

UNDERSTANDING DEEP LEARNING STRATEGIES IN EFL CLASSROOMS: STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES FROM AN INDONESIAN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Bonefantura Jemy Bria¹, Yofince Abatan², Yohanes Rusae³
STIPAS keuskupan Agung Kupang, Kupang, Indonesia^{1,2,3}

Received: 02/03/2026

Accepted: 07/08/2026

Publication: 22/08/2026

Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explores junior high school students' lived experiences with deep learning strategies in their English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom at a public junior high school in Weliman. Deep learning, characterized by critical thinking, connection-making, and intrinsic motivation, is often emphasized in curriculum goals but remains less understood from the student perspective in low-resource contexts. The research aimed to understand how students perceive, engage with, and benefit from (or are hindered by) strategies designed to foster deep learning. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 15 purposively selected eighth-grade students. Thematic analysis revealed three major themes: 1) The central role of meaningful teacher-student interaction and feedback in fostering engagement; 2) The double-edged sword of collaborative projects, valued for peer support but criticized for free-riding; and 3) The struggle to connect textbook English to personal identity and real-world use, which often acts as a barrier to deep processing. The findings suggest that while instructional strategies are implemented, the affective and relational dimensions—such as relevance and a psychologically safe classroom environment—appear to be more critical catalysts for deep learning from the students' viewpoint. The study recommends a student-centered pedagogy that prioritizes personal relevance and reflective dialogue over mere task completion.

Keywords: deep learning, EFL, learner experience, qualitative research, secondary education

Introduction

The global shift towards 21st-century skills has elevated deep learning as a pedagogical priority. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, deep learning transcends surface-level memorization. It involves learners critically analyzing linguistic input, connecting new grammatical and lexical items to their existing cognitive frameworks, and actively using the language for authentic, communicative purposes (Deng, 2020). In Indonesia, national curriculum objectives explicitly advocate for higher-order thinking skills and communicative competence. However, a persistent practical problem remains: the perceived gap between these aspirational goals and classroom reality. Due to exam pressure and large class sizes, rote learning and grammar-translation methods often dominate (Sergis, 2019). This raises serious concerns about the development of students' autonomous and proficient English use. Recent studies have extensively documented various teaching strategies intended to facilitate deep learning in EFL settings, such as project-based learning (PBL), inquiry-based tasks, and reflective journaling (Han, 2023). Research has also highlighted influencing factors, including motivation, self-efficacy, and metacognitive awareness (Hamidah, 2023). However, much of this literature is either theoretical or examines effectiveness from a pedagogical or outcome-based perspective (Bloemert, 2020), primarily using quantitative methods. Consequently, these studies often treat students as passive recipients of instruction rather than active co-constructors of the learning process.

A significant gap exists in understanding the lived experience of adolescent EFL learners themselves. How do they interpret and internalize the strategies teachers employ to promote deep learning? What do they find meaningful, challenging, or irrelevant? While teachers' perceptions and external test scores are valuable, they cannot fully capture the subjective, affective, and cognitive processes that students undergo. This gap is particularly salient in the context of Indonesian junior high schools. Students aged 13–14 are at a critical developmental stage where they are forming their learner identities and long-term attitudes towards English (Solikhah, 2023). They are also transitioning from basic vocabulary acquisition to the analytical use of language, making this period crucial for establishing deep processing habits. Furthermore, this study is situated in Weliman, a district in the regency of Malaka, East Nusa Tenggara. This region is characterized by limited access to authentic English media, scarce digital infrastructure, and relatively low socioeconomic resources—conditions typical of Indonesia's "3T" regions (*tertinggal, terdepan, terluar*; underdeveloped, frontier, outermost). In such contexts, students rely almost exclusively on textbooks and teacher instruction, making the exploration of their engagement with deep learning strategies even more urgent and locally relevant.

This study aims to address the identified gap by answering the central research question: *What are the experiences of junior high school students in Weliman with deep learning strategies in their EFL classroom?* The specific objectives are to: 1) describe students' perceptions of various in-class activities designed for deep learning; 2) identify factors that students believe enable or hinder their deep engagement with English; and 3) explore the emotional and cognitive impact of these strategies (Suri, 2024). While existing studies predominantly measure deep learning through quantitative or teacher-centric lenses, the novelty of this research lies in its phenomenological approach. By prioritizing the emic (insider) perspective of learners in this specific, under-researched local context, this study provides nuanced, contextualized insights that are essential for improving pedagogical practices in similar low-resource environments.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of Deep Learning

The concept of deep learning originated in the 1970s through the seminal work of (Marton and Säljö 1976), who employed a phenomenographic research approach to reveal qualitative differences in how students approached learning tasks. Their research identified two distinct approaches: *deep learning*, characterized by comprehension, meaning-making, and critical analysis, and *surface learning*, characterized by rote memorization and reproduction of learning materials. This foundational distinction has since shaped decades of educational research. Building upon this foundation, several theoretical frameworks have been developed to explain and operationalize deep learning. (Biggs 1987, 1993) proposed the Presage-Process-Product (3P) Model, which conceptualizes learning as a dynamic interplay between student characteristics (presage), learning activities (process), and learning outcomes (product). Entwistle and (Ramsden 1982) developed the Students' Approaches to Learning (SAL) framework, which further elaborated on the qualitative differences in student learning strategies. More recently, Fullan, Quinn, and McEachen (2017) expanded the concept to emphasize deep learning as a means of preparing students for real-world challenges, focusing on the development of "6Cs" competencies: critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, character, and citizenship.

