

CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS IN SMALL CLASSROOM

Rivki Surya Maulana, Fahriany
UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta
rivkisuryamaulana@gmail.com, fahriany@uinjkt.ac.id

Submitted: 2024-11-12

Accepted: 2025-04-22

Abstract: This qualitative study explores the challenges faced by teachers delivering offline, small-group English courses to young learners. It has been known that it is best for students to learn English at an early age. The class size itself is relatively small compared to formal school class. These classes have around three to six students. Despite that, it has been found that the teaching process, even in the small classroom, is not without challenges. There were two experienced teachers who had participated in this study. Through interviews with teachers and classroom observations, the study identifies two key obstacles: student shyness hindering participation and frequent mood swings disrupting the learning environment. Students who are shy are not willing to participate in the activity which stalled the learning process. Also, their frequent mood-swing proves to be difficult to handle as the students could just stop participating or even be disruptive toward their friends. These findings highlight that effective instruction for young learners goes beyond just lesson planning and selecting materials. Teachers need to actively cultivate an engaging and confidence-building classroom environment. The study emphasizes the importance of utilizing positive reinforcement and ensuring all students within the small group setting receive equal attention. This understanding can inform the development of more effective teaching strategies for teachers of young learners in offline small-group English courses.

Keywords: English; English Course; Small Group Classroom; Young Learners

INTRODUCTION

Young learners are very unique in terms of characteristics and their strength in learning English. Researchers had their own definition of “young learners”. According to Cameron (2001), young learners differ from adults in their language learning process due to their limited metacognitive awareness and their reliance on contextualized learning. On the other hand, Nunan (2010), offers a more exact age which encompasses children from ages 3 to 15, others, such as Annamaria Pinter (2017), propose a similar timeframe of 3 to 14 years old. Similarly, Slattery and Willis (2001) define young learners as children between the ages of 7 and 12 who are still developing literacy skills in their first language while also learning a second language. As for their strength in learning English, studies have supported the notion that young learners possess distinct advantages when it comes to language acquisition. Leinberg (as cited in Hummel, 2021) highlights a “critical age” for language learning, situated between the ages of two and puberty. This period coincides with a crucial stage of brain development known as lateralization, where information processing becomes more specialized between hemispheres. This developmental window offers young learners a unique capacity to acquire a natural-sounding accent and clear pronunciation (Fahriany, 2018). Phillips (1993) further highlights that young learners acquire language more effectively through engaging activities such as

movement, songs, stories, and games, as they have short attention spans and require a fun, stimulating learning environment. Additionally, young learners tend to exhibit lower levels

of inhibition and a greater willingness to experiment with new languages (Nunan, 2010). This lack of self-consciousness fosters a sense of confidence, allowing them to embrace the stumbles and triumphs of language learning with greater enthusiasm. By exposing them to English at a young age, we capitalize on this remarkable capacity for learning, laying a strong foundation that will serve them throughout their language development journey.

Nunan (2010) outlines several characteristics that contribute to young learners' remarkable language acquisition abilities. These strengths highlight their natural aptitude for language learning and offer valuable insights for teachers in the classroom :

- **Prioritizing Meaning:** Young learners focus on understanding the message first, readily absorbing vocabulary and connecting words to ideas. This focus on meaning allows them to build a strong foundation for language comprehension.
- **Exposure and Interaction:** Young learners excel in acquiring language through exposure and interaction. They subconsciously acquire vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation by using the language in everyday situations with a focus on playful exploration, not memorization. This approach allows for natural and engaging language learning.
- **Building on Existing Knowledge:** Young learners' developing brains readily absorb new information, building a language foundation by connecting the new language to their native tongue. This existing linguistic knowledge serves as a springboard for further language acquisition.
- **Experimentation Without Fear:** Unafraid of mistakes, young learners experiment freely with new sounds and words, accelerating their learning. This lack of self-consciousness allows them to take risks and embrace errors as part of the learning process.
- **Thriving in Creative Environments:** Young learners flourish in imaginative environments, finding joy in games, stories, and creative settings. This playful and engaging approach to language learning fosters motivation and enjoyment.

These characteristics, present in young learners, contribute significantly to their remarkable language acquisition abilities.

