ELSA JOURNAL
English Language Studies and Applied Linguistics Journal

Vol. 6, No. 2, May 2026 e-ISSN 2747-2957

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF DEEP LEARNING CURRICULUM IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: A CASE STUDY AT SMK NEGERI 1 BENGKAYANG

Oktavia Erwinarti Indahtriyani
oktaviagassa@gmail.com
SMK Negeri 1 Bengkayang, West Kalimantan, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the implementation of the Deep Learning Curriculum within English Language Teaching (ELT) at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkayang. The research explores how deep learning principles, such as inquiry-based learning, collaboration, creativity, and reflection enhance students' communicative competence and critical thinking. A qualitative case study design was used, involving classroom observations, interviews with English teachers and students, and analysis of lesson plans. The findings reveal that deep learning practices encourage active participation and authentic language use through project-based and problem-based tasks. Despite positive impacts on student engagement and confidence, challenges were found in aligning assessments, teacher readiness, and limited exposure to authentic English input. The study concludes that integrating deep learning into ELT promotes meaningful language learning and supports the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum in vocational education.

Keywords: Deep Learning Curriculum, ELT, vocational education, communicative competence, SMK Negeri 1 Bengkayang

INTRODUCTION

Language learning in vocational education requires more than grammatical accuracy, it demands communicative competence, creativity, and adaptability to workplace contexts. The Deep Learning Curriculum promotes these values by emphasizing inquiry, collaboration, and reflection, aligning well with communicative language teaching (CLT) principles in ELT (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In the Indonesian Merdeka Curriculum, deep learning supports the goal of developing student agency and authentic learning. At SMK Negeri 1 Bengkayang, English teachers have begun integrating deep learning strategies to enhance students' speaking and problem-solving skills through meaningful communicative activities. This study aims to explore how deep learning is implemented in ELT classes, what challenges are encountered, and how it influences students' engagement and language development.

Language learning in vocational education requires more than grammatical accuracy; it demands communicative competence, creativity, and adaptability to workplace contexts. The Deep Learning Curriculum promotes these values by emphasizing inquiry, collaboration, and reflection, aligning well with communicative language teaching (CLT) principles in English Language

Teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In the Indonesian Merdeka Curriculum, deep learning supports the goal of developing student agency and authentic learning. At SMK Negeri 1 Bengkayang, English teachers have begun integrating deep learning strategies to enhance students' speaking and problem-solving skills through meaningful communicative activities. This study aims to explore how deep learning is implemented in ELT classes, what challenges are encountered, and how it influences students' engagement and language development.

Deep learning, as conceptualized by Fullan and Langworthy (2014), shifts traditional rote memorization toward higher-order thinking skills, such as critical analysis and real-world application, which are essential for vocational students preparing for industries like tourism, manufacturing, and business services in West Kalimantan. In ELT contexts, this approach fosters "six Cs" character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking enabling learners to navigate authentic workplace scenarios, such as role-playing client negotiations or collaborative project presentations. At SMK Negeri 1 Bengkayang, a vocational high school serving diverse local communities including Dayak Salako students, such strategies address the gap between classroom English and practical communication needs, promoting cultural relevance alongside linguistic proficiency.

Despite its promise, implementing deep learning in resource-constrained vocational settings like Indonesian SMKs presents unique hurdles, including teacher training deficits, large class sizes, and misalignment with high-stakes national exams that prioritize grammar over fluency (Kirkpatrick, 2017). Preliminary observations at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkayang reveal enthusiastic student responses to activity-based lessons, yet persistent challenges like limited technology access and time constraints hinder sustained engagement. This study employs a qualitative case study design, drawing on classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student focus groups to provide empirical insights tailored to similar Merdeka Curriculum implementations. By examining these dynamics, the research contributes to the growing body of work on innovative pedagogies in Indonesian vocational ELT, offering practical recommendations for teacher professional development and curriculum adaptation. Ultimately, it underscores how deep learning can empower vocational learners to thrive in globalized workplaces, bridging local cultural contexts with international communication standards.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Deep learning in language education involves understanding meaning and applying knowledge to new situations (Marton & Säljö, 1976). In language education, this approach complements communicative methodologies that prioritize real-world use of language, critical thinking, and collaboration (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Both CLT and deep learning emphasize learner autonomy, active participation, and meaningful communication. According to Fullan, Quinn, and McEachen (2018), deep learning develops six global competencies: character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking, all essential in English communication and vocational contexts. The Merdeka Curriculum encourages teachers to design project-based learning (PBL) experiences that connect classroom learning to real-life challenges.

