

CHALLENGES FACED BY TEACHERS IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS THROUGH SONGS

Cut Raudhatul Miski¹, Imro'atul Azizah², Najwa Amelia Arben³, Nurhalimah⁴,
Siti Fadilah Sukma⁵

English Language Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education,
State Islamic University of Sultan Syarif Kasim, Pekanbaru, Riau, Indonesia
imaziizah26@gmail.com, arbennjwa@gmail.com, nurhalimah030505@gmail.com,
sitifadilahsukma@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the challenges faced by teachers when using songs as a medium for teaching English to young learners. A descriptive qualitative design was employed, involving one English teacher at SDN 192 Pekanbaru as the participant. Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed four major categories of challenges: teacher-related challenges, student-related challenges, classroom and school environment challenges, and song-specific challenges. The most prominent difficulties included limited teacher training, students' low motivation and limited English proficiency, inadequate learning facilities, and challenges related to pronunciation, vocabulary, and song tempo. From a Second Language Acquisition (SLA) perspective, fast musical tempo and connected speech make speech segmentation and listening comprehension particularly difficult for young learners. The study concludes that effective song-based instruction requires careful song selection, adequate institutional support, and appropriate scaffolding strategies to facilitate learners' language processing and comprehension.

Keywords: English for Young Learners, songs, teacher challenges, SLA, primary school.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi tantangan yang dihadapi guru dalam menggunakan lagu sebagai media pembelajaran bahasa Inggris bagi anak usia dini. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif dan dilaksanakan di SDN 192 Pekanbaru dengan melibatkan satu guru bahasa Inggris sebagai partisipan. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terbuka dan wawancara semi-terstruktur, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Temuan menunjukkan empat kategori tantangan utama, yaitu tantangan terkait guru, siswa, lingkungan kelas dan sekolah, serta tantangan yang berkaitan dengan karakteristik lagu. Tantangan yang paling menonjol meliputi keterbatasan pelatihan guru, rendahnya motivasi dan kemampuan bahasa Inggris siswa, keterbatasan infrastruktur pembelajaran, serta

kesulitan memahami pengucapan, kosakata, dan tempo lagu. Dari perspektif Second Language Acquisition (SLA), tempo lagu yang cepat dan fenomena connected speech menyebabkan kesulitan dalam proses segmentasi ujaran dan pemahaman lisan pada peserta didik. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa penggunaan lagu dalam pembelajaran EYL memerlukan pemilihan materi yang sesuai, dukungan infrastruktur yang memadai, serta strategi scaffolding yang dapat membantu siswa memahami input bahasa secara lebih efektif.

Kata Kunci: English for Young Learners, lagu, pembelajaran bahasa Inggris, tantangan guru, SLA.

A. Introduction

Teaching English to Young Learners (EYL) has become increasingly important as many countries introduce English at the primary school level. This policy is based on the belief that early exposure to English can support children's language development and help them build communicative competence in the future (Cameron, 2001). In Indonesia, English is taught in many elementary schools, either as a compulsory or elective subject. However, teachers still face various challenges in delivering English lessons effectively. One teaching medium that is commonly used in EYL classrooms is songs. Songs are often considered suitable for young learners because they can make learning more enjoyable while helping students

develop vocabulary, pronunciation, and listening skills (Harahap & Kembaren, 2023; Anis et al., 2021).

Songs are particularly appropriate for young learners because they contain rhythm, repetition, and melody, which can support children's language learning process (Bokiev & Ismail, 2021). In addition, songs can create a more relaxed classroom atmosphere, reduce students' anxiety, and increase their motivation to participate in learning activities (Krashen, 1982, as cited in Muhammed, 2024). Although songs offer many benefits, teachers still encounter several challenges when using them in the classroom. These challenges include selecting suitable songs, managing classroom activities, and addressing differences

in students' English proficiency levels (Awatin & Escandallo, 2024; Xi, 2021).

