

LITERACY CONCEPT PERSPECTIVES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING WITHIN THE EMANCIPATED CURRICULUM

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Abstract

Indonesia's literacy rate is low, ranking 61st in the PISA survey, 60th in the OECD's 2016 survey, and 45th in PIRLS 2011. To address this, a Merdeka Belajar curriculum focusing on literacy activities is being implemented. Thus, it is necessary to conduct research related to teachers' and students' perspectives of literacy through reading activities in emancipated learning because it can reflect how they understand and experience it. The qualitative case study is used as the research method and involved an English teacher and a 7th-grade student in a junior high school in Tasikmalaya. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis approach. The findings indicate that teachers perceive literacy in English learning as multifaceted, emphasizing reading and writing activities to enhance knowledge. They advocate for literacy skills development through diverse activities, promote independent learning strategies, and employ multimodal approaches, aligning their practices with the principles of the Emancipated Curriculum to empower students. Therefore, further research should explore the impact of English reading literacy activities on students'; English language skills, specifically the four skills, using a quantitative experimental approach to investigate the effects of literacy through reading activities.

Keywords: *Emancipated learning perspectives; English reading activity; literacy*

1. Introduction

A country's literacy rate is an important indicator of its overall quality. This is because a country's ability to grow is strongly correlated with its literacy rate. Literacy has become an essential activity because it refers to a person's ability to read, write, speak, count, and comprehend information to solve difficulties encountered in everyday life (Oktariani & Ekadiansyah, 2020). Although literacy is commonly defined as the ability to read, write, speak, and count, this study focuses on the ability to read. In the concept of literacy, reading is interpreted as an ability to comprehend, evaluate, use, and interact with written language to participate in society, achieve objectives, and expand knowledge and potential (Koyuncu & Firat, 2020). In their article, Damaianti, Abidin, & Rahma, (2020) also explained that

reading is considered in the context of literacy as an attempt to comprehend, apply, reflect on, and engage with a variety of texts to achieve the goal of increasing someone's knowledge and potential as well as their capacity to participate in society. With that said, even though literacy is the most important part of reading, the definition of literacy also covers many more aspects, both for learning and life.

However, Indonesia came in 61st place from 72 countries in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey. It is also ranked 60th out of 61 participating countries based on data from the 2016 Central Connecticut State University survey of the world's most literate nations conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD). In addition, the reading proficiency of students in Indonesia ranks 45th out of 48 countries according to the 2011 Progress International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) test results (Susanto, 2019). This brings into consideration that reading literacy is urgent.

Considering the understanding of reading literacy, Syamsuri and Bancong (2022) argue that reading literacy is one of the most essential skills in education. Reading literacy, related to reading activities, can be characterized as an activity to acquire knowledge or understand information conveyed through written language. Following this statement, Audina et al. (2020) also stated that reading is a process of obtaining information to understand the significance or meaning of the text read. Because reading is getting information to understand the text's importance or meaning, reading has become a valuable way to learn new things for students who participate actively in academic activities, especially for language learners. This is consistent with Harmer (2007) viewpoint, which states that reading activities benefit language learners. Given the situation, significant efforts need to be made to improve literacy levels through reading activities in Indonesia, especially in the context of the educational system.

The government made a policy called Emancipated Learning (Merdeka Belajar) to support the importance of literacy through reading activities in the educational system. Emancipated Learning (Merdeka Belajar) is a policy introduced by Indonesia Minister of Education and Culture Decree No. 3 of 2020. Sholeh et.al. (2023) state that the essence of the government's emancipated learning programs is to investigate students' ability to create and improve the quality of learning independently based on their passion. Implementing emancipated learning or Merdeka Belajar, which states about independent learning, is also related to the Merdeka curriculum (Emancipated Curriculum). According to Fathurrahman et.al. (2022), in the Emancipated Curriculum, students must learn independently, be independent of their educational environment, and choose their study method. Not only that, Nugraheny et.al. (2023) also provides a view that Merdeka itself is a situation where teachers and students have the freedom to innovate and learn independently and creatively in the process of teaching and learning activities. The concept of emancipated learning (Merdeka Belajar) is a topic of interest in educational research and pedagogy.