A complementary theoretical perspective comes from (Ausubel's 1968) theory of meaningful learning, which posits that learning is most effective when new information is meaningfully connected to learners' existing cognitive structures. Ausubel distinguished between meaningful learning where new knowledge is integrated with prior knowledge and rote learning, where information is memorized without genuine understanding. This distinction

parallels the deep-surface learning dichotomy and underscores the importance of relevance and prior knowledge in fostering deep engagement.

Deep Learning in EFL Contexts

The application of deep learning principles to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has gained increasing attention in recent years. (Oktavianus and Rido 2025) provide a comprehensive conceptual exploration of deep learning in English Language Teaching (ELT), grounded in the frameworks of Marton and Säljö, Entwistle, and Biggs. Their work emphasizes that deep learning in EFL transcends surface-level memorization, involving learners in critically analyzing linguistic input, connecting new grammatical and lexical items to existing cognitive frameworks, and actively using language for authentic, communicative purposes. Strategies for fostering deep learning in EFL classrooms have been extensively documented. (Han 2023) examined project-based learning as a means of promoting deep learning in college English teaching, finding that such approaches engage students in authentic language use and higher-order thinking. (Hamidah and Pinkan 2023) similarly explored project-based learning in language classrooms, emphasizing its potential to engage learners in authentic language use. Inquiry-based tasks, reflective journaling, and formative assessments have also been identified as effective strategies for promoting deep processing and critical thinking in EFL contexts.

However, the implementation of deep learning in EFL settings faces significant challenges. (Oktavianus and Rido 2025) highlight the dominance of traditional teaching methods, resource limitations, and the need for professional development as key barriers. In many EFL contexts, examination pressure and large class sizes perpetuate rote learning and grammar-translation methods, which are antithetical to deep learning principles.

Deep Learning in the Indonesian EFL Context

In Indonesia, the national curriculum has increasingly emphasized higher-order thinking skills and communicative competence, aligning with global 21st-century education goals. The *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) policy has further promoted deep learning as a pedagogical priority, advocating for student-centered, meaningful, and joyful learning experiences. Recent Indonesian studies have examined the implementation of deep learning across various educational levels. Saputri (2026) investigated how deep learning practices support high school students' readiness for the English Academic Achievement Test (TKA), finding that collaborative discussions, inquiry-based reading, and project-based learning play significant roles in developing analytical competencies. (Apoko et al. 2025) explored vocational high school students' perspectives on deep learning, revealing positive responses regarding mindfulness, meaningfulness, and enjoyment in English language teaching.

At the junior high school level, research has identified both challenges and possibilities. A study at MTs Al Islah Gorontalo found that while deep learning approaches hold significant potential for transformative English education, pedagogical and structural barriers including limited resources and traditional teaching paradigms constrain implementation. Teacher perceptions have also been examined, with studies revealing that while teachers show strong understanding of deep learning principles, sustaining deep learning practices is constrained by limited professional development opportunities and infrastructural challenges. The Indonesian EFL context is characterized by particular challenges: students often rely on teacher-directed, exam-oriented routines with limited explicit instruction on self-regulated learning. In "3T" regions (*tertinggal, terdepan, terluar*—underdeveloped, frontier, outermost) such as East Nusa Tenggara, where this study is situated, limited access to authentic English media, scarce digital infrastructure, and low socioeconomic resources further compound these challenges, making students almost exclusively dependent on textbooks and teacher instruction.

The Student Perspective on Deep Learning

A significant gap in the literature concerns the student perspective on deep learning. Much of the existing research examines deep learning from pedagogical or outcome-based perspectives, primarily using quantitative methods. (Bloemert, Paran, and Jansen 2020) have called for greater attention to the "student voice" in foreign language education research, arguing that students' priorities and perceptions may differ from those of researchers or curriculum designers. Recent studies have begun to address this gap. A qualitative study exploring EFL students' perceptions of deep learning in higher education revealed four main themes: the importance of meaningful understanding beyond mere memorization, the development of critical and reflective thinking, the need for active learner involvement, and the significance of applying knowledge in real-world contexts. Students demonstrated positive perceptions and support for the deep learning approach, indicating a need for student-centered learning design. However, research specifically examining adolescent EFL learners' lived experiences with deep learning strategies remains limited. Students aged 13–14 are at a critical developmental stage where they are forming their learner identities and long-term attitudes towards English. They are also transitioning from basic vocabulary acquisition to the analytical use of language, making this period crucial for establishing deep processing habits. The phenomenological approach which prioritizes the emic (insider) perspective of learners offers particular value in capturing the subjective, affective, and cognitive processes that students undergo.

