



Challenge in Teaching English for Young Learners: A Pre-service Teachers Perspective

Sushy Teko Patanduk^(✉), Normalia Sirande, Rigel Sampelolo, Selvi Panggua,
and Viktor Siumarlata

Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja, Tana Toraja, South Sulawesi, Indonesia
sushy@ukitoraja.ac.id

Abstract. This research aims to find out pre-service teachers challenges in teaching English for young learners as part of their community service learning in Tana Toraja and Toraja Utara. It is descriptive qualitative research with 12 pre-service teachers as the participants. To obtain the data, the researcher conducted interview using an open-ended question as the instrument. The research reveals some challenges as follows: Limited attention span and concentration, mother tongue interference, motivation and engagement, different learning style and abilities and Limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

Keywords: Challenge · Perspective · Teaching English · Young Learners

1 Introduction

In our ever-evolving global landscape, the significance of teaching English to young learners has gained increasing prominence. As the world becomes more interconnected and English continues to serve as the lingua franca, the advantages of early English language education for young learners are becoming more evident. Moreover, it is critical for learners to acquire the English language at a young age as early exposure to English is essential for learning [1]. Recent study shows Younger ages are really better for learning a language in terms of pronunciation and exposure to speaking, which will improve their fluency and help them sound more native-like even it is still debatable about the appropriate age to teach English [2–4].

Furthermore, recent research, such as the meta-analysis that indicates that learning English at a young age offers cognitive advantages that extend beyond language skills [5]. The ability to speak two languages, including English, has been linked to higher executive functioning, problem-solving abilities, and cognitive flexibility. Young learners' cognitive growth is stimulated and abilities that go far beyond language learning are fostered by immersing them in English language training.

Proficiency in English also plays a pivotal role in fostering academic success. Recent research shows that Students' academic performance would increase if their English language skills were improved [6] and The level of academic accomplishment for each learners increases with their level of English proficiency [7]. Proficiency in English

opens doors to educational opportunities and equips young learners with the necessary skills to thrive in a competitive, globalized world.

Additionally, proficiency in English empowers young learners to express themselves confidently and effectively. The ability to communicate proficiently in English correlates to self-esteem [8], critical thinking [9], and supports communications ability [10]. As young learners develop their English language proficiency, they gain the confidence and competence to actively engage in social and professional settings.

In summary, research affirms the undeniable importance of teaching English to young learners. From fostering cognitive development to facilitating global communication, promoting academic success, enhancing cultural understanding, and empowering self-expression, early English language education equips young learners with invaluable tools for their future. By investing in their English language learning journey, we prepare young learners to thrive in an interconnected world, embrace global opportunities, and contribute meaningfully to the global community.

Considering the importance of teaching English to young learners, especially in Toraja as tourism destination, students and lecturers from English Education Study Program of UKI Toraja prefer choosing English teaching on doing their community services. This kind of community service hopefully beneficial for Toraja community in building up their social competence, especially when interact with foreign visitor. However, some challenges persist. The researchers aim to investigate some challenges face by the students as pre-service teachers in conducting that program.

2 Methods

This research was a qualitative study investigating pre-service teachers' perspective about challenge in teaching English to young learners. For this purpose, 12 pre-service teachers with teaching English to young learners experience were chosen. Semi-structured interviews with guidelines and open-ended questions were designed and used to collect the research data from the participants for the data analysis.

3 Results and Discussion

Here are the results of data analysis obtained from interviews on the subject of this study about challenges in teaching English for young learners.

Limited attention span and concentration

Young learners tend to have shorter attention spans, making it challenging to keep their focus during English lessons. Teachers need to incorporate interactive and engaging activities to maintain their interest and maximize learning opportunities. Here are the pre-service teachers' perception about this:

“Tantangannya adalah kadang kadang anak anak lebih fokus bermain atau bercerita tentang benda yang diperlihatkan ketika belajar, sehingga materi tidak di dengarkan dengan baik”.

(The challenge is that sometimes children are more focused on playing or talking about objects shown when learning, so that the material is not listened to properly.)

“Siswa mudah bosan atau jenuh dalam pembelajaran”

(Students are easily bored or bored in learning).

“Konsentrasi anak-anak mudah teralihkan dan tidak fokus saat dalam pembelajaran dan lebih banyak bermain”

(Children’s concentration is easily distracted and unfocused while learning and playing more).

Recent research has shed light on the limited attention span and concentration challenges faced by young learners. These studies highlight the need for educators to employ effective strategies to enhance engagement and maintain focus during English language learning. Research result shows that unlike adults who have long attention span, children only have attention span less than 15 min [11]. As found that that preschool-aged children typically have shorter attention spans compared to older children and adults [12]. Another research identified environmental distractions, such as noise and visual stimuli, as significant contributors to decreased attention spans in young learners [13]. The study emphasized the need to create a conducive learning environment that minimizes distractions.

Mother tongue interference

Young learners may encounter difficulties in accurately pronouncing English sounds and words due to differences in phonetic systems between their native language and English. They encounter their mother tongue, Toraja language, interference. As can be seen in the following interview result:

“Anak-anak kesulitan dalam pengucapan karena mereka terbiasa dengan Bahasa Toraja.

(Children have difficulty in pronunciation because they are used to the Torajan language).