Previous study explained the importance of teachers implementing reading activities in schools on students' literacy skills (Cahya, Padmadewi, & Artini, 2020; Khofiyya, Mirnawati, & Setiawan, 2023; Noveliana & Ghani, 2022). Therefore, this study focuses and aims on knowing more perspectives, both from teachers and students, regarding the implementation of literacy through English reading activities because the reality of the low level of literacy in Indonesia must be a concern, especially in the implementation of literacy in the emancipated learning or Merdeka Belajar. By investigating teachers' and students'

perspectives of literacy through English reading activity, the study offers practical contributions that are expected to be useful for expanding knowledge on the teaching and learning through English reading activities in improving literacy levels.

1. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Literacy

Traditionally, literacy refers to the ability to read and write. The definition then evolves into the ability of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills that everyone requires to reach their full potential (Jama & Dugdale, 2012). Literacy also refers to an individual's ability to comprehend, assess, and apply knowledge learned from various sources (Jusmirad et.al., 2023). Frankel et.al (2016) states that literacy is defined as the process of using reading, writing, and spoken language in the context of socially situated practices to interact and engage with multimodal texts to extract, create, integrate, and evaluate meaning. Reading and writing are important literacy components to learn. Shara et.al (2020) stated that mastering reading literacy is very important for other literacies because reading fluently and understanding the information or meaning in the text requires high concentration. Not only that but writing also has a central role in literacy as a means of expression and communication. The act of writing for an audience can be viewed as a process of conveying information, a process in which the writer aims to convey the message as effectively as possible to the reader (Kroll, 1984).

The concept of understanding literacy is also widely known in Indonesia. As explained by Rintaningrum (2020), the Indonesian term for literacy is commonly known as 'melek huruf' or literate in English, and it refers to the ability to read and write. Besides being related to reading and writing skills, literacy has a general definition that includes many different aspects. Hobbs (2016) stated that while reading and writing are the most well-recognized aspects of literacy, definitions of literacy often include the ability to comprehend, develop, and share ideas, experiences, information, and meanings through culturally significant symbol systems. These abilities to read, write, and understand the information will affect someone's ability to be considered literate. (Paul, 2018) stated that being literate was defined as having the ability to access and understand written or printed information. This statement is also supported by an explanation which says that a person is literate if they understand the information required for all tasks that need literacy to participate effectively in society, as well as the knowledge gained through reading and writing that enables them to apply it on their own (Rajagukguk, Nababan, & Situmeang, 2022). A person is considered literate if they have a means of literate thought. Based on the definition of literacy and literate person above, literacy is the ability to understand several types of literacy.

2.2 Literacy Foundation

Literacy is the foundation for all other academic knowledge and abilities in education (Smith, 2023). Concerning the world of education, literacy is an important part of the growth and development of students as subjects of education. Thus, Smith (2023) explained that literacy skills are very important in education since they impact students' ability to learn about complex topics, communicate effectively, and retain knowledge. Anis and Bariroh (2020) stated that literacy is a way for students to recognize, comprehend, and apply what they learn in school.

To help students recognize, comprehend, and apply literacy to their learning at school, there must be some fundamental shifts that can be given during the learning process. The goal of literacy learning in schools is to teach students with the necessary reading and writing skills, which is the teacher's responsibility in all subject areas (Khofifah & Ramadan, 2021). Frankel et al. (2016) explained that literacy emphasizes four key shifts: productive and receptive processes, the context of social practices, conceptualizations of literacy, and modalities beyond written language. In addition, in the article, he explained that each of these key shifts has an explanation that refers to several aspects of understanding or literacy. Some of those key shifts explain that literacy involves both productive and receptive processes, with reading taking place in the context of social practices and culturally rooted activities. It is a disciplinary approach that influences the participation of students and teachers in literacy practices such as teaching and learning. Literacy is compounded further by modalities other than written language, such as image, sound, and gesture, which can convey unique meanings that differ from reading written words (Frankel et al., 2016).

