

## **EXPLORING BEST PRACTICES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION FOR PRIMARY STUDENTS**

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First Received: February 2, 2026

Final Proof Received: June 30, 2026

### **Abstract**

This study explores best practices in teaching English to young learners (TEYL) in Indonesian primary schools by examining teachers' instructional approaches, classroom communication, management strategies, materials, assessment practices, and challenges. Employing a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with experienced primary school English teachers. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes across participants' perspectives. The findings reveal five major themes: the use of diverse and creative teaching methods, functional bilingual classroom communication, engagement-based classroom management, flexible use of teaching materials and assessment practices, and challenges accompanied by adaptive coping strategies. Teachers emphasized play-based and multi-sensory activities, such as songs, games, and storytelling, to enhance learners' motivation and vocabulary development. The strategic use of the first language was found to support comprehension and reduce anxiety, while engagement-centered management fostered positive learning environments. Despite challenges including mixed-ability classrooms and limited parental involvement, teachers demonstrated pedagogical flexibility in adapting instruction to contextual constraints. These findings underscore the importance of child-centered, context-sensitive, and supportive approaches in TEYL and offer practical implications for teachers, schools, and teacher education programs.

**Keywords:** Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), primary education, qualitative research, thematic analysis, English language teaching

### **INTRODUCTION**

As English becomes increasingly important in the global economy, many countries are introducing it into their education systems at earlier stages. In Indonesia, English is widely recognized as a valuable skill, yet its role in the primary school curriculum remains ambiguous. Despite rising demand from parents and schools, the implementation of English instruction at the primary level is inconsistent and often under-resourced. The curriculum plays an important role in teaching English for primary level. In the Indonesian national curriculum, English is not a mandatory subject at the primary school level. Based on the Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia Number 12 of 2024, English at the primary school level is not designated as a compulsory national subject. Instead, it may be implemented as an elective subject or local content subject depending on the characteristics and needs of each educational institution. This policy results in uneven implementation across the country. According to Lie (2007), many private and urban schools introduce English from as early as Grade 1, driven by parental pressure and the perception that English is essential for future success. However, the lack of a standardized national framework has created disparities in curriculum quality, teaching materials, and assessment practices. This policy gap contributes to confusion among teachers and school administrators about learning goals and outcomes (Renandya, 2013).

Those conditions drive into some significant challenges in teaching English at the primary level, particularly the shortage of qualified teachers. Many English teachers at the primary level are general classroom teachers who lack formal training in English language education. A study by Astuti and Lestari (2020) revealed that only 40% of English teachers in rural areas had appropriate qualifications or certifications in teaching English. Furthermore, the prevailing teaching methods remain largely traditional. Widodo (2016) notes that many teachers rely on the grammar-translation method and rote memorization rather than communicative language teaching (CLT). These methods focus on grammar drills and vocabulary lists, which fail to develop students' speaking, listening, and interactive communication skills. As a result, students often struggle to use English meaningfully outside the classroom. Access to learning materials and technology also varies widely between urban and rural schools. In a study by Yulia (2014), urban schools were more likely to have up-to-date textbooks, audio-visual resources, and even digital language labs. In contrast, rural and remote schools often lack even the most basic materials, such as English workbooks or listening aids. The digital divide exacerbates this issue. Schools in provinces like Papua, Nusa Tenggara, and Maluku often have limited internet access and outdated technology, hindering efforts to integrate digital tools into English instruction (Indonesia Ministry of Education, 2020). These disparities not only affect the quality of learning but also widen the achievement gap between students in different regions.

