



Challenges and Possibilities of Implementing Deep Learning Approach in English Language Learning at Junior High School

Dhea Ayu Astuti Olii¹, Suleman Bouti², Irmawaty Umar³

^{1,2,3}Department of English Language Education, Faculty of Letters and Cultures,
Universitas Negeri Gorontalo

Article Info	Abstract
Accepted: 2025-11-21 Revised: 2026-06-22 Accepted: 2026-06-25 Keywords: <i>Challenges, Possibilities, English Teaching, Deep Learning Approach</i> DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.8494 Corresponding authors: Dhea Ayu Astuti Olii oliideea143@gmail.com Department of English Language Education, Faculty of Letters and Cultures, Universitas Negeri Gorontalo	<i>This study examines the challenges and possibilities of implementing a Deep Learning approach in English language learning at MTs Al Islah Gorontalo. Using a qualitative case study involving observations, interviews with three English teachers, and analysis of lesson plan documents, the study identified that implementation is in a transitional stage. Possible outcomes include teachers' established initial understanding of the Deep Learning concept. Furthermore, classroom observations revealed high student participation, cognitive engagement (questioning and discussion), and enthusiasm, indicating the successful creation of a conducive and meaningful learning environment. Challenges include the acknowledged difficulty in designing truly meaningful and differentiated tasks for students. Structural barriers also emerged, with heavy administrative workloads consuming teachers' time, limiting the space needed for deep learning innovation and creative instructional design. The study concludes that despite these pedagogical and structural barriers, the Deep Learning approach holds significant potential for transformative English language education.</i>

1. Introduction

Education in Indonesia continues to undergo significant transformation to adapt to the demands of the 21st century. A key reform is the introduction of the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek). This curriculum is designed to provide flexibility for schools and teachers to organize learning processes that are more contextual, flexible, and student-centered. It emphasizes project-based learning, differentiation, and character strengthening.

The teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesia, particularly within the Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) level, often struggles with achieving communicative competence. Traditional methodologies frequently emphasize grammar translation and rote memorization, leading to students possessing theoretical knowledge but lacking practical, functional language skills. The Independent Curriculum attempts to address this by mandating a shift towards pedagogical models that prioritize communicative outcomes and practical application.

However, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in various educational units, including madrasahs, still faces significant challenges. Many educators implement this curriculum primarily in an administrative and procedural manner, such as merely selecting teaching modules or using flexible assessment forms, without fully grasping the transformative substance of the learning process itself. Consequently, the learning process often remains traditional: one-way, teacher-centered, and heavily oriented toward superficial academic achievement.

This pedagogical deficiency necessitates the adoption of constructivist and socio-constructivist approaches, of which Deep Learning is a prime example. Unlike behaviorist models that view learning as a passive reception of information, Deep Learning is predicated on the idea that students actively construct knowledge through meaningful interaction with content and peers (Biggs & Tang, 2011). In the context of English, this means moving away from merely learning about the language to actively using the language to solve problems and collaborate.

This situation highlights the necessity for a paradigm shift from a focus on structure and procedure to a deeper pedagogical approach, known as Deep Learning. According to Fullan, Quinn, and McEachen (2018), Deep Learning emphasizes the development of 21st-century competencies, including critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration. This approach ensures that learning is directed not only at the mastery of knowledge but also at emotional engagement, reflective awareness, and the construction of meaning (Fullan et al., 2018; Biggs & Tang, 2011). Deep learning involves holistic engagement with the material, constructing understanding, making meaningful connections, and the ability to apply knowledge across contexts. This contrasts fundamentally with the surface learning approach.

The alignment of Deep Learning with the 6Cs is particularly pertinent to global language education. Mastering English today requires more than vocabulary; it demands critical thinking (to analyze information), effective communication (to articulate ideas clearly), collaboration (to work in global teams), and creativity (to generate innovative solutions). Therefore, the success of the Independent Curriculum in English classrooms hinges on whether teachers can transition from basic content delivery to designing tasks that explicitly cultivate these six competencies.

The existing problem in classroom practice (surface learning and procedural implementation of the Independent Curriculum) creates a critical gap with the theoretical demands of the curriculum (meaningful learning, contextual, and reflective practice). Furthermore, the tension between the dense curriculum/administrative workload and the required deep planning for innovation represents a pedagogical challenge that requires specific exploration (Fullan, 2007).

MTs Al Islah Gorontalo serves as a representative case study of a junior high school operating under the national curriculum reform in a non-urban, regional context. Understanding the implementation of the ADLX model within this specific environment which faces challenges related to infrastructure, resources, and administrative demands is crucial for providing targeted, evidence-based recommendations for educational policy makers and practitioners both regionally and nationally.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the challenges and possibilities experienced by teachers and students in implementing the Deep Learning approach, specifically the Active Deep Learner Experience (ADLX) model, in English language learning at MTs Al Islah Gorontalo, thereby establishing the current novelty and transitional stage of implementation in this specific context.