2.3 Reading Activity in EFL Classroom

Reading is a method or process for gaining information from a text. According to Audina et al. (2020), reading is a process of obtaining information to understand the significance or meaning of the text read. From the explanation, reading involves more than just looking at a group of letters that have been organized into words, groups of words, sentences, paragraphs, and discourse; reading is an activity that involves understanding and interpreting written symbols, signs, or meaningful writing for the reader to comprehend the author's intended meaning fully (Patiung, 2016). Looking into the definition, it can be said that reading is an important skill for teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) (Hidayat & Setiawan, 2020). Okasha (2020) also argues that reading is important because EFL specialists see it as both a productive and receptive skill. As they read, students take in and process the text's information before responding with questions, ideas, and comments. Therefore, Gurduza (2019) said that reading is an important skill for EFL students and is the most important ability to master since EFL readers with enhanced reading skills will make higher progress and achieve more significant improvement in all academic areas. Not only that, but reading is also the primary instrument for EFL learners to improve their understanding of other aspects of English. Repeated exposure to the same English patterns and components through reading can help students improve their writing, spelling, vocabulary, and grammatical comprehension (Manihuruk, 2020).

Reading activities are referred to as boring, so teachers must find ways or strategies that make reading enjoyable for students (Lubis, 2021). Successful reading activities depend on the selection of appropriate materials and the implementation of engaging strategies. The teacher should be able to examine the materials while considering the student's goals and learning needs (Suwarso & Praseno, 2022). The student's needs must be determined before the material is developed so that the outcome fulfills those needs. Furthermore, they also emphasized that the teaching material should include activities that help students identify the components of the text they are studying and provide many opportunities for actual language usage. Therefore, in preparing EFL students to face and implement reading materials, it is necessary to have some reading strategies that can emphasize the ability to understand reading materials. According to Banditvilai (2020), reading strategies are

assumed to be important for students' reading comprehension, and reading strategies provide students with skills to handle their reading effectively. He also argued that teachers can help students improve their reading comprehension through reading strategies because they are purposeful ways to understand the researcher's meaning.

2.4 Emancipated Learning

Emancipated learning, also known as Merdeka Belajar, is one of the programs implemented by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek). Merdeka Belajar's policy is to give independence to each education unit to innovate (Yandri, 2022). In essence, Merdeka Belajar is present to explore the potential of teachers, schools, and students to innovate and improve quality independently. That is why Nugraheny et al. (2023) provide a view that Merdeka is a situation where teachers and students have the freedom to innovate and learn independently and creatively in teaching and learning activities.

Based on the above explanations, the Ministry of Education and Culture introduced the Merdeka Curriculum (Emancipated Curriculum) on February 11, 2022, as a curriculum innovation to support this Merdeka Belajar innovation. Based on that explanation, Rani et.al (2023) state that the Emancipated Curriculum was first initiated by the Minister of Education and Culture, Nadiem Makarim. This curriculum is motivated by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) research conducted in 2019 with the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, which shows that 70% of 15-year-old students are below the minimum competency in understanding simple reading or applying basic mathematical concepts. These PISA scores have mostly stayed the same in the last 10-15 years.

2. Research Method

3.1 Methodological Design

Qualitative research is used to build and construct concepts and categories, thoroughly comprehend the study topic, or gain in-depth information on specific circumstances (Thuv, 2023). According to Vanwynsberghe and Khan (2007), it would be implied that a case study is a strategy, procedure, or method for gathering evidence or obtaining data if the term "methodology" (which is frequently used similarly with "case study") was used. Thus, the case study is applied in numerous contexts to help our understanding of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related issues (Yin, 2009).

3.2 Setting and Participants

This research explored the perspectives of English teachers and students in a junior high school in Tasikmalaya, West Java, Indonesia. The school implemented the Emancipated Curriculum in July 2023 and implemented various learning activities to improve students' literacy and numeracy abilities. A 7th-grade English teacher and student were selected for the study. The teacher focuses on reading activities from textbooks and allows students to access information online. The student, with a strong background in literacy and English language learning, is supported by learning activities both inside and outside school, such as participating in English literacy competitions or courses.

3.3 Research Instrument

The research utilized semi-structured interviews to explore teachers' and students' perspectives on literacy in reading activities through emancipated learning. Semi-structured interviews are well-suited for many valuable activities, especially when several open-ended questions ask for additional information (Adams, 2015). These interviews were designed to allow for a more comprehensive exploration of their perspectives on literacy through English reading activities.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Thematic analysis from Braun and Clarke (2006) used to analyze the data by following the stages: familiarizing data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes.

4. Results and Discussion

By using thematic analysis, the findings of the study have been divided into four themes: 1) Reading and Writing Activity to Gain Knowledge and Information, 2) Literacy Skills through Literacy Activities, 3) Strategies to Improve Reading Skills and Ask Students to Learn Independently, 4) Using Multimodal in Teaching and Learning Activity in Emancipated Learning.

