

NARRATING TEACHING ENGLISH FOR YOUNG LEARNERS (TEYL) FROM TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES: A NARRATIVE RESEARCH

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Abstract

This study employs narrative inquiry to explore the challenges and strategies experienced by three teachers of English for young learners (EYL) in a rural primary school in Central Java, Indonesia. Through in-depth interviews, participants shared their personal and professional stories, highlighting common challenges, such as managing large class sizes, limited resources, and varying levels of student engagement, as well as the strategies they developed to address these issues. The narratives were analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing the researchers to identify recurring themes and patterns across the teachers' experiences. This methodological approach ensures a rigorous examination of the data while preserving the rich, detailed nature of the participants' stories. By presenting these findings through a narrative lens, the study provides a deep, contextualized understanding of the lived experiences of EYL teachers, offering valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers committed to enhancing English language education for young learners.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, teaching English for young learners, teacher challenges, adaptive teaching strategies, educational resources.

Introduction

Teaching English to young learners (TEYL) is becoming increasingly significant in schools worldwide as the world becomes more interconnected. English remains the primary language of international communication, functioning as a *lingua franca* that bridges linguistic differences and enables global interaction (Pennycook, 2017). Its prevalence in business, education, and technology further underscores the need for early English education to equip future generations for international collaboration. The growing awareness of English's importance has prompted many to advocate for starting English instruction at a young age.

Children's cognitive flexibility plays a crucial role in language acquisition. Their neural plasticity allows them to absorb new languages more efficiently, establishing a strong foundation for future language skills (Suskin, 2015). However, while there are clear advantages to beginning English education early, teachers face significant

challenges when working with young children. Research by Copland, Garton, & Burns (2013) and Garton, Copland, & Burns (2011) highlights these issues, with one of the primary challenges being how to maintain students' motivation and engagement throughout lessons.

The need to differentiate instruction for diverse learners adds another layer of difficulty. Teachers must tailor their methods to suit each child's learning style, while managing large classes and providing individual attention. Maintaining classroom discipline among energetic young learners is another persistent struggle, especially when trying to create an environment conducive to learning.

To address these challenges, it is essential that lessons are engaging and fun, as young learners thrive on dynamic, interactive activities. Sinaga & Oktaviani (2020) emphasize that play, creativity, and hands-on experiences are critical in fostering both enjoyment and comprehension in language learning. By

incorporating these elements, educators can retain students' interest while promoting meaningful language acquisition. Additionally, enhancing teachers' own proficiency in English is crucial for the success of TEYL, as their competence directly impacts the quality of instruction.

Regardless of the abundance of research highlighting these challenges, there remains a gap in exploring the specific strategies teachers employ to overcome them. This study seeks to fill that gap by focusing on teachers' experiences in TEYL, examining their strategies for maintaining engagement, differentiating instruction, and improving their own language skills. The goal is to provide a more coherent understanding of the complexities involved in teaching English to young learners, offering practical insights that can inform educators and policymakers alike.

Methodology

This study employed a narrative inquiry approach to explore the challenges of teaching English to young learners (TEYL) from the perspectives of experienced teachers. Narrative inquiry, as outlined by Barkhuizen & Wette (2008), is particularly effective in language teacher education, as it seeks to understand teachers' experiences within the unique contexts of their work environments. In this study, the participants were two teachers with over five years of experience teaching young learners (ages 5-12) in public schools located in rural areas. Both teachers have worked with diverse student populations, often in resource-limited settings, which adds complexity to the challenges they face.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, although the interviews were shorter than the typical 60-90 minutes suggested by Kwok et al. (2022). Instead, each interview lasted 15 minutes due to time constraints and the participants' busy schedules. While this limited the depth of each conversation, the teachers still provided valuable insights into their daily struggles and strategies. The interviews were direct and focused, aiming to elicit key experiences related to classroom management, student engagement, and instructional challenges.

The study also incorporated focus group discussions to triangulate the interview data. These discussions included the two participants and one additional teacher from a nearby school, providing a broader perspective on the shared challenges within the region. The focus group sessions lasted approximately 30 minutes each and were structured to encourage participants to reflect on and compare their teaching experiences. This method helped to corroborate findings from the individual interviews, ensuring that consistent themes were identified across multiple data sources (Natow, 2019).

The collected data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis within a narrative framework. Following the guidelines of Braun & Clarke (2021), the process involved familiarizing with the data, coding it, identifying themes, and reviewing, defining, and naming these themes. Ethical considerations were strictly followed throughout the study to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Member checking was employed to validate the accuracy of the transcripts and interpretations, ensuring the reliability of the findings.

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Finding and Discussion

The study revealed several key challenges and strategies in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) from the teachers' perspectives.

a. Challenges Faced by Teachers:

narration: What makes me sometimes confused is, how I can manage teaching.

