TEACHER COGNITION AND CURRICULUM CHANGE: HOW NON-NATIVE ENGLISH TEACHERS PERCEIVE DEEP LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia's shift from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum has repositioned deep learning, anchored on mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning, as the pedagogical core of classroom practice, including English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Because most Indonesian English teachers are non-native English teachers (NNETs) serving as both language models and curriculum agents, their cognition, the beliefs and knowledge shaping instructional decisions (Borg, 2003), plays a decisive role in translating policy into classroom enactment. This study investigated how junior high school NNETs perceive and enact deep learning integration under the Merdeka Curriculum. A qualitative case study was employed with two NNETs teaching Grade VIII and Grade IX English at a public junior high school in West Java, purposively selected. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observation, and document analysis, then analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's interactive model and interpreted through Borg's framework. Findings show both teachers conceptualize deep learning through the mindful-meaningful-joyful triad and align lesson planning with the Capaian Pembelajaran-Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran (CP-ATP) framework through collaborative teacher communities. Observation corroborated their reported facilitative, student-centered practices, including contextual prompting, collaborative and game-based tasks, error tolerance, and appreciation-first feedback. However, both reported persistent self-doubt about their English proficiency, heavier workload from differentiated instruction, and students' affective barriers as major constraints, mitigated through continuous professional development. The study concludes that NNET cognition, shaped by training, professional community, and lived experience as English learners, bridges the gap between curriculum policy and classroom enactment, though sustained institutional support remains essential.

Keywords: *Teacher Cognition, Merdeka Curriculum, Deep Learning, Non-Native English Teachers (NNETs), EFL Classroom*

ABSTRAK

Pergeseran Kurikulum 2013 menuju Kurikulum Merdeka di Indonesia menempatkan deep learning (berkesadaran, bermakna, menggembirakan) sebagai inti pedagogis pembelajaran di kelas, termasuk dalam pengajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL). Karena sebagian besar guru Bahasa Inggris di Indonesia adalah non-native English teachers (NNET) yang berperan sebagai model bahasa sekaligus agen kurikulum, kognisi mereka, yaitu keyakinan dan pengetahuan yang membentuk keputusan mengajar (Borg, 2003), memegang peran penentu dalam

menerjemahkan kebijakan menjadi praktik di kelas. Penelitian ini menginvestigasi bagaimana NNET SMP mempersepsikan dan melaksanakan integrasi deep learning dalam Kurikulum Merdeka. Studi kasus kualitatif digunakan dengan melibatkan dua NNET pengampu Bahasa Inggris kelas VIII dan kelas IX di sebuah SMP negeri di Jawa Barat, dipilih secara purposif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi kelas, dan analisis dokumen, lalu dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldana serta diinterpretasi melalui kerangka Borg. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan kedua guru memaknai deep learning melalui trias berkesadaran-bermakna-menggembirakan dan menyelaraskan perencanaan pembelajaran dengan kerangka Capaian Pembelajaran-Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran (CP-ATP) melalui komunitas belajar guru. Observasi mengonfirmasi praktik fasilitatif dan berpusat pada siswa, seperti pertanyaan pemantik kontekstual, tugas kolaboratif dan berbasis permainan, toleransi kesalahan, serta umpan balik yang diawali apresiasi. Namun, keduanya melaporkan keraguan diri terhadap kemampuan Bahasa Inggrisnya, beban kerja tambahan akibat pembelajaran berdiferensiasi, dan hambatan afektif siswa sebagai kendala utama yang diatasi melalui pengembangan profesional berkelanjutan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa kognisi NNET, dibentuk oleh pelatihan, komunitas profesional, dan pengalaman hidup sebagai pembelajar Bahasa Inggris, menjembatani kesenjangan antara kebijakan kurikulum dan pelaksanaannya di kelas, meskipun dukungan kelembagaan berkelanjutan tetap diperlukan.

