

## STUDENTS LEARNING APPROACHES IN THE EFL ONLINE LEARNING CONTEXT

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**Abstract:** The switching between conventional learning to online learning during this pandemic quite affected the learning approach adopted by students. This study aims to determine the learning approach of the eighth-grade students at one of public schools in Bali during online learning. The mixed-method was used in this study with two instruments for data collection: the R-SPQ-2F questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. This study involved 168 eighth grade students of one public junior high school in Bali. The analysis of the mean score of R-SPQ-2F was used to evaluate the data from questionnaire, while the interactive model analysis was used to analyze the interview data. Based on the findings, the learning method of the eight-grade students in the context of online learning tends to be of deep approach. The results of the interview revealed that the student learning approach was influenced by several supporting and inhibiting factors. This shows that student learning approaches can adapt and be influenced by various factors faced by students during the learning process. These factors can come from within students and students' learning environment. Therefore, teachers should have a better understanding of learning approaches adopted by students during online learning situations to assist students in achieving learning success.

**Keywords:** *EFL, online learning, students' learning approach*

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## INTRODUCTION

The fast advancement of technology in the twenty-first century has altered the position of the teacher. Learning was evolving from how teachers deliver knowledge to students to how students grasp new concepts and gain wide insights. It encourages students in applying their information and building skills and abilities to compete in today's constantly expanding global environment (Keiler, 2018). It also encourages students to take an active, independent, collaborative, and reflective role in the

learning process (Sanoto, 2021). Education, particularly the learning process, evolves with time. Humans must become more sensitive to technological advancement as it continues to advance. The availability of more accessible learning resources, as well as the introduction of platforms that allow independent learning, give students more immediate opportunities to enhance their curiosity. They can fulfill their curiosity through a self-directed study guided by the teacher (Wiraningsih & Santosa, 2020). This is known in the education field as student-centered learning.

The world's current emergency scenario has an impact on the entire learning process at all levels of school. The COVID-19 epidemic becomes unavoidable to reduce social interaction (Sanoto, 2021). To limit the transmission of the virus, face-to-face interaction has been phased out. As a result, an online learning system was launched. It is not a new concept to adopt online learning. However, in this case, online learning in Indonesia was carried out totally and in conjunction with a program known as "Merdeka Belajar," which provides students with the opportunity to explore their curiosity and supports independent learning (Abidah et al., 2020). This new paradigm has implications for many factors of education. They include the teaching and learning process between teachers and students, educator facilities and preparedness, and student approaches to learning. Throughout the current pandemic crisis, determining the learning approach utilized by students during the implementation of learning is not only a challenge, but also a subject of study.

One of the intriguing characteristics that might be examined further for its applicability, in this case, is the learning approach. The reason for this is that the learning approach influences learning achievement (Inayat & Ahmad, 2011; Turdjai, 2016). Aside from that, it influences how students acquire knowledge and subsequently apply it during the learning process. They also stated that the technique used distinguishes each student from the others (Biggs, 1988). There are two kinds of learning approaches that have an impact on the learning process. The deep learning approach and the surface learning approach were utilized to process knowledge throughout the learning process. Marton and Saljo conducted the first learning method subject study in 1976. The findings of their investigation show that these two approaches have distinctive characteristics. The goal of the surface learning approach seems to be to complete the task and concentrate on the knowledge's contents (Marton & Saljo, 1976). Meanwhile, in the deep learning approach, the motivations are primarily built on curiosity and comprehension, as well as the application of newly acquired information that focuses on ideas.

Some research investigating on learning approach has been conducted by several researchers (Alkhateeb & Milhem 2020; Hulreski, Syatriana, & Ardiana, 2020; Meeks et al., 2013). These studies reveal the great number of surface learning approaches used by students. Students use the surface method to prevent failures during the class with minimal effort. The majority of students are able to retain the material in a short amount of time when using this learning approach. Because they avoid asking questions, students have a tendency to disregard information that they do not comprehend. According to the research, one student's learning strategies differ from those of another (Hulreski et al., 2020). Many factors, such as gender, generation, and a student's study sector, have an impact on those who are influenced by the research. During the pandemic, there was an increase in the number of factors influencing students' approaches to learning. In keeping with education in the twenty-first century, when students were required to have abilities in a variety of

areas, students should take a more in deep approach to absorbing content and dealing with challenges.