4.1 Reading and Writing Activity to Gain Knowledge and Information

Given the importance of literacy to students' education and knowledge, it is necessary to determine teachers' perspectives on the most basic things related to literacy as an initial foundation for implementing literacy activities.

Participant 1 – T *“Literacy activities are activities where students not only read and write but also memorize to improve their knowledge. Literacy is important for students because in this present era, if we are not being literate, it seems like we will be left behind. With literacy, eee ... all kinds of information can be gained.”*

Not only did the teacher give her perspectives about understanding and telling the importance of literacy, but the student also gave his perspectives about it.

Participant 2 – S *“Literacy is an activity that has to do with reading or writing that aims to manage knowledge or information. Maybe in my opinion, literacy is important in all languages, especially Indonesian and English are also very important because with this literacy we can control, can collect, and get more information. And with this literacy, we can deepen the information that we will get.”*

As a result, both participants state that literacy includes activities such as reading, writing, understanding, and using language in various contexts. Based on the explanation, literacy is also defined as the process of using reading, writing, and spoken language in the context of socially situated practices to interact and engage with multimodal texts to extract, create, integrate, and evaluate meaning (Frankel et al., 2016). In addition, literacy can also be explained as an individual's ability to understand, evaluate, and apply knowledge learned from many different sources (Jusmirad et al., 2023). These three literacy activities are

expected to positively impact students by making it easier to understand, get, and memorize information from previous readings, which will then improve their knowledge and comprehension of related content broadly.

4.2 Literacy Skills through Literacy Activities

In its implementation, emancipated learning focuses on the implementation of literacy activities to improve students' literacy skills, and several impacts related to students' knowledge.

Participant 1 – T *“For English learning, usually for eee ... reading, I usually ask the students to read first, at least read first, don't say “Ibu, I don't understand.” It is okay not to understand too, the important thing is to read first.”*

Participant 1 – T *“The impact of literacy is that students' knowledge becomes broader, and we as teachers also become easier to teach. So, there is no need to explain at length.”*

Participant 1 – T *“... the students have a better understanding of how to use good English reading techniques, especially in terms of pronunciation and fluency. In addition, the students get new vocabulary and eee ... the students understand more about the content of the story, and it can make the students more interested in eee ... finding out about new stories.”*

Not only the teacher who gave her perspective on the freedom in using texts in reading activities, the student also gave his perspective on this issue and its impact.

Participant 2 – S *“Well, usually the English teacher likes to ask us to read the text in the textbook, so we usually just use the textbook.”*

Participant 2 – S *“... I can also learn the vocabulary, and I can learn the sentence structure from there. The first thing I did was to improve my ability to read English texts. I'm now able to read English texts quite correctly, but I still need to improve my pronunciation.”*

It can be concluded that on its implementation, emancipated learning focuses on the implementation of literacy activities to improve students' literacy skills. This aligns with Simbolon (2023) who explained that one of the main focuses of the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is the implementation of literacy activities in every school in Indonesia. He also mentioned that implementing literacy in the Merdeka Belajar curriculum aims to provide a holistic education, focusing on developing students' reading, writing, speaking, and listening abilities. This resonates with the teacher's and student's implementation of literacy through reading activity which also can lead to the students' improvement of English and literacy skills. From that, Suwarso and Praseno (2022) also explained that teaching material given by the teacher should include activities that help students identify the components of the text they are studying, in addition to providing many opportunities for actual language usage.

4.3 Strategies to Improve Reading Skills and Ask Students to Learn Independently

Based on the findings of the interviews, the teacher implemented reading strategies for her students so that they could find and understand information from what they had read.

Participant 1 – T *“So, before learning, usually the students are looking for it by themselves first.”*

Participant 1 – T *“The way to do it, well that’s free. Whether looking through a dictionary, or Google, look for it on their own.”*

Participant 1 – T *“It is usually determined through assessment. With tests usually. It is usually a written test, so it’s not a multiple-choice test.”*

Not only do teachers implement reading strategies in teaching literacy in English reading activities, but students also explain and implement the same thing.

