

EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Deep Learning Practices in Enhancing Elementary School Learners' Language Skills: Evidence from Curriculum Merdeka Implementation

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Abstract

This study explores EFL teachers' perceptions of deep learning practices in enhancing elementary school learners' English language skills within the context of Curriculum Merdeka implementation. Deep learning practices in this study refer to student-centered, meaningful, interactive, reflective, and contextual learning activities that encourage learners to use English for communication rather than memorization. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the study involved 25 EFL teachers from elementary schools in Central Lombok selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that teachers perceived deep learning practices as effective, relevant, and child-friendly for improving learners' vocabulary, pronunciation, listening comprehension, speaking confidence, motivation, and classroom participation. Teachers reported that storytelling, songs, games, role play, picture-based discussion, guided questioning, simple projects, and group work helped learners connect English with familiar experiences. Classroom observations showed that deep learning practices supported engagement through enjoyable participation, confidence through low-pressure speaking opportunities, and meaningful English use through contextual classroom interaction. Teacher scaffolding, including modeling, repetition, visual support, gestures, and guided questions, was found to be essential in helping learners understand and produce English. However, challenges such as limited time, low vocabulary mastery, lack of media, large classes, and teacher readiness were also identified. The study concludes that deep learning practices offer a promising pedagogical direction for elementary EFL learning when supported by clear objectives, appropriate scaffolding, and teacher professional development.

Keywords: Deep learning practices; EFL teachers' perception; Elementary school learners; English language skills; Curriculum Merdeka

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INTRODUCTION

English language learning in the twenty-first century increasingly requires pedagogical practices that move beyond memorization, repetition, and the mechanical mastery of grammar rules. In many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, learners are expected not only to recognize vocabulary or complete written exercises but also to use English meaningfully for communication, collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving. This shift has encouraged educators and researchers to reconsider how English is taught across educational levels, from elementary schools to higher education. Deep learning practices offer an important framework for this transformation because they emphasize conceptual understanding, authentic language use, reflection, learner

agency, and the integration of language with real-life experiences. In English language teaching (ELT), deep learning does not simply refer to advanced cognitive activity, but to pedagogical processes that engage learners in constructing meaning, interacting socially, and applying language in purposeful contexts. This view is consistent with studies arguing that ELT should treat language as a tool for meaning-making and social participation rather than as a set of isolated linguistic forms (Donohue-Bergeler et al., 2023; Kirsch, 2020; Nguyen & Phillips, 2022; Sastre et al., 2022).

Deep learning practices are relevant across educational levels because they can be adapted to learners' developmental stages, linguistic needs, and learning environments. In elementary schools, deep learning may be implemented through storytelling, songs, games, picture-based discussion, role play, multimodal activities, and simple projects that connect English to children's familiar experiences. These activities allow young learners to encounter English through concrete, enjoyable, and socially meaningful situations. At the secondary and tertiary levels, deep learning can be expanded through task-based learning, project-based learning, collaborative writing, debates, drama, digital storytelling, multiliteracies, and problem-solving activities. Such practices require learners to interpret, negotiate, produce, and reflect on language in more complex ways. Research has shown that storytelling, project-based learning, task-based learning, drama, game-based learning, translanguaging, and digital literacy activities can support communicative competence, critical thinking, creativity, and learner engagement in ELT contexts (Amena, 2020; Beaumont, 2022; Choo et al., 2022; Ding, 2022; Donohue-Bergeler et al., 2023; Nguyen & Phillips, 2022; Ollerhead & Pennington, 2024; Sastre et al., 2022; York et al., 2021). Therefore, deep learning provides a flexible pedagogical orientation that can bridge linguistic development and higher-order thinking.

Despite the growing emphasis on meaningful English learning, EFL learners continue to face serious difficulties in improving their language skills. These difficulties are multidimensional because they involve linguistic, affective, cognitive, and sociocultural factors. In speaking, learners often experience anxiety, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, pronunciation problems, limited vocabulary, and difficulty organizing ideas spontaneously. These barriers reduce learners' willingness to communicate and limit their opportunities to produce meaningful output (Awlaqi & Ghazali, 2023; Burhan, 2024; Maleki, 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). In listening, learners may struggle with unfamiliar accents, rapid speech, insufficient vocabulary knowledge, and difficulty recognizing words in connected speech. In reading and writing, learners commonly encounter weak vocabulary mastery, grammatical inaccuracies, difficulty understanding implicit meanings, poor sentence construction, and dependence on direct translation from the first language (Aldosari et al., 2023; Al-Mutraf, 2020; Drew, 2021; Ibrahim et al., 2023; Thảo & Tran, 2024). These challenges show that language learning problems cannot be solved merely by increasing grammar instruction or vocabulary drills.

