ENHANCING EFL STUDENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGH DEEP LEARNING APPROACHES

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INTRODUCTION

Learner engagement stands as a crucial element in achieving successful outcomes in language education, especially in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Aditama et al., 2023). Engaged students often display increased motivation, active participation, and a sustained interest in learning, which altogether contribute to improved academic performance and long-term

retention (Wang et al., 2023). Engagement, understood holistically, includes behavioral involvement, emotional connection, and cognitive investment in learning tasks (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Despite the recognized importance of engagement, many junior high school classrooms in Indonesia continue to struggle with disengaged learners. Previous research has pointed to multiple contributing factors, including overcrowded classrooms, rigid curriculum delivery, limited learner autonomy, and insufficient use of interactive digital resources (Wahyuni et al., 2021)(Kurniawan et al, 2022). These challenges are particularly acute in rural areas, where infrastructural and pedagogical innovation often lag behind national standards (Shofyana et al., 2024).

In response to these challenges, emerging pedagogical frameworks have placed increasing emphasis on what is known as deep learning. Within educational discourse, deep learning refers not to machine learning per se, but to instructional models that cultivate students' capacity for critical inquiry, collaboration, reflective thinking, and the application of knowledge in meaningful ways (Wijaya A, 2025). As digital tools and AI-based platforms become more accessible, even in under-resourced schools, there is a growing opportunity for educators to shift from surface-level instruction to deeper, more transformative learning experiences (Aditama & Sugiharto, 2021)(Griffani et al., 2025).

Empirical studies from diverse educational settings have underscored the benefits of deep learning practices. For instance, Thompson (2022) found that inquiry-oriented instruction enhances learners' ability to connect classroom content with real-life contexts. Halil et al., (2024) similarly highlighted that involving learners in analytical and reflective tasks fosters higher engagement and intrinsic motivation. In Southeast Asia, research by Suhendar & Syakir (2022) revealed that digitally enhanced classrooms, where learners collaborate and receive personalized feedback, significantly increase student participation in EFL settings. Likewise, Park & Kim (2023) emphasized that combining problem-solving tasks with formative feedback leads to a more engaged and autonomous language learning process.

However, despite its promise, the practical application of deep learning strategies in Indonesian secondary education, particularly in rural or semi-urban context has not been sufficiently explored (Pugu et al., 2024). Much of the literature centers on higher education institutions or urban schools, often overlooking the unique constraints and innovations emerging in local, less-privileged contexts (Herika et al., 2024)(Pratama & Asriyanti, 2020). Moreover, existing studies tend to rely on quantitative data, leaving a gap in understanding the experiential and reflective dimensions of teachers' practice.

This study addresses a critical void in the literature by focusing on the lived experiences of EFL teachers in a rural Indonesian junior high school as they implement deep learning strategies to foster student engagement. Unlike previous research that primarily examines technological interventions or standardized outcomes, this study foregrounds teacher agency and pedagogical reasoning within a specific local context. It also highlights how deep learning approaches can be contextualized, negotiated, and adapted in environments with limited resources.

By employing a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to uncover the nuances of how teachers interpret and enact deep learning principles in their classrooms. The originality of this research lies in its dual focus: exploring instructional practices rooted in deep learning, and capturing teacher perspectives on their influence on student engagement. As such, it contributes both to theoretical understandings of deep learning in EFL pedagogy and to practical insights for educators working in comparable settings.

This study aims to explore the implementation of deep learning strategies by English teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Bandar and to investigate their perceived effects on student engagement. Specifically, the study is guided by the following research questions: 1) How do deep learning strategies influence EFL students' engagement in SMP N 2 Bandar? and 2) What are the teachers' perceptions of the impact of deep learning approaches on student engagement?

METHOD

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of two junior high school English teachers in implementing deep learning strategies to enhance student engagement. A phenomenological design was appropriate to uncover in-depth insights from the participants' perspectives, highlighting their experiences, challenges, and reflections (Creswell & Poth, 2018)(Winaryati et al., 2023).

Before initiating data collection, the researchers coordinated with the school administration of SMP Negeri 2 Bandar to explain the study's purpose and seek formal approval. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, with the inclusion criteria being English teachers who had at least three years of teaching experience and had begun incorporating deep learning strategies in their instruction. Two teachers met the criteria and voluntarily agreed to participate after being briefed on the research purpose and procedures.

Data were collected over a period of one month using the following three methods:

1. Preliminary Interview
   Each participant was interviewed individually to explore their initial understanding of deep learning approaches and the rationale behind their use in the classroom. The interviews lasted 30–45 minutes and were audio-recorded with consent.

2. Classroom Observations
   Each teacher was observed during three regular EFL teaching sessions. The observations focused on instructional practices aligned with deep learning principles (e.g., student-centered activities, critical thinking tasks, collaborative learning), as well as indicators of student engagement such as attention, participation, interaction, and emotional involvement (Seidman, 2019). Observations were documented through detailed field notes.

