

# Teaching English to Young Learners: the Complexity of Reality

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**Abstract.** The education system in Indonesia is overgrowing along with globalization. Since English becomes the world's lingua franca, Indonesia has implemented Teaching English to Young Learner (TEYL) as the local content subject for the last two decades. This study is a descriptive qualitative study that aims to expose the realization of TEYL in kindergarten. The data collection instruments are a survey and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). A survey was conducted on 50 principals and teachers from 25 kindergartens in Salatiga, Central Java, in February 2021. The result showed that 96 percent of respondents considered introducing English as a foreign language in an early childhood education highly needed. Furthermore, the majority (100 percent) of the respondents' schools teach English as an extracurricular subject. On the aspect of teacher education background, it was found that only 14 percent of teachers in TEYL graduated from the English education department. Then, only 48 percent of respondents argued that the media in their school had already supported the TEYL program. Lastly, only 30 percent perceived that the TEYL program had been integrated with the early childhood education curriculum. In addition, the FGD also exposed the complexity of reality in TEYL. Finally, it can be concluded that in realizing an ideal TEYL is still needed many improvements in pedagogy, quality of teachers, good resources, curriculum, and media based on needs analysis.

**Key words:** TEYL; complexity; reality.

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## INTRODUCTION

In line with the demands of globalization, introducing English to ever-younger learners becomes a trend these days. Since English is declared as the lingua franca, all countries implemented English lessons into their education curriculum. Several studies claimed a "critical period" which means that a child can learn English as a foreign language and acquire native-like proficiency. Then, Lenneberg (1967) proposed the term "lateralization," which means a period when the localization of language-processing ability in the human's left hemisphere was connected with human's biological change or development. His study indicates that children's brains are more flexible than adults' in learning a foreign language. Moreover, someone exposed to a foreign language at earlier ages consistently would perform well in language learning (Wallin & Cheevakumjorn, 2020). Those theories strengthen that a child should learn a language earlier since childhood is the appropriate time to acquire a foreign language.

In addition, English becomes the subject priority to be taught at every level of education. This fact is proven by the increasing number of district and city government schools introducing English lessons earlier, even starting from kindergarten. However, some cases in the world

reported that realizing Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) has happened with inadequate curriculum and preparation (Emery, 2013; Listyariyani, 2018; Zein, 2017). Some problems identified in TEYL such as teachers' inabilities dealing with teaching context, the lack of training in TEYL, low qualification of English teachers because of their inadequate English language proficiency, and teachers in early childhood education have to teach English when this was not their subject specialism (Chang, 2012; Eksi & Learning, 2015; Sukarno, 2008). Therefore, many efforts should be made to overcome the complexity of reality in TEYL gradually.

For the last two decades, Indonesia has implemented Teaching English to Young Learner (TEYL) as local content at the primary school. English is taught as a foreign language in this country, while Bahasa Indonesia is the lingua franca in education (Rini, 2014; Lauder, 2008). Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) in Indonesia means introducing English as a foreign language to young students. Specifically, TEYL means guiding and facilitating students at the early childhood education level to learn, know, practice, and understand the English materials as foreign language learners. Then, it is expected that students' outcomes would be better since English is taught early (Tamara et al., 2012;

Sepyanda, 2017). Young learners should be motivated to acquire English unconsciously by giving attention, creating fun activities in the classroom, asking them to participate in playing the games and others. By providing those activities, young learners will learn, enjoy, and get used to an English-speaking environment (Getie, 2020). Hence, the process of TEYL in early childhood education should happen naturally by immersing them in English learning spontaneously and subconsciously in their classroom activity.

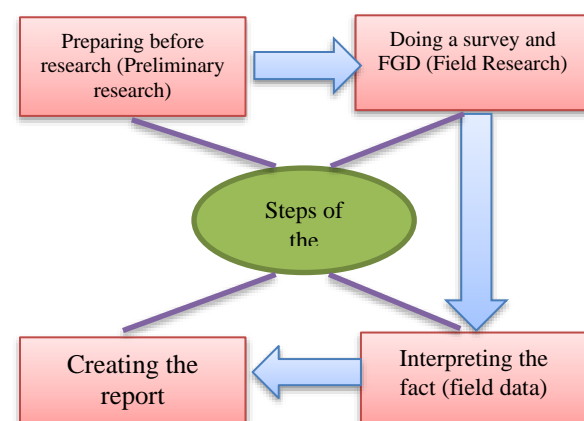
In Indonesia, parents believe that teaching English before children reach primary school can positively impact their future. The kindergartens that provide English lessons as extracurricular subjects have become an excellent program and popular among parents (Kurniawan, 2020; Cahyati et al., 2019; Nufus, 2019). Although children should learn English early, there are many challenges in realizing TEYL in Indonesia (Nodira, 2020). These complex challenges include curriculum, limited learning environments, unqualified teachers, learning materials, learning media, facilities, etc. Furthermore, the expansion of TEYL is a phenomenon that should be taken seriously by minimize the problems and serve the solution. Thus, this study aims to reveal the complexity, problems, and limitations in the realization of TEYL in kindergarten.