The difficulties faced by EFL learners are also strongly shaped by the learning environment. In many EFL classrooms, learners have limited exposure to authentic English communication outside school, making classroom interaction a central source of language input and practice. When classroom activities are teacher-centered, textbook-driven, or overly focused on correct answers, learners may have few opportunities to use English for negotiation, expression, and social interaction. Affective factors such as anxiety, motivation, self-efficacy, and enjoyment also influence learners' engagement and achievement. Krashen's affective filter, Swain's output hypothesis, Long's interaction hypothesis, and Vygotskian sociocultural theory provide useful theoretical perspectives for understanding how emotional conditions, meaningful output, interaction, and social mediation affect language development (Aldosari et al., 2023; Almalki et al., 2023; Awlaqi & Ghazali, 2023; Burhan, 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2023;

Maleki, 2022; Thảo & Tran, 2024; Waked et al., 2024). From this perspective, EFL instruction should not only transmit linguistic knowledge but also create supportive, interactive, and cognitively engaging environments where learners can use English with confidence.

The need for deep learning practices is particularly important in elementary English education. Young learners are still developing their cognitive, emotional, social, and linguistic capacities; therefore, they require learning experiences that are concrete, playful, contextual, and meaningful. When English is introduced through storytelling, songs, visual media, games, role play, and guided inquiry, children can associate new language with actions, images, emotions, and familiar social situations. This process supports vocabulary development, listening comprehension, pronunciation, speaking confidence, reading readiness, and early writing skills. Storytelling and multimodal activities, for example, can help learners understand language through narrative structure, gestures, visual cues, and repeated exposure. Drama and embodied literacy activities may also support phonological awareness, vocabulary growth, and oral expression because they involve rhythm, movement, and interaction (Beaumont, 2022; Nguyen & Phillips, 2022; Nikolov & Djigunović, 2023; Sunar et al., 2022). Thus, deep learning practices are pedagogically appropriate for elementary learners because they align English learning with children's natural ways of learning.

In addition, deep learning practices can make elementary English classrooms more inclusive and engaging. Translanguaging and multiliteracies approaches recognize learners' home languages, cultural backgrounds, and semiotic resources as valuable supports for English development. Rather than treating the first language as an obstacle, these approaches allow children to use their existing linguistic resources to make meaning, understand new concepts, and participate more confidently in classroom activities. Studies on multilingual storytelling and translanguaging indicate that such practices can promote learner agency, oral language development, reflective practice, and critical literacy (Kirsch, 2020; Ollerhead & Pennington, 2024; Sastre et al., 2022). Digital storytelling and multimedia-based activities may also enrich elementary English learning by combining images, sounds, texts, and oral expression in ways that motivate learners and provide repeated exposure to language in meaningful contexts (Nikolov & Djigunović, 2023; Sunar et al., 2022). However, the effectiveness of these practices depends on teachers' ability to design age-appropriate tasks, provide scaffolding, manage interaction, and align activities with language learning goals.

Based on this background, the present study focuses on the efficacy of deep learning practices in improving elementary school learners' English language skills in an EFL context. The study is important because elementary education is a foundational stage for developing learners' attitudes toward English, basic communicative competence, vocabulary knowledge, listening comprehension, speaking confidence, and early literacy. If English learning at this stage is dominated by memorization and passive repetition, learners may develop limited communicative ability and low confidence. Conversely, if English is taught through meaningful, interactive, reflective, and child-centered practices, learners may develop stronger motivation and more functional language skills. Therefore, this study aims to examine how deep learning practices contribute to the improvement of elementary school learners' English language skills and to identify how such practices support meaningful engagement in EFL classrooms.

