

FOSTERING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGH DEEP LEARNING: STRATEGIES FROM VOCATIONAL ENGLISH TEACHERS

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Abstract: Student engagement plays a vital role in achieving meaningful learning, especially in vocational English classrooms where practical application is essential. Deep learning, which emphasizes critical thinking, relevance, and active participation, provides a promising pedagogical framework. However, research on how vocational English teachers perceive and apply deep learning principles remains limited. This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to explore how six vocational English teachers, three from SMK Negeri 1 Kandeman and three from SMK Muhammadiyah Bawang understand and implement strategies to foster student engagement through deep learning. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that teachers perceive engagement as students' active, emotional, and cognitive involvement in the learning process. Engagement was strongly associated with activities requiring real-world application, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. Teachers implemented project-based learning, group collaboration, student autonomy, and problem-solving tasks to support deep learning. Despite these efforts, they faced several challenges such as students' limited English skills, large class sizes, and time constraints. Nevertheless, vocational relevance, student creativity, and technology integration emerged as key opportunities. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how deep learning principles can be translated into practice in vocational settings. It highlights the need for adaptable strategies that consider both pedagogical goals and classroom realities.

Keywords: student engagement, deep learning, vocational English, teachers' practice

1. INTRODUCTION

Student engagement remains a persistent challenge in English language teaching, particularly in vocational school contexts where students often exhibit low motivation and passive participation (Khoiriyah et al, 2020). In Indonesian Vocational High Schools (SMK), English is taught as a compulsory subject, yet many students find it irrelevant to their practical learning or future employment, leading to decreased classroom involvement and surface-level learning (Herlina, N., & Widodo, 2022). To address this, teachers must not only deliver content but also design innovative, student-centered teaching strategies that promote deep learning and sustained engagement.

Over the years, several pedagogical models have been introduced to improve student engagement, such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Project-Based Learning (PBL), and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Orinbayeva, 2024;

Richards & Rodgers, 2014). However, recent discourse in education emphasizes the importance of deep learning, a paradigm that goes beyond rote memorization and emphasizes meaningful understanding, critical thinking, and knowledge application (Wang & He, 2021). In ELT, deep learning fosters students' ability to transfer knowledge, solve problems collaboratively, and apply language skills in real-life contexts (Thao & Bui, 2021).

Student engagement is central to effective language learning. Yuen et al (2018) categorize engagement into three dimensions: behavioural (participation and effort), emotional (interest and enjoyment), and cognitive (investment in learning and self-regulation). In the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), these forms of engagement determine the extent to which students interact with the content, their peers, and the teacher (Reschly & Christenson, 2020).

In Indonesian vocational schools, however, research reveals that student engagement in ELT remains a challenge. Factors contributing to low engagement include the perceived irrelevance of English to students' vocational interests, traditional lecture-based instruction, and limited use of communicative or contextual teaching approaches (Khoiriyah et al., 2020; Herlina, N., & Widodo, 2022).

Deep learning emphasizes critical thinking, understanding of core principles, integration of ideas, and the ability to apply knowledge across contexts (Wijaya A, 2025). In contrast to surface learning, where students memorize facts without comprehension, deep learning fosters long-term retention and real-world application (Wang & He, 2021).

In ELT, deep learning can be fostered through project-based learning, task-based activities, reflective teaching, and authentic assessments. Such approaches require students to be actively involved in problem-solving and using English in meaningful ways (Dewi et al., 2023). However, the integration of deep learning into vocational ELT contexts remains limited and under-theorized (Aditama et al., 2025).

Vocational High Schools (SMK) in Indonesia face unique challenges in English instruction. Teachers are expected to not only teach general English but also adapt instruction to vocational needs (Putra et al., 2022). Yet, most teachers rely on textbooks and focus on grammar and vocabulary, with little emphasis on communication skills or contextualized tasks (Siregar & Nugroho, 2023).

The implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* encourages teachers to develop flexible, student-centered, and contextual learning designs (Kemdikbud, 2022). However, many teachers still struggle with the practical application of such principles, particularly in activating students and applying deep learning approaches (M. G. Aditama et al., 2023).

While the theoretical framework of deep learning has been well developed, its practical implementation in vocational English classrooms especially in the Indonesian context remains underexplored. Studies tend to focus on higher education or general secondary schools, with minimal attention given to the pedagogical realities faced by SMK English teachers (Putra et al., 2022 ; Dewi et al., 2023). Additionally, most existing research adopts a quantitative approach, which may not capture the complexity and contextual nuance of teachers' experiences and classroom practices. This results in a gap in understanding how teachers perceive, design, and apply deep learning strategies to engage vocational learners.

To address this gap, this study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of English teachers in SMKs in implementing engagement-focused strategies grounded in deep learning principles. The research seeks to uncover not only what strategies are used but also how they are shaped by

teachers' beliefs, institutional demands, and student characteristics. By placing teachers at the centre of inquiry, the study also acknowledges their agency in pedagogical innovation, despite systemic constraints.

The novelty of this research lies in integrating concepts of deep learning, student engagement, and vocational pedagogy, providing practical insights into how teachers transform these theories into actionable strategies in their unique teaching contexts. This is especially relevant within the Indonesian *Merdeka Belajar* framework, which promotes differentiated, contextualized, and competency-based instruction (Kemdikbud, 2022). The findings are expected to contribute to the field of English language education, informing both teacher development programs and classroom practices in vocational schools across similar developing contexts.

Although the importance of student engagement and deep learning in English language education has been widely acknowledged, the practical realization of these concepts in vocational high school settings remains limited. English teachers in SMK often face institutional, pedagogical, and motivational constraints that hinder the application of innovative, student-centered learning approaches.

Moreover, there is insufficient research that qualitatively explores the real experiences, strategies, and challenges faced by vocational English teachers in their attempts to foster student engagement through deep learning. Without understanding these lived experiences, efforts to reform language education at the vocational level risk remaining theoretical and disconnected from classroom realities.

This study addresses these issues by investigating: 1) How do vocational English teachers perceive student engagement in the context of deep learning?; 2) What strategies do vocational English teachers implement to foster student engagement through deep learning?; 3) What challenges and opportunities do teachers encounter when applying deep learning principles in vocational English classrooms?

By focusing on the voices and agency of teachers, the study fills a critical gap in the literature and contributes to building context-sensitive frameworks for improving ELT practices in vocational education.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach to explore English teachers' strategies in enhancing student engagement through deep learning in vocational high schools. The focus was on understanding the lived experiences of teachers as they implement instructional actions that foster meaningful and active student involvement.

The research was conducted in two schools: SMK Negeri 1 Kandeman and SMK Muhammadiyah Bawang, involving six purposively selected English teachers (three from each school). Participants were chosen based on their teaching experience (minimum three years), active role in instructional innovation, and application of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis (lesson plans, teaching materials, and assessment rubrics). Interviews explored teachers' understanding of engagement and deep learning, applied strategies, challenges faced, and student responses. Observations and document analysis supported triangulation and provided contextual insights.

The research followed these steps: (1) initial coordination and permissions, (2) participant selection, (3) data collection through interviews, observations, and documents, (4) data transcription and coding, (5) thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2021) thematic analysis framework, and (6) validation through member checking and expert debriefing. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability principles.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Teachers' Perceptions of Student Engagement in the Context of Deep Learning

The participating vocational English teachers articulated nuanced and evolved understandings of student engagement, particularly within the paradigm of deep learning. Instead of equating engagement solely with compliance or observable behavior (such as sitting quietly or completing worksheets), the teachers emphasized a holistic perspective that integrates cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions.