Teacher-Student Interaction and Feedback

The role of teacher-student interaction and feedback in fostering deep learning has been widely recognized in educational research. Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) posits that learning is mediated through social interaction and scaffolding, with the teacher serving as a responsive dialogic partner. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) further identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic psychological needs for intrinsic motivation needs that can be met through personalized, encouraging feedback. In EFL contexts, research has demonstrated that students value teacher feedback for its personalization, contextual sensitivity, and motivational impact. Students often prefer teacher feedback over automated alternatives because the former is considered more direct and empathetic. However, the quantity and timing of feedback must be carefully managed, as excessive feedback can overwhelm students.

Collaborative Learning in EFL

Collaborative learning has been championed for developing critical thinking and communication skills in EFL contexts. Sociocultural theory emphasizes the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where learning occurs through interaction with more capable peers. Cooperative learning techniques such as Round Robin, Number Head Together, and Think-Pair-Share have been explored as means of manifesting deep learning principles in Indonesian classrooms. However, collaborative learning also presents challenges. Research on "social loafing" (Karau & Williams, 1993) has documented how individuals may exert less effort in group settings. In Indonesian contexts, where students are often unaccustomed to collaborative learning due to traditional, teacher-centered practices, these challenges may be amplified. The emphasis on examination performance may further encourage task-oriented behavior over genuine learning engagement.

Relevance and Meaningful Learning

The importance of relevance in fostering deep learning is well-established in educational theory. Ausubel's meaningful learning theory emphasizes that learning is most effective when new information is linked to existing knowledge. When students cannot connect

new content to their prior knowledge or lived experiences, learning remains rote and superficial. In EFL contexts, the disconnect between textbook content and students' lives has been identified as a significant barrier to engagement. Research has called for more localized and personalized content in EFL materials, not merely as a pedagogical preference but as a psychological prerequisite for deep engagement. Contextual relevance motivates learners and anchors abstract concepts in real-life experiences.

Research Gap and Contribution

Despite the growing body of research on deep learning in EFL contexts, several gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature is either theoretical or examines effectiveness from a pedagogical or outcome-based perspective, treating students as passive recipients of instruction rather than active co-constructors of the learning process. Second, research specifically examining the lived experiences of adolescent EFL learners particularly in low-resource, "3T" regions of Indonesia is limited. Third, while the Indonesian *Merdeka Curriculum* has elevated deep learning as a pedagogical priority, empirical research on how students in junior high school settings experience and engage with deep learning strategies remains scarce. This study addresses these gaps by adopting a phenomenological approach to explore junior high school students' lived experiences with deep learning strategies in their EFL classroom in Weliman, East Nusa Tenggara. By prioritizing the emic perspective of learners in this specific, under-researched local context, this research provides nuanced, contextualized insights essential for improving pedagogical practices in similar low-resource environments.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach, as it sought to understand the essence of the lived experiences of a group of individuals regarding a shared phenomenon deep learning in EFL (Bonyadi,2023). The study was conducted at a public junior high school (SMP) in Weliman, selected for its stated commitment to implementing the national curriculum's higher-order thinking skills mandate. The participants were 15 eighth-grade students (aged 13-14), purposively selected to represent variations in self-reported English proficiency (high, medium, low) and gender. Informed consent was obtained from the school, parents, and students. Data were collected over a three-month period through two primary methods: (1) *Semi-structured individual interviews* (30-45 minutes each) exploring personal experiences, feelings, and interpretations of classroom activities; and (2) *Two focus group discussions* (FGDs, 60 minutes each) to stimulate interaction and gather shared perspectives on collaborative learning. All sessions were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure comfort and depth of expression, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis followed (Miharja,2024)six-phase thematic analysis. The researcher first familiarized herself with the transcripts, generated initial codes, then collated codes into potential themes. These themes were reviewed, refined, and clearly defined. To ensure trustworthiness, member checking was performed by sharing preliminary interpretations with a subset of participants, and peer debriefing was conducted with fellow researchers to cross-check the coding framework. The study adhered to strict ethical protocols, ensuring anonymity (using pseudonyms like S1, S2, etc.) and the right to withdraw.