The objectives of this study are: first, to investigate the effectiveness of deep learning practices in improving elementary school learners' English language skills; and second, to analyze how deep learning activities support learners' engagement, confidence, and meaningful use of English in classroom interaction. To achieve these objectives, the study is guided by two research questions: (1) What is the EFL teachers'

perception of deep learning practices like in improving elementary school learners' English language skills? (2) How do deep learning practices support learners' engagement, confidence, and meaningful English use during classroom learning? The novelty of this study lies in its specific focus on elementary EFL learners, where deep learning is examined not merely as a general pedagogical concept but as an integrated set of age-appropriate practices involving storytelling, play-based interaction, multimodal learning, translanguaging, guided inquiry, and collaborative communication. This focus contributes to the literature by clarifying how deep learning can be operationalized in early English education to address both linguistic development and affective engagement.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of deep learning practices and to examine how these practices support elementary school learners' engagement, confidence, and meaningful English use during classroom learning. A qualitative design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand teachers' experiences, interpretations, classroom practices, and pedagogical reasoning rather than to measure variables statistically. The first research question, "What are EFL teachers' perceptions of deep learning practices in improving elementary school learners' English language skills?" required rich descriptive data from teachers who had direct experience teaching English to young learners. Meanwhile, the second research question, "How do deep learning practices support learners' engagement, confidence, and meaningful English use during classroom learning?" required classroom-based evidence of how such practices were implemented and how learners responded during the learning process.

The qualitative descriptive design allowed the researcher to capture the complexity of deep learning practices in real classroom contexts. Deep learning in this study was understood as a pedagogical approach that encourages meaningful understanding, active participation, collaboration, reflection, creativity, problem-solving, and authentic language use. Therefore, the design enabled the researcher to investigate not only what teachers believed about deep learning practices but also how these beliefs were reflected in classroom activities such as storytelling, games, role play, group discussion, guided inquiry, project-based tasks, and other interactive learning activities. The use of interviews and observations also made it possible to compare teachers' stated perceptions with actual classroom practices, thereby strengthening the credibility of the findings.

The chosen design was suitable for addressing the objectives of the study because teachers' perceptions, classroom interaction, learner engagement, and confidence are context-bound phenomena. These aspects cannot be fully understood through numerical data alone, as they involve attitudes, experiences, meanings, classroom culture, and teacher–student interaction. Through qualitative inquiry, the researcher was able to explore how EFL teachers interpreted the value of deep learning practices, how they applied these practices in elementary English classrooms, and how learners responded during learning activities. This design also provided flexibility for the researcher to identify emerging themes that might not have been predicted before data collection.

However, several limitations and potential biases were associated with this research design. First, the findings were not intended to be generalized to all elementary EFL teachers because the study involved a limited number of participants from Central Lombok. To address this limitation, the researcher provided a detailed description of the research context, participants, and classroom situations so that readers could determine the transferability of the findings to similar contexts. Second, interview data might be influenced by social desirability bias, as teachers could present idealized views of their

teaching practices. To minimize this bias, the researcher used open-ended questions, created a comfortable interview atmosphere, and assured participants that there were no right or wrong answers. Third, classroom observation might be affected by the observer's presence, which could influence teachers' and learners' behavior. To reduce this effect, the researcher conducted observations in a natural classroom setting and focused on ordinary teaching practices rather than specially prepared lessons. Fourth, researcher subjectivity could influence data interpretation. Therefore, the researcher used data triangulation, careful coding procedures, repeated reading of transcripts and field notes, and member checking to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

Participants

The participants of this study were 25 EFL teachers from elementary schools in Central Lombok. The participants were selected because they had direct experience teaching English to elementary school learners and were considered capable of providing relevant information about deep learning practices in English language learning. The sample size of 25 teachers was considered appropriate for qualitative research because it allowed the researcher to obtain rich and varied data while still maintaining depth in data analysis. The participants represented different elementary school contexts, which helped the researcher understand how deep learning practices were perceived and implemented across diverse classroom situations.

The study used purposive sampling to select participants who met specific criteria. The selection criteria included: (1) teachers who taught English or English-related learning activities at the elementary school level; (2) teachers who had experience using interactive, student-centered, or meaningful learning activities in English classrooms; (3) teachers who were willing to participate in interviews and classroom observations; and (4) teachers who taught in elementary schools located in Central Lombok. These criteria were used to ensure that the participants had relevant knowledge and experience related to the focus of the study.

The demographic information collected from the participants included gender, age range, educational background, years of teaching experience, school location, grade level taught, and prior experience with student-centered or deep learning-oriented activities. These demographic details were used to provide a clearer description of the participants and to help interpret the findings. For example, teachers with longer teaching experience might have different perceptions from novice teachers, while teachers from rural and semi-urban schools might face different challenges in implementing deep learning practices. However, the study did not aim to compare participants statistically; instead, demographic information was used to enrich the qualitative interpretation of the data.