Some students can do easily, some can not. So the variations are high (Wiwi, 2024).

From this voice, we can know the participant who expressed confusion regarding the management of teaching due to the wide variation in student abilities. She stated, "What makes me sometimes confused is, how I can manage teaching. Some students can do easily, some can not. So the variations are high." This highlights the challenge of addressing diverse student needs within a single classroom. Linguistically, the participant's statement reflects a personal struggle with the variability in student performance. The use of phrases such as "sometimes confused" and "how I can manage teaching" indicates a sense of uncertainty and a quest for applicable strategies. The mention of "some students can do easily" versus "some can not" underscores the disparity in student abilities, pointing to a significant challenge in achieving equitable learning outcomes.

This variation in student abilities can be analyzed through the lens of Lev Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (1978). Vygotsky's ZPD refers to the difference between what a learner can do without help and what they can achieve with guidance and encouragement from a skilled partner. In the context of the participant's classroom, some students may be operating within their ZPD, able to accomplish tasks with minimal assistance, thus appearing to "do easily." Conversely, other students may be working beyond their ZPD, requiring more support and scaffolding to achieve the same tasks.

The participant's recognition of these variations aligns with Vygotsky's emphasis on the importance of tailored instructional support. Leuwol et al (2023) mentioned that it is important to prioritize the child's individual needs within the educational framework. The same thought is stated by Kendall (2018) that supporting children's potential is a must. It means that teaching within a diverse classroom involves identifying each student's ZPD and

providing appropriate scaffolding to bridge the gap between their current capabilities and potential achievements. This could involve differentiated instruction, personalized learning plans, or targeted interventions designed to bring each student closer to independent problem-solving.

Another challenge relates to classroom management. The participant mentioned large class sizes and limited resources as the common issues. Teacher struggled to give each child individual attention while maintaining classroom order. This can be found below:

When I teach, my students because they are young learners, they sometimes run here there, especially when they are early grade. Even there are girls who just talked and looked at the mirror, playing the pencil and rulers. Imagine, big class, with 30 students up (Rara, 2024).

The teacher's statement reveals several key aspects through its linguistic elements. The phrase "because they are young learners" provides a causal explanation for the students' behavior, suggesting that their age and developmental stage are primary factors in their actions. Additionally, the descriptive language, such as "run here there," "just talked and looked at the mirror," and "playing the pencil and rulers," paints a vivid picture of the classroom environment, indicating a high level of activity and distraction among the students. The word "Imagine" invites the reader to empathize with the teacher's situation, highlighting the emotional and logistical challenge of managing a large and active classroom. Furthermore, the mention of "big class, with 30 students up" quantifies the classroom size, emphasizing the scale of the challenge faced by the teacher.

This relates to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, particularly the preoperational stage, which typically includes children aged 2 to 7 years old. Based on Piaget's cognitive theory, children in this stage are characterized by

egocentric thinking, limited attention spans, and a propensity for engaging in imaginative play (Hanfstingl et al, 2019). The behaviors described by the teacher, such as running around, talking, and playing with objects, are consistent with Piaget's observations of children in the preoperational stage. Piaget's theory suggests that these behaviors are not merely distractions but are integral to how young children explore and understand their world. The same case is for children age 7-12. These children are in a crucial developmental phase, where their cognitive abilities are expanding rapidly (Cetin Dag, 2020). It's understandable that some might struggle to sit still in class during this period. Their growing awareness of the thoughts and perspectives of others, as well as their increased logical thinking skills, can lead to a restless energy that makes it difficult for them to stay seated for long periods.

To relate to these children, it's important to provide concrete explanations and examples whenever possible. Fiorella & Mayer (2016) said that students, particularly younger learners, may need extensive support through concrete examples, as concreteness fading involves providing concrete materials initially and gradually moving to abstract concepts, which fosters students' ability to generate self-explanations during learning. Instead of relying solely on abstract language or concepts, educators and caregivers can use hands-on activities, visual aids, and real-life examples to help make ideas more tangible and accessible. Creating a dynamic learning environment that allows for movement and exploration can also help channel their energy in productive ways while still supporting their cognitive development. By understanding and accommodating their developmental stage, we can better support these children in their learning journey.

Understanding these developmental characteristics can help teachers develop strategies that incorporate these natural

tendencies into the learning process rather than simply trying to suppress them. Parker & Thomsen (2019) stated that incorporating more hands-on activities, allowing for movement breaks, and integrating play into learning can align with young learners' developmental needs. By acknowledging the developmental stage of their students, teachers can create a more engaging learning environment that accommodates the natural behaviors observed. This approach not only mitigates the challenges highlighted by the teacher but also leverages the strengths of young learners to enhance educational outcomes.

Teaching English for young learners can be fun, but can be frustrating. Imagine, teaching 30 students in a class. It's a lot for me. Your voice must be powerful, but you can not yell. I think I need to have microphone (Rara, 2024).