Result And Discussion

Results

Analysis of the interview and focus group discussion (FGD) data yielded three overarching themes characterizing the students' experiences with deep learning strategies in their EFL class. These themes emerged consistently across all 15 participants, though with varying degrees of emphasis depending on individual proficiency levels and gender. The

following sections present each theme in detail, supported by representative quotations, and include both prevalent patterns and contradictory cases to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Theme 1: The Primacy of Relational Feedback over Task Design

This theme was the most consistently mentioned across all participants, regardless of proficiency level or gender. All 15 students (100%) explicitly emphasized that their deepest engagement occurred not from the complexity of a task itself, but from the quality of interactive feedback from their teacher. This finding was remarkably uniform across the sample, with students describing moments of "understanding deeply" when the teacher provided personalized, encouraging comments during writing conferences or patiently scaffolded their spoken errors in dialogic exchanges.

Subtheme 1.1: Scaffolding that Sparks Thinking

Students consistently valued feedback that did not merely correct errors but challenged them to think more deeply. As S4 noted: "When Mrs. Ana repeats my broken sentence correctly, but then asks me a new question based on my own idea, I feel my brain working harder to answer... not just to fix the grammar." Similarly, S8 explained: "She doesn't just say 'wrong.' She asks, 'Why do you think this word fits here?' That makes me stop and really think about meaning, not just memorize rules." S11, a lower-proficiency student, described the affective dimension: "When she says 'good try' and then helps me find the right word slowly, I feel brave to speak again. If she just corrected me quickly, I would stop talking."

Subtheme 1.2: Personalized Encouragement as a Motivational Driver

Students across all proficiency levels emphasized the importance of feeling noticed as individuals. S6 stated: "She remembers what I wrote last week and asks about it. That makes me feel she really reads my work, not just checks for mistakes." S13, a male student with medium proficiency, added: "The encouragement is not just 'good job.' She says specific things like 'I like how you described your family.' That makes me want to write more."

Contrasting Case

However, one student (S10) offered a dissenting perspective, suggesting that while feedback was valuable, it was sometimes overwhelming: "Sometimes I get confused with all the corrections. I want her to focus on one or two things first, not everything at once." This indicates that while feedback is valued, its delivery and quantity need to be carefully calibrated.

Subtheme 1.3: The Limitations of Task Design without Relational Follow-up

In contrast to the positive experiences with interactive feedback, students consistently described meticulously designed group worksheets with no follow-up discussion as "just doing exercises." S5 explained: "The worksheet has many nice pictures and interesting questions, but if we just fill it and hand it in, it's like any other homework. The learning stops there." S2 echoed this sentiment: "We finish the task, but we don't discuss it. So I don't know if my answer was actually good or just accepted." This contrast highlights that task design alone, without relational follow-up, fails to generate deep engagement.

Theme 2: Collaborative Work as a Community of Support and Strain

This theme elicited the most ambivalent responses from participants. It was mentioned by 13 out of 15 students (86.7%), with experiences varying significantly based on group composition and individual confidence levels.

Subtheme 2.1: Peer Support as a Scaffolding Mechanism

Positively, students valued the "sharing of ideas" and peer support, especially for those with lower confidence. S9, a female student with low proficiency, stated: "I can ask my friend slowly, no pressure. If I don't understand the teacher, my friend can explain in a different way." S14, a male student with medium proficiency, added: "In group work, I hear how my friends say things. Sometimes I learn new words just by listening to them discuss." S7, a high-proficiency student, noted:

"I like teaching my friends. Explaining something to them helps me understand it better myself."

Subtheme 2.2: The Hidden Burden of Free-Riding and Unfair Grading

However, a significant and frequently mentioned sub-theme was frustration with "free riders" and perceived unfair grading. This was particularly salient among higher-proficiency students (7 out of 8 high-proficiency participants mentioned this concern). S12 admitted: "We just divide parts and paste from Google Translate to finish on time. I don't learn much, but I'm worried about the grade." S3, a female high-proficiency student, expressed strong frustration: "Some members just sit and wait. When we present, everyone gets the same score, even though I did all the work. It's not fair, and next time I will work alone if possible." S1, another high-proficiency student, added: "I spend more time arguing about who should do what than actually learning English."

Subtheme 2.3: Gender-Related Patterns in Collaboration

Notably, gender appeared to influence collaborative experiences. Female students (7 out of 8) generally reported more positive peer support experiences, while male students (6 out of 7) more frequently mentioned concerns about free-riding and group conflict. S15, a female student, observed: "In my group, the girls always do the work. The boys play around and don't contribute. It's frustrating." However, this was not universal, as S11, a male student with low proficiency, shared: "I like group work because my friends help me. I'm shy to ask the teacher, but I can ask my friends."

Contrasting Case

One student (S5) reported consistently positive collaborative experiences, suggesting that effective group norms can mitigate the negative aspects: "In my group, we have a system. Everyone has a role: one writes, one checks grammar, one presents. We all participate equally." This contrasting case demonstrates that when collaboration is structured with clear roles and individual accountability, the negative dynamics can be reduced.