To address these challenges, understanding the principles of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) is essential. Researchers agree that young learners benefit significantly from language instruction that is interactive, contextualized, and age-appropriate. Children in the primary years are particularly receptive to language learning when lessons are delivered in engaging and meaningful ways. Astuti and Lestari (2020) found that storytelling techniques were effective in enhancing vocabulary acquisition and improving students' speaking confidence. Their research, conducted in Indonesian primary schools, showed that when English instruction is integrated with narrative and visual elements, students become more enthusiastic and retain language structures more effectively. In addition to storytelling, technology has become an increasingly important tool in TEYL, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Gunawan and Arifin (2021) examined the use of digital storytelling in online EFL classes for young learners and found that students showed higher engagement and comprehension when multimedia content such as animated videos and audio narration was incorporated. These findings suggest that technology, when used appropriately, can support language development and maintain students' attention in virtual learning environments. Similarly, Santosa and Rahmah (2022) explored blended learning models—combining online platforms like Zoom and WhatsApp with face-to-face instruction—and reported increased student participation and differentiated instruction opportunities.

Effective teaching methods and strategies are essential for English language learning at the primary level, where young learners have unique developmental needs. One widely used approach is Total Physical Response (TPR), which integrates physical movement with language instruction. By responding to commands with actions, children link language to physical experiences, which supports comprehension and memory. For example, activities such as “Simon Says” or movement-based songs help reduce learner anxiety and keep students engaged (Shin, 2006; Santosa & Rahmah, 2022). Songs, chants, and rhymes also play a central role in young learners' language development. Through rhythm and repetition,

these musical elements help students internalize pronunciation, grammatical patterns, and vocabulary. Research highlights how music supports memory and creates a fun, low-stress learning environment (Cameron, 2001; Moon, 2000). Furthermore, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is another powerful strategy for engaging young learners in real-life communication. Through meaningful tasks such as role plays or classroom projects, students develop communicative competence and apply their language skills in purposeful situations. For example, Nguyen (2021) found that implementing TBLT in Vietnamese primary schools improved students' oral fluency and increased peer interaction significantly. Additionally, Project-Based Learning (PBL) fosters creativity and collaboration, as Ahmed and Alfaki (2023) reported that primary students creating cultural "mini-museums" showed improved speaking skills and learner autonomy. A more recent approach is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), where English is used to teach other subjects. Park and Ramírez (2024) found that CLIL strategies help learners build both academic and linguistic competence simultaneously.

Alongside teaching methods, effective classroom management is a critical component of successful English language teaching at the primary level. Young learners are often energetic, curious, and easily distracted, so teachers must create structured yet engaging environments that support both language development and positive behavior. Classroom routines, clear rules, and consistent expectations help establish a safe and predictable learning space (Cameron, 2001). Positive reinforcement strategies such as praise and reward systems promote student motivation (Moon, 2000). Managing transitions through songs or movement breaks helps maintain attention, which is particularly important given the variable attention spans of young students (Shin, 2006). Teachers can also use classroom language consistently to reinforce both management and learning goals (Santosa & Rahmah, 2022). In multilingual or crowded classrooms, differentiated instruction and flexible seating arrangements are necessary. Oktaviani and Suprayogi (2021) reported that Indonesian primary school teachers often adapted their classroom layouts and grouped students based on language proficiency to manage mixed-ability classes more effectively.

Finally, developing appropriate learning materials and assessment methods is vital for the success of English language instruction. Learning materials for young learners should be visually rich, contextually meaningful, and developmentally appropriate, such as picture books, puppets, and interactive digital tools (Cameron, 2001; Moon, 2000). In the Indonesian context, Santosa and Rahmah (2022) emphasized the importance of contextualized materials that relate to learners' everyday experiences. Assessment for young English learners requires a different approach, moving away from formal paper-based tests toward observation checklists, portfolios, and performance-based tasks (Cameron, 2001). Performance-based assessments, such as role plays, are effective in evaluating communicative competence (Ahmed & Alfaki, 2023). However, Oktaviani and Suprayogi (2021) noted that many teachers still rely on informal assessments due to limited standardized materials.

