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DEEP LEARNING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: A CONCEPTUAL PAPER

David Oktavianus[1], Akhyar Rido[2]
Affiliation[1] Universitas Teknokrat Indonesia[1,2]

david_oktavianus@teknokrat.ac.id[1] akhyar_rido@teknokrat.ac.id[2]

Abstract

This conceptual paper explores deep learning theories in English Language Teaching (ELT), emphasizing their potential to foster critical thinking, creativity, and communicative competence. Grounded in the frameworks of Marton and Säljö's Deep Learning Theory, Entwistle's Students' Approaches to Learning (SAL), and Biggs' 3P Model, the study contrasts deep learning's emphasis on comprehension and application with surface learning's focus on memorization. It highlights challenges in implementing deep learning, including the dominance of traditional teaching methods, resource limitations, and the need for professional development. The paper underscores the transformative potential of deep learning in cultivating linguistic adaptability and reflective thinking, particularly through strategies such as task-based learning, inquiry-driven activities, and formative assessments. Practical recommendations are provided to align curriculum design and assessment with deep learning principles, addressing barriers to integration in diverse ELT contexts. A visual framework of deep learning dimensions is also proposed, offering educators a structured approach to enhance classroom practices. By bridging theory and practice, this paper advocates for pedagogical shifts that align with 21st-century educational goals, equipping learners with the skills needed for real-world communication challenges. Future research should focus on adapting deep learning frameworks to promote deeper engagement in ELT.

Keywords: Deep learning, English language classroom, English language teaching

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, innovative teaching methods have transformed education globally, offering new pathways to develop critical thinking and collaboration (Trilling & Fadel, 2009), including in Indonesia. As the newly elected Minister of Primary and Secondary Education in October 2024, Prof. Dr. Abdul Mu'ti, M.Ed., promoted deep learning as a learning approach (Kompas.id, 2024). Deep learning, as presented by Marton and Säljö (1976) alongside Biggs and Tang (2011), involves a holistic engagement with the materials, designing comprehension, meaningful connections, and the ability to apply knowledge across contexts, in contrast to surface approaches, which focus on memorization. This framework challenges conventional classroom practices, which often prioritize surface learning and short-term performance indicators. In English language teaching, adopting deep learning methodologies holds the promise of cultivating communicative competence, reflective thinking, and the ability to transfer knowledge across contexts (Stoller, 2006).

Despite its potential, implementing deep learning in English classrooms faces numerous barriers. The prevalent use of traditional methods, such as rote learning and repetitive exercises, often contradicts the reflective and integrative skills needed for deep learning (Walsh, 2011). Furthermore, teachers face practical challenges, including limited resources, scarce professional development opportunities, and the need for teachers' agency and significant

pedagogical shifts to accommodate inquiry-based and student-centered learning approaches (Fullan, 2007; Tran, 2018). These challenges underscore the necessity of rethinking curriculum design and assessment strategies to align with deep learning principles (Gass & Mackey, 2007).

The global requests for improving language proficiency emphasize the urgency of integrating deep learning into English language teaching (ELT) to nurture critical thinking, creativity, and deeper engagement (Varas et al, 2023). Thus, this paper explores the theoretical foundations of deep learning and its application in the language classroom. It equips strategies for educators to unify these principles effectively into their teaching practice.

This conceptual paper adopts a theoretical and analytical approach to examine the relevance and application of deep learning theories within ELT. This paper synthesizes existing literature to develop a coherent argument for integrating deep learning principles into ELT pedagogy. The method employed is grounded in conceptual analysis, involving the comparison and integration of key educational frameworks that inform deep learning processes in language education. The primary theoretical lenses guiding this analysis are: (1) Marton and Säljö's Deep and Surface Learning Theory, which distinguishes between learners who seek to understand underlying meaning and those who focus on rote memorization; (2) Entwistle's Students' Approaches to Learning (SAL) framework, which provides insight into how contextual and personal factors influence learning orientations; (3) Biggs' 3P Model (Presage–Process–Product), which offers a systemic view of teaching and learning by connecting learner characteristics, teaching strategies, and learning outcomes. The paper specifically contrasts deep and surface learning orientations in ELT settings, identifies pedagogical strategies aligned with deep learning, and explores barriers and enabling conditions for implementation in varied educational contexts.