Subtheme 2.4: Task-Oriented Behavior and Surface Engagement

The social friction often diverted focus from deep language processing to group management and task completion, leading to surface-level engagement for some. S8 explained: "When we rush, I just copy from the textbook or Google Translate. I don't think about the meaning or how to say it in my own words." S13 added: "We just want to finish quickly so we don't get scolded. The teacher checks if we finished, not how we learned." This shift from learning to completion represents a significant barrier to deep learning in collaborative settings.

Theme 3: The Disconnect Between "Classroom English" and the "Real Me"

This theme emerged as the most prominent barrier to deep learning, mentioned by all 15 students (100%) as a significant challenge. The perceived lack of relevance was described with

particular intensity by higher-proficiency students (8 out of 8), who seemed to feel the disconnect most acutely.

Subtheme 3.1: Irrelevant Textbook Content

Students consistently struggled to connect textbook dialogues and topics to their personal lives, interests, or digital worlds. S7 expressed a common sentiment: "We learn about describing a tourism place, but I have never been there. I want to learn how to talk about my game or my YouTube videos." S4 elaborated: "The textbook talks about famous people from Jakarta. I don't know those people. Why can't we talk about our own local heroes or our village?" S9, a low-proficiency student, shared a similar experience: "The topics are about things I never see. Like airports and hotels. I live in a village. I have never been to an airport."

Subtheme 3.2: Yearning for Digital and Personal Content

Several students explicitly expressed a desire for content that reflected their digital lives. S2 explained: "I spend hours on TikTok and Instagram. I know English words from there. But in class, we never use those words. It's like two different worlds." S6 added: "If we could talk about our favorite games or YouTube videos, I would remember the words easily. But the textbook words feel useless."

Subtheme 3.3: Proficiency-Based Variation in Perceived Relevance

Interestingly, the experience of irrelevance varied by proficiency level. Higher-proficiency students (S7, S4, S1) expressed the disconnect more strongly and articulated it more clearly. S7 stated: "I know enough English to understand that the textbook topics are not useful for my real life. It makes me feel like school English is a separate, fake language." In contrast, lower-proficiency students tended to express confusion or boredom rather than explicit critique of relevance. S12, a low-proficiency student, said: "I don't know why we learn this. I just do what the teacher says." This variation suggests that higher-proficiency students are more cognitively aware of the gap between classroom English and authentic language use, making them more frustrated by the disconnect.

Contrasting Case

A single student (S14) offered a contrasting perspective, suggesting that she was able to find personal connections despite the textbook content: "Even though the topics are sometimes boring, I try to imagine that I am the person in the dialogue. I think, 'What would I say if I was there?' That helps." This indicates that individual strategies for creating relevance can mediate the negative impact of disconnected content.

Subtheme 3.4: The Cognitive and Affective Impact of Irrelevance

The disconnect made it difficult for students to invest cognitive effort in making personal connections or critical evaluations, which are hallmarks of deep learning. S1 explained: "If I can't connect it to myself, I just memorize and forget. There's no reason to remember it." S5 added: "I feel sleepy when the topic is boring. My mind wanders. I don't learn anything." This affective impact of boredom, disengagement, and frustration represents a significant barrier to deep processing.

Discussion

Theme 1: Relational Feedback as a Catalyst for Deep Learning

Connection to Deep Learning Theory

The finding that relational feedback was perceived as the most powerful catalyst for deep engagement aligns closely with sociocultural theory, which posits that learning is mediated through social interaction and scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978; Ding, 2025). In this study, the teacher's role as a responsive dialogic partner appeared more catalytic for deep cognitive engagement than the structural complexity of any assigned activity. This supports the theoretical assertion that deep learning is not merely a cognitive process but fundamentally a social and relational one (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Furthermore, the emphasis on personalized, encouraging feedback resonates with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic psychological needs for intrinsic motivation. When students received feedback that made them feel "noticed" (S6) and encouraged them to "think about meaning" (S8), these needs were being met, fostering the intrinsic motivation essential for deep learning. The contrast between interactive feedback and "just doing exercises" highlights that deep learning requires a departure from transmission-based models of teaching. When tasks are completed without meaningful follow-up, they remain at the level of surface engagement, regardless of their design complexity. This finding supports Entwistle's (2000) distinction between deep and surface approaches to learning, where the learner's intention and the context of learning are as important as the task itself.

