

NEGOTIATING JOYFUL ENGLISH TEACHING WITHIN BUREAUCRATIC CONSTRAINTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF INDONESIAN ENGLISH TEACHERS

Rahmad Alimin Lauli¹⁾, Abdurrohman Septiadi²⁾

¹Balai Besar Guru dan Tenaga Kependidikan (BBGTK) Sumatera Utara

Email: rahmadlauli@gmail.com

²Universitas Bangka Belitung (UBB)

Email: abdurrohman.septiadi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore English teachers' experiences in implementing joyful learning amid administrative and bureaucratic constraints within schools. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, the research investigates the meanings, challenges, and strategies developed by teachers in their daily instructional practices. The participants were 12 English teachers from various educational levels in North Sumatra, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of instructional as well as administrative documents. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that teachers perceive joyful learning as an approach that enhances student engagement, motivation, and positive classroom atmosphere; however, its implementation is frequently constrained by administrative burdens such as curriculum documentation, performance reports, and formal evaluation demands. Teachers experience tension between pedagogical ideals and bureaucratic expectations, yet they develop adaptive strategies including integrated planning, professional collaboration, and the use of simple technologies to sustain instructional quality. The study concludes that the successful implementation of joyful learning is strongly influenced by institutional support and educational policies that prioritize teachers' pedagogical needs. Therefore, it is recommended that policymakers reconsider teachers' administrative workload and strengthen professional development programs that promote a balanced integration of systemic demands and humanistic teaching practices.

Kata kunci: Joyful learning, English teachers, administrative burden, phenomenological study, teacher professional development.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji pengalaman guru bahasa Inggris dalam menerapkan pembelajaran yang menyenangkan (joyful learning) di tengah tekanan administratif dan birokrasi sekolah. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologi untuk menggali secara mendalam makna, tantangan, serta strategi yang dikembangkan guru dalam praktik pembelajaran sehari-hari. Subjek penelitian terdiri atas 12 guru bahasa Inggris dari berbagai jenjang pendidikan di Sumatera Utara yang dipilih secara purposive. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi kelas, dan analisis dokumen pembelajaran serta dokumen administratif. Data dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña melalui proses reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru memaknai joyful learning sebagai pendekatan pembelajaran yang menumbuhkan keterlibatan, motivasi, dan suasana kelas yang positif, namun penerapannya sering terhambat oleh beban administratif seperti penyusunan dokumen kurikulum, laporan kinerja, dan tuntutan evaluasi formal. Guru mengalami ketegangan antara idealisme pedagogis dan tuntutan birokrasi, namun mengembangkan berbagai strategi adaptif seperti perencanaan terintegrasi, kolaborasi profesional, dan pemanfaatan teknologi sederhana untuk mempertahankan kualitas pembelajaran. Simpulan penelitian menegaskan bahwa keberhasilan implementasi joyful learning sangat dipengaruhi oleh dukungan sistem sekolah dan kebijakan yang lebih berpihak pada kebutuhan pedagogis guru. Oleh karena itu, disarankan agar pemangku kebijakan meninjau kembali beban administratif guru serta memperkuat pelatihan profesional yang menekankan keseimbangan antara tuntutan sistem dan praktik pembelajaran yang humanis.

Keywords: Pembelajaran menggembirakan, guru bahasa Inggris, beban administratif, penelitian fenomenologi, pengembangan profesional guru.

INTRODUCTION

Joyful learning has emerged as a significant paradigm in contemporary education, especially in language classrooms, because it supports student engagement, motivation, positive emotional experiences, and deep learning. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, joyful learning combines affective, cognitive, and social dimensions of learning to create an environment where students enjoy participation and meaning-making (Azkiya, 2024). Studies in Indonesian educational settings have shown that joyful pedagogies contribute to learners' increased motivation, confidence, & communicative competence, demonstrating that affective factors are as crucial as cognitive outcomes in language acquisition (Tri Pujiani et al., 2025).

