EFL Teachers' Lived Experiences in Teaching English to Young Learners

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Abstract

Teachers' lived experiences significantly shape their teaching approaches, particularly in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), where understanding these experiences is essential for improving instructional practices. This qualitative phenomenological study explored EFL teachers' challenges in TEYL and their strategies to overcome them in elementary schools in Palembang. Data were collected through interviews and classroom observations with teachers with at least five years of experience in these school settings. The findings revealed three primary challenges: difficulties in managing classroom activities, the unique learning characteristics of young learners, and the use of Indonesian language during English lessons. To address these challenges, teachers employed strategies such as incorporating games into lessons, fostering a creative and engaging learning environment, encouraging consistent English usage by students, and consulting resources on young learners' language acquisition. The study underscores the importance of flexible, adaptive strategies in overcoming challenges in TEYL, highlighting how a better understanding of young learners' needs can improve the effectiveness of English teaching.

Keywords: EFL teachers, lived experiences, TEYL, Young Learners

INTRODUCTION

The global prominence of English Language Teaching (ELT), which defined by Bland (2019) as teaching English to non-native speakers across different age groups, has increased as English continues to be a vital skill for communication, education, and employment across various industries. English proficiency can enhance individual prospects in multinational corporations and other global institutions, making it a valuable subject within formal education (Nguyen, 2018). It has become an integral part of the education system in many countries, such as Indonesia, beginning as early as kindergarten. Kusmaryati (2020)

emphasizes that English is introduced early in the curriculum to equip students with skills essential for academic and professional success.

Particularly for young learner, teaching English is quite unique and special. Astutik et al. (2021) state that effective Teaching English for Young Learners or TEYL practices use engaging tools like songs, games, and storytelling to maintain students' interest and facilitate language acquisition. Rixon (2019) highlights the importance of designing lessons that cater to young learners' cognitive and emotional needs, stressing that an engaging and joyful learning environment can lay the groundwork for successful language learning in later stages. For the teachers, teaching young learners can be effectively success to be done if the teachers has a wide lived experiences as a teacher.

Lived experience refers to the knowledge, reflections, and decisions an individual accumulates through personal and professional experiences. Gürsoy and Eken (2018) define lived experience as a reflective process where individuals gain insight by looking back on their actions and decisions after they have lived. In the context of TEYL, teachers continuously reflect on their experiences, shaping their approach to overcoming challenges such as classroom management, engaging young learners, and fostering English language use among children who may not be exposed to English outside of school.

Some relevant studies have demonstrated the value of lived experiences in improving teaching practices. Farrell (2018) argues that reflective practice, a core component of lived experience, enables teachers to evaluate their teaching methods, identify challenges, and adapt their strategies accordingly. Farrell's work suggests that experienced teachers who engage in reflection can better navigate classroom complexities and implement more effective pedagogical strategies. Similarly, Wyatt (2020) underscores the importance of teacher reflection in developing classroom resilience, which allows teachers to respond flexibly to the diverse needs of young learners in TEYL settings. Teachers with extensive lived experiences often develop a deeper understanding of the various dynamics in young learner classrooms, such as maintaining student attention, handling behavioural issues, and creating a supportive language-learning environment. Teachers' lived experiences enable them to refine their use of these strategies to better meet the needs of young learners as they reflect on what works best in specific classroom situations.

However, Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) poses unique challenges, as it requires teachers to introduce a new language to children while ensuring that learning is engaging and developmentally appropriate. Children may not fully grasp the importance of language learning. Teachers' lived experiences play a crucial role in shaping how they respond to these challenges in the classroom.

On the other side, previous studies have examined the theoretical and methodological aspects of TEYL, more research needs to be done, focusing specifically on the lived experiences of teachers who work in these contexts. In Indonesia itself, research on lived experiences among EFL teachers in TEYL contexts is relatively limited. Thus, this study explores EFL teachers' lived experiences in TEYL settings, particularly in elementary schools in Palembang. By focusing on teachers' reflections on their challenges and strategies, this research will provide practical insights into how teachers manage classrooms, engage students, and navigate the complexities of teaching English to young learners. These findings will contribute to the existing literature on TEYL and offer strategies that future educators

can adopt to overcome challenges and enhance language learning outcomes for young learners.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of EFL teachers in teaching English to young learners. As Creswell and Poth (2018) explained, phenomenology seeks to understand how individuals interpret their experiences related to a particular phenomenon. It is well-suited for investigating the challenges and strategies teachers face. The research was conducted at an elementary school in Palembang, Indonesia, with two female English teachers who were purposively selected. Both participants had at least five years of teaching experience and formal qualifications in English education, ensuring they had substantial expertise relevant to the study's aims (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to collect detailed narratives while providing the flexibility to probe deeper into specific areas of interest (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). This method was chosen to gain insights into the participants' experiences with teaching English and how they addressed various challenges. Classroom observations supplemented the interviews, allowing a direct view of how the teachers implemented their strategies in real time. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), observations provide a valuable means of triangulating data, enabling researchers to cross-check findings from different sources.