The Indonesian EFL Context

This finding is particularly significant in the Indonesian EFL context, where teacher-centered instruction and large class sizes often limit opportunities for personalized interaction (Sergis, 2019). The students' strong emphasis on relational feedback suggests a hunger for individual attention that may be unmet in typical classroom settings. In the context of Weliman, where resources are limited and students rely heavily on teacher instruction, the relational dimension of teaching becomes even more critical. The study's finding that students valued specific, encouraging comments aligns with research on effective feedback practices in Indonesian EFL contexts (Lie, 2017). However, it extends this research by demonstrating that from the student perspective, the *quality of interaction* surrounding feedback is more important than the feedback itself. This has implications for teacher professional development in Indonesia, which might traditionally focus on task design and curriculum implementation rather than relational practices.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The finding that relational feedback is paramount contrasts with the heavy emphasis on task design in much of the deep learning literature (Agyeman, 2024; Deng, 2020). While previous studies have extensively documented strategies like project-based learning and inquiry-based tasks (Han, 2023; Hamidah & Pinkan, 2023), this study suggests that these strategies are ineffective without a relational foundation. This finding supports Bloemert et al.'s (2020) call for more attention to the student voice in EFL education research, as students' priorities may differ from those of researchers or curriculum designers.

The contrasting case of S10, who found the volume of feedback overwhelming, echoes research on feedback overload (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), suggesting that the quantity and timing of feedback must be carefully managed. This nuance is often overlooked in studies that simply advocate for more feedback.

Implications for Teacher Training and Curriculum Design

The primacy of relational feedback has significant implications for teacher professional development. Training programs should emphasize:

1. **Dialogic feedback techniques:** Rather than simply marking errors, teachers should be trained to ask open-ended questions that prompt thinking (e.g., "Why do you think this word fits here?").
2. **Creating a psychologically safe classroom climate:** Students need to feel safe to make mistakes and express uncertainty. This requires explicit attention to classroom norms and teacher-student relationships.
3. **Differentiating feedback delivery:** Teachers should consider individual students' needs and preferences, possibly offering feedback in manageable chunks rather than overwhelming students with all corrections at once.

Theme 2: The Double-Edged Sword of Collaborative Work

Connection to Deep Learning Theory

The ambivalence toward collaborative work both supports and complicates theoretical perspectives on collaborative learning. On one hand, the positive aspects—peer support, idea sharing, reduced anxiety—align with sociocultural theory's emphasis on the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where learning occurs through interaction with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). On the other hand, the negative aspects—free-riding, social friction, task-oriented behavior—suggest that collaborative learning environments can also hinder deep learning. This finding resonates with the concept of "social loafing" (Karau & Williams, 1993), where individuals exert less effort in group settings. The prevalence of this issue, particularly among higher-proficiency students, suggests that collaborative tasks without individual accountability may actually *reduce* cognitive engagement for some learners, contrary to the assumption that group work always promotes deep learning. The shift from learning to "task completion" among students (S8, S13) is particularly concerning from a deep learning perspective. When students prioritize finishing over understanding, they are engaging in surface learning strategies, which have been shown to result in poor retention and transfer (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

The Indonesian EFL Context

In the Indonesian context, where students are often unaccustomed to collaborative learning due to traditional, teacher-centered practices, the challenges of group work may be amplified. Students may lack the collaborative skills necessary for effective group work, and teachers may not have received training in managing collaborative dynamics. The large class sizes typical of Indonesian schools (Sergis, 2019) may exacerbate these issues, as teachers have limited capacity to monitor group processes.

Furthermore, the emphasis on examination performance in Indonesian education may encourage the task-oriented behavior observed in this study. When students are primarily motivated by grades, they may see collaborative tasks as obstacles to be completed rather than learning opportunities to be embraced.

Comparison with Previous Studies

This finding both supports and complicates existing research on collaborative learning. While collaboration has been championed for developing critical thinking and communication skills (Teng & Zhang, 2020; Johnson & Johnson, 2009), this study uncovers the hidden social

dynamics—free-riding, social friction, task-orientation—that can undermine its deep learning potential in real classrooms. This aligns with research by Volet and Wosnitza (2004), who found that peer interactions can sometimes lead to superficial engagement. However, much of the collaboration literature focuses on well-resourced, supportive contexts. This study extends that literature by documenting the specific challenges faced by students in low-resource contexts, where teachers and students may lack the training and support necessary for effective collaboration. The contrasting case of S5, who reported consistently positive collaborative experiences, demonstrates that effective group structures can mitigate these challenges. This finding supports research on cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), which emphasizes the importance of positive interdependence, individual accountability, and group processing.

Unexpected and Contradictory Findings

The gender differences observed in collaborative experiences were unexpected. Female students generally reported more positive experiences, while male students more frequently expressed frustration with free-riding. This may reflect broader social patterns in Indonesian culture, where gender roles may influence collaborative dynamics. Alternatively, it may reflect differences in communication styles or social skills. This finding warrants further investigation. The contrasting case of S14, who found personal connections to disconnected content, suggests that individual strategies can mediate the negative impact of irrelevant content. This resilience and creativity in learning represents an important area for future research.