Participant 2 – S *“The best way for me to organize the information from the text that I read is usually to highlight it.”*

Participant 2 – S *“... I find a keyword that I don’t understand, then I can directly open a dictionary, or I can go to the internet to search for what is meant by that word. So, it also really helps me to understand what the words are, and their meaning.”*

Participant 2 – S *“After the teacher explains the material, we are usually given a few questions from the textbook to work on. That is also a material to test eee ... whether we have understood the material or not.”*

As a result, literacy through reading activities also implements the implementation of strategies to help improve reading skills, one of which incorporates the concept of emancipated learning related to learning independently. These strategies are used because some studies have provided results regarding students’ views or perspectives on reading activities, which are challenging because they are complex and purposeful activities. As explained by Fitri and Ginting (2021), reading is said to be challenging since it requires students to become proficient readers by recognizing words in the text, interpreting their meaning, and organizing the words they find to produce meaning. Thus, to be able to get comprehensive information when reading, both teachers and students must be able to apply several strategies that are considered to help them find and understand information. As explained by (Banditvilai, 2020), reading strategies are assumed to be important for students’ reading comprehension, and reading strategies provide students with skills on how to handle their reading effectively.

4.4 Using Multimodal in Teaching and Learning Activity in Emancipated Learning

In implementing teaching and learning that focuses on literacy activities, teachers have an important role to play in providing a fun teaching and learning activity to help students improve their literacy ability.

“I usually take it from YouTube. I am a flexible person, “Ibu, can we sing first?” “You can but sing in English.”

Participant 1 – T *“Currently... The last time, Ibu made eee... a video. So, when the students, for example, make descriptive text. In the past, descriptive text was eee... writing, now there are many media.”*

Based on the data, the teacher has implemented English literacy activities by using multimodal that can help students learn English through learning media beyond written texts.

Participant 1 – T *“From videos, students’ curiosity is higher, besides asking the teacher, students also search for themselves. Then from the video, it’s more ... interesting.”*

Not only does the teacher apply or use media as a teaching tool, but the student also uses media to learn English.

Participant 2 – S *“Maybe the media that I often use when I’m trying to learn is YouTube. If I’m taking a break after school, I usually watch TikTok, there are also a lot of tips and tricks eee... verbs or tenses, which are related to English.”*

Participant 2 – S *“In my opinion, using media is better, because what? I learn English with a unique motivation. So, if for example there are no pictures, I don’t like it, if there are pictures, like in ornaments, maybe I like it more to improve my English skills. I also think it affects my English skills because for me, my learning motivation is to play while learning, not learning while playing.”*

Furthermore, the implementation of teaching and learning activities in schools in various subjects must follow the policies in emancipated learning (Merdeka Belajar). As explained by Nugraheny et al. (2023), Merdeka is a situation where teachers and students have the freedom to innovate and learn independently and creatively in teaching and learning activities. Thus, in its implementation, teachers and students are given the freedom to find teaching and learning materials that suit their needs and are considered able to help improve understanding and English language skills.

As a result, the finding supports the explanation from (Frankel et al., 2016) which said that literacy is one of the four key shifts, and it is compounded further by modalities other than written language, such as image, sound, and gesture, which can convey unique meanings that differ from reading written words.

5. Conclusion

The present study aims to find out about teachers’ and students’ perspectives of literacy through English reading activities in emancipated learning. At the beginning of the analysis stage, the researchers found out about teachers’ and students’ perspectives on understanding literacy and the importance of literacy. This was done to explore their understanding of literacy, which would later impact the implementation of literacy activities. From the results of the analysis, the teacher’s perspective explains that in the implementation of literacy in English reading activities, she focuses more on how she

implements and provides English reading activities to students, and she also gives her perspectives on the impacts of these reading activities on their literacy and English language skills. Furthermore, the student also gave his perspective on how he was learning literacy through English reading activities, which impacted one improvement of literacy and English language skills. From the research findings, it can be concluded that both participants had a basic knowledge of literacy related to reading activities, and they also stated that literacy is important to help them improve their English language skills and increase comprehension and awareness of reading activities in education.

To find out the impact of English reading literacy activities on English language skills, especially for students, further research can conduct research that focuses on the impact that students get on the ability of 4 English language skills. Future research that investigates the impact of literacy through English reading activities on the four English language skills could be directed to a quantitative experimental approach. Suggestions include developing research designs that involve control and treatment groups to evaluate changes in listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. This research can offer a deeper understanding of the direct impact of English reading activities on improving English language skills and provide valuable insights for developing more effective educational programs.

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