

INVESTIGATING EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHALLENGES IN TEACHING FOR YOUNG LEARNERS

Ela Nur Lailiyah¹, Ribut Sabartono², Fatih Al Fauzi³

English Education Program, Islamic University Of Jember, Jember

E-mail: *ellailiyah229@gmail.com¹, ributsabartono0@gmail.com², Fatih.alfauzi16@gmail.com³

ABSTRACT

This research focuses on teachers' perception of the challenges when teaching English to young learners. The study utilizes qualitative methods, the instrumentation is semi- structured interviews (George, 2020), to gather data from participants. The research participants in this case are English teachers with at least three years of experience teaching young learners. Purposive sampling is used to select four teachers who will participate in the study (Jupp, 2006). The recruitment process involves using a messaging application to invite teachers, ensuring confidentiality and obtaining their consent. Four participants have volunteered to take part in the study, each with pseudo-name to protect their identity. By using this approach, the research aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by EFL teachers in teaching English to young learners based on their teaching experiences. The results show that teachers consider classroom management to be the most challenging aspect of teaching English to young learners.

Keywords

EFL, Teachers' Perceptions, Challenges, Young Learners, Teaching

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, there has been a growing emphasis on developing English language skills, particularly for young learners, within the global education landscape. Indonesia is known for its cultural diversity, so it is experiencing an increasing demand for English proficiency. As a result, it has placed significant values on teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to young learners.

Teaching English to young learners is important for keeping the brain healthy and active, improving cognitive, artistic and memory functions (Goriot & van Hout, 2023). As they pick up new vocabulary and grammar, children are actively strengthening their brains and memories, which enhances their mental capacity. Teaching children is unique, because they are still in their development period cognitive, verbal, physical, and psychological. In this case, there is a need to take into consideration these elements and characteristics in order to effectively teach EFL young learners (Moon, 2005).

According to Ellis (2014) there appear to be a number of terms used to describe the contexts in which children learn English as a foreign language. In fact, it is not easy to teach young students about English (Oktavia et al., 2022). Teaching English to young learners (TEYL) certainly has a very different method compared to teenagers or adults. For young learners, they can only be taught the basics and they are taught in a way that they know, namely playing, but not just playing. Play here is directed play. Through direct play, children can learn many things. Moreover, when playing, the children's brains calm down because they feel happy and cheerful. If their brain is calm, of course knowledge can enter and be implanted easily and well.

Things that must be considered are that teachers must find out more information that students need. By knowing a lot of information, the teacher will have many choices that can be conveyed in class. Teachers must also increase their knowledge about the methods and materials that will be presented in class (Zein, 2017). Lastly, teachers must be flexible when dealing with students who may be bored in class. Young learners sometimes have unpredictable moods. When they are tired of previous lessons, it is very possible that they will feel reluctant to learn English. If this happens the teacher must be flexible and not force activities that may have been previously planned.

A teacher is a person who has numerous parts within the learning and teaching stages. As a great proficient teacher, a teacher must not only be a role model in the classroom, but also as class administrator, organizer, evaluator, teleprompter, participant, resource person, observer and tutor (Hedge, 2003). In this regard, teachers must respect their work, have a lot of ability and knowledge, and also be able to be actors (Oktavia et al., 2022). However, when teaching English, a teacher must not only be able to carry out these roles but also make learning interesting. A recent study (Pertiwi et al, 2019) reported that English teachers often face challenges such as a lack of management ability on unruly young learners, inability to focus on every young learner, and facing the fickle mood of the young learners. To tackle those difficulties, it is important to understand these challenges for enhancing the quality of English language instruction at the early stages of education.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching by providing current, context-specific data on the challenges teachers face in the classroom. Unlike previous studies that may generalize across educational contexts, this research offers detailed insight into the lived experiences of EFL teachers, especially within the Indonesian educational setting. The findings can serve as a valuable reference for future research that aims to explore teacher resilience, pedagogical adaptation, or professional development strategies in response to these challenges.

A study in Mexico (Millán Librado & Basurto Santos, 2020) whose participants were six English teachers, from public schools in the southern region of the state of Veracruz, Mexico. A qualitative approach was applied, and primary data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews. This study (Millán Librado & Basurto Santos, 2020) reported that it seems that the majority of teachers have negative recognition of the condition of their education. It is concluded that pressing activity is required on the portion of the government to make strides in EFL situation, particularly presently when the presentation of EFL has been proposed at prior ages in all levels of instruction within the nation.