The concept of Deep Learning is centered on enabling students to master content while also developing the six global competencies (6Cs): character, citizenship, communication, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration (Fullan, Quinn, & McEachen, 2018). These competencies are crucial for navigating complex 21st-century challenges and represent the ultimate goal of educational transformation under the Independent Curriculum.

A core model used for implementing Deep Learning in the classroom is the Active Deep Learner Experience (ADLX). ADLX emphasizes four key instructional components to foster deep engagement (Fullan et al., 2018):

1. **Mindful Learning:** Ensuring students are aware of the learning goals and process, often achieved by clearly stating learning objectives and assessment criteria at the outset. This aspect promotes student self-regulation and goal orientation.

2. **Meaningful Learning:** Connecting the content to students' real lives, interests, and prior experiences to ensure relevance and stimulate intrinsic motivation. In English language learning, this involves using authentic contexts and tasks.
3. **Joyful Learning:** Creating a positive, engaging, and collaborative classroom environment where students feel safe to take risks and explore. This often involves interactive activities and a supportive teacher-student relationship.
4. **Use of Media/Technology:** Leveraging diverse tools and digital resources to enrich content delivery, facilitate collaboration, and enable creative expression. This component is increasingly vital in modern language education.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine the implementation of the Deep Learning approach in the specific context of MTs Al Islah Gorontalo. The research participants are English teachers at the junior high school level. Data collection was conducted through three main techniques: (1) Classroom Observation to assess how the principles of Deep Learning (Mindful, Meaningful, Joyful, use of media/technology) are applied in real-time interactions;

(2) In-depth interviews conducted with three English teachers to gather perspectives on understandings, challenges, strategies, and obstacles regarding the Deep Learning approach; and (3) Document Analysis of teaching materials, including teachers' lesson plans (RPP/Teaching Modules), teaching modules, and assessment rubrics, to evaluate the integration of Deep Learning principles into the planning. The collected qualitative data were then analyzed thematically to identify core challenges and possibilities in the implementation of Deep Learning.

Data Analysis Techniques: This analysis follows Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which consists of three concurrent steps:

- 1) **Data Reduction**, in which field notes, interview transcripts, and document excerpts were summarized and coded based on themes related to Deep Learning challenges (e.g., Assessment Issues, Teacher Readiness) and possibilities (e.g., Student Motivation, Meaningful Learning, Technology Use, External Support).

- 2) **Data Display**, in which the coded data were arranged in tabular form.

Conclusion Drawing/Verification, in which initial findings were cross-checked across the three data sources (observations, interviews, documents) to establish triangulation and ensure the credibility of the conclusions.

3. Results

The findings are organized by outlining the pedagogical and structural challenges, followed by the possibilities for success identified in the study.

Challenge 1: Teacher Readiness and Assessment Issues

Interview results revealed that teachers are in a transitional stage regarding their mastery of the Deep Learning approach. While they possess initial conceptual understanding viewing it as an approach for deep comprehension rather than rote memorization the major challenge lies in the practical application. The conceptual understanding among teachers was generally positive. Teacher 2, for example, articulated Deep Learning as an effort to ensure that "the material learned will be more etched in their memory," aligning with the goal of deep retention over surface memorization. Teacher 1 specifically acknowledged the difficulty in designing truly meaningful tasks and developing differentiated instruction strategies, which directly relates to assessment issues under the Deep Learning framework.

This highlights a gap between conceptual knowledge and the ability to implement authentic, competency-based assessment. The Assessment Issues are particularly acute, as teachers are accustomed to traditional summative tests and lack experience in developing complex, project-based rubrics that accurately measure competencies like critical thinking or collaboration, which are central to Deep Learning. Document analysis of lesson plans showed a preference for conventional assessment formats rather than integrated, differentiated assessments, indicating limited Teacher Readiness in the area of evaluation.

Challenge 2: Curriculum Constraints and Administrative Burden

Structural issues related to time management and workload emerged as a significant barrier. Teacher 1 stated that the dense curriculum and heavy administrative workload (e.g., preparing teaching modules, reports, and non-teaching duties) consume a considerable amount of time and energy. This constraint directly limits the capacity for instructional innovation and the dedicated time required for the thorough and creative planning necessary for high-quality Deep Learning task design.