MARTON AND SÄLJÖ'S SURFACE AND DEEP LEARNING APPROACH

The initial discussion of deep learning was processed through the lens of Marton and Säljö's (1976) surface-level and deep-level processing terminology and its implications for the learners' engagement. Marton and Säljö's empirical study involved assigning students to read extensive academic passages and answering reflective and content-based questions. Significant variations in the way students approached the same reading task were discovered by the researchers. Some concentrated on integrating the author's underlying message, while others tried to understand and recall specific facts and surface details. The names of these contrasting methods were surface-level processing and deep-level processing, respectively.

Marton and Säljö found significant differences in learning outcomes and thinking methods through a series of research experiments in which university students read and interpreted academic texts. It was found that certain pupils prioritized learning specific facts and textual components; Marton and Säljö referred to this as surface-level processing. Some, on the other hand, focused on understanding the structure and meaning of the arguments being made, demonstrating a more critical and introspective approach—what they called deep-level processing. Deep and surface learning were not initially introduced by the researchers as formal theoretical models, but were able to be concluded as like Table 1 below.

Table 1. Initial Conceptual Distinction Between Surface and Deep Processing
Adapted from Marton and Säljö (1976)

Surface Processing	Deep Processing
Focus on:	Focus on:
- Text itself	- Meaning of text
- Memorization	- Understanding
- Recall of facts	- Interpretation

These distinctions were used to characterize learner engagement and comprehension patterns that developed implicitly from their observations. Rather than being theoretically abstracted, the term evolved in the context of exploration. This processing distinction has major significance for students and teachers when it comes to language acquisition, especially reading comprehension. While a surface-level approach to reading may lead to a limited understanding of contextual or linguistic nuances, a deep-level approach helps readers develop a more significant and transferable comprehension of the language and concepts of the text.

There are several strategies that ELT practitioners might implement to align curriculum design with deep-level processing principles. The learning process can be enhanced and assignments made relevant to authentic learning materials such as articles, interviews, and real-life conversations. By these resources, students can learn to understand complex concepts and modify their language use for a variety of situations. A process that actual resources naturally support, deep learning involves meaningful engagement with content rather than fact memorization (Marton and Säljö, 1976).

Moreover, collaborative assignments such as presentations or research tasks by pairs or group projects provide opportunities for learners to drill language skills while engaging in critical and creative ways. This aligns with Biggs and Tang's (2011) constructive alignment approach, which emphasizes designing learning activities that promote deep engagement and higher-order thinking. Inquiry-driven learning activities, such as designing experiments and analyzing case studies, can also be integrated to promote exploration and discovery. These activities require learners to apply linguistic knowledge actively, thereby deepening their understanding and retention (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1982).

Overall, Marton and Säljö's 1976 study laid the empirical foundation for the concepts of deep and surface learning by observing how students interacted with academic texts. While their work was exploratory, the distinctions they introduced have since proven highly applicable in language learning contexts. They underscore the idea that effective reading in a second language is not about how much a learner remembers, but about how meaningfully the learner processes and interprets what is read. This paradigm shift, from quantity to quality of learning, remains central to both contemporary ELT research and effective classroom practice.

ENTWISTLE'S STUDENTS' APPROACH TO LEARNING (SAL) FRAMEWORK

The Students' Approaches to Learning (SAL) framework was initiated by Noel Entwistle and Paul Ramsden (1982), which was also explored by John Biggs (1987) provides valuable insights into how learners engage with learning tasks. Rooted in the earlier study on deep-level and surface-level processing by Marton and Säljö (1976), SAL categorizes learning behaviors into three main approaches: deep, surface, and, additionally to that, strategic. Each approach reflects a distinct set of motivations and cognitive strategies implemented by students, which significantly influence their learning outcomes. Strategic learning, a later expansion of the SAL framework, describes how learners adapt their methods based on task requirements and goals.

