ENGLISH TEACHERS' CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO 3-5 YEARS OLD CHILDREN AT PPA HILINA'A

Adieli Laoli[1], Meniati Zebua[2], Merlin Waruwu[3], Julvin Oryentika Waruwu[4], Fitri Seniawati Halawa[5]

[12345]Universitas Nias

[1]laoliadieli65@gmail.com, [2]meizebua323@gmail.com, [3]merlinwaruwu8@gmail.com, [4]julvinwaruwu662@gmail.com, [5]fitrihalawa718@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Teaching English to children aged 3–5 years presents unique challenges related to their developmental characteristics, particularly in non-formal early childhood education settings. This study aims to explore the challenges faced by English teachers in teaching young learners at PPA Krammer Hilina'a. A descriptive qualitative research design was employed to obtain an in-depth understanding of classroom practices and teacher experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations involving one teacher/student practitioner responsible for teaching English for Young Learners (EYL). The data were analyzed thematically to identify key challenges and instructional responses. The findings reveal that teachers face significant pedagogical difficulties, including children's limited ability to understand abstract concepts, rapid memory loss, and interference from the first language (L1). Classroom management emerged as the most prominent challenge, characterized by short attention spans, high energy levels, and ineffective transitions between learning activities. To address these challenges, teachers implemented visual-based learning strategies, such as flashcards and presentation slides, combined with emotional and patient interaction and direct engagement with students. These approaches contributed to improved learner participation and confidence. The study concludes that teaching English to very young learners in non-formal educational contexts requires developmentally appropriate strategies and strong classroom management skills. Therefore, targeted training in early childhood pedagogy and English for Young Learners is recommended to enhance teaching effectiveness.

Keywords: English for Young Learners, early childhood education, teacher challenges, classroom management, non-formal education

A. Introduction

English language learning in early childhood, especially for children aged 3–5 years, is an area of education that has unique characteristics and its own challenges. At this age, children are in the early stages of development and are very sensitive to language stimulation, but at the same time have limitations in

terms of cognition, attention, emotional regulation, and first language skills (Pitriani et al., 2023). Therefore, the process of teaching English to early childhood cannot be equated with language learning in elementary school or adolescence.

Theoretically, early childhood is in a critical period for language acquisition, where children's brains have high plasticity to absorb sounds, vocabulary, and language patterns naturally (Siahaan, 2022). At this age range, language learning is more effective when it takes place through meaningful interactions, play activities, and contextual social experiences, rather than through a formal academic approach (Mutiah et al., 2020). However, this potential does not automatically guarantee successful learning if it is not supported by teaching strategies that are appropriate for the child's stage of development.

In the context of early childhood education, the role of teachers is a key factor in bridging children's language development potential with classroom learning practices. Teachers not only function as conveyors of material, but also as facilitators, language models, and companions for children's

development (Fahriany et al, 2022). English teachers for children aged 3–5 years are required to be able to adjust methods, instructional language, learning media, and interaction patterns to align with children's cognitive and socio-emotional developmental needs (Mutiah et al., 2020).

The challenges in teaching English to young children are very complex (Alenezi et al., 2022). In addition, when learning takes place in non-formal institutions such as Child Development Centers (PPA), these challenges can become even more complex. PPAs have different characteristics from formal educational institutions, in terms of curriculum, learning duration, children's backgrounds, and teaching resources. Children enrolled in CDCs generally come from diverse social backgrounds, with limited prior experience with English. This condition requires teachers to have a high degree of pedagogical flexibility in managing the classroom and delivering English material effectively. In addition, at the age of 3–5 years, children are still in the zone of proximal development stage (Jauhari et al., nd.) where their abilities are highly

dependent on the support and scaffolding of adults. Teachers are required to be able to provide appropriate assistance—not too difficult but also not too easy—so that children remain motivated and able to actively participate in learning activities. The mismatch between learning demands and children's abilities has the potential to cause various obstacles, such as lack of focus, low participation, and even resistance to using English.

