Integration of Indonesian Language and Literature Learning in the Merdeka Curriculum: A Holistic Approach to Enhancing Literacy and Cultural Appreciation in Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the integration of Indonesian language and literature learning within the context of Merdeka Curriculum implementation at the secondary school level as a strategy to strengthen students' literacy and cultural appreciation. The main objective of this research is to understand the extent to which an integrative approach can improve the quality of learning that is not only cognitively oriented but also affective and cultural in nature. The subjects of this research consist of 20 scholarly articles selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the topic and the publication period between 2015 and 2025. The characteristics of the literature encompass perspectives on educational policy, pedagogical strategies, and empirical studies involving junior and senior high school students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. This study employs a qualitative approach using a library research method, with documentation techniques for data collection and thematic analysis to identify patterns, trends, and conceptual contributions from each source. The findings indicate that integrating language and literature learning significantly enhances students' literacy skills, broadens their cultural insights, and creates more reflective and meaningful learning experiences. Learning strategies that combine literary texts and language practice foster students' critical thinking, empathy, and appreciation of literature as well as real-life contexts. These findings confirm that the integration of language and literature not only substantively strengthens the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum but also contributes to the formation of the Pancasila Student Profile. As an implication, this approach needs to be further developed through teacher training, the provision of contextual learning media, and educational policies that support holistic and transformative teaching practices.

Keywords: *Integrated Learning; Indonesian Language and Literature; Merdeka Curriculum; Literacy and Cultural Appreciation.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of Indonesia's education system continues to undergo transformation in line with social changes, technological advancements, and global demands. One of the most significant curricular reforms in the past decade is the

implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, designed to provide students with greater learning freedom and teachers with pedagogical flexibility in designing contextual and meaningful learning activities. This curriculum not only emphasises academic achievement but also focuses on character development, creativity, and the cultural values that form the foundation of national identity. Within this framework, the teaching of Indonesian Language and Literature occupies a strategic position, as both serve as key instruments for fostering literacy while instilling cultural values in the younger generation.

As the national language, Indonesian carries complex functions. It is not merely a tool for communication, but also a medium for conveying ideas, emotions, and cultural expression. Language learning that is detached from its cultural context tends to produce structurally competent but affectively and aesthetically impoverished learners. Conversely, literature is often perceived as supplementary—or even merely entertaining—rather than as an integral part of developing critical thinking, empathy, and appreciation for linguistic beauty. As Lestari et al. (2019) assert, the integration of language and literature can create more vibrant, reflective, and contextual learning experiences for students.

Within the Merdeka Curriculum, an integrative and holistic approach is essential as it provides students with the opportunity to experience more coherent and unfragmented learning. Holistic education refers to the balanced development of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. This approach aligns with the "Pancasila Student Profile," which forms the core of the Merdeka Curriculum, aiming to shape learners who are faithful, critical thinkers, independent, creative, collaborative, and globally-minded (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

Integrated language and literature instruction makes a substantial contribution to strengthening students' literacy (Kasiyarno & Apriyanto, 2025). Here, literacy is not merely understood as the technical ability to read and write, but as the capacity to comprehend, evaluate, and process information in various forms, including literary texts. As Hasanah & Prayogo (2020) note, literature learning designed to be communicative and contextual can enhance students' reading interest and critical thinking skills. Literature also opens space for students to explore moral, social, and aesthetic values grounded in real life.

Wulandari (2018) found that students who learn language through literary texts demonstrate deeper syntactic and semantic understanding compared to those who use only functional texts. Literary works offer rich and contextual linguistic structures that challenge students to think more broadly and deeply. Similarly, a study by Simanjuntak et al. (2021) revealed that integrating literary texts with language skills promotes multiliteracy development, particularly in the digital era.

However, the biggest challenge in integrating language and literature learning lies in its implementation. Many teachers continue to separate the teaching of language and literature due to segmented syllabus structures and assessment frameworks. Other constraints include limited resources, such as a lack of contextual teaching materials and insufficient teacher training in integrative approaches (Sukma & Fauziah, 2017).

This is reinforced by Hartono et al. (2023), who observed that most teachers still treat literature as a supplementary subject rather than as a core strategy to enhance language proficiency.

In a competency- and character-oriented educational paradigm, the integrative approach becomes indispensable. According to Marzuki (2016), integrating language and literature helps students interpret texts not only from a linguistic perspective but also by appreciating the emotions and cultural values within. This approach also aligns with constructivist learning theories, where learners construct knowledge through experience and reflection, rather than by passively receiving information (Suryani & Mulyadi, 2021).

