

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the basic components of these studies. First, it presents the research context which is of significance to the study, and outlines the research question that it seeks to answer. It also explains the aims of the study, and most importantly, the value of the research is articulated.

### A. Background of the research

Over the past decade, critical literacy has assumed an increasingly prominent position in global educational discourse and has increasingly informed discussions of literacy and critical thinking in formal education. Contemporary perspectives on literacy extend beyond functional language proficiency to include learners' capacity to interpret texts critically, question meaning, and evaluate how knowledge and social realities are constructed through language and media (Luke, 2014). Within this tradition, critical literacy emphasizes reflective, analytical, and dialogic engagement with texts rather than surface-level comprehension alone.

In Indonesia, the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* under the broader *Merdeka Belajar* policy framework represents a major effort to reorient national education toward learner autonomy, competency-based learning, and character development (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2022). Within this reform, Deep Learning is promoted as an instructional orientation that foregrounds meaningful learning, higher-order thinking, and active learner participation. At the policy level, these orientations are frequently framed as fostering critical, reflective, and independent learners. Although such principles appear conceptually compatible with the aims of critical literacy, the pedagogical meaning of "critical" remains broadly defined and is not explicitly elaborated in curriculum policy documents.

Concerns regarding students' limited capacity for critical engagement with texts—particularly in English language classrooms—have been consistently

reported in Indonesian educational research (Sakhiyya & Hapsari, 2020). Moreover, the persistence of assessment-driven instructional practices may constrain teachers' ability to translate abstract curricular ideals into sustained classroom practices that promote critical inquiry and reflective meaning-making (Wilson, 2024). These tensions highlight a potential gap between curriculum intentions and the operationalization of critical literacy within instructional guidance.

The urgency of strengthening critical literacy is further intensified by the contemporary digital environment, characterized by the rapid circulation of misinformation, ideological bias, and unverified content (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Without well-developed critical literacy capacities, learners risk becoming passive recipients of information rather than active and reflective participants in civic and democratic life (Hobbs, 2020). International policy frameworks, including UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy agenda, underscore critical engagement with texts and media as a foundational competence for twenty-first-century citizenship and lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2021).

Within *Kurikulum Merdeka*, *Capaian Pembelajaran (CP)* function as the core structural reference points guiding curriculum planning, instructional design, and assessment across subject areas. These competencies articulate expectations related to reasoning, interpretation, communication, and interaction, and they serve as the basis for instructional documents such as teaching modules and textbooks (Print, 1993). While these competencies resonate with general principles associated with critical thinking and reflective learning, the curriculum does not explicitly clarify how they are intended to cultivate critical literacy as conceptualized in international critical literacy scholarship—particularly with regard to ideology, representation, and power relations embedded in texts.

Previous research in Indonesian educational contexts demonstrates both the potential and the challenges of integrating critical literacy into English language teaching. Afrilyasanti (2025) illustrates how critical media literacy practices can

foster students' analytical awareness and creative engagement at the senior high school level. Similarly, Novianti et al. (2025) identify tensions between critical literacy theory and pedagogical practice in Indonesian EFL teacher education, emphasizing the need for contextual and cultural mediation. Other studies have drawn attention to limitations within curricular guidelines and textbooks, especially in relation to cultural representation and the depth of critical engagement encouraged through instructional materials (Paudel & Saputra, 2025). However, much of this work focuses on classroom implementation or teacher perspectives, leaving curriculum documents themselves relatively underexamined.

Accordingly, a significant gap remains in the literature concerning systematic content analysis of *Kurikulum Merdeka* instructional documents—particularly those informed by Deep Learning principles—to examine how critical literacy is articulated at the level of curriculum design. Given that these documents function as authoritative references shaping teachers' instructional decision-making, limited clarity or implicit treatment of critical literacy may contribute to uneven or inconsistent classroom enactment.