3. In-depth Semi-structured Interviews
   After the observation phase, follow-up interviews were conducted to examine the teachers' reflections, perceived challenges, and evaluations of the deep learning implementation. These interviews lasted 60–75 minutes

and allowed participants to elaborate on observed teaching moments. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Data from interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke's (2021) framework. To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed data triangulation across the three methods and conducted member checking, where participants reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of synthesized findings. Thick description and audit trails were maintained to support dependability and confirmability. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendal Batang. Participants signed informed consent forms and were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

RESULT

This study explored how deep learning strategies were implemented in English classes at SMP Negeri 2 Bandar and how they influenced student engagement. The data, collected from initial interviews, classroom observations, and post-teaching interviews, revealed clear patterns of student behavior and instructional practices that supported deep engagement across cognitive, behavioral, and emotional aspects.
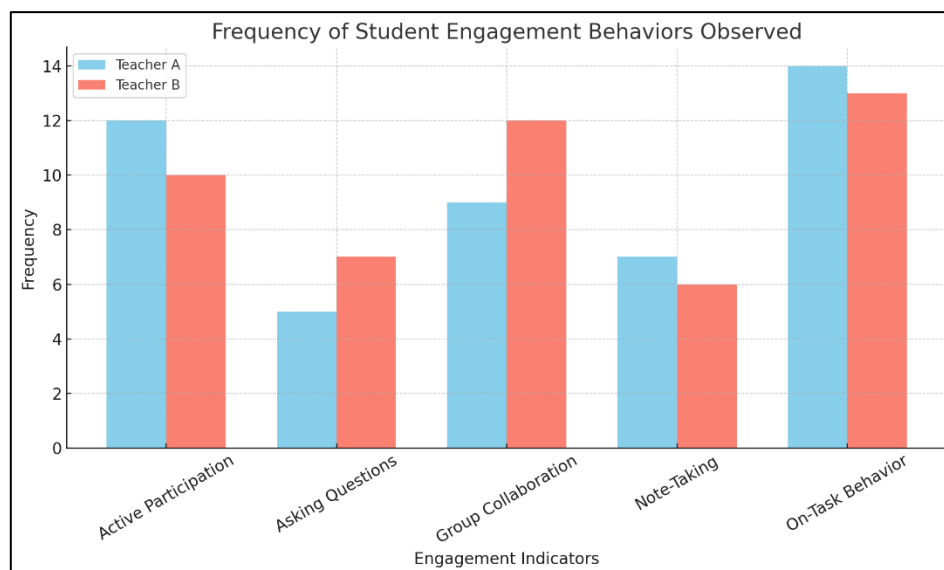
Figure 1: Students Engagement Behaviors

Observable Student Engagement Behaviors

From three separate classroom observations for each teacher, several key indicators of student engagement emerged. These included active participation, asking thoughtful questions, working collaboratively, taking notes, and staying on task. The summary of these behaviors is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of Student Engagement Behaviors Observed

Engagement Indicator	Teacher A (Total)	Teacher B (Total)
Active Participation	12	10
Asking Questions	5	7
Group Collaboration	9	12
Note-Taking	7	6
On-Task Behavior	14	13

Both teachers demonstrated the ability to create learning environments where students were engaged and involved. Teacher B's class showed slightly more group collaboration, indicating her emphasis on peer learning and interaction. The high levels of on-task behavior in both classrooms showed that students remained focused during lessons that required active thinking and problem-solving.

Deep Learning Strategies and Learning Process

The observations revealed that both teachers used a variety of deep learning strategies that encouraged students to go beyond surface-level understanding. The core strategies included:

1. Problem-Based Learning: Students tackled real-life issues, such as designing English campaigns for environmental awareness. This approach motivated students to reason, plan, and be creative.
2. Collaborative Projects: Students often worked in groups to research, discuss, and present ideas. This not only supported language development but also fostered social interaction and teamwork.
3. Reflective Questioning: Teachers posed open-ended questions that encouraged students to explain their thinking, compare options, and justify their ideas.
4. Scaffolded Critical Thinking: Lessons included tasks that built students' abilities to analyze, categorize, and conclude information in stages, helping them build confidence in their thinking.

These teaching practices aligned with Fullan's (2018) 6 Cs of deep learning character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking ensuring that learning was both meaningful and engaging.

Teachers' Reflections on Deep Learning Implementation

Interviews with both teachers highlighted their positive perceptions of deep learning. Teacher A noted that students seemed more confident and willing to participate when lessons were connected to real-world problems:

"They're more excited when they can relate to the task. Even the shy ones started to speak up when we asked them to create something meaningful."

She observed greater enthusiasm and participation, especially during problem-solving activities. Teacher B emphasized that students responded better when tasks had personal relevance and collaborative elements:

"When they worked in teams, they supported each other. They felt responsible, not just for their own work, but for their group's success."

