



“Teachers’ Challenges and Strategies in Developing Deep Learning-Oriented English Lesson Plans”

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the challenges and strategies of English teachers in developing deep learning-oriented lesson plans under the Merdeka Curriculum in a vocational high school context. This research employed a qualitative case study design involving four English teachers selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that teachers generally possess a strong conceptual understanding of deep learning, emphasizing meaningful, contextual, and student-centered learning. However, a gap exists between teachers’ conceptual understanding and its practical implementation in lesson planning. The challenges identified include diverse student abilities, time constraints, curriculum demands, and limited resources. In addition, teachers’ prior teaching experiences influence both their strengths and difficulties in adapting to deep learning approaches. To address these challenges, teachers apply various strategies, such as implementing student-centered activities, adapting learning materials to vocational contexts, engaging in reflective practices, and integrating technology into lesson planning. These findings indicate that lesson planning is a complex cognitive process shaped by the interaction of teachers’ beliefs, knowledge, experiences, and contextual factors. This study highlights the need for continuous professional development and stronger institutional support to bridge the gap between conceptual understanding and practical implementation of deep learning in English language teaching, particularly in vocational education settings.

1. Introduction

Educational reform has increasingly emphasized learning approaches that promote meaningful understanding, critical thinking, and long-term knowledge retention rather than surface-level memorization. Within this shift, deep learning has emerged as a central concept in contemporary educational discourse (Hasanah et al., 2025). Deep learning focuses on students' active knowledge construction, the integration of prior and new knowledge, and the ability to apply learning in authentic contexts (Fullan et al., 2018). In instructional planning, this orientation requires teachers to design meaningful objectives, authentic learning tasks, and aligned assessment practices. As a result, learning moves beyond mechanical content delivery toward purposeful engagement in which students actively construct and apply knowledge. This is particularly important in language education, where communicative competence depends on meaningful and contextualized language use (Xu et al., 2025).

In response to this global shift, Indonesia has introduced the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes learner autonomy, contextualized learning, and competency-based instruction. In English language education, the curriculum promotes flexible and student-centered learning design aligned with deep learning principles (Abidin & Malisa, 2023). However, curriculum reform does not automatically lead to effective classroom practices. Teachers play a crucial role in interpreting and enacting curriculum expectations, and their instructional decisions significantly influence how reforms are implemented in practice (Tran et al., 2023).

From the perspective of teacher cognition theory, instructional practices are shaped by a dynamic interaction between cognitive and contextual factors (Borg, 2015). These include teachers' beliefs, professional knowledge, prior teaching experiences, and the institutional contexts in which they work. Teachers' beliefs influence how pedagogical concepts are interpreted, while professional knowledge guides instructional planning. At the same time, prior experiences and contextual constraints shape how teachers make practical decisions in classroom settings. Therefore, lesson planning can be understood not merely as a technical task, but as a cognitive process in which teachers interpret knowledge, negotiate constraints, and make instructional choices.

Lesson planning serves as a crucial bridge between curriculum expectations and classroom practice. It involves organizing learning objectives, instructional activities, materials, and assessment strategies to ensure coherent instruction (Richards & Farrell, 2005). In EFL contexts, lesson plans function not only as administrative requirements but also as pedagogical frameworks that guide instructional alignment and student engagement (Nurhaeliani et al., 2025). Under the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers are expected to integrate deep learning principles by designing meaningful tasks, reflective activities, and authentic language use (Satosa et al., 2025). However, previous studies indicate that teachers often face difficulties in translating these principles into practical lesson plans due to constraints such as limited time, heavy workloads, and insufficient professional support (Dahlia & Ira Maisarah, 2025).

These challenges become more complex in vocational education settings, where English learning must align with students' professional needs. In this context, English is not only an academic subject but also a functional tool for workplace communication (Ma'fiah & Sumardiono, 2023). Consequently, lesson planning requires teachers to integrate language skills with vocational relevance while maintaining deep learning objectives. This creates additional pressure for teachers, as they must balance curriculum demands, student needs, and contextual applicability. Previous studies also highlight that

teachers in vocational contexts frequently struggle to design materials and learning activities that reflect real-world language use (Sukyning et al., 2023; Wardani et al., 2025).

