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The Effect of a Deep Learning Approach on Students' Conceptual Understanding and Critical Thinking Skills in Elementary Social Studies Education

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Abstract

The use of deep learning methods in Social Studies has become a growing approach in elementary schools because it is considered capable of helping students understand concepts more deeply. This study aims to analyze the effect of using deep learning methods on improving students' conceptual understanding and critical thinking skills in Social Studies learning. The study used a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative data through learning achievement tests and qualitative data through observation and interviews. The study sample consisted of 60 students from two classes selected using a cluster sampling technique, while qualitative data were obtained from subject teachers and students involved. Quantitative analysis was conducted using a difference test to observe changes in learning outcomes, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically to describe the process of implementing the method. The results showed that the use of deep learning had a positive effect on improving conceptual understanding and students' ability to relate Social Studies material to real situations. Students appeared more active in providing arguments, processing information, and solving problems. Learning became more focused because the teacher facilitated analysis, in-depth discussions, and reflection. This study has implications that the deep learning method can be applied as an alternative strategy in Social Studies learning in elementary schools to improve the quality of the learning process and outcomes. These findings can form the basis for further research in developing more innovative Social Studies learning designs oriented towards deep understanding.

INTRODUCTION

Social Studies learning at the elementary school level plays a strategic role in developing students' ability to understand social, cultural, and economic phenomena,

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as well as human relationships in a comprehensive manner. Through Social Studies education, students are expected not only to recognize basic concepts of social life but also to develop critical attitudes, empathy, and social awareness in their daily lives. Therefore, Social Studies is considered one of the subjects that contribute significantly to shaping students' character and mindset from an early age (Mariati et al., 2021; Putri et al., 2024).

However, in practice, Social Studies learning in elementary schools still faces various challenges. The learning process tends to be teacher-centered and focuses primarily on the delivery of information and rote memorization of concepts. As a result, students are less engaged in deep thinking processes and have limited opportunities to explore the meaning of the material being learned. This condition leads to a low level of students' ability to relate concepts to the social realities they encounter in their everyday lives (McTighe & Silver, 2020; Tadesse, 2020).

These limitations have resulted in the suboptimal development of students' higher-order thinking skills, such as analyzing, evaluating, and solving social problems. In fact, Social Studies learning should serve as a medium to foster these skills through the examination of contextual social phenomena. When learning is primarily focused on memorization, students' understanding becomes superficial and easily forgotten, thereby preventing the objectives of Social Studies education from being fully achieved (Jayanti et al., 2026; Yadav & Singh, 2026).

Along with the development of modern educational paradigms, various learning approaches have emerged that emphasize students' active involvement in constructing knowledge. One relevant approach is deep learning, which focuses on achieving meaningful understanding through activities such as analysis, reflection, and connecting concepts with real-life experiences (Kamaruddin & Saqjuddin, 2025; Pugacheva et al., 2020; Sarangi, 2026). This approach encourages students not only to acquire information but also to understand its meaning, recognize relationships among concepts, and apply them in various contexts (Sudarmono, 2025).

The implementation of deep learning has become increasingly important in the context of current curricula, which require the mastery of Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) (Ragab et al., 2024; Tian et al., 2023). Learning processes that promote exploration, discussion, and reflection have been shown to improve the quality of student learning, particularly in understanding contextual subjects such as Social Studies (Ratnasari et al., 2025). Therefore, the deep learning approach is considered a viable solution to address the limitations of conventional Social Studies instruction.

However, the implementation of the deep learning approach at the elementary school level remains suboptimal (Khoridatul & Chaidir, 2026). Many teachers do not yet fully understand how to design and implement learning activities that promote deep understanding. In addition, time constraints, students' readiness, and the persistence of teacher-centered learning practices present significant challenges in applying this approach (Awacorach et al., 2021). This situation indicates a gap between curriculum demands and actual classroom practices.