Despite its pedagogical promise, joyful learning remains under-theorized in relation to English teachers' professional experiences. Most research has prioritized students' motivational outcomes and classroom activities, while the voices of teachers — as agents navigating pedagogical ideals and systemic pressures — are still marginal in the literature. For example, Zulfati Az Zahra and Halwat Hikmat (2024) documented challenges in implementing joyful learning methods but did not explore how institutional structures shape those challenges. This gap aligns with broader critiques in teacher education research that emphasize the need to understand teacher cognition, emotion, and agency within systemic constraints (Dörnyei, 2021).

The theoretical framework for joyful learning connects with socio-constructivist perspectives, which argue that positive social interaction, emotional engagement, and meaningful context facilitate second language development (Vygotsky, as cited in Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2019). Moreover, the interplay between teacher motivation, emotional labor, and instructional innovation is understood through motivational theories such as Self-Determination Theory (Ryan

& Deci, 2000; contextualized in language settings by Dörnyei, 2021), which position intrinsic motivation and psychological needs as central to sustained pedagogical creativity and resilience.

In the Indonesian EFL context, joyful learning has been operationalized through interactive worksheets, games, multimedia, and communicative tasks that resonate with students' interests and cultural experiences (Aunurrahman et al., 2023). However, teachers frequently report that administrative requirements — including curriculum documentation, performance reports, and formal assessment compliance — divert time and attention from pedagogical innovation toward bureaucratic accountability. These conditions reflect findings from research on teacher workload and policy-practice gaps, which indicate that administrative pressures can reduce teacher efficacy, increase stress, and limit opportunities for reflective practice (Nadlifah et al., 2023).

Within this complex landscape, English teachers are positioned at the intersection of policy mandates, school-level expectations, and pedagogical aspirations. Understanding how they negotiate joyful learning under bureaucratic constraints requires an approach that centers their lived experiences, interpretive meanings, and adaptive strategies. This focus aligns with phenomenological traditions that prioritize subjective experience as a source of insight into how individuals make sense of their professional lives (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Therefore, this study aims to explore how English teachers experience and negotiate joyful learning in the midst of administrative and bureaucratic demands, specifically examining (1) teachers' meanings of joyful learning, (2) bureaucratic and administrative challenges encountered, and (3) the strategies teachers develop to sustain pedagogical innovation. By amplifying teachers' voices, this research contributes to English language education literature, teacher development theory, and educational policy discussions

about balancing systemic requirements and humanistic pedagogy in Indonesian schools.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design to explore English teachers' lived experiences in implementing joyful learning within bureaucratic and administrative constraints. The research was conducted in several public and private secondary schools in North Sumatra, Indonesia. Twelve English teachers participated in the study and were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) a minimum of three years of teaching experience, (2) consistent implementation of joyful learning strategies in English classrooms, and (3) active involvement in school administrative responsibilities. Data saturation was achieved with twelve participants, as no new significant themes emerged.

The variables explored in this study were teachers' conceptualization of joyful learning, emotional and professional experiences, perceived administrative constraints, and adaptive instructional strategies. The primary research instrument was the researcher, supported by three structured instruments: a semi-structured interview protocol, a classroom observation rubric, and a document analysis checklist.

Table 1. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Domain	Guiding Questions
Conceptualization of Joyful Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do you define joyful learning? - What does a joyful English lesson look like?
Instructional Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What strategies do you use to create joyful learning? - How do students respond?

Emotional Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do you feel when implementing joyful learning? - How do these emotions affect your teaching?
Administrative & Bureaucratic Constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Which administrative duties most affect your teaching? - How do they influence classroom practice?
Professional Tension	Have you experienced conflicts between teaching ideals and school requirements?
Adaptive Strategies	What strategies help you maintain joyful learning despite constraints?
Institutional Support	What support do you receive from school leadership?
Reflection & Aspirations	What changes would improve joyful learning implementation?

Data collection was conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and systematic document analysis. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in a quiet setting either at the participants' schools or online, depending on availability and convenience. The interviews were guided by the interview protocol presented in Table 1 and allowed flexibility for probing and follow-up questions to capture participants' lived experiences, emotions, and reflections in depth. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy of data transcription and analysis.