This urgency is further amplified by Indonesia's national literacy crisis. PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) data show that Indonesian students' literacy levels remain below the OECD average. In the 2018 PISA report, Indonesia ranked 74th out of 79 countries in reading literacy (OECD, 2019). Instruction that emphasises memorisation and technical language structures has proven ineffective in improving students' functional literacy. Therefore, a new approach is needed—one that combines linguistic and aesthetic aspects simultaneously. Literature also plays a vital role in shaping cultural identity and reinforcing national character. Amid the growing forces of globalisation, local literary education serves as an effective cultural defence. As Yuliana (2020) puts it, through literature, students not only learn language but also delve into the richness of local culture, which is increasingly eroded by the global information flow. Appreciation of local literature also fosters pride and a sense of ownership over the nation's cultural heritage.

Research by Dewi & Hapsari (2021) demonstrated that students exposed to local literary works showed increased empathy, tolerance, and openness towards cultural diversity—qualities highly relevant to nurturing students who respect differences, in line with the national motto Bhinneka Tunggal Ika. Meanwhile, Susanto et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of teaching traditional literary works using modern digital tools to keep them relevant for millennial and Gen Z learners.

The integration of language and literature learning also supports interdisciplinary learning outcomes, particularly in the development of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). Isnawati & Sari (2018) argue that analysing short stories, poems, and plays stimulates students' abilities in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. These activities promote critical reasoning while simultaneously building reflective communication and writing skills. In this context, language and literature are not merely educational tools but also platforms for developing students' intellectual and social capacities (Apriyanto et al., 2020; Dalman et al., 2020; Kasiyarno & Apriyanto, 2025; Santoso & Apriyanto, 2020; Triana et al., 2020).

The Merdeka Curriculum strongly encourages intertextual and thematic learning. Teachers are urged to link literary texts with current issues and students' daily lives, making learning more relevant and less abstract. According to Fitriyani (2022), this integration can be realised through project-based literature learning, in which students

analyse literary works while producing their own creative outputs. This method has been shown to improve students' learning motivation and creativity.

Technology integration in language and literature learning also adds new dimensions to instruction. Digital media such as podcasts, literacy videos, and e-book readers allow teachers to deliver content more interactively and engagingly. A study by Rahmawati & Setiawan (2021) found that students who studied literature through digital media showed greater reading interest and engagement than those who used conventional methods. This suggests that digital integration is an effective strategy to bridge the gap between curriculum demands and students' digital realities.

Nevertheless, structural and cultural challenges persist. The lack of teacher training in integrative approaches, the scarcity of contextually-aligned textbooks, and administrative pressures such as summative assessments are hurdles that must be overcome. As Hidayat & Purnama (2023) point out, curriculum reform without accompanying pedagogical and infrastructural reform will not yield significant change. This study aims to analyse how the integration of Indonesian Language and Literature learning is implemented within the Merdeka Curriculum at the secondary school level, and to evaluate its impact on enhancing students' literacy and cultural appreciation. It also explores field-level implementation challenges and the innovative strategies teachers employ to deliver holistic and meaningful learning.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach, using a library research method as the primary basis for data collection and analysis. This method enables the researcher to establish a strong theoretical and conceptual framework while expanding the breadth of information used to explore the phenomenon under study. Data were gathered through the exploration and inventory of relevant literature published between 2015 and 2025. Sources were retrieved from scholarly repositories such as Google Scholar, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), SINTA, and Garuda Ristekbrin to obtain nationally and internationally accredited journal articles.

The main data sources in this study include academic papers, educational policy reports, textbooks, prior research findings, and technical guidelines from educational institutions. The data analysis process involved content analysis and thematic analysis techniques. Content analysis was used to identify core ideas within the texts, such as learning approaches, strategies, models, as well as literacy and cultural appreciation outcomes discussed in the literature. To ensure validity and objectivity, cross-validation across sources was carried out using the principle of source triangulation. The researcher compared the content of various journals addressing similar topics from different perspectives.

Narrative analysis was also employed to construct a comprehensive picture of how language and literature integration supports the success of the Merdeka Curriculum. As such, the analytical methods used in this study do not merely yield

partial findings but also provide a holistic perspective on the issue of integrated learning in secondary schools.

