CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the background of the research, the research questions, the research purposes as the target to achieve research results, the research significances, the research framework as a framework based on the variables to be studied, and previous research, which contains a foundation, comparison, and reference for research.

A. Background

English language teaching in Indonesia has undergone significant transformations, particularly with the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum, which emphasizes student-centered learning (SCL). This current research explores the strategies implemented by English pre-service teachers in integrating SCL in their classrooms during teaching practicum. It specifically explores how these strategies align with *Merdeka* curriculum ideals, analyzes the problems that pre-service teachers experience, and explores their perspectives on the usefulness of these strategies. This research is aimed at observing English language teaching strategies they use.

Teaching practicum is an important component of the professional development of pre-service teachers (Korthagen, 2010). It has long been considered a cornerstone of pre-service teachers' growth in education schools. In this case, the teaching practicum focuses on English education students who have completed the program. Due to the importance of this program for education students, pre-service teachers must prepare all teaching components, insights, and knowledge relevant to the current state of education.

One of the conditions that pre-service teachers need to understand is the implementation of the curriculum by the Indonesian education system. Indonesia's education system has undergone considerable change in recent years, with the implementation of the *Merdeka* curriculum, which stresses student-centered learning (Noptario et al., 2024). With the teacher as the facilitator, this concept

enables students to participate actively in the learning process, allowing them to explore and create their knowledge (Qoiriah & Febrianto, 2025). Therefore, the concept also emphasizes that pre-service teachers should be more creative in facilitating learning to fit the concept of SCL.

In general, student-centered learning (SCL) is defined as a learning approach that requires teachers to facilitate student activities by providing instructions and activities that encourage students to be more active (Singh, 2011). These activities include hands-on engagement such as talking, calculating, experimenting, writing, and creating videos or web-based materials (Jacobs et al., 2016). In addition, students are also invited to be more involved in thinking and shaping their learning process (Jacobs et al., 2016). In this approach, the teacher has an important role as a facilitator and guide who assists students from the stages of learning planning, implementation, interaction, research, to evaluation of learning outcomes (Tholibon et al., 2022). Therefore, SCL requires teachers to have high pedagogical skills and reflective abilities so that the learning process favors the needs and potential of students. This foundational philosophy of SCL becomes increasingly relevant when connected to broader educational goals in today's democratic and information-rich society.

In addition to being mandated by national education systems, SCL is highly relevant in today's context of increased democratic values and wider access to information. These societal shifts demand an education system that disseminates knowledge and empowers learners. SCL emphasizes lifelong learning, critical thinking, diversity, and student-to-student interaction elements that prepare learners to shape a future where both people and the environment can thrive (Jacobs et al., 2016). Furthermore, research has shown that children involved in SCL are generally more enthusiastic and demonstrate stronger critical thinking skills (M. I. Maulana, 2021). These findings reinforce the success of SCL and highlight the critical role of teacher competency in designing meaningful, engaging, and empowering learning experiences.

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Despite its potential benefits, implementing SCL remains a challenge for pre-service teachers, particularly during their teaching practicum. Although SCL can improve student motivation and outcomes, its success depends on the teacher's ability to manage dynamic and cooperative classrooms (Felder & Brent, 1996). Many pre-service teachers struggle with selecting appropriate strategies, managing the class, and encouraging student participation, issues often intensified by their limited teaching experience. In English classes, which require interactive communication, these challenges can be overwhelming (Wright, 2011). As a result, SCL is often poorly executed, leading to teacher-centered lessons and reduced student engagement. These difficulties highlight a persistent gap between theory and practice, underscoring the need for structured mentorship, simulated teaching, and reflective support in teacher training programs.

On the other hand, the success of SCL implementation is also strongly influenced by pre-service teachers' beliefs. An article states that teachers' implementation of a SCL learning environment is influenced by their beliefs about effective practices (Pedersen & Liu, 2003). These beliefs include the nature of learning, the optimal ways in which students learn, the characteristics of an ideal teacher, the traits of an ideal student, and various other factors associated with learning and teaching can significantly influence their behavior in the classroom (Kaymakamoglu, 2017). Among these, beliefs about effective ways of learning are particularly relevant to the current research, as they directly influence the strategies pre-service teachers choose to implement in the classroom. Constructive beliefs that are aligned with SCL principles will encourage teachers to be more open to innovative and participatory learning strategies (Kohonen, 1992). Therefore, it is important to examine how pre-service teachers' beliefs are formed and how they influence the way they implement SCL strategies in the classroom.