Several studies done at various levels in Asian countries such as China, Korea, and Malaysia discovered that students tended to adopt a deep learning approach (Hussin, Hamed, & Jam, 2017; Rachmatullah & Ha, 2019). This seems to be due to factors such as learning pressure, cultural differences, and the high quality of education maintained in modern countries. Students in courses such as mathematics, physics, and mechanical engineering prefer to seek long-term application of their knowledge. The high level of educational requirements in countries such as China and Korea assist students in mastering ideas in learning that correspond to real-world applications.

Various research in the context of Indonesian education has shown varying outcomes, namely that the student learning approach differs between a deep approach and a surface approach. Students with higher education levels, particularly those in medical schools, tend to use a deep learning approach that would be focused on active learning for long-term knowledge understanding (Arini & Malik, 2019). In another major, English education, a deep approach was discovered that was employed by students at one of Bali's universities (Santosa, 2017). Furthermore, students in secondary education have the same propensity as Korean students in science topics in processing science tasks, which is directed toward a deep approach (Rachmatullah & Ha, 2019). They study science in-depth and focus on its application in everyday life. Meanwhile, students studying English at a university in Makassar, on the other hand, are oriented toward a surface approach to vocabulary learning and tend to learn English vocabulary through recalling (Hulreski et al., 2020) where memorizing is their main goal, not understanding the content.

The development of Indonesian government regulations to provide online-based distance learning has a significant impact on the learning approach used by students. In addition to minimizing social activities such as face-to-face teaching and learning. This resulted in several factors that influence student learning styles and learning approaches that help students use an immersive approach, and almost all aspects of teaching and learning activities that students encounter. Independent learning, collaboration, and self-confidence can all be enhanced with various student learning materials available in online learning (Hermanto & Srimulyani, 2021). This is a situation that has received little attention in the context of student learning approaches. With today's online learning environment, it is interesting to examine its effect on student learning approaches whether students find it easier to direct their learning approach towards deep learning approach or vice versa.

Based on various studies on student learning approaches that have been carried out, research on learning approaches for EFL junior high school students seems to be still limited. Previous studies have mostly focused on higher education students and some high school students (Astika & Sumakul, 2019; Hussin et al., 2017; Rachmatullah & Ha, 2019; Santosa, Ratminingsih, & Adnyani, 2021; Santosa, 2017; Yueying & Xiaodong, 2016). For example, research on Islamic high school students in Indonesia found a tendency to apply a surface approach (Mulyani, Suherdi, & Sundayana, 2020). This is because students perceive learning as an obligation and aim to obtain parental satisfaction. These results are in line with the findings of the surface method on student traits, including the desire for high test scores and memorization practices (Ilhan-Beyaztas & Metin, 2019). In this present study, the

investigation of learning approach was conducted to junior high school students especially in the context of learning English as a foreign language through online learning during the pandemic in Indonesia. It is hoped that by undertaking this research, teachers and students will have a better understanding of the student learning approach employed during the online learning process. It is also suggested that students will be able to implement a deep learning strategy because it will affect their skills and ability to compete in the twenty-first century era.

The objectives of this present study, therefore, are as follows: (1) to find out the learning approaches of the eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 Singaraja in the context of online EFL learning?; (2) to find out supporting factors that play a role in students learning approaches of the eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 Singaraja in the context of online EFL learning?; and (3) find out the inhibiting factors that play a role in students learning approaches of the eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 Singaraja in the context of online EFL learning?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Subjects**

Respondents in this study were 168 eighth-grade students of SMP Negeri 2 Singaraja, where the students learn English as a foreign language at school in the context of online learning. This school was chosen because it is accessible, and initial observations revealed that the students tend to use one of the two learning approaches, and the teacher's inability to see the significance of recognizing student learning approach in making it easier for students to comprehend the material during the learning process. For interview purposes, students who voluntarily agreed to be involved in interview were selected. The subjects were consisted of four students with three female and one male.

