

STUDY TEACHER STRATEGIES TO REDUCE ROTE LEARNING AND ENHANCE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: This study examines teacher strategies to reduce rote learning and enhance collaborative learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research was conducted at State Junior High School 1 Ciledug involving three English teachers from grades 7, 8, and 9. Data were obtained through interviews and classroom observations. The findings reveal that teachers employed student-centered approaches such as problem-solving tasks, small-group work, collaborative projects, and interactive media to minimize reliance on memorization. These strategies were found to increase students' engagement, speaking confidence, and critical thinking. The study emphasizes the importance of shifting from traditional rote-based instruction to communicative and collaborative practices to improve language proficiency in EFL settings.

Keywords: Collaborative learning, EFL, qualitative research, rote learning, teacher strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to communicate effectively in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has become increasingly important in the twenty-first century, requiring the integration of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in meaningful contexts. However, English

teaching in Indonesia remains largely dominated by rote memorization, such as repeating vocabulary lists or grammar rules without sufficient opportunities for real communication practice. Although memorization may help learners retain certain information, it does not foster fluency, creativity, or critical thinking (Li, 2004; Ausubel, 1968). As a result, many students can recall grammatical forms yet struggle to use English spontaneously in authentic situations. This issue is reflected in Indonesia's low performance in the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI, 2023), indicating ongoing challenges in communicative English instruction.

A growing body of research highlights the limitations of rote learning and the benefits of student-centered approaches. Studies indicate that communicative competence is better achieved when learners actively engage in meaningful interaction rather than memorizing isolated language forms (Kiswardhani & Ayu, 2021; Arini & Wahyudin, 2022). Collaborative learning has been shown to support this process by promoting peer interaction, shared problem-solving, and authentic language use. Homagai (2024) found that collaborative activities significantly improved learners' fluency and confidence, while Rai (2024) reported gains in critical thinking and social interaction among secondary students. These findings suggest that collaborative learning offers strong potential for enhancing EFL outcomes.

Despite increasing attention to collaborative approaches, most existing studies focus on higher education settings or contexts outside Indonesia. Research specifically examining *how EFL teachers in Indonesian junior high schools reduce reliance on rote learning* remains limited. This gap is important because junior high school represents a formative stage in which students develop key linguistic, cognitive, and social skills that influence long-term learning. Limited exposure to English outside the classroom further increases the need for effective, engaging instructional strategies (Nozima, 2021; Chen, 2023).

Collaborative learning provides a promising alternative to traditional, teacher-centered instruction. It emphasizes positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, and the development of social skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1987). Through discussions, peer feedback, and group tasks, students engage with English in authentic ways that support both linguistic and cognitive development. These principles align with constructivist learning theory, which views knowledge as actively constructed through social interaction and meaningful experience (Vygotsky, 1978; Piaget & Inhelder, 2013).

Given these considerations, this study aims to explore strategies used by junior high school English teachers to reduce rote learning and to examine how collaborative learning can

enhance students' engagement and language proficiency. Addressing this issue is essential for improving the quality of English instruction and supporting more meaningful learning experiences in EFL classrooms. In line with the purpose of the study, this research seeks to explore several key questions, namely how English teachers reduce the use of rote learning in EFL classrooms, how they implement collaborative learning to enhance students' language abilities, and what challenges as well as opportunities they encounter when applying these strategies in junior high school settings.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand how English teachers reduce rote learning and foster collaborative learning in EFL classrooms. The phenomenological design was chosen because it focuses on capturing participants' real experiences and interpreting the meaning behind their instructional practices. This approach enabled the researcher to explore how teachers perceive, implement, and adapt strategies within natural classroom settings without relying on numerical measurement.

Research Site and Participants, the research was conducted at State Junior High School 1 Ciledug, Cirebon, Indonesia. Three English teachers were selected using purposive sampling. The selection criteria included teaching experience, government teacher certification, participation in professional development activities such as MGMP, and familiarity with student-centered and collaborative learning methods. In general, the participants had between 12 and 26 years of teaching experience and were actively engaged in continuous professional development. These varied backgrounds were sufficient to provide different perspectives on teaching strategies while maintaining relevance to the study purpose.