Previous studies have reported the benefits of songs for improving vocabulary, pronunciation, and motivation among young learners. However, most studies have focused on students' learning outcomes rather than the challenges teachers face when implementing song-based activities in the classroom. In the Indonesian primary school context, studies exploring teachers' experiences and difficulties in using songs as a teaching medium are still limited. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the challenges encountered by an English teacher at SDN 192 Pekanbaru when teaching English to young learners through songs.

Literature Review

Teaching English to Young Learners

Young learners, broadly defined as children between the ages of five and twelve, possess distinctive cognitive, social, and linguistic characteristics that differentiate them from older language learners (Cameron, 2001). Children at this developmental stage learn best

through concrete, meaningful, and experiential activities, and they demonstrate a natural propensity for imitation, repetition, and playful language exploration. Cameron (2001) emphasizes that effective EYL instruction must be grounded in an understanding of these developmental characteristics, requiring teachers to employ contextually rich and cognitively appropriate strategies.

In Indonesia, teaching English to young learners is not without challenges. Previous studies have shown that teachers often deal with limited facilities, low student motivation, and difficulties in implementing effective teaching strategies (Anwar et al., 2020). Pertiwi (2022) also found that primary school teachers face challenges related to teaching resources, classroom management, and student participation. These findings suggest that the difficulties experienced by EYL teachers are influenced by both classroom conditions and the broader school environment.

Songs as a Pedagogical Tool in EYL Instruction

The pedagogical value of songs in language learning is well-

established. Songs provide contextualized, memorable, and affectively engaging input that can simultaneously develop multiple language skills, including listening, speaking, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Anis et al., 2021; Harahap & Kembaren, 2023; Güler & Bozkurt, 2021). Research has consistently demonstrated that learners exposed to English songs exhibit improved vocabulary retention, enhanced phonological awareness, and greater motivation to engage with the target language (Bsharat et al., 2021; Taula'bi, 2022). For young learners in particular, songs that incorporate movement, rhythm, and repetition are especially effective in reinforcing linguistic input in a natural, stress-free manner.

Moreover, from a multimodal perspective, songs align with post-pandemic digital pedagogies, as teachers can now integrate song-based activities with visual and auditory digital tools such as smartboards, captioned videos, and slow-playback applications (Adisti, 2022, as cited in Frontiers, 2026). The use of interactive digital media alongside songs can cater to diverse learning styles and help sustain the

notoriously short attention spans of young learners in technology-saturated environments.

Challenges in Using Songs for EYL Teaching

Despite the recognized benefits, teachers face several practical and pedagogical challenges when integrating songs into EYL classrooms. One recurring challenge involves the selection of appropriate songs. Harahap and Kembaren (2023) and Anis et al. (2021) note that teachers must carefully evaluate songs based on age-appropriateness, vocabulary load, cultural relevance, and alignment with lesson objectives. Inappropriate song selection can render learning activities ineffective or even counterproductive. Güler and Bozkurt (2021) further identify a mismatch between students' musical interests and teacher-selected songs as a source of decreased participation.

Pronunciation and listening comprehension represent additional song-specific challenges. Because song lyrics are often delivered at a natural or fast tempo, and because pronunciation in songs may diverge from standard spoken norms, learners

frequently struggle to decode the linguistic content (Bokiev & Ismail, 2021; Xi, 2021). Muhamad and Rahmat (2020) observe that EFL learners may also encounter difficulty with idiomatic or culturally specific language embedded in song lyrics. These challenges are compounded in classrooms where students have limited baseline English proficiency, as is common in many Indonesian primary schools.

At the institutional level, limited access to technology, inadequate classroom acoustics, and the absence of professional development opportunities in song-based and immersive instruction further restrict teachers' capacity to implement effective song-based lessons (Anwar et al., 2020; Muhammed, 2024). These structural barriers highlight the need for research that examines teacher-reported challenges within authentic primary school settings.

B. Research Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design. Qualitative research is appropriate when the aim is to describe and interpret human experiences, perceptions, and

practices within their natural social contexts (Emon, 2024, as cited in Muhammed, 2024). Given that the present study sought to explore the lived professional challenges of an English teacher in implementing song-based instruction, a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable for generating rich, contextually grounded data.