Teachers perceived deep engagement as a student's active and purposeful involvement in the learning process one that goes beyond surface-level participation to include thinking critically, expressing curiosity, engaging emotionally, and applying knowledge in meaningful contexts.

"Engaged students are not just listening—they're thinking, asking questions, and applying what they learn to their lives or future jobs," (T2, SMK Muhammadiyah Bawang).

This shift in perception reflects the influence of deep learning pedagogy, which prioritizes higher-order thinking, real-world relevance, and student-centered learning. Teachers noted that deep engagement occurred most clearly when students were involved in tasks that required evaluation, creativity, and collaboration, particularly when such tasks were connected to their vocational identities e.g., designing a hotel brochure (Hospitality), or role-playing customer interactions (Tourism).

Moreover, teachers highlighted that student-generated questions and the ability to make connections between lessons and future careers were key signs of meaningful engagement. Emotional responses such as excitement, pride in their work, or frustration followed by persistence were also viewed as positive indicators of deep involvement.

From the interview data, a set of five recurring indicators emerged across the responses of the six English teachers. These are summarized in Table 1, based on frequency of mention:

Table 1: Teachers' Key Indicators of Deep Student Engagement

Engagement Indicator	Frequency (n = 6)
Student-generated questions	5
Real-life application	6
Group interaction	5
Reflection and discussion	4
Creative problem-solving	4

- a. **Real-life application (n=6):** All teachers consistently mentioned that students engaged more deeply when they could see the relevance of a task to their field of

study or future career. For instance, creating English menus or tourism pamphlets allowed students to bridge classroom content with real-world vocational practices.

- b. **Student-generated questions (n=5):** Teachers valued students' initiative in asking questions, particularly when these questions reflected curiosity, doubt, or a desire to go deeper into the content. Such behavior signaled cognitive engagement and a departure from passive learning.
- c. **Group interaction (n=5):** Engaging in meaningful peer collaboration through discussion, feedback, or joint task completion—was another strong indicator. Teachers viewed social interaction as essential to co-constructing knowledge and maintaining motivation.
- d. **Reflection and discussion (n=4):** Although less frequent than other indicators, reflection moments (oral or written) helped students internalize learning and connect concepts to prior experiences or personal growth.
- e. **Creative problem-solving (n=4):** Teachers associated student engagement with imaginative responses and solutions to complex or open-ended tasks, such as designing a campaign or simulating customer complaints.

These findings suggest that vocational English teachers are not only aware of the behavioral signs of engagement but are also attuned to deeper cognitive and emotional processes that signal meaningful learning. This perception aligns closely with the deep learning framework, which posits that true engagement arises when students are intellectually stretched, emotionally invested, and personally connected to the learning experience (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

3.2 Strategies to Foster Student Engagement through Deep Learning

To enhance student engagement, vocational English teachers implemented diverse and context-sensitive strategies grounded in the principles of deep learning. These strategies not only encouraged surface-level participation but also stimulated students' critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration elements central to deep learning. The following are five key strategies that emerged from the interview data and classroom observations:

a. Project-Based Learning (PjBL)

All six teachers frequently employed project-based tasks that were directly connected to students' vocational fields. For example, students in tourism-related majors were assigned to create travel brochures, record video dialogues simulating hotel reception interactions, or develop itineraries for local tours in English. These projects encouraged students to research, collaborate, and apply language meaningfully.

“When students create a brochure or video, they don't just use English—they think how it applies to their future job,” (T3, SMK N 1 Kandeman).

By working on authentic tasks that mimic real-world job roles, students became more motivated and engaged in the learning process, and teachers observed significant increases in participation and effort.

b. Collaborative Tasks

Five out of six teachers emphasized the use of collaborative activities such as role plays, group discussions, and joint presentations. Teachers intentionally grouped students with varying abilities to foster peer-to-peer support and co-construction of

knowledge. Through collaboration, students developed communication skills and learned to negotiate meaning, which are vital for both language acquisition and workplace readiness.

