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Teachers' Challenges in Teaching Online English to Young Learners: A Case Study in Pandemic Era

Fahriany^{1✉}, Fitriani², Lulu Farhan³, Nida Husna⁴, Didin Nuruddin Hidayat⁵, Mahlil⁶

UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia^{1,2,3,4,5}

Politeknik Negeri Lhokseumawe, Indonesia⁶

E-mail: fahriany@uinjkt.ac.id¹, fitriani21@mhs.uinjkt.ac.id², lulufarhan_21@mhs.uinjkt.ac.id³,
nida.husna@uinjkt.ac.id⁴, didin.nuruddin@uinjkt.ac.id⁵, mahlil@pnl.ac.id⁶

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi tantangan guru sekolah dasar dalam mengajar bahasa Inggris online kepada pelajar muda di era pandemi serta pandangan guru terhadap pengajaran bahasa Inggris online. Solusi juga diberikan oleh guru untuk mengatasi masalah tersebut. Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi kasus. Data diperoleh melalui kuesioner dan wawancara semi terstruktur terhadap 20 guru bahasa Inggris sekolah dasar. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan sejumlah tantangan muncul dari tiga sisi, yaitu kegiatan pembelajaran, manajemen waktu, dan penilaian siswa. Tantangan kegiatan pembelajaran yaitu motivasi siswa, komunikasi, pembelajaran kooperatif, dan pengajaran menulis. Tantangan manajemen waktu termasuk memiliki jumlah waktu yang terbatas dalam memberikan umpan balik kepada siswa. Sedangkan penilaian siswa adalah menilai sikap dan keterampilan kognitif siswa. Penelitian ini menyarankan kepada pengelola dan otoritas pembuat kebijakan pendidikan untuk melakukan evaluasi terhadap pedoman peningkatan kualitas pengajaran online, khususnya untuk sekolah dasar.

Kata Kunci: pengajaran online, pelajar muda, pengajaran bahasa Inggris.

Abstract

This study aims to explore the challenges of primary school teachers in teaching online English to young learners in the pandemic era and teachers' views toward teaching online English. The teachers also provide the solutions to overcome the problems. This is qualitative research that employs a case study as the approach. The data are obtained through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 20 English teachers of primary schools. The results show some challenges emerged from three sides: instructional activity, time management, and student assessment. Challenges of instructional activity, namely students' motivation, communication, cooperative learning, and teaching writing. Time management challenges include having a limited amount of time and providing feedback. At the same time, student assessments assess students' attitudes and cognitive skills. This study suggests the administrators and authorities of education policymakers evaluate the guidelines to enhance the quality of online teaching, especially for elementary schools.

Keywords: online teaching, young learners, teaching English.

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✉ Corresponding author :

Email : fahriany@uinjkt.ac.id

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching English at an early age, as early as possible, to young learners can give great attainment. It is in line with Cameron's theory of foreign language learning, which suggests starting learning a foreign language as early as possible. The earlier age offers great advantages to some language skills areas, i.e., listening skills and pronunciation. Some researchers have shown that the age before 5 is the best age for a child to start learning a second language. This period is also called the golden age, which means children are more successful in mastering their language skills by the age of 5-12. The students who start learning a foreign language in primary school can better accomplish language proficiency than those who start learning a foreign language in the following levels of educational stages (Capperucci, 2017). That fact reflects the necessity of English learning is strongly emphasized in the initial stages. Thereby, the consideration of English is essential to be introduced to young learners at earlier ages.

Moreover, teaching English to children is different from older learners since they have specific characteristics and needs that insist teachers pay close attention to particular principles of teaching English to young learners (TEYL). In terms of learning, young learners require a wide range of activities that engage all of their senses compared to adults (Richelson, 2010). On the other hand, young learners are more enthusiastic, curious, and energetic as they still learn and discover the world around them. Besides, teaching English to young learners entails more than teaching language skills. Teachers need to boost young learners' emotional, physical, social, and intellectual to develop their English skills (Brown, 2001).