The researchers concluded that three primary approaches to learning that students generally employed were deep, surface, or strategic, as shown in Table 2. Using a deep approach involves attempting to find personal meaning while creating connections to existing knowledge to fully comprehend the content. This kind of learning frequently results in improved comprehension and sustained memory. However, not all deep learning is equally effective; sometimes students appear to be learning deeply but make quick and unsupported conclusions, which can slip into surface-level thinking. In contrast, the surface approach is often driven by fear of failure or a desire just to pass. It depends on rote memorization and tends to

concentrate on specific information rather than pursuing a more thorough understanding. This method frequently leads to misunderstandings, insufficient learning outcomes, and low motivation, particularly when students find the assignments or the instruction uninspired.

On the other hand, a strategic approach is more focused on achieving high grades. Students who apply this approach are organized, aware of what is expected by their teachers, and switch between deep and surface strategies depending on what they think will help them succeed. While they may not always seek deep understanding, they are highly motivated by results and often perform well academically. The researchers also noted that these approaches are not just about personality—students' learning behavior can change depending on the context, such as the kind of task, the teacher's style, or how they are assessed. In other words, learning is shaped both by who the student is and the situation they are in.

Table 2. A framework summarizing descriptions of student learning
(Entwistle and Ramsden, 1982)

Study Orientation	Approach	Style	Stereotypic Personality	Processes	Probable Outcome
Meaning Orientation	Deep Active	Versatile	Integrated and balanced personality	Uses evidence critically, argues logically and interprets imaginately	Describing, justifying and criticizing what was learned. (High grades with understanding).
	Deep Passive	Comprehension Learning	Impulsive introvert with a theoretical orientation	Intuitive, imaginative, thriving on personal interpretation, and integrative overview but neglecting evidence	Mentioning overall argument, laced with illustration and anecdote. (Fairly high grades in arts).
Reproducing Orientation	Surface Active	Operation learning (sometimes combined with improvidence)	Converger with strong economic and vocational interests Neurotic introvert with obsessional characteristics	Attention to detail, cautious and limited interpretation, syllabus-bound and anxiously aware of assessment demands	Accurately describing fact and components of arguments, but not related to any clear overview. (Sometimes high grades in science)
Non-Academic Orientation	Surface passive	Improvidence combined with globetrotting	Social extrovert with few academic interests or vocational aspirations	Little attention to detail, over-readiness to generalize, superficial treatment and casual interpretation	Mentioning often irrelevant facts within disordered, haphazard overview. (Low grades)
Strategic Orientation	Deep or surface as necessary	Strategic	Stability and confidence combined with competitive aggressiveness	Detail or meaning as perceived to be required by the teacher	High grades, with or without understanding

In ELT, the implementation of SAL might highlight the diverse engagement of learners with language tasks and offer guidance for fostering critical thinking and meaningful and

effective learning experiences. Strategic learners may switch between memorization, which indicates surface-level processing, and deeper engagement depending on the task. For example, prioritizing rote memorization for vocabulary quizzes while applying critical thinking for essay writing. This adaptability underscores the importance of flexible task designs and assessments in language classrooms. Strategic learning encourages a dual focus on efficiency and depth, making it particularly relevant in exam-oriented educational contexts. Biggs (1987) then identified strategic learners as those motivated by achievement and efficiency, reflecting a pragmatic balance between deep and surface approaches. Such learners thrive when educational goals are clear and assessments are aligned with real-world applications.

The interaction between teaching methods and SAL is essential in ELT. Teachers must consider how assessments and pedagogical practices influence students' perspectives toward deep, surface, or strategic learning. For instance, rote-based assessments may push learners toward surface learning, undermining the communicative and functional goals of ELT. Entwistle and Ramsden's SAL framework also highlights the influence of the academic environment, a factor highly relevant to ELT. Creating a supportive and interactive learning atmosphere encourages students to approach language tasks with curiosity and confidence. English language teachers should design lesson strategies that integrate cultural and real-world relevance, fostering connections between linguistic elements and students' lived experiences (Entwistle et al., 1991). This contextual emphasis aligns with the reflective and experiential learning models advocated by Kolb (1984), wherein learners cycle through experiences, reflections, and applications.