For the past few decades, the study on EFL teachers' challenges in teaching young learners has attracted the attention of several researchers worldwide such as in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2016), Japan (Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016), Turkey (Yildiz & Savaşçı, 2024), South Korea (Garton, 2014), and in the southern region of the state of Veracruz, Mexico (Librado & Santos, 2020). EFL is considered as English as a Foreign Language. EFL means learning English in non-English speaking countries (Shu Dingfang, 1994), as Indonesian people most learn English as EFL. Learning a foreign language is for tourism and communicating with native. From the teacher's perspective, the EFL audience is those for whom English is not their first language or official language used for daily life. However, in Indonesia, the study which explores teachers' challenges in teaching young learners is still in its infancy. In Indonesia itself the research was in Nias, North Sumatera (Hulu, 2024), and in Jembrana District, Bali (Listyariyani, 2018). Therefore, to seal this gap, this research is conducted to investigate EFL teachers' perception of the challenges faced

during the process of teaching English as a foreign language to young students in Indonesia. This study will answer the following research question; "what are the challenges faced by EFL teachers when teaching EFL to young learners?"

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This research proposal aims to determine the challenges teachers face when teaching English to young students. In this regard, this research uses qualitative methods that collect data through interviewing participants (Creswell, 2017). These are all forms of open data where participants express their ideas freely, not limited by predetermined scales or instruments. There are several reasons underlying the decision to employ a qualitative method in this study. Meanwhile, interview studies can be defined as interactions created between interviewers and sources (Kvale, 2007). In doing so, this study conducts interviews with participants, phone interviews, or engage in focus group interviews. This interview involves unstructured and generally open-ended questions which are few in number and are intended to elicit the views and opinions of the participants (Mackiewicz, 2018). By doing so, this study can gather in-depth data about the EFL teachers' challenges in teaching English for young learners based on their experiences in teaching young learners.

2.2 Research Participants

In order to get appropriate sample for this study, this study employs purposive sampling (Jupp, 2006). This sample is also known as subjective, judgmental or selective sampling. To do so, there are several criteria for the research participants. First, participants in this research are teachers of English for young learners. Second, they need to have at least three years of experience in teaching English for young learners. In this regard, the targeted participants who will participate in this research are nine teachers. The way to recruit teachers is to use the WA application and invite them via private chat. The invitation contains the research objectives, a summary of the research background, and guarantees the confidentiality of the identities of the research participants. If prospective research participants agree to be involved in this research, the researcher will send a letter of approval.

2.3 Data Analysis Method

In order to gain in-depth understanding on EFL teachers' challenges in teaching young learners, this study analyzes the results of interviews using thematic analysis. According to (Braun & Clarke, 2006) Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing, identifying, and reporting patterns, or themes, in data. It organizes and describes your collection of information in a minimal way. However, it often goes further than this, and interprets different aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). This is a common technique often used to analyze interview or focus group data in qualitative research.

There are advantages and disadvantages to using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The advantage is flexibility. This means a method that is relatively easy and quick to learn and implement, accessible to researchers with little or no qualitative research experience. The results are generally accessible to the educated public. The disadvantages make the development of specific guidelines for higher stage analyses difficult, and can potentially paralyze researchers in trying to decide which aspects of the data to focus on. Another disadvantage arises when thematic analysis is considered nearby a few other qualitative analysis methods.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

A teacher who has perception means the teacher understands fundamental concepts teaching English for young learners. Through interviews initially with nine teachers, but some of them had less than three years of experience teaching English to young learners, the interviews were only conducted with four teachers. To gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by EFL teachers, data were collected over a period of approximately ten days through WhatsApp call interviews, conducted with participants' full consent and in adherence to ethical research standards. The findings presented below highlight the key themes that emerged from these interviews.

To answer the first question whether EFL teachers in Jember, Indonesia face challenges related to classroom management in teaching English to young learners and what challenges they face. The following is an analysis of the results of interviews with them. Teachers usually experience challenges with students who like to play and they want to play games during lessons. This is a challenge in classroom management. Statement from one of the participants:

"They really like to play, because they are still young. Sometimes they don't listen to you about anything, They like ignoring me as a teacher, they just want to play and play. it is very difficult to organize a management class and we have to be patient to get their attention." (teacher 1).