“They feel more confident when working in pairs. It lowers their anxiety and helps them express ideas better,” (T1, SMK Muhammadiyah Bawang).

Collaborative settings also created a supportive environment where students took shared responsibility for learning outcomes.

c. Problem-Solving Activities

Problem-solving tasks were integrated into lessons by four teachers, typically in the form of case-based discussions, role plays, or scenarios involving customer service or work-place challenges. For example, students were asked to solve hypothetical complaints from guests in a hotel using proper English expressions, or plan emergency responses for tour delays. These tasks engaged learners in reflective and critical thinking.

“I present them with situations they might face in real jobs, and they must find solutions together in English,” (T2, SMK N 1 Kandeman).

Such tasks encouraged analysis, decision-making, and language production under realistic constraints, fostering deeper engagement and learning.

d. Reflective Discussions

Four teachers employed post-task reflections and guided class discussions to help students process what they had learned and how they could improve. Teachers used questions like, “What did you find difficult in this project?” or “How would you do it differently next time?” These reflections deepened students’ metacognitive awareness and made learning more personalized.

While not as frequently used as other strategies, reflective discussions were appreciated by students who needed time and space to internalize their learning experiences.

e. Technology-Integrated Tasks

Three teachers integrated technology into their instruction to enhance engagement and allow for creative expression. Tools such as Canva, Google Slides, and mobile video editing apps were used by students to create multimedia-rich content. Teachers reported that when students were allowed to use familiar technology, their motivation increased, and they took greater ownership of their projects.

“When I let them use their phones to create videos or design slides, they become more serious and even competitive,” (T3, SMK Muhammadiyah Bawang).

Technology-supported learning allowed for a broader range of student outputs, including digital posters, storytelling videos, and simulated interviews.

Figure 1: Frequency of Deep Learning Strategies Used by Teachers

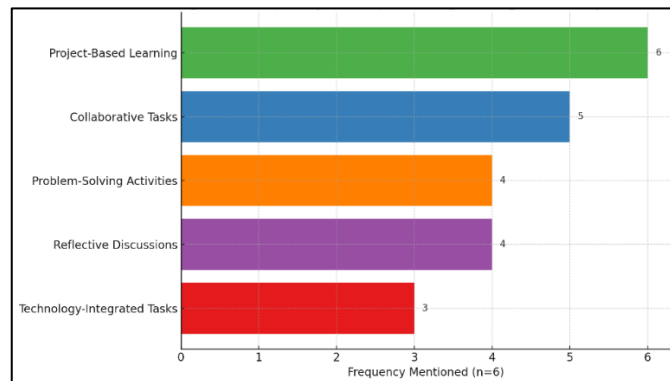


Figure 1 visually represents the frequency of deep learning strategies implemented by the six vocational English teachers. As shown, Project-Based Learning was the most widely used strategy, cited by all six teachers. This reflects the high relevance of PjBL in vocational contexts where practical and authentic language use is emphasized. Collaborative Tasks followed, mentioned by five teachers, indicating the strong emphasis on peer interaction in the classroom. Problem-Solving Activities and Reflective Discussions were each mentioned by four teachers, highlighting a balanced focus on both cognitive engagement and metacognitive reflection. Technology-Integrated Tasks were used by three teachers, showing potential for growth in leveraging digital tools to enhance learning.

This distribution suggests that while teachers are adopting a variety of deep learning strategies, more support and training may be needed to fully integrate reflective and technology-based practices across all classrooms.

3.3. Challenges and Opportunities in Applying Deep Learning Principles

Despite embracing deep learning principles and implementing various strategies, vocational English teachers faced several practical and pedagogical challenges during the teaching process. These challenges reflect the complex realities of teaching in vocational settings, particularly within the Indonesian educational context. Nevertheless, teachers also identified notable opportunities that highlight the potential of deep learning approaches when applied with contextual sensitivity.