Several studies have examined challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, including limited training, unclear conceptual understanding, and difficulties in adapting to curriculum changes (Emawati et al., 2024; Reza et al., 2023). Other studies have focused on teachers’ readiness and perceptions, showing that although teachers generally support the curriculum, they still face obstacles in lesson planning and assessment design (Arina & Tri Herlambang, 2025; Azizah, 2024). In addition, research on deep learning in EFL contexts highlights the importance of strategies such as problem-based learning, reflective discussion, and authentic communicative tasks in promoting meaningful learning (Abdurakhimova, 2024; Ardiansyah, 2023). However, these studies primarily focus on classroom implementation rather than the instructional planning process

Despite the growing body of research, limited attention has been given to how teachers cognitively navigate the process of developing deep learning-oriented lesson plans. There is a lack of micro-level analysis of teacher cognition in lesson planning, especially in vocational education contexts. This gap is significant because lesson planning reflects how teachers interpret curriculum demands and negotiate contextual constraints in practice (Borg, 2015; Sehweil et al., 2024).

Guided by teacher cognition theory (Borg, 2015), this study aims to explore the challenges faced by English teachers in developing deep learning-oriented lesson plans under the Merdeka Curriculum in a vocational school context, as well as the strategies they employ to address those challenges. Through this approach, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how cognitive and contextual factors shape instructional planning in real educational settings.

2. Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the challenges faced by English teachers in developing deep learning-oriented lesson plans within a vocational high school context. A qualitative approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers’ experiences, perceptions, and instructional decision-making processes in real educational settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study design enabled the researcher to investigate a bounded system within a specific institutional and curricular context.

Participants

The participants of this study were four English teachers from a public vocational high school in Lampung Province, Indonesia. They were selected using purposive sampling, as they were directly involved in designing and implementing English lesson plans under the Merdeka Curriculum.

All participants were considered information-rich individuals who could provide relevant insights into the research focus. In addition, they had varying teaching experience, allowing for diverse perspectives on instructional planning practices.

Data Collection

The primary data collection technique used in this study was semi-structured interviews. This method was selected because it allows the researcher to prepare guiding questions while maintaining flexibility to explore emerging issues during the interview process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The interview protocol consisted of 12 main questions designed based on teacher cognition theory by Simon Borg (2015), focusing on four key dimensions: teachers' beliefs, professional knowledge, prior teaching experiences, and instructional context. Each dimension was represented by several guiding questions to ensure comprehensive data collection.

For example, questions related to teachers' beliefs explored their understanding of deep learning and effective learning practices, while questions on contextual factors addressed challenges related to curriculum demands, time constraints, and school resources. Follow-up questions were also used to obtain deeper insights from participants' responses.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face, depending on participants' availability. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. The recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached, indicated by the absence of new themes or significant insights from subsequent interviews.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed several stages: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes.

The coding process was guided by the four dimensions of teacher cognition theory proposed by Simon Borg (2015), namely teachers' beliefs, professional knowledge, prior teaching experiences, and instructional context. Initial codes were generated from the data and categorized according to these dimensions.

For example, codes such as "difficulty adapting materials" were categorized under professional knowledge, while "limited time" and "lack of facilities" were categorized under instructional context. These codes were then grouped into broader categories and further developed into themes such as difficulties in designing contextualized materials, pedagogical challenges in addressing student diversity, and institutional constraints in implementing deep learning.

While the analysis was primarily guided by these theoretical dimensions (deductive), new patterns and themes also emerged inductively from the data, particularly in relation to teachers' strategies and context-specific challenges. This approach ensured a systematic, theory-informed, and data-driven analysis.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study applied credibility strategies such as member checking and reflective memoing. Member checking was conducted by confirming the interview findings with participants to ensure accuracy and validity. Reflective memoing was used to document the researcher's analytical process throughout the study.

3. Result

The findings of this study reveal that teachers’ challenges and strategies in developing deep learning-oriented English lesson plans are shaped by the interaction between cognitive factors, contextual constraints, and adaptive strategies. Based on the thematic analysis, the results are organized into three main categories: (1) teachers’ cognition, (2) instructional and contextual challenges, and (3) teachers’ strategies.