However, both teachers also faced challenges. Deep learning activities took more time than traditional lessons, often exceeding the allocated class period. Students had varying levels of readiness and motivation, which required the teachers to adjust their methods and provide extra guidance. Lastly, assessing deep learning outcomes proved difficult with traditional tests, prompting the need for more authentic assessment tools like portfolios and reflective journals.

These findings suggest that when deep learning strategies are used thoughtfully and consistently, they can significantly enhance EFL student engagement. However, success depends on adequate planning, differentiated support, and professional development to help teachers sustain these practices effectively.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore how deep learning strategies could boost student engagement in EFL classrooms at SMP Negeri 2 Bandar. The findings tell a powerful story: when teachers thoughtfully design and implement learning activities rooted in deep learning principles, students respond with higher motivation, stronger focus, and more meaningful participation. The data show that classroom practices like collaborative projects, open-ended problem-solving, and reflective questioning don't just fill time they spark students' curiosity and help them feel connected to what they're learning.

One of the key takeaways is how much these strategies align with Fullan et al's (2018) 6 Cs character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. The moments where students were most engaged working in teams, asking thoughtful questions, showing persistence are the exact qualities these global competencies aim to develop. In other words, the classrooms became more than places to learn English; they became spaces for students to grow as thinkers and contributors.

The study also echoes what Avendaño (2023) found that inquiry-based and real-world learning makes a big difference. When students are asked to solve problems that feel relevant to their lives, they start to take ownership of their learning. This shift from passive listening to active involvement is one of the clearest signs of deeper engagement. Similarly, research by Zhao & Tan (2022) highlighted that learners stay more focused and motivated when they're challenged to think critically and collaborate meaningfully exactly what happened here.

What makes this study stand out is its emphasis on teachers' experiences and reflections. Many past studies have measured engagement through test

scores or surveys, but this one looked closely at what was happening in the classroom and how teachers made sense of it. Their stories reveal the real-world challenges and victories that come with trying new approaches. This qualitative lens adds depth and context, especially in Indonesian schools where cultural values and classroom norms heavily shape learning dynamics (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

Compared to other local studies like Perdana et al (2021) which emphasized STEM-based approaches, this research offers a language-learning perspective and shows that deep, interdisciplinary learning isn't limited to science or math it can be just as powerful in the EFL classroom. The study also makes a case for how deep learning can thrive even in schools with limited resources, as long as the pedagogy is student-centered and purposeful.

That said, the journey isn't without bumps. Teachers shared how tough it can be to manage time, support all students at different levels, and work within assessment systems that don't always match their teaching goals. These concerns aren't new Wijaya (2025) pointed out that for deep learning to take root, schools need to rethink more than just classroom activities. They need to redesign curricula, provide professional support for teachers, and adopt assessments that capture creativity and collaboration, not just memorization.

Despite these hurdles, the study offers hope and practical value. It shows that deep learning strategies are not just theories from textbooks they're real tools that can bring life into English lessons and make learning more relevant and rewarding for students. Teachers who embrace this approach can benefit from targeted training and peer support that helps them design activities tailored to their students' needs and contexts (Tan & Koh, 2020).

Of course, like any study, this one has its limits. It covered a short time frame and a small group of teachers. Future research could look at a wider range of schools and track progress over a longer period. It would also be valuable to hear directly from students through interviews or learning journals to understand how they experience deep learning from their perspective. Also, this study reaffirms that deep learning isn't just a buzzword it's a pathway to more meaningful and engaging education. By tapping into critical thinking, collaboration, and real-world relevance, deep learning can help EFL students not only learn English but connect it to who they are and who they're becoming. That's a powerful step toward the kind of transformative learning that today's world and today's learners truly need.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how deep learning strategies influence English as a Foreign Language (EFL) student engagement in a junior secondary school context in Indonesia, specifically at SMP Negeri 2 Bandar. Drawing from classroom observations, teacher reflections, and in-depth interviews, the research found that the integration of deep learning strategies such as problem-based tasks, collaborative learning, reflective questioning, and scaffolded critical thinking significantly enhanced students' behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement. The observable increase in active participation, group collaboration, and on-task behaviour among students

confirmed that when learning tasks are contextualized, meaningful, and socially engaging, students become more invested in their learning process.

In addition, the study revealed that these strategies not only supported academic engagement but also nurtured key 21st-century competencies, as described in Fullan's 6 Cs framework. Teachers reported increased student motivation, confidence, and responsibility when they used tasks connected to real-life issues. However, challenges such as time limitations, varied student readiness, and assessment constraints underscore the need for systemic support, including ongoing teacher training and curriculum alignment. Ultimately, the findings suggest that deep learning provides a viable pathway for transforming traditional EFL classrooms into dynamic spaces that foster deeper understanding, collaborative interaction, and sustained learner engagement.

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