The research was conducted at Sekolah Dasar Negeri (SDN) 192 Pekanbaru, located in Pekanbaru City, Riau Province, Indonesia. SDN 192 Pekanbaru is a state primary school that offers English as part of its curriculum, providing an appropriate site for examining the challenges associated with EYL instruction through songs. The participant was one experienced English teacher at SDN 192 Pekanbaru, referred to hereafter as Mr. Kevin, who is actively engaged in teaching English to young learners at the elementary level. Purposive sampling was employed, as the participant was selected based on his direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation, namely the use of songs in EYL instruction.

Data were collected through two instruments. First, an open-ended

questionnaire comprising 38 questions across four thematic domains – teacher-related challenges, student-related challenges, classroom and school-related challenges, and curriculum-related challenges – was administered to obtain written reflective responses. Second, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the English teacher at SDN 192 Pekanbaru to allow for deeper exploration of the participant's experiences, strategies, and perceptions regarding song-based EYL instruction. The interview was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently analyzed alongside the questionnaire data.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2020) reflexive thematic analysis framework, involving the phases of data familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, review, definition, and write-up. Member-checking and cross-referencing between questionnaire and interview data enhanced the credibility and triangulation of the findings.

C. Findings and Discussion

Findings

The analysis of questionnaire and interview data collected from the

English teacher at SDN 192 Pekanbaru yielded four overarching thematic clusters of challenges: (1) teacher-related challenges, (2) student-related challenges, (3) classroom and school environment challenges, and (4) song-specific pedagogical challenges. Each theme is elaborated below with supporting evidence from the data.

Teacher-Related Challenges

The participant acknowledged that teaching experience positively shapes instructional decision-making, particularly in terms of adapting methods to students' characters and needs. As he noted in the questionnaire, the longer he teaches, the better he understands how to adjust methods to suit students' learning characteristics. However, he also recognized that not all teachers at SDN 192 Pekanbaru possess sufficient proficiency in interactive teaching methodologies and that there remains a need for continuous professional development, particularly in the area of immersive and song-based instruction.

Regarding professional training, Mr. Kevin referenced the Pendidikan Profesi Guru (PPG) in-service

program as a highly relevant and practically oriented training initiative. During the interview, he stated that the PPG provided structured guidance on pedagogy and required teachers to produce demonstration teaching videos, which enhanced their practical competence. Nevertheless, he conceded that training specifically targeting immersive learning and song-based approaches remains limited, resulting in a gap between aspirational practice and classroom reality at SDN 192 Pekanbaru. This finding aligns with Muhammed (2024), who reported that a lack of teacher preparation for music-based instruction constitutes a significant barrier to its effective implementation.

Lesson planning also emerged as a challenge, particularly in reconciling curricular demands with the diverse proficiency levels of students at SDN 192 Pekanbaru. The participant indicated that time constraints and heterogeneous class compositions complicate the planning of song-based activities that are simultaneously inclusive and academically meaningful.

Student-Related Challenges

Student motivation and attention span were identified as central concerns at SDN 192 Pekanbaru. The participant described instances where low motivation manifested as passivity and disengagement during English lessons, noting that students with low motivation tend to be less active, and that this directly affects learning outcomes. He employed varied activities, including games, role plays, and group work, as strategies for sustaining engagement, reflecting the broader literature on task-based and activity-based approaches to EYL instruction (Cameron, 2001).

The short attention span characteristic of young learners was especially pronounced during song-based activities. Mr. Kevin observed in the interview that contemporary young learners, shaped by technology, have attention spans of approximately five seconds, making it imperative to employ visually stimulating and dynamically varied instructional media. He reported using smartboards and interactive digital content to complement song instruction, thereby catering to both auditory and visual learning modalities.