Teachers’ Cognition of Deep Learning and Effective Instruction

The findings indicate that teachers conceptualize deep learning as a meaningful and contextual learning process that goes beyond surface-level understanding. Teachers emphasized that deep learning involves students’ ability to apply English in real-world contexts, particularly in relation to their vocational fields. As one teacher stated, deep learning “is not just about understanding the material superficially, but about using the language in real-world contexts” (T1).

This perspective indicates that teachers possess a relatively strong conceptual understanding of deep learning as an application-oriented and practice-based approach. However, this understanding does not fully translate into instructional practice, suggesting a gap between teachers’ conceptual beliefs and their practical implementation of deep learning in lesson planning.

Furthermore, teachers believe that effective learning must actively engage students in the learning process. They emphasized the importance of student participation through discussion, practice, and exploration. This reflects a shift toward student-centered learning orientations, where students are positioned as active participants rather than passive recipients.

However, despite this strong conceptual alignment, the findings reveal an underlying tension between teachers’ beliefs and their ability to implement these principles in practice, particularly when faced with classroom realities.

Instructional and Contextual Challenges

Despite their strong conceptual understanding, teachers encounter significant challenges in implementing deep learning in instructional planning. One of the most prominent challenges is related to student diversity, including differences in ability, motivation, and readiness. As one participant noted, “student abilities are not evenly distributed” (T3).

This finding indicates that the primary difficulty lies not in understanding deep learning, but in adapting it to heterogeneous classroom conditions. Teachers must continuously adjust their instructional approaches to accommodate varying student needs, which complicates the design of effective lesson plans.

In addition, teachers experience difficulties in selecting and developing instructional materials that align with both deep learning principles and vocational contexts. Learning materials are often perceived as too general and insufficiently relevant to students’ specific fields. This highlights the contextual complexity of English instruction in vocational education, where learning must be closely connected to real-world applications.

Furthermore, institutional constraints such as limited instructional time, curriculum demands, and restricted access to resources further hinder the implementation of deep learning. Teachers reported that the available time is often insufficient to support in-depth learning processes, while curriculum requirements create additional pressure to meet specific learning outcomes.

These findings suggest that contextual factors play a dominant role in shaping instructional challenges. Teachers are required to constantly negotiate between ideal pedagogical principles and practical classroom limitations, making lesson planning a complex and demanding process.

Teachers' Strategies in Addressing Challenges

In response to these challenges, teachers employ various adaptive strategies to support the implementation of deep learning. These strategies include engaging students through interactive activities such as discussions and hands-on practice, conducting reflective practices to improve instructional effectiveness, and utilizing available technology to support lesson design.

In addition, teachers apply differentiated instruction to accommodate diverse student needs, demonstrating their awareness of classroom heterogeneity. They also adapt learning materials to better align with vocational contexts, ensuring that learning remains relevant and meaningful.

These findings indicate that teachers are not passive implementers of the curriculum, but active agents who continuously adjust their instructional practices based on contextual demands. Their ability to adapt reflects a dynamic and responsive approach to lesson planning.

Across all themes, the most critical finding of this study is the persistent gap between teachers' strong conceptual understanding of deep learning and the practical challenges of implementing it in real classroom contexts. This gap emerges as the central issue underlying all identified challenges.

4. Discussion

This study demonstrates that the challenges and strategies experienced by teachers in developing deep learning-oriented English lesson plans are shaped by a dynamic interaction between cognitive and contextual factors. This finding aligns with the framework proposed by Simon Borg (2015), which emphasizes that teachers' instructional practices are influenced by their beliefs, professional knowledge, prior experiences, and the contexts in which they operate.

First, the findings suggest that teachers' strong conceptual understanding of deep learning reflects a cognitive alignment with contemporary pedagogical principles. However, this alignment does not necessarily translate into effective classroom practice, indicating a gap between cognition and implementation. This supports Borg's (2015) argument that teachers' beliefs do not directly determine instructional practices, as they are mediated by contextual constraints.

Second, professional knowledge emerges as both an enabling and limiting factor in instructional planning. While teachers demonstrate awareness of key pedagogical strategies such as student-centered learning, differentiation, and reflective practices, their application remains inconsistent. This suggests that teachers' professional competence is still in a developmental stage, particularly in translating abstract pedagogical concepts into concrete lesson plan designs. This finding supports previous research indicating that limited training and insufficient pedagogical support can hinder the effective implementation of new curriculum approaches (Emawati et al., 2024). Therefore, strengthening teachers' professional knowledge through continuous development programs becomes essential.

