

The concept of joyful learning in EFL classroom: A literature-based review

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Abstract. Joyful learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms is often connected with entertaining classroom activities rather than a comprehensive educational strategy that fosters deep learning. The goal of this study is to identify the key components of joyful learning and analyze how they contribute to meaningful learning and reduced language anxiety in EFL settings. A qualitative narrative literature review was conducted by analyzing 15 peer-reviewed articles published between 2022 and 2026 retrieved from ERIC, SAGE Journals, Cambridge Core, and Google Scholar, based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The research identified five interconnected components of joyful learning: meaningful knowledge, sustained curiosity, emotional safety, active participation, and the teacher's role as an inspiring facilitator. These components demonstrate that joyful learning extends beyond classroom enjoyment by incorporating cognitive, emotional, and pedagogical characteristics that encourage deep learning while decreasing learners' affective barriers. According to the review, joyful learning works best when meaningful, insightful, and learner-centered instructional approaches are combined with emotionally supportive classroom environments. These findings provide a clearer conceptual framework for implementing joyful learning in EFL classrooms, practical advice for teachers, and a foundation for future empirical research.

Keywords: joyful learning; english language teaching; classroom environment; learner participation; affective learning

1 Introduction

Joyful learning has emerged as an essential topic in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction as a technique of reducing student disengagement and boosting learning outcomes. This method comprises offering engaging and pertinent learning opportunities in an engaging classroom environment. In this study, joyful learning is conceived as a process where delight arises from deep comprehension and intellectual curiosity, rather than only offering pupils amusing activities. This approach engages students through emotional security, meaningful learning experiences, and active inquiry rather than merely entertaining

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classroom activities (Maming et al., 2023). Since a supportive learning environment can reduce psychological barriers like the "affective filter" and enhance language acquisition, the affective component is crucial in this situation (Shan Liu, 2021).

Based on learning psychology and 21st-century teaching, joyful learning is recognized as one of the most important characteristics for "deep learning," which involves behavioral, affective, and cognitive aspects, as well as higher-order thinking and long-term intrinsic motivation (Fredricks et al., 2004; Yasid, 2025). This synergy is bolstered by pedagogical approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Project-Based Learning (PBL), which engage students, promote real communication, and foster a social-constructivist learning environment in which students can express themselves freely without being mocked by others (Ramadana & Abdul Halim, 2025; Richards, 2006). Last but not least, when successful EFL teaching approaches are integrated with emotional support, students' fear of the foreign language is reduced, and their teacher relationship is strengthened, resulting in significantly higher levels of student engagement (Mercer & Dornyei, 2020).

Joyful learning should be applied as a comprehensive pedagogical method that combines cognitive challenge with emotional support to promote meaningful learning. A supportive teaching environment, along with proper incentive tactics, allows students to enhance both their language skills and their emotional well-being (Benu et al., 2025; Dörnyei, 2001). To do this, traditional teacher-centered instruction must give way to more innovative and learner-centered techniques that actively engage students in the learning process (Yazid Mubarak et al., 2024).

Although there is growing interest in joyful learning, it still lacks a clear definition in the field of EFL education. To date, research has focused mostly on the link between joyful learning and pleasant classroom activities, with little clarity on how these activities can help students attain meaningful learning, mental health, and deeper learning outcomes (Ricita et al., 2025). As a result, joyful learning is regarded as a tool for comprehending engagement in the classroom, rather than a pedagogical technique. The gap highlights the necessity for a more precise integration of its primary components and their role in the development of deep learning in EFL settings.

This study aims to review the literature on joyful learning in EFL education to identify its core components based on active engagement, emotional well-being, and a supportive learning environment. Through a narrative literature review, this study seeks to clarify the relationship between joyful learning and deep learning while bridging the gap between theoretical perspectives and classroom practice (Benu et al., 2025; Ramadana & Abdul Halim, 2025). The findings are expected to provide a more comprehensive conceptualization of joyful learning beyond classroom entertainment, offer practical guidance for designing learner-centered EFL instruction (Maming et al., 2023; Yazid Mubarak et al., 2024), and serve as a foundation for future research on sustainable joy-based deep learning (Ricita et al., 2025).

