

Deep Learning Pedagogy

Reconstructing Joyful Learning in Indonesian Vocational EFL Classrooms Through Deep Learning Pedagogy

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In recent years, English Language Teaching (ELT) in Indonesia has entered a transformative phase. The implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka, the rapid growth of Artificial Intelligence (AI), and the increasing emphasis on student-centered learning have encouraged educators to rethink traditional classroom practices. However, amidst these changes, one important question remains: Are our students truly enjoying the learning process while developing meaningful language competencies?

As English lecturers and teacher educators, we often encounter vocational school students who perceive English as difficult, intimidating, and disconnected from their real lives. Many learners participate in classroom activities merely to complete assignments rather than to genuinely communicate, collaborate, or express ideas. Consequently, English classrooms frequently become spaces dominated by passive participation and examination-oriented instruction. Recent Indonesian studies have shown that meaningful engagement in EFL classrooms is strongly influenced by emotional connection, authentic interaction, and contextual learning experiences (Mahmud et al., 2025; Ricita et al., 2025).



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Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Several recent findings in Indonesia further strengthen this concern. A study involving vocational high school students in Malang found that more than 71% of students responded positively to Project-Based Learning because it increased their motivation, participation, and speaking confidence in English classes (Amalia & Degeng, 2024). Similarly, research conducted in a vocational school in Cianjur revealed that the use of interactive web-based media fostered high levels of behavioral engagement (78%), emotional engagement (76%), and cognitive engagement (75%) among EFL students (Kurniawati & Fauziyah, 2022). These findings indicate that Indonesian vocational students actually possess strong learning potential when classrooms provide meaningful, contextual, and emotionally supportive learning experiences.

This reality indicates that English education in vocational settings requires more than curriculum adjustment; it demands pedagogical reconstruction. One promising direction is the integration of deep learning pedagogy that promotes joyful, meaningful, and engaging learning experiences. Deep learning emphasizes authentic problem-solving, collaboration, communication, creativity, and learner agency rather than rote memorization. In vocational English contexts, such approaches are particularly relevant because students learn more effectively when language activities reflect real-world professional practices (M. Aditama et al., 2025).

Deep learning in education should not be misunderstood as merely a technological term associated with Artificial Intelligence. In pedagogical discourse, deep learning refers to learning processes that encourage students to actively construct knowledge, connect lessons with authentic experiences, think critically, collaborate socially, and reflect meaningfully. Joyful learning emerges not because students are entertained, but because they feel emotionally connected, valued, and challenged within the learning process. Recent findings from Indonesian ELT classrooms reveal that meaningful, mindful, and joyful learning environments significantly contribute to students' cognitive and emotional engagement (Aditama et al., 2026).

Students in vocational schools tend to engage more actively when learning activities align with their future professions. For instance, hospitality students may perform hotel service simulations, culinary students may create English promotional videos for local food products, while multimedia students can design English-based digital storytelling projects. Such practices position English not merely as a school subject but as a practical communication tool relevant to students' future careers. Research on vocational English teachers also confirms that project-based learning, contextual teaching, and authentic tasks are highly effective in fostering student engagement and creativity (Ricita et al., 2025).

Another important issue is classroom discourse. In many Indonesian EFL classrooms, teachers still dominate communication while students remain passive recipients of information. Research conducted in Indonesian vocational high schools found that many students choose silence during English lessons because of anxiety, low confidence, fear of making mistakes, and limited opportunities for interaction (Nurhayati et al., 2022). This situation demonstrates that language learning fundamentally requires interaction, negotiation of meaning, and communicative participation.

Therefore, English teachers need to reconstruct classroom interaction into more dialogic and participatory communication. Teachers can integrate collaborative discussion, inquiry-based learning, project-based speaking activities, and multimodal digital resources to support deeper engagement. Educational technology, when implemented appropriately, can strengthen students' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional participation in EFL learning (M. Aditama et al., 2025).

The rise of AI technologies such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, Canva AI, and other generative tools also presents both opportunities and challenges for ELT. Interestingly, a recent nationwide survey in Indonesia involving 349 teachers reported that educators increasingly use AI for lesson planning, teaching materials, and classroom instruction, although challenges related to infrastructure and contextual adaptation still remain (Aisyah et al., 2026). This trend suggests that Indonesian education is entering a new pedagogical era where teachers are expected not only to master technology but also to humanize technology in meaningful learning processes (Aditama, 2025).

Importantly, AI should not replace the human dimensions of teaching. Research on AI-supported language learning highlights that teacher presence remains essential in fostering emotional and agentic engagement among learners (Li et al., 2025). Teachers continue to play irreplaceable roles as facilitators, motivators, mentors, and designers of meaningful learning experiences.

In addition, English learning in Indonesia should continue integrating local wisdom within Global Englishes perspectives. Students should not feel that learning English requires abandoning their cultural identities. Instead, English can become a medium to promote Indonesian traditions, local tourism, culinary heritage, and socio-cultural values to global audiences. Through culturally responsive pedagogy, students simultaneously develop intercultural awareness and communicative competence in international contexts.

Ultimately, the future of ELT in Indonesia should not be measured solely through examination scores or curriculum completion. Success in language education should also be reflected in students' confidence, creativity, collaboration, empathy, and willingness to communicate meaningfully. Vocational students particularly need learning environments that connect English with authentic professional realities and future aspirations.

As educators, we are not merely teaching vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation. We are shaping learning experiences that influence how students perceive themselves and their futures in an interconnected world. Reconstructing joyful learning through deep learning pedagogy is therefore not only an instructional innovation, it is an educational necessity for the future of Indonesian ELT.

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