When I teach English, what makes me stuck is when I want them to practice but they lack of motivation. The previous teacher used only Students' work sheet. So they only had activity writing, filling the sentences or doing homework (Wiwi, 2024).

Through Rara's explanation Rara's linguistic expression provides a window into the intricacies of her teaching experience, particularly regarding the challenges she faces in motivating students to practice English. Through her choice of vocabulary, such as "stuck" and "motivation," she articulates the frustration of encountering student disengagement despite her efforts to encourage active participation. Furthermore, her syntactic structure, employing complex sentences to elaborate on specific teaching situations, underscores the depth of her reflections and the complexity of the issues at hand.

In her narrative, Rara pragmatically critiques the instructional methods employed by the previous teacher, particularly the reliance on worksheets and homework. By highlighting the limitations of such approaches, she initiates a discourse on the need for diversified

instructional strategies to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. This is evidenced in Luu (2022) that it is important to provide diverse strategies in their learning. Through her semantic analysis, she sheds light on the disconnect between instructional intentions and student motivation, emphasizing the importance of aligning teaching practices with the dynamic needs and interests of the learners. Overall, Rara's linguistic expression offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities inherent in English language teaching, contributing to ongoing conversations about student-centered learning approaches.

In considering Rara's experiences teaching English to young learners within a large classroom setting, Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory (1978) provides a valuable framework for understanding the dynamics at play. The challenge of addressing the diverse needs and abilities of 30 students underscores the significance of individualized support within the ZPD. This necessitates the implementation of differentiated instruction, the option of small group activities, and peer tutoring to accommodate varying levels of competence and foster growth within the ZPD.

Rara's also emphasis on the importance of scaffolding instruction highlights the critical role of the educator in guiding students through their ZPD. By employing strategies such as clear explanations, modeling, and prompts, it mediates the students' engagement as well. This engagement is crucial as it leads to students' confidence as well, as mentioned by Montgomery (2015) that students' engagement is crucial in every level. Rara can bridge the gap between students' current abilities and their potential for development. This not only boost students' linguistic skills but also cultivates their Wiwi's mention of feeling "stuck" when attempting to engage students in practice activities highlights a common challenge

confidence and autonomy as learners. Additionally, the collaborative learning opportunities facilitated by peer interactions align with Vygotsky's emphasis on the social dimension of learning within the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). By harnessing the collective knowledge and support of peers, Rara can create a dynamic and enriching learning environment where students actively engage in reciprocal teaching and learning processes.

Furthermore, Rara's consideration of cultural tools, such as the microphone, illustrates the application of ZPD theory in leveraging external resources to help her in the instructional success. By incorporating such tools into her teaching practice, Rara extends the reach of her guidance and facilitates communication within the classroom. This reflects the dynamic nature of the ZPD, where educators continually adapt their strategies in response to evolving student needs and classroom dynamics (Gest et al, 2014). Ultimately, by embracing the principles of the ZPD and implementing pedagogical strategies that promote individualized support, collaborative learning, and the utilization of cultural tools, Rara can create a supportive and engaging learning environment conducive to students' cognitive growth and academic success.

While from another participant's voice, we can know that Wiwi's linguistic reflection provides valuable insights into the challenges encountered while teaching English, particularly concerning student motivation and instructional methods. Through a linguistic analysis of Wiwi's statement, we can relate her experiences to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985), which emphasizes intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and competence as essential factors in fostering optimal learning environments.

faced by educators: motivating learners to actively participate in language learning tasks. This sentiment resonates with SDT's

emphasis on intrinsic motivation, which posits that individuals are more likely to engage in an activity willingly and persistently when they perceive it as personally meaningful and aligned with their interests and values (Vansteenkiste et al, 2017). Wiwi's observation suggests a potential misalignment between the prescribed instructional activities and students' intrinsic motivation, prompting further investigation into the factors influencing student engagement within the classroom. The same case exist in Wiwi's explanation of the previous teacher's reliance on worksheets for language practice underscores the role of external motivators in shaping student engagement and learning outcomes. The needs to meet student's autonomy as in SDT's (Deci & Ryan, 1985) should lessen the exclusive use of worksheets as they may have inadvertently undermined students' intrinsic motivation by reducing language practice to rote tasks devoid of meaningful context or personal relevance. This disconnect between instructional methods and student motivation highlights the importance of fostering autonomy and competence in language learners, allowing them to actively participate in shaping their learning experiences and goals.

b. Strategies to Overcome the Problems

Apart from the challenges, teachers employ various strategies to enhance learning experiences and overcome obstacles in the classroom. These strategies are designed to engage students, promote active participation, and foster a supportive learning environment. By implementing creative teaching methods, educators strive to optimize learning outcomes and facilitate student success. This can be found in their narration below:

Sometimes I use icebreaking to engage them. So I sing a song like good morning teacher, good morning student. effects of this strategy on students' language proficiency.

