

BEYOND FUN: TEACHER'S CHALLENGES IN INTEGRATING JOYFUL, MINDFUL, MEANINGFUL LEARNING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| <p>Article history: Received: December 20, 2025 Revised: December 25, 2025 Accepted: December 28, 2025 Published: December 31, 2025</p> <p>Keywords: Joyful learning Mindful learning Meaningful learning Teaching for young learners Merdeka curriculum</p> | <p>The Merdeka Curriculum promotes a deep learning paradigm through the integration of joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning. However, classroom practices in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) frequently prioritize enjoyment while neglecting cognitive depth and reflective awareness, creating a critical gap between policy expectations and pedagogical implementation. This study aims to examine the challenges faced by English teachers in integrating joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning within English language instruction. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, this study was conducted at SDN 078010 Banuasibohou Onozikho. The participants comprised one English teacher and sixteen fifth-grade elementary school students. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that joyful learning was the most consistently implemented dimension, as reflected in high student enthusiasm, active participation, and a positive classroom atmosphere. In contrast, mindful and meaningful learning were insufficiently developed. Students tended to rely on rote repetition with limited conceptual understanding or transfer of knowledge, while teachers encountered persistent difficulties in maintaining students' focus and self-regulation. These challenges were further intensified by limited instructional resources, restricted instructional time, and uneven student readiness. This study contributes novel empirical evidence from a rural primary school context, highlighting the imbalance in the implementation of deep learning dimensions under the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings underscore the urgency of providing systematic pedagogical support, adequate learning materials, and continuous professional development to enable teachers to integrate joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning more effectively in English language teaching.</p> |
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INTRODUCTION

The education transformations in Indonesian, formalized through the Merdeka Curriculum, mandates a significant shift from traditional pedagogy focused on surface-level memorization toward a deep learning approach (Sisviana et al., 2025). However, in English language learning, particularly in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), classroom practices often remain centered on vocabulary memorization, repetition drills, and enjoyment-based activities. Although these practices increase students' motivation and classroom participation, they frequently provide limited opportunities for sustained cognitive engagement, reflective awareness, and meaningful language use. This framework fundamentally requires the simultaneous and holistic integration of three essential pillars (Lingu et al., 2024): joyful learning (affective engagement), meaningful learning (conceptual comprehension and application), and mindful learning (self-awareness and cognitive focus) (Rahman et al., 2025). The synergy among these three pillars is crucial for achieving transformative learning outcomes (Ubaidila, 2025). Joyful learning boosts motivation and emotional involvement (Muslim, 2023), while meaningful and mindful learning address the cognitive and metacognitive dimensions (Ramadhan, 2025). The successful integration of these three aspect is demonstrably effective in enhancing language proficiency (Vera et al., 2025), conceptual understanding, and students' reflective thinking skill (Maknun & Niswar, 2025). Conceptually, the overarching goal of deep learning is to move beyond mere recall the cultivate a profound and lasting comprehension of the language and its application (Maknun & Niswar, 2025; Nafi & Faruq, 2025).

Despite the clear theoretical imperative for holistic integration, pedagogical reality frequently reveals a significant implementation gap (Zahwannisa & Lubis, 2025), where instruction is often reduced to only one dimension. The specific imbalance forms the core investigate substance of the current study, titled "Beyond Fun: Teachers' Challenges in Integrating Joyful, Mindful, And Meaningful Learning in English Language Teaching". The title critically highlights the pressing need for educators to move beyond the aspect of "fun" to ensure students attain necessary cognitive depth and self-reflective capacity. For Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), a failure to fully integrate the Meaningful and Mindful pillars risks creating learners who can only mimic without true comprehension thereby confining the learning process to memorization rather than critical understanding and application (Cahyuni & Purbani, 2025).