Preliminary observations were carried out on different pre-service teachers enrolled in the English education program who were conducting teaching practices at various public and private high schools. The observational results indicated that while most of pre-service teachers strived to implement the SCL principles, their

implementation presented significant variability. Several students demonstrated creativity in employing SCL methods, including group discussions, project-based activities, and educational games. Nevertheless, while certain students adopted the SCL approach, its implementation appeared inappropriate for their situations and the content being delivered. The employed strategies proved ineffective. This inconsistency underscores the necessity of comprehending both the employed strategies, the beliefs and challenges that underpin their implementation. The initial findings highlight the necessity and significance of investigating how English pre-service teachers perceive, choose, and implement SCL strategies within the context of the *Merdeka* Curriculum during their teaching practice experiences.

Several studies have shown that while pre-service teachers appreciate the value of SCL, its implementation is frequently inconsistent due to insufficient skills and resources (Dewi, 2017). Furthermore, Sukardi (2014) research suggests that SCL has the potential to significantly improve the quality of English language instruction in Indonesia. However, educators must receive continual training and support. Thus, a more systematic approach to empowering pre-service teachers, including practice-based training and reflective assistance, is required to provide opportunities to build contextualized and successful SCL strategies in the classroom.

The current research varies from earlier ones in key respects. Although previous research has explored various aspects of teaching practice, such as the implementation of differentiated instruction (Rahmani et al., 2024), teachers beliefs, perceived, and actual classroom practice related to traditional and constructivist teaching (Kaymakamoglu, 2017), performance assessment (Merç, 2015), challenges in transformative learning (Maharani & Fithriani, 2023), and international teaching contexts (Kabilan et al., 2020), none have specifically examined the strategies pre-service English teachers employ to implement SCL under the *Merdeka* curriculum. This curriculum emphasizes independent, student-focused learning as a core principle, presenting unique challenges and opportunities for teaching practice in the Indonesian context. Additionally, the role of critical

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reflection in addressing these challenges and enhancing SCL strategies remains underexplored.

Furthermore, the current research fills the gap by focusing on how English pre-service teachers navigate and implement SCL within the *Merdeka* curriculum, their challenges, and their reflections on the effectiveness of these strategies. This particular focus is significant because, while SCL is a core component in the *Merdeka* curriculum, not all pre-service teachers have the necessary experience to optimally utilize this approach in the classroom. This current research not only provides a picture of actual teaching methods but also contributes to the development of teacher training that is more adaptable to curriculum demands.

B. Research Questions

1. How do English pre-service teachers implement the *Merdeka* curriculum's student-centered learning strategy in their teaching practicum?
2. What beliefs do the English pre-service teachers hold regarding the student-centered learning approach?

C. Research Purposes

1. To analyze how English pre-service teachers', apply a student-centered learning strategy in *Merdeka* curriculum-based learning in their teaching practicum.
2. To identify pre-service teachers' beliefs regarding the implementation of student-centered learning in their teaching practicum.

D. Research Significance

This research is advanced in some theoretical and practical areas. Thus, the following are some of the anticipated implications of this research:

1. Practical Significances
a For pre-service teachers

This research is expected to have a positive impact on students participating in the teaching practicum program, as it provides support in understanding effective learning methods and approaches aligned with the ideals of the *Merdeka* curriculum. Practical solutions to classroom challenges are also offered to enhance the practicum experience.

b   For institutions

The results of this research should help institutions enhance their teacher training curricula by offering fresh perspectives and recommendations. By focusing more on the application of SCL and modifying training programs to be more relevant to the demands of practice in the field, the current research is expected to help institutions improve the curriculum.

c   For school teachers

In addition to strengthening teacher-student collaboration during teaching practicum, this research can offer insights into how to make SCL more effective in enhancing student learning motivation and outcomes.

2.   Theoretical Significance

The current research is expected to contribute to the knowledge of using SCL in Indonesian education, particularly concerning the *Merdeka* curriculum, which still requires extensive study for successful implementation. Furthermore, this research is expected to investigate English pre-service teachers' beliefs towards the SCL approach during their teaching practicum.

E. Research Scope

The research investigates how English pre-service teachers apply student-centered learning approach during their teaching practicum within the context of the *Merdeka* curriculum. The current research looks at the strategies used by pre-service teachers and the beliefs that pre-service teachers have towards SCL. The research is conducted at senior high school with pre-service teachers from the English education study program at the State Islamic University in Indonesia. The

project intends to provide insights on enhancing SCL practices in English language teaching by using qualitative methods such as video analysis, interviews, and individual report reviews, as well as to contribute to the establishment of practical teacher training programs.

This research does not thoroughly discuss other aspects, such as student learning outcomes, the full implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum in schools, or reflection theory in learning. It also does not quantitatively assess teacher performance or statistically compare strategies among individuals. These limitations were established to maintain the research's focus on exploring SCL-related strategies and beliefs within the context of teaching practice.