### **Design and Procedures**

A mixed-method research design was used to accomplish this goal. The quantitative research data was collected through the distribution of an online questionnaire to students at SMP Negeri 2 Singaraja, whereas the qualitative data was gathered through one-on-one interviews to identify supporting and inhibiting factors to student learning approaches in the context of online learning.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

The questionnaire utilized in this study was adapted from the R-SPQ-2F questionnaire (Biggs et al., 2001). The respondents were asked to fill out the questionnaire. In this study, the questionnaire findings were computed numerically and supported by the results of interviews as quantitative data. The semi-structured interview guide was utilized to gather more information regarding students' enabling and impeding issues. The use of interview guidelines assists researchers in obtaining in-depth information on certain topics without restricting the length of the interview. In addition, the interview was conducted to validate the data gathered via questionnaires and to obtain additional information to corroborate the questionnaire results.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

#### *Students Learning Approaches*

The first, out of three research objectives of this present study was to assess students' learning approaches in the context of EFL online learning. The data for this study were derived from the students' responses to a previously developed learning approach questionnaire. Figure 1 presents the learning approach of the eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 Singaraja in the context of EFL online learning.

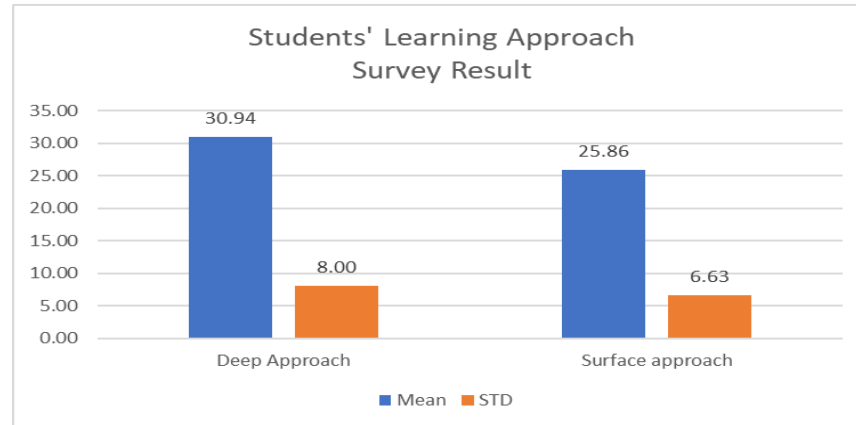


Figure 1. SAL survey result

According to the figure above, the total deep approach was more than the surface approach ( $t_{dap}=30.94 > t_{sap}=25.86$ ). This suggests that the students choose to take a deeper approach to studying English as a foreign language in an online learning situation. Students learn to grasp and apply material concepts rather than focusing just on the substance of material and completing tasks with the restricted objective of merely receiving grades.

#### *Supporting Factors in Students' Learning Approach*

Furthermore, to understand the findings, interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data that would focus on the supportive and inhibiting factors that play a part in the respondents' SAL. There were four students that eager to take part in this interview. Because of the limited availability of face-to-face meetings at school, interviews with respondents were performed online using virtual meetings. The second study topic looks at the supporting factors that occur in the 8th-grade students' approaches to learning at SMP Negeri 2 Singaraja. Several factors contribute to the implementation of this online learning approach; students said that they searched in the internet for additional sources to better comprehend the content. Student 2, for example, expressed the following.

*"Teachers provide little explanations about the subject and prefer to provide duties straight away, but I have to seek additional information on my own from other sources such as Google to complete assignments and grasp the material."*  
(Student 2, Female)

Student 1 highlighted the same viewpoint as Student 2.

*“Because teachers were often passive in online learning, it motivates me to take the effort to learn on my own to better understand the content.”* (Student 1, Female)

According to the data, the students are interested in learning more about the content to better understand it, which appears to be compatible with the notion of student-centered learning.

A variety of reasons that inspire students to study also improve the learning approach that students utilize in this online environment. For example, student 1 stated,

*“I want to be able to communicate well with foreigners.” Apart from that, knowing the challenging language that I frequently encounter in online books drives me to study English.”* (Student 1, Female)

Similarly, to student 1 student 2 commented,

*“Being able to quickly translate English words into Indonesian is certainly nice. My motive for studying English is that you don't have to worry when you hear an English term since I comprehend it straight away.”* (Student 2, Female)

*“My marks in the previous semester were not very good since my ability to absorb the content was poor. However, I still want to be able to speak English fluently since I believe it is important and will benefit me later in life.”* (Student 4, Male)

Based on interview excerpt above, it can be concluded that one of the components that encourage students to study English was a desire to speak effectively and fluently. When students' intrinsic motivation is high, the amount of effort they put forth to study is increased. As a source of learning, students will actively seek out further knowledge. Therefore, students may better understand the subject and achieve their objectives.