Kata Kunci: Kognisi Guru, Kurikulum Merdeka, Deep Learning, Guru Bahasa Inggris Non-Native, Kelas EFL

A. Introduction

Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) was introduced as a response to persistent learning loss and the tendency of prior curricula to privilege content coverage over conceptual depth. A defining feature of its most recent operational guidance is the explicit adoption of deep learning as the pedagogical foundation of classroom practice, grounded in three interlocking principles: pembelajaran berkesadaran (mindful learning), pembelajaran bermakna (meaningful learning), and pembelajaran menggembirakan (joyful learning) (Kemdikbudristek, 2022). Deep learning, in this policy sense, departs from surface-level, teacher-centered transmission toward learning experiences in which students construct understanding, connect material to lived experience, and engage in critical thinking, collaboration, and creative expression (Fullan et al., 2018).

English Language Teaching (ELT) occupies a strategic position within this reform. At the junior high school level, English functions both as a compulsory subject governed by Fase D learning outcomes and as a primary vehicle through which the 4C/6C

competencies—critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creativity, character, and citizenship—promoted by deep learning are expected to be cultivated (Richards, 2017). Yet the great majority of English teachers in Indonesian public junior high schools are non-native English teachers (NNETs): individuals who are themselves products of the Indonesian EFL system, who continue to negotiate their own language proficiency while being tasked with facilitating high-order, learner-centered instruction in that same language.

This study is grounded in (Borg, 2003)'s teacher cognition framework, which conceptualizes teaching as a cognitively grounded activity in which teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes—formed through prior learning experience, professional training, and classroom practice—actively shape what and how they teach. Recent state-of-the-art reviews of NNET research (Selvi et al., 2023) confirm that non-native status continues to intersect with teachers' professional identity, confidence, and pedagogical choices, while comparative work on native and non-native teacher qualities (Deng et al., 2023) shows that NNETs often draw distinctive pedagogical strength from their own experience as language learners, even as they report persistent language-related self-doubt.

Despite the policy urgency of deep learning implementation, empirical accounts of how NNETs cognitively interpret and enact this shift—particularly at the junior high school level—remain limited. Broader curriculum-reform literature indicates that the gap between policy intention and classroom enactment is frequently mediated by teachers' interpretive cognition rather than by the policy text itself (Yembergenova et al., 2024), and that teacher readiness and confidence substantially determine whether learner-centered innovations are enacted with fidelity or reduced to surface compliance (Syafryadin et al., 2022). Within the Indonesian Merdeka Curriculum context specifically, comparatively little qualitative attention has been paid to how junior high school NNETs themselves make sense of deep learning as both a conceptual construct and a lived instructional demand.

Building on this gap, the present study addresses the following research question: How do non-native English teachers at the junior high school level perceive the integration of deep learning under the Merdeka Curriculum? This

study aims to describe junior high school NNETs' conceptual understanding of deep learning, examine how that understanding is translated into lesson planning and classroom enactment, and identify the challenges and support systems that shape their implementation. The findings are expected to contribute empirically to teacher cognition literature in under-researched non-native, lower-secondary EFL contexts, and practically to inform the design of professional development programs that more directly address NNETs' self-reported linguistic and pedagogical needs.

B. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design, appropriate for exploring teacher cognition in depth within its natural instructional context rather than testing predetermined hypotheses. The case was bounded as an embedded single case comprising two English-subject units within one public junior high school, allowing for both within-participant depth and cross-participant comparison.

Participants were two non-native English teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Limbangan, Garut Regency, West Java, selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (a) certified English subject teachers with direct experience designing and delivering Merdeka Curriculum lesson modules (Modul Ajar), (b) responsibility for different grade levels—Participant 1 taught Grade VIII, Participant 2 taught Grade IX—to allow comparison across Fase D sub-levels, and (c) willingness to be observed and interviewed. Both participants are Indonesian native speakers of the local language who acquired English as a foreign language through formal teacher education, positioning them squarely within the NNET category as defined by Braine (2010) and (Selvi et al., 2023).