Several previous studies have discussed the challenges faced by teachers in teaching early childhood education, the first of which is Muhammad & Sugirin (2024), which explores the challenges of EFL teachers in Indonesia. This study found that the main challenges experienced by teachers in teaching early childhood education can be categorized into four areas, namely: (1) Teaching method challenges, where monotonous teaching methods are not suitable for preschool children; (2) Class management challenges, related to the difficulty of managing a class with children who are very active and have a short attention span; (3) Student diversity challenges, in dealing with diverse student characters (shy vs. active); and (4) Literacy challenges, because children at this age generally do not yet have reading and writing skills in English.

Next is a study by Yıldız & Savaşçı (2024), which maps the perceptions of teachers in Turkey. This study identifies four groups of challenges, namely: (1) Classroom management challenges, related to enforcing discipline and managing learning time appropriately for early childhood; (2) Student engagement challenges, in the form of difficulties in maintaining student interest and active participation; (3) Monitoring challenges, in providing feedback and addressing individual differences among children; and (4) Material adaptation challenges, which require teachers to modify materials to suit the learning needs of preschool children.

And finally, there is research by Alenezi et al. (2022) conducted in Kuwait. The findings of this study reveal challenges arising from teacher capacity and support systems, namely: (1) Training challenges, where teachers do not have adequate training to teach EFL to preschool children; (2) Curriculum challenges, in the form of teaching materials that are not appropriate for the developmental

level of children aged 3-5 years; (3) Proficiency challenges, namely teachers' difficulties in English grammar and pronunciation; and (4) L1 challenges, which encourage teachers to rely on their mother tongue in the classroom. This study reinforces the importance of teacher competence and curriculum readiness as the main sources of challenges in EFL classrooms for young children.

Collectively, the three studies above have identified a wide range of challenges, covering aspects of methodology, classroom management, student diversity, teacher competence, curriculum, and teaching materials. However, these studies were conducted in formal settings (schools/courses) in Indonesia, Kuwait, and Turkey. This study attempts to fill the gap by exploring similar challenges in a more specific and different context, namely in early childhood education centers (PAUD) or non-formal institutions such as PPA Krammer Hilina'a. Thus, this study is expected to confirm, deepen, or even discover new dimensions of challenges unique to community-based or non-formal early childhood care and education environments, which may have different dynamics in

terms of resources, parental expectations, and learning conditions compared to the formal settings that have been extensively researched.

This study focuses on exploring the challenges faced by English teachers in teaching 3-5 year olds at PPA Hilina'a. Using data from interviews and classroom observations, this study is expected to provide a realistic picture of the conditions of English language learning in early childhood in the PPA environment, as well as a basis for the development of teaching practices that are more contextual and appropriate to the needs of children.

B. Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design to comprehensively describe the challenges faced by English teachers at PPA Krammer Hilina'a in bteaching 3-5-year-old children. This approach was selected for its ability to explore complex social phenomena within their natural context—the non-formal PPA learning environment (Yıldız & Savaşçı, 2024).

The primary data source in this study is one teacher/student practitioner from the Community

Service Program (PKM). The participant is a 7th-semester student from the English Language Study Program assigned to teach English for Young Learners (EYL) classes for children aged 3-5 years at PPA Krammer Hilina'a. The teaching context occurs in learning sessions lasting 80-120 minutes, focusing on introducing basic English vocabulary through songs, games, and flashcards.

Data collection was conducted using method triangulation with two main instruments to enhance finding validity (Alenezi et al., 2022). First, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted using a guide divided into three main parts: (a) Background and Teaching Context, (b) Teaching Practices and Perceived Challenges, and (c) Coping Strategies and Future Needs. Second, passive participatory observation was conducted to observe actual classroom practices. The observation sheet used covers six main categories: (I) Physical Context & Resources, (II) Teaching Structure and Flow, (III) Teacher Behavior and Strategies, (IV) Student Behavior & Participation, (V) Critical Incidents, and (VI) General Impressions & Reflections.