Heterogeneity in English proficiency presented an additional challenge at SDN 192 Pekanbaru. To address this, the participant employed mixed-ability grouping, placing high, mid, and low-proficiency students together so that more advanced learners could scaffold understanding for their peers. This cooperative strategy is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978, as widely cited) zone of proximal development and reflects evidence-based practices in differentiated EYL instruction. Despite its effectiveness, the participant acknowledged that this approach requires careful monitoring and does not entirely resolve the challenge of ensuring equitable participation.

Emotional barriers, including shyness and fear of making errors, were further obstacles to student participation. Mr. Kevin reported employing encouragement, peer applause, and a rapport-building approach to reduce affective barriers, telling students to imagine their classmates as trees so they would feel free to speak. This approach resonates with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that lower anxiety levels facilitate greater receptivity to language input.

Classroom and School Environment Challenges

Infrastructure and physical environment challenges were prominently reported across both instruments in the context of SDN 192 Pekanbaru. Large class sizes made individualized attention difficult, with the participant noting that in a large class, it is challenging to monitor every student's comprehension and engagement simultaneously. Limited classroom space further restricted the implementation of movement-based song activities, which are widely recognized as beneficial for kinesthetic learners and young children in particular.

Technology infrastructure presented a dual challenge at SDN 192 Pekanbaru. On one hand, the school had made commendable investments in smartboards, a computer laboratory, and Chromebooks, which the participant actively utilized to support song-based lessons, displaying lyrics, videos, and interactive tasks. On the other hand, slow internet connectivity remained a persistent constraint, with the participant describing slow internet as the primary barrier to digital learning. This finding is consistent with broader

reports on the digital divide in Indonesian educational contexts (Anwar et al., 2020; Frontiers, 2026), where unequal access to reliable infrastructure continues to impede technology-enhanced instruction.

Additional environmental factors at SDN 192 Pekanbaru, including classroom noise from external sources, poor acoustics, inadequate lighting, uncomfortable seating, and malfunctioning air conditioning, collectively diminished students' ability to concentrate and engage during song-based listening activities. These physical environment variables are particularly consequential for listening-intensive activities such as song instruction, where acoustic clarity is fundamental to comprehension.

Song-Specific Pedagogical Challenges

The most distinctive findings pertained to challenges unique to the use of songs as instructional media at SDN 192 Pekanbaru. Drawing primarily from interview data, the participant articulated three interconnected song-specific challenges: pronunciation divergence, vocabulary comprehension, and listening to song tempo. These

findings can be more deeply understood through the lens of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory and contemporary EYL scholarship.

First, the participant highlighted the mismatch between sung pronunciation and standard spoken English as a source of confusion for young learners, observing that in songs, the way words are pronounced is often not the pronunciation expected for classroom purposes. This observation corroborates the findings of Bokiev and Ismail (2021) and Xi (2021), who identified pronunciation as a primary challenge when songs are used in EFL classrooms. The phonological simplifications, contractions, and rhythmic distortions inherent in musical delivery can inadvertently model non-target forms, requiring teachers to explicitly address discrepancies between sung and spoken norms.

From an SLA perspective, this divergence is closely related to the phenomenon of connected speech – a process in which individual words blend, reduce, or transform phonologically when produced in natural, fluent streams of speech or

song (Cauldwell, 2013). In sung English, phenomena such as elision (deletion of sounds), assimilation (sound blending), and weak-form reduction are pervasive and occur at a pace dictated by musical rhythm rather than pedagogical clarity. For young learners whose phonological awareness in the target language is still developing, decoding connected speech in songs presents a significant cognitive challenge. Nation and Newton (2009) argue that the ability to segment a stream of speech into discrete lexical units – a skill known as speech segmentation – is foundational to listening comprehension, yet it is precisely this skill that is most taxed when learners encounter rapid, musically distorted input. Teachers at SDN 192 Pekanbaru must therefore go beyond simply playing songs; they need to explicitly scaffold awareness of how sounds change in connected, musical contexts before and during song-based activities.