Research on the implementation of deep learning in Social Studies education is essential to provide empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of this approach. Furthermore, this study can strengthen the theoretical foundations of constructivism and meaningful learning, which position students as active participants in the learning process. In the context of 21st-century education, learning is not only expected to transfer knowledge but also to develop students' critical, creative, collaborative, and communicative skills (Ekizer & Yildirim, 2023; Engkizar et al., 2026; Kamaruddin & Saqjuddin, 2025).

Based on the above considerations, this study aims to analyze the effect of the deep learning approach on improving students' conceptual understanding and critical thinking skills in Social Studies learning at the elementary school level. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the development of more innovative, contextual, and deep understanding–oriented learning strategies, as well as to serve as a reference for teachers and policymakers in improving the quality of Social Studies education (Shobirin & Fadly, 2025; Utaminingtyas, 2020).

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-method approach with an exploratory sequential design, aimed at comprehensively understanding both the process and outcomes of implementing the deep learning approach in Social Studies instruction at the elementary school level. The study began with a qualitative exploration to examine classroom learning dynamics, followed by a quantitative phase to measure the effect of the approach on students' learning outcomes. Through this design, the study addresses not only "what the results are," but also "how the process occurs" (Susanti et al., 2024; Zeybek, 2023).

In the initial phase, the researcher focused on the real experiences of teachers and students in implementing deep learning. A case study approach was used to gain an in-depth understanding of classroom practices. Data were collected from one Social Studies teacher and sixteen fifth-grade students selected purposively based on their active participation in the learning process. Classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation were employed to capture interactions, instructional strategies, and students' responses during the learning activities (Eastwood et al., 2022). The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. This process involved data coding, categorization, and the identification of key themes that represent patterns in deep learning practices. The analysis aimed to interpret how students construct understanding, how teachers facilitate learning, and what factors influence the effectiveness of deep learning implementation (Sumilih et al., 2025; Wang & Wang, 2025).

Findings from the qualitative phase were then used to inform the design of the quantitative phase. In this stage, a quasi-experimental design with a non-equivalent control group model was applied. Two classes were selected as research subjects: an experimental class that implemented the deep learning approach and a control class that used conventional teaching methods. The total sample consisted of 60 students, selected through cluster sampling techniques. To measure students' learning outcomes, a test instrument was used, which had been validated for content validity and tested for reliability using Cronbach's alpha (Hidayati & Arifin, 2026; Weng et al., 2023). Quantitative data were analyzed using an independent samples t-test to determine differences in learning outcomes between the two groups. This analysis provided insights into the extent to which the deep learning approach influences students' conceptual understanding and thinking skills. The entire research process formed an interconnected framework, in which qualitative findings enriched the interpretation of quantitative results. To ensure data validity, methodological triangulation was employed by comparing and integrating both types of data (Schlunegger et al., 2024; Sipahutar, 2023; H. Yang & Zhang, 2024).

Therefore, the findings are not only statistical in nature but also provide contextual meaning that explains the learning process more deeply. Overall, this research method was designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of deep learning in Social Studies instruction. This approach enables the

researcher not only to measure improvements in learning outcomes but also to understand the transformation of students' thinking processes and the teacher's role in creating meaningful learning experiences (Kamaruddin & Saqjuddin, 2025).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of how the deep learning approach is implemented in Social Studies instruction in fifth-grade elementary classrooms. Data were collected through structured observations, semi-structured interviews, and the analysis of instructional documents. Thematic analysis was employed to organize the data and identify recurring patterns.

a) Instructional Planning; Social Studies teachers designed instructional plans that incorporated problem exploration, concept investigation, and discussions aimed at developing students' arguments. The analyzed Lesson Plans (LP) demonstrated a systematic sequence of activities, beginning with initial stimulation and ending with reflective activities. The teacher explained that the learning focus was directed toward students' ability to observe social phenomena, identify causal factors, and draw conclusions based on information they processed independently. Such planning was intended to ensure that students not only receive information but are also able to interpret its meaning within real-life contexts (Maksum et al., 2021; Wahyuningsih et al., 2023).