2 Method

2.1 Research Design

This research's qualitative study was a narrative literature review on the issue of joyful learning in the EFL context. The narrative review was deemed appropriate because it would allow the researchers to synthesize the results of prior research, find common themes, and provide a comprehensive conceptual comprehension of the specific topic rather than simply a synthesis of the findings of other studies. The evaluation focused on the concept and

practice of joyful learning in EFL classrooms, emphasizing meaningful learning, emotional well-being, student involvement, and deeper learning.

2.2 Data Source and Search Strategy

Four academic databases were used to locate literature: ERIC, SAGE Journals, Cambridge Core, and Google Scholar. The following keywords were used in the search from February to March 2026: "joyful learning," "English language teaching," "EFL classroom," "student engagement," "deep learning," "meaningful learning," "mindful learning," "language anxiety," and "affective learning."

Boolean operators (AND and OR) were employed to combine and filter search terms in order to improve search efficiency. The AND operator was used to find studies that dealt with multiple concepts at the same time (for example, "joyful learning" AND "EFL classroom"), whereas the OR operator was used to broaden the search by including synonyms or terms that are similar or synonymous with the initial terms. Other criteria included peer-reviewed journal articles, publication year (2022-2026), and language (English and Indonesian), where available in the databases. Table 1 shows the complete search technique.

Table 1. Literature search strategy.

Database	Example Search String	Filters Applied
ERIC	("joyful learning") AND ("EFL classroom" OR "English language teaching")	2022–2026; Peer-reviewed; Journal Articles
SAGE Journals	("joyful learning") AND ("student engagement")	2022–2026; English
Cambridge Core	("joyful learning") AND ("deep learning")	2022–2026
Google Scholar	("joyful learning") AND ("language anxiety") AND EFL	2022–2026; English & Indonesian

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance and quality of the reviewed literature, predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria were used in the article selection process. Studies were considered if they (1) were peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2022 and 2026, (2) were written in English or Indonesian, (3) focused on joyful learning or closely related concepts in EFL or English language teaching contexts, and (5) presented empirical findings or conceptual discussions relevant to the objectives of this review. Conference proceedings, theses, dissertations, book chapters, duplicate publications, and studies dealing with issues unrelated to EFL instruction were all removed. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication period	2022–2026	Before 2022
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference proceedings, theses, dissertations, book chapters
Language	English and Indonesian	Other languages
Research focus	Joyful learning or related concepts in EFL/ELT	Studies outside EFL/ELT
Study type	Empirical and conceptual studies	Editorials, opinion papers, duplicate publications

2.4 Study Selection

The literature search found 25 potentially relevant studies from the selected databases. The titles and abstracts of these papers were initially evaluated for their relation to the review's objectives. During this stage, ten papers were removed because they did not explicitly address Joyful Learning in EFL contexts or were insufficiently relevant to the study's goal. The remaining 15 papers were then fully evaluated using the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. These studies were chosen for the final analysis because they provided the most essential conceptual and empirical evidence on their application in EFL courses. This screening process ensured that only publications directly relevant to the review's objectives were included in the final synthesis.

2.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed on the selected papers to find recurring patterns of joyful learning in EFL classes. First, the whole text was read thoroughly to get a comprehensive grasp of each study. The key concepts and findings were then identified and classified based on their relation to the research objectives. Similar codes were classified into broader categories, which were then combined to form five primary themes: meaningful comprehension, persistent curiosity, emotional safety, active engagement, and the teacher's position as an inspiring facilitator. The themes were repeatedly compared across the selected research to verify that they accurately reflected the evidence offered in the literature.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

The narrative literature evaluation included 15 research articles published between 2022 and 2026. The selected studies used empirical and conceptual approaches to investigate the application of joyful learning in a variety of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching environment. Despite conflicts in research settings and instructional methodologies, the studies consistently examined at how joyful learning impacts meaningful learning, student engagement, emotional well-being, and deep learning.

Thematic analysis of the selected literature revealed five recurring themes that define joyful learning in EFL classrooms: (1) meaningful understanding and long-term retention, (2) sustained curiosity through inquiry-based exploration, (3) emotional security and an inspirational learning environment, (4) active participation through creative and collaborative learning activities, and (5) the teacher's role as an inspiring facilitator. Among these themes, meaningful understanding and active involvement were the most often highlighted elements, followed by emotional security, continuous curiosity, and the teacher's role in enabling pleasant and meaningful learning. These repeating elements imply that joyful learning goes beyond delightful classroom activities to include cognitive, emotional, and pedagogical qualities. Table 3 presents a summary of the reviewed papers.

