

Integrating Deep Learning-Oriented Instruction in Indonesian EFL Classrooms: Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

This study examines English teachers' perspectives on the integration of deep learning-oriented instruction in Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Drawing on a qualitative research design, the study involved three senior high school English teachers from a public school in North Aceh, Indonesia. The findings indicate that teachers conceptualize deep learning as an approach that emphasizes critical thinking, inquiry, collaboration, problem-solving, and reflective learning rather than surface-level knowledge acquisition. In classroom practice, deep learning was enacted through inquiry-based activities, problem-based tasks, collaborative learning, and reflective practices that encouraged meaningful language use and student engagement. Teachers perceived deep learning as beneficial for enhancing learner autonomy, communicative competence, and higher-order thinking skills. However, several challenges were identified, including limited instructional time, heterogeneous student proficiency, and resource constraints. To address these challenges, teachers adopted adaptive strategies such as scaffolding, differentiated instruction, and flexible task design.

Keywords: deep learning-oriented instruction; teachers' perspectives; senior high school

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji perspektif guru bahasa Inggris terhadap integrasi pembelajaran berorientasi deep learning di kelas English as a Foreign Language (EFL) tingkat sekolah menengah atas di Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif deskriptif dengan melibatkan tiga orang guru bahasa Inggris di salah satu SMA negeri di Aceh Utara. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru memaknai deep learning sebagai pendekatan pembelajaran yang menekankan pemahaman mendalam, berpikir kritis, pemecahan masalah, kolaborasi, dan refleksi, bukan sekadar penguasaan materi secara permukaan. Dalam praktiknya, pembelajaran berorientasi deep learning diwujudkan melalui kegiatan berbasis inkuiri, problem-based learning, kerja kelompok, dan aktivitas reflektif yang mendorong penggunaan bahasa Inggris secara bermakna. Guru memandang pendekatan ini efektif dalam meningkatkan keterlibatan siswa, kemandirian belajar, kompetensi komunikatif, serta keterampilan berpikir tingkat tinggi. Namun demikian, implementasi deep learning masih menghadapi kendala, seperti keterbatasan waktu pembelajaran, perbedaan tingkat kemampuan siswa, keterbatasan sumber belajar, dan tuntutan sistem evaluasi yang berorientasi pada ujian. Untuk mengatasi kendala tersebut, guru menerapkan strategi adaptif berupa scaffolding, diferensiasi pembelajaran, dan penyesuaian desain tugas.

Kata Kunci: pembelajaran deep learning; perspektif guru; sekolah menengah atas



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Introduction

In the Indonesian educational context, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) plays a crucial role in equipping students with linguistic and cognitive competencies necessary for global communication, academic advancement, and future employment (Richards, 2021; Zein, 2019). Recent curriculum reforms in Indonesia emphasize not only linguistic accuracy but also the development of critical thinking, creativity, learner autonomy, and meaningful communication (Widodo & Allamnakhrah, 2020; OECD, 2020). Consequently, English teachers are encouraged to adopt instructional approaches that promote deeper learning rather than surface-level knowledge acquisition.

However, classroom practices in many Indonesian secondary schools remain predominantly teacher-centered and examination-oriented. Instruction often prioritizes grammar drills, vocabulary memorization, and test preparation, which limits opportunities for students to engage in reflective thinking, collaboration, and authentic language use (Musthafa, 2019; Richards, 2017). This mismatch between curriculum goals and instructional practice highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that foster meaningful and sustainable learning in EFL classrooms.

One pedagogical orientation that has gained increasing attention is **deep learning**. Deep learning refers to a learning approach that emphasizes conceptual understanding, critical thinking, metacognitive reflection, and the application of knowledge in authentic contexts (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Marton & Säljö, 1976). In contrast to surface learning, which focuses on memorization and procedural completion, deep learning encourages learners to construct meaning and transfer knowledge across contexts (Hattie & Donoghue, 2016).