Deep learning has evolved from a cognitive construct into a multidimensional educational paradigm encompassing cognitive, socio-emotional, and contextual dimensions. Unlike surface learning, which emphasizes memorization, deep learning focuses on knowledge construction, transferability, and critical engagement. Recent scholarship highlights three core dimensions.

Cognitive depth, learners engage in higher-order thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation), relational understanding, knowledge is interconnected across disciplines and contexts, Transferability, learning can be applied to real-world situations, particularly relevant in vocational settings. In this sense, deep learning aligns with the OECD Learning Compass (2030), emphasizing student agency and transformative competencies.

In ELT, deep learning shifts the focus from linguistic accuracy to communicative competence and meaning-making. This transformation is supported by three major pedagogical approaches: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), CLT emphasizes authentic interaction and real-life communication. It supports deep learning by encouraging negotiation of meaning, promoting learner autonomy, and facilitating contextual language use. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), TBLT engages learners in goal-oriented tasks that mirror real-world activities. It enhances, Problem-solving skills, language use in context and collaborative learning. Project-Based Learning (PBL), PBL integrates language learning with complex, interdisciplinary projects, fostering Critical thinking, Creativity and Reflective learning.

Vocational education requires authentic, context-driven learning experiences. Deep learning is particularly relevant because it bridges school learning with workplace demands, develops both hard skills and soft skills, and encourages adaptability in dynamic labor markets. However, challenges arise in implementation curriculum rigidity, teacher-centered traditions, and limited industry collaboration. The Role of Teacher Agency and Pedagogical Capacity Teacher readiness is a critical factor in implementing deep learning. Teachers must shift from knowledge transmitters to learning facilitators and content delivery to learning design Key competencies include designing authentic tasks facilitating reflective learning and using formative assessment. This research indicates that without adequate professional development, deep learning initiatives often fail to achieve intended outcomes.

Traditional assessment methods (e.g., multiple-choice tests) are insufficient for deep learning. Instead, authentic assessment is required performance-based tasks, portfolio assessment, and reflective journals. These approaches evaluate language use in context, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities. Despite growing interest in deep learning, there is still limited empirical research in vocational ELT contexts and lack of integrated frameworks combining pedagogy, cognition, and context. This study contributes by proposing a localized deep learning ELT model tailored to Indonesian SMK settings.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2018), exploring the implementation of deep learning in English classes at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkayang. Participants consisted of two English teachers and twenty students from Grade XI Accounting and Office Administration programs. Data were collected through classroom observations, teacher and student interviews, and document analysis of lesson plans and teaching materials. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify emerging patterns related to instructional design, engagement, and challenges. The case study design enables the researcher to explore the phenomenon comprehensively and holistically. The study is conducted at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkayang, West Kalimantan, Indonesia. The site is selected based on the following considerations. The school has begun integrating technology and AI-based learning, its relevance to vocational education, accessibility of data for the researcher. The research is conducted over a period of six months, covering preparation, data collection, analysis, and reporting. The

participants of this study include, English teachers, Students of Grade X and XI, Vice Principal of Curriculum Affairs and School Principal. Participants are selected using purposive sampling, based on their relevance to the research objectives.