Third, prior teaching experience plays a dual role in shaping instructional practices. On one hand, experience enables teachers to adapt, reflect, and refine their lesson planning based on classroom realities. This reflects the development of adaptive expertise, where teachers learn from past practices to improve future instruction. On the other hand, prior experience can also act as a constraint, particularly when teachers are accustomed to teacher-centered approaches. This suggests that transitioning toward deep learning-oriented instruction requires not only experience but also a shift in pedagogical mindset and practice.

Most importantly, the findings highlight that contextual factors represent the most dominant source of challenges. These include student diversity, time limitations, curriculum demands, and resource availability. This indicates that the primary difficulty in implementing deep learning does not lie in teachers’ understanding, but in their ability to adapt instructional design to complex classroom conditions. In vocational education contexts, these challenges are further intensified by the need to align English instruction with students’ professional fields, making lesson planning more demanding and context dependent. This finding is consistent with previous studies emphasizing the significant influence of contextual constraints on instructional practices (Dahlia & Ira Maisarah, 2025).

Interestingly, the study also reveals variations in how teachers perceive and respond to these contextual constraints. While some teachers view these challenges as major obstacles, others perceive them as manageable and even as opportunities for adaptation. This suggests that teachers’ responses are mediated by their beliefs, confidence, and adaptability, reinforcing the idea that teacher cognition functions as an interpretive lens through which contextual realities are understood and addressed (Borg, 2015).

Furthermore, the findings show that teachers actively develop adaptive strategies to cope with these challenges. These include adapting learning materials to vocational contexts, implementing interactive and student-centered activities, engaging in reflective practices, and utilizing available technology. This suggests that teachers are not merely passive implementers of the curriculum, but active agents who continuously negotiate between pedagogical ideals and contextual constraints to maintain instructional effectiveness (SwarSuri, 2024).

Overall, the findings highlight a persistent gap between teachers’ conceptual understanding and their practical implementation of deep learning, reinforcing the complexity of instructional planning as both a cognitive and contextual process.

This study contributes to the literature by providing a micro-level understanding of how teacher cognition interacts with contextual constraints in lesson planning, particularly in vocational EFL contexts. While previous studies have largely focused on classroom implementation, this study highlights the instructional planning stage as a critical site of pedagogical decision-making.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the study involved a limited number of participants from a single vocational school, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Second, the data were primarily based on self-reported interviews, which may not fully capture actual classroom practices. Future research is recommended to include classroom observations and a broader participant scope to provide a more comprehensive understanding of deep learning implementation in diverse educational contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the challenges and strategies faced by English teachers in developing deep learning-oriented lesson plans under the Merdeka Curriculum in a vocational school context. The findings indicate that lesson planning is not merely a technical activity, but a complex cognitive process shaped by teachers' beliefs, professional knowledge, prior experiences, and contextual factors.

The study reveals that teachers generally possess a strong conceptual understanding of deep learning, emphasizing meaningful, contextual, and student-centered learning. However, a gap remains between teachers' understanding and its practical implementation in lesson planning. This gap is influenced by several challenges, including time constraints, diverse student abilities, curriculum demands, and limited resources. In addition, prior teaching experience plays a dual role, as it supports reflective practices while also creating challenges when teachers shift from teacher-centered to student-centered approaches.

Furthermore, the vocational school context requires teachers to align English learning with students' specific fields, adding complexity to the instructional planning process. Despite these challenges, teachers actively develop adaptive strategies, such as implementing student-centered activities, contextualizing learning materials, engaging in reflective practices, and utilizing technology to support lesson planning.

These findings highlight the need for continuous professional development. They also emphasize the importance of stronger institutional support to facilitate the effective implementation of deep learning in English language teaching. Schools are encouraged to provide collaborative platforms, targeted training programs, and adequate resources to support teachers' instructional planning. In addition, policymakers should offer clearer practical guidelines for integrating deep learning principles within the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in vocational education contexts. Future research is recommended to involve a broader range of participants and to examine the implementation of deep learning in classroom practices to gain more comprehensive insights into its impact on teaching and learning.

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Salsabila Abelagista Anindya, Elis Susanti

“Teachers’ Challenges and Strategies in Developing Deep Learning-Oriented English Lesson Plans”

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