Therefore, fostering English language proficiency in young learners transcends a mere strategic move; it represents a necessary investment in their future. Their inherent cognitive characteristics, like their remarkable plasticity and absorbent minds, make them ideal candidates for language acquisition. Equipping them with strong English skills from a young age empowers them not only to participate in the vast network of information, education, and opportunity available in a globalized world, but also to contribute meaningfully to its growth. By prioritizing early English language learning, we empower the next generation to connect and collaborate across borders, fostering a more interconnected and prosperous future for all.

Despite the characteristics mentioned previously, some studies have shown interesting findings that provide new insights and challenges in English learning for young learners. A study by Pertiwi et al. (2019) identified challenges in classroom management for young learners, including maintaining order with less-obedient students, encouraging shy students to participate, and managing the focus of overactive students who struggle to concentrate. This study highlights the challenges that appeared in teaching English to young learners. As it was their nature to be playful, that also leads to less-obedient manners. Some students were also shy and the rest simply couldn't focus on the lesson.

Furthermore, research by Putri and Nurjati (2023) explored student-related challenges such as lack of confidence due to shyness or fear of mistakes, unclear pronunciation as their

skills are still developing, and limited attention span which can make holding their focus during speaking activities difficult. It can be learned that to some extent, students experienced shyness which prevented them from participating in the lesson

Moreover, these studies highlighted some more challenges in teaching English. Mutiah et al., (2020) found that while there is a strong desire to learn English, young Indonesian learners often perceive it as a challenging subject, further compounded by a lack of media variety that can lead to student disengagement. Sudrajat (2022) found that Indonesian teachers grapple with two key challenges: students' native language interference and limited vocabulary, compounded by a lack of out-of-classroom English exposure. These challenges necessitate creative and engaging teaching methods that bridge the gap between students' existing knowledge and the target language. Furthermore, fostering a supportive and encouraging classroom environment can help young learners overcome their anxieties and develop a positive attitude towards English language learning.

These findings were in the context of Indonesia which puts English as a foreign language. As stated by Alrajafi et al., (2021) that despite the popularity, especially in the wealthier region of Indonesia, it is still considered as a foreign language. Also the studies above were conducted in school with a large number of students. It's important to acknowledge that existing research primarily explores challenges faced in large classrooms. This study, however, specifically focuses on understanding the unique challenges that arise when teaching English to young learners in a small group setting.

METHOD

This study utilized a qualitative method that prioritizes interpreting information to understand the teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching English in a small group setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) . By utilizing a narrative approach, the study will focus on the lived classroom experiences of Ms. O and Ms Y. which would be obtained using the interview. Other than their insights, the study also utilized observation. Observation is the process of collecting information for the social situation (Cohen et al., 2018). Observation allows the researcher to gather data on physical, program, human and interaction settings. (Cohen et al., 2018). These instruments are meant to capture the data needed to know what are the challenges in teaching English to young learners in a small-group classroom.

This study employed a qualitative research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) to explore the challenges faced by teachers in a small group English language learning environment. The data collection process involved two primary methods: interviews and classroom observations.

Interviews were conducted in an unstructured format with the two participating teachers. Open-ended questions were used to encourage detailed responses and to capture their perspectives on the challenges they face in teaching small group English classes. This method allowed teachers to freely share their experiences, providing rich qualitative data for the study. Classroom observations were also carried out using closed-circuit television (CCTV) with the teachers' consent. This approach ensured minimal disruption to the natural classroom environment while allowing the researcher to observe classroom dynamics, teaching strategies, and student interactions. The observations served to complement the interview data by providing contextual insights into the teachers' experiences.

Following the data collection phase, the interview transcripts and observational notes will be carefully reviewed and analyzed thematically. Thematic analysis involves identifying recurring themes and patterns within the data that illuminate the challenges faced by the

teachers. This analysis will provide a rich understanding of the complexities of teaching English in a small group setting.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The following section delves into the findings of this qualitative study, which explored the challenges faced by teachers in a small group English language learning environment. Data collection utilized a two-pronged approach, employing both semi-structured interviews with the teachers and unobtrusive classroom observations conducted via CCTV. By analyzing both the teachers' perspectives shared in the interviews and the observed classroom dynamics, this section seeks to paint a comprehensive picture of the challenges encountered within this specific educational setting.