Second, vocabulary presented challenges insofar as song lyrics often include idiomatic expressions, culturally specific references, or low-frequency vocabulary that exceeds learners' current proficiency levels. The participant indicated that pre-

teaching vocabulary before engaging with a song is essential but time-consuming within the constraints of a typical lesson period at SDN 192 Pekanbaru. This aligns with Muhamad and Rahmat's (2020) observation that fast-paced or idiomatic lyrical content can impede comprehension for EFL learners. From a comprehensible input standpoint (Krashen, 1982, as cited in Muhammed, 2024), songs whose vocabulary load lies significantly beyond learners' current level of competence ($i+1$) risk becoming incomprehensible noise rather than meaningful input, thereby diminishing their pedagogical value.

Third, the tempo of songs posed listening challenges. Unlike scripted classroom language, which is typically delivered at a controlled, pedagogically adjusted pace, song lyrics are bound to musical rhythm and tempo. Young learners at SDN 192 Pekanbaru with limited auditory processing experience in English frequently struggle to segment individual words within the continuous stream of lyrical input. Mr. Kevin noted that repeated listening, chunking of lyrics, and the use of visual lyric displays on the smartboard were

strategies he employed to mitigate this challenge.

This difficulty is well-grounded in SLA and cognitive language processing theory. Researchers in the field of EYL have consistently noted that children in early stages of L2 acquisition have not yet developed robust phonological short-term memory capacity for the target language, making it harder for them to hold and process rapidly delivered linguistic input in working memory (Gathercole & Baddeley, 1993, as cited in Cameron, 2001). Songs, by their very nature, deliver linguistic content embedded within musical rhythm – a phenomenon Murphey (1990, as cited in Bokiev & Ismail, 2021) described as the “song stuck in the head” effect, which while mnemonically beneficial, presupposes a baseline level of phonological familiarity. When that familiarity is absent, the musical beat can paradoxically obscure rather than illuminate word boundaries.

Moreover, the musical tempo imposes what Cauldwell (2013) calls a “greenhouse” versus “jungle” distinction in listening exposure: classroom speech is carefully pruned and slowed for learning purposes (the

greenhouse), whereas songs present speech in its wild, natural, and often rhythmically compressed form (the jungle). Young learners, who typically receive most of their English input in greenhouse conditions, are cognitively unprepared for the jungle-like acoustic density of authentic songs. This theoretical framework reinforces the practical strategy reported by Mr. Kevin – namely chunking lyrics and using visual lyric displays – as pedagogically sound scaffolding techniques. It also points to the importance of selecting songs with slower tempos and clearer articulation for beginning-level learners, a criterion endorsed by Brewster et al. (2002), who argue that song selection for young EFL learners should prioritize phonological accessibility alongside motivational appeal.

Discussion

The findings show that using songs in teaching English to young learners involves various challenges related to teachers, students, classroom conditions, and the characteristics of the songs themselves. Although songs are often considered enjoyable and motivating learning media, their successful use in

the classroom depends on several supporting factors.

One of the main challenges reported by the participant was the limited opportunity to receive training related to song-based and immersive language teaching. Although the PPG program provided useful pedagogical knowledge and practical teaching experience, it did not specifically prepare teachers to integrate songs into English instruction. Similar issues have been reported in previous studies, which indicate that many EYL teachers still require more specialized training to effectively use music as a language-learning resource (Muhammed, 2024). This suggests that professional development programs should include more practical guidance on implementing song-based activities in EYL classrooms.

The findings also showed that student characteristics played an important role in the implementation of song-based activities. Low motivation, short attention spans, and differences in English proficiency often made classroom management more challenging. These conditions are commonly found among young learners, who generally require

engaging activities and continuous support to remain focused during learning (Cameron, 2001). To address these challenges, the participant frequently combined songs with games, group work, and visual materials to maintain students' interest and participation. The participant's adaptive strategies – mixed-ability grouping, varied activity formats, and rapport-building techniques – reflect a pragmatic and learner-centered orientation that is broadly consistent with best practices in EYL pedagogy. However, the sustainability and scalability of these strategies in resource-constrained contexts warrant further consideration.

