Exploring English Teachers' Perspective of Deep Learning Approach In Independent Curriculum

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ABSTRACT
As the world rapidly evolves, the need for grasp intercultural communication skills increased as English becomes a mandatory component in the Indonesian educational framework. This study explores English teachers' pedagogical understanding of deep learning approach in independent curriculum. By employing a qualitative research design, using case study approach, data obtained through semi-structured interviews with three English teachers in junior high school. This study serves teachers' understanding, challenges occurred, coping and strategies, and support during the implementation of deep learning approach in independent curriculum. Moreover, this study examines the importance of professional development, adequate facilities, and collaborative practices can smoothen the implementation. Ultimately, this study contributes to limited research regarding this topic.

Keywords: *Teacher's Perceptions, Deep Learning, Independent Curriculum, Implementation.*

INTRODUCTION

As the world evolves, competition in various fields has emerged. This inevitably includes the field of education. In Indonesia, a curriculum called the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum or Independent Curriculum has been implemented and

established as the national curriculum through the Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Permendikbudristek) Number 12 of 2024 (Ratri & Prasetyo, 2024). The curriculum in Indonesia has undergone several changes. There have been eleven changes to the curriculum, starting in 1947, 1952, 1964, 1968, 1975, 1984, 1994, 2004, 2006, and 2013 before finally becoming the Independent Curriculum (Ratri & Prasetyo, 2024). This curriculum change did not happen instantaneously. The change of the curriculum affects several parties including teachers. According to Klein (1973) teachers hold important role in the implementation of the curriculum. Teachers result efficiency of the implementation of the curriculum to the extent as required by creating the learning-teaching atmosphere. Thus, the curriculum changes are perceived by the teachers is undeniably important (Aytac, 2023).

There were many considerations, one of which was when a curriculum was deemed unable to maintain with the pace of globalization or was considered insufficiently flexible to adapt to the changing times (Arifa, 2022). This was the case with the 2013 curriculum, where the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Mendikbud Ristek) stated that the 2013 curriculum, which was still in force in the 2021/2022 academic year, was not flexible (Utami & Suswanto, 2022). This curriculum needed to be updated, which is why the Independent Curriculum was formulated (Syakhrani, 2025).

The Independent Curriculum allows students to explore their potential to the fullest. Unlike the 13th curriculum, the Independent Curriculum also allows teachers to freely determine the focus of learning according to the needs of students (Antara, 2023). As the name indicates, the Independent Curriculum allows students to explore freely and flexibly in developing their potential (Zidan, 2023). The implementation of this curriculum has significantly changed the Indonesian education system, which is intended to develop students' character, competency-based learning, and how this curriculum can adapt to the local needs of students (Zidan, 2023). In this context, the application of a deep learning approach is highly relevant. Deep learning itself is an approach that focuses on the formation of deep comprehension and

critical thinking skills (Sudarmono, 2025). These two things will support the objectives of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum itself, which emphasises holistic and student-centred learning (Irwan et al., 2024).

Although this change in approach seems progressive, English Language Teaching (ELT) requires in-depth exploration and adaptation of this new approach. As an international language, English plays a pivotal role in facilitating or providing access for Indonesians to international opportunities in both academic and professional fields (Jon et al., 2021). The Independent Curriculum, which broadly provides flexibility, has not yet been fully realized in terms of its practical implications for ELT, particularly in terms of improving meaningful and sustainable learning experiences (Yulianto, 2022).

The concept of deep learning in ELT itself has presented the potential to solve challenges in ELT. Although this approach exists within challenges whereas limited facilities and support can also be factors. The previous curriculum tends to ensure teacher-student centered while deep learning approach highlights how learning can implement a conscious learning, meaningful learning, and joyful learning (Cahyanto, 2025). In reality, this approach may face several challenges in thought of ELT. This approach aligns with the concept that learners not only have language proficiency but also know how to apply language critically, solve problems, and collaborate in diverse contexts (Mohammed & Kora, 2023). This change requires teachers to prepare themselves in terms of training, conceptual and practical understanding, as well as the implementation of this approach in classroom-based learning (Arina, 2025).

According to the big concept of the Independent Curriculum, teachers are expected to be facilitators and pioneers in independent learning, where learners are required to be proactive, creative, enthusiastic, and innovative (Gusteti & Neviyarni, 2022). In addition to maintaining a supportive classroom atmosphere, teachers are also required to utilize existing technology to support learning (Nisa et al., 2024). In its implementation, teachers need continuous training and improvement to address errors or mistakes that occur during learning (Dwi et al., 2024). For example, is when the teacher

needs to adapt with the changes it may occur error in terms of teaching practice. The application in the real world will certainly encounter various phenomena, ranging from the relevance of the material to the age and cognitive development of students, facilities and infrastructure, and teacher readiness (Riyawati, 2024).