Data analysis was conducted thematically following qualitative data analysis stages (Muhammad & Sugirin, 2024). Data from interview transcripts and observation notes were combined and analyzed together. The process began with reading and understanding all data thoroughly. Next, the researcher marked and noted data parts considered important and relevant to the research focus, such as quotes about classroom management difficulties or observation notes about inattentive children. Finally, the researcher compiled an analysis report presenting research findings supported by direct quotes from interviews and observation descriptions for each finding. This systematic analysis process aims to comprehensively and deeply answer the research questions.

C. Findings and Discussion

Table 1.Class observation sheet

No	Criteria	Notes
1	Pedagogical Challenges	Teachers face significant challenges in conveying the meaning of words, not just memorizing their sounds:

No	Criteria	Notes	No	Criteria	Notes
		• Abstraction of the Concept of Family: Children aged 3-5 years old find it difficult to understand specific family relationships. They tend to think that all males are brothers and all females are sisters. • Interference from the Mother Tongue: The use of the terms "kakak" and "adik" in Indonesian or regional languages often confuses children when they have to be converted into the concepts of brother or sister, which do not explicitly distinguish age. • Memory Retention: Young children forget very quickly, so teachers must continuously repeat the material in creative ways to ensure that the vocabulary is remembered.		and Student Behavior	challenge during the learning process. • Short Attention Span: Children of this age have a lot of energy but a very short attention span, so they are easily distracted by friends or disturbances outside the classroom. • Chaotic Activity Transitions: Observations show that transitions between learning stages are sometimes uncontrolled because children start chatting, not paying attention, or constantly asking the same questions. • Focus Gap: When some children have finished their tasks (such as matching cards), they become bored and make noise while other children are still trying to complete their tasks.
2	Challenges in Classroom Management	Classroom management is the most prominent	3	Strategies and Use of	Teachers have attempted to overcome these

No	Criteria	Notes
	Learning Media	challenges by utilizing visual resources. • Visual-Based Learning: Teachers use a combination of PowerPoint (PPT) and flashcards to provide children with concrete images. The use of physical cards helps children associate words with images directly. • Emotional Approach: Teachers use gentle, calm, and patient language to manage classroom dynamics. Praise (developmental sentences) is also given to boost children's confidence in responding. • Direct Interaction: To address children who lose focus, teachers approach students' desks personally and provide more in-depth explanations to those who do not understand.

The table highlights recurring patterns that emerged across different learning activities, providing an overview of the major challenges faced by the teacher and the responses applied in practice. Each category presented in the table is further described below to clarify how these challenges manifested during classroom interaction.

Pedagogical Challenges

The first set of findings relates to pedagogical challenges experienced by the teacher in conveying English language content to very young learners. Observations revealed that children aged 3–5 years had difficulty understanding the meaning of English vocabulary beyond memorizing sounds or repeating words. One prominent issue was the abstraction of concepts, particularly when teaching vocabulary related to family members. Children tended to oversimplify family relationships, for example by assuming that all males were "brothers" and all females were "sisters," without recognizing specific relational distinctions.

In addition, interference from the mother tongue was frequently

observed. The use of local language terms such as *kakak* and *adik* influenced how children interpreted English kinship terms, often leading to confusion when these concepts did not align directly. Another pedagogical challenge identified was limited memory retention. Children quickly forgot previously introduced vocabulary, requiring the teacher to repeat the material multiple times using varied activities to reinforce learning.

Challenges in Classroom Management and Student Behavior

Classroom management emerged as the most prominent challenge during the learning process. Observational data showed that children at this age displayed high energy levels combined with short attention spans, making it difficult for them to stay focused for extended periods. Children were easily distracted by peers, surrounding activities, or external noise, which disrupted the flow of instruction.

Difficulties were particularly evident during transitions between learning activities. When shifting from one task to another, some children began chatting, moving around the classroom, or repeatedly asking the same questions. Additionally, uneven task completion created management challenges. Children who finished activities earlier often became bored and noisy, while others were still attempting to complete the task, resulting in a lack of classroom control.

Instructional Strategies and Use of Learning Media

Despite the challenges encountered, the findings also reveal several strategies employed by the teacher to support learning. Visual-based learning was consistently used as the primary instructional approach. The teacher utilized PowerPoint slides and flashcards to provide concrete visual representations of vocabulary, helping children associate English words with images more directly.

