language learning in different circumstances have been published. However, many teachers struggle due to the scarcity of availability of authentic materials that have been translated into English.

Moreover, critical thinking skills are crucial and inevitable nowadays. Therefore, critical thinking skills also must be infused into English language learning. Incorporating infusion into English reading materials will help advance students' life skills, especially in the context of the twenty-first century. On the other side, the number of infusions of critical thinking skills, whether in instructions, types of text, types of contexts, reading topics, or reading exercises, is still limited.

Numerous studies attempted to design and develop English learning materials infused with cultural dimensions and/or critical thinking skills. However, no one of them attempted to design and develop English reading materials infused with local wisdom and critical thinking skills specifically for fourth graders of elementary school. Thus, the intended objective of this research is to meet current and future student needs by designing and developing English reading materials required by the students. The novelty of this research is the products of English reading materials infused with local wisdom and critical thinking skills for fourth graders and its procedures of development. Additionally, the researcher aims for these reading materials to equip students with the ability to interact and cooperate in an acceptable and appropriate manner, both within the educational setting and beyond it, to bolster their future professional pursuits.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

Local wisdom is defined as specific cultures in specific areas that become the identity of a group of people since it represents the characteristics, norms, and culture adopted over generations and is considered the local wealth, including policies and life perspectives. It is a cultural dimension that molds humans into wiser beings (Albantani & Madkur, 2018; Azizah, Inderawati, & Vianty, 2021; Cahya & Syafrizal, 2022; Geertz, 1973; Mulyati & Soetopo, 2016; Tohri, Rasyad, Sururuddin, & Istiqlal, 2022; Wulandari, Sundari, & Ellysafni, 2020). In this research, the term local wisdom refers to Indonesian local culture including cultural products, practices, perspectives, communities, and persons.

Critical thinking skills refer to cognitive abilities involving self-correction and the use of cognitive abilities to form judgments and improve their accuracy (Facione, 2015; Heidari, 2020; Mohseni et al., 2020).

English reading materials are anything designed to be read. In this study, the researcher aims to design and develop English reading materials. The term “designing and developing materials” refers to all of the activities undertaken by educators or practitioners who are involved in the creation or use of materials for language learning purposes. These steps include evaluating, modifying, designing, creating, utilizing materials, and conducting research. This is true for any skill in language learning as well as any structured element of learning, such as activating schemata, content, exercises, assignments, and assessments. When creating language learning materials, these cycles, according to Tomlinson (2008), should be carefully considered and coordinated.

Fourth graders are learners of grade four of elementary schools which are also categorized as learners in the phase B in the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. In this phase of language proficiency development, the learners are introduced to written form of language (Muslim & Sumarni, 2023). Along with this, language teachers assist students in understanding that the way English is pronounced and written differs. In relation to the CEFR Descriptors for Overall Reading Comprehension, Phase B in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* equals to Pre-A1 level of CEFR.