### ***Inhibiting Factors in Students' Learning Approach***

This interview focuses not just on factors that assist student learning approaches, but also on factors that limit student learning approaches. It was carried out to better grasp the background of the learning approach utilized in this study. Because of the teacher's lack of straightforward explanation, some students said that they had to memorize more throughout the exam. Student 1, for example, indicated that she needed to recall some challenging terminology.

*“There was some challenging language that I need to learn to effectively answer questions during the exam.”* (Student 1, Female)

Not unlike student 2, who indicated that she needed to know the tenses formula to answer.

*“I remembered the tenses formula and its structure before the exam since I frequently forget the correct sentence structure.”* (Student 2, Female)

Student 2 also mentioned that she had to memorize more because the teacher did not provide enough explanations and examples.

*“Most of the time, students are given homework right away, even though English, in my opinion, needs a lot of examples and practice because pronunciation is tough.”* (Student 2, Female)

Based on students' comments, it shows that when it comes to tests, they prefer to adopt the surface approach. This was because individuals prefer to memorize information that they feel is vital to recall. Their attention appears to be drawn to the

material's content or to items they feel noteworthy and should be remembered, rather than to the notion of the material itself.

A similar response is given to another question on the importance of technology in online learning.

*"Online learning in English is mostly handled through the WhatsApp application's group function, where all learning occurs through group discussions beginning with the delivery of material, directions, and the collection of assignments."* (Student 1, Female)

Student 2 had a similar opinion on the platform, saying,

*"Usually, we are given content in the form of a PowerPoint file or a YouTube link. Virtual meetings utilizing platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet have never been used in English lessons, although I find it easier to grasp when the class is done in this manner."* (Student 2, Female)

Students continued to utilize their handbooks in addition to using technology-based media, as stated by student 4,

*"Sometimes the teacher gives directions to read the handbook and finish the homework there."* (Student 4, Male)

About activity, student 3 stated,

*"Discussions that require us to answer questions have never been carried out in online learning because usually after instructions on reading material or watching Videos, and a brief explanation from the teacher, we were immediately assigned an assignment for the day. Typically, we are given assignments in the form of answering multiple-choice questions, writing paragraphs or phrases, and filling in gaps," Student 1 said of the sort of assignment assigned."* (Student 3, Female)

Student 1 added the same idea, and stated that,

*"Any assignments requiring an opinion were never supplied."* (Student 1, Female)

Students struggled to grasp the subject being taught due to a lack of learning technology utilized in online learning, particularly the utilization of virtual meetings. Due to a lack of discussion sections and the sorts of assignments supplied, students appeared to be less able to think critically in online learning.

Although the majority of students reported that the ease of access to technology in online learning aided them, they also found difficulties in sifting through the vast amount of information from numerous sources. As student 1 stated,

*"Translating difficult phrases or sentences using Google Translate helped me comprehend the meaning of the questions being asked. Looking for answer references on the internet also quite helpful, yet I still prefer to use certain websites to assist me to locate solutions to complex issues since I feel some websites are less reputable."* (Student 1, Female)

Student 3 mentioned about many sources that come from the internet make students confusing, as stated

*"I use the internet pretty regularly to help me locate solutions, but because there are so many sources, I sometimes feel confused about selecting the suitable response because of the various possibilities, but I eventually choose the top one."* (Student 3, Female)

Some students, notably student 1, reported they had difficulty asking the teacher if they were having problems with online learning.

*"I find it difficult to offer questions in group discussions since I feel they are less productive. Friends frequently contribute messages in the chat group that has nothing to do with the issue, so if I raise a question, the teacher seems less likely to see it. In addition to asking the teacher directly, I find it difficult to communicate and choose the suitable phrases."* (Student 1, Female)

Student 2 felt the same way when being asked about online learning

*"Teachers are frequently late in responding to inquiries in group chats or they are illegible. Furthermore, the shame of asking questions of friends might be an issue to consider. That makes me too afraid to approach the teacher in group discussions."* (Student 2, Female)

Student 4 acknowledged that he often had issues with devices and signals.

*"When I study online, I frequently get latency, where my device crashes and is difficult to use. When I open Google, I may have to wait for a long time because of an error. Furthermore, signal issues have become an impediment that leads me to be late for online classes."* (Student 4, Male)

These findings suggest that some students had technological difficulties throughout the online learning process.

