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Fostering Student Engagement through Deep Learning in Vocational English Teaching

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A B S T R A C T

This qualitative phenomenological study investigates how deep learning-based instructional strategies enhance teacher competence and student engagement in vocational English classrooms at SMK Muhammadiyah Batang. Four English teachers participated in in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis to explore their lived experiences in implementing Multimedia Teaching Modules (MTM) enriched with kearifan lokal (local wisdom). The modules integrated cultural elements such as traditional batik motifs, local tourism videos, and regional proverbs into vocabulary, speaking, and project-based learning activities. Findings reveal that teachers developed stronger pedagogical competence in designing contextually relevant and culturally responsive lessons. Students showed notable improvement in engagement indicators, including increased participation in discussions, higher on-time assignment submission rates, and enhanced language output in collaborative tasks. Comparative engagement data indicated a clear rise in active learning behaviors post-MTM integration. The cultural contextualization of materials fostered both a sense of identity and greater motivation among learners, making lessons more meaningful and relatable. The discussion situates these findings within the broader framework of deep learning pedagogy, emphasizing its capacity to connect cognitive skills with socio-cultural relevance in vocational education. The study concludes that combining deep learning principles with multimedia and local wisdom can bridge the gap between curriculum objectives and real-world communicative needs in vocational contexts. Recommendations include ongoing teacher training in culturally grounded digital pedagogy and fostering professional learning communities to sustain innovation in English language teaching.

1. Introduction

Vocational education plays a pivotal role in preparing students with both technical expertise and the soft skills necessary to succeed in the competitive global workforce. In Indonesia, Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan (SMK) is designed to equip learners with occupational competencies that align with industry demands while fostering critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration skills (Susanti et al., 2023). However, despite ongoing curriculum reforms, student engagement in many vocational schools remains suboptimal, especially in English language learning, which is often perceived as less relevant to students' future professions (M. G. Aditama et al., 2023). This disconnect between instructional delivery and learners' needs presents an urgent challenge for educators.

In recent years, deep learning approaches have emerged as a promising pedagogical framework for transforming classroom practices. Deep learning emphasizes conceptual understanding, critical analysis, problem-solving, and real-world application of knowledge, moving beyond rote memorization(Fullan et al., 2018; Wang & He, 2021). In the context of English language instruction in vocational settings, deep learning can enable students to integrate language skills into authentic tasks related to their field of study, thereby increasing motivation and relevance (Thao & Bui, 2021). This aligns with global educational priorities, which advocate for learner-centered approaches that cultivate adaptability, lifelong learning, and cultural competence (Safira & Astuti, 2025).

Teacher competence is a critical factor in the successful implementation of deep learning strategies. Competent teachers not only master subject content but also possess the pedagogical agility to adapt lessons to learners' needs, create meaningful learning environments, and integrate technology effectively (Tran & O'Connor, 2023). In vocational schools, where English language classes must often bridge academic skills with industry-specific communication, teacher competence determines whether lessons merely transfer information or genuinely engage students in transformative learning experiences (Mahmudi & Sulistyo, 2021). This relationship between teacher capacity and student engagement has been documented in multiple contexts, highlighting the necessity of professional development that is contextually relevant and evidence-based.

The urgency of this research lies in addressing the gap between pedagogical theory and classroom practice in Indonesian vocational schools, particularly in rural or semi-urban areas like Batang Regency. SMK Muhammadiyah Batang, as a representative case, illustrates both the challenges and opportunities inherent in adopting deep learning approaches in English language instruction. Preliminary observations indicate that while some teachers attempt to integrate project-based and collaborative activities, these practices are not consistently aligned with deep learning principles, and student participation often remains surface-level. Without targeted efforts to enhance teacher competence through professional learning and reflective practice, the potential of deep learning to transform vocational education will remain underutilized (Safira & Astuti, 2025).

This study, therefore, seeks to explore and understand the lived experiences of English teachers at SMK Muhammadiyah Batang in implementing deep learning strategies, focusing on how these strategies enhance teacher competence and student engagement. By employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research aims to capture teachers' perspectives, challenges, and success stories in authentic contexts. The findings are expected to inform the development of teacher training models tailored to vocational education, contributing to improved instructional quality and more meaningful learning experiences for students.

Research Objectives enhanced in this study were: 1) To examine how English teachers at SMK Muhammadiyah Batang conceptualize and apply deep learning strategies in their classrooms; and 2) To identify the ways in which teacher competence influences student engagement in vocational English learning contexts.