Data Collection Procedures, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document review. Observations were conducted in a non-participatory manner to allow the researcher to record classroom interactions and strategy implementation without interfering in the learning process. The focus of observation was on how teachers minimized memorization and promoted student engagement. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face with the three teachers. The open-ended format allowed participants to express their views freely and enabled the researcher to probe for further clarification. To support the accuracy of findings, relevant documents such as lesson

plans and teaching materials were also examined. Document analysis served as triangulation to strengthen the validity of observational and interview data.

Data Analysis Procedures, data analysis followed Creswell's qualitative analysis steps. First, all interview transcripts and observation notes were organized and prepared. The researcher then read through the data to gain an overall understanding and noted initial reflections. The next step was coding, in which significant segments related to teaching strategies, challenges, and collaborative learning activities were identified and labeled. These codes were then grouped into broader categories, leading to the development of major themes such as strategies to reduce rote memorization and approaches to enhance student participation. The findings were presented in descriptive narrative form, supported by direct excerpts from participants and classroom observations.

Trustworthiness, several strategies ensured the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. Triangulation was conducted by comparing information from interviews, observations, and documents. Member checking was employed by asking participants to review the researcher's interpretations. An audit trail documenting each stage of data analysis was maintained to ensure transparency. Ethical procedures were applied throughout the research. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written consent was obtained before data collection. All participants' identities were anonymized to maintain confidentiality, and the collected data were stored securely for research purposes only.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Research Results

This study explored the strategies used by English teachers to reduce rote learning and enhance collaborative learning in EFL classrooms at State Junior High School 1 Ciledug. Data were obtained from classroom observations and interviews with three English teachers: Participant 1 (Grade 7), Participant 2 (Grade 8), and Participant 3 (Grade 9). The results present a descriptive summary of the strategies implemented across the three grade levels.

Observation data show that teachers in Grades 7, 8, and 9 applied a combination of student-centered and collaborative learning strategies. These strategies included the use of open-ended questions, contextual examples, group arrangements, peer teaching, and the integration of multimedia tools. Teachers also reported several challenges, particularly related to time limitations, classroom facilities, and varied student abilities.

During interviews, each teacher highlighted specific practices used in their classrooms. Participant 1 stated, *“I always try to give open-ended questions so that students do not simply memorize answers, but try to explain using their own words.”*

Participant 2 emphasized the use of problem-based tasks: *“I give them scenarios so they can discuss and find solutions together, not just memorize grammar.”*

Meanwhile, Participant 3 noted the importance of collaborative projects: *“Group projects such as creating dialogues or posters make them more active and help each other.”*

Table 1

Teacher Strategies to Reduce Rote Learning and Enhance Collaborative Learning in Grades 7, 8, and 9

No.	Indicators of Strategies	Grade 7 (%)	Grade 8 (%)	Grade 9 (%)	Description
1	Use of open-ended questions	87	82	78	Encourages critical thinking.
2	Problem-solving tasks	85	80	76	Develops analytical skills.
3	Interactive media use	90	85	82	Utilizes videos, flashcards, etc.
4	Student discussions	84	88	80	Promotes peer interaction.
5	Contextual examples	81	85	77	Connects lessons to daily life.
6	Small-group arrangement	88	91	86	Builds teamwork.
7	Collaborative projects	79	83	88	Encourages communication and responsibility.
8	Peer feedback	75	78	82	Encourages reflection.
9	Peer-teaching	74	76	80	Strengthens understanding.
10	Supportive classroom climate	93	90	91	Builds motivation.
11	Students' positive	89	86	84	Shows engagement.

	responses				
12	Teachers' challenges	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Time and facility limitations.
13	Supporting facilities	Adequate	Adequate	Limited	Availability of media and technology.

Note. *Adequate* refers to availability of basic teaching media (LCD, speakers, worksheets). *Moderate* challenges refer to time constraints, varied student abilities, and partial access to digital tools.

B. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that English teachers at SMPN 1 Ciledug have actively shifted from rote learning toward more collaborative and student-centered practices. The strategies identified through classroom observations and teacher interviews show a consistent pattern across grades 7, 8, and 9, indicating that teachers increasingly prioritize contextual understanding, interaction, and active participation over memorization.

1. Relating Material to Daily Life

The first strategy emphasizes connecting lesson content to students' everyday experiences. This practice aligns with the study's findings that teachers frequently used examples related to family, school routines, and familiar environments. By situating language within real-life contexts, students were more willing to express themselves and less dependent on memorized structures. This supports the theoretical claim that meaningful learning reduces rote behavior and promotes deeper comprehension. The teachers' interviews further confirmed that contextualization helped students gain confidence and improved their spontaneous language use.