Instruments

The research instruments used in this study were semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. These two instruments were selected because they were suitable for collecting qualitative data related to teachers' perceptions, classroom practices, learner engagement, confidence, and meaningful English use. The interview was used to obtain in-depth information about EFL teachers' understanding, beliefs, experiences, challenges, and expectations regarding deep learning practices. The classroom observation was used to examine how deep learning practices appeared in actual teaching and learning activities.

The interview guide was developed based on the research questions, the objectives of the study, and relevant concepts of deep learning in English language learning. The questions focused on teachers' understanding of deep learning practices, the types of activities they used, their perceptions of the effectiveness of such practices, the challenges they experienced, and their views on how deep learning supported learners' English

skills. The interview questions were open-ended to allow participants to explain their experiences freely and provide examples from their teaching practices. Follow-up questions were also used when necessary to clarify participants' responses and obtain deeper information.

The classroom observation sheet was developed to document the implementation of deep learning practices during English learning activities. The observation focused on several aspects, including the types of learning activities used by the teacher, the level of learner participation, opportunities for learners to use English meaningfully, learner confidence, collaboration among learners, teacher scaffolding, use of media, and classroom interaction patterns. The observation also recorded examples of learner behavior, such as asking questions, responding to the teacher, participating in group work, using English expressions, showing enthusiasm, and expressing ideas during learning activities.

To ensure validity and reliability, the instruments were reviewed before being used in the field. The interview guide and observation sheet were examined by experts or experienced lecturers in English language education to check the clarity, relevance, and alignment of the items with the research questions. Revisions were made based on their feedback. A small pilot interview could also be conducted with teachers outside the main participants to ensure that the questions were understandable and able to generate relevant responses. In qualitative research, reliability was strengthened through consistency in data collection procedures, careful documentation, audio recording of interviews with participants' permission, and systematic organization of observation notes. Validity was enhanced through triangulation between interview and observation data, member checking, and peer discussion during data interpretation.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study followed a qualitative thematic analysis procedure. The analysis was conducted to identify, organize, and interpret patterns of meaning related to the two research questions. The data consisted of interview transcripts and classroom observation notes. The interview data were mainly used to answer the first research question concerning EFL teachers' perceptions of deep learning practices in improving elementary school learners' English language skills. The observation data were mainly used to answer the second research question concerning how deep learning practices supported learners' engagement, confidence, and meaningful English use during classroom learning. However, both data sources were analyzed together to strengthen the interpretation of the findings.

The first step of data analysis was data familiarization. The researcher transcribed the interview recordings and read the transcripts several times to gain a deep understanding of the participants' responses. Observation notes were also reviewed repeatedly to identify important classroom events, learner behaviors, and teaching strategies. During this stage, the researcher wrote initial notes related to teachers' perceptions, types of deep learning activities, learner engagement, learner confidence, and meaningful English use.

The second step was coding. The researcher identified meaningful units of data from the interview transcripts and observation notes. Codes were assigned to important statements or classroom events. Examples of possible codes included "learning through storytelling," "students more active," "increased confidence," "fear of speaking," "teacher scaffolding," "group collaboration," "limited vocabulary," "meaningful English use," "student-centered activity," and "teacher challenge." The coding process was conducted carefully and repeatedly to ensure that the codes represented the data accurately.

The third step was theme development. The codes were grouped into broader themes based on their similarities and relevance to the research questions. For the first research question, possible themes included teachers' understanding of deep learning practices, perceived benefits for English language skills, perceived challenges in implementation, and teachers' strategies for supporting young learners. For the second research question, possible themes included learner engagement through interactive activities, confidence development through supportive classroom interaction, meaningful English use through contextual tasks, and the role of teacher scaffolding in deep learning activities.