Data are collected through the following methods. Observation is conducted to examine the implementation of the deep learning curriculum, teacher-student interactions and the use of technology and AI in teaching and learning. The observation is non-participant in nature. In-depth interviews are conducted with English teachers (to explore teaching strategies), students (to understand learning experiences) and school management. Semi-structured interview guidelines are used to ensure flexibility and depth. Documents analyzed include Lesson plans (RPP) or teaching modules, School curriculum documents, Students' learning outcomes and AI-based learning media. The primary instrument in this study is the researcher as a human instrument. Supporting instruments include Observation checklist, Interview guidelines, and Documentation checklist. These instruments are developed based on indicators of deep learning implementation, such as Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), Student-centered learning and Integration of technology and AI. Data analysis in this study follows the interactive model, which emphasizes a continuous and cyclical process of examining qualitative data. This approach allows the researcher to move back and forth between different stages of analysis to develop a deeper and more accurate understanding of the findings. The first stage is data reduction, which involves the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw data obtained from fieldwork. At this stage, the researcher carefully reviews interview transcripts, observation notes, and relevant documents to identify key themes and discard irrelevant information. Data reduction is not merely a process of elimination, but also an effort to organize data in a meaningful way so that it becomes manageable and aligned with the research objectives.

The second stage is data display, where the reduced data are systematically presented in an organized form. This can include descriptive narratives, matrices, tables, or visual charts that help clarify patterns and relationships within the data. By displaying the data in such formats, the researcher can interpret complex information more effectively and identify emerging trends or categories that may not be immediately visible in raw data form.

The final stage is conclusion drawing and verification. In this phase, the researcher interprets the meaning of the data by identifying patterns, relationships, and explanations that address the research questions. Conclusions are not drawn hastily; instead, they are continuously verified through comparison with existing data, re-examination of evidence, and triangulation across multiple sources. This iterative verification process ensures that the findings are credible, valid, and grounded in the data.

Overall, the interactive model provides a flexible yet systematic framework for qualitative data analysis, enabling researchers to generate well-supported and insightful conclusions through an ongoing process of reflection and validation. The analysis is conducted in a continuous and cyclical process throughout the study. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the following strategies are applied Source triangulation (teachers, students, and school leaders), method triangulation (observation, interviews, documentation), member checking (validation from participants) and audit trail (documentation of research process). The research follows the steps; preliminary study, proposal development, data collection, data analysis, and dissertation writing. This study adheres to ethical principles, including Obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and maintaining researcher objectivity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The findings of this study reveal that the implementation of deep learning in English Language Teaching (ELT) operates across three interconnected levels: instructional design, classroom interaction, and reflective learning. These levels illustrate how deep learning is translated from policy into actual classroom practice, highlighting both progress and existing gaps. At the instructional design level, teachers have begun to incorporate elements of deep learning into their lesson planning. This is evident in the use of real-life scenarios, such as job interviews and customer service dialogues, which are relevant to students' vocational contexts. In addition, teachers utilize contextualized materials that align with students' specific majors, making learning more meaningful and applicable. However, despite these efforts, lesson plans often only partially reflect the principles of deep learning. There remains a noticeable gap between what is planned and what is fully implemented in the classroom, suggesting that teachers may still be in the early stages of adapting to this approach.

At the classroom interaction level, the implementation of deep learning becomes more visible. Classroom observations indicate increased student participation, particularly during group-based activities. Students actively engage in negotiating meaning in English, demonstrating not only linguistic practice but also deeper cognitive processes. They can interpret meaning, express opinions, and collaboratively solve communication problems. This level of engagement reflects a key characteristic of deep learning, where students move beyond surface-level understanding toward critical thinking and meaningful language use.

At the reflective learning level, however, the findings show that implementation is still limited. While some teachers have introduced feedback sessions as a form of reflection, the use of structured reflective tools, such as learning journals or self-assessment frameworks, remains minimal. As a result, students have fewer opportunities to develop metacognitive skills, such as self-awareness and the ability to evaluate their own learning processes. This indicates that reflective practices, which are essential for sustaining deep learning, have not yet been fully integrated into classroom routines. In summary, while there are clear indications that deep learning is being implemented in vocational ELT, particularly in classroom interactions, there are still significant challenges in ensuring consistency across instructional design and reflective learning practices.