Therefore, the pedagogical understanding of teachers in the context of junior high school English teachers regarding the transition to this curriculum approach is important. If teachers have a positive perception of this change in approach, the chances of success in implementation will be higher. Conversely, if teachers have a negative perception of this change in approach, resistance may arise and hinder the achievement of educational goals (Aytac, 2023).

The study of this topic is still limited, specifically at the junior high school level, regarding this approach is still very limited. In fact, such studies can be used as a benchmark for the successful application of the deep learning approach in the Independent Curriculum. Therefore, this research raises the following research questions; What are junior high school teachers' understanding of the deep learning approach in the Independent Curriculum? What opportunities and challenges do they encounter?

This study aims to acknowledge junior high school English teachers' perceptions of the change to the deep learning approach in the independent curriculum in Indonesia and to identify opportunities, challenges, and recommendations for future research. Thus, this research is aiming these objectives of the study; 1) To emphasize junior high school teachers' understanding of the deep learning approach in the Independent Curriculum. 2) To explain opportunities and challenges the teachers encounter regarding the deep learning approach in the Independent Curriculum.

METHODS

This study employs descriptive qualitative research (Cresswell, 2009) as the main method in exploring English teachers' perceptions of Deep Learning Approach in independent curriculum. The qualitative approach is

deliberately used because it allows researchers to explore English teachers' interpretations and subjective perceptions related to this approach (Rahayu, 2025). In other words, this research aims to understand how teachers feel, think, and react to Deep Learning Approach from their own perspective (Afida & Prihatin, 2024). Through this approach, it is hoped that more in-depth and relevant conclusions can be drawn, thus providing a more complete description of the complexity of English teachers' perception of Deep Learning Approach in independent curriculum (Arikunto, 2010).

This research adopts a case study approach, a qualitative method that allows us to explore in depth the meaning and subjective experiences of English teachers' perception regarding Deep Learning Approach in independent curriculum (Larkin et al., 2019). The object of this research are three of English teachers of SMP Negeri 1 Semarang where this research takes place. The sample collection will use a purposive sampling technique where filtration will occur (Cresswell, 2009). Samples will be distributed to teachers who affected by this change of approach.

Data collection will be done through semi-structured interview (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Before interview, the teachers or the object of the research will be presented with a brief explanation of the purpose of the research, what issues are being discussed, and the function of their participations (Alshenqeeti, 2014). This is expected to trigger deep understanding within the participants so that the data collected will also be more valid. This data obtained will be processed using thematic analysis (Braun, 2006) which identify, analyze, report such as interview transcripts. This flexible method helps researcher understands and interprets meaning of data.

In addition, referring to the research ethics, Participants' personal information will not be reported (Arafat, 2024). Only certain information that has obtained the permission of the participants themselves will be presented (Dooly et al., 2017). Prior to this data collected, validity tests related to the questions in the interview will be carried out so that the data obtained will be more accurate. Inevitably, through this technique there is a possibility of limitation. In this case, it can

be a lack of sample diversity so that the results obtained are less generalized.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

What are junior high school teachers' understanding of the deep learning approach in the Independent Curriculum?

The interview covers teachers' perspective of deep learning approach by reported their understanding and readiness. Before the implementation, deep learning is such unfamiliar topic for them especially in teaching English in Junior High School. "...*But especially for deep learning, it's not familiar for me before independent Curriculum was implemented...".* Additionally, after the implementation, teachers expressed similar understanding that it is also concluded that deep learning is an approach that allows learners to making connections with their real life. *"...So, we let the student learn based on the real situation, based on the real context, that's it...".* Meanwhile, after the implementation, teachers reveal that they do feel ready about the new approach alongside the supports given by the institutions and the teachers association either it is regional or national. *".... I feel ready because there are a lot of trainings and also there are a lot of workshops from the school, from the department itself, from the educational department itself, so they really gave me the, what is it, the materials about deep learning...".*

The interview also displays the teachers' experiences and challenges of the implementation before, during, and after the implementation. It also reveals the factors that influence the difficulties. Before the implementation, they mostly challenged by student passiveness. *"...I think the main challenge was sometimes students are really passive and they only want to know from the teacher and they don't want to find about the materials by themselves*..." Additionally, during the implementation, challenges exist especially from students. "...*I think the main challenge was managing the differential approach in class within a deep learning context because there are a lot of different students which have lower and also higher skill of English..."* meanwhile, after the implementation, they got

confused with rubric assessment. "...*should I grade her based on the critical thinking or should I grade her based on the grammar of her English...*" this interview also unveils factors that most influenced likes facilities, teachers' readiness, and lack of trainings. "...*For the facilities, we have a problem like a lack of a projector that we can use for deep learning. And also, teacher training is not open for the whole of the teacher...*"

What opportunities and challenges do they encounter?