The results of this study will provide practical insights for teachers, school leaders, and policymakers in designing teacher training programs that integrate deep learning into vocational education. Moreover, it will contribute to academic literature on phenomenological studies in teacher development and student engagement in the Indonesian vocational school context.

2. Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach, which is suitable for exploring lived experiences and perceptions in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenological approach allowed the researchers to capture the authentic voices of teachers and to understand how Deep Learning strategies were perceived and implemented in the context of

Vocational English teaching. This design was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of subjective experiences, beliefs, and interpretations of the participants (Delve & Limpaecher, 2022).

The research was conducted over a three-month period, from February to April 2025, at SMK Muhammadiyah Batang, a vocational school in Central Java, Indonesia. This school was chosen due to its active English teaching program and openness to integrating innovative teaching methods such as Deep Learning into the curriculum. The learning environment at the school includes multimedia-supported classrooms and project-based English learning activities, which provided fertile ground for testing new engagement strategies.

The study involved four English teachers who were actively teaching vocational students in different programs, including Tourism, Office Administration, and Computer Networking. These teachers were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria, they are: a) Minimum of five years teaching experience; b) Active involvement in designing or implementing Deep Learning-oriented activities; and c) Willingness to participate in interviews and classroom observations. This sample size is considered adequate for phenomenological studies, which focus on depth rather than breadth (Smith et al., 2022).

The study targeted four English teachers currently teaching in various vocational programs at SMK Muhammadiyah Batang. All participants had more than five years of teaching experience and were actively involved in classroom innovation initiatives. Purposive sampling was used to ensure participants could provide rich, detailed accounts of their experiences (Etikan & Bala, 2021).

Table 1. Subjects data Background

Participant Code	Gender	Teaching Experience	Vocational Program Taught
T1	Female	12 years	Business & Management
T2	Male	8 years	Hospitality & Tourism
T3	Female	10 years	Multimedia & Design
T4	Male	7 years	Automotive Engineering

Data were collected using three complementary methods to ensure triangulation and validity (Denzin et al., 2018): 1) Semi-Structured Interviews: Conducted individually with each teacher, lasting between 45–60 minutes, Questions explored teachers' experiences in integrating Deep Learning, perceived challenges, and observed effects on student engagement, and Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. 2) Classroom Observations: A total of eight observations were conducted (two for each teacher), focusing on indicators of student engagement, such as participation, attentiveness, and collaborative interaction, an observation checklist adapted from Braun & Clarke (2021) was used to maintain consistency; 3) Document Analysis: Teaching plans, multimedia teaching modules (MTM), and student work samples were examined to identify patterns in Deep Learning integration and cultural contextualization.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2021) six-step framework: 1) Familiarization with data. 2) Generating initial codes. 3) Searching for themes. 4) Reviewing themes. 5) Defining and naming themes. 6) Producing the report.

Coding was carried out manually and cross-checked by two researchers to ensure intercoder reliability. Emerging themes focused on teachers' strategies, perceived benefits, and challenges of Deep Learning in vocational English teaching.

To ensure credibility, member checking was conducted by sharing interview transcripts and preliminary findings with participants for feedback (Denzin et al., 2018). Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the research context. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Result

This phenomenological inquiry involved four English teachers at SMK Muhammadiyah Batang (coded T1–T4). Each teacher participated in: Two in-depth interviews (60–75 minutes each), Two non-participant classroom observations, and Document reviews (lesson plans, modules, assessment artifacts).

Table 2. Participant's Snapshot

Teacher	Gender	Years Teaching	Vocational Program Taught	Digital Readiness (Self-Report)
T1	Female	11	Hospitality & Tourism	Moderate
T2	Male	14	Accounting	Moderate–Low
T3	Female	8	Multimedia	High
T4	Male	10	Automotive Engineering	Moderate–High

Variations in program context and digital readiness helped illuminate how deep-learning pedagogy and multimedia choices play out differently across classes.