The tension between pedagogical ideals and bureaucratic demands is a tangible constraint. Teachers reported spending significant non-teaching hours on administrative tasks mandated by the Independent Curriculum, which ironically reduces the time available for its effective implementation. This administrative pressure restricts the creative time needed for lesson differentiation, material adaptation, and innovative activity design, which are the hallmarks of a successful Deep Learning approach. Furthermore, the sheer volume of English language material required to be covered throughout the year often pressures teachers to revert to quicker, teacher-centered methods (surface learning) simply to meet the

curriculum completion targets.

Possibilities 1: Student Motivation and Engagement

The most promising aspect of the implementation is found at the student level. Classroom observations indicated high student motivation, evidenced by active participation, frequent questioning, and enthusiastic engagement in discussions. The learning environment was characterized as joyful and conducive, with students showing focus and happiness when assigned project or creative tasks. Furthermore, teachers successfully integrated the Meaningful principle by connecting material to real-life situations, significantly boosting student relevance and intrinsic motivation.

The observational data provides concrete evidence of successful ADLX elements. Field notes confirmed that students showed high enthusiasm, stating, "Students look enthusiastic when given project/creative tasks," and that "The project task cultivates the spirit of learning, students look more focused and joyful." This aligns perfectly with the Joyful Learning component of ADLX. Crucially, the Meaningful Learning element was consistently applied, with teachers providing real-life illustrations to clarify the material, making the content feel relevant and applicable. This intrinsic connection to real life is the engine driving high Student Motivation and cognitive participation, where students actively engage in class discussions and spontaneously ask questions.

Possibilities 2: Technology Use and Facilities

While teachers understood the necessity of interactive media, the lack of crucial facilities transformed technology use into a major challenge. Observations confirmed the unavailability of essential tools such as LCD projectors, speakers, and supplementary visual aids (e.g., flashcards, posters). This facility gap restricts the creative and joyful dimensions of Deep Learning that rely on rich multimedia support.

However, teachers showed professional resilience by maximizing the existing non-technological resources and maintaining effective classroom management, which underscores the potential for success when basic tools are provided. The physical infrastructure analysis painted a clear picture of limitations. The classroom environment itself was adequate, but the required modern teaching aids were conspicuously absent.

The observation log noted: "The teacher does not use creative media," and confirmed "LCD/Projector: No" and "Speaker/Sound System: No." This absolute lack of basic audio-visual equipment fundamentally restricts the implementation of Technology Use as a key ADLX component. Despite this infrastructural deficiency, the possibility remains high because the teachers demonstrated an

ability to facilitate smooth learning processes even without advanced tools, indicating strong fundamental pedagogical skills that could be amplified if resources were made available.

4. Discussion

The findings suggest that the implementation of the Deep Learning approach at MTs Al Islah Gorontalo involves a complex interplay between strong pedagogical potential and operational constraints. The current pedagogical landscape at MTs Al Islah Gorontalo reflects a classic dilemma in educational reform: while policy mandates deep change (Independent Curriculum), implementation is constrained by internal teacher capacity and external structural pressures. The transition from surface to deep pedagogy is, therefore, uneven.

Student Engagement and Transformative Potential (Possibility 1)

The high level of student motivation and cognitive engagement observed strongly confirms that the core principles of Deep Learning are successfully being initiated at the classroom level. The active participation and the joyful learning atmosphere align with Biggs and Tang's (2011) theory, which emphasizes the necessity of holistic engagement for deep learning. This represents the greatest possibility for transformative success within the institution.

This high level of Student Motivation is the primary catalyst for deep change. The alignment of Meaningful Learning connecting concepts to students' daily experiences is directly supported by Biggs and Tang (2011), who argue that a student-oriented learning environment focused on meaning fosters high-quality learning outcomes. The reported enthusiasm confirms that teachers are effectively creating a positive learning climate, fulfilling the Joyful Learning aspect of ADLX, which is a prerequisite for sustained intellectual effort and collaboration (Fullan et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the observation of students actively asking questions and engaging in discussions demonstrates that the learning environment is moving toward cultivating 'Communication' and 'Critical Thinking,' two core 6Cs. When tasks are perceived as meaningful, students are more willing to invest cognitive effort, suggesting a successful initial shift from passive listening to active knowledge construction. This confirms the feasibility of the Deep Learning approach in promoting 21st-century skills within the MTs context, provided the teacher maintains task relevance.

Pedagogical Barriers (Challenge 1: Teacher Readiness and Assessment)

The fact that teacher readiness is in a transitional stage and the struggle with designing meaningful tasks and associated assessment issues remain primary hurdles. The difficulty in creating truly differentiated and authentic tasks (which serve as both instruction and assessment) prevents students from fully developing 21st-century competencies. This issue demands focused professional development aimed at deep instructional design.