Some previous studies on TEYL have exposed several challenges and barriers. Teachers in TEYL classes have not received adequate training in teaching young learners, particularly in teaching English to early childhood education (Copland et al., 2012). In Indonesia, teachers' low proficiency levels and lack of confidence are still identified in TEYL (Habibi & Sofwan, 2015; Diyanti et al., 2020; Mudra, 2020; Cahyati et al., 2019). Another complex challenge in TEYL is related to pedagogy. Some studies mentioned that Indonesia has no TEYL curriculum integrated with the early childhood education curriculum (Subur, 2017; Octarra & Hendriati, 2018; Anggraini & Suyadi, 2019). Moreover, a study from Taghizadeh and Yourdshahi (2019) showed insufficient facilities to support TEYL class. Other studies also claimed that most teachers in TEYL did not have sufficient pedagogical and technological knowledge, especially to face the digital era. The previous studies on the complexity of the realization of TEYL in kindergarten need to be reviewed. Therefore, this study has a novelty because the data collection is

carried out through a survey of kindergarten teachers in Salatiga about the realization of TEYL in the pandemic era.

## METHODS

This research used a descriptive qualitative research design that aims to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics. Furthermore, the descriptive qualitative research design is related to what happened rather than investigating how or why something happened (Nassaji, 2015). In this study, a survey and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) are used to gather data. In addition, qualitative research is more holistic. This research design often involves a rich collection of data from numerous sources to understand individual participants, including their beliefs, perspectives, attitudes, and opinions (Ryan et al., 2009). This study involved 50 teachers from 25 early childhood education schools in Salatiga, Central Java, Indonesia. Systematically, the stages of the research are described in Figure 1 as follows:



**Figure 1.** Stages of Conducting the Research

Preliminary research was the first step in conducting this study. This step did get pre-information about the realization of TEYL in early childhood educations in Salatiga. The second step in this study is doing field research. A survey and FGD were conducted to highlight teachers' perceptions of the complexity of reality in TEYL. After doing field research to get the findings, then the data have been collected and interpreted. Furthermore, to increase the credibility and validity of research findings, the researcher did theoretical triangulation by combining theories, methods, or observers in a research study. Finally, creating a research report is the last step after the findings have been analyzed.

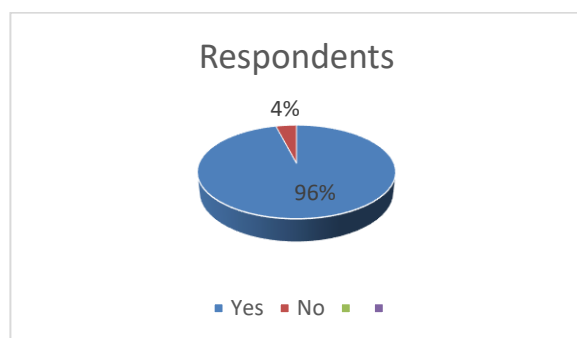
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on reference data from the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, there are 118 early childhood education schools in Salatiga, including 86 kindergarten (TK) and 32 Raudhatul Athfal/RA (Islamic kindergarten under the Ministry of Religious Affairs). A survey was conducted on 50 respondents from TK and RA principals and teachers from 25 kindergartens in Salatiga, Central Java, in February 2021. Five questionnaire items expose their perception of teaching English in early childhood education adapted from Richards (2006), revealing the realization of TEYL in kindergarten, qualifications of English teachers in kindergarten, learning media, and curriculum used in TEYL. The five questions are listed in Figure 2 as follows;

**Table 2.** Items of Questionnaire

No	Theory	Item
1	Richards, 2006	The importance of introducing English as a foreign language in kindergarten.
2	Richards, 2006	The implementation of TEYL in kindergarten.
3	Richards, 2006	Teacher education background in TEYL.
4	Richards, 2006	The teaching media in TEYL.
5	Richards, 2006	The curriculum aspect in TEYL.

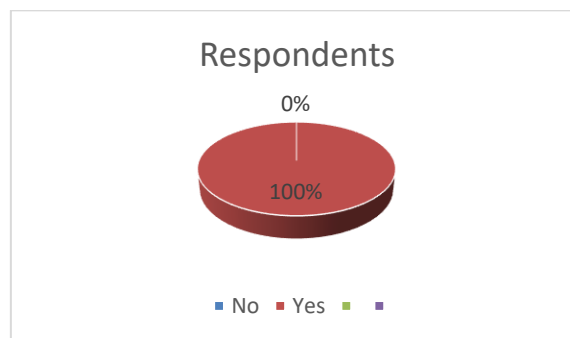
The results of the survey can be seen in the diagram below;



**Figure 1.** The survey result number one

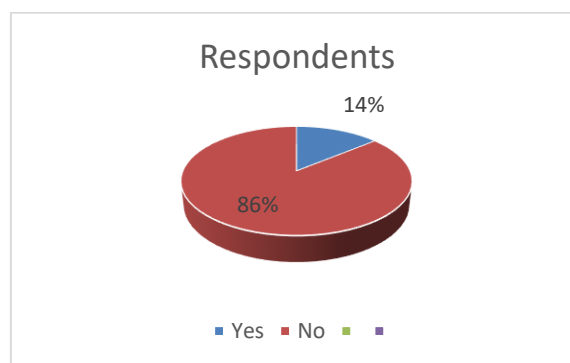
The survey results on the importance of teaching English in kindergarten show that 96 per cent of respondents considered introducing English as a foreign language in early childhood education is highly needed.