Three data collection instruments were used to enable triangulation. First, semi-structured interviews of approximately 10–25 minutes per session explored participants' conceptual understanding of deep learning, lesson planning rationale, classroom enactment strategies, assessment and feedback practices, perceived challenges, and professional development experiences; the interview protocol was developed around five thematic clusters (understanding of deep learning, lesson planning, teaching practice, assessment and reflection, and challenges/support) grounded in (Fullan

et al., 2018) and (Borg, 2003). Second, non-participant classroom observation was conducted using a ten-indicator checklist adapted from deep learning and student-centered pedagogy indicators, covering objective-setting, module fidelity, active participation, prompting questions, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, real-life relevance, constructive feedback, and reflective closure. Third, document analysis was conducted on each participant's Modul Ajar (teaching module) for the observed chapter, examining stated learning objectives, activity sequencing, and embedded assessment/reflection prompts.

Data were analyzed using the interactive qualitative analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Interview transcripts were first read holistically for familiarization, then inductively coded; codes were grouped into four analytic sub-themes: conceptual understanding of deep learning, alignment with Merdeka Curriculum guidelines, enactment and pedagogical realities, and challenges and support systems. Within-case analysis was conducted for each participant before cross-case comparison was undertaken to identify convergence and divergence. Interview and document findings were then triangulated against classroom observation data to assess the correspondence between reported beliefs and observed practice, consistent with (Borg, 2003)'s emphasis on examining the relationship between cognition and classroom behavior rather than treating self-report as a proxy for practice. Trustworthiness was addressed through source triangulation (interview, observation, document), member checking during the interview sessions, and thick description of the research setting and participants.

Table 1 Summary of Classroom Observation Results for Two Participants

No	Indikator Observasi	Partisipan 1 (Kelas VIII)	Partisipan 2 (Kelas IX)
1	Guru menjelaskan tujuan pembelajaran secara jelas di awal	Ya	Ya
2	Aktivitas pembelajaran sesuai dengan Modul Ajar	Ya	Ya
3	Siswa berpartisipasi aktif (menjawab, berdiskusi, mengerjakan tugas)	Ya	Ya
4	Guru menggunakan pertanyaan pemantik untuk merangsang berpikir	Ya	Ya
5	Siswa didorong berpikir kritis (menganalisis, mengevaluasi)	Ya	Ya
6	Siswa berkolaborasi dengan teman secara berpasangan/kelompok	Ya	Ya
7	Siswa mengomunikasikan ide secara lisan maupun tertulis	Ya	Ya
8	Aktivitas pembelajaran terkait konteks kehidupan nyata siswa	Ya	Ya
9	Guru memberikan umpan balik yang konstruktif dan apresiatif	Ya	Ya
10	Terdapat refleksi/ulasan penutup di akhir pembelajaran	Ya	Ya

Sumber: hasil observasi kelas, 4 Agustus 2026 (diolah dari lembar Observation Checklist masing-masing partisipan). Untuk menjamin kredibilitas dan keabsahan temuan, peneliti menerapkan triangulasi data dengan membandingkan hasil observasi, transkrip wawancara mendalam, dan analisis dokumen kurikulum (Purwanti et al., 2024).

Gambar 1 Matriks Triangulasi Hasil Observasi Kelas pada Dua Partisipan

C. Finding and Discussion

1. Findings

Sub-tema 1: Pemahaman Konseptual tentang Deep Learning

Both participants articulated deep learning through the government's mindful-meaningful-joyful triad, but grounded that abstract policy language in concrete classroom meaning. Participant 1 (Grade VIII) described deep learning as pembelajaran yang memuliakan peserta didik ('learning that honors the learner'), explaining that it must make students conscious of the value of what they are learning (berkesadaran), feel that the material matters to them (bermakna), and experience learning without pressure (joyful). He explicitly distinguished deep learning from conventional teaching by locating the teacher's role as facilitator rather than the sole source of knowledge: 'di pembelajaran mendalam itu guru itu benar-benar hanya sebagai fasilitator' (in deep learning, the teacher is truly just a facilitator).

Participant 2 (Grade IX) offered a converging but more application-oriented account, emphasizing that deep learning in English lessons means enabling students to apply English in daily encounters—reading signs, understanding shop slogans, or producing the simple communicative exchanges required at Fase D. He distinguished deep learning from conventional instruction primarily

through differentiation: whereas conventional teaching assumes 'satu materi, satu tujuan pembelajaran, siswa itu harus paham semuanya' (one material, one objective, all students must understand equally), deep learning requires the teacher to accommodate varying levels of student understanding toward the same learning goal.