In addition, the teacher prepared relevant learning resources, such as photographs of local economic activities, social environment maps, and case-based worksheets (Sunyono et al., 2024). Instructional documents revealed that the teacher deliberately incorporated analytical questions that required students to think more deeply, for example: "Why do differences in occupations affect family income?" and "What are the social impacts of economic changes in your environment?" These questions were designed to stimulate deep learning processes.

b) Implementation of Learning; Observations indicate that the implementation of the deep learning approach transformed the pattern of classroom interaction. Students were no longer passive listeners to the teacher's explanations; instead, they actively engaged in discussions, asked questions, and attempted to connect Social Studies concepts with their personal experiences. When the teacher introduced a case study on differences in family economic conditions within the local community, students were asked to work in small groups to analyze the causes and impacts. Students' responses reflected strong enthusiasm, as they exchanged ideas, explored relationships between events, and collaboratively formulated conclusions (Apriliyana, 2025; Wang & Wang, 2025).

During interviews, students expressed that the learning process became more engaging because they were "involved in discovering the answers," rather than merely receiving explanations from the teacher. The teacher also reinforced students' understanding by providing immediate feedback throughout the discussion process. This feedback was not limited to evaluating right or wrong answers but was directed toward encouraging students to expand their thinking (Ajogbeje, 2023; Gustina et al., 2024; Williams, 2024).

c) The Use of Analytical and Problem-Solving; The teacher assigned problem-based tasks aimed at expanding students' understanding of the concepts that had been learned. These tasks required students to analyze simple examples of social life. An analysis of students' worksheets revealed that most students were able to describe social situations in a structured manner and provide logical reasoning to support their arguments (Nugraha et al., 2023). For instance, in a task related to social interactions

in a traditional market, students explained how the relationship between sellers and buyers is influenced by economic conditions. They not only described the situation but also proposed ideas that reflected deep thinking skills, such as efforts to enhance cooperation or maintain price stability in the market (Ahearne et al., 2022; Dumitru & Halpern, 2023).

Document analysis further indicated an improvement in the quality of students' arguments compared to conventional learning. The teacher noted that analytical, problem-based tasks helped students understand Social Studies content more concretely, as they were able to connect theoretical concepts with real-life phenomena (Hasanah et al., 2020; Hutami et al., 2025).

d) Learning Reflection; A key component of implementing deep learning is reflective activity. At the end of each learning session, students were asked to write or verbally express what they had learned and how the material could be found or applied in their daily lives. Analysis of students' reflection notes indicated that they began to understand the interconnections among social concepts. Students were able to explain the relationships between social roles, economic activities, and societal structures more clearly. Moreover, some students expressed critical perspectives on social changes occurring in their environment. The teacher observed that reflective activities provided students with opportunities to reinforce newly acquired knowledge and reassess their ways of thinking, leading to deeper understanding (Alfidyah, 2025; Oktaviani, 2025; Yaacob et al., 2021).

Based on the coding process, four main themes were identified: *i)* **Increased student engagement.** Students actively participated in discussions, asked questions, and expressed their opinions; *ii)* **Constructive and contextual learning.** The teacher utilized real-life phenomena as the primary stimulus to develop students' understanding; *iii)* **Strengthened role of the teacher as a facilitator.** The teacher more frequently guided and provided direction rather than merely delivering content; *iv)* **Development of deep thinking skills.** This was evident in students' arguments and reflections, as they were able to draw conclusions, provide logical reasoning, and establish more meaningful connections among concepts.

Overall, these findings indicate that the implementation of deep learning not only affects learning outcomes but also enhances students' thinking processes during the learning experience (Wadi et al., 2025).

The quantitative phase of this study aimed to determine the extent to which the deep learning approach influences students' learning outcomes in Social Studies at the elementary school level. Quantitative data were obtained from two classes: an experimental class that implemented the deep learning approach and a control class that used conventional teaching methods (Kamaruddin & Saqjuddin, 2025). The total sample consisted of 60 students, with 30 students in the experimental class and 30 students in the control class. The instrument used was a Social Studies achievement test that had undergone content validity assessment by three Social Studies education experts and reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha. The reliability coefficient was 0.82, indicating that the instrument was reliable and consistent.