Although previous studies have significantly contributed to understanding TEYL practices, several research gaps remain. First, many studies focus on single instructional approaches or technological tools without examining how teachers integrate multiple pedagogical components simultaneously within authentic classroom settings. Second, limited

research has explored teachers' adaptive decision-making processes and professional agency when addressing contextual challenges such as curriculum ambiguity, resource limitations, and mixed learner proficiency. Third, empirical research that provides a holistic understanding of how instructional methods, classroom management, materials development, and assessment practices interact in real classroom environments remains scarce, particularly within the Indonesian primary education context. Recent TEYL scholarship increasingly highlights the importance of teacher agency, contextual responsiveness, and reflective pedagogical adaptation in achieving sustainable language learning outcomes (Copland, Garton, & Mann, 2020; Butler, 2021). However, such perspectives remain underexplored in Indonesian TEYL research.

Therefore, this study aims to explore best practices in English language instruction for primary students by examining teachers' instructional approaches, classroom communication strategies, classroom management techniques, learning materials, assessment practices, and contextual challenges. By providing an in-depth qualitative investigation of teachers' experiences and pedagogical adaptations, this research seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of TEYL implementation in Indonesia and to provide practical implications for teacher professional development, curriculum planning, and educational policy improvement.

## **METHOD**

This research employs a qualitative descriptive design to explore best practices in English language instruction for primary students. This approach is selected to understand complex teaching practices, instructional strategies, and classroom dynamics in their natural setting (Creswell, 2014). The study was conducted in Tulungagung Regency, involving schools and English teachers at the primary level as participants. There are eleven teachers from schools in the urban and rural area. Data collection was carried out from July to August 2025, coinciding with the beginning of the 2025/2026 Academic Year. The research procedure followed six distinct stages as outlined by Creswell and Guetterman (2019), beginning with exploring the research problem and reviewing relevant literature to justify the study. Subsequently, the researcher formulated specific research problems and objectives, followed by data collection, analysis, and finally, reporting and evaluating the findings to draw conclusions.

To obtain comprehensive data, the researcher utilized three primary data collection techniques: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. These techniques were supported by instruments validated by experts in English language teaching and piloted prior to the main study. The instruments included interview guidelines with open-ended questions to explore teaching strategies and challenges, observation checklists to capture classroom management and student engagement, and document review forms to analyze lesson plans and assessment tools. Interviews provided in-depth insights into teachers' perceptions, while classroom observations offered real-time data on actual teaching practices. Document analysis served to triangulate the findings by reviewing the instructional materials used by the teachers.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, identifying and reviewing themes related to teaching practices, and defining these themes to represent the findings accurately. Specifically, observation data were analyzed using Hoffmann's theory, while interview and questionnaire results focused on English instruction at the primary level. To ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the research, methodological, data, and theoretical triangulation were employed. This involved cross-verifying information across different times, places, and sources (observations, interviews, and documents). Field notes were also used as additional evidence to recognize inconsistencies and ensure a comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomenon.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Findings**

This study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to examine interview data regarding instructional practices in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). The analysis revealed five major themes reflecting the complexity of teaching English at the primary level. The first theme, *Diverse and Creative Teaching Methods*, indicates that all eleven teachers consistently emphasized the importance of enjoyable, interactive, and child-friendly learning activities. Interview data revealed that teachers teaching lower grades (Grades 1–3) relied heavily on multi-sensory approaches such as songs, chants, guessing games, and simple storytelling to maintain learners' attention and motivation. One teacher from SDN Beji, with more than 18 years of teaching experience, explained that "young students learn faster when they sing and move, so I usually combine simple textbooks like *Cerdas Tangkas* with songs to introduce vocabulary." Classroom observations confirmed that such activities encouraged active participation and reduced learners' anxiety. In contrast, teachers handling upper grades (Grades 4–6), particularly at SDN Tunggul Sari and SDN Tawang Sari, reported shifting toward more structured and task-oriented activities such as dictation, short reading tasks, and group discussions due to limited instructional time and examination demands. As noted by the teacher "For grade five and six, I start using dictation and short reading tasks because they must be ready for more formal learning". This variation demonstrates that teachers consciously tailor their pedagogy according to students' developmental stages and curricular expectations.