The data collection spanned two weeks, during which each teacher was interviewed and observed multiple times to understand their experiences comprehensively. The interviews were recorded with the participant's consent, and detailed field notes were taken during the classroom observations to document interactions and strategies used by the teachers. This combination of methods helped ensure that the data were well-rounded and reflected the teachers' lived experiences (Flick, 2018).

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). This approach involved familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report. Thematic analysis is a widely used method in qualitative research, valued for its flexibility in identifying patterns and themes in data (Terry et al., 2017). The analysis of the interviews and observation notes led to the emergence of three key themes: classroom management challenges, addressing young learners' language acquisition needs, and balancing the use of English and Indonesian in the classroom. These themes provided valuable insights into the strategies used by the participants to navigate the complexities of teaching English to young learners.

To enhance the validity of the study, member checking was employed. The validity involved sharing the preliminary findings with the participants to confirm that the researchers' interpretations accurately reflected their experiences (Birt et al., 2016). This process ensured the credibility of the findings by allowing the participants to verify the accuracy of the data and interpretations. Additionally, data triangulation through interviews and observations provided further reliability to the study by cross-validating the identified themes (Carter et al., 2014).

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are presented in two parts: the challenges faced and the strategies teachers use in teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL).

Challenges in Teaching EFL

The findings of this study revealed three significant challenges EFL teachers face in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL): managing classroom dynamics, addressing diverse learner characteristics, and overcoming students' reliance on the Indonesian language during English lessons. These challenges reflect the complexities inherent in teaching young learners and provide insight into areas where pedagogical support is needed.

One of the most significant challenges identified was classroom management. Both participants expressed difficulties controlling the classroom environment, which was often noisy and chaotic due to the students' high energy levels. Participant WP highlighted this issue: "*The most challenging aspect in TEYL is managing the class because even after preparing the teaching materials, some students cry, don't want to join the class, and make noise talking to their peers.*" The observations further confirmed this challenge, as students were frequently off-task, talking among themselves or wandering around the classroom. This aligns with Damar et al. (2017) and Deni and Fahriany (2020), who argue that managing young learners' behaviour is a common challenge in TEYL. The difficulty of maintaining classroom order limits the teacher's ability to focus on instruction, reducing the effectiveness of the teaching process.

As children in this age group have short attention spans and are highly energetic, teachers must find innovative strategies to maintain discipline while engaging in lessons. This finding is significant because effective classroom management is crucial for creating an environment where young learners can focus on language acquisition. Without proper management, valuable instructional time is lost, and students may not fully benefit from the lesson. Copland and Ni (2018) have shed light on the challenges teachers face in similar settings, such as large class sizes, limited teaching resources, and time constraints.

Another substantial challenge was dealing with the diverse learning characteristics of young learners. The participants noted that students exhibited varying levels of readiness, motivation, and engagement during lessons, making teaching the entire class effectively challenging. Participant WY explained, "*Teaching English to children is difficult because it has to depend on the characters of the children. Some are easy to handle, while others are difficult to control, and some only participate in class sporadically.*" This finding is consistent with the work of Diyanti and Madya (2019), who emphasize the importance of addressing children's individual learning needs. The diversity in learners' abilities and motivation levels means that teachers must constantly adapt their instructional strategies to meet these varied needs, which can be exhausting and time-consuming. In addition, the classroom observations reflected this challenge, as some students were highly engaged while others were more passive or distracted. This suggests that differentiated instruction—tailoring lessons to meet student's individual needs—is essential in TEYL but can be challenging to implement in large or mixed-ability classrooms. The significance of this finding lies in the need for teachers to receive training on differentiated instruction strategies that cater to the diverse cognitive and emotional development of young learners.

A third challenge identified was the use of Indonesian during English lessons. Despite focusing on teaching English, students frequently reverted to their native language when communicating with teachers and peers. Participant WP noted, *"Some students still use Indonesian to ask questions or engage in conversations with me and their peers, despite the expectation that they should use English."* WY shared similar experiences, adding, *"When asking for permission to go to the toilet, for example, students use Indonesian because they don't know how to say it in English."* This reliance on Indonesian indicates the students' limited English proficiency and language use discomfort. This finding aligns with Harsanti and Manara (2021) and Lesia et al. (2021), who reported that young learners often revert to their native language due to a lack of vocabulary or confidence in their English skills. The observations confirmed that many students used Indonesian, especially during informal interactions or when they encountered difficulties expressing themselves in English. This poses a significant challenge to creating an immersive English-learning environment, as it limits students' exposure to and practice with the target language. The importance of this finding lies in the need for teachers to develop strategies that encourage the use of English in the classroom, such as providing more structured opportunities for language use or scaffolding vocabulary to help students feel more confident in their language abilities.