Shy Students

During classroom observations, behaviors emerged that complemented and expanded upon the challenges identified in teacher interviews. Notably, a prevalence of shyness was observed among some students within the small group setting. These students exhibited hesitation to participate, often appearing reluctant to answer questions or volunteer during activities. For instance, in one classroom, a student consistently avoided eye contact and remained silent when addressed. The observations also revealed potential dynamics within the small group. In another instance, a more outgoing student appeared to dominate the class, readily answering questions and volunteering for tasks. This left a noticeably shy student with limited opportunities to participate. However, the teacher's attentiveness was evident, as they intervened by creating opportunities for the quieter student to answer questions and engage in activities.

This observation suggests that student participation is influenced by more than just emotional outbursts (as previously discussed). Underlying shyness and group dynamics can also play a significant role. Furthermore, the observations provided valuable insights into teacher strategies for addressing these behaviors. Teachers were frequently observed employing positive reinforcement techniques, offering comfort and praise to students who participated correctly. This suggests that fostering a supportive and encouraging classroom environment may be crucial for drawing out hesitant students and promoting active participation within the small group setting.

This study aligns with Pertiwi et al. (2019) and Putri and Nurjati (2023) in highlighting the challenge of shyness in young learners, particularly within small group English language classrooms. This finding appears to contradict Nunan's (2010) characterization of young learners as generally confident and unafraid of mistakes. However, it's important to consider the specific context of learning a new language. Unlike their native language where they are comfortable and confident, young learners in an English language environment might experience shyness due to unfamiliarity with the language and fear of making mistakes.

Additionally, the smaller class size, while promoting interaction, can also heighten social awareness and self-consciousness which could potentially lead to shyness in some students. The teachers in this study mitigated this issue by giving proper appreciation for the students for their effort to participate. Things like “high-five”, “great job”, “well done” and a thumbs up and smile given to the students for their effort despite the accuracy and clarity. With some consistency, they found that students became more confident in each meeting. On top of it, they also found success in incorporating games in the lesson to get the shy students to participate.

Similar findings also appear in Putri and Nurjati (2023) that incorporating games into the lesson could lead to better student participation.

These findings suggest that a multifaceted approach might be most effective. Teachers can create a more supportive learning environment by combining positive reinforcement, as observed in this study, with engaging activities like games and giving appreciation for students' effort in using the language. This comprehensive approach could address the underlying anxieties associated with language learning while fostering a more interactive and engaging classroom environment for all students, regardless of their initial level of confidence.

Mood Swing

A recurring issue emerged from the teacher interviews: the unpredictable nature of student behavior within the small group setting. Teachers reported experiencing frequent mood swings among their students. Students described as pleasant and cooperative one moment could exhibit disruptive or unmotivated behavior the next, seemingly for no apparent reason. The interviews revealed that these shifts often stemmed from seemingly minor triggers, such as the absence of a close friend or the frustration of making a mistake. This emotional sensitivity was further highlighted by Ms. O's experience: "At one point, one of my students just suddenly screamed and cried just because he made a mistake of writing the number '2' instead of the letter 'S,'" she explained. "From there he kept screaming and throwing everything he saw. Luckily, I could manage his emotions by showing that it's okay to make a mistake." as stated by Ms.O during the interview. This finding underscores the emotional sensitivity of young learners and the potential impact of classroom dynamics on their engagement and behavior. Ms. O's experience exemplifies how a seemingly minor setback can trigger a significant emotional response in a young learner. The small group setting, while fostering interaction, can also intensify emotional responses due to the close proximity and heightened social awareness.

In addition to shyness, this study aligns with Pertiwi et al. (2019) and Putri and Nurjati (2023) in highlighting another challenge in teaching young learners: student disruptiveness. These studies reveal that young learners' behavior can be unpredictable, and disruptiveness can emerge as a significant obstacle within small group settings. Unlike the potentially idealized picture of enthusiastic learners, this finding suggests a more complex reality. The close proximity of students in a small classroom environment might heighten social awareness and self-consciousness, potentially leading to disruptive behavior. Furthermore, the unfamiliar structure and expectations of a new language learning environment can be disorienting for young learners, potentially leading to confusion and frustration that manifests as disruptiveness.