The fourth step was data interpretation. The researcher interpreted the themes by connecting interview findings with classroom observation evidence. For example, if teachers stated that storytelling improved learners' confidence, the researcher compared this claim with observation notes showing whether learners actively responded, repeated English expressions, asked questions, or participated in storytelling activities. This process helped the researcher determine whether teachers' perceptions were supported by classroom practices. The interpretation also considered the context of elementary EFL learning in Central Lombok, including learners' limited English exposure, teachers' instructional resources, and classroom conditions.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study used triangulation, member checking, and peer review. Triangulation was conducted by comparing interview data with observation data. Member checking was conducted by asking selected participants to review or confirm the accuracy of their interview summaries. Peer review was used to discuss the coding and theme development process with colleagues or experts in English education. These steps were taken to reduce researcher bias and improve the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings.

The final results of the analysis were presented descriptively in relation to the two research questions. The findings explained how EFL teachers perceived deep learning practices as a way to improve elementary school learners' English language skills and how such practices supported learners' engagement, confidence, and meaningful English use. Direct quotations from teachers and selected examples from classroom observations were used to support the interpretation of each theme. Through this process, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of deep learning practices in elementary EFL classrooms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Research Question 1: What is the EFL teachers' perception of deep learning practices in improving elementary school learners' English language skills?

The findings indicate that most EFL teachers perceived deep learning practices as beneficial for improving elementary school learners' English language skills. Teachers viewed deep learning as a student-centered approach that helps learners understand and use English meaningfully rather than merely memorizing vocabulary, grammar rules, or short expressions. This perception is consistent with the conceptual foundation of deep learning in English language teaching, which emphasizes language as a tool for meaning-making, real-life interaction, creativity, and critical thinking rather than as isolated linguistic knowledge. In the interviews, teachers explained that activities such as storytelling, songs, games, role play, picture-based discussion, guided questioning, and simple projects made English lessons more understandable and enjoyable for young learners.

Teachers also perceived deep learning practices as effective because they helped learners connect English with familiar experiences. For example, when teachers used

pictures, classroom objects, local stories, songs, or daily routines, learners were more able to understand the meaning of English words and expressions. Instead of receiving English as an abstract subject, learners experienced English through actions, images, interaction, and repeated contextual use. Several teachers stated that these practices improved learners' vocabulary mastery, listening comprehension, pronunciation, and speaking confidence. Elementary-oriented deep learning practices such as storytelling, songs, role play, picture-based discussion, and project work are particularly relevant because they connect English learning with children's familiar contexts and social interaction.

Another important perception was that deep learning practices encouraged active participation. Teachers reported that learners became more willing to answer questions, imitate expressions, work in groups, perform short dialogues, and express simple ideas in English. This suggests that deep learning practices contributed not only to language knowledge but also to learners' confidence and motivation. However, some teachers also acknowledged challenges in implementing deep learning practices. These challenges included limited teaching time, learners' low vocabulary levels, large class sizes, lack of media, and teachers' need for more training in designing meaningful English activities. Therefore, teachers generally perceived deep learning practices positively, but they emphasized that successful implementation requires proper scaffolding, creative materials, and teacher readiness.

Table 1. Summary of Teachers' Perceptions of Deep Learning Practices

Main Theme	Qualitative Evidence from Interviews	Number of Teachers Mentioning the Theme	Interpretation
Meaningful language use	Teachers stated that learners understood English better when language was connected to real-life situations.	22 of 25	Deep learning helped shift English instruction from memorization to contextual communication.
Interactive and student-centered activities	Teachers used storytelling, songs, games, role play, and group work.	21 of 25	Teachers perceived active learning as more suitable for young learners.
Vocabulary and speaking development	Teachers reported improvement in learners' vocabulary, pronunciation, and simple speaking ability.	20 of 25	Repeated contextual exposure supported basic English skill development.
Confidence and motivation	Teachers observed that learners became more confident and enthusiastic.	18 of 25	Deep learning reduced fear and increased willingness to participate.
Need for scaffolding	Teachers emphasized guidance, modeling, repetition, and visual support.	15 of 25	Deep learning was effective when supported by clear teacher guidance.
Implementation challenges	Teachers mentioned limited time, media, vocabulary, and training.	13 of 25	Positive perception was accompanied by practical classroom constraints.

The answer to the first research question is that EFL teachers perceived deep learning practices as effective, relevant, and child-friendly for improving elementary school learners' English language skills. Teachers believed that deep learning practices supported vocabulary development, listening comprehension, pronunciation, speaking

confidence, and learner motivation. Nevertheless, they also recognized that deep learning requires careful planning, sufficient media, repeated scaffolding, and teacher creativity to be successfully implemented in elementary EFL classrooms.