Both teachers traced their understanding of deep learning to structured institutional exposure rather than pre-service training alone: Participant 1 cited In-House Training (IHT) organized by the school principal together with a supervising officer (pengawas bina), MGMP subject-teacher forums featuring national resource persons, and district-level training (diklat Dinas Pendidikan), supplemented by independent searching online. Participant 2 traced his first exposure to national-level policy socialization by the Minister of Education, followed by ongoing self-directed reading via the ministry's digital learning platform and discussion within the school's Komunitas Belajar (Kombel). This pattern indicates that both teachers' conceptual cognition of deep learning was substantially shaped by externally provided, institutionally mediated professional learning rather than solely by personal interpretation of curriculum documents-consistent with (Borg, 2003)'s view that teacher cognition is formed cumulatively through professional community and training exposure, not derived from policy text in isolation.

Sub-tema 2: Keselarasan dengan Pedoman Kurikulum Merdeka

Both teachers demonstrated clear procedural alignment with the Merdeka Curriculum's CP-ATP (Capaian Pembelajaran-Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran) planning architecture, though the depth of collaborative process differed slightly by grade level. Participant 2 described a structured, community-based planning process: the school's seven or eight English teachers convene in grade-level Kombel groups (Grade 7, 8, 9) to jointly interpret the CP into ATP, before individually developing Program Tahunan (Prota) and Program Semester (Promes). Contextual material selection was explicitly tied to available school facilities, and where authentic contextualization was not feasible, teachers substituted mediated resources such as projected images, audio, and video.

Participant 1's account of planning was more classroom-adaptive: rather than

describing a formal community process in detail, he emphasized reading classroom character before finalizing an approach-'kita pelajari dulu bagaimana nih karakter di kelas ini' (we first study what this class's character is like)-and adapting material toward what students actually experience in daily life, for instance replacing a traditional letter-writing task with email writing, or a printed poster task with a social-media video assignment. This reflects an implicit form of differentiation embedded in material contextualization rather than in the formalized Kombel process reported by Participant 2, suggesting that both teachers converge on the Merdeka Curriculum's central expectation of contextual, learner-relevant material selection even as their planning routines differ in formality.

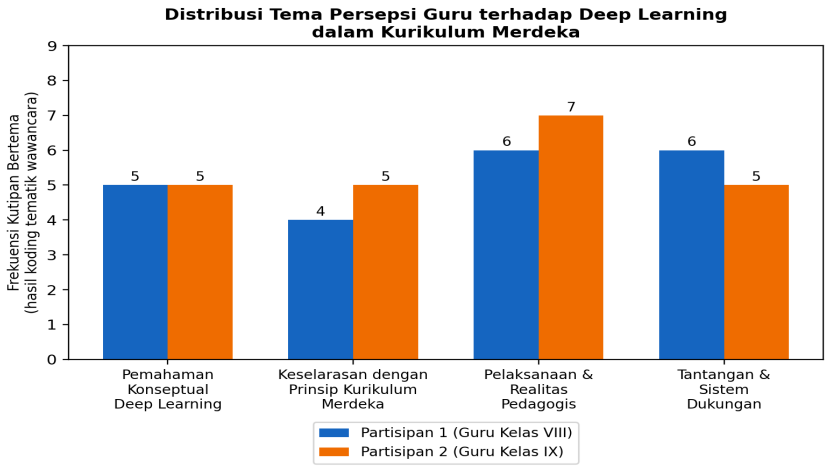

Figure 2 Frequency Distribution of Teacher Perception Themes from Interview Coding Results

Table 2 Summary of Comparison of Perceptions Themes Between Participants

Sub-tema	Partisipan 1 (Kelas VIII)	Partisipan 2 (Kelas IX)
Pemahaman konseptual deep learning	Berkesadaran-bermakna-menggembirakan; guru sebagai fasilitator	Penerapan Bahasa Inggris dalam konteks harian; diferensiasi tujuan
Keselarasan dengan Kurikulum Merdeka	Adaptasi materi berbasis karakter kelas	CP-ATP melalui Kombel lintas jenjang; Prota/Promes terstruktur
Pelaksanaan & realitas pedagogis	Toleransi kesalahan; habituasi literasi 5 kata kerja/pertemuan	Model games, jigsaw, role-play; aplikasi recount text buatan sendiri
Tantangan & sistem dukungan	Transisi karir SD-SMP; beban diferensiasi; rasa takut siswa	Motivasi siswa rendah; ketergantungan gawai; tantangan pelafalan NNET