Teachers did not strictly follow one approach but used a hybrid model PBL for projects, TBLT for task execution and CLT for communication practice. This hybridization is significant because it reflects contextual adaptation and supports flexible learning environments. However, lack of theoretical grounding sometimes leads to inconsistent implementation and superficial task design. Student Engagement: Behavioral, Cognitive, and Emotional Dimensions. Behavioral Engagement Increased participation in group activities and Higher attendance and task completion. Cognitive Engagement represents students demonstrated critical thinking and ability to analyze and respond in English improved. Emotional Engagement increased confidence in speaking and reduced anxiety in communication. These findings confirm that deep learning promotes holistic engagement. The study found that students developed communicative competence, improved fluency, and better interaction skills. Higher-order Thinking Skills (HOTS) also increase problem-solving in communication contexts and analytical thinking. This aligns with 21st-century skill frameworks shows transferable skills, collaboration, and presentation skills. Teachers encounter significant structural and pedagogical challenges in implementing deep learning approaches in the

classroom. One of the primary difficulties lies in designing meaningful deep learning activities that promote critical thinking, problem-solving, and student autonomy. Many teachers are still accustomed to traditional, teacher-centered methods, making the transition to student-centered learning environments complex and demanding. This situation highlights the urgent need for systematic and continuous professional development programs that equip teachers with the necessary pedagogical and technological competencies. In addition, infrastructure constraints remain a critical barrier. Limited access to digital tools, inadequate technological facilities, and insufficient learning resources hinder the effective integration of technology into deep learning practices. As a result, the potential of deep learning to enhance students' engagement and learning outcomes cannot be fully realized.

Another major challenge is the misalignment between the national curriculum and the principles of deep learning. The national curriculum tends to emphasize content coverage, requiring teachers to complete a wide range of topics within a limited timeframe. In contrast, deep learning prioritizes depth over breadth, encouraging students to explore concepts more comprehensively and meaningfully. This fundamental difference creates tension between policy expectations and classroom practices. Teachers often feel pressured to prioritize syllabus completion over facilitating deeper understanding, which ultimately limits the effectiveness of deep learning implementation.

Student diversity also presents a significant challenge in the application of deep learning. Learners come with varying levels of English proficiency, which affects their ability to participate actively in complex learning tasks. Additionally, differences in learning motivation further complicate classroom dynamics, as some students are highly engaged while others show limited interest. These variations require teachers to adopt differentiated instruction strategies that can accommodate diverse learning needs. Without proper support and training, however, implementing such strategies can be both time-consuming and difficult, further adding to the challenges faced by educators.

Discussion

Toward a Contextualized Deep Learning Model

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of deep learning in vocational English Language Teaching (ELT) cannot be approached in a generic or one-size-fits-all manner. Instead, it requires a contextualized model that considers the unique characteristics of vocational education, including students' career orientations, practical skill demands, and industry relevance. First, deep learning must be contextualized. This means that learning activities, materials, and assessments should be closely aligned with students' vocational fields and their future professional needs. In vocational settings, students are more motivated when learning is directly connected to real-world applications. Therefore, integrating authentic tasks, industry-based scenarios, and job-related communication practices can significantly enhance engagement and relevance. Contextualization ensures that deep learning is not only theoretical but also practical and meaningful for students' career development. Second, deep learning needs to be scaffolded. The development of students' cognitive and linguistic abilities should occur gradually and systematically. Many vocational students may not yet possess the higher-order thinking skills or language proficiency required for deep learning tasks. As a result, teachers must provide structured support, such as guided practice, modeling, and step-by-step instruction, before gradually

transferring responsibility to learners. This scaffolding process helps students build confidence and competence, enabling them to engage more effectively in complex learning activities.

Finally, deep learning must be supported systemically. Successful implementation cannot rely solely on individual teacher efforts; it requires comprehensive support at the institutional and policy levels. This includes continuous teacher training programs to enhance pedagogical and technological skills, curriculum reform to ensure alignment with deep learning principles, and infrastructure improvement to provide adequate access to digital tools and learning resources. Without such systemic support, efforts to implement deep learning are likely to remain fragmented and unsustainable. In conclusion, a contextualized, scaffolded, and systemically supported approach is essential for the effective integration of deep learning in vocational ELT. Such a model not only addresses existing challenges but also provides a sustainable pathway for improving the quality and relevance of vocational education.