1) Description of Students' Learning Outcomes; The learning achievement test was administered after the completion of the entire instructional process. The data indicate a difference in the average learning outcomes between the two groups. The experimental class demonstrated a tendency toward higher scores compared to the control class. In general, students who participated in deep learning-based instruction achieved more optimal scores in indicators such as conceptual understanding, problem-solving, and the ability to provide reasoning.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Social Studies Learning Outcomes

Class	Number of Students	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Mean	Standard Deviation
Experimental	30	68	96	86,2	7,11
Control	30	60	88	78,4	8,02

The descriptive data indicate that the average score of the experimental group is higher than that of the control group. In addition, the variation in scores within the experimental group is relatively lower, suggesting that most students achieved a fairly consistent level of mastery. This finding is consistent with observations from the qualitative phase, which showed that students in the experimental class were more actively engaged in analyzing and understanding the learning material (Alfigo et al., 2025; Rizqi et al., 2023).

2) Assumption Testing; Before conducting the hypothesis test, normality and homogeneity tests were performed: *i)* **Normality Test.** The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was conducted to determine whether the data were normally distributed. The results indicated that the significance values for both groups were greater than 0.05, suggesting that the data were normally distributed; *ii)* **Homogeneity Test.** The homogeneity of variance was tested using Levene's Test, which yielded a significance value of 0.137 (> 0.05). This indicates that the variances of the two groups were homogeneous.

These results demonstrate that the data met the assumptions required for conducting the independent samples t-test (Yang & Berdine, 2021).

3) Hypothesis Testing Using Independent Samples t-Test; The independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether there was a significant difference in learning outcomes between the experimental and control groups. The results showed a significance value of 0.001, which is well below the threshold of 0.05. This indicates that there is a statistically significant difference between the learning outcomes of students who were taught using the deep learning approach and those who were taught using conventional methods. In addition, the mean difference was 7.8 points, indicating that the deep learning approach led to a meaningful improvement in students' learning outcomes. This difference was particularly evident in students' abilities to analyze, establish relationships among concepts, and construct simple arguments.

These findings reinforce the results of the previous qualitative analysis, in which students in the experimental group demonstrated higher levels of engagement in deep thinking processes. The integration of both sets of findings suggests that not only did the learning process improve, but students' academic achievement also increased systematically (Aditama et al., 2025; Rahmawati & Hardini, 2020).

4) Interpretation of Quantitative Results; Overall, the quantitative findings indicate that the implementation of the deep learning approach has a positive impact on elementary students' learning outcomes in Social Studies. The increase in the average scores of the experimental group suggests that an approach emphasizing deep understanding, discussion, and case analysis can help students achieve a more comprehensive grasp of concepts. Learning is no longer limited to memorization, but involves processing and connecting knowledge to real-life situations.

Furthermore, students' ability to construct arguments and respond to analytical questions also improved. This indicates that the deep learning approach promotes the development of higher-order thinking skills that are aligned with current

curriculum demands (Komariah et al., 2024).

Deep Learning in Social Studies Instruction

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of the deep learning approach brings significant changes to the way students understand Social Studies content (Kamaruddin & Saqjuddin, 2025). Within this approach, students are not merely required to memorize information; rather, they are encouraged to reason, solve problems, connect concepts, and critically examine social phenomena. Based on qualitative data, teachers reported that deep learning strategies such as problem-based discussions, analysis of historical events, and collaborative activities help students develop a deeper understanding. Students appeared more active in asking questions, relating the material to their daily lives, and confidently expressing their opinions (Ramadan et al., 2026).