In conclusion, the Student Approaches to Learning framework, with its focus on deep and strategic learning, offers valuable insights for ELT. By emphasizing comprehension, adaptability, and reflection, educators can design lessons that transcend surface-level instruction, cultivating meaningful linguistic competence. Aligning SAL theories with ELT practices enhances language acquisition while equipping learners for real-world communication challenges. Future research should focus on integrating SAL principles into culturally diverse educational systems and designing learning environments that support motivation and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

BIGGS' 3P MODEL

Biggs' 3P model was developed in 1989, built upon foundational work in learning theory, particularly the concepts of deep and surface learning approaches that were introduced by Marton and Säljö (1976). Deep learning is characterized by an intrinsic motivation to understand the material, while surface learning focuses on rote memorization and the minimum effort required to complete tasks. Biggs expanded this dichotomy into a more comprehensive framework to explain how various factors, from student characteristics to classroom environments, influence the learning process and outcomes.

Biggs' 3P model integrates three interrelated constructs: presage, process, and product. As shown in Figure 1, the model emerged during an era of growing interest in the interaction between learner characteristics and teaching context, approach to task, and learning outcome in education. While Marton and Säljö concentrated on individual student approaches, Biggs desired to provide a comprehensive view by examining the dynamic exchange between students and their learning environments.

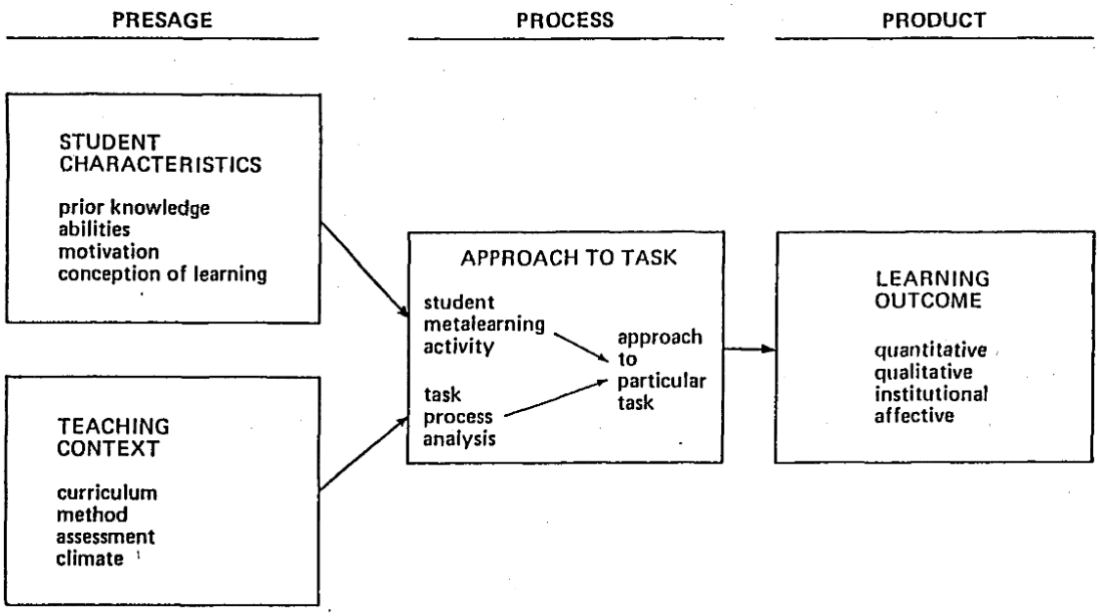

Figure 1. Presage, Process, and Product in Student Learning (Biggs, 1989)

The development of the 3P model was also influenced by Biggs' experience in higher education and his observation of how different teaching methods impacted student learning outcomes. Biggs (1989) explored that learning is not merely the product of individual effort but is also shaped by environmental and instructional variables. By synthesizing elements of cognitive, behavioral, and socio-constructivist learning theories, the 3P model became a seminal framework in educational research, offering insights into the factors that contribute to effective learning across disciplines, including English Language Teaching (ELT).