3.3.1 Challenges

a. Low Student English Proficiency and Readiness

One of the most pressing challenges was the varying levels of English proficiency among students, with many lacking basic vocabulary and grammar mastery. This limited their ability to fully engage in complex, communicative tasks. Teachers noted that some students were hesitant to participate in discussions or present projects due to anxiety or lack of confidence.

“Even when the topic is interesting, some students don’t join the activity because they’re afraid of making mistakes,” (T1, SMK N 1 Kandeman).

This issue was especially prominent in classes with a significant number of students from rural areas or with limited exposure to English outside school.

b. Large and Mixed-Ability Classrooms

Class sizes often exceeded 30 students, creating logistical and instructional difficulties in managing group tasks or giving personalized feedback. Differentiating tasks to accommodate various ability levels was described as burdensome, especially when classroom time was limited.

“It’s hard to focus on everyone. Some students finish fast, others don’t even start unless you sit next to them,” (T2, SMK Muhammadiyah Bawang).

Large classes also made it challenging to facilitate deeper discussion or ensure every student had a voice in collaborative tasks.

c. Time Constraints for Deep Learning Activities

While deep learning activities like projects, role plays, and reflective discussions were seen as highly beneficial, they also required more instructional time than standard grammar or reading tasks. The constraints of the school schedule, tight curriculum demands, and exam preparation reduced the flexibility teachers had to implement such activities fully.

“Sometimes I have to skip reflection or shorten the presentation because the time is too short,” (T3, SMK N 1 Kandeman).

3.3.2 Opportunities

a. Vocational Relevance Boosts Engagement

When learning tasks were directly related to students’ vocational majors such as management, tourism, or culinary arts students showed increased enthusiasm and participation. Teachers found that the closer the content aligned with students’ future job roles, the more meaningful the learning became.

“When the task mirrors what they will do after school, they get more serious,” (T2, SMK Muhammadiyah Bawang).

This authentic connection helped students see the value of learning English beyond the classroom, serving as a motivational tool.

b. Creativity Through Autonomy and Open-Ended Tasks

Teachers discovered that allowing students to make choices such as selecting their own topics, formats, or group members triggered creativity and innovation, even among lower-performing students. Tasks like creating video dialogues, designing menus, or acting out customer service scenarios allowed students to showcase their ideas freely.

“Even the shy students become confident when they can act or record a video with friends,” (T3, SMK N 1 Kandeman).

Student-driven tasks promoted ownership of learning and led to more original, varied outputs.

c. Technology as a Facilitator of Innovation

Digital tools, particularly those already familiar to students (e.g., Canva, CapCut, Google Slides), were seen as effective enablers of engagement and creativity. Teachers reported that students were more excited and motivated when learning involved smartphones or laptops, especially for project-based work.

“With Canva or their phones, they create better work than when just writing on paper,”
(T1, SMK Muhammadiyah Bawang).

Technology not only modernized the learning experience but also supported differentiated instruction by accommodating different learning styles.

Table 2: Challenges and Opportunities Identified by Vocational English Teachers

Challenges	Opportunities
Low student English proficiency and confidence	Real-world, vocationally relevant tasks that boost motivation
Large and mixed-ability classrooms	Autonomy and choice trigger creativity and inclusive learning
Limited instructional time	Technology-supported activities enhance efficiency and output

4. DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that while challenges in implementing deep learning are real and multifaceted, they can be addressed through creative, context-aware solutions that draw on students' interests, career aspirations, and digital habits. The opportunities identified underscore the potential for transforming vocational English classrooms into spaces for meaningful, student-centered learning.

The findings of this study reveal the nuanced perceptions and intentional strategies of vocational English teachers in fostering student engagement through deep learning approaches. Rather than viewing engagement solely as behavioral compliance, teachers in this study perceived it as a multifaceted construct involving cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions. This aligns with contemporary perspectives that conceptualize engagement as a holistic and dynamic process essential for promoting deep learning outcomes (Park & Kim, 2023; Bond et al., 2020).