Research Question 2: How do deep learning practices support learners' engagement, confidence, and meaningful English use during classroom learning?

The classroom observations showed that deep learning practices supported learners' engagement by creating enjoyable and participatory learning situations. Learners were more attentive and active when teachers used songs, games, storytelling, pictures, gestures, role play, and group-based tasks. These activities helped learners participate even when their English proficiency was still limited. Learners showed engagement through verbal responses, physical movement, repetition of English expressions, peer interaction, and willingness to join classroom activities. This finding supports the view that elementary learners benefit from concrete, enjoyable, contextual, and interactive learning experiences. Deep learning practices such as storytelling, songs, games, visual media, role play, simple projects, and guided inquiry can develop listening, speaking, vocabulary, pronunciation, reading readiness, and basic writing skills in a natural way.

Deep learning practices also supported learner confidence by providing low-pressure opportunities to use English. In observed classrooms, learners were more willing to speak when teachers modeled expressions first, allowed choral repetition, provided visual clues, and accepted simple responses. Pair work and group work also helped learners feel safer because they could practice with peers before speaking in front of the class. Confidence appeared when learners volunteered to answer questions, performed short dialogues, repeated words loudly, and used simple English expressions during games or role play. This suggests that confidence developed gradually through supportive interaction, repetition, encouragement, and meaningful participation.

Meaningful English use was observed when learners used English for classroom purposes rather than only repeating isolated words. For example, learners used English to greet others, name objects, describe pictures, respond to simple questions, ask for help, follow instructions, and participate in short role-play activities. These forms of English use were simple but meaningful because they were connected to classroom interaction and familiar contexts. The observation data also showed that teacher scaffolding was central to this process. Teachers supported learners through modeling, translation when necessary, gestures, pictures, repetition, and guided questions. Therefore, deep learning practices supported meaningful English use when teachers provided structured opportunities for learners to hear, practice, and produce English in context.

Table 2. Summary of How Deep Learning Practices Supported Classroom Learning

Main Theme	Observation Evidence	Number of Teachers/Observed Coding References	Interpretation
Learner engagement through enjoyable activities	Learners participated actively in songs, games, storytelling, and role play.	23	Enjoyable activities increased attention and classroom participation.
Confidence through low-pressure speaking	Learners repeated expressions, answered simple questions, and performed short dialogues.	21	Repetition, modeling, and encouragement reduced fear of speaking.
Meaningful English use	Learners used English to greet, describe	20	English was used for communication, not

Main Theme	Observation Evidence	Number of Teachers/Observed Coding References	Interpretation
through contextual tasks	pictures, name objects, and respond to instructions.		only memorization.
Peer collaboration	Learners worked in pairs or groups to complete simple tasks.	18	Peer interaction created a supportive learning environment.
Teacher scaffolding	Teachers used gestures, pictures, modeling, guided questions, and repetition.	17	Scaffolding helped learners understand and produce English.
Multimodal support	Teachers used visual media, songs, movements, and classroom objects.	16	Multimodal input made English more concrete and understandable.

The answer to the second research question is that deep learning practices supported learners' engagement, confidence, and meaningful English use by making English learning interactive, contextual, and emotionally supportive. Learners became more engaged when activities were enjoyable and connected to their daily experiences. They became more confident when teachers provided modeling, repetition, encouragement, and peer-supported practice. They used English more meaningfully when classroom tasks required them to communicate, respond, describe, ask, and interact using simple English expressions. Thus, deep learning practices functioned as a bridge between language input, learner participation, and communicative output in elementary EFL classrooms.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that EFL teachers perceived deep learning practices as effective, relevant, and developmentally appropriate for improving elementary school learners' English language skills. Teachers viewed deep learning not merely as a set of attractive classroom techniques but as a pedagogical orientation that helped learners understand and use English meaningfully. This finding confirms previous studies which argue that English language teaching should move beyond memorization of isolated vocabulary and grammar toward authentic communication, meaning-making, reflection, collaboration, and social participation (Donohue-Bergeler et al., 2023; Kirsch, 2020; Nguyen & Phillips, 2022; Sastre et al., 2022). In this study, teachers associated deep learning with storytelling, songs, games, role play, picture-based discussion, guided questioning, and simple projects. These practices were perceived as effective because they created concrete and familiar learning situations for young learners. This confirms the view that elementary English instruction should be contextual, playful, and multimodal because children learn language more effectively when it is connected to actions, images, emotions, and meaningful interaction (Beaumont, 2022; Nikolov & Djigunović, 2023; Sunar et al., 2022). Thus, the study supports earlier research while extending it by showing how teachers in Central Lombok interpret deep learning within the context of elementary EFL classrooms and Curriculum Merdeka implementation.