The deficit in Teacher Readiness to create differentiated and authentic tasks is a critical threat to the integrity of the Deep Learning model. Deep Learning necessitates that Assessment Issues move beyond merely testing knowledge recall (surface learning) to evaluating the 6Cs through complex performance tasks (Fullan et al., 2018). The observed preference for traditional assessment and the acknowledged difficulty in creating differentiated tasks confirm that teachers lack the necessary design skills to embed the 6Cs into their Modul Ajar. This highlights a significant training gap in shifting assessment methodology from summative scoring to formative, competency-based feedback.

The gap in Teacher Readiness is not merely about skills, but also about pedagogical beliefs. Many teachers still operate under the implicit belief that covering content is more important than achieving deep understanding, a hangover from previous curricula. Effective professional development must therefore address not only the technical aspects of designing rubrics but also the philosophical shift required to value process and competency over content coverage. Unless teachers are equipped to design truly differentiating tasks, the promise of the Independent Curriculum catering to diverse student needs will remain unfulfilled.

Structural Barriers (Challenge 2: Curriculum and Technology)

The curriculum constraints and the administrative burden, identified by Fullan (2007) as a core pedagogical tension, severely limit teachers' time for creative, in-depth lesson planning. Time that should be dedicated to designing innovative Deep Learning activities is instead consumed by administrative tasks. Furthermore, the lack of basic equipment directly affects the quality of technology use, restricting the Mindful and Joyful dimensions that multimedia support should provide. Addressing these structural barriers and providing basic facilities is a prerequisite for moving implementation from procedural compliance to substantive, transformative practice. The constraints of the Curriculum framework particularly the heavy administrative load reaffirm Fullan's (2007) assertion that meaningful educational change is often undermined by non-pedagogical pressures.

When teacher energy is diverted to bureaucracy, the necessary time for collaborative planning and resource creation is lost. Similarly, the inadequate Technology Use due to absent projectors and speakers directly violates the ADLX principle of leveraging media to enrich the learning experience. While the teachers showed resilience, the lack of these basic tools creates an unnecessary drag on the potential for Joyful and Mindful learning, limiting the scope of English activities (e.g., listening, watching authentic videos) that rely on audio-visual presentation. This resource scarcity is a significant external factor that institutional leadership must address to support pedagogical innovation.

5. Conclusion

The implementation of the Deep Learning approach in English language learning at MTs Al Islah Gorontalo is in a transitional stage. Possibilities for success are rooted in the high student motivation, active participation, and the teachers' ability to create a relevant (*Meaningful*) learning environment. However, the limitations and challenges include the incomplete teacher readiness in instructional design and associated assessment issues, the structural burden of the heavy curriculum and administration, and the critical lack of facilities needed for optimal technology use.

This study, being a qualitative case study with a small sample size (three teachers), has an inherent limitation in its findings' generalizability. The results are specific to the unique context and conditions of MTs Al Islah Gorontalo, including its specific administrative environment and student body. Therefore, caution is advised in generalizing these findings to all madrasas in Gorontalo.

In recommendation for further studies, it is advised to conduct research focusing on practical professional development models for teachers, specifically aimed at improving skills in developing high-quality, authentic, and differentiated tasks and rubrics, as advocated by Fullan, Quinn, and McEachen (2018). Furthermore, a study on the effect of reduced administrative load on teacher creativity and time allocation for instructional design is suggested. Institutional policy should prioritize the provision of basic technological media to bridge the facility gap and optimize the implementation of the "Joyful" learning aspect.

6. References

- Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does* (4th ed.). McGraw-Hill/Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Ermawati, E., & Sardi, A. (2024). How Students View on Instagram in Self-Development in Mastering English Language. *IDEAS: Journal on English Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics and Literature*, 12(1), 748-754.
- Fullan, M. (2007). *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Fullan, M., Quinn, J., & McEachen, J. (2018). *Deep Learning: Engage the World Change the World*. Corwin.
- Malik, F. D. (2025). Empowering Students' Speaking Proficiency through a Two-Day English Camp: A Community Service Program in Rural Indonesia. *Room of Civil Society Development*, 4(5), 887-896.
- Ismail, I., & Masruddin, M. (2023). Implementation of Smart Pop Up Book Media to Improve Read-Write Literacy in Children. *IDEAS: Journal on English Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics and Literature*, 11(1), 864-869.
- Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia. (2020). *Independence Policy Learning: The Transformation of Indonesian Education*. Jakarta: Ministry of Education and Culture.
- Masruddin, M. (2022). Implementation of weekly English Program with fun learning method for Pesantren students.
- Madehang, M., Masruddin, M., & Iksan, M. (2024). Reflecting on the implementation of online English learning in Islamic higher education. *International Journal of Asian Education*, 5(3), 183-197.
- Raharjo, P. (2023). Tantangan Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka di Madrasah.