One significant contribution of this research lies in highlighting the vocational context as a unique space where deep learning strategies can be particularly effective. Teachers intentionally designed tasks that aligned with students' future careers, such as creating promotional materials for the tourism and hospitality sectors. These efforts support recent literature asserting that contextualized learning fosters both motivation and deeper conceptual understanding, particularly in vocational education settings (Beausaert et al., 2021).

Teachers' emphasis on real-world application, student autonomy, and higher-order thinking reflects a shift from surface learning to deeper engagement a finding echoed in recent studies by Gonzalez & Silva (2023), who found that vocational learners respond positively to learning environments that require them to evaluate, create, and reflect, especially when learning connects to their future roles.

Moreover, the identification of indicators such as student-generated questions and creative problem-solving reveals the teachers' alignment with constructivist and socio-cognitive frameworks, which emphasize learner agency and metacognition (Cheng & Chan, 2021). These indicators are often overlooked in traditional classrooms, yet they are critical markers of meaningful engagement in deep learning environments.

This research also sheds light on the pedagogical strategies that vocational English teachers adopt to promote deep learning. The use of Project-Based Learning (PjBL), collaborative tasks, and choice-driven assignments confirms the findings of prior studies, which underscore the efficacy of such methods in enhancing both engagement and learning outcomes (Shofyana et al., 2022).

What is particularly significant is how these strategies were adapted to the local vocational context, where teachers tailored projects not only to meet curriculum standards but also to simulate real workplace challenges. For example, students creating videos to simulate hotel check-ins allowed them to develop language proficiency and soft skills simultaneously, a combination rarely addressed in general English instruction.

While the challenges faced by teachers such as large class sizes, time constraints, and students' limited proficiency are not new (Siregar & Nugroho, 2023), this study uncovers how teachers leverage contextual opportunities to mitigate these barriers. For instance, the integration of technology tools like Canva and Google Slides provided scaffolding for students with low English skills while also encouraging creativity. These findings echo recent research by Darmawan & Raharjo (2022), which showed that simple digital tools can enhance engagement and accessibility in resource-limited schools.

Furthermore, the study reveals an underexplored opportunity in autonomy and creativity: when given the freedom to choose their topics or presentation formats, even lower-achieving students exhibited increased enthusiasm and confidence. This supports Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that autonomy enhances intrinsic motivation, especially in task-based learning environments (Ryan & Deci, 2020)

Theoretically, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on deep learning in vocational education, an area still underrepresented in global ELT discourse (Kyndt et al., 2019). It offers a localized insight into how deep learning principles are interpreted and implemented by English teachers in Indonesian vocational schools.

Practically, the findings suggest that teacher training and curriculum development should incorporate deep learning principles explicitly particularly those that leverage vocational contexts and promote student agency. This would help teachers move beyond procedural instruction and foster critical engagement, even in large or low-proficiency classes.

The findings encourage further exploration of assessment frameworks that align with deep learning objectives, such as those that value process, reflection, and creativity rather than rote accuracy. Additionally, longitudinal studies could investigate how sustained exposure to deep learning strategies impacts students' long-term language use and professional readiness.

5. CONCLUSION

This study revealed that vocational English teachers perceive student engagement as active, reflective, and meaningful participation, closely aligned with deep learning principles. Teachers fostered engagement through strategies such as project-based learning, collaboration, autonomy, and vocationally relevant tasks. Despite facing challenges like low proficiency and time constraints, they identified opportunities through real-world integration and technology use.

The findings contribute to the growing discourse on deep learning in ELT by highlighting its practical implementation in vocational contexts. This research underscores the importance of aligning pedagogical strategies with students' future careers to enhance engagement. Future studies should investigate long-term impacts and develop assessment tools tailored to deep learning outcomes.

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