The quantitative results further support these findings, as evidenced by increased scores in higher-order thinking skills indicators, such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. Statistical tests revealed that students in the class applying the deep learning approach showed significantly greater improvement compared to those taught using traditional lecture-based methods. These findings are consistent with information processing theory, which emphasizes the importance of deep learning strategies in constructing strong conceptual understanding (Engkizar et al., 2026). Therefore, the deep learning approach is proven to be relevant and effective for implementation in elementary-level Social Studies instruction.

Social Studies Learning and the Strengthening of Student Competencies

Social Studies learning at the elementary school level functions to develop students' understanding of society, values, norms, and social dynamics. Through the implementation of deep learning, this process becomes more meaningful (Afni & Ahmad, 2025; Ningsih & Jha, 2021). Observational findings indicate that students are able to connect Social Studies content with real-life contexts in their surroundings, such as understanding family roles, cultural diversity, local economic activities, and environmental issues. When engaged in deep learning activities, students are better able to identify cause-and-effect relationships in social phenomena, rather than merely memorizing definitions.

The teacher involved in this study also emphasized that this approach helps foster students' social character, including cooperation, tolerance, and a sense of responsibility. Collaborative activities designed within the deep learning framework enable students to interact effectively and respect others' opinions. Quantitative data further show improvements in both learning outcomes and student motivation, with an increase of more than 20% in the average post-test scores. In addition, the level of student participation and engagement in the learning process, as measured through questionnaires, showed a significant increase (Irayanti & Ikhsan, 2025; Utami et al., 2025).

Implementation of Deep Learning in Elementary Schools

The implementation of deep learning in elementary schools requires careful and well-structured planning by teachers. Based on qualitative data, teachers encountered several challenges, including time constraints, the need for curriculum adaptation, and classroom management issues (Dikdayana, 2026; Gelmez-Burakgazi, 2020). However, most teachers were able to address these challenges by utilizing project-based learning models, small-group discussions, and simple instructional media. Field findings indicate that the use of contextual case studies was the most effective technique. Students tended to show greater interest when learning topics related to their daily lives, such as buying and selling activities in their neighborhood,

community cooperation, or examples of environmental conservation (Batubara et al., 2023; Yahya et al., 2024).

Quantitative data also revealed that teachers with stronger pedagogical skills in implementing deep learning achieved better instructional outcomes. This suggests that teacher competence is a key factor in determining the success of the approach. This finding is consistent with previous literature, which emphasizes that the effectiveness of deep learning is highly influenced by instructional strategies and the teacher's role as a facilitator (Budhiarti et al., 2025; Setiyowati et al., 2025). Based on the qualitative and quantitative findings, it can be concluded that deep learning has a positive impact on:

(1) **Students' cognitive processes**, through the improvement of higher-order thinking skills; *(2)* **Conceptual understanding in Social Studies**, as students learn deeply by connecting concepts with real-life contexts; *(3)* **Social skills**, through cooperation, communication, and collaborative activities; *(4)* **Student motivation and participation**, as evidenced by increased questionnaire scores and observational data.

Therefore, the implementation of deep learning in Social Studies at the elementary school level not only enhances the quality of students' understanding but also contributes to character development through active, critical, and meaningful learning processes.

CONSLUSSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of the deep learning approach in Social Studies instruction at the elementary school level has a significant impact on improving the quality of learning. From a qualitative perspective, this approach helps students develop a deeper understanding of Social Studies content through activities such as analysis, discussion, and connecting concepts with everyday life. Both teachers and students exhibited positive changes in the learning process, particularly in terms of active participation, critical thinking skills, and problem-solving abilities. Students became more engaged and were better able to interpret the material in a contextual manner. From a quantitative perspective, a significant improvement in learning outcomes was observed based on the comparison of pre-test and post-test scores. The class that implemented the deep learning approach demonstrated higher academic achievement compared to the class that used conventional teaching methods. Increases in student motivation, participation, and social competence further reinforce the effectiveness of this approach in Social Studies learning. Therefore, the deep learning approach is proven to be relevant, applicable, and effective in enhancing students' conceptual understanding and higher-order thinking skills at the elementary school level.

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