An emotional and patient approach was also observed as part of classroom management. The teacher used calm language, gentle guidance, and positive reinforcement to maintain a supportive learning atmosphere. Praise and encouraging expressions were frequently used to increase

children's confidence in responding to questions. Furthermore, the teacher engaged in direct interaction by approaching individual students who lost focus or experienced difficulty, providing additional explanations at their desks.

Overall, the findings indicate that teaching English to children aged 3–5 years at PPA Krammer Hilina'a involves multiple interconnected challenges related to pedagogy, classroom management, and learner behavior. At the same time, the data show that adaptive strategies, particularly the use of visual media and emotionally supportive interaction, play an important role in sustaining children's engagement during the learning process.

D. Conclusion

This study explored the challenges faced by English teachers in teaching English to children aged 3–5 years at PPA Krammer Hilina'a, a non-formal early childhood education setting. Using a descriptive qualitative approach through interviews and classroom observations, the findings reveal that teaching English to very young learners in a PPA context involves multifaceted challenges that stem primarily from children's developmental characteristics and linguistic background.

The findings indicate that pedagogical challenges are strongly related to children's limited cognitive ability to understand abstract concepts, such as family relationships, as well as rapid memory loss that requires continuous repetition of materials. In addition, first language (L1) interference plays a significant role in hindering children's understanding of English vocabulary, particularly when linguistic concepts in English do not align directly with those in the children's mother tongue. These challenges confirm theoretical perspectives on early childhood language learning, which emphasize the need for concrete, contextualized, and repetitive learning experiences.

Classroom management emerged as the most dominant challenge. Children's short attention spans, high energy levels, and uneven task completion often lead to chaotic classroom situations, especially during transitions between activities. This finding supports previous studies that highlight classroom management as a central issue in early childhood

EFL instruction, particularly in settings with limited structure and diverse learner characteristics, such as non-formal institutions.

Despite these challenges, the study also found that teachers employed several effective strategies to support learning. The use of visual-based media, such as flashcards and PowerPoint presentations, helped make abstract vocabulary more concrete and accessible for young learners. In addition, an emotional and patient teaching approach, combined with direct interaction and positive reinforcement, contributed to increased student confidence and participation. These strategies demonstrate teachers' pedagogical adaptability, even in the absence of extensive professional training.

In conclusion, while English teachers at PPA Krammer Hilina'a face significant challenges related to child development, classroom management, and language interference, the implementation of visual and affective teaching strategies shows promising outcomes. However, the study highlights the need for targeted training in early childhood classroom management and EYL pedagogy, particularly for teachers working in non-formal educational contexts. Future research is recommended to involve more participants and explore long-term instructional support systems to further enhance the quality of English instruction for young learners in community-based early childhood education settings.

Rerefences

Aji Jauhari Ma, A., & Sri Handayani, N. (n.d.).
Konsep Zone Of Proximal Development (ZPD) Dalam Permainan Anak Anak. In *Jurnal Tumbuh Kembang Anak Usia Dini* (Vol. 2, Issue 1).

Alenezi, H., Ihmeideh, F. M., & Alshaboul, Y. (2022). *Kindergarten teachers' challenges in teaching English as a foreign language to children.* International Journal of Early Years Education. https://www.anecd.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/KindergartenteacherschallengesinteachingEnglishasaforeignlanguagetochildren.pdf

Assel, K., & Venera, M. (n.d.). *Teaching English for young learners.* https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2016). *Qualitative research for

education: An introduction to theories and methods* (5th ed.). Pearson.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Fahriany, F., Fitriani, F., Farhan, L., Husna, N., Hidayat, D. N., & Mahlil, M. (2022). Teachers' Challenges in Teaching Online English to Young Learners: A Case Study in Pandemic Era. *Jurnal Basic edu*, *6*(4), 5533–5541. https://doi.org/10.31004/basicedu.v6i4.2876

Hanum Hasibuan, R., Tursina, A., Dwi Ningsih, A., & Abdul Halim Hasan Al-Islahiyah, H. (2021). Knowledge Acquisition in Early Childhood: An Analysis of Sand Play Activities. *Jurnal Ilmiah PESONA PAUD*, *8*(2). http://ejournal.unp.ac.id/index.php/paud/index

Koshenova, Assel, and Venera Moldakulova. "Teaching English for Young Learners." *Scientific Collection «InterConf»*, no. 140, Jan. 2023, pp. 149-151.