Classroom observation and Modul Ajar documentation (Table 1) substantially corroborated reported enactment strategies, indicating a comparatively strong alignment between stated cognition and observed practice for both teachers. Participant 1 described tolerating student error to build speaking courage before correcting form—'yang penting mereka berani aja dulu bicara ... kesalahan ini harus segera diperbaiki, enggak usah' (what matters is that they dare to speak first; the errors don't need to be corrected right away)-and permitting code-switching that is gradually translated into English. This scaffolding approach was mirrored in his Modul Ajar, which embeds explicit sentence starters and repeated prompting-question routines ('What can you see in this picture?', 'Who is she?') across every meeting, and in an ongoing literacy habituation practice in which students memorize and submit five verbs each session, a routine he began in 2023 to build the vocabulary base needed for verb-tense transformation tasks.

Participant 2 described a more explicitly model-driven pedagogy, citing games-based teaching, window shopping, jigsaw, role-play, discovery learning, and cooperative learning, and reporting that roughly 80% of his classroom activities are collaborative rather than individual. He also described developing a self-made mobile application for recount-text learning, allowing students to practice independently outside class time. Both teachers reported authentic, formative assessment combining written, oral, and attitudinal components, and both described a feedback sequence that begins with appreciation before moving to corrective suggestion-Participant 1 explicitly rejected blunt error-flagging ('jangan "Ini salah!"', don't just say 'this is wrong!') in favor of guided suggestion, while Participant 2 linked feedback to a formal remedial-enrichment (remedial-pengayaan) cycle tied to percentage-based achievement analysis. Reflective closure—asking students what they learned or found difficult-was present in both teachers' self-reports, their Modul Ajar documents, and observation field notes, satisfying Indicator 10 of the observation checklist for both participants.

Sub-tema 4: Tantangan dan Sistem Dukungan

Despite converging enactment patterns, both teachers reported substantial and partly distinct challenges. Participant 1's central challenge was biographical: after graduating in English education, he spent an extended period teaching as a generalist primary school (SD) classroom teacher before returning to secondary English teaching in 2023, which he described as requiring him to reopen and relearn subject-specific competence-'kemampuan bahasa Inggris saya ... tergerus gitu karena biasa dengan guru kelas di SD' (my English ability eroded from being used to being a generalist SD teacher). Layered onto this was the workload of differentiation, requiring him to design multiple material and assessment levels within a single class, and students' affective resistance—fear of being laughed at, shyness inherited from limited discussion habituation in elementary school.

Participant 2's challenges centered more directly on student-side barriers and his own NNET identity: limited student use of physical dictionaries despite gadget access, low self-efficacy expressed by students as 'saya enggak bisa bahasa Inggris' (I can't do English), and, as a non-native speaker himself, an ongoing need to refine pronunciation and deepen mastery of varying text-type structures (narrative, report, recount, descriptive). Both teachers, however, converged strongly on support systems: In-House Training, MGMP subject forums (Participant 2 specifically named a monthly Rayon 5 MGMP), school-level Kombel, and district/ministry-facilitated training and online resources were cited by both as the primary mechanisms through which they narrowed the gap between deep learning's ambitious demands and their self-perceived competence.