Overall, the analyzed studies show that joyful learning is a multifaceted educational strategy rather than simply a method of providing delightful classroom experiences. The findings show that meaningful understanding, sustained interest, emotional security, active involvement, and effective teacher facilitation are all interconnected characteristics that help students develop cognitively, emotionally, and academically in EFL classrooms. These recurring themes form the basis for the debate in the following section.

Table 3. Narrative literature review summary table.

No	Author and Year	Focus Area	Key Findings
1	Vargas-hernández & Vargas-gonzález (2022)	<i>Meaningful Understanding</i>	Meaningful learning must be the foundation of joyful learning; when material is relevant to the actual world, pupils retain it more effectively.
2	Turmuzi (2025)		Deep learning and AI enable individualized content and adaptive feedback, making students' learning experiences more dynamic and meaningful.
3	Mariana & Hula (2024)		Deep learning has been shown to produce a meaningful learning experience at Islamic boarding schools because it allows students to relate linguistic content to everyday situations, which greatly increases their willingness to learn.
4	Santosa et al. (2026)	<i>Sustained Curiosity</i>	In the context of AI, thoughtful and meaningful learning are important predictors of successful deep learning, whereas joy alone was proven to be a poor predictor in the absence of cognitive depth.
5	Weng et al. (2023)		Students feel challenged and curious to solve challenges through design-based activities, which is the essence of intellectual fun.
6	Yasid (2025)		A joyful deep learning model enhances students' intrinsic motivation and curiosity.
7	Sisviana et al. (2025)	<i>Inspiration and Emotional Security</i>	Cultural intelligence provides a safe environment in which pupils can interact without fear.
8	Ricita et al. (2025)		The implementation of the MMJ technique in ELT classrooms has received excellent response from both teachers and students, as a pleasant and attentive learning environment has been found to increase students' cognitive engagement to the point of deep learning.
9	Maming et al. (2023)		In the post-pandemic era, implementing joyful learning through the use of songs has been demonstrated to greatly revive students' drive to learn while also improving their interest in and skill with English.
10	Insani et al. (2025)	<i>Active Participation</i>	Educational games and mini-projects have contributed to substantially increased student participation and classroom engagement.
11	Ramadana & Abdul Halim (2025)		Project-Based Learning (PjBL) implementation resulted in considerably increased learning outcomes (from 55.00 to 82.50) and student engagement through real-world projects that incorporate meaningful, thoughtful, and joyful components.
12	Feriyanto & Anjariyah (2024)		Mindfulness in a pleasant setting improves students' performance and engagement.
13	Gulo (2025)	<i>Teacher's Facilitation</i>	The challenge for teachers is to create a balance between fun and cognitive depth.
14	Pandang (2025)		Teachers require continuing help to develop deep learning pedagogy.
15	Yazid Mubarak et al. (2024)		The MMJ approach is seen as a comprehensive system; however, it is limited by time and curriculum.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 *Meaningful understanding: Connecting language to reality*

According to the reviewed studies, meaningful understanding is a critical component of joyful learning in EFL classrooms because students learn more effectively when English is linked to authentic and personally relevant contexts (Mariana & Hula, 2024; Turmuzi, 2025; Vargas-hernández & Vargas-gonzález, 2022). Rather than focusing on mechanical memorization of vocabulary and syntax, these studies indicate that meaningful learning happens when students see the practical utility of English in their daily lives. Although the research was conducted in various educational situations, they all agree that contextualized learning enhances deeper comprehension and encourages students to utilize English for genuine communication.

The studied literature also discusses several techniques for developing meaningful comprehension. Mariana & Hula (2024) and Vargas-hernández & Vargas-gonzález (2022) emphasize contextual learning by connecting instructional content to students' real-life experiences, whereas (Turmuzi, 2025) expands on this idea by demonstrating how artificial intelligence can personalize learning through adaptive feedback and customized instructional materials. These findings imply that meaningful knowledge is shaped not just by contextual relevance but also by instructional tactics that cater to learners' unique needs and learning progress.