Within language education, deep learning is particularly relevant because language learning inherently involves meaning-making, social interaction, and contextualized communication (Larsen-Freeman, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). Deep learning-oriented instruction requires teachers to shift their roles from knowledge transmitters to facilitators of inquiry, collaboration, and reflective learning experiences (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014).

Despite its theoretical relevance, empirical studies indicate that many EFL teachers experience difficulties in implementing deep learning principles in classroom practice. Deep learning is sometimes misunderstood as merely incorporating group work or projects without sufficient cognitive depth (Jiang, 2022). Additionally, contextual constraints such as limited instructional time, heterogeneous student proficiency levels, and examination-oriented assessment systems further challenge its implementation (OECD, 2020; Widodo & Allamnakhrah, 2020).

Although previous studies have examined deep learning models and student outcomes, research focusing on **teachers' perspectives** remains limited, particularly in Indonesian senior high school contexts (Borg, 2018). Teachers' beliefs, instructional practices, and perceived challenges play a central role in shaping how deep learning is enacted in real classrooms. Therefore, this study investigates English teachers' perspectives on integrating deep learning-oriented instruction in Indonesian EFL classrooms.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore English teachers' perspectives on integrating deep learning-oriented instruction in Indonesian EFL classrooms. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' beliefs, experiences, and instructional practices within their natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was conducted at a public senior high school in North Aceh, Indonesia. Three English teachers were purposively selected based on their teaching experience and involvement in student-centered instructional practices.

Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that participants could provide rich and relevant data related to deep learning implementation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The use of multiple data sources aimed to enhance data credibility and triangulation (Miles et al., 2014). Interviews explored teachers' conceptual understanding of deep learning, instructional practices, perceived benefits, and challenges. Classroom observations documented instructional activities, student engagement, and teacher-student interaction, while lesson plans were analyzed to examine alignment with deep learning principles. Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Coding and categorization were conducted iteratively to identify emerging themes across data sources. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents was employed to enhance trustworthiness and analytical rigor.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the data revealed four major themes related to teachers' perspectives on integrating deep learning-oriented instruction in Indonesian EFL classrooms: teachers' conceptual understanding of deep learning, classroom implementation practices, perceived pedagogical benefits, and challenges accompanied by adaptive strategies.

Teachers' Conceptual Understanding of Deep Learning

The participating teachers demonstrated a clear understanding of deep learning as an instructional approach that emphasizes meaningful learning rather than surface-level knowledge acquisition. Deep learning was commonly described as a process that encourages students to think critically, ask questions, solve problems, collaborate with peers, and reflect on their learning experiences. This understanding is consistent with theoretical conceptions of deep learning that contrast meaningful learning with surface learning focused on memorization and examination preparation (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Marton & Säljö, 1976).

Teachers explicitly distinguished deep learning from traditional instruction that prioritizes content transmission and test-oriented practices. Instead, they emphasized understanding, application, and active student involvement, reflecting views that position deep learning as a cognitively demanding and student-centered process (Hattie & Donoghue, 2016; Entwistle, 2018).

Teachers also highlighted that deep learning requires students to engage both cognitively and emotionally with learning tasks. According to the participants, deep learning occurs when students are challenged to analyze real-life issues, express opinions in English, and connect lesson content with their own experiences. This conceptualization aligns with perspectives that view deep learning as a holistic process integrating cognitive, social, and reflective dimensions of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Implementation of Deep Learning-Oriented Instruction

In classroom practice, deep learning-oriented instruction was implemented through various student-centered strategies. Teachers frequently employed inquiry-based learning by encouraging students to explore topics through questioning, discussion, and guided investigation. Such practices correspond with instructional models that emphasize inquiry and problem-solving as key mechanisms for promoting deep cognitive engagement (Jonassen, 1997; Jiang, 2022).

Problem-based learning activities were also observed, where students worked collaboratively to analyze real-world problems, propose solutions, and present their ideas using English as the medium of communication. This approach supports the use of language

as a tool for reasoning and meaning-making rather than rote memorization (Larsen-Freeman, 2015).