Despite the pivotal roles of the teaching profession as a teacher to young learners, primary school teachers need adaptability to the changing learning process, especially with the current condition that schools are facing unexpected situations or shifts from the traditional classroom model to the online classroom (Palvia et al., 2018). Online learning requires young learners' teachers to emphasize their attention to children's language developmental aspects which involve motoric, emotional, social, and cognitive aspects (Robingatin et al., 2021). Following young learners' characteristics, the teachers' role is essential in designing online language activities since children's language development is significantly influenced by their touch and thought. Therefore, children's online learning activities and learning atmosphere should be similar to conventional ones.

However, many primary school teachers claim that English teaching is uncomfortable and challenging since schools convert face-to-face classes to virtual on (Cahyati & Rizqiya, 2021). It can be challenging for teachers to accomplish some of those requirements in teaching English to young learners since schools convert face-to-face classes to virtual classes. During the pandemic, there have been a number of barriers that primary teachers face during online classes. Although face-to-face learning and virtual learning aim to achieve the target of teaching and learning, those two ways of learning are undoubtedly different in terms of teachers' roles and competencies to demonstrate young learners through engaging and motivating online activities. Thus, teachers of English to young learners must be comprehended how to handle online learning properly.

These current circumstances lead to a challenging task for teachers when switching to online teaching practices. Although there has been a rise in research on how online learning changed the educational system, there is still a dearth of research exploring teachers' views and challenges toward online teaching for younger students. Overall, to respond to the issue, this study explores primary school teachers' challenges in teaching online English to young learners. This study mainly focuses on several aspects, including instructional activity, time management, and students' assessment. Despite the challenges encountered by teachers, this study also explores how the teachers deal with those challenges. Hence, to ensure the objectives, this study presents the research questions as follows:

1. What are the teachers' views toward teaching online English to young learners?
2. What are the challenges of teachers in online English to young learners?
3. How do the teachers overcome those problems?

In teaching English to young learners in primary school, the English teachers must comprehend young learners' language learning principles. Children learn through experience by manipulating the surrounding objects, which means that young learners learn through hands-on experience and manipulating objects in their environment (Sukarno, 2008). Thus, teachers need to use extensive and varied media and realia as teaching aids when delivering the materials. Besides, they learn through the social context where the learners meet and know one another. Thus, teachers need to build the classroom similar to the social context. Young learners' acquisition of language takes place through social interaction. Vigotsky in Sukarno (2008) claimed that language acquisition occurs through social interaction. Therefore, teachers should communicate English naturally in the classroom as they are similar in society.

Teaching-learning online means lessons are conducted through a virtual classroom in which communication occurs through technology using an internet connection by using a computer, tablet, or smartphone (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). The online teaching-learning process should establish the social context as the objective of the traditional classroom (Wiseman et al., 2020). On the other hand, several outline essential aspects in designing online subjects: learning space, planning and conveying an enhancing course content, communicating, and providing feedback. Teachers should be able to organize the online classroom as the face-to-face class routine, such as involving several activities that engage students to learn English and building interaction between a teacher and a student.

Researchers and scholars have discovered various challenges in teaching English online to young learners in the previous studies. First, the challenges of pre-elementary teachers regarding the quality to delivery content of English courses, assessment, technical limitations, and much more have arisen (Krishan et al., 2020). Second, teachers also experienced challenges teaching English for secondary students, such as no direct response, internet connection plan, and inability to see students directly. Third, a study by Rasmitadila et al. (2020) also revealed the primary teachers' challenges related to students' participation in instruction, students' conditioning, technical barriers to online teaching, and online teaching experience. The challenges in teaching online English classes were also found in several aspects, namely learners' motivation, attitude, personal practice, and study habits in online English learning (Mutiah et al., 2020; Widayanti & Suarnajaya, 2021).

In addition, a survey published by Cambridge English (2020) claimed that teaching young learners online was a challenging task for teachers. These included challenges in giving instructions in the online lesson, taking longer time to prepare activities, getting easily distracted, and focusing on the teachers' center.

From all those prior studies, many challenges appear in teaching online English for young learners since their characteristics need more interactions not only with their teachers but also with their classmates to build communication through a new language. Therefore, it is recommended for educators to use hand-on activities, which mean learning by doing for children to encourage them to learn English while discussing, investigating, creating, and discovering.