A case study conducted at SDN 078010 Banuasibohou Onozikho provides empirical confirmation of this pedagogical disconnection (Marthawati & Adi, 2024). Preliminary observations show that Joyful Learning is effectively implemented, evidenced by high student enthusiasm and positive affective responses (e.g., laughter, active response) during simple educational games like guessing vocabulary and the frequent use of verbal praise by the teacher (Candra & Wahzudik, 2024). However, this affective success is not paralleled by optimization of the cognitive dimensions:

- Meaningful learning deficit: the indicators review confirms that the meaningful Learning pillars are not fully realized. Students were observed to primarily engage in phonetic imitation, repeating words or sentences without grasping their semantic meaning. They struggled significantly when asked to apply learned material in different contexts or relate it to personal experience, suggesting that learning remains at a surface level (Ap et al., 2025). This underscores the fact that implementing joyful learning through games, without a foundation in psycholinguistic, risks becoming mere entertainment that fails to support substantive language acquisition
- Mindful learning obstacles: The most critical challenge resides in mindful learning. The teacher explicitly reported this aspect as the most difficult to implement, citing primary challenges in maintaining student focus and managing constant distraction. Observation data revealed a lack of self-regulation techniques (such as deep breathing) and a reliance on repetitive verbal instructions to redirect student attention. This difficulty is further compounded by infrastructural constraints, specifically the absence of necessary visual media (like flashcards or videos), which are crucial for maintaining student's engagement and making abstract concepts concrete. Such lack of adequate educational facilities is a pervasive challenge facing teachers in rural areas (Akbar et al., 2023), often hindering the quality of instruction.

Given the significant implementation gap-where affective engagement is achieved but cognitive and reflective depth is not-this study is essential for investigating the specific pedagogical and structural challenges encountered by the teacher. This research aims to comprehensively analyze the obstacles that prevent the teacher at SDN 078010 Banuasibohou Onozikho from successfully integrating joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning. The findings are intended to offer practical, adaptive pedagogical strategies to bridge this gap, ensuring that English language teaching achieves the genuine, holistic deep learning objectives required by the Merdeka Curriculum.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive research method because the research aimed to explore in depth the nature of teachers' difficulties, classroom interactions, and contextual factors (Braun, V., & Clarke, 2021) in integrating joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning in English language teaching for young students at SDN 078010 Banuasibohou Onozikho, as highlighted by the imbalance in implementation identified in the initial observation (Rahmi, Muhammad Tahir, 2025). Qualitative method was chosen to gain a comprehensive understanding of classroom dynamics, educators' perspectives, and environmental constraints, rather than measuring outcomes through numerical assessment (Mulyani et al., 2025). This approach is in line with academic research on the challenges of teaching English to young students in Indonesia within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum.

This study was conducted at the fifth grade of SDN 078010 Banuasibohou Onozikho, focusing on English language teaching within the framework of in-depth learning in the Merdeka Curriculum (Mulyani et al., 2025). The main participants were English teacher and students based on their direct involvement in classroom activities, relevant expertise in the pedagogical process, and identified imbalances in the dimensions of excitement (strong), awareness, and meaning (underdeveloped).

Data was collected through classroom observation (Rahman et al., 2025) and semi-structured interviews, facilitating triangulation to generate robust insights into the challenges faced by teachers. Observations covered the implementation of joyful learning (including student engagement and classroom atmosphere), mindful learning (involving focus regulation), and meaningful learning (focusing on conceptual understanding and strategies), using systematic guidelines to maintain consistency (Minarto & Hatip, 2025). Semi-structured interviews explored perceived barriers, instructional decisions, and contextual factors such as infrastructure deficiencies, allowing flexibility for in-depth elaboration on experiences (Rahman et al., 2025).

Thematic analysis was applied to the data according to Braun and Clarke's six-phase model: transcription, familiarization, initial coding, theme search, review, and definition (Kushnir, 2025). Observation notes and interview transcripts were analyzed simultaneously to identify patterns in challenges, including disturbance management and semantic deficits, thereby strengthening findings through an integrated approach.