F. Conceptual Framework

The current research is based on student-centered learning (SCL) core concepts, teaching strategies, and pre-service teachers' beliefs, particularly in English language instruction aligned with the *Merdeka* Curriculum. These concepts are interconnected and form the foundation of the current study, which investigates the teaching strategies employed by pre-service teachers during their practicum, including teachers' plans, implementation, and how they evaluate their teaching practices.

The *Merdeka* curriculum, currently being implemented in Indonesian education, is based on the principle of independent learning, regarded as its fundamental principle (Prihatini & Sugiarti, 2022). This approach aims to cultivate independent student characters, both in the learning process in the classroom and in social interactions in the community (Noptario et al., 2024). Therefore, the *Merdeka* curriculum aligns with the SCL approach by promoting differentiated instruction, student agency, and contextual learning. It encourages educators to design lessons that cater to students' interests, readiness levels, and learning profiles.

SCL draws heavily on constructivist principles, which regard students as active constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients of information (Weimer, 2013). The active participation of students in the learning process is emphasized by

SCL. Students are urged to create their understanding via inquiry, teamwork, and critical thinking rather than being passive consumers of knowledge (Felder & Brent, 1996). According to Kolb (1984), knowledge is created through experience transformation, where students engage in a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In line with this, Piaget's theory (1954) asserts that learning occurs when learners are actively involved in meaning and knowledge construction instead of passively receiving information. These views emphasize that students should be the leading agents in their learning process. At the same time, the teacher functions as a facilitator who designs learning experiences that stimulate critical and reflective thinking.

In implementing SCL, pre-service teachers are required to design and apply appropriate teaching strategies that encourage student engagement and collaboration. This approach is based on constructivism, emphasizing that students construct knowledge through their experiences and interactions with the learning (Sulemanoski, 2022). Strategies for implementing SCL include various active methods, such as collaborative group work, inquiry-based learning, flipped classrooms, and formative assessment (Tomlinson, 2014). This approach can also be operationalized through project-based learning, problem-based learning, argument-based curriculum, and technology-based learning (Tang, 2023). Whereas, with this method, educators serve as facilitators who help students grow in their independence, inventiveness, and sense of accountability for their education which align with Vygotsky's sociocurtural theory, that learning is most successful when it occurs in a social setting where students engage with their peers and receive help from teachers within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Another key aspect in this framework is pre-service teachers' beliefs. Teachers' beliefs have such a strong influence on their choices and behaviors that they also affect student achievement (Kaymakamoglu, 2017). Teachers' beliefs refer to the assumptions held regarding students, classrooms, and teaching materials in relation to the methods and strategies employed during the learning process (Fauzi et al., 2017). These beliefs address a range of elements, such as perspectives on teaching

approaches, student learning, and inclusive education (Dignath et al., 2022). In the context of this research, beliefs refer to pre-service teachers' understanding of and interpretation regarding the effectiveness of SCL strategies that they implemented during their teaching practice. Reflecting on these experiences shapes their beliefs about which strategies are successful, appropriate, and feasible to implement in the classroom. Therefore, it is important to understand pre-service teachers' beliefs to interpret the pattern of their selection and implementation of SCL strategies.

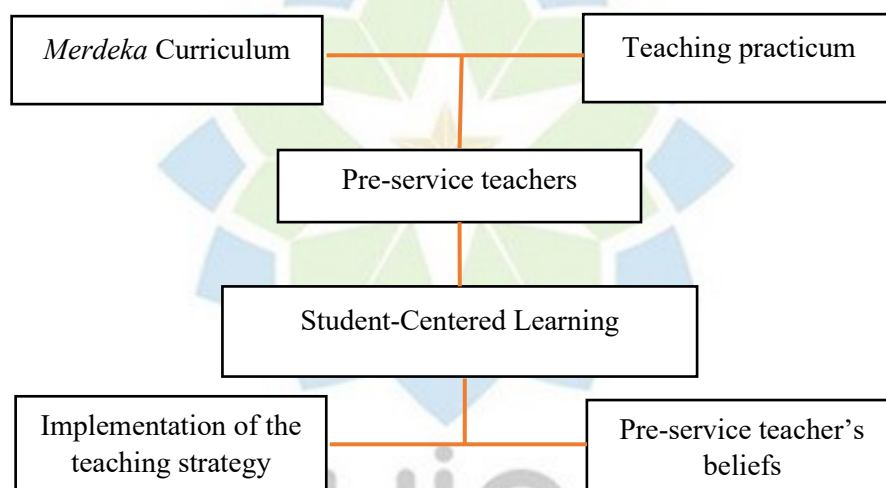The following diagram illustrates the relationship between the elements in this research:

Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework

G. Previous Research

The following are some research references used in previous research:

The research conducted by Rahmani et al. (2024) investigated pre-service English teachers' experiences in implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI) during their teaching practice in secondary schools. This research used a qualitative descriptive approach and involved 17 purposively selected 9th-semester students of the English Language Education study program who had previously completed their teaching practicum in the 7th semester. Data were collected through a

combination of open-ended and closed-ended questionnaires, allowing the researchers to gain comprehensive insights into the participants' instructional practices. The study found that pre-service teachers attempted to adjust the content, process, and product of learning to suit students' diverse needs and abilities. Strategies such as scaffolding, flexible grouping and varied assessments were used to create inclusive learning. This research is relevant to the current study as it shows the importance of adaptation of learning strategies and pedagogical competence in dealing with student diversity, which is also a principle in SCL.

The second research conducted by Kaymakamoglu (2017) explored the beliefs, perceived practices and actual practices of EFL teachers in secondary schools in Cyprus regarding teacher-centered and learner-centered learning approaches. This research used a qualitative design, the researcher employed interviews and classroom observations as the main instruments to collect data. The participants consisted of 10 EFL teachers who were purposively selected through criterion sampling to gain a deeper understanding of the alignment or discrepancy between their pedagogical beliefs and classroom behavior. Although most teachers expressed belief in the importance of constructivist approaches, classroom observations showed that their actual practices were still predominantly traditionally oriented. This research emphasizes that there is a gap between teachers' beliefs and actual practices, which could be due to a lack of skills or pressure from the institutional context. This is also in line with the focus of this study, which is the importance of understanding pre-service teachers' beliefs towards SCL and how these beliefs influence the strategies they choose and implement.

The research by Merç (2015) explored EFL pre-service teachers' views on performance assessment during teaching practice at Anadolu University, Turkey. The research, which used survey and interview methods with 117 students, found that most students were satisfied with the assessment of planning and organizational aspects. However, they were less satisfied with the assessment of the cooperating teacher and the reflection report. These results suggest the need for university supervisors to take a more active role in teaching practice supervision to improve

the credibility of the assessment. In addition, the reflective report is considered less effective because it does not provide in-depth feedback.

The research by Maharani & Fithriani (2023) explored the challenges pre-service English teachers face during their teaching practice from a transformative learning perspective. Using a descriptive qualitative research design with phenomenological methods, the research involved five seventh-semester students majoring in English Education at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra as participants. The data were collected through reflective notes and in-depth interviews and then analyzed thematically. The results showed key challenges, including the gap between vision and reality, classroom management, and supervision limitations. This research emphasizes the importance of critical reflection to help pre-service teachers overcome challenges and improve their capacity to choose teaching methods that suit students' needs.

The research by Kabilan et al. (2020) highlights the challenges faced by pre-service English teachers trained in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context when teaching in an ESL (English as a Second Language) setting. This research, conducted using a phenomenological study approach, applied four pre-service teachers from two Indonesian universities who underwent international teaching practice in Malaysia. Data were obtained through open-ended interviews and reflective journals. The four main challenges identified were curriculum differences, lesson planning, language proficiency, and cultural differences. This research emphasizes the importance of integrating elements of multiculturalism in teacher training programs to support teacher candidates' adaptation in international contexts.

Previous research has similarities in researching pre-service teachers, and of course, there are also gaps between previous research and planned research. The research gap between previous and planned research lies in the specific focus on SCL strategies in the context of the *Merdeka* Curriculum, which researchers have not yet explored. While previous research examined the implementation of differentiated instruction (Rahmani et al., 2024), teachers' beliefs, perceived, and

actual classroom practice related to traditional and constructivist teaching (Kaymakamoglu, 2017), performance assessment in teaching practice (Merç, 2015), challenges during teaching practice from a transformative learning perspective (Maharani & Fithriani, 2023), and challenges of international teaching practice (Kabilan et al., 2020), none have explicitly addressed the implementation and pre-service teachers' beliefs of SCL approaches. Furthermore, no research has examined how pre-service teachers adapt these strategies to align with the pedagogical goals and principles of the *Merdeka* Curriculum that emphasize flexibility, student independence, and differentiated instruction.

The current research fills that gap by focusing on the strategies used by pre-service English teachers to implement SCL during their teaching practicum within the framework of the *Merdeka* curriculum. It also investigates their beliefs on the effectiveness of these strategies during the teaching practicum. By addressing these aspects, this research contributes new insights into the practical application of SCL in the Indonesian education system and how pre-service teachers navigate the unique demands of the *Merdeka* curriculum, which has not been the primary focus of existing research.