

Exploring Factors Influencing Students' Engagement in Deep Learning-Based EFL Speaking

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ABSTRACT

Student engagement is essential for fostering significant learning and enhancing speaking proficiency in EFL lessons. While prior research has investigated student involvement and deep learning independently, there is a paucity of studies addressing the elements that affect students' participation in deep learning-oriented EFL speaking activities, especially at the junior high school level. This study defines deep learning-based EFL speaking activities as speaking tasks that foster meaningful comprehension, critical analysis, cooperation, reflection, and the application of information through genuine communication. This study sought to examine the factors affecting students' engagement in these learning activities. The study utilized a descriptive qualitative approach and featured 10 eighth-grade students from SMP Muhammadiyah Lajoa, recruited via purposive sampling. Data were gathered via classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, subsequently analyzed employing the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). The results identified five elements affecting student engagement: personal motivation, instructional methods, educator support, classroom atmosphere, and English language competency. The data suggest that student involvement is influenced by the interplay of internal and external influences. The study emphasizes the significance of establishing supportive, engaging, and student-centered learning settings to promote meaningful engagement and active participation in EFL speaking activities.

Keywords: *Students' engagement, Deep Learning, Speaking.*

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a crucial skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it enables learners to communicate ideas and participate effectively in social interactions. However, many Indonesian EFL students continue to face difficulties in speaking due to limited vocabulary, pronunciation problems, grammatical inaccuracies, and insufficient opportunities to use English outside the classroom (Hasanah et al., 2025; Nazri, 2025; Rosi, 2024). These challenges often reduce students' confidence and willingness to communicate, resulting in passive participation during speaking activities (Suryadi et al., 2024). To address these issues, communicative and student-centered approaches have been widely promoted through discussions, role plays, presentations, and collaborative tasks that encourage meaningful language use and interaction (Raskova & Fitri, 2024; Syaripuddin, 2022).

One approach that has recently gained attention is deep learning, which emphasizes meaningful understanding, critical thinking, reflection, and knowledge application rather than memorization (Aditama et al., 2025; Fitrianiingsih et al., 2025). In EFL speaking classrooms, deep learning can be implemented through collaborative discussions, project-based activities, and problem-solving tasks that encourage students to actively construct knowledge while developing communication skills (Benu et al., 2025; Y. Lin, 2025). Recent studies have demonstrated that deep learning-oriented instruction promotes active participation, meaningful interaction, and higher-order thinking skills among EFL learners

(Aditama et al., 2025; Benu et al., 2025; Y. Lin, 2025). These findings suggest that deep learning provides opportunities for students to engage more deeply with language learning through authentic and collaborative speaking activities.

The effectiveness of deep learning is closely associated with student engagement, which refers to students' active involvement in learning processes. According to Fredricks et al. (2004), student engagement consists of three interrelated dimensions: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement. Behavioral engagement refers to students' participation, effort, and involvement in classroom activities. Emotional engagement relates to students' feelings, interests, enjoyment, and sense of belonging during learning. Cognitive engagement involves students' investment in understanding, problem-solving, critical thinking, and self-regulated learning. These dimensions are particularly relevant in deep learning environments, where students are expected not only to participate actively but also to think critically, reflect on their learning, and develop meaningful understanding (Fullan et al., 2018).

Recent studies have consistently shown that student engagement contributes positively to language learning outcomes, particularly in speaking instruction. Similarly, Lin (2025) reported that project-based speaking activities promoted behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement among EFL learners. Furthermore, Mihai et al. (2022) highlighted that emotional and social engagement played an important role in fostering active participation and meaningful language learning. These findings indicate that student engagement remains a critical factor in promoting successful EFL speaking instruction.

Although previous studies have explored student engagement and deep learning in EFL contexts, limited research has specifically examined the factors influencing students' engagement in deep learning-based EFL speaking activities at the junior high school level. Most studies have focused on learning outcomes and instructional effectiveness rather than the factors that encourage students to engage in speaking activities. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the factors influencing students' engagement in deep learning-based EFL speaking activities. The findings are expected to contribute to the literature on student engagement and provide practical insights for teachers in designing more engaging and meaningful speaking instruction.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore the factors influencing students' engagement in deep learning-based EFL speaking activities. The participants were ten eighth-grade students of SMP Muhammadiyah Lajoa, consisting of eight female students and two male students aged between 13 and 14 years old. They were selected through purposive sampling based on two criteria: (1) active participation in deep learning-based EFL speaking activities and (2) willingness to share their learning experiences during the interview sessions. All participants had experienced various speaking activities implemented through the deep learning approach, including collaborative discussions, classroom presentations, and speaking practices.

Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Classroom observations were conducted to identify students' participation, interaction patterns, and engagement-related behaviors during deep learning-based speaking activities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' perceptions and experiences regarding the factors influencing their engagement. Each interview lasted approximately 15–20 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The data were coded and organized into thematic categories to identify recurring patterns across participants' responses. To enhance the credibility of the findings, data triangulation was employed by comparing observation data with interview responses. In addition, member checking was conducted to ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Individual Motivation

Individual motivation appeared as one of the most powerful factors impacting students' participation in speaking activities. The majority of students responded that they were motivated to learn English because they believed it would benefit their future, communication skills, education, and self-development. Several students also stated that fluent English speakers encouraged them to become more engaged in their speaking development. The result can be drawn from multiple students' comments during the interview

"Because I realize that English is very important for the future. In the future, English skills will be highly needed." (Student 3)

"Yes, I think people who can speak English sound cool, and that makes me motivated to be able to speak English as well." (Student 9)

"Because nowadays the ability to speak a foreign language is very important. Many people go abroad to study, and that motivates me to learn English better." (Student 1)

"Because I often see people who can speak English looking cool. From that, I feel that I should also be able to speak English like they do." (Student 2)

These comments demonstrate that students' personal objectives and desires motivate them to actively participate in speaking activities. Observation data also suggest that some students willingly offer to speak in front of the class, demonstrating a strong personal desire and incentive to engage.

The findings showed that individual motivation became one of the strongest factors influencing students' engagement in speaking activities. Most students stated that they were motivated to learn English because they believed that English would be useful for their future, communication skills, education, and self-development. Students also mentioned that seeing people who could speak English fluently encouraged them to improve their own speaking ability. This indicates that students were not only participating in classroom activities because of external demands, but also because they had personal goals and internal motivation to learn English

This discovery illustrates the principle of meaningful learning in deep learning, wherein students associate learning activities with practical applications and future aspirations (Fullan et al., 2018). When students recognise learning as significant and pertinent to their life, they are more likely to exhibit heightened emotional and behavioral engagement in classroom activities. This study found that students' recognition of the significance of English for future prospects motivated them to engage more actively in speaking activities.

Moreover, the results corroborate Jiang (2022), who asserts that deep learning is intimately connected to intrinsic motivation and significant involvement in language acquisition. Students with robust internal motivation are more inclined to exhibit persistence, passion, and a readiness to engage in communication during speaking assignments. Reeve (2012) elucidates that autonomous motivation plays a crucial role in enhancing students' behavioural, emotional, and cognitive involvement in learning activities.

The observation data indicated that some students actively participated in speaking performances and classroom discussions on their own initiative, without being prompted by the teacher. This finding demonstrates that personal motivation served as a driving force behind students' active involvement in speaking activities. Thus, individual motivation contributed substantially to enhancing students' engagement in deep learning-based EFL speaking learning.

Teaching Strategy

Teaching strategies are another important factor in determining student engagement. Interactive learning activities, including as games, conversation exercises, pronunciation guides, and group speaking activities, increase students' enthusiasm and engagement during speaking lessons. This is demonstrated by various statements from students

"Games are the best, Kak, because they make me more active." (Student 3)

"What I enjoy the most is when I am asked to speak in front of the class because it helps improve my speaking skills." (Student 6)

"I feel more enthusiastic about speaking when we do it together." (Student 5)

These findings indicate that interactive and enjoyable teaching strategies encouraged students to participate more actively during speaking activities. Observation data also showed that the teacher frequently guided pronunciation practice and used interactive classroom activities to involve students in learning.

The data demonstrated that teaching methods had a substantial impact on student involvement throughout speaking exercises. Students reported that interactive activities like games, speaking presentations, group discussions, and pronunciation practice boosted their excitement and participation in the classroom. These exercises provided more fun and dynamic learning experiences, encouraging students to speak more boldly and participate more actively in classroom interactions. This finding is consistent with Irmayani et al. (2022), who found that strategies such as playing games and question-and-answer activities increased students' activeness, enthusiasm, and confidence in speaking English.

This conclusion aligns with the notion of joyful learning in deep learning, which emphasises engaging, interactive, and student-centered learning experiences (Hasanah et al., 2025). Interactive teaching tactics reduced students' fear and provided a more relaxed classroom environment, allowing them to participate more freely in speaking exercises. Deep learning encourages pupils to be active participants rather than passive receivers of information. As a result, speaking activities that include contact, cooperation, and direct participation might help students become more engaged in the learning process.

The findings further corroborate Aditama et al. (2025) claim that collaborative learning, games, reflective activities, and contextual tasks might boost students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in EFL classrooms. In this study, students became more engaged and excited when the teacher employed games and collaborative speaking activities. These exercises encouraged students to communicate, interact with their peers, and practise speaking more often.