Classroom and school conditions also influenced the effectiveness of song-based instruction. Although SDN 192 Pekanbaru had access to technological facilities such as smartboards and Chromebooks, unstable internet connections sometimes disrupted learning activities. In addition, large class sizes made it difficult for the teacher to monitor every student's participation and understanding. These findings indicate that the successful use of songs is not determined solely by

teaching strategies but also by the availability of adequate learning facilities and a supportive classroom environment.

The most distinctive challenges were related to the songs themselves. The participant reported that students often struggled with pronunciation, unfamiliar vocabulary, and the fast tempo of English songs. These difficulties are consistent with previous studies showing that song lyrics can be challenging for EFL learners because words are often pronounced differently from everyday speech and are delivered at a rapid pace (Bokiev & Ismail, 2021; Xi, 2021). In the context of SLA, fast-paced songs may make it difficult for learners to identify individual words within a continuous stream of speech. As a result, students may understand fewer words even when they are familiar with the vocabulary being used.

Overall, the findings indicate that the successful use of songs in EYL classrooms depends on teacher preparation, students' readiness to learn, adequate school facilities, and the selection of suitable songs. When one of these elements is lacking, the effectiveness of song-based instruction may be reduced. The

pedagogical implications are considerable: teacher education programs must incorporate song-based and immersive language teaching methodologies; schools such as SDN 192 Pekanbaru must invest in acoustically appropriate classrooms and reliable technological infrastructure; and teachers must be equipped with frameworks for scaffolding song-based listening and pronunciation activities in ways that are developmentally appropriate and linguistically accessible.

D. Conclusion

This study found that an English teacher at SDN 192 Pekanbaru faced several challenges when using songs to teach English to young learners. These challenges were related to teacher preparation, student characteristics, classroom and school conditions, and the songs themselves. Among these, difficulties associated with pronunciation, vocabulary, and song tempo emerged as the most prominent challenges during song-based learning activities.

From the perspective of second language acquisition, these difficulties can be understood as part of the

natural challenges faced by young learners when processing spoken English. The rapid tempo of songs and the presence of connected speech often make it difficult for learners to recognize word boundaries and understand the meaning of what they hear. Therefore, teachers need to provide appropriate support, such as repeated listening activities, lyric chunking, and visual aids, to help learners process language input more effectively.

The study implies that teachers of young learners at SDN 192 Pekanbaru and similar schools should pay close attention to the alignment between song selection and learners' developmental and linguistic profiles, and that institutional support in the form of professional development, adequate infrastructure, and curriculum flexibility is indispensable to the effective implementation of song-based pedagogy. Future research should employ larger, multi-site samples and longitudinal designs to generate more transferable insights into how these challenges evolve across different instructional contexts and with varying levels of teacher experience and institutional support.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Summary of Open-Ended Questionnaire Data (Selected Responses)

The following table presents a thematic summary of selected responses from the open-ended questionnaire administered to the participant (Mr. Kevin), English teacher at SDN 192 Pekanbaru.

Theme	Key Challenge (Translated)
Teacher-related	Limited training in interactive and immersive instruction; time constraints in lesson planning.
Student-related	Short attention span; low motivation; limited English proficiency; disruptive behaviour; fear of speaking.
Classroom/School	Large class size; inadequate resources; slow internet; uncomfortable physical environment at SDN 192 Pekanbaru.
Song-specific	Pronunciation divergence between sung and spoken English; vocabulary difficulty; song tempo hinders listening; connected speech impedes word segmentation.

Appendix B: Interview Excerpt (Translated)

The following is a translated excerpt from the semi-structured interview with Mr. Kevin, English teacher at SDN 192 Pekanbaru, focusing on song-specific challenges:

Interviewer: *What challenges do you usually encounter when using songs in teaching English to students?*

Mr. Kevin: *Perhaps in terms of listening ability and understanding pronunciation and vocabulary, because the way words are written and the way they are pronounced are not always the same. There is also the issue of the song's tempo songs move fast, and sometimes the pronunciation in a song is not the pronunciation we want students to internalize for classroom use. Those are the challenges. How to help them hear the song properly, understand the correct pronunciation, and how to read the lyrics those are the main difficulties.*