These findings align with previous research on TEYL and highlight recurring challenges in the field. Damar et al. (2017) and Meisani et al. (2020) similarly identified classroom management as a significant issue for teachers, noting that young learners' unpredictable behaviour can disrupt the flow of lessons. Reynolds et al. (2021) also found that addressing diverse learner needs is a common difficulty in early language education, with teachers needing help to balance students' varied abilities and engagement levels. Likewise, Harsanti and Manara (2021) reported that using native languages in TEYL classrooms is widespread, particularly in contexts with limited English proficiency.

The challenges of managing classroom dynamics, catering to diverse learner characteristics, and promoting English over Indonesian underscore the complexity of teaching young learners. These findings are consistent with the literature and provide valuable insights into the daily realities faced by EFL teachers in TEYL contexts. To address these challenges, teachers need access to more specialized training in classroom management, differentiated instruction, and strategies for promoting language immersion. By addressing these areas, teachers can create more effective learning environments that support young learners in acquiring English skills while managing their developmental needs.

Strategies to Cope with the Challenges in Teaching EFL

The findings of this study revealed several strategies that EFL teachers employ to cope with the challenges of teaching English to young learners. These strategies include implementing games, fostering a creative learning atmosphere, encouraging regular English usage in the classroom, and researching the characteristics of young learners to adapt teaching methods. Each strategy addresses teachers' challenges in TEYL (Teaching English to Young Learners) and contributes to a more effective and engaging classroom environment.

Implementing games in the teaching-learning process

One of the most effective strategies identified was using games to maintain student engagement and focus. WP highlighted this, stating, *"I always use games in teaching-learning to make the students pay attention. One game I frequently use is guessing the pictures."* Similarly, WY shared, *"When I teach my students, I implement fun activities like quizzes or games to cover the material being learned."*

The use of games is supported by a wealth of research demonstrating how they enhance young learners' motivation and retention. Ratminingsih et al. (2018) found that incorporating games into language lessons improves retention and student enthusiasm, making learning an enjoyable experience. This is crucial for young learners, whose attention spans are often short. Games create a sense of play, transforming learning into an interactive and engaging process. Furthermore, Bland (2019) noted that games stimulate cognitive and social engagement, allowing children to explore new vocabulary and grammar in a non-threatening and enjoyable way.

Furthermore, observations confirmed that students were more attentive and eager to participate when games were introduced. Activities like "Guess the Picture" allowed students to learn through fun, interactive experiences that kept them focused. This finding aligns with Seyarini et al. (2018), who emphasized that games are especially beneficial in creating a fun learning atmosphere where children can acquire knowledge while playing with peers. By making lessons enjoyable, games address the challenge of keeping young learners engaged and motivated throughout the lesson. Using interactive activities like games and songs has enhanced engagement and language retention, as Jacobsen et al. (2024) assert.

Creating a Creative Learning Atmosphere

Another critical strategy the teachers employed was fostering a creative and stimulating classroom environment. WP explained, *"Teachers must be creative in delivering material. For example, when teaching the alphabet, I connect each letter with English words, so children learn vocabulary and pronunciation in a fun way."* Similarly, WY remarked, *"We need to use various methods so that students enjoy learning. I aim to create a positive environment with fun activities, which keeps their attention."*

Research shows that creativity in the classroom enhances both engagement and comprehension. Gilakjani and Sabouri (2017) argue that creative teaching methods are vital in helping students grasp complex concepts, particularly when learning a foreign language. Similarly, Nafissi and Shafiee (2020) suggest that creative environments foster curiosity and help students internalize new vocabulary and grammar structures. In this study, classroom observations revealed that students were more active and participated more enthusiastically in lessons that included creative elements such as singing alphabet songs, using flashcards, and watching videos. These activities kept students interested and attentive throughout the lesson, addressing the common challenge of managing short attention spans in young learners.

This strategy is significant because young learners, due to their developmental stage, require more stimulation to stay focused (Benevides & Peterson, 2019). Creative teaching helps overcome the monotony of traditional lessons and enables teachers to connect with students on a more engaging level. Introducing music, visuals, and movement into the

lessons made the learning process more dynamic, aligning with findings by Di Santo et al. (2017), which emphasized that young learners need constant engagement to maintain their interest in learning. The creative approach to teaching improved classroom management and enhanced the students' ability to retain and apply what they learned.