From a pedagogical standpoint, meaningful understanding appears to reduce learners' affective barriers by reversing the emphasis from memorizing language forms to using English as a communication tool. When students see learning activities as valuable and relevant, they are more likely to participate, make mistakes, and use authentic language. This research lends credence to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which states that meaningful and emotionally supportive learning experiences reduce learners' anxiety and resource in language acquisition. As a result, happy learning should not only involve delightful classroom activities, but also provide meaningful learning experiences that connect language acquisition to students' real-world situations and communicative goals.

3.2.2 *Sustained curiosity: Inquiry-based learning*

The reviewed research consistently identifies sustained curiosity as a fundamental component of joyful learning because it motivates students to actively engage with language beyond surface-level understanding (Santosa et al., 2026; Weng et al., 2023). Curiosity emerges when learners face real cognitive difficulties that encourage investigation, questioning, and problem-solving, rather than simply through entertaining classroom activities. This research shows that joyful learning should promote intellectual engagement as well as a positive classroom environment.

The studies also provide complementary viewpoints on how to foster inquiry in EFL classes. Weng et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of design-based learning in fostering inquiry and creative problem-solving, whereas Santosa et al. (2026) contend that meaningfulness and mindfulness have a greater influence on deep learning than enjoyment alone. Although these approaches differ in instructional design, both show that interest is maintained when students are encouraged to research real-world problems rather than merely completing enjoyable tasks. This comparison underscores the notion that enjoyment acts as a supplementary condition for learning, but cognitive engagement remains the fundamental driver of restarted interest.

From a pedagogical standpoint, inquiry-based learning allows students to develop knowledge freely via discovery and reflection. When learning activities inspire students to ask questions, seek information, and solve significant challenges, their motivation switches from external rewards to a genuine desire to learn English. This research implies that joyful learning should include inquiry-based activities that make learners cognitively engaged while maintaining a supportive and enjoyable learning environment, so as to encourage both long-term curiosity and deeper language learning.

3.2.3 *Inspiration and emotional safety: Developing a safe environment*

The analyzed research consistently identifies emotional safety as a basic condition for joyful learning because it reduces learners' fear and promotes active involvement in EFL classes (Maming et al., 2023; Ricita et al., 2025; Sisviana et al., 2025). Rather than avoiding mistakes, students are more prepared to interact and experiment with English when they perceive the classroom to be friendly and courteous. These findings suggest that emotional well-being is not just a side effect of enjoyable learning but a requirement for meaningful language acquisition.

The research provides distinct but complementary approaches to promoting emotional safety. Ricita et al. (2025) emphasize the Meaningful, Mindful, and Joyful (MMJ) approach as a framework for fostering a positive and engaging classroom environment, whereas (Sisviana et al., 2025) emphasize the role of cultural intelligence in promoting students' sense of belonging and reducing feelings of inferiority or alienation. In contrast, (Maming et al., 2023) show that creative media, such as songs, can improve students' emotional preparation and reduce stress before they engage in increasingly difficult language activities. Although these ideas have different implementations, they all propose that emotional safety can be established through supportive classroom practices that acknowledge kids' emotional and cultural needs.

From a pedagogical standpoint, having an emotionally safe learning environment reduces learners' affective filters, allowing them to concentrate on communication rather than fear of making mistakes. This finding is consistent with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that lower anxiety promotes language acquisition by boosting learners' readiness to hear and process linguistic input. As a result, joyful learning should go beyond fun classroom activities to promote emotional stability, cultural inclusivity, and positive teacher-student interactions that allow students to participate confidently and achieve deeper language mastery.

3.2.4 *Active Participation: Passive Recipients to Active Learners*

Active participation is consistently identified as a key feature of joyful learning because it encourages learners to become actively involved in knowledge construction rather than passively accepting information (Feriyanto & Anjariyah, 2024; Insani et al., 2025; Ramadana & Abdul Halim, 2025). Across the research, students showed higher levels of engagement, confidence, and motivation when learning activities required cooperation, creativity, and authentic communication. These findings indicate that joyful learning increases deeper language acquisition by including students as active participants in the learning process.