Observation results also revealed that students participated more actively when the teacher immediately introduced interactive classroom activities and coached speaking practices. This demonstrates how effective teaching strategies can result in meaningful and engaging learning experiences that enable deep learning-based speaking training.

Teacher Support

Teacher support and feedback were also found to influence students' engagement during speaking activities. Many students stated that the teacher provided encouragement, appreciation, pronunciation correction, and clear explanations during the learning process. Positive support from the teacher made students feel more comfortable, confident, and motivated to participate in speaking activities. This finding can be seen from several students' responses during the interview

"Mr. Imran gives feedback by saying 'good job' before providing corrections in a kind manner." (Student 1)

"I become more enthusiastic about learning to speak when I receive support and appreciation." (Student 10)

"I feel more confident when I receive appreciation after speaking in front of the class." (Student 5)

These responses show that positive comments and teacher support boosted students' confidence and desire to talk in class. Observation data also revealed that students actively

asked the teacher questions, to which the teacher reacted positively and helped them during speaking activities.

The data revealed that teacher support increased students' involvement throughout speaking activities. Students stated that encouragement, admiration, constructive feedback, and pronunciation correction from the teacher increased their confidence and motivation to participate in speaking exercises. Positive instructor reactions also helped students feel emotionally supported and more comfortable expressing themselves in English.

This finding is consistent with Hu & Wang (2023), who discovered that supportive teacher engagement and instructor immediacy greatly increase students' desire to communicate in EFL speaking classrooms. Positive feedback and supportive correction might help students overcome their anxiety of making mistakes and participate more actively in speaking assignments.

In the context of deep learning, the teacher's responsibility includes not only delivering information but also facilitating meaningful learning experiences and assisting students' learning processes. Teacher support promotes mindful learning by making students more aware of their speaking performance and learning progress through constructive feedback and reflection. According to Hasanah et al. (2025), mindful learning encourages students to reflect on their understanding and enhance their competencies over time through guided learning experiences.

Observation data also revealed that students regularly questioned and interacted with the teacher during speaking activities. The teacher responded favourably and offered help when pupils experienced obstacles. This supportive connection fostered a positive classroom environment, encouraging students to become more emotionally and behaviourally involved during speaking courses.

Classroom Environment

Students' engagement in speaking activities was also influenced by their classroom environment. Several students mentioned that having supportive classmates and a friendly classroom environment increased their confidence and comfort when speaking English. However, some students stated that unpleasant comments or scorn from classmates have occasionally lowered their confidence. Here are some student statements from the interview session.

"My friends usually provide support during speaking activities." (Student 1)

"I feel more comfortable when learning and speaking with friends." (Student 5)

However, some students stated

"Sometimes I feel embarrassed because I am teased by my friends." (Student 2)

"Because some boys often tease and talk during the activities, I become less motivated to speak." (Student 4)

These data suggest that classroom contact might either positively or negatively influence students' engagement in speaking activities. Positive classroom settings enabled kids to participate more confidently, but negative peer responses made students feel scared to speak. Observation data also revealed that several students enjoyed learning and speaking with their peers because they could help and support one another during classroom activities. Students were observed discussing tasks together, assisting classmates who had difficulties, and encouraging each other to participate in speaking activities. However, the observations also showed that some students occasionally disrupted the learning process by talking excessively or teasing their classmates, which distracted other students and reduced their willingness to participate.

The results showed that the classroom environment influenced students' participation in speaking activities. Supportive classmates and excellent peer interaction made pupils feel more at ease and confident when speaking English. Students reported that learning with friends lowered anxiety and boosted their willingness to participate in classroom activities. This finding supports Qadri et al. (2023), who found that friends and classmates have a significant influence on students' speaking performance and emotional responses during

speaking activities. A positive classroom environment therefore plays an important role in fostering student engagement and encouraging active participation in speaking activities. However, some children said that taunting and unfavourable comments from peers lowered their confidence and motivation to speak.

This research suggests that social connection influences students' affective engagement during speaking tasks. A supportive classroom setting can foster emotional safety, encouraging children to express themselves and actively engage in communication activities. Negative peer responses, on the other hand, may heighten students' nervousness and reluctance while public speaking.

The observation findings further strengthened this result. During collaborative speaking activities, several students were observed helping their peers understand instructions, correcting pronunciation, and encouraging classmates to participate in discussions. These interactions created a supportive learning atmosphere that facilitated students' behavioral and emotional engagement. However, the observations also revealed that some students occasionally talked excessively or teased their classmates during speaking activities. Such behaviors disrupted classroom interaction and reduced some students' confidence and willingness to participate. This suggests that the quality of peer interaction plays a crucial role in determining whether the classroom environment promotes or hinders students' engagement in speaking activities.