The teachers' perception that deep learning practices improve vocabulary, pronunciation, listening comprehension, and speaking confidence also supports previous research on meaningful input and communicative output. In EFL contexts, learners often have limited exposure to English outside the classroom; therefore, classroom

activities become the primary source of language input, practice, and interaction. Previous studies have noted that EFL learners commonly struggle with limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, grammatical weakness, anxiety, and low confidence in speaking (Aldosari et al., 2023; Awlaqi & Ghazali, 2023; Burhan, 2024; Maleki, 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). The present findings confirm these challenges but also show that deep learning practices can help reduce them when teachers provide contextual exposure, repetition, modeling, and supportive interaction. For example, storytelling and picture-based activities allowed learners to associate English words with visual and situational meaning, while role play and games encouraged learners to pronounce words and produce simple expressions in a less threatening atmosphere. This finding aligns with Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, which suggests that learners acquire language more effectively in low-anxiety learning environments, and with Swain's output hypothesis, which emphasizes the importance of producing language to develop communicative competence (Aldosari et al., 2023; Almalki et al., 2023; Burhan, 2024; Thảo & Tran, 2024).

The classroom observation findings further indicate that deep learning practices supported learners' engagement by creating enjoyable and participatory learning situations. Learners became more attentive and active when teachers used songs, games, storytelling, gestures, pictures, role play, and group-based tasks. This finding confirms studies that emphasize the importance of play-based learning, storytelling, drama, and multimodal activities in young learners' English development (Beaumont, 2022; Nguyen & Phillips, 2022; Nikolov & Djigunović, 2023; Sunar et al., 2022). Young learners often need concrete learning experiences because abstract explanation alone is insufficient for early language development. In this study, learners showed engagement through verbal responses, body movement, repetition of English expressions, peer interaction, and willingness to participate in classroom activities. These forms of participation indicate that engagement in elementary EFL learning is not limited to verbal fluency but also includes attention, physical involvement, emotional interest, imitation, collaboration, and readiness to try. This extends previous research by offering a more situated understanding of engagement in elementary EFL classrooms, where learners' limited English proficiency does not prevent them from participating meaningfully when teachers design multimodal and interactive tasks.

Another important finding is that deep learning practices strengthened learners' confidence by providing low-pressure opportunities to use English. Learners were more willing to speak when teachers modeled expressions, used choral repetition, provided visual clues, allowed peer practice, and accepted simple responses. This confirms previous studies showing that anxiety, fear of mistakes, and low self-confidence are major barriers to EFL speaking development (Awlaqi & Ghazali, 2023; Burhan, 2024; Maleki, 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). However, the findings also extend previous research by showing that confidence among elementary learners can be developed gradually through repeated, supportive, and enjoyable classroom routines. Learners did not immediately produce complex English utterances, but they began to volunteer, repeat expressions loudly, answer simple questions, and perform short dialogues. These behaviors suggest that confidence is built through scaffolded participation rather than through direct correction alone. This is consistent with Vygotskian sociocultural theory, which views learning as a socially mediated process in which learners develop competence through interaction, modeling, guidance, and participation within supportive learning environments (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Thảo & Tran, 2024; Waked et al., 2024).

The finding that learners used English more meaningfully during contextual tasks also supports the central principle of deep learning in ELT. Meaningful English use occurred when learners used English to greet others, name objects, describe pictures,

respond to instructions, ask for help, and participate in simple role-play activities. These uses may appear linguistically simple, but they are pedagogically significant because they represent movement from passive repetition to functional communication. This finding confirms previous studies arguing that deep learning in language education should position English as a medium for communication and social action rather than as a subject consisting only of discrete forms (Donohue-Bergeler et al., 2023; Kirsch, 2020; Sastre et al., 2022). It also aligns with task-based and project-based perspectives that emphasize purposeful language use, collaboration, and problem-solving as pathways to deeper learning (Amena, 2020; Ding, 2022; York et al., 2021). In elementary classrooms, meaningful English use does not always require complex tasks; it can emerge from simple but purposeful classroom interaction when learners understand why they are using the language.