The first part of Biggs' 3P model is presage, which refers to everything that happens before learning starts. This includes initial understanding, abilities, motivation of the student, and their perspectives toward learning. For example, a student who thinks learning is just about memorizing facts may not engage deeply with the material. For teachers, it is what the teacher or institution provides, including how the course is designed, the teaching methods used, the way assessments are structured, and the overall classroom environment. All of these factors influence how students will respond to learning tasks.

The second part is the process, which refers to how students go about learning. This includes the strategies they use and their reasons for using what Biggs calls "an approach to learning." There are three common types: surface, deep, and achieving. Surface approach means the student is focused on getting through the task with minimum effort, often just trying to memorize facts without really understanding them. A deep approach means the student is genuinely interested in the topic and wants to understand it fully. They might try to connect ideas, reflect on the meaning, and relate it to what they already know. The achievement approach is focused on getting the best grades, often through organized and efficient study habits. The teaching context and the student's background influence which of these approaches they choose.

The third part is the product, which refers to what comes out of the learning process. This includes things like how much the student has learned (quantitative), how well they understand the material (qualitative), their grades or certifications (institutional), and how they feel about the learning experience (affective). Research shows that a surface approach usually

leads to poorer outcomes, while a deep approach leads to better outcomes, such as meaningful understanding and higher academic performance. The model shows that learning outcomes are shaped by both what students bring into the learning process and how they engage with the learning tasks.

The role of the teacher is crucial here, as Biggs (1999) explored further that teaching strategies that encourage active learning, promote meaningful interaction, and create a supportive environment can facilitate deep learning. A deeper engagement within the language can be facilitated for students through task-based learning, project-based activities, formative assessments, frequent feedback from teachers, interactive and communicative tasks and exercises such as role-plays, discussions, and peer teaching. Such elements encourage students to investigate the language and its application in real-world situations, as an alternative to concentrating only on grammar drills or vocabulary memorization.

Despite its broad acceptance, Biggs' 3P model has also faced some criticisms. As noted by Ramsden (1992), Biggs' 3P model distorted the complex relationship between the learning process and learners' outcomes, especially in the substance of diverse cultural settings. In ELT, where students come from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the presage factors might not always be adequately addressed by the model. Moreover, the model's assumption that deep learning is always the most desirable compared to surface learning may still exist in specific contexts, especially for beginner learners or in language situations that require memorization, such as vocabulary acquisition.

Biggs' model has been expanded upon in recent research by acknowledging more complex perspectives on language learning environments, such as task-based language teaching (TBLT) and the function of feedback in language acquisition (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). These frameworks enhance Biggs' model by offering additional information about the potential impact of assignments and interactions with peers and teachers on the learning process.

In summary, Biggs' 3P model offers essential implications for comprehending the elements that affect ELT and the procedures that result in successful language acquisition. The model brings direction on how to create learning strategies that encourage deeper language use and generate more meaningful learning outcomes by emphasizing the relationship between presage, process, and product. Biggs' 3P model brings essential contributions to the ELT context, including the focus on higher-order language skills that enable learners to communicate effectively in a variety of contexts, comprehending learners' prior experiences and motivations, and creating learning environments that promote interaction and meaning-making.

CONCLUSION

The paper explores the transformative potential of deep learning within the English language classroom, grounded in theories by Marton and Säljö, Biggs, and Entwistle. It exposes that deep learning, emphasizing comprehension, application, and integration of knowledge, exceeds rote memorization in surface learning. The work also underscores the significant barriers educators face, such as traditional teaching methods, limited resources, and the need for pedagogical shifts. By integrating frameworks like Marton and Säljö's Deep Learning Theory, Entwistle's SAL Framework, and Biggs' 3P Model, the paper proposes a framework to align teaching practices with deep learning principles as shown in Figure 2. The agency-mediated learning cycle enables critical thinking, creativity, and communicative competence.