Drawing on Freire's (1970) conception of education as a dialogical and reflective process, this study examines the articulated presence and absence of critical literacy principles within the English instructional documents of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, with a specific focus on Senior High School Phase E (Class X) as the foundational stage of upper secondary education. Through qualitative document-based content analysis, the study seeks to identify the theoretical and instructional orientations embedded in curriculum policy, examine their alignment with global and national educational goals, and analyze how critical literacy is represented—explicitly and implicitly—across official instructional documents. In doing so, the study also considers how critical literacy could be more clearly articulated and supported within curriculum design to strengthen alignment between policy intentions and pedagogical practice.

## B. Research Problems

Critical literacy is widely recognized as a core competence for learners in the twenty-first century, particularly within educational contexts shaped by rapid information circulation, media saturation, and increasing socio-cultural complexity. Contemporary international frameworks emphasize learners' capacity to critically interpret texts, evaluate perspectives, and engage responsibly with information across diverse communicative environments. Within this global landscape, Indonesia's *Kurikulum Merdeka* adopts a competency-based and learner-centered orientation intended to promote higher-order thinking, learner autonomy, and character development, with Deep Learning positioned as an instructional approach that supports meaningful, reflective, and active learning. At the level of policy discourse, these orientations are frequently associated with the cultivation of critical and reflective learners. However, how critical literacy is articulated, structured, and operationalized within the curriculum's official instructional documents—particularly those guiding instructional planning and assessment—remains analytically underexamined.

Although the *Kurikulum Merdeka* introduces *Capaian Pembelajaran* that reference analytical reasoning, interpretation, and communication, critical literacy is not articulated as a distinct conceptual or pedagogical framework within the curriculum documents. Nor is there explicit guidance regarding how these competencies are intended to be enacted as critical literacy practices in English language instruction. Consequently, it remains analytically unclear whether critical literacy is conceptualized primarily as an ideological and transformative practice—concerned with power, representation, and social positioning—or whether it is framed more narrowly in functional, cognitive, and communicative terms. This ambiguity raises important questions regarding the depth and consistency of critical literacy integration at the level of curriculum design, particularly when examined in relation to internationally recognized critical literacy frameworks and Indonesia's broader educational aspirations.

Existing research on critical literacy in the Indonesian context has largely focused on classroom practices, teacher beliefs, and pedagogical challenges (e.g., Janks, 2019; Hobbs, 2020; Sakhiyya & Hapsari, 2020). While these studies offer valuable insights into how critical literacy may be enacted—or constrained—within instructional settings, they provide limited analysis of how critical literacy is represented in the official curriculum documents that function as authoritative references for teaching, learning, and assessment. In the absence of systematic document-based analysis, it remains difficult to determine whether Kurikulum Merdeka structurally supports critical literacy through its design or whether the realization of critical literacy is largely dependent on teacher interpretation and classroom mediation.

To address this gap, the present study conducts a qualitative content analysis of two official English instructional documents within *Kurikulum Merdeka*: (1) the *Panduan Mata Pelajaran Bahasa Inggris Fase E (SMA/MA)*, which integrates *Capaian Pembelajaran* and curriculum planning components, and (2) the *Buku Paket Bahasa Inggris Kelas X*, including both student and teacher editions. The study examines how critical literacy is represented—explicitly or implicitly—within these documents, identifies the dominant theoretical and instructional approaches underpinning their design, and analyzes the extent to which these approaches align with global literacy frameworks and Indonesia’s national educational goals. By adopting an analytic rather than assumptive stance, this study seeks to clarify the curricular positioning of critical literacy within *Kurikulum Merdeka* and to contribute empirical evidence to ongoing discussions on curriculum design, educational policy, and English language education in Indonesia.

### **C. Research Questions**

1. What theoretical and instructional approaches related to critical literacy are articulated in the English instructional documents of the *Kurikulum Merdeka (Phase E)*?

2. To what extent do these articulated approaches align with global critical literacy frameworks and Indonesia's national educational goals?
3. How is critical literacy represented and distributed—explicitly or implicitly—across the English instructional documents of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Phase E)?

#### **D. Purposes of the study**

This study employs a qualitative, document-based content analysis to examine how critical literacy is articulated within the instructional design of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, with particular attention to English curriculum documents informed by Deep Learning as a pedagogical paradigm. The study is confined to the analysis of official curriculum documents and does not involve classroom observations, teacher interviews, surveys, or other forms of field-based data collection. Its purpose is analytical and interpretive rather than evaluative of classroom practice.