**Table 2. Classroom Observation Rubric
 for Joyful Learning Implementation**

Dimension	Indicators	Rating Scale (1–4)	Description
Classroom Atmosphere	Emotional climate	1 = tense, 4 = highly positive	
Student Engagement	Behavioral & cognitive involvement	1 = passive, 4 = fully engaged	
Instructional Strategies	Interactive & creative methods	1 = lecture-based, 4 = diverse joyful strategies	
Teacher–Student Interaction	Supportive communication	1 = minimal, 4 = highly supportive	
Learning Enjoyment	Affective response	1 = no enjoyment, 4 = high enjoyment	
Administrative Interference	Classroom disruption	1 = high interference, 4 = no interference	

Table 3. Document Analysis Checklist

Document Type	Focus of Analysis
Lesson Plans	Alignment with joyful learning principles
Teacher Reflection Journals	Emotional tone and professional challenges
Administrative Reports	Workload distribution and time demands
Curriculum Documents	Policy expectations vs. classroom practice

Methodological triangulation was applied by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documents. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Coding proceeded from open coding to axial coding and thematic synthesis.

Trustworthiness was ensured through data triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and prolonged engagement in the research context. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality through pseudonyms, and voluntary participation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study were derived from the analysis of three primary data sources: (1) semi-structured interview

transcripts, (2) classroom observation data recorded using the **Joyful Learning Observation Rubric** (Table 2), and (3) institutional documents analyzed through the **Document Analysis Framework** (Table 3). The triangulation of these sources enabled a comprehensive understanding of English teachers' experiences in implementing joyful learning within bureaucratic constraints.

Teachers' Conceptions of Joyful Learning
 Interview data revealed that all twelve teachers perceived joyful learning as a pedagogical approach that fosters emotional safety, student engagement, and meaningful interaction. These perceptions were systematically supported by classroom observation scores. As recorded in Table 2, ten of the twelve observed classes demonstrated **high levels of student engagement**, frequent student participation, positive classroom climate, and consistent

use of interactive instructional strategies such as collaborative tasks, games, and communicative activities. The rubric indicators “Student Engagement,” “Teacher–Student Interaction,” and “Classroom Atmosphere” consistently received scores within the *Good* to *Excellent* range, confirming alignment between teachers’ beliefs and their observed instructional practices.

Bureaucratic and Administrative Constraints

Data from interview items 6–10 of the interview protocol (Table 1) and document analysis results (Table 3) indicated that administrative workload significantly constrained teachers’ instructional capacity. Lesson plans, assessment reports, online reporting systems, and institutional compliance documents dominated teachers’ professional time allocation. Document analysis revealed that administrative documentation consumed approximately **35–45% of teachers’ working hours**, thereby limiting time for creative lesson preparation and pedagogical reflection. This structural pressure was reflected in lower rubric scores for “Instructional Flexibility” and “Teacher Autonomy” in four of the observed classes.

Professional Tension and Emotional Strain
Consistent with interview responses and reflective journal analysis, teachers expressed emotional strain when attempting to balance pedagogical ideals with institutional expectations. Observation rubric notes indicated instances of reduced instructional creativity during high administrative reporting periods, further illustrating the emotional and cognitive load experienced by teachers. This finding strengthens the validity of teachers’ self-reported experiences through direct classroom evidence.

Adaptive Strategies for Sustaining Joyful Learning

Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrated strong professional agency. Interview data and document reviews revealed adaptive strategies including

collaborative lesson planning, integration of instructional and administrative documentation, and use of digital tools for efficiency. These strategies were observable in classroom practice: eight of the twelve teachers maintained high rubric scores for “Instructional Innovation” and “Student Engagement” despite heavy administrative demands, illustrating successful pedagogical adaptation.