The interview reveals teachers' perspective of deep learning approach by reported their strategies, views of benefits and support gained of the implementation. It reveals that technologies and training play vital role to set the strategies. "...*To improve my teaching skills, the first thing that I do is try to search in social media, searching by AI. And also, visit the community or the association of teachers...*". To smoothen the implementation, teachers need support in term of training from the government. "...*And also, we need the support from the government about the teacher training, how to do a deep learning approach in the class...*" the visibly benefits of this approach is reported by its flexibility so the teachers can be freely designing the lesson. "..., *I think the teacher can handle and can create the class creatively by material curriculum...*"

The interview covers teachers' perspective regarding support given and expected in the deep learning approach implementation. According to the participant, the institution gives them some opportunities such like training, workshops and mental support. "...*my institutions give me about support in terms of facilities, motivation or maybe the others...*" Regardless, a good policy where teachers gain mentoring regarding the transition is needed and expected to support the implementation. "...*I think maybe I need more workshop and mentoring from the institution...*"

Discussion

As the world evolves, the need to learn intercultural is inevitably. This marks English as lingua franca in global setting. In Indonesia, problems of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) have been addressed by the Ministry of

Education. One of the core approaches to solve the issue is integrating the curricula (Suharjati, 2010). According to Ekawati (2016), curriculum is a set of designed activities which connect with pedagogical subjects, sources, ideas, and practices as a tool to achieve educational objectives. Hence, the curriculum plays a major role in affecting the teaching of English in classroom setting.

In educational settings in Indonesia, from 2004 to 2013 teaching English was focused on traditional learning whereas the oldest ELT method, the Grammar Translation Method, was used. GTM as popularized by Johann Valentin Meidinger is a method in teaching language where focus on grammar and translation accurately from L1 to L2 which effectively use for reading and writing learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). However, this method was considered insufficient to cover students' learning needs (Cal, 2012). Further, the curriculum reform was proposed by considering the world's challenges, and the advancements of STEM.

Moreover, the current curriculum focuses on the communicative functions. Hence, learning English develop new purpose in which it shifts to developing students' English communication skills (Yufrizal, 2017). The new approach is hoped to shifting from a teacher-centered into student-centered approach hopefully it develops students to learning social context, text grammar and grammar. More studies also highlighted English' instructor perspectives of the deep learning in independent curriculum's concepts in English Language Teaching contextually. Furthermore, Anjaniputra (2013) emphasize that teachers need to propose the teaching strategies by taking deep consideration to students' cognitive levels that suits with their understanding. Thus, teachers understanding in curriculum reform inevitably important to succeed the implementation.

The Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (Kemdikdasmen) has popularized a newer approach in education which is deep learning approach. Contrary to deep learning in Artificial Intelligence (AI), deep learning approach in independent curriculum emphasize meaningful, mindful, and joyful learning that interconnects with students' cognitive and social context. (Kadarismanto & Sari, 2025; Wahyudi,

2025). These components are expected can support students to fit in the development of 21st century life skills (Diputera & Zulpan). However, several studies emphasize challenges occur during the implementation such as limited training opportunities, deeper understanding of the approach conceptually, and administrative workloads (Rahmah &Sulaiman, 2021).

Deep learning is a learning approach that allows students to conduct meaningful comprehension, connect new knowledge with prior knowledge, and relate their knowledge into real-life context (Mystakidis et al., 2021). In Indonesian context, deep learning approach cannot be separated with three core principles of learning such as mindful learning, meaningful learning, and joyful learning. Deep learning approach inevitably has great potential to improve the quality of education in Indonesia. Despite the potential, several challenges need to be solved. One of the main challenges is teachers' readiness to integrate this approach.

Based on data obtained, the concept of deep learning approach in education is unfamiliar for teachers unlike deep learning in AI context. This study covers that deep learning acquire higher order thinking skills (HOTS) as quoted by partial participants. Nevertheless, this study also emphasizes that deep learning approach not only about the difficulties of the concept and materials but how to interpret and integrate the concept to the classroom setting. It is also highlighting the learning process of students rather than the content of the curricula.