Implications for Teacher Training and Curriculum Design

Based on these findings, several practical implications emerge:

1. **Explicit training in collaborative skills:** Teachers should explicitly teach students how to collaborate effectively, including how to divide tasks, support group members, and manage conflict.
2. **Individual accountability in group work:** Assessment should include individual contributions to prevent free-riding and ensure that all students are engaging with the content.
3. **Structured group roles:** Assigning specific roles (researcher, writer, presenter, checker) can promote equal participation and reduce social friction.
4. **Monitoring and intervention:** Teachers should actively monitor group processes and intervene when necessary to redirect task-oriented behavior toward deeper engagement.

Theme 3: The Disconnect Between "Classroom English" and the "Real Me"

Connection to Deep Learning Theory

The finding that perceived irrelevance acts as a significant barrier to deep learning directly challenges a core assumption of deep learning theory: the learner's need to integrate new knowledge with existing cognitive structures (Biggs & Tang, 2011). If students cannot see a point of connection between "classroom English" and their "real self," this integration is thwarted from the outset. This finding supports Ausubel's (1968) theory of meaningful learning, which posits that learning is most effective when new information is linked to existing knowledge. In the absence of such connections, learning remains rote and superficial. The students' struggle to connect textbook content to their digital lives (social media, gaming, YouTube) suggests that their "existing cognitive structures" are shaped by digital culture, while the curriculum remains bound to traditional content. The cognitive and affective impact of irrelevance—boredom, disengagement, frustration—highlights the emotional dimension of deep learning. This aligns with theories of motivation in second language acquisition (Dörnyei,

2001), which emphasize that learner emotions and attitudes significantly influence learning outcomes.

The Indonesian EFL Context

This finding is particularly significant in the Indonesian context, where EFL curricula often draw on content that is far removed from students' lived experiences (Lie, 2017). The students' desire to discuss their games, YouTube videos, and social media reflects the broader tension between local educational contexts and globalized media culture. In low-resource contexts like Weliman, the irrelevance gap may be even more pronounced. Students have limited access to authentic English materials, making them dependent on textbooks that may not be culturally or locally relevant. This finding underscores the need for more localized and personalized content in EFL materials, not merely as a pedagogical preference but as a psychological prerequisite for deep engagement.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The strong theme of irrelevance echoes calls for more localized and personalized content in EFL materials (Lie, 2017). However, this study frames it not just as a pedagogical preference but as a psychological prerequisite for deep engagement. While previous research has documented the need for culturally relevant materials (Gay, 2010), this study provides empirical evidence from the student perspective, demonstrating that irrelevance is not merely a matter of interest but a fundamental barrier to deep processing. The finding that higher-proficiency students felt the disconnect more strongly aligns with research on learner autonomy and self-awareness (Benson, 2011). More proficient learners are more aware of their learning needs and goals, making them more critical of content they perceive as irrelevant. This has implications for differentiated instruction: advanced learners may require different content or task types than beginners.

The contrasting case of S14, who actively worked to create personal connections to disconnected content, demonstrates the importance of learner agency. This resilience in the face of irrelevance is a valuable skill that could be cultivated in other students.

Unexpected and Contradictory Findings

The finding that irrelevance was the most prominent barrier to deep learning, mentioned by all 15 students, was unexpected in its intensity. While previous research has noted the importance of relevance (Lie, 2017), the pervasiveness and strength of this finding suggests that it is a more significant issue than previously recognized. The contrasting case of S14, who found ways to connect with disconnected content, demonstrates that individual learner strategies can mitigate the negative impact of irrelevance. This suggests that explicitly teaching students how to make personal connections to content could be a useful pedagogical strategy.

Implications for Teacher Training and Curriculum Design

Based on these findings, several practical implications emerge:

1. **Incorporating student voice and choice:** Curriculum and task design must incorporate student interests and allow for choices in topics and formats. As S3 insightfully suggested, "Let us ask the questions sometimes too."
2. **Bridging the relevance gap with digital content:** Teachers should integrate students' digital lives into the curriculum, allowing them to discuss their games, social media, and YouTube videos in English.
3. **Localizing the curriculum:** Textbook content should be adapted to include local cultural references and topics relevant to students' lives.

4. **Teaching connection-making strategies:** Students should be explicitly taught how to make personal connections to content, as exemplified by S14's strategy of "imagining I am the person in the dialogue."
5. **Differentiated content:** Higher-proficiency students may require more challenging or personally relevant content to maintain engagement.

Implications for Assessment in Collaborative Tasks

The finding that unfair grading and free-riding are significant issues in collaborative work has important implications for assessment. Current assessment practices in Indonesian schools often assign a single grade to all group members, which may encourage free-riding and discourage individual effort. To promote deep learning in collaborative settings, assessment should include:

1. **Individual contributions:** Assess each student's contribution to the group product, such as through individual written reflections or peer evaluations.
2. **Process-oriented assessment:** Assess not just the final product but the process of collaboration, including participation, support for peers, and management of group dynamics.
3. **Self and peer assessment:** Include self-assessment and peer assessment to promote accountability and metacognitive awareness.
4. **Weighting of group versus individual components:** The final grade should reflect a balance of group and individual work, to incentivize both collaboration and individual effort.