The outcome of this interview was critical in comprehending the prior survey's findings. The interview findings will aid in determining the factors that impact the eighth-grade students' learning approaches when studying English online. According to the survey results, students use the deep approach, however the interview data show that students' learning techniques tend to surface depending on the many impacting factors. The interview findings revealed two things: supporting factors and inhibiting factors. The urge to locate alternative learning materials, such as utilizing Google, and the strong encouragement of students to grasp English in everyday life are two supporting factors. Internal problems such as memorizing behavior, lack of confidence when asking questions, and a lack of capacity to sift out information are among the obstacles. Extrinsic factors include an unsupportive learning environment, as well as device and signal difficulties.

## **Discussion**

The survey information results indicated that the students in this study choose a deep learning approach. It is because the total deep approach is higher than the surface approach. This demonstrates that children prefer to learn by doing rather than perceiving learning as a chore (Biggs, 1999). This study is comparable to that of Astika and Sumakul (2019), who observed that students at a private institution in Central Java adopt a deep approach to English learning. The students from Central Java utilized a learning approach were comparable to what Santosa et al. (2021) identified, namely the approach used by English students at a university in Bali to study in the setting of emergency learning.

Several findings were found to conflict with the conclusions of this investigation. Among them are the findings of Meeks et al. (2013), who direct the learning approach utilized by three generations, with the Millennial generation dominating the surface approach as a consequence. Hulreski et al. (2020) discover in the context of an Indonesian study that English students' learning approach to vocabulary acquisition tends to be a surface approach. This is because respondents would



memorize more to grasp the vocabulary. Similarly, findings with Islamic high school students in Indonesia were discovered. According to the findings of this study, students tend to employ the surface level in their learning approach (Mulyani et al. 2020). According to Mulyani et al (2020) research's the majority of high school students regard studying as an obligation. It concludes that according to research conducted in the Indonesian context, the student learning approach is linked to the student's learning objectives (Hulreski et al., 2020; Meeks et al., 2013; Mulyani et al., 2020). For instance, memorizing material to make it easier to recall, or making learning a necessity with an emphasis on high grades

Several of the study's conclusions need to be looked into further. Some respondents were questioned to obtain more detailed and in-depth information. Interviews were done since the survey data still needed to be supplemented. In interviews, specific characteristics such as supportive and limiting factors experienced by students were addressed as supplementary information from previous studies. Four students agreed to participate as responders in this interview and voiced their perspectives. The interview focuses on how students might use their learning approach in various online learning situations. Other supporting problems include how they feel throughout learning activities and what determines whether or not they learn successfully.

Based on the findings of a prior survey, which revealed that students prefer a deep approach, the interviews yielded the opposite results. According to the findings of student interviews, students have behavioral patterns that lead to a surface approach. This issue should undoubtedly be researched further, particularly regarding factors affecting students' approaches. It has been shown that students use remembering methods to memorize vocabulary and tense structures. These findings are corroborated by Biggs' (1988, 1999) previous study, which stated that students who exclusively employed the surface approach have lacked critical thinking abilities.

The status of English as a foreign language in Indonesia affects the English language skills of Indonesian students. In particular, the ability of junior high school students was quite lacking, for example in learning grammar (Andriani, Yuniar, & Abdullah, 2021). Septianasari et al. (2019) found that Indonesian students' English proficiency is closely related to the influence of their mother tongue, which affects students' pronunciation and syntax. Furthermore, his research shows that this is related to variations in linguistic characteristics and the environment around the two languages. The way students learn is influenced by their English competence. Based on the findings of interviews conducted for this study, students preferred to use memorization tactics identical to the surface approach. They use memorizing important components of a material as a learning strategy to achieve excellent grades for example memorizing vocabulary (Hulreski et al., 2020).

In line with memorizing, the interviews result from this research indicated a variety of other student behaviors that contribute to the features of the surface approach. Students' inability to find information on the internet, as well as the attitude of students who are unwilling to ask questions when they meet difficulties, were other features that affect them. Those categorize as internal factors that take a role in determining students' learning approach. When they encountered difficulties, numerous students said that the internet assisted them in finding solutions. They are, nevertheless, frequently perplexed while determining if the information is accurate and beneficial. This is consistent with McGrew's (2020) findings on students'

learning when they use the internet as a source of knowledge. He also found that students actively sought materials on the internet, but they were less capable of evaluating online information. The students' inability to interpret material on the internet is exacerbated by their dread of asking inquiries when they encounter difficulties. According to student interviews result in this research, this behavior was created by communication challenges, students feeling afraid of a late response, and social stigma that comes from their friends.