Familiarizing Students with Speaking English

Encouraging students to use English regularly in the classroom became another crucial strategy. WP described her approach, stating, *"I get students used to speaking English during classroom activities by asking questions related to the material. If they use Indonesian, I don't respond until they switch to English."* WY added, *"I encourage students to use English, whether it's for asking questions or asking permission to leave the class."*

This strategy is supported by research that underscores the importance of immersive language experiences in second language acquisition. Jacoby and Lesaux (2019) argue that consistently using the target language in meaningful contexts helps students build confidence and fluency. Similarly, Reynolds et al. (2021) emphasize that regular practice in speaking English fosters better language habits and helps students become more comfortable using English in everyday interactions.

On the other part, observations revealed that students were likelier to use English when encouraged and given structured speaking opportunities. However, some students reverted to Indonesian when encountering difficulties, which aligns with the findings of Harsanti and Manara (2021), who noted that young learners often switch to their native language when they lack the vocabulary or confidence to express themselves in English. This strategy addresses the challenge of students' reliance on Indonesian by gently pushing them to use English more frequently, thereby promoting language development. The gradual increase in students' use of English in classroom interactions highlights the effectiveness of this approach in building fluency.

Understanding and Researching Young Learners' Characters

Finally, both participants emphasized the importance of understanding young learners' personalities and learning styles as a critical strategy in classroom management and instruction. WP commented, *"Making students feel like friends is key to managing the classroom. It's important to close the gap between teacher and student, so I always try to be friendly and approachable."* WY added, *"I read articles, journals, and books about children's characters to better understand how to manage the classroom. Knowing their personalities helps me control the teaching process more effectively."*

The value of understanding young learners' personalities is well-supported in educational research. Di Santo et al. (2017) argue that teachers must understand each child's personality to create a supportive and effective learning environment. Nafissi and Shafiee (2020) further suggest that knowledge of students' behavioural tendencies helps teachers adapt their classroom management techniques and instructional methods to suit the diverse needs of their learners. Classroom observations revealed that when teachers were attentive to individual student needs and built strong rapport with their students, classroom management improved, and students became more engaged in the learning process.

This strategy is vital for overcoming behavioural challenges and ensuring students feel comfortable and motivated to participate in lessons. Nufus (2018) highlights the importance

of establishing a close teacher-student relationship in promoting a positive classroom atmosphere. When teachers take the time to understand students' personalities, they are better equipped to tailor their teaching methods and address potential disruptions in a way sensitive to individual student needs. This approach improves classroom behaviour and enhances student engagement and learning outcomes.

The findings from this study have important implications for teaching practices in elementary schools in Palembang and other similar TEYL (Teaching English to Young Learners) contexts. The challenges teachers face, including managing classroom dynamics, addressing diverse learning characteristics, and encouraging consistent English usage, highlight the need for more structured and creative teaching strategies. The study shows that using games and creative activities significantly enhances student engagement and helps improve language acquisition. This suggests that schools should actively promote interactive, play-based learning approaches in their curriculum. Moreover, familiarizing students with speaking English consistently through scaffolded support helps address the overreliance on Indonesian, which hinders complete immersion in English. These strategies could be integrated into teacher training programs to equip educators with the tools necessary for improving the quality of English education at the elementary level.

However, this study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the sample size was small, with only two teachers from one elementary school in Palembang participating, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Second, the focus was solely on the teachers' perspectives, leaving out students' experiences, which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the strategies' effectiveness. Additionally, the study relied on qualitative methods, such as interviews and observations, which are rich in detail but may introduce subjective interpretations. A mixed-methods approach combining qualitative insights with quantitative data could strengthen the conclusions drawn from the research.

For future research, it would be beneficial to expand the sample size by including more teachers from diverse school settings across different regions to generalize the findings better. Further studies should also investigate the impact of these teaching strategies from the students' perspective, examining how they influence student motivation, language acquisition, and overall learning outcomes. A longitudinal approach could provide insights into the long-term effectiveness of creative and interactive teaching methods on young learners' English proficiency. Additionally, combining qualitative and quantitative data would offer a more comprehensive analysis of these strategies. Exploring the role of technology in enhancing English language teaching for young learners, particularly how digital tools complement traditional activities, is also a valuable avenue for future research.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a clear understanding of the key challenges and strategies involved in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) based on the lived experiences of EFL teachers in Palembang. Teachers need help managing classrooms, addressing diverse learner needs, and encouraging consistent use of English while successfully employing strategies like incorporating games, creating a creative learning atmosphere, and fostering habitual English use among students. This study is essential as it sheds light on practical,

teacher-driven solutions that can enhance the effectiveness of English teaching in early childhood education, which is crucial in shaping foundational language skills. The findings contribute to the existing literature by validating previous research on classroom management and student engagement in TEYL while also offering insights into how personalized and interactive teaching methods can address common classroom challenges. These strategies provide valuable implications for improving instructional practices and reinforce the importance of adapting teaching to meet young learners' developmental and linguistic needs.

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