Credibility is maintained through continuous engagement, consistent observation, and alignment between data sources. Triangulation between observation and interviews, combined with meticulous documentation, strengthens confirmation and transferability, thereby effectively addressing the strictness of qualitative methods commonly found in educational research (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2018; Nowell, 2024). This methodological framework provides comprehensive insights into bridging the "beyond enjoyment" gap in the holistic integration of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) (Sudirman, 2025).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines the research findings and presents an in-depth analysis based on qualitative data obtained from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. In accordance with the qualitative descriptive method, the research results are organized into separate subsections to explain the implementation of joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning, culminating in an integrated examination of the challenges faced by teachers.

Classroom observation results

This section presents the results of classroom observations that focus on the application of joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning in teaching English to young students at SDN 078010 Banuasibohou Onozikho.

The observation data shows that joyful learning emerged as the most consistently applied aspect in the learning dimension (Salwa et al., 2025). Students showed high enthusiasm throughout classroom activities (Zalukhu, 2024), marked by active engagement,

positive affective responses such as smiles and laughter, and participation in games and vocabulary exercises. Educators routinely provided verbal praise and motivation to create a joyful learning environment. However, the use of visual teaching materials, such as flash cards or videos, was limited by resource constraints (Manunggal et al., 2022)

On the other hand, mindful learning was only partially observed. Although the instructor tried to create a calm classroom atmosphere by adjusting their tone of voice and teaching speed, some students had difficulty maintaining concentration and needed verbal encouragement from time to time (Kurniyatillah & Achadi, 2025). Explicit self-regulation or mindfulness techniques, such as breathing exercises or attention focusing activities, were not present in the teaching process.

Meaningful learning emerged as the least developed dimension (Salwa et al., 2025). Although educators occasionally connected the teaching material to familiar objects in the classroom, most students exhibited learning behaviors dominated by mechanical memorization. Students had difficulty applying vocabulary independently or expanding their knowledge to new contexts, demonstrating limited conceptual understanding as seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Classroom observation results of joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning

| Learning Aspect | Table Column Head | | |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | Classroom Observation | Observation Result | Notes |
| Joyful Learning | Student enthusiasm and positive emotional expression | Observed | Students showed excitement during games and vocabulary activities |
| | Varied and engaging activities | Observed | Games, question-answer activities, and pronunciation drill were combined |
| | Use of attractive learning media | Not observed | No flashcards or videos due to limited facilities |
| Mindful Learning | Student focus during instruction | Partially observed | Some students required repeated reminders to stay focused |
| | Calm classroom regulation | observed | Teacher adjusted tone and teaching pace |
| Meaningful Learning | Application of self-regulation techniques | Not observed | No breathing or mindfulness techniques implemented |
| | Connection to daily life contexts | Observed | Real classroom objects were used as examples |
| | Conceptual understanding | Not observed | Students mostly |

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Transfer of learning to new contexts | Not observed | repeated without understanding |
| | | Students struggled to apply knowledge independently |

The data presented in Table 1 the classroom observations spanned three instructional sessions on 15, 22, and 29 November 2025, aiming to provide a thorough and reliable portrayal of the enactment of joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning. Consistent instructional patterns emerged across these sessions, suggesting a stable pedagogical approach rather than sporadic classroom dynamics. In the initial session (15 November 2025), joyful learning was notably evident through students' enthusiasm, enthusiastic involvement in vocabulary games, and favorable affective responses. Nonetheless, student engagement was predominantly confined to repetitive exercises, with scant indications of conceptual comprehension or self-regulatory practices. The second session (22 November 2025) upheld the prevalence of joyful learning, as students exhibited persistent excitement in interactive tasks. Likewise, the third session (29 November 2025) exhibited analogous implementation trends. Structured mindfulness or self-regulation methods were not observed, and students persistently struggled to generalize acquired vocabulary to novel situations. In summation, the three observation periods substantiate that joyful learning was reliably enacted throughout the sessions, while mindful and meaningful learning persisted as underdeveloped elements during the instructional timeframe.

Teacher interview results

This section describes the results obtained from semi-structured interviews conducted with English teachers, with the aim of identifying obstacles encountered in implementing joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning approaches as written in the following.