The role of teacher scaffolding emerged as a central factor in the successful implementation of deep learning practices. Teachers supported learners through modeling, repetition, guided questions, gestures, translation when necessary, visual media, and peer-supported practice. This finding confirms previous research that deep learning practices require careful teacher guidance, especially in classrooms where learners have limited vocabulary and little exposure to English outside school (Amena, 2020; Kirsch, 2020; Sastre et al., 2022). Without scaffolding, interactive activities may become enjoyable but linguistically shallow. Therefore, the effectiveness of deep learning depends not only on the type of activity but also on how the teacher structures participation, introduces language input, supports comprehension, and encourages output. This finding extends previous studies by emphasizing that teacher scaffolding is the bridge between enjoyable activity and meaningful English learning.

The study also reveals several constraints that partially challenge overly optimistic views of deep learning practices. Although teachers generally perceived deep learning positively, they also reported limited teaching time, insufficient media, learners' low vocabulary levels, large class sizes, and the need for further professional development. This finding supports previous studies noting that the implementation of student-centered, multimodal, translanguaging, and digital learning practices is often constrained by teacher readiness, classroom resources, technological access, and institutional conditions (Boreland et al., 2023; Donohue-Bergeler et al., 2023; Sastre et al., 2022). Therefore, deep learning should not be understood as an automatically effective approach. Its success depends on contextual readiness, teacher competence, instructional planning, and continuous support.

The findings confirm the existing body of knowledge that deep learning practices can enhance language learning by promoting meaningful interaction, learner engagement, confidence, collaboration, and contextual language use. They also extend previous studies by providing qualitative evidence from elementary EFL teachers in Central Lombok, a context where young learners' exposure to English is limited and teacher creativity plays a crucial role. The study contributes to ELT research by showing that deep learning practices are not limited to higher-order tasks in secondary or tertiary education but can be operationalized in elementary classrooms through storytelling, games, songs, visual media, role play, guided inquiry, peer collaboration, and teacher scaffolding. The findings suggest that deep learning is most effective when it combines enjoyment with clear language objectives, learner-centered participation with structured support, and contextual communication with repeated exposure.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that EFL teachers in Central Lombok perceived deep learning practices as effective and suitable for improving elementary school learners'

English language skills. Teachers viewed deep learning as a student-centered and meaningful approach that helped learners move beyond memorizing vocabulary and grammar toward using English in more contextual and communicative ways. The findings showed that activities such as storytelling, songs, games, role play, picture-based discussion, guided questioning, simple projects, and group work were considered useful for developing learners' vocabulary, pronunciation, listening comprehension, speaking confidence, and motivation. These practices were perceived as appropriate for elementary learners because they connected English with children's familiar experiences, emotions, movements, images, and social interaction. However, teachers also recognized that deep learning requires careful planning, sufficient learning media, repeated scaffolding, and teacher creativity. Therefore, the effectiveness of deep learning practices depends not only on the use of enjoyable activities but also on the teacher's ability to align those activities with clear language learning objectives.

The study also concludes that deep learning practices supported learners' engagement, confidence, and meaningful English use during classroom learning. Classroom observations showed that learners became more active when English lessons involved songs, games, storytelling, gestures, visual media, role play, and collaborative tasks. Learners' confidence developed when teachers provided modeling, repetition, encouragement, peer practice, and low-pressure opportunities to speak. Meaningful English use emerged when learners used simple English expressions to greet, describe pictures, name objects, respond to questions, follow instructions, ask for help, and participate in short role-play activities. These findings indicate that deep learning practices can function as a bridge between language input, learner participation, and communicative output in elementary EFL classrooms. Nevertheless, the implementation of deep learning practices still faces challenges, including limited time, learners' low vocabulary mastery, lack of media, large class sizes, and teachers' need for professional development. Future studies are recommended to involve larger and more diverse school contexts, include learners' perspectives, and examine the impact of specific deep learning strategies on measurable English skill development.

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DECLARATION OF USING AI TOOLS

The authors declare that artificial intelligence tools were used only to assist with language refinement, organization of ideas, and manuscript editing. The conceptual framework, research design, data interpretation, findings, and final academic responsibility remain entirely with the authors. All AI-assisted outputs were reviewed, revised, and validated by the authors to ensure accuracy, originality, and alignment with the purpose of the study.

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