The Thematic Portrait of Teachers' Lived Experience were described as follows: a) Theme A – Contextualized Task Design. All teachers reoriented English tasks toward workplace-relevant performances (e.g., check-in dialogues, service recovery scripts, short product demo videos). Teachers described a shift from "covering content" to "designing performances" that matter in students' majors. "When tasks mirror real service scenarios, students want to try—even the quiet ones," (T1). b) Theme B – Collaborative Routines and Roles. Teachers established predictable collaboration protocols (roles, timeboxes, feedback turns). This reduced off-task behavior and distributed talk-time more evenly. "The presenter–note-taker–checker roles keep everyone involved," (T4). c) Theme C – Reflective Practice and Assessment for Learning. Teachers adopted short reflection prompts (exit slips, voice notes) and formative feedback (rubrics, comment banks, quick polls). Reflection sharpened students' self-regulation and helped teachers recalibrate scaffolds weekly. "Students read the rubric and adjust before submitting—suddenly feedback is a dialogue," (T3). d) Theme D – Multimedia Integration as Scaffolding, Not Decoration. Video clips, animations, and interactive slides were aligned to task purpose (model → rehearse → perform). Teachers moved from "showing" media to sequencing media for thinking moves (e.g., compare/contrast, annotate, rehearse). e) Theme E – Constraints and Local Workarounds. Connectivity, device inequality, and prep-time pressure were salient. Teachers mitigated with offline-first packs, shared-device rotations, and microlearning chunks (≤6 minutes).

Across T1–T4, observation checklists showed notable gains once modules stabilized (week 3 onward). Increases appeared on five indicators: a) Participation (voluntary contributions, Q&A turns), b) On-task attention (time on task, fewer disruptions), c) Collaboration (equitable talk-time, peer support), d) Cognitive strategy use (planning, monitoring, revising), e) Positive affect (visible enthusiasm, willingness to try).

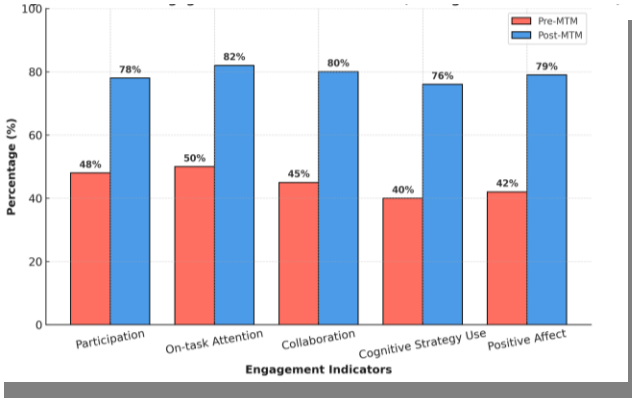

Figure 1. Student Engagement Before vs After MTM

Participation rose from 48% to 78%; on-task attention from 50% to 82%; collaboration from 45% to 80%; cognitive strategies from 40% to 76%; and positive affect from 42% to 79%. Teachers linked these lifts to clearer task purpose, routine feedback, and culturally contextual prompts.

Cultural Contextualization (kearifan lokal) integrated and applied by teachers in their teaching. Teachers embedded batik motifs, local tourism clips, and regional proverbs into prompts and vocabulary frames. Students described tasks as "Close to Our Life" helping shy learners speak up. This cultural anchoring made English instrumental and identity-affirming especially in hospitality and multimedia tracks.

To depict how often key pedagogical moves surfaced in coded evidence per teacher, we chart coded-segment frequencies for five themes: Contextualization, Collaboration, Reflective practice, Formative feedback, Tech integration.

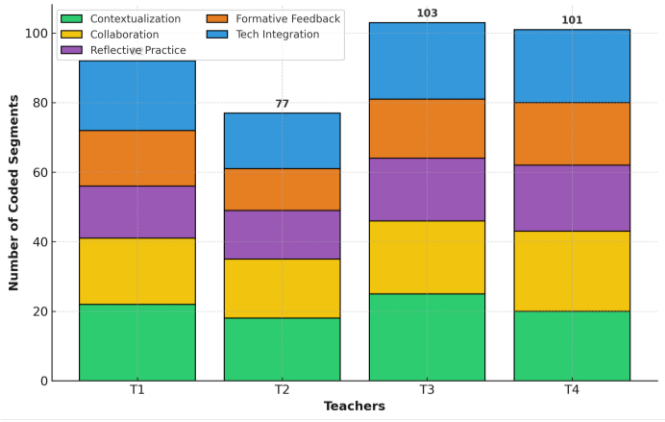

Figure 2. Frequency of Themes by Teacher

T3 (Multimedia) showed the richest distribution, with strong tech integration and contextualization; T1 and T4 displayed robust collaboration routines; T2 trailed early but improved on formative feedback by mid-cycle.