The use of library research in this study demonstrates the continuing value of literature-based approaches in uncovering deep insights into educational issues—especially when empirical field data are limited or inaccessible. In the case of integrating Indonesian Language and Literature learning, library research offers a rich theoretical perspective and allows the researcher to explore broader contexts—ranging from policy to pedagogical practices and the underlying cultural perspectives. It is hoped that this research will not only contribute to academic discourse but also provide practical references for teachers, policymakers, and curriculum developers in designing more relevant and transformative learning strategies. Therefore, the chosen method is expected to yield in-depth, incisive, and impactful analyses that inform the formulation of more effective educational strategies for the future.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are structured based on a comprehensive analysis of 20 relevant academic sources, a theoretical synthesis of recent studies from 2015 to 2025, and an examination of trends in national education policy through official documents that support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The data collected are classified into several major themes aligned with the research focus: the impact of integrating language and literature on student literacy, its influence on cultural appreciation, and the teaching strategies employed by educators to implement this integration. Additionally, thematic mapping results are presented in tabular form to clarify patterns in findings based on the groupings of the reviewed literature.

The first table presented is a classification of the 20 analysed scholarly articles according to the primary variables of the research focus. These variables include integrative approaches, teaching strategies, literacy enhancement, and cultural appreciation. Each article is identified by year, author(s), research focus, and its key contribution to the understanding of language and literature integration within the Merdeka Curriculum context.

Table 1. Thematic Mapping of Reviewed Scholarly Articles (2015–2025)

No	Author (Year)	Focus of Study	Key Contribution
1	Lestari et al. (2019)	Integration of language and literature in lesson plans	Enhances critical thinking and writing skills
2	Hasanah & Prayogo (2020)	Literature and student literacy	Literature as a tool to boost reading interest
3	Wulandari (2018)	Literary texts in language learning	Provides rich and contextual linguistic structures
4	Simanjuntak et al. (2021)	Multiliteracy in literature	Literature supports digital and visual literacy
5	Hartono et al. (2023)	Teachers' role in material	Teachers often separate language

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		integration	and literature
6	Marzuki (2016)	Character education through literature	Literature strengthens students' moral education
7	Suryani & Mulyadi (2021)	Constructivism in language learning	Integration promotes critical reflection and dialogue
8	Yuliana (2020)	Local literature and culture	Literature learning reinforces cultural identity
9	Dewi & Hapsari (2021)	Empathy and tolerance from literary texts	Literature enhances social empathy and inclusivity
10	Susanto et al. (2019)	Digitalisation of literary texts	Digital media expands access and appreciation

From Table 1, it is evident that the integration of language and literature produces wide-ranging and profound effects—from improving technical literacy skills such as reading and writing, to strengthening social and cultural values through appreciation of literary works. Authors such as Hasanah & Prayogo (2020) stress that using literary texts in language instruction proves more effective in increasing students' reading interest. This supports the central hypothesis of this study, namely that such integration fosters holistic literacy improvement.

The following table outlines the types of literary texts most frequently used in integrated learning, alongside the related language activities and learning objectives. This analysis illustrates how integration is operationalised in classroom practice.

Table 2. Types of Literary Texts and Integrated Learning Activities

No	Literary Text Type	Linked Language Activities	Learning Objective
1	Short Stories	Rewriting, summarising, oral discussion	Enhancing listening and writing skills
2	Poetry	Expressive reading, composing new poems	Developing self-expression and imagination
3	Novels	Reviews, character analysis, essays	Enhancing critical literacy and interpretation
4	Drama	Role-playing, writing new scripts	Improving speaking skills and collaboration
5	Fables & Legends	Analysing moral values, summarising	Character building and cultural understanding

This table reveals that integrating literary texts with language skills can be designed through diverse activities that not only target cognitive development but also affective and psychomotor domains. For instance, in short story lessons, students are trained to rewrite stories in their own style, thereby developing reasoning and writing abilities. Meanwhile, drama lessons encourage students to act out roles, promoting speaking proficiency and teamwork.

Further analysis of the literature also indicates that this integration significantly enhances cultural appreciation. Local literature introduced in classrooms becomes a medium for preserving traditional values. This aligns with Yuliana's (2020) assertion that exposure to local literary works fosters a sense of belonging and pride in one's cultural identity. Texts such as folklore, regional legends, and traditional poetry not only teach language structure but also help students connect with Indonesia's rich cultural heritage.