2. Discussion

When read through the (Borg, 2003) teacher cognition framework, these findings suggest that both NNETs' classroom enactment of deep learning is substantially mediated by beliefs formed through professional community participation rather than derived directly from curriculum text. Their shared mindful-meaningful-joyful framing did not originate from independent reading of the Merdeka Curriculum's philosophical documents alone, but from socially situated learning experiences-IHT, MGMP, Kombel, and ministry socialization-that Borg identifies as central to how

language teacher cognition is constructed and revised over a career. The close correspondence between reported beliefs, Modul Ajar documentation, and observed classroom practice (Table 1, Figure 1) is notable given that curriculum-implementation research elsewhere has frequently reported a policy-practice gap driven by ambiguous or unfamiliar reform content (Yembergenova et al., 2024). In this case, the near-uniform 'Ya' (Yes) ratings across all ten observation indicators for both participants suggest that, at the level of externally visible behavior, deep learning's procedural expectations—objective-setting, prompting questions, collaboration, contextualization, feedback, and reflection—were consistently enacted. This is consistent with findings that teacher readiness and confidence, rather than curriculum wording itself, are the strongest determinants of faithful enactment of learner-centered reform (Syafryadin et al., 2022).

At the same time, a revealing tension emerges between this observed procedural fidelity and both teachers' self-reported linguistic insecurity. Participant 1 explicitly stated that his own grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation are 'belum optimal' (not yet optimal), and Participant 2 described an ongoing need to refine his pronunciation and structural knowledge as a non-native speaker. This mirrors (Deng et al., 2023)'s finding that NNESTs' professional identity remains shadowed by persistent language-competence self-doubt even where their pedagogical practice is judged effective, and aligns with (Selvi et al., 2023)'s argument that native-speakerist ideology continues to structure how non-native teachers evaluate themselves regardless of demonstrated classroom competence. Both participants appeared to cognitively resolve this tension not by claiming linguistic mastery, but by reframing their professional value around facilitation, empathetic understanding of learner difficulty (particularly salient for Participant 2, who explicitly linked his own regional/linguistic background to understanding his students' pronunciation struggles), and continuous, community-supported self-improvement-an adaptive cognitive strategy that resonates with the understanding that teacher cognition is not static but continuously

reconstructed through classroom experience and professional dialogue (Meirink et al., 2007).

The study's second notable pattern concerns differentiation. Both teachers independently identified accommodating heterogeneous student ability as a defining feature separating deep learning from conventional, uniform instruction, yet both also identified differentiation as their most tangible added workload. This suggests that while NNETs in this study have internalized differentiation as a core belief consistent with Merdeka Curriculum policy intent, the practical infrastructure to support it—time, assessment tools, class-size accommodation—has not scaled at the same pace as the belief itself, echoing broader concerns that ambitious learner-centered reforms frequently outpace the operational capacity of the schools implementing them (Sakata et al., 2022).

D. Conclution

This study set out to answer how non-native English teachers at the junior high school level perceive the integration of deep learning under the Merdeka Curriculum. Drawing on interview, observation, and document data from two NNETs teaching Grade VIII and Grade IX English, the findings show that both teachers conceptualize deep learning consistently through the government's mindful-meaningful-joyful triad, translate this understanding into CP-ATP-aligned, contextually adapted lesson planning, and enact facilitative, student-centered classroom strategies that were independently corroborated through direct classroom observation. At the same time, both teachers' cognition is marked by a persistent tension between their belief in and practiced enactment of deep learning pedagogy, and enduring self-doubt about their own English proficiency as non-native speakers, compounded by the added workload of differentiated instruction and students' affective resistance to English use.

Theoretically, the study extends (Borg, 2003)'s teacher cognition framework to the under-researched context of Indonesian junior high school NNETs navigating a national pedagogical reform, showing that institutionally mediated professional learning communities (IHT, MGMP, Kombel) function as the primary channel through which policy-level pedagogical constructs are cognitively internalized and behaviorally enacted.

Practically, the findings suggest that professional development programs for NNETs implementing deep learning should explicitly address language-competence confidence-building alongside pedagogical strategy training, and that schools should provide structural support (time allocation, differentiated assessment tools) commensurate with the differentiation that deep learning philosophically demands.

This study is limited by its scope to two participants within a single school, which constrains the transferability of its findings to other institutional contexts; the relatively short observation window (one lesson per participant) also limits claims about the consistency of enactment over time. Future research is recommended to extend this inquiry to a larger, cross-school sample of junior high school NNETs, to incorporate longitudinal classroom observation across a full instructional unit, and to examine whether the confidence-practice tension identified here similarly characterizes NNETs teaching other Phase D subjects under the same deep learning mandate.

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