“Karena sehari-hari anak-anak menggunakan bahasa Toraja dan bahasa Indonesia, maka agak sulit ketika saya mengajar bahasa inggris utamanya dalam hal pengucapan”

(Because children use Toraja and Indonesian on a daily basis, it was a bit difficult when I taught English, especially in terms of pronunciation).

“Siswa sudah terbiasa dengan pola kalimat berbahasa Indonesia sehingga ketika mereka diminta berbahasa Inggris, terkadang kata-kata dalam kalimatnya salah posisi.”

(Students are familiar with Indonesian sentence patterns so that when they are asked to speak English, sometimes the words in the sentence are misplaced.)

This data shows that the mother tongue affect the students in term of their English pronunciation and their sentence structure/sentence pattern. Phonological interference is related to the first language of foreign language students which is affected the sound production of the target language [14]. It is supported by a research result that the biggest impact of mother tongue interference can be seen in the speaking as a language skill and grammar as a language area [15].

Motivation and engagement

Sustaining motivation and engagement is crucial for effective language learning. Young learners may face fluctuations in motivation levels, especially when the learning process becomes repetitive or challenging. Teachers should incorporate stimulating and interactive activities, create a positive learning environment, and provide regular encouragement

and praise to keep learners motivated. Here are some perspectives by the pre-service teachers:

“Susah untuk anak-anak belajar karena mereka memang sudah berprinsip bahwa Bahasa Inggris itu susah dipelajari”

(It is difficult for children to learn because they have the principle that English is difficult to learn.)

“Anak-anak tidak bisa dipaksakan belajar sehingga harus menyediakan situasi belajar yang menyenangkan”

(Children cannot be forced to learn so must provide a pleasant learning situation).

“Anak-anak khususnya di Toraja tidak terbiasa belajar bereksplorasi dengan hal baru”

(Children, especially in Toraja, are not used to learning to explore new things).

The data above shows that children are less motivated in learning. Thus, every English teacher should provide some interesting learning activities and atmosphere. Teacher can give some classroom activities even outside activities in other to the EFL students more familiar with English [16].

Different learning styles and abilities

Young learners have diverse learning styles and abilities. Some may be visual learners, while others may prefer auditory or kinesthetic approaches. Teachers should employ a variety of instructional methods and materials to accommodate different learning styles and provide individualized support when needed. Here are some perspectives by the pre-service teachers:

“Anak-anak punya gaya belajar yang berbeda, bisa jadi media yang kita gunakan tidak sesuai dengan gaya belajar mereka”.

(Children have different learning styles, it could be that the media we use is not in accordance with their learning style).

“Siswa ada yang cepat tanggap dan mudah mengerti dan ada pula yang tidak”

(Some students are responsive and easy to understand and some are not).

“Ada siswa yang langsung mengerti saat mendengarkan penjelasan namun ada pula yang membutuhkan penjelasan berulang-ulang bahkan perlu didekati secara pribadi”.

(There are students who immediately understand when listening to explanations, but there are also those who need repeated explanations and even need to be approached personally.)

Data above shows that personal learning style and ability is challenging in teaching English to young learners. The English teacher then need to adapt technology to classes appropriately for young learners with various learning styles [17].

Limited exposure to English outside the classroom

Young learners may have limited opportunities to practice English outside the classroom, especially if English is not widely used in their immediate environment. Teachers can encourage parental involvement, recommend online resources, and suggest language-learning activities that can be done at home to promote continuous English language development.

“Ada perasaan khawatir untuk berbahasa Inggris di lingkungan yang tidak menggunakan Bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa sehari-hari”

(There is a feeling of worry about speaking English in an environment that does not use English as a daily language).

“Orang disekitar lingkungan siswa tidak menggunakan Bahasa Inggris sehingga prakteknya terbatas”.

(People around the student environment do not use English so the practice is limited.)

“Tidak ada media-media pendukung baik online ataupun yang ada di rumah ataupun di lingkungan sekitar”

(There are no supporting media either online or at home or in the neighborhood).

Data shows that students living environment affects students in learning English. It was challenging for students to develop their speaking skills because they did not frequently communicate in English [18]. Hence children who have adequate exposure to language accustomed to the specific qualities of that language and those who lack exposure feel difficult to train the brain for new speech pattern of the target language [19].

Limited learning resources

Limited learning resources pose a significant challenge in teaching English to young learners. Access to appropriate and diverse learning materials is crucial for creating engaging and effective language learning experiences. Results of interview can be seen as follows:

“Susahnya mendapat materi yang pas dan sesuai konteks untuk digunakan mengajar”

(It is difficult to get the right and contextual material to be used to teach).

“Butuh fasilitas yang lengkap dan tidak semua tempat menyediakan sarana tersebut.”

(We need complete facilities and not all places provide these facilities).

This data shows that the last challenge is the limited learning resources in delivering their teaching process. As supported by a research that limited computer facilities, teachers' lack of skills, and lack of support from schools and institutes were found to be the major challenges of using technology in young learners' classes [21].

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the pre-service teacher in Toraja face several challenges in teaching English to young learners. The challenges are limited attention span and concentration, mother tongue interference, motivation and engagement, different learning styles and abilities, limited exposure to English outside the classroom, and limited learning resources. By recognizing and addressing these challenges, teachers can create effective strategies and learning environments that support the English language learning journey of young learners.

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