In addition, interview findings revealed that teachers faced several difficulties in students' involvement in teaching English to young learners. This answers the second question of whether EFL teachers face challenges related to students' involvement in teaching English to young learners and what challenges they face. From the results of the interview analysis, teachers found difficulties such as students are tired, bored and do not want to study. One of the participants commented as follows:

"Some of the students are not interested in English, they said English is so difficult, English is so bored and make them sleepy. Maybe because they hungry, they did not have their breakfast or they have had breakfast but the food is not nutritious enough, so they are less interested and less excited about attending class." (teacher 2)

To answer the third question whether EFL teachers face challenges in monitoring learning or providing feedback in teaching English to young learners and what challenges they face. The following are the results of the interview. Almost all EFL teachers experience challenges in monitoring learning or providing feedback, such as having to understand the characteristics and adjust the age of the students. One of the participants said:

"Actually I can monitoring their learning very well, but when it comes to providing feedback, I'm not sure about that. I don't think I'm perfect to do that because they have different characteristics and also almost different ages." (Teacher 3).

From the various challenges mentioned above, the teachers stated that the most difficult challenge faced by the teachers was the challenge in classroom management. This answers the last question, the fourth, which is the most difficult for EFL teachers when

teaching English to young learners: student engagement, monitoring learning, or classroom management. Here is one of the statements from the participants:

"Most of us can give feedback or monitor learning, and also can handle student engagement such as tired and bored students or even those who do not want to learn, but we really feel the big challenge in managing the class such as playful students, physical condition of the class, energetic or active students, and time management." (Teacher 4).

3.2 Discussion

Interviews of teachers revealed that the biggest challenge for teachers is classroom management. The results show that teachers consider classroom management to be the most challenging aspect of teaching English to young learners. The results of this interview are in accordance with research by Pertiwi et al. (2020), classroom management proves to be teachers' biggest challenge when teaching English to young learners. In addition, teachers reported facing behavioral problems from their students, this is in accordance with one of the five challenges face by teachers by Nunan (2010) regarding students' attention. This result also in line with research by Widodo and Dewi (2021) which also shows that this problem is caused by a lack of student learning discipline. These results also support the findings of Copland et al. (2014) described teachers facing the problem of lack of time when teaching English to young students. Furthermore, teachers mentioned in interviews that they had problems with energetic and active students. Kusmaryati (2020) reported similar results, which showed that students had problematic character because they were very active and energetic.

Teachers also seem to have difficulty relating to student characteristics. They stated that students generally become bored or tired while studying. It is a big challenge for teachers to make students participate in class because various circumstances make students bored and tired. In Nunan's (2010) opinion, this is a challenge that teachers must face by motivating students, which is in line with Krashen (1981) that stated "...without sufficient motivation and focused attention, even fairly comprehensible input can fail to facilitate language acquisition" (p. 35).

This highlights how motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety can create barriers to effective language acquisition. For teachers, understanding this is crucial as teachers face the challenge of engaging young learners who may be experiencing high levels of anxiety or low self-esteem in a language learning environment.

In addition to student engagement, teachers usually face several challenges in monitoring learning progress in classes with young students, such as providing feedback and learning pace. Due to the age and characteristics of students, these findings suggest that teachers may not be able to provide appropriate feedback to students. These results are in accordance with Yıldız & Savaşçı (2024) that teachers may not provide proper feedback to students due to the constraints of their age and learning characteristics

4. CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to investigate the challenges faced by teachers when teaching English to young learners. Interviews with four teachers highlighted a variety of challenges. Teachers found it difficult to manage students who were more interested in playing during lessons than studying. Furthermore, providing feedback and managing varying levels of learning among students were identified as areas of difficulty for teachers. Several teachers expressed uncertainty in their ability to provide effective

feedback to students. The study also revealed that classroom management was a major challenge for teachers when teaching English to young learners. This finding is in line with previous research that suggests that classroom management is a significant concern for educators. Teachers also found it difficult to engage students and maintain their interest in English lessons. Motivating students was identified as a key strategy to overcome these challenges.

It can be concluded that most teachers have difficulties in managing discipline, managing time effectively, and managing the classroom environment. With differences in educational background, teaching experience, and grade/class level when teaching, classroom management was found to be a major challenge, especially in terms of engaging students and monitoring their learning progress. Therefore, it can be concluded that teachers have similar perceptions about the challenges faced when teaching English to young learners.

5. SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that educational stakeholders, including school administrators and policy-makers, provide more targeted professional development programs that directly address the challenges identified by EFL teachers, such as limited resources, classroom management, and curriculum alignment. Teacher training institutions should also incorporate practical strategies for overcoming these obstacles into their programs. Future researchers are encouraged to explore specific intervention models or comparative studies across regions to deepen understanding and enhance the support systems for EFL teachers.

6. REFERENCES

- Boyatzis, R. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Sage.
- Braun & Clarke, V. B. & V. (2006). Qualitative Research in Psychology Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Copland, F., & Yonetsugi, E. (2016). Teaching English to Young Learners: Supporting the Case for the Bilingual Native English Speaker Teacher. *Classroom Discourse*, 7(3), 221–238.
- Copland, F., Garton, S., & Burns, A. (2014). Challenges in teaching English to young learners: Global perspectives and local realities. *Tesol quarterly*, 48(4), 738–762.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage publications.
- Ellis, G. (2014). 'Young learners': clarifying our terms. *ELT Journal*, 68(1), 75–78.
- Garton, S. (2014). Unresolved issues and new challenges in teaching English to young learners: The case of South Korea. *Current issues in language planning*, 15(2), 201–219.
- George, M. L. (2020). Effective Teaching and Examination Strategies for Undergraduate Learning During COVID-19 School Restrictions. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 1–26.
- Goriot, C., & Van Hout, R. (2023). Primary-school teachers' beliefs about the effects of early-English education in the Dutch context: communicative scope, disadvantaged learning, and their skills in teaching English. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 26(4), 498– 513.

- Hedge, T. (2003). The Practice of English Language Teaching. *ELT Journal*, 57(4), 401–405.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/57.4.401>
- Hulu, N. A. (2024). Teachers' Difficulties in Teaching English to Young Learners in 5 Schools at Nias. *The Journal Of English Teaching For Young And Adult Learners*, 3(1), 21-27.
- Jupp, V. (2006). The sage dictionary of social research methods. In SAGE Publication Ltd. SAGE Publications, Ltd.
- Krashen, S. D. (1981). Second language acquisition and second language learning.
- Kusmaryati, S. E. (2020). Teachers' perspectives of teaching English to young learners (A descriptive study at primary schools in Kudus). *ELT Worldwide: Journal of English Language Teaching*, 7(2), 94-103.
- Kvale, S. (2007). Kvale, Steinar (1996) - Interviews.pdf. In Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing (pp. 124–135).
- Librado, T.M., & Santos, N.M. (2020). Teaching English to Young Learners in Mexico: Teachers' Perceptions About Their Teaching Contexts. *Profile Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 22, 125-139.
- Listyariyani, N. P. R. (2018). Teachers' Perception of Teaching English for Young Learners and the Implementation in Public Primary Schools in Jembrana Sub-District. *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Indonesia*, 6(2).
- Mackiewicz, J. (2018). Writing center talk over time: A mixed-method study. Routledge.
- Moon, J. (2005). Teaching English to young learners: the challenges and the benefits. *British Council*, 30-34.
- Nguyen, C. D. (2016). Metaphors as a window into identity: A study of teachers of English to young learners in Vietnam. *System*, 60, 66-78.
- Nunan, D. (2010). Teaching English to young learners. Anaheim, CA: Anaheim University Press.
- Oktavia, D., Mukminin, A., Marzulina, L., Harto, K., Erlina, D., & Holandyah, M. (2022). Challenges and strategies used by English teachers in teaching English language skills to young learners. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 12(2), 382-387.
- Pertiwi, R. S., Salabiyati, I., Damara, D., & Pratolo, B. W. (2020, February). The teacher's perspectives about challenges of teaching English for young learners: A case study at English course for young learners. In 3rd International Conference on Learning Innovation and Quality Education (ICLIQE 2019) (pp. 65-74). Atlantis Press.
- Shu Dingfang. Foreign Language, Second Language, Mother tongue and another language [J]. *Foreign Language Education*, 1994:15-19.
- Widodo, A., & Dewi, S. R. (2019). Revealing problems on teaching English for young learners at Al-Azhar 55 Islamic Primary School Yogyakarta and how to solve them. *Journal Varidika*, 30(2), 21-29.
- Yıldız, G. R., & Savaşçı, M. (2024). Navigating Turkish EFL Teachers' Perceived Challenges with Very Young Learners. *Language Teaching and Educational Research*, 7(1), 37-50.

Zein, S. (2017). The pedagogy of teaching English to young learners: Implications for teacher education. *Indonesian JELT: Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 12(1), 61-77