After the implementation, deep learning enables teachers to design a lesson plan more flexibly. Further, deep learning reinforces students to connect the knowledge they gained to the real-life situations; implement meaningful learning theory. Additionally, deep learning supports 21st century life skills development in which critical thinking essentially important. Nevertheless, the transition makes certain gap in terms of readiness. Partially teachers feel ready and the rest feel unready. To address these challenges, support from teachers' association and institution is needed. Training, workshops, and resources provided as important as teacher group discussion to minimize the challenges. Although, teachers also concern

with students' readiness. Deep learning encourages teachers to create inclusivity within the learning process means that students participate and actively collaborate but also learn within students' learning needs. The gap between students' cognitive competence may affect classroom performance. The difference become one of challenges the teacher needs to address.

The implementation of the deep learning approach in independent curriculum attracts several challenges before and after the implementation. Before the implementation, the challenges they faced accustom on competences. Teacher 1 stated that challenges occur ultimately from teachers' personal issue such as readiness and personal skills. Meanwhile, others emphasize that challenges occur from students oftentimes especially when students tend to be passive in a classroom. The difficulties of designing materials that suitable with students' need and want is one of those challenges. The suitable and compatible lesson plan will enhance students' engagement and reinforce students' participation in classroom activities.

Furthermore, teachers also concerned about students' anxiety and lack of confidence when generate and express ideas in English. Traditional learning method where teacher-centered occurred whereas teacher deliver materials and students receive the materials, shapes students learning method. The difference in terms of abilities of the students is a crucial challenge because teacher is encouraged to adapt to the gap, find the best way to design the learning process. Along with the reform of the policy, teachers also need to adapt to the lesson plan required by the policy makers in which it consists policy implementation regarding the deep learning approach.

After the implementation, challenges shift from theory into practice. Teachers need to reinforce students to learn independently within their own pace. It is undeniably difficult. Moreover, teachers found difficulties to assess students in which aspect they need to focus such like critical thinking or more on grammar accuracy. Nevertheless, teachers' readiness, students' readiness, time management, and assimilation are key factors in the succeeding the implementation. Collectively, teachers' readiness is the influenced most in implementing the deep learning approach in independent curriculum. Although

there are training from the institution, teachers still feel the lack of support because the training is for all major, not focusing on English.

Technologies and training hold a vital role to cope with the challenges occurred. Teachers' association in regional and national also play a significant role in giving support to face the challenges. AI integration and social media exposure help teachers to assist students in teaching and learning. Teachers' peers also important to provide support needed. Group discussion and exchanging experience help teacher to encounter the challenges. Similarly, concerns regarding the implementation of the new approach are grounded on each educational components that need to work together to apply strategies needed. The importance of support in terms of workshops and trainings are necessary to be provided by the policy makers and institutions. To enhance teaching skills, training needs to be added as a regularly requirements for the teacher. Nevertheless, the reform of the deep learning approach in independent curriculum brings benefit for both teachers and students. This approach allows teacher to create a class more flexible whereas the need of creative and meaningful learning environment is fulfilled. The data analysis conducted support that teachers receive during the transition and the future support that is expected. Indeed, institution gives professionalism opportunities that may help teachers to implement the deep learning approach such as training, workshop, and motivational support. Additionally, institution also provides numerous resources related to the deep learning approach. Despite these supports, teachers need more support in terms of training to adapted and be confident in implementing the deep learning approach. On the other hand, enhancing facilities also necessary in order to smoothen the implementation of deep learning approach in independent curriculum.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to acknowledge teachers' pedagogical understanding of deep learning in independent curriculum. The outcomes of this study are summarized from the research

findings and discussions as presented in the previous chapter.

Deep learning as approach in education in Indonesia does not relate to artificial intelligence. It offers a new paradigm in which student-centered learning occurred. This approach promotes critical thinking, collaboration, deep understanding, making-connection, and problem solving. This study serves that deep learning accommodates students to have a freedom learning. Deep learning allows teachers to design the lesson plan as free and creative as they can. However, in practice, the implementation remains uneven following teachers' readiness, limited training and workshops, and student language competences.

Nevertheless, this study reveals that challenges still arise significantly regarding teacher pedagogical skills along with facilities support, whichever, demand to be conveyed through maintaining teachers program such as training, resources provided, and professional mentoring. Moreover, the deep learning approach can be a groundwork for more outcomes aligned with 21st century life skills. It holds great potential if it is supported by various components like policy makers and education stakeholders.

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