An important aspect explored in this study is the teacher's role in designing integrative learning strategies. The analysis found that successful integration heavily relies on teachers' pedagogical competence—particularly their ability to create learning activities that combine linguistic and aesthetic elements. The study by Hartono et al. (2023) shows that teachers with strong literary literacy tend to be more creative in planning lessons that link literary texts with language skills. Nevertheless, challenges remain as many teachers have yet to receive training in holistic approaches or are unfamiliar with project-based or thematic lesson planning.

This challenge is echoed in Dewi & Hapsari's (2021) findings, which highlight that most teachers still focus on meeting conventional curriculum targets, such as final exams or summative assessments, making them reluctant to adopt integrative methods perceived as time-consuming and creativity-demanding. This illustrates a gap between the policies of the Merdeka Curriculum and its classroom implementation.

Another notable finding is the correlation between the use of literary texts in teaching and the enhancement of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). Research by Isnawati & Sari (2018) notes that students who regularly analyse literary works' intrinsic and extrinsic elements show marked improvement in critical and reflective thinking. This supports the hypothesis that the integration of language and literature impacts not just technical literacy, but also the development of complex cognitive skills. Thus, learning extends beyond comprehension to the evaluation of meaning, comparison of values, and the construction of new ideas.

The findings also suggest that digital media use in literature instruction significantly supports integration success. Rahmawati & Setiawan (2021) report that platforms like YouTube, interactive e-books, and literary podcasts increase students' engagement with learning content. In today's era, where students are more accustomed to digital tools than printed materials, such strategies prove practical and relevant. Digital media not only facilitate access to literary texts but also allow for multimodal learning, where text, imagery, and audio complement one another.

Collectively, these findings affirm that integrating Indonesian Language and Literature learning within the Merdeka Curriculum has significant potential to shape linguistically literate, culturally sensitive, and reflective learners. Holistic learning addresses not only the cognitive aspects but also stimulates students' emotional and psychomotor development. However, these outcomes heavily depend on systemic support from schools, teacher training, the development of accessible learning resources, and a willingness to move beyond conventional methods toward transformative practices.

Integrated learning demonstrates that language and literature are inseparable in educational contexts aiming to instil values—not merely knowledge. Literary texts, as reflections of life, guide students in perceiving diversity, conflict, hope, and morality. Their integration into language learning enriches discourse, refines sensibilities, and broadens students' perspectives. This directly responds to the urgency of this study, which from the outset has positioned integrative learning as a solution for enhancing literacy and cultural education in the Merdeka Curriculum era.

Hence, the study's hypothesis that integrating Indonesian Language and Literature learning in the Merdeka Curriculum can improve literacy and cultural appreciation in secondary schools is confirmed. These findings not only affirm the significance of integration as a teaching strategy but also as a nation-building approach. Strengthening the connection between language and culture propels Indonesian education further towards developing well-rounded individuals who think critically, empathise deeply, and uphold cultural values.

CONCLUSION

The integration of Indonesian Language and Literature learning in the Merdeka Curriculum has been shown to make a significant contribution to improving student literacy in secondary schools. Through an approach that merges linguistic proficiency with literary appreciation, students not only enhance their technical language skills but also develop the ability to think critically, reflectively, and creatively. The use of literary texts such as short stories, poems, novels, and plays—paired with related language activities—has led to more contextualised and meaningful learning experiences. This affirms that literature is not merely a supplementary component of the language curriculum but is essential in nurturing linguistic sensitivity and student reasoning.

Beyond literacy, this integration also has a profound impact on strengthening cultural appreciation. Learning that includes local and traditional literary works allows students to understand, internalise, and value the cultural norms embedded in society. This process reinforces students' cultural identity and instils pride in the nation's cultural heritage. In Indonesia's multicultural context, the ability to understand cultural diversity through literature is a vital asset for shaping students into tolerant, inclusive, and nationally conscious individuals.

However, the success of this integration greatly depends on teacher readiness and competence, as well as systemic support from educational institutions. Teachers must possess a thorough understanding of integrative approaches and be equipped with appropriate pedagogical training. In addition, sufficient learning resources—including digital media that support diverse texts and teaching approaches—must be provided. With the right strategies and ongoing support, the integration of language and literature in the Merdeka Curriculum can become a cornerstone in improving literacy quality and strengthening the cultural foundation of secondary education.

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