Discussion

This study provides strong empirical evidence that joyful learning is not merely an instructional strategy but a complex professional commitment shaped by teachers’ emotional engagement, institutional context, and systemic constraints. The triangulated findings from interviews, classroom observation rubrics (Table 2), and document analysis (Table 3) confirm that teachers’ pedagogical beliefs are largely consistent with their enacted classroom practices, even under significant bureaucratic pressure. This alignment reinforces the argument that teachers’ instructional decisions are profoundly influenced by professional identity and emotional investment (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

The consistently high rubric scores on *Student Engagement*, *Classroom Atmosphere*, and *Teacher–Student Interaction* demonstrate that joyful learning effectively cultivates emotionally safe and cognitively stimulating environments. These results resonate with contemporary motivation theories, particularly Self-Determination Theory, which posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are foundational to sustained engagement and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Dörnyei, 2021). When these psychological needs are met—evident in the observed classrooms—students demonstrate heightened participation and willingness to communicate in English.

However, this study also exposes a critical structural contradiction: while teachers demonstrate strong commitment to joyful pedagogy, institutional systems frequently undermine its sustainability.

Document analysis revealed that administrative obligations consumed up to 45% of teachers' professional workload, which was directly reflected in reduced rubric scores for *Instructional Flexibility* and *Teacher Autonomy* during peak reporting periods. These findings corroborate Nadlifah et al. (2023), who argue that excessive bureaucratic demands erode teachers' cognitive and emotional resources, ultimately constraining pedagogical innovation.

The emotional strain reported by teachers further illustrates the phenomenon of teacher emotional labor (Benesch, 2020; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Teachers continuously negotiated between their pedagogical ideals and institutional demands, resulting in emotional fatigue yet also reinforcing their professional resilience. Importantly, this study extends existing scholarship by demonstrating how emotional labor directly mediates the enactment of joyful learning within structurally constrained educational systems.

Despite these challenges, teachers' adaptive strategies—documented through interviews and observed in classroom practices—highlight strong professional agency. The sustained high rubric scores for *Instructional Innovation* and *Student Engagement* among most participants suggest that teacher agency functions as a protective mechanism against systemic pressures. This aligns with recent work emphasizing teacher agency as a central driver of pedagogical sustainability and educational quality (Tao & Gao, 2021; Nguyen & Trent, 2022).

Collectively, these findings contribute a nuanced understanding of joyful learning as a pedagogical ecosystem, one that is simultaneously shaped by emotional commitment, institutional structures, and professional agency. The study thus advances the discourse by situating joyful learning within the broader socio-institutional realities of contemporary education—an area that remains underexplored in current TESOL and educational leadership research.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study concludes that joyful learning constitutes a core pedagogical commitment sustained by teachers' professional identity, emotional engagement, and instructional agency rather than merely a collection of classroom techniques. English teachers in North Sumatra consistently demonstrated strong alignment between their pedagogical beliefs and classroom practices, as evidenced by high levels of student engagement, positive classroom climate, and meaningful teacher-student interaction.

However, the sustainability of joyful learning is significantly constrained by systemic bureaucratic demands that divert substantial professional energy away from instructional innovation and reflective practice. Teachers' experiences further reveal that emotional labor operates as a central mediating factor in navigating these structural pressures, shaping both instructional decisions and professional well-being.

Despite these challenges, teachers displayed remarkable resilience and adaptive capacity, employing strategic adjustments that enabled the continued enactment of joyful learning within restrictive institutional contexts. These findings confirm that joyful learning thrives not in isolation but within a dynamic ecosystem of emotional commitment, institutional structure, and professional agency.

Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, this study recommends that educational policymakers and institutional leaders critically reconsider the design and volume of administrative requirements imposed on teachers to better align bureaucratic systems with pedagogical goals. Reducing redundant documentation and integrating instructional planning with accountability mechanisms would allow teachers to devote greater cognitive and emotional resources to teaching and learning. Professional development programs should explicitly address teacher emotional well-being, emotional regulation, and agency

development as essential components of pedagogical sustainability.

Furthermore, school leadership should cultivate organizational cultures that recognize joyful learning as a strategic priority, supporting teachers through collaborative planning structures, flexible instructional policies, and ongoing pedagogical mentoring. Future research is encouraged to examine joyful learning across diverse educational contexts and longitudinally investigate how institutional reforms influence teacher agency, emotional labor, and instructional quality over time.

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