2. Utilization of Audiovisual Media

The second strategy involves integrating videos, images, and songs to support lesson delivery. Observation data showed that audiovisual tools increased student engagement, reduced boredom, and clarified difficult material. Teachers used short video clips to demonstrate vocabulary in context or to model conversational expressions. This observation-based evidence reinforces the idea that multimodal input enriches students' learning experiences and encourages active engagement. Rather than relying on theoretical explanations alone, teachers used media to scaffold understanding through concrete examples.

3. Learning by Doing

The third strategy, learning by doing, includes role-plays, simulations, and group tasks. Teachers reported that these activities helped students practice language authentically. Observation notes revealed that students participated actively when they were asked to enact real-life situations such as shopping or giving directions. This aligns with constructivist principles, but more importantly, it reflects the actual shift observed in classrooms: students were solving problems, negotiating meaning, and collaborating, which are all indicators of reduced rote learning.

4. Educational Games and Interactive Activities

The fourth strategy highlights the use of games to review vocabulary, grammar, and speaking skills. While previous drafts repeated this content, the core point is that games stimulated motivation and encouraged cooperative learning. Classroom observations showed students competing in team quizzes, matching-word games, and sentence-building races. These activities helped reinforce material without repetitive memorization. Rather than simply recalling answers, students interacted, discussed, and made decisions collaboratively.

5. Student Concept Elaboration

The fifth strategy focuses on asking students to explain concepts in their own words. All three teachers intentionally used this method, as also captured in interview excerpts. This technique helped teachers assess understanding while encouraging students to process information more deeply. Observation data indicated that this approach reduced reliance on memorized definitions and promoted independent thinking. Instead of repeating textbook explanations, students attempted to articulate concepts based on their comprehension.

6. Tasks Based on Concept Application

The sixth strategy concerns assignments requiring students to apply concepts, such as creating posters, dialogues, or short presentations. This finding aligns directly with classroom data, where teachers structured tasks that required students to collaborate and negotiate meaning. These tasks strengthened students' ability to use English in purposeful ways, demonstrating that understanding—not memorization—became the basis for task completion. This directly supports the study's conclusion that collaborative tasks foster more meaningful language use.

7. Avoidance of Explicit Formula Teaching

The seventh strategy involves reducing explicit instruction on grammar formulas. Instead of teaching grammar rules in isolation, teachers embedded grammar into communicative activities. Observation findings showed that students learned structures naturally while describing experiences, sharing opinions, or completing collaborative assignments. This contextual approach made grammar more functional and less mechanical, marking a clear departure from formula-based rote instruction.

Across all strategies, the discussion highlights a clear and consistent pattern: teachers at SMPN 1 Ciledug are gradually replacing repetitive memorization with interactive and meaningful learning processes. The findings not only support theoretical perspectives on collaborative learning but also provide concrete evidence from classroom practices and teacher testimonies. Although challenges such as time constraints and resource limitations remain, the strategies observed demonstrate adaptability and a strong commitment to fostering active, communicative, and context-based learning.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the strategies used by English teachers to reduce rote learning and enhance collaborative learning in EFL classrooms at SMPN 1 Ciledug. Through interviews and classroom observations of three teachers, the research found that the shift from memorization-based methods to more contextual, interactive, and collaborative approaches has positively influenced students' engagement and participation. Teachers integrated strategies such as contextualized learning, the use of audiovisual media, practical activities, and collaborative tasks to promote deeper understanding and meaningful language use.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study also identified several limitations. Time constraints, varied student proficiency levels, and the limited availability of technological resources occasionally hindered the consistent implementation of collaborative learning. Additionally, because the research involved only one school and three teachers, the findings cannot be generalized to all EFL contexts.

The study provides practical implications for teachers, policymakers, and curriculum designers. Teachers are encouraged to adopt flexible, student-centered practices that emphasize interaction and real-life application. Schools and policymakers should support these efforts by improving classroom facilities and providing professional development on

collaborative instructional methods. Curriculum designers may also consider integrating more communicative and task-based components to reduce reliance on rote learning.

For future research, studies involving larger samples, multiple schools, or comparative designs across different regions are recommended to gain broader insights into effective strategies for reducing rote learning. Further exploration of students' perspectives and learning outcomes would also enrich the understanding of how collaborative methods influence language development.

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