These findings underscore the complexities of managing young learners in small group English language settings and the need to consider the specific dynamics that can influence their behavior. Observations of Ms. O and Ms. Y suggest that maintaining student focus and interest might be crucial in addressing disruptiveness. This aligns with Musthafa's (2010) principle of a good English classroom, which emphasizes the use of games and various strategies to keep students engaged.

On top of fun activities and engaging interaction, these teachers also provided and clearly mentioned the classroom rules during the lesson. Despite sounding counterintuitive to produce a fun learning environment, they managed to uphold the rules in a more respectful and friendly way. They reminded them nicely and used the "good star" point system to appreciate the well behaved and interactive students. This is align with Madsen et al., (1986) that highlighted rules

alone isn't enough and teachers need to also appreciate appropriate behavior which would lead to improved classroom behavior.

CONCLUSION

Teaching small groups of young learners comes with unique challenges that require thoughtful strategies to address. One of the main difficulties teachers face is students' mood swings, which can lead to a lack of willingness to participate and, in some cases, disrupt other students. Additionally, shyness is another common issue, preventing some learners from speaking up and engaging in classroom activities.

To help students become more confident and willing to participate, teachers in this study emphasized the importance of incorporating fun and engaging activities into their lessons. They also found that showing appreciation for students' efforts played a key role in boosting their confidence and motivation. When it came to managing disruptive behavior, teachers relied on gentle reminders of classroom rules, ensuring that these were communicated in a kind and respectful manner. Furthermore, they used positive reinforcement, such as awarding star points, to encourage good behavior and active participation.

Overall, the findings of this study highlight the importance of creating a supportive and encouraging classroom environment. By using a combination of engaging activities, positive reinforcement, and respectful communication, teachers can effectively manage challenges and foster both confidence and discipline in young learners.

REFERENCES

- Alrajafi, G. (2021). The use of English in Indonesia: Status and Influence. In *SIGEH ELT : Journal of Literature and Linguistics* (Vol. 1, Issue 1, pp. 1–10). Universitas Muhammadiyah Lampung. <https://doi.org/10.36269/sigeh.v1i1.355>
- Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research Methods in Education*. Taylor & Francis.
- Creswell, J. W., Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. United Kingdom: SAGE Publications.
- Fahriany. (2018). *Second Language Acquisition*. Prenada Media.
- Hummel, K. M. (2021). *Introducing Second Language Acquisition: Perspectives and Practices*. Wiley.
- Kartika Putri, H. S., & Nurjati, N. (2023). The Teachers' Challenges of Teaching Speaking For Young Learners: A Case Study at English First (EF). *Journal on Education*, 6. <https://www.jonedu.org/index.php/joe/article/view/2997>
- Madsen, C., Madsen, C., Becker, W., Becker, W., Thomas, D., & Thomas, D. (1968). Rules, praise, and ignoring: elements of elementary classroom control.. *Journal of applied behavior analysis*, 1 2, 139-50 . <https://doi.org/10.1901/JABA.1968.1-139>.

- Musthafa, Bachrudin. (2010). Teaching English to Young Learners in Indonesia: Essential Requirements. *Dalam Educationist Journal*. Vol. 4, (2), 120-125.
- Mutiah, S. D., Nakhriyah, M., Husna HR, N., Hidayat, D. N., & Hamid, F. (2020, October). The Readiness of Teaching English to Young Learners in Indonesia. *Jurnal Basicedu*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.31004/basicedu.v4i4.541>
- Nunan, D. (2010). *Teaching English to Young Learners*. Anaheim University Press.
- Pertiwi, R. S., Salabiyati, I., Damara, D., & Pratolo, B. W. (2019). The Teacher's Perspectives About Challenges of Teaching English for Young Learners: A Case Study at English Course for Young Learners. 3rd International Conference on Learning Innovation and Quality Education (ICLIQE 2019).
- Phillips, S. (1993). *Young Learners*. OUP Oxford. Pinter, A. (2017). *Teaching Young Language Learners*, Second Edition. Oxford University Press.
- Slattery, M., & Willis, J. (2001). *English for Primary Teachers: A Handbook of Activities & Classroom Language*. Oxford University Press.
- Sudrajat, I. (2022). Teachers' Strategies And Challenges In Teaching Speaking To Young Learners. *JELA : The Journal of English Language Teaching, Literature and Applied Linguistic*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.37742/jela.v4i1.71>
- Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact*. Wiley.