Specifically, the study is aimed to:

1. Identify and describe the theoretical and instructional approaches related to critical literacy that are articulated in the design of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, as reflected in its official English instructional documents.
2. Examine the extent to which these approaches align with global critical literacy frameworks and Indonesia's national educational goals, including competencies emphasized in the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila*.
3. Analyze how critical literacy is represented and structured—explicitly or implicitly—within the two official English curriculum documents of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, namely:
  - (a) the *Panduan Mata Pelajaran Bahasa Inggris Fase E (SMA/MA)*, which integrates the *Capaian Pembelajaran* and syllabus components; and
  - (b) the *Buku Paket Bahasa Inggris Kelas X*, including both student and teacher editions.

Through these purposes, the study seeks to clarify the positioning of critical literacy at the level of curriculum policy and instructional design and to provide empirical evidence that may inform curriculum development, teacher professional learning, and future research on literacy education in the Indonesian context.

## **E. Contributions of the study**

This study contributes theoretically, conceptually, policy-wise, and practically to scholarly and professional understanding of how critical literacy is positioned within the instructional documents of *Kurikulum Merdeka* for English language teaching in Indonesia. Rather than presuming a uniform or explicit articulation of critical literacy, the study offers an analytic account of how—and to what extent—it is articulated, implied, or constrained at the level of curriculum design.

### **1. Theoretical Contribution**

Theoretically, this study extends critical literacy scholarship by applying Freire's (1970) conception of dialogical and critical education and Janks' (2018) critical literacy framework to the analysis of national curriculum documents. While these theories have traditionally been employed to examine classroom practices and pedagogical interactions, this study demonstrates their analytical utility in interrogating curriculum texts as policy instruments that shape instructional possibilities.

By situating critical literacy theory within the context of *Kurikulum Merdeka* and its pedagogical orientations, the study broadens the scope of critical literacy from classroom enactment to curriculum design and policy discourse. In doing so, it highlights how critical literacy principles may be reframed, diluted, or rendered implicit when translated into official instructional documents, thereby contributing to theoretical discussions on the institutional and structural constraints that shape the enactment of critical literacy in formal education systems.

## **2. Conceptual Contribution**

Conceptually, this study develops a document-based analytical framework for examining the representation of critical literacy within national curriculum texts. The framework organizes analysis across interconnected instructional components—*Capaian Pembelajaran*, syllabus structures, and teaching and learning materials—allowing for a systematic examination of how critical literacy-related orientations are articulated, distributed, and aligned across curriculum documents.

Unlike the theoretical contribution, which draws on established critical literacy theories, this conceptual framework emerges from the study's methodological design and analytical process. As such, it offers a transferable and replicable model for researchers and curriculum analysts seeking to examine critical literacy—or other higher-order literacy orientations—within policy and curriculum documents in different educational contexts.

## **3. Policy Contribution**

At the policy level, this study provides evidence-based insights into the strengths and limitations of *Kurikulum Merdeka* in articulating critical literacy within its English instructional documents. By identifying areas where critical literacy is implicit, unevenly distributed, or absent, the study informs ongoing curriculum reform efforts and contributes to policy discussions concerning competency articulation, instructional coherence, and alignment with international literacy frameworks, including those promoted by UNESCO.

The findings may assist policymakers, curriculum designers, and review committees in refining curriculum documents to more explicitly articulate critical literacy objectives, clarify pedagogical intentions, and strengthen coherence between stated educational goals and instructional guidance.

#### **4. Practical Contribution**

Practically, although the study does not evaluate classroom implementation, it offers implications for instructional planning and teacher preparation by clarifying how critical literacy is positioned within official curriculum texts. By making visible the curricular expectations and limitations embedded in these documents, the study supports teachers, teacher educators, and material developers in interpreting curriculum guidance more critically and in identifying areas where additional pedagogical support or professional development may be required.

The study's insights may inform the design of teacher education programs, in-service training, and instructional materials that aim to bridge gaps between curriculum design and classroom practice, particularly in fostering critical, reflective, and socially engaged literacy learning.