Conclusion

This study concludes that for junior high school EFL students in Weliman, the pathway to deep learning is less about the technical design of instructional strategies and more profoundly influenced by the quality of teacher-student interaction and the personal relevance of the learning content. Students experience deep learning most acutely in moments of responsive, idea-focused dialogue with their teacher. Conversely, even well-structured collaborative tasks can devolve into surface-level activity if social dynamics are unmanaged, and a persistent sense of irrelevance remains a significant barrier. These context-specific findings contribute to EFL research by providing empirical evidence from the student perspective, an angle often overlooked in studies that prioritize teacher perceptions or quantitative outcome measurements. The phenomenological approach adopted in this research reveals that students' affective and relational experiences are central to their cognitive engagement, challenging the dominant emphasis on task design in the deep learning literature. A key limitation of this study is its focus on a single school, which limits generalizability. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data may not capture unconscious learning processes. Based on these findings, it is recommended that EFL teachers prioritize building strong relational rapport and integrating student interests and local contexts into the curriculum. For future research, a multi-school study would address the limitation of single-site focus and enhance transferability. Additionally, incorporating observational methods alongside self-reported data could capture learning processes that students may not consciously articulate. Investigating teacher perspectives would provide a valuable comparative lens, while a longitudinal action-research study co-designed with teachers and students could evaluate the effectiveness of interventions that enhance personal relevance in EFL tasks.

Acknowledgment

The researchers would like to extend their deepest gratitude to the principal, teachers, and students of SMP Weliman for their invaluable participation and openness. This study was partially supported by the STIPAS KAK. We also thank our colleagues for their meaningful suggestions during the manuscript development and the anonymous reviewers of the seminar where a preliminary version of this paper was presented.

References

- Agyeman, N. Y. B. (2024). Deep learning in high schools: exploring pedagogical approaches for transformative education. *Humanika: Kajian Ilmiah Mata Kuliah Umum*, 24(2), 111–126. <https://doi.org/10.21831/hum.v24i2.71350>
- Agyeman, N. Y. B. (2024). Deep learning in high schools: exploring pedagogical approaches for transformative education. *Humanika: Kajian Ilmiah Mata Kuliah Umum*, 24(2), 111–126. <https://doi.org/10.21831/hum.v24i2.71350>
- Bloemert, J., Paran, A., & Jansen, E. (2020). Connecting students and researchers: the secondary school student's voice in foreign language education research. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 50(4), 429–449. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2020.1720603>
- Bloemert, J., Paran, A., & Jansen, E. (2020). Connecting students and researchers: the secondary school student's voice in foreign language education research. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 50(4), 429–449. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2020.1720603>
- Bloemert, J., Paran, A., & Jansen, E. (2020). Connecting students and researchers: the secondary school student's voice in foreign language education research. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 50(4), 429–449. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2020.1720603>
- Bonyadi, A. (2023). Phenomenology as a research methodology in teaching English as a foreign language. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-022-00184-z>
- Ding, N. (2025). Analysis of the Role of Teacher Feedback in Students' Cognitive Engagement. *International Journal of Education and Humanities*, 18(1), 279–283. <https://doi.org/10.54097/6qe8s854>
- Deng, Z., & Chen, L. (2020). *Cultivating Higher-Order Skills Based on the Connotation and Teaching Logic of Deep Learning*. <https://doi.org/10.1109/CIPAE51077.2020.00101>
- Han, L. (n.d.). A Practical Study of Project-based Learning Approach Pointing to Deep Learning in College English Teaching. *International Journal of New Developments in Education*. <https://doi.org/10.25236/ijnde.2023.052003>
- Hamidah, F. N., & Pinkan, F. N. (2023). Project-based learning in the language classroom: engaging learners in authentic language use. *TRANSFORMATIONAL LANGUAGE LITERATURE AND TECHNOLOGY OVERVIEW IN LEARNING (TRANSTOOL)*, 2(1), 29–34. <https://doi.org/10.55047/transtool.v2i1.1371>
- Madeamin, R., & Sahriani, S. (2025). Transformation of Indonesian language learning:

Integration of deep learning strategy with character education in the era of independent learning. *International Journal of Nusantara Islam*, 13(2), 229–244. <https://doi.org/10.15575/ijni.v13i2.46155>

Miharja, F. J., Setyaningrum, Y., Wahyuningtyas, Y., Masrudi, M., Nurhidayati, F. I., & Mawaddah, M. (2024). *Designing collaborative learning: Shifting learning ownership for students*. 193–199. <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781003376125-26>