The song can make them have different atmosphere (Rara, 2024).

I have song in my class. This is to provide different situation for my students. I think they are happy if compared to only writing answering questions (Wiwi, 2024).

In response to the challenges of teaching English to young learners (TEYL), teachers have employed various strategies designed to engage students, promote active participation, and create a supportive learning environment. While these methods effectively address immediate classroom obstacles, a deeper analysis is necessary to assess their long-term impact on language acquisition, retention, and overall proficiency.

For example, Rara uses icebreakers, such as singing, to engage her students and foster a positive classroom atmosphere. Her practice of singing "Good morning teacher, good morning student" serves as a regular icebreaker to set a cheerful tone at the beginning of lessons. This method aligns with Bandura's Social Learning Theory (2021), which emphasizes the significance of modeling behavior for observational learning. By consistently incorporating this routine, Rara not only encourages her students to participate but also establishes a sense of community and emotional connection in the classroom. The repetition of the song, combined with its positive tone, likely aids language retention and enhances students' willingness to engage with the lesson.

However, while Rara highlights the emotional and atmospheric benefits of her approach, the analysis of its long-term impact remains underdeveloped. There is a lack of empirical evidence to determine whether such engagement-focused activities result in measurable improvements in language acquisition, retention, or academic performance. While the immediate benefits are clear, further research is needed to explore the lasting

Similarly, Wiwi incorporates music as an alternative to traditional methods like writing or answering questions, aiming to

increase engagement by creating a "different situation" for her students. This approach reflects Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory (Gardner & Hatch, 1989), specifically acknowledging the relevance of musical-rhythmic intelligence in fostering student engagement. By diversifying her teaching methods, Wiwi not only caters to different learning styles but also enhances students' emotional well-being, making them feel more connected and motivated in the classroom.

Nevertheless, like Rara's, Wiwi's strategy lacks concrete data on its efficacy in fostering long-term language development. While students clearly enjoy the lessons and feel more engaged, there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate whether this emotional connection leads to improved language skills, such as vocabulary retention or conversational fluency. The focus on the immediate emotional and engagement outcomes overlooks a deeper exploration of whether these methods significantly enhance language learning over time.

Both Rara and Wiwi's teaching methods underscore the importance of emotional engagement and positive classroom environments in supporting young learners. However, the analysis of their strategies remains surface-level, focusing more on short-term benefits rather than exploring the potential long-term outcomes. To fully understand the effectiveness of these methods, future research should investigate their sustained impact on students' language proficiency, assessing whether such creative and emotionally engaging approaches lead to measurable improvements in language acquisition, retention, and overall academic success.

Conclusions and Implications

This narrative research offers valuable insights into the challenges and strategies employed by teachers in Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL). Through the detailed exploration of teachers'

experiences, we gain a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted obstacles they face, such as large class sizes, varying student motivation, and the need to address diverse learning needs. Despite these challenges, the teachers displayed resilience and creativity by employing pedagogical strategies that engage young learners in dynamic and interactive ways.

Teachers in this study employed a range of innovative approaches—such as interactive storytelling, music, and movement activities—to create vibrant learning environments. These strategies not only facilitate language acquisition but also foster students' holistic development by nurturing curiosity, collaboration, and empowerment. Additionally, the emphasis on building supportive relationships and fostering a sense of community within the classroom played a crucial role in creating inclusive learning spaces where students felt valued and motivated to actively participate.

Despite the valuable insights gained, this study is not without limitations. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, as the experiences of just two teachers cannot fully represent the diversity of TEYL contexts. Future studies with larger and more diverse participant pools would provide a broader perspective on the strategies and challenges faced by teachers across different settings. Furthermore, the short duration of the interviews (15 minutes each) may have limited the depth of the narratives collected, preventing a more thorough exploration of the teachers' experiences.

The findings have practical implications for educators and policymakers. To better support teachers in implementing these creative strategies, schools must provide access to resources and training that enhance pedagogical innovation. Professional development programs focusing on interactive and multisensory approaches—such as

storytelling, music, and movement—can equip teachers with the necessary skills and techniques to foster more engaging and effective language learning environments.

Additionally, schools can address some of the challenges highlighted in the study, such as large class sizes and diverse learning needs, by providing adequate resources and support staff. Collaboration with peers and access to cultural tools can also help teachers scaffold learning effectively, ensuring that every student receives the attention they need to succeed.

By recognizing the significance of fostering inclusive, interactive, and supportive learning environments, educators and policymakers can take meaningful steps toward improving TEYL outcomes. This includes not only providing teachers with the training and resources to innovate but also creating policies that encourage smaller class sizes, differentiated instruction, and a focus on holistic student development.

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