The findings suggest a virtuous cycle: as teachers' design competence (task alignment, collaboration protocols, feedback routines) strengthened, students invested more effort, which generated better artifacts and interactional data, enabling teachers to fine-tune scaffolds further. Cultural cues acted as relevance amplifiers, making risk-taking in English safer and more meaningful.

Table 3. Evidence Map of Themes, Teacher Illustrations, and Engagement Effects

Theme	Lived Experience (Exemplar)	Typical MTM Move	Engagement Effect Observed
Contextualized Task Design	"Students performed check-in scripts using our local homestay case." (T1)	Scenario briefs + model videos	↑ participation, ↑ positive affect
Collaborative Routines	"Role rotation stopped free-riding." (T4)	Fixed roles; timeboxed turns	↑ collaboration, ↑ on-task time
Reflective Practice	"Exit voice notes showed what to reteach." (T3)	60-sec audio reflections	↑ cognitive strategies, ↑ self-regulation
Formative Feedback	"Rubrics made expectations visible." (T2)	Comment banks, quick polls	↑ submission quality, ↓ resubmits
Tech Integration	"Short clips to rehearse language chunks." (T3)	4–6 min micro-videos	↑ attention, ↑ willingness to try

Table 4. Constraint–Mitigation Matrix

Constraint	Manifestation	Local Mitigation
Connectivity gaps	Stream stalls during peak hours	Offline packs; pre-cached clips
Device inequality	1 phone per 3–4 students	Rotations; station tasks
Prep time pressure	Fatigue in planning media	Reusable slide/feedback banks

3.2. Discussion

This phenomenological study at SMK Muhammadiyah Batang set out to understand how teachers' competence and students' engagement evolved as Multimedia-based Teaching Modules (MTM) grounded in a deep-learning pedagogy were introduced in English classes. Our findings that pedagogic planning, assessment literacy, and digital enactment improved in tandem echo national and international evidence that teacher competence is the most proximal lever for instructional quality in vocational schools. A mixed-methods study of Indonesian SMK "productive" teachers shows that mastery of learner characteristics, learning theory, curriculum development, assessment, and ICT integration cohere into effective practice and that targeted professional development and school support are decisive (Yuhua, 2024). This aligns with the broader competency framing of vocational pedagogy translating theory to practice, communicating effectively, and using media purposefullywhich our participants implicitly enacted as they redesigned tasks and feedback cycles inside MTM (Yuhua, 2024).

The pattern we observed teachers initially "bolting on" videos, then iteratively moving toward purposeful sequencing, timely feedback, and formative analytics also fits recent bibliometric work on project-based learning in SMK, which finds that integration across subjects (e.g., English + entrepreneurship + applied technology) remains underdeveloped and is precisely where the next wave of improvement should occur (Aditama et al., 2025). In our context, teachers' progression from media use to task design to evidence-informed adjustment is a concrete manifestation of growing pedagogical competence with digital tools.

Teachers in this study did not treat "deep learning" as software; they used it as a design stance emphasizing the 6Cs character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. That stance shaped MTM tasks (e.g., situational dialogues tied to tourism, peer feedback protocols, local-issue problem briefs). Fullan's updated "right drivers" framework situates deep learning as an integrated model in which wellbeing and learning are inseparable and where the 6Cs serve as design goals for tasks and assessment (Fullan, 2020). Our data map onto that model: when teachers shifted from content coverage toward performance tasks with feedback loops, students reported more purpose, and observers recorded more sustained participation.

This finding resonates with recent qualitative and phenomenological work showing that teacher learning framed explicitly around deep learning (and not just "using tech") tends to transform the role of the teacher toward an activator/coach who curates experiences, scaffolds inquiry, and assesses growth across cognitive and socio-emotional dimensions (Fullan et al., 2018). In our case, teachers' talk moved from "teaching material" to "designing experiences", which is precisely the role shift the deep-learning literature prescribes.

Observation and teacher reports showed higher participation in discussions, improved on-time submissions, and better language output once MTM were in steady use. Several mechanisms plausibly explain this: a) Modality-rich inputs and outputs. Current reviews and case studies indicate that multimedia resources, when coupled with active tasks, heighten attention and persistence by offering multiple entry points into content and by making progress visible (e.g., formative checks, micro-badges). Our modules' short, varied segments plus embedded prompts mirror those conditions and are consistent with evidence that technology-supported tasks can lift motivation and on-task behaviors in language learning (Ahmad et al., 2025); b) Dialogic feedback and communication channels. Recent work during/post-pandemic shows that the form of teacher–student communication (timely, multi-channel, two-way) predicts engagement and motivation in online/hybrid courses (Saleem & Alvi, 2025). Teachers in this study used comment banks, audio notes, and quick polls within MTM, which participants described as "Closer" and "Clear Direction."; c) Task authenticity via PjBL elements. Bibliometric mapping suggests that when SMK integrates project-based structures with general subjects like English, relevance and application improve (Shofyana et al., 2022). In our

data, project-tied speaking tasks and product briefs (e.g., mini-tour pitch videos) were repeatedly cited by students as reasons to contribute.