Meanwhile, the result of the survey for the second item can be seen in the following diagram;



**Figure 2.** The survey result number two

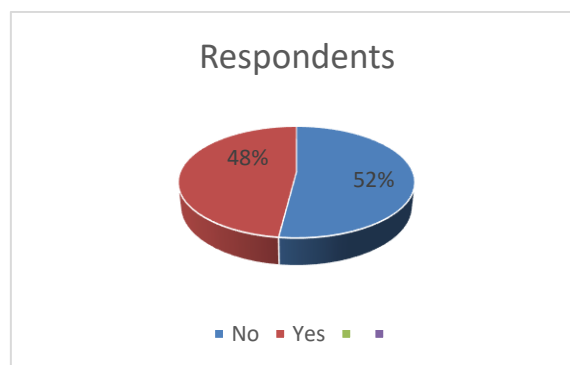
Furthermore, the survey also reveals that the majority (100 per cent) of the respondents' schools teach English as an extracurricular subject. Then, the result of the survey for the third item can be seen in the following diagram;



**Figure 3.** The survey result number three

On the aspect of teacher education background, it was found that only 14 per cent of teachers in early childhood education graduated from the English education department. On the contrary, 86 per cent of teachers in TEYL do not have qualifications in English teaching.

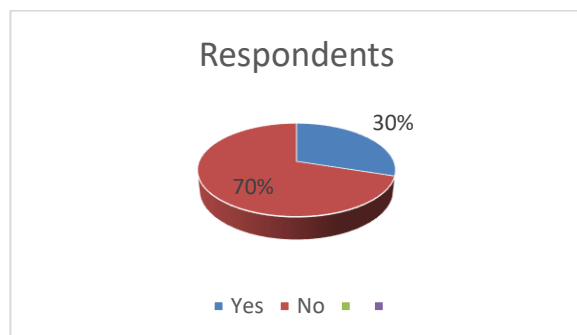
The results of the survey for question number four can be seen in the diagram below;



**Diagram 4.** The survey result number four

Then, only 48 per cent of respondents stated that the English teaching media in their school has already supported TEYL class.

Moreover, the result of the survey for item number five can be seen in the following diagram;



**Figure 5.** The survey result number five

Lastly, only 30 per cent of respondents claimed that TEYL class had been integrated with the early childhood education curriculum on the curriculum aspect. This means that 70 per cent of respondents argued that TEYL had not been integrated with the early childhood education curriculum.

In addition, to strengthen the survey, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was also conducted. The result exposed the teachers' perception about the limitation of media that can support them in TEYL. Most of the teachers stated that they still have difficulty teaching English because of their limited abilities; therefore, they need media that can help them teach in TEYL class. Moreover, the teachers claimed that early childhood education should develop six child development aspects that refer to the early childhood education curriculum. However, in reality, the learning materials in TEYL have not been able to integrate these six aspects of child development.

The respondents also revealed that they were unwillingly to teach English in this pandemic era because of the limited media that can be used for blended learning. Therefore, they suggested that the researcher creates digital media to help them in TEYL since this medium is relevant, fascinating and familiar to use in TEYL both in face-to-face and online learning.

All results from surveys and FGDs show that there are still complex problems in realizing TEYL in kindergarten. These results certainly strengthen the findings of Habibi and Sofwan (2015), Diyanti et al. (2020), Mudra, (2020), Cahyati et al., (2019) that there are still many things that need to be improved in TEYL in kindergarten. Some crucial things that must be

resolved immediately are the quality of English teachers in kindergarten, the curriculum, and the media used at TEYL, especially in this pandemic era.

## CONCLUSION

Realizing Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) in kindergarten is appropriate because childhood is the superior period to acquire a foreign language. They have a "golden age" moment and "critical period," which will naturally help them learn a foreign language. In fact, the survey results and FGD of 50 respondents from 25 kindergartens in Salatiga showed that the implementation of TEYL still faces many problems and limitations, including the quality of teachers, curriculum, and media that still do not support the success of TEYL in kindergarten. Therefore, the TEYL learning materials need to be integrated with the early childhood education curriculum, which develop six child development aspects. In addition, there is a need for media to assist teachers in teaching at TEYL, considering that their skills still need to be improved. In facing the pandemic era, teachers also need media in TEYL to be used in a blended learning system such as digital media. Finally, it can be concluded that in realizing an ideal TEYL is still needed many improvements in pedagogy, quality of teachers, good resources, curriculum, and media based on needs analysis.

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