Besides internal factors, there are also external factors in addition to factors inside students that show students' tendency to adapt surface approach. Two of these were a lack of variety in the use of learning applications and a lack of discussion between students. Based on the interviews, WhatsApp used as the primary application in online learning was less effective in assisting students to comprehend the topic. According to the students, virtual meetings had never been utilized in English classrooms. Differences in the usage of apps and media play a key role in assisting students in better understanding the topic. The adoption of the student surface approach was also influenced by the lack of discussion in this online learning environment. Discussion is connected to learning outcomes and plays a role in the collaborative process and student output in learning (Fear & Erikson-Brown, 2014). From discussion students can engage their critical thinking skills. Besides that, the teacher seems to lack of giving feedback to students. Giving feedback has also been shown to help students understand the value they get and how they might enhance it in the future, leading to more in-depth learning (Clack & Dommett, 2021).

The type of assignment, as well as signal and device limitations, are all other important external factors that also influence student learning approaches. One aspect that affects the implementation of their surface approach is the type of task that does not inspire students to think critically. Meanwhile, according to a study, the types of assignments that allow students to gain knowledge and build critical thinking skills are those that collect personal points of view (Warsah et al., 2021). Giving opinions, will train students' critical and rational thinking skills to find an answer. The following external aspects to consider are signal and device factors. Some students find it problematic with signal interference and gadgets that lag or don't work when in use. Students are still experiencing the problems listed above, which need extra attention to solve. Because overcoming existing obstacles will be able to help students understand learning in-depth while also reducing the behaviors and conditions that contribute to the surface approach.

Students enrolled in online learning have the option to engage in self-directed learning activities such as researching alternate sources of knowledge. This project is also supported by students' enthusiasm to study English. The desire to master English, both in theory and in application in conversation, dominates the initiative to study. Some data, on the other hand, concerning student behavior and the condition of the learning environment, are consistent with a surface approach. Internal actions of students show traits of a surface approach, such as memorizing, difficulties analyzing knowledge, and fear of asking questions. While the conditions of the student learning environment, such as a lack of diversity of apps and media, a lack of debate, and the sorts of tasks assigned to students, influenced the approach's acceptance. In addition, signal and device issues also play a role.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

From the data presented, it can be concluded that the eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 Singaraja uses a flexible deep learning approach that is influenced by various internal and external factors. Students took the initiative to engage in self-study by seeking other sources of information. In addition, their learning motivation affects students' utilization of the immersive approach. On the other hand, it was also found that the students exhibited some behaviors, which led to the use of the surface approach. These include rote memorization, lack of ability to process information, and lack of confidence in asking questions. In addition to student behavior, additional problems such as repetitive learning applications, lack of discussion, lack of task types, and signal and device challenges also play a role. An interesting conclusion in this study reveals that the application of the student learning approach in the context of online English learning at SMP Negeri 2 is flexible or dynamic between the deep approach and the surface approach, which is adjusted to the supporting and inhibiting factors faced by students.

It was recommended that all parties involved in the learning process, such as teachers and students, assess the importance of students adopting a deep learning approach, especially in this online context. Helping students to understand deep learning will make students' life more meaningful by becoming lifelong learners. This is in line with the evolution of globalization in the twenty-first century. The competition will be tougher, demanding the ability of new generations, such as students, to acquire soft skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, communication, and creative thinking, especially in today's digital world. Students' digital literacy skills will be greatly helped by appropriate technology and infrastructure. Then there is student-centered learning, where students can develop independent learning, with adequate learning facilities provided by the teacher and an open perspective from all parties involved. All research findings indicate that student learning approaches are influenced by various circumstances. This shows that the learning approach is flexible which is influenced by the conditions that exist in students. It is important to emphasize some components of soft skill proficiency when discussing 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning.

Although this research offers a valuable contribution to better understanding student learning approaches, particularly at the junior secondary level, it has some limitations. First, this study only involved subjects on a less broad scale for both questionnaire and interview data. For future research, it is best to use more representative participants. Finally, this research only focuses on students' perspectives on the things that influence them to adopt a learning approach. Future studies could involve teachers' perspectives on research to gain different insights.

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