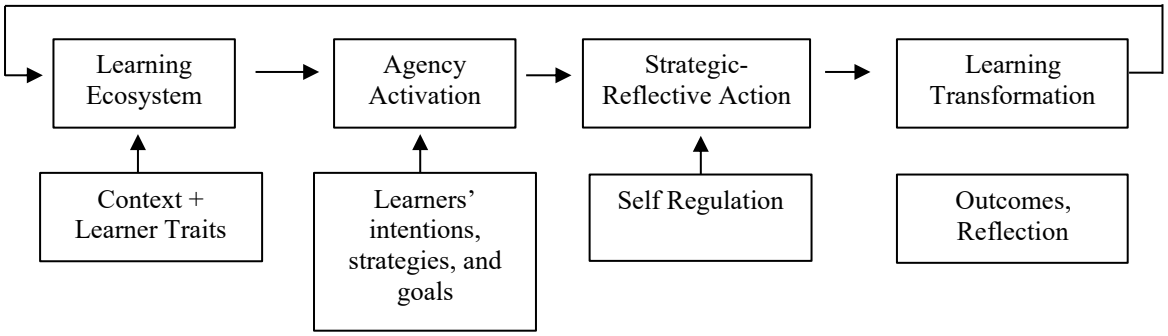

Figure 2. Proposed Agency-Mediated Learning Cycle

The proposed model cycle is a conceptual summary of deep learning principles in the ELT context. Drawn upon the theoretical foundations of Marton and Säljö's deep and surface learning approach, Entwistle's SAL framework, and Biggs' 3P model, this model combines key constructs such as learner agency, self-regulation, and contextual influences into a dynamic cycle of meaningful language learning.

In the ELT context, the model emphasizes that deep learning is not only a cognitive process but also a socially and emotionally mediated experience, shaped by learners' intentions, strategies, and the broader learning ecosystem. By positioning the agency at the core, the model highlights the active role of learners in navigating and transforming their learning trajectories through reflective and strategic engagement. This is particularly relevant for communicative and task-based language learning environments that demand critical thinking, adaptability, and sustained motivation.

As a propositional framework, the model is not yet a tested theory but offers a structured lens for interpreting and designing deep learning-oriented language teaching practices. Its primary function at this stage is to bridge theory and pedagogy, suggesting how foundational learning theories can be contextualized within 21st-century ELT practices. Future empirical research is necessary to validate, refine, or adapt this model across diverse classroom settings and learner profiles.

Stakeholders and educators can use this exploration to encourage essential deep learning dimensions in English language teaching classrooms. Despite the various expansions and terminologies of deep learning that educators can understand, and the limitations of exploring limited expansions, encouraging deep learning through preparation, process, and assessment is the most essential consideration for developing English language teaching. ELT requires the use of strategies that promote deep learning engagement with the English language, fostering meaningful, reflective activities that encourage critical thinking and long-term understanding.

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BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS

David Oktavianus is a student in the Magister of English Language Program, Faculty of Arts and Education, Universitas Teknokrat Indonesia. He is also the principal of Pelita Bangsa Secondary School, Bandar Lampung and has more than 18 years of experience as an English educator. In 2025, he successfully presented his paper at the 13th Open TESOL International Hybrid Conference hosted by Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. He is interested in English language teaching, deep learning, and educational leadership.

Akhyar Rido is a professor of interaction and pedagogy at the Faculty of Arts and Education, Universitas Teknokrat Indonesia. He was a visiting scholar at Mahidol University International College, Thailand (2022) and a visiting researcher at the Research Centre for Education, the National Research and Innovation Agency, Republic of Indonesia (2022-2023). His research interest includes classroom interaction using technology, classroom discourse, and second language learning.