The studied literature discusses various educational approaches for encouraging active involvement. Insani et al. (2025) show that gamification boosts students' classroom participation and engagement by generating engaging and stimulating learning experiences. Similarly, (Ramadana & Abdul Halim, 2025) underline that Project-Based Learning (PjBL) promotes students to use English through authentic projects that foster teamwork, problem-

solving, and meaningful communication. Complementing these findings, (Feriyanto & Anjariyah, 2024) propose that incorporating mindfulness into pleasurable learning environments increases student engagement by encouraging greater focus and active participation. Although these techniques use diverse instructional strategies, they all indicate that active involvement emerges when students have significant opportunities to connect, create, and discuss.

From a pedagogical standpoint, active engagement allows students to gain confidence through actual language use rather than passive observation. Active participation in conversations, collaborative projects, and problem-solving exercises increases students' communication ability, self-efficacy, and long-term enthusiasm to study English. Furthermore, active involvement reduces anxiety by transforming the classroom from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered atmosphere in which mistakes are accepted as a natural part of the learning process. As a result, joyful learning should give students meaningful chances to participate actively, collaborate with peers, and apply language in real-world circumstances in order to improve both academic accomplishment and emotional well-being.

3.2.5 *Teachers' Challenge*

The studied scientific literature continuously demonstrates that the successful implementation of happy learning is strongly dependent on instructors' pedagogical skills and the combination of pleasurable and meaningful learning (Gulo, 2025; Pandang, 2025; Yazid Mubarak et al., 2024). Despite the numerous benefits of joyful learning for reducing language anxiety and engaging students, the findings reveal that loving the process is insufficient to provide substantial learning outcomes. Teachers should plan learning activities that integrate good emotions, cognitive challenge, and relevant learning objectives.

Furthermore, the research discussed highlight a variety of challenges in implementing joyful learning methodologies in EFL classrooms. Gulo (2025) emphasizes the importance of striking a balance between academic rigors and enjoyment in learning, whereas (Pandang, 2025; Yazid Mubarak et al., 2024) highlight limitations in applying joyful learning, such as a lack of time for instruction, curriculum constraints, and underprepared teachers. Apart from the stated hurdles, (Gulo, 2025) suggest that insufficient learning activities can result in "hollow joy" when students enjoy classroom events but do not achieve learning results. Regardless of the causes of the hurdles, it is apparent that effective joyful learning requires adequate instructional design and cannot be accomplished just through learners' amusement.

In terms of pedagogy, educators should help to create an emotionally and cognitively supportive learning environment by not only utilizing effective teaching methods but also continually adjusting learning processes based on learners' needs, abilities, and learning context. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the successful implementation of the happy learning approach will be dependent on adequate institutional support, which includes professional development, adaptable teaching tools, and curriculum policies that enable educators to implement meaningful, mindful, and happy learning. As a result, the effectiveness of happy learning in lowering language anxiety will be decided not just by teachers' inventiveness, but also by institutional support that allows for regular implementation.

4 **Conclusion**

Based on the review of literature of 15 studies conducted between 2022 and 2026, it can be established that the application of Meaningful, Mindful, and Joyful Learning strategies within the Deep Learning framework is a powerful solution for mitigating English as a Foreign

Language (EFL) anxiety. The synthesis of recent research suggests that the application of the Joyful Learning acts as a vital emotional catalyst, particularly through songs and games, in reducing the affective barriers of learners. This is because a "joyful classroom" provides a "safe space" for learners to communicate boldly without the fear of being negatively judged—a major impediment in language acquisition.

Although emotional engagement is crucial, this review highlights that it is insufficient to guarantee long-term academic achievement if it lacks cognitive depth. It has been determined that Meaningful and Mindful learning serve as the primary predictors for achieving Deep Learning, ensuring that students engage deeply with real-world content and maintain reflective awareness. Because they enable students to actively produce language in relevant contexts, student-centered approaches like Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and inquiry learning are identified as the most effective vehicles for implementing the MMJ framework.

Finally, the success of this pedagogical approach heavily depends on the teacher's ability to strike a balance between engagement and intellectual challenge while avoiding "hollow joy." Particular attention must still be paid to systemic issues like time constraints and pedagogical preparedness, especially in integrating adaptive technologies such as Artificial Intelligence. In conclusion, a synchronized mix of emotional, cognitive, and psychological components will not only help students overcome EFL anxiety but also enable them to reach a level of profound understanding and sustainable confidence in their language proficiency.

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