Table 2. Summary of teacher interview findings on joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning

| Learning Aspect | Table Column Head | |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | Interview Focus | Interview Focus |
| Joyful Learning | Understanding of joyful learning | Learning that makes students feel happy, comfortable, and motivated despite limited English ability |
| | Strategies applied | Vocabulary guessing games, simple movements, and the use of real classroom objects |

| | | |
|---------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | Challenges encountered | Students' low proficiency and limited facilities restrict variation of learning activities |
| | Focus management strategies | Calling students' names, repetition, slowing speech, and giving simple instructions |
| Mindful Learning | Causes of distraction | Short attention span, varied learning pace, and limited basic ability |
| | Main difficulty | Maintaining students' focus consistently during lessons |
| | Contextualization strategies | Linking learning materials to familiar objects and daily activities |
| Meaningful Learning | Learning difficulties | Students tend to imitate pronunciation without understanding meaning |
| | Barriers to application | Role-play and dialogue activities are difficult due to limited vocabulary and low confidence |
| General Challenges | Dominant obstacles | Lack of learning media, limited instructional time, and uneven student readiness |
| Teacher Needs | Required support | Visual learning media, teacher training, and improved learning facilities |

The interview results, as summarized in Table 2, A semi-structured interview was administered on a single occasion, 29 November 2025, with an English teacher from SDN 078010 Banuasibohou Onozikho, comprising 20 open-ended questions. The primary objective was to investigate the educator's comprehension, pedagogical approaches, and obstacles in incorporating joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning. The results reveal that joyful learning was deliberately prioritized to sustain student motivation and alleviate anxiety. Nevertheless, mindful learning presented the most significant difficulty, especially in sustaining student concentration amid brief attention spans and inadequate self-regulation abilities. Meaningful learning was impeded by students' restricted vocabulary and diminished self-assurance, rendering autonomous language application challenging. Furthermore, inadequate instructional resources and constrained teaching periods additionally obstructed the seamless incorporation of these three learning facets.

Discussion on integration challenges across learning dimensions

This section examines the research outcomes by analyzing classroom observation and interview data to elucidate the reasons behind the predominance of joyful learning, while mindful and meaningful learning remained underdeveloped in English language instruction for fifth-grade students (Nafi & Faruq, 2025).

The prominence of joyful learning stems from both instructional objectives and learner attributes. As fifth-grade elementary pupils, students are at a developmental phase that is particularly receptive to emotional stimuli, including games, commendation, and participatory exercises (Maknun & Niswar, 2025). The educator intentionally favored joyful learning to uphold motivation, mitigate anxiety, and promote involvement, especially given the learners' constrained English competence (Az-zahra & Hikmat, 2023). This outcome corresponds with the affective component of the deep learning paradigm, which underscores emotional involvement as a foundational element for education (Maknun & Niswar, 2025; Nafi & Faruq, 2025). Nevertheless, in execution, joyful learning predominantly served as a motivational mechanism rather than a conduit to enhanced cognitive involvement.

Conversely, mindful learning was inadequately enacted owing to students' restricted self-regulatory capacities and the dearth of formalized mindfulness techniques (Nadia et al., 2025). Fifth-grade learners typically exhibit nascent, yet incomplete, attentional control abilities. Data from observations and interviews demonstrate that the teacher primarily employed verbal directives such as reiteration, addressing students by name, and decelerating the instructional tempo to preserve concentration (Ayu et al., 2025). The omission of overt self-regulation methods, like attention-focusing or respiration exercises, curtailed students' aptitude for autonomously overseeing focus. This scenario mirrors a prevalent issue in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) environments, where mindful learning is frequently neglected due to temporal limitations and inadequate pedagogical preparation (Nafi & Faruq, 2025).