The second theme, *Bilingual Classroom Communication*, reflects a shared instructional strategy among all participating teachers. Interview data showed that the eleven teachers regularly used a combination of English and Bahasa Indonesia, with occasional use of Javanese, to facilitate comprehension and reduce learners' anxiety. Several teachers noted that exclusive use of English was challenging, particularly for students with limited vocabulary. As one teacher from SDN Kampungdalem stated, "If I use only English, some students become silent, so I mix it with Indonesian to make sure they understand." Classroom observations at SDN Kampungdalem showed that English was consistently used for routines such as greetings and classroom commands ("Stand up," "Open your book"). Observation at SDN Bendo also supported this claim. One of teacher added that "English is for greeting and simple expressions, but for difficult vocabulary I switch to Bahasa Indonesia so they don't get confused". It showed that English was primarily used for greetings, routines, and simple expressions, while Bahasa Indonesia functioned as a scaffold to clarify instructions, explain

vocabulary, and manage classroom activities. This pragmatic bilingual approach enabled teachers to maintain lesson flow while ensuring student engagement.

The third theme relates to *Classroom Management through Engagement*. Across the eleven classrooms observed, teachers demonstrated a clear preference for engagement-based management strategies rather than strict disciplinary control. Interview responses indicated that teachers frequently used icebreakers, movement-based games, and changes in activity pace to sustain attention. Observations at SDN Tawang Sari and SDN Tunggulsari revealed that when students became distracted, teachers introduced short physical activities or songs to refocus the class. One teacher from SDN Tawang Sari explained that “when they start talking too much, I don’t scold them. I give a short icebreaker or ask them to stand and sing”. Proficiency-based grouping and peer tutoring were also commonly implemented, particularly in mixed-ability classrooms. One teacher noted that “students feel more confident when they learn together, especially when higher-level students help their friends.” These strategies fostered a supportive learning environment and promoted collaborative learning.

The fourth theme, *Materials and Assessment Practices*, highlights teachers’ adaptability in utilizing both traditional and digital resources. Interview and document analysis showed that all eleven teachers used student workbooks (LKS) as core materials, supplemented by digital media such as YouTube videos, PowerPoint slides, and Canva-based visuals. At SDN Beji and SDN Bendo, digital resources were frequently used to introduce vocabulary and contextualize lesson content, while printed worksheets supported practice and consolidation. A teacher from SDN Beji remarked that “students like videos. If I show a short YouTube clip about animals or food, they become more enthusiastic”. Assessment practices across all schools were predominantly formative. Teachers assessed vocabulary recognition, pronunciation, and basic grammar through oral questioning, performance tasks, drawing activities, and portfolios. For example, during a food-themed lesson observed at SDN Kampungdalem, students were asked to draw their favorite food and label it in both Indonesian and English, allowing teachers to assess learning outcomes in a low-anxiety and creative manner.

The final theme addresses *Challenges and Coping Strategies*. All eleven teachers reported facing similar challenges, including mixed proficiency levels, limited vocabulary mastery, spelling difficulties, and low parental involvement. Interview data revealed that these challenges were more pronounced in rural schools. To address these issues, teachers employed coping strategies such as task differentiation, repetition, and drilling embedded within creative activities. A teacher from SDN Tunggulsari noted that “some students still struggle to read in Indonesian, so learning English spelling is more difficult”. Teachers from SDN Beji, SDN Tunggulsari, SDN Kampungdalem, and SDN Tawang Sari emphasized that flexibility and creativity were essential to sustaining student engagement. As one teacher remarked “we must be flexible. If one method does not work, we try another way”. Overall, these findings demonstrate that despite structural constraints, the eleven teachers exhibited strong professional agency in adapting their instructional practices to support effective English learning for young learners.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study indicate that English instruction in Indonesian public primary schools is characterized by pedagogical adaptability, creativity, and strong contextual

awareness. Teachers' frequent use of songs, games, storytelling, and multi-sensory activities reflects core principles of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), which emphasize play-based and experiential learning as essential for young learners' language development (Pinter, 2017; Butler, 2021). Recent research confirms that such approaches support vocabulary retention, pronunciation development, and learner confidence, particularly in EFL contexts where exposure to English outside the classroom is limited (Lee & Song, 2023; Park & Ramírez, 2024). The differentiation between lower and upper grades observed in this study further demonstrates teachers' awareness of learners' developmental readiness, with younger students benefiting from concrete and repetitive input, while older students respond better to more structured and cognitively demanding tasks (Nguyen, 2021; Ahmed & Alfaki, 2023).