Collaborative learning played a central role in promoting deep learning. Group discussions, pair work, and peer feedback activities were used to foster interaction and shared meaning-making. Teachers designed tasks that required students to negotiate meaning, justify opinions, and respond to peers' ideas, thereby promoting both communicative competence and higher-order thinking skills (Richards, 2017; Hiver et al., 2021). Reflective activities, such as short learning reflections and oral feedback sessions, were integrated to help students evaluate their learning processes and outcomes. These practices align with research emphasizing reflection as a core component of deep and autonomous learning (Oxford, 2017; Kovač et al., 2023). Lesson plan analysis further confirmed that teachers intentionally aligned learning objectives, instructional activities, and assessment with deep learning principles. Learning tasks were designed to encourage analysis, interpretation, and application rather than simple recall, demonstrating teachers' efforts to operationalize deep learning within curriculum constraints (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Perceived Pedagogical Benefits

Teachers perceived deep learning-oriented instruction as highly beneficial for students' language development and learning engagement. According to the participants, deep learning activities increased students' motivation and active participation, as learners were more involved in meaningful tasks that required interaction and problem-solving. This perception aligns with studies highlighting the role of meaningful engagement in enhancing learning outcomes (Hattie, 2012; Jiang, 2022).

Teachers also noted improvements in students' confidence in using English, particularly during group discussions and presentations. These findings support the view that communicative and collaborative tasks foster communicative competence and learner confidence in EFL classrooms (Richards, 2017; Norton, 2013). Another perceived benefit was the development of learner autonomy. Through inquiry-based and reflective activities, students gradually became more responsible for their own learning, showing greater initiative in completing tasks and expressing ideas. This supports research emphasizing the role of reflection and strategic learning in fostering learner autonomy (Oxford, 2017; Kovač et al., 2023). Teachers further emphasized that deep learning helped students develop critical thinking and communicative competence simultaneously, supporting both linguistic and cognitive growth (Vygotzky, 1978; Larsen-Freeman, 2015).

Challenges and Adaptive Strategies

Despite the perceived benefits, teachers encountered several challenges in implementing deep learning-oriented instruction. Limited instructional time was frequently mentioned as a major constraint, as deep learning activities often require extended discussion and reflection. Time constraints have been widely reported as a barrier to implementing student-centered and cognitively demanding instructional approaches (OECD, 2020).

Teachers also reported difficulties related to heterogeneous student proficiency levels, where differences in language ability affected students' participation in cognitively demanding tasks. Such challenges are common in EFL classrooms and require pedagogical adjustment to accommodate learner diversity (Harmer, 2015). Resource limitations and assessment pressures further constrained implementation. Teachers noted that examination-oriented assessment systems sometimes discouraged the sustained use of deep learning practices, reflecting misalignment between instructional goals and assessment demands (Widodo & Allamnakhrah, 2020; OECD, 2020).

To address these challenges, teachers employed adaptive strategies such as scaffolding language use, simplifying task instructions, differentiating activities based on student ability, and adjusting task complexity to fit time constraints. Peer collaboration was also used as a strategy to support lower-proficiency students and maintain active engagement. These strategies demonstrate teachers' professional agency and align with recommended practices for managing diversity and promoting meaningful learning in EFL classrooms (Harmer, 2015; Fullan & Langworthy, 2014).

Discussion

This study reveals that English teachers demonstrate a well-articulated understanding of deep learning-oriented instruction, positioning it as a pedagogical approach that prioritizes meaningful learning, critical thinking, collaboration, and reflection. Such conceptualization closely aligns with Biggs and Tang's (2011) theory of deep learning, which emphasizes students' active engagement in constructing meaning rather than reproducing surface knowledge. Teachers' perspectives in this study suggest that deep learning is perceived not merely as a set of instructional techniques, but as a broader pedagogical orientation guiding instructional decision-making.