Meaningful learning emerged as the most deficient aspect, chiefly attributable to students' narrow vocabulary proficiency, diminished self-assurance, and reliance on imitation-oriented instruction. Despite the teacher's efforts to situate lessons within recognizable classroom artifacts, the lack of methodical scaffolding and scarce learning resources impeded students' capacity to formulate conceptual insight and extrapolate knowledge to unfamiliar scenarios. From the standpoint of deep learning, meaningful learning necessitates avenues for active linguistic application, progressive independence, and conceptual consolidation (Maknun & Niswar, 2025). The results imply that in the absence of ample instructional assistance and materials, education persists at a superficial stratum, typified by mechanical reiteration instead of genuine comprehension (Ramadhan, 2025).

Moreover, systemic impediments substantially contributed to the disparity across the three learning facets. Restricted instructional duration, deficient visual aids, and disparate student preparedness constrained the educator's ability to amalgamate joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning in a cohesive manner. Such barriers are routinely documented in rural elementary school contexts and frequently compel instructors to emphasize classroom control and student participation over profound cognitive advancement.

Pedagogically, these insights suggest that joyful learning in isolation falls short of attaining the deep learning aspirations advocated by the Merdeka Curriculum. Although enjoyment constitutes an essential base, it must be deliberately interconnected with mindful attentional management and meaningful conceptual support. Educators necessitate instructional direction, readily available teaching resources, and ongoing professional enhancement to facilitate the equitable incorporation of joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning (Nafi & Faruq, 2025). Lacking such provisions, joyful learning may persist as an appealing yet shallow endeavor, incapable of cultivating enduring comprehension and contemplative learning in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL).

General findings in relation to the research questions

In general, the findings of this study indicate that English teachers face distinct challenges in integrating joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning within English language instruction for young learners. In relation to the research question, the results demonstrate that joyful learning was the most consistently implemented dimension, primarily manifested through games, verbal praise, and affective engagement. However, mindful learning was only partially enacted due to students' limited self-regulation abilities and the absence of structured mindfulness strategies. Meaningful learning emerged as the most underdeveloped dimension, as students predominantly relied on rote memorization and experienced difficulty applying vocabulary meaningfully in new contexts. These findings collectively reveal an imbalance in the implementation of deep learning dimensions, confirming that joyful learning tends to dominate classroom practice, while mindful and meaningful learning remain insufficiently developed.

Limitations and future research directions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted in a single rural elementary school with a limited number of participants, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Second, the data relied primarily on classroom observations and a single teacher interview, without incorporating students' perspectives or longitudinal data to capture changes over time. Additionally, the study focused on descriptive analysis and did not examine the effectiveness of specific instructional interventions.

Future research is encouraged to involve multiple schools and diverse educational contexts to enhance the breadth of findings. Further studies may also integrate students' voices and employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs to examine the long-term impact of integrating joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning. Experimental or action research approaches are recommended to explore practical instructional models that effectively balance these three dimensions in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL).

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study aimed to explore the challenges encountered by English teachers in integrating joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning within the Merdeka Curriculum framework, particularly in the context of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). The findings demonstrate that although joyful learning effectively fosters students' motivation and classroom engagement, its implementation alone is insufficient to achieve the deep learning objectives promoted by the Merdeka Curriculum.

Overall, our results highlight that limited instructional time, inadequate learning resources, and uneven student readiness significantly hinder teachers' efforts to integrate joyful, mindful, and meaningful learning in a balanced and holistic manner. While joyful learning serves as a crucial affective foundation, the absence of systematic support for mindful and meaningful learning restricts students' cognitive development, reflective awareness, and conceptual understanding.

In essence, this study emphasizes the importance of intentional instructional design, adequate pedagogical resources, and continuous professional development to support teachers in implementing mindful and meaningful learning alongside joyful learning. Teacher training programs focusing on mindfulness-oriented strategies and contextualized language use are particularly essential in resource-constrained primary school settings.

To conclude, our research suggests that future studies should expand the research scope by involving multiple schools or grade levels, employing longitudinal research designs, or adopting mixed-method approaches. Such efforts would contribute to a deeper understanding of how deep learning principles can be effectively implemented in English language instruction for young learners across diverse educational contexts.

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