The findings confirm Siwa & Basthomi (2023) claim that positive peer relationships and helpful classroom interaction considerably increase students' involvement in EFL learning. Students in deep learning classrooms are encouraged to collaborate, interact, and communicate actively. As a result, supportive classroom environments are vital for increasing students' confidence and active participation in speaking activities.

Furthermore, joyful learning, one of the core elements of deep learning, emphasizes the creation of a positive and supportive learning environment that promotes students' motivation and participation (Benu et al., 2025; Hasanah et al., 2025). When students feel comfortable and valued in the classroom, they are more willing to take risks in speaking English and participate actively in classroom interactions. This finding is consistent with Hasdina et al. (2024) and Siwa & Basthomi (2023), who reported that supportive classroom environments and positive peer relationships enhance students' engagement in EFL learning. Therefore, the classroom environment became an important factor influencing students' engagement in deep learning-based EFL speaking activities.

English Proficiency

Students' English proficiency was also identified as one of the factors influencing their engagement in speaking activities. Students who considered themselves more proficient in English were generally more confident and active in participating during classroom activities. In contrast, students with lower English proficiency tended to feel anxious, hesitant, and afraid of making mistakes when speaking. This finding was supported by several students' responses during the interview.

"When I'm more proficient, I feel more confident speaking up." (Student 5)

"When I'm somewhat proficient, I'm more active in class." (Student 10)

Meanwhile, some students stated

"I'm not very good at speaking English." (Student 8)

"I'm still hesitant because of my pronunciation." (Student 6)

These answers show that students' English proficiency influenced their confidence and involvement in speaking activities. Students with higher language proficiency tended to participate more actively, whereas students with lower proficiency frequently exhibited reluctance and lack of confidence during classroom speaking tasks. Observation data further supported this finding. During speaking activities, students with better English proficiency were observed participating more actively in classroom discussions, responding to teachers' questions, and expressing their ideas with greater confidence. In contrast, some students with lower proficiency tended to hesitate before speaking, relied on their peers for assistance, or

remained silent when asked to express their opinions. Difficulties related to vocabulary, pronunciation, and sentence construction were frequently observed among these students, which appeared to reduce their confidence and willingness to participate in speaking activities.

The findings showed that students' English proficiency influenced their engagement during speaking activities. Students with higher English proficiency tended to feel more confident and actively participate during classroom interaction. Meanwhile, students with lower proficiency often felt hesitant, anxious, and afraid of making pronunciation or grammatical mistakes when speaking English.

This finding supports Mai et al. (2024), who explain that English proficiency strongly influences students' willingness to communicate in EFL classrooms. Students with better vocabulary mastery, pronunciation, and grammatical understanding are generally more confident in expressing ideas during speaking activities. In contrast, lower proficiency can reduce students' confidence and limit their classroom participation.

In the context of deep learning, students are encouraged to improve their understanding and communication ability through meaningful learning experiences, active participation, collaboration, and reflection (Fullan et al., 2018). Although some students experienced difficulties due to limited English proficiency, they continued to participate in collaborative speaking activities and pronunciation practice. This finding is consistent with Aditama et al. (2025), who found that deep learning strategies promote students' engagement by encouraging active involvement, interaction, and continuous improvement throughout the learning process.

The observation findings also revealed that English proficiency influenced not only students' speaking performance but also their level of engagement during classroom interaction. Students who were able to communicate their ideas more easily tended to participate more frequently and confidently in speaking tasks. Meanwhile, students who experienced linguistic difficulties often showed signs of hesitation and anxiety. This suggests that language competence and engagement are closely interconnected, as students' confidence to participate is often shaped by their perceived ability to use English effectively.

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the factors influencing students' engagement in deep learning-based EFL speaking activities at a junior high school. The findings identified five major factors: individual motivation, teaching strategies, teacher support, classroom environment, and English proficiency. Among these, individual motivation emerged as the strongest factor encouraging active participation in speaking activities. The results indicate that students' engagement is shaped by the interaction between internal motivation and external learning conditions. Pedagogically, teachers are encouraged to implement interactive and collaborative speaking activities, provide continuous support and constructive feedback, and create positive classroom environments that foster confidence and participation. Schools should also promote student-centered learning environments that encourage meaningful communication, collaboration, and active engagement in speaking tasks. This study contributes to the growing literature on student engagement in deep learning-based EFL classrooms by identifying key factors that support meaningful participation in speaking activities. However, the study was limited by its small sample size and focus on a single school, restricting the transferability of the findings. Future research should involve larger samples, multiple schools, and diverse educational contexts.

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