The findings further indicate that deep learning-oriented instruction was operationalized through inquiry-based learning, problem-based tasks, and collaborative activities. These practices resonate with Jonassen's (1997) assertion that ill-structured problems and inquiry-driven tasks are central to promoting higher-order thinking and deeper cognitive engagement. In the EFL context, such instructional strategies enabled students to use English as a medium for reasoning, negotiation, and meaning-making rather than as an object of rote memorization. This supports Larsen-Freeman's (2015) view that language learning should be understood as language development embedded in authentic and purposeful use.

Teachers' emphasis on collaboration and discussion also reflects sociocultural perspectives on learning. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social interaction, learning occurs through dialogic engagement and guided participation. In this study, group discussions and peer interaction created opportunities for learners to co-construct meaning and develop communicative competence. These findings are consistent with Norton's (2013) argument that language learning is inherently social and closely connected to learners' identities and participation in classroom discourse.

In addition to cognitive and linguistic development, teachers perceived deep learning-oriented instruction as beneficial for fostering learner autonomy and engagement. This perception aligns with Oxford's (2017) framework of strategic language learning, which highlights the importance of metacognitive awareness and learner responsibility. Reflective activities observed in this study encouraged students to evaluate their learning processes, supporting Kovač et al.'s (2023) claim that reflection plays a crucial role in promoting autonomy in language learning.

Despite these pedagogical benefits, the implementation of deep learning-oriented instruction was constrained by several contextual challenges. Limited instructional time, heterogeneous student proficiency levels, and examination-oriented assessment systems were identified as major barriers. These challenges reflect broader systemic issues within Indonesian secondary education, where assessment practices often prioritize measurable outcomes over deep understanding (OECD, 2020; Widodo & Allamnakhrah, 2020). Consequently, teachers are required to negotiate between curriculum demands and the principles of deep learning.

Teachers' adaptive strategies demonstrate professional agency in responding to these constraints. The use of scaffolding, differentiated instruction, and flexible task design aligns

with Harmer's (2015) pedagogical recommendations for addressing learner diversity in EFL classrooms. Such strategies indicate that deep learning-oriented instruction is not a rigid model but a flexible framework that can be adapted to local classroom realities. Nevertheless, sustainable implementation requires institutional support, including professional development and assessment alignment, as emphasized by Fullan and Langworthy (2014). Overall, the discussion underscores that deep learning-oriented instruction is both pedagogically valuable and contextually challenging in Indonesian EFL classrooms. Teachers' perspectives highlight the importance of pedagogical understanding, reflective practice, and contextual adaptation in bridging the gap between theory and classroom practice.

Conclusion

This study investigated English teachers' perspectives on integrating deep learning-oriented instruction in Indonesian senior high school EFL classrooms. The findings indicate that teachers possess a clear conceptual understanding of deep learning and are able to implement its principles through inquiry-based, problem-based, collaborative, and reflective instructional practices. This finding aligns with theoretical perspectives that conceptualize deep learning as an approach emphasizing meaningful learning, critical thinking, collaboration, and reflective engagement rather than surface-level knowledge acquisition. Deep learning-oriented instruction was perceived as effective in promoting student engagement, learner autonomy, communicative competence, and higher-order thinking skills, which is consistent with sociocultural and constructivist views of language learning. Despite these pedagogical benefits, teachers encountered several contextual challenges, including limited instructional time, diverse student proficiency levels, resource limitations, and examination-oriented assessment systems. These constraints reflect broader structural issues in Indonesian secondary education, where assessment practices may not fully support deep learning objectives. Nevertheless, teachers demonstrated pedagogical adaptability by employing strategies such as scaffolding, differentiated instruction, and flexible task design to sustain deep learning practices. Such adaptive strategies highlight teacher agency in negotiating contextual constraints and resonate with pedagogical recommendations for effective EFL instruction in diverse classroom settings.

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