The strategic use of bilingual classroom communication also aligns with recent shifts in TEYL scholarship that challenge rigid English-only approaches. Rather than impeding language learning, the functional use of learners' first language (L1) facilitates comprehension, reduces anxiety, and supports meaning-making processes (Butler, 2021; Copland, Garton, & Mann, 2020). In the Indonesian context, where learners often have limited English proficiency and minimal exposure beyond school, the use of Bahasa Indonesia—and occasionally local languages—serves as an essential pedagogical scaffold. This finding is consistent with recent studies showing that judicious L1 use enhances classroom interaction and affective engagement without limiting opportunities for English input (Oktaviani & Suprayogi, 2021; Santosa & Rahmah, 2022).

Classroom management practices observed in this study further highlight the importance of engagement-based approaches in TEYL. Teachers relied on icebreakers, movement-based activities, and peer interaction to maintain classroom order, reflecting the growing emphasis on affective and social dimensions of learning (Butler, 2021; Kurniawati & Herlina, 2023). Peer tutoring and proficiency-based grouping were particularly effective in mixed-ability classrooms, supporting collaborative learning and learner autonomy, as suggested in recent research (Ahmed & Alfaki, 2023; Nguyen, 2021).

In terms of materials and assessment, teachers demonstrated adaptability by combining traditional resources, such as workbooks, with digital media including videos and visual materials. This reflects post-pandemic trends toward blended and technology-enhanced learning environments (Santosa & Rahmah, 2022; Lee & Song, 2023). Assessment practices were predominantly formative and performance-based, aligning with current assessment paradigms that prioritize authentic evaluation of communicative competence over high-stakes testing (Ahmed & Alfaki, 2023).

Despite persistent challenges such as mixed proficiency levels, limited vocabulary, and low parental involvement, teachers exhibited strong professional agency. Through task differentiation, repetition, and creative instructional strategies, teachers adapted their practices to meet diverse learner needs. Overall, the findings suggest that effective TEYL implementation in Indonesia depends on teachers' ability to balance pedagogical principles with contextual realities, underscoring the importance of supporting teacher agency, bilingual pedagogy, and formative assessment in policy and teacher education frameworks.

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) in the primary school context is characterized by pedagogical flexibility, contextual responsiveness, and high levels of teacher creativity. Teachers consistently employ diverse, child-centered strategies—such as songs, games, and storytelling—that are carefully adapted to students' developmental stages to maximize engagement and multi-sensory learning. To address limited proficiency and reduce anxiety, teachers adopt a functional bilingual approach, utilizing the first language to scaffold comprehension while maintaining English exposure. Furthermore, classroom management is achieved primarily through engagement strategies and peer support rather than strict control, reflecting a sensitivity to the affective needs of young learners. Although teachers face significant structural challenges, including mixed-ability classrooms, limited vocabulary, and minimal parental involvement, they demonstrate professional agency by implementing adaptive coping strategies such as task differentiation and creative repetition. Ultimately, the success of TEYL in this context relies heavily on the teachers' ability to balance pedagogical ideals with the practical realities of their classrooms.

### **Suggestion**

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the quality of English instruction at the primary level. Teachers are encouraged to refine their skills in differentiated instruction to better address mixed proficiency levels and to incorporate systematic formative assessment to monitor progress. At the institutional level, schools should provide greater support by ensuring access to age-appropriate digital resources and strengthening parent–school partnerships to extend learning beyond the classroom. For policymakers and teacher educators, there is a critical need to emphasize TEYL-specific pedagogy in professional development programs, particularly focusing on bilingual instructional strategies and technology integration. Finally, future research should expand on this study by employing classroom observations to capture real-time teaching dynamics and by recruiting a broader range of participants to improve the generalizability of the findings regarding TEYL effectiveness.

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