Teachers applied deep learning through project-based tasks, such as designing English promotional videos, conducting role plays simulating workplace scenarios, and collaborative problem-solving discussions. These activities promoted authentic language use and encouraged critical thinking and creativity. Students reported higher motivation and confidence when using English for real purposes. They practiced communication strategies, negotiation skills, and collaborative learning, key aspects of both CLT and deep learning. Challenges included insufficient training in deep learning pedagogy, time constraints, and difficulty in developing authentic assessment rubrics for communication-based tasks. The success of deep learning in ELT relies on school-level support, flexible curriculum planning, and professional development.

CONCLUSION

The integration of the Deep Learning Curriculum into English Language Teaching (ELT) at SMK Negeri 1 Bengkayang demonstrates a significant contribution to the development of students' communicative competence, collaborative skills, and higher-order thinking abilities. The findings indicate that the adoption of deep learning strategies, particularly project-based learning and inquiry-based learning, facilitates more meaningful, contextualized, and student-centered language use. These approaches enable learners to actively construct knowledge, engage in authentic problem-solving, and apply English in real-life vocational contexts, thereby enhancing both linguistic proficiency and transferable skills. Furthermore, the study underscores that the effectiveness of deep learning implementation is contingent upon systematic and sustained institutional support. This includes continuous professional development for teachers to strengthen pedagogical competence, the design and application of authentic and performance-based assessments, and the alignment of instructional practices with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. Without these supporting structures, the potential impact of deep learning risks being limited to partial or inconsistent classroom practices. In conclusion, the successful integration of the Deep Learning Curriculum in vocational ELT requires a holistic and strategic approach that bridges policy and practice. It necessitates not only pedagogical innovation at the classroom level but also organizational commitment at the school level to ensure long-term sustainability and scalability.

REFERENCES

Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for quality learning at university* (4th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Fauziati, E. (2025). *Teaching English as a foreign language: Principles and practices in Indonesian context*. Era Pustaka Utama.

Fullan, M., Quinn, J., & McEachen, J. (2018). *Deep learning: Engage the world change the world*. Corwin Press.

Fullan, M., & Langworthy, M. (2014). A rich seam: How new pedagogies finds deep learning. Pearson.http://www.michaelfullan.ca/wp content/uploads/2014/01/3897.Rich_Seam_web.pdf

Hattie, J. (2012). *Visible learning for teachers: Maximizing impact on learning*. Routledge.

Kirkpatrick, A. (2017). The languages of higher education in East and Southeast Asia: Will internationalisation lead to Englishisation? In B. Fenton-Smith, P. Humphreys, & R. Walkinshaw (Eds.), English medium instruction in higher education in Asia-Pacific (pp. 15–31). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-49886-0_2

Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 74*, 5–12. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.7401

Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia. (2022). *Kurikulum Merdeka: Pedoman implementasi untuk SMK*. Kemendikbudristek.

OECD. (2023). *Future of education and skills 2030: Curriculum analysis*. OECD Publishing.

Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Tang, H. (2024). Construction of vocational undergraduate education teacher team based on deep learning. *Journal of Vocational Education Studies, 12*(1), 45–58.

UNESCO. (2024). *Artificial intelligence in education: Guidance for policymakers*. UNESCO Publishing.

Utomo, A., Suryani, N., & Prasetyo, Z. K. (2024). Integrating AI-based learning in vocational education: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Technical Education and Training, 16*(2), 120–135.

Xie, X. (2025). Integration of deep learning and vocational college education evaluation index system model construction. *International Journal of Educational Technology, 9*(1), 33–47.

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.

Zhao, Y., & Watterston, J. (2023). The changes we need: Education post COVID-19. *Journal of Educational Change, 24*(1), 3–12.