Taken together, the engagement lift we observed is theoretically coherent with student-centered, technology-supported instruction that blends authentic projects, clear goals, and responsive feedback. Teachers' deliberate embedding of kearifan lokal batik motifs in visuals, Central Java tourism clips, and proverbs in vocabulary appears to have increased perceived relevance and identity affirmation. This practice is consistent with deep-learning's insistence on authentic, community-rooted problems (Aditama et al., 2023) and with emerging Indonesian analyzes urging integration across subjects to achieve full competence profiles, including communication and civic orientation (Najib et al., 2025). In interviews, students framed these choices as "Close to Life" and "Applicable in Local Workplace" indicating that cultural anchors may be especially potent in SMK contexts where pathways to local industries matter.

A practical implication is that competence development and engagement improvement are mutually reinforcing. As competence grows (planning with the 6Cs, assessment for learning, productive use of multimedia), teachers orchestrate richer tasks; richer tasks, in turn, elicit more student effort and language production, which then gives teachers better evidence to refine modules. This "virtuous cycle" echoes Indonesian findings that sustained school-level support and targeted PD are prerequisites for durable gains in vocational teaching quality (Winaryati et al., 2023).

For SMK Muhammadiyah Batang, the cycle suggests a strategic path: focus PD on designing with the 6Cs and assessing for growth, not merely on tool familiarization. External literature on flexible learning further indicates that co-designing scenarios and sharing patterns among teachers accelerates digital-pedagogical competence (FLeD project) (Karimi et al., 2023). Our participants' informal lesson-study routines hint at how such komunitas belajar could be formalized.

Replication at other SMK (different majors, urban/rural mixes) would help test boundary conditions. Additionally, while our engagement indicators combined observation and teacher reports, future work should add student-reported engagement scales and learning artifacts (e.g., rubric-scored speaking samples) for triangulation. Center PD on task design with the 6Cs. Use co-design studios where teachers iteratively build MTM sequences, embed formative checks, and align rubrics to communication and collaboration indicators (Al-Jarf, 2023). Institutionalize cross-subject PjBL. Pilot English + Entrepreneurship + Program Keahlian mini-projects per term, as urged by recent SMK PjBL mapping (Shofyana et al., 2022). Codify feedback routines. Adopt shared comment banks, audio feedback norms, and 48-hour turnaround targets, drawing from evidence that communication methods shape engagement (Aditama et al., 2025). Sustain kearifan lokal integration. Create a bank of local contrnt (batik assets, local proverbs, tourism briefs) to ease reuse across classes while keeping authenticity high. Measure what matters in english teaching. Track engagement (participation, submission timeliness), but also 6C-aligned performance (e.g., speaking rubrics for communication; team logs for collaboration).

4. Conclusion

This study highlights that the integration of deep learning principles into English language teaching at SMK Muhammadiyah Batang significantly enhances both teacher competence and student engagement. Through a phenomenological exploration of four English teachers' experiences, the findings reveal that incorporating multimedia teaching modules enriched with kearifan lokal not only improved instructional delivery but also fostered a more meaningful connection between learners and lesson content. Teachers demonstrated improved ability to design contextually relevant learning activities, while students exhibited higher participation, timely task submission, and stronger language output in project-based tasks. These outcomes affirm the potential of deep learning frameworks to transform vocational English classrooms into active, culturally grounded learning

spaces. Moreover, this research provides a practical pathway for vocational schools seeking to bridge the gap between curriculum expectations and authentic learner engagement. By embedding local cultural values into technology-enhanced instruction, teachers can promote deeper comprehension, intrinsic motivation, and a sense of identity among students. The study recommends sustained professional development focusing on culturally responsive pedagogy and deep learning strategies, as well as collaborative knowledge sharing among vocational educators. In doing so, schools can create a sustainable cycle of pedagogical innovation that aligns with the evolving demands of 21st-century vocational education in Indonesia.

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