Labaika, M. T., & Purwanto, S. (2023). Teaching English to Young Learners: Evidence from Kampus Mengajar Practice. *Edunesia: Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan*, *4*(3), 1344–1356. https://doi.org/10.51276/edu.v4i3.536

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation (4th ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

Muhammad, M., & Sugirin. (2024). *Problems in Teaching English to Young Learners and Their Solutions.* Britain International of Linguistics, Arts and Education Journal, 6(1), 17-23. https://biarjournal.com/index.php/biolae/article/download/1078/1009

Mutiah, Syifa D., et al. "The Readiness of Teaching English to Young Learners in Indonesia." *Jurnal Basicedu*, vol. 4, no. 4, 13 Oct. 2020, pp. 1370-1387, doi:10.31004/basicedu.v4i4.541.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Pitriani, H., Faslah, D., & Masitoh, I. (2023). IMPLEMENTASI TEORI PERKEMBANGAN KOGNITIF JEAN PIAGET PADA ANAK USIA DINI. *Jurnal Ilmiah Al-Muttaqin*, *9*(1), 33–38. https://doi.org/10.37567/al-muttaqin.v9i1.2218

Putri, A. R. (2016). TEACHING ENGLISH FOR YOUNG LEARNERS USING A TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE (TPR) METHOD. In *Jurnal Edulingua* | (Vol. 3, Issue 2).

Ramadhan, Y. A., & Wulandari, S. (2021). *The Teaching of English Vocabulary to Young Learners in Beginner II Class at the Star English Course* (Vol. 3).

R., Yendi A., and Sri Wulandari. "The Teaching of English Vocabulary to Young Learners in Beginner II Class at the Star English Course." *Edulink*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2021, pp. 146-159, doi:10.32503/edulink.v3i2.2041.

Rexhepi, A. (2017). *Case Study*. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4064928

Rifqiyah, N., Arifin, I., & Sobri, A. Y. (2025). Kegiatan Bermain Literasi untuk Mengembangkan Kemampuan Berbahasa Anak Kelompok A1 di TK Negeri Pembina Bangil. *Muallimun: Jurnal Kajian Pendidikan Dan Keguruan*, 5(2), 221–234. https://doi.org/10.23971/muallimun.v5i2.10783

Saeed Al-Harbi, S. (2020). Language development and acquisition in early childhood. *Journal of Education and Learning (EduLearn)*, 14(1), 69–73. https://doi.org/10.11591/edulearn.v14i1.14209ˆ69

Santos, R. I. (2025). PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE CONSTRUCT IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: CRITICAL THEORETICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING. *IJIET (International Journal of Indonesian Education and Teaching)*, 9(2), 288–305. https://doi.org/10.24071/ijiet.v9i2.11467

Seidman, I. (2019). Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences (5th ed.). Teachers College Press.

Siahaan, F. (2022). The Critical Period Hypothesis of SLA Eric Lenneberg's. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 2(2), 40–45. https://doi.org/10.52622/joal.v2i2.77

Siahaan, F. (n.d.). *The Critical Period Hypothesis of Second Language Acquisition Theory of Eric Lenneberg's*.

Swastika, A. I., & Utami, I. W. P. (2024). Penerapan Scaffolding pada Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) Kelas X DKV-2 Di SMK terhadap Mata Pelajaran Sejarah. *Journal of Innovation and Teacher Professionalism*, 3(1), 68–76. https://doi.org/10.17977/um084v3i12025p68-76

T1_712019212_Isi. (n.d.).

TEACHING ENGLISH FOR YOUNG LEARNERS IN INDONESIA: A Practical Guide Nur Najibah Sukmawati PENERBIT CV. EUREKA MEDIA AKSARA. (n.d.).

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. https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/3389236

Yin, R. K. (2018). Case study research and design: Methods and applications (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.