Having highlighted the key challenges in the literature regarding some problems both teaching offline and online English, the problem is that all of the findings are intended for older students from secondary to university students. Nonetheless, all research are very limited which link to teaching English for younger students in the context of online English, especially in the Indonesian sense. To lessen this void, the issue requires to be further discussed. The current study addressed the primary school teachers' challenges in TEFYL online, which mainly focuses on the three aspects: instructional activity, time management, and student assessment. Therefore, the finding of this study will be beneficial for administrators and authorities of education policymakers to evaluate the guidelines for enhancing the quality of online teaching, especially for elementary schools.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative design that applies the case study as the approach. The case study investigates the contemporary phenomenon within the real-life context, and the research should be specific,

complex, and functional (Prihatin et al., 2021). The subjects in this study are 20 primary English teachers year 1-3 level from different schools in Jakarta and South Tangerang. Most English teachers were younger in their careers, and they were within 23-30 years. The researchers intentionally chose the participants to fulfill the criteria as the target of the research study.

Both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were employed in this study for the instruments. The questionnaire and interview questions are adopted from Mercado (2008), Lapada et al. (2020), and Pinter (2017) elaborated with other kinds of scientific papers related to the study's issue. The questionnaires are intended to know general data regarding teachers' views about teaching online English to young learners. Meanwhile, the interview as major data aimed to gain detailed and further data information comprehensively and meaningfully about teachers' challenges and their solutions to overcome the problems.

The procedure started by collecting the data from the questionnaire, which was taken through Google form. Then, the researcher began gathering data from the interview, which was conducted for around 30 to 40 minutes and recorded through Zoom. After gathering the data, the researchers divided the data analysis into two steps. First, data from the questionnaires were analyzed and calculated to determine the percentage of each indicator, which was then the data displayed on the table statistically. Second, data from the interview questions were analyzed and described qualitatively.

In the process of analyzing data, the researchers need to reduce irrelevant data and choose the relevant data that occurs when reading the data to represent the objectives of the research questions (Creswell, 2012). The data reduction was made to reduce the unessential data since the researcher sometimes obtained abundantly available the gathered data. After being done with data reduction, the researcher displayed the data through a description explanation and some ways for displaying the data.

After data, both the questionnaire and interview followed those steps, such as reducing data and displaying data. Concluding was the final step after the results of data analysis had been organized and analyzed. The researchers interpret the data with a deeper understanding and more significant meaning the data, which created a result finding followed by a drawing for the conclusion.

In addition, to explore the trustworthiness of this qualitative research, the researchers used member checking as a technique involving participants' validation to obtain the credibility of the results. Data analysis or results are returned to the actual participants involved in the research to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences regarding teaching online English. The researchers confirmed the participants by interviewing them again whether the description was complete and realistic, whether the themes were accurate, and whether the interpretations were fair and representative (Candela, 2019). Besides, to establish the content validity of data, three expert judgments/professionals were asked to evaluate the instruments, both questionnaires and interview questions. In this case, the expert judgments are language program lecturers that know the research situation well. Therefore, data validity can be acceptable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the analysis data collected from both data questionnaire and interview concerning the teachers' views, teachers challenges, and the ways teachers overcame the problems in teaching online English, together with the discussion with the answers to the research questions are presented after results.

Table 1
Teachers' View on Teaching Online English

List of teachers' views	Number of participants				Percentage	
	Agree	Strongly agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Agree/ Strongly agree	Disagree/ Strongly disagree
Teaching online English for young learners is effective	3	1	10	6	20%	80%
I prefer teaching online for young learners than offline	2	2	11	5	20%	80%
I am fully ready to pedagogically teach online English	3	2	9	6	25%	75%
I can teach online English effectively	5	2	8	5	35%	65%
I can motivate students to learn online English	3	3	7	7	30%	70%
Adequate support from the institution for online learning	7	3	6	4	50%	50%

As presented in Table 1, teachers' views towards the effectiveness and preference of teaching online English to young learners are the highest choice with disagreements, and intense disagreements of 80% and only 20% agree with the effectiveness of online English to young learners. Teachers considered that teaching online is ineffective for children, so they favored teaching in the normal classroom setting. In addition, the number of teachers, 75% confirmed they are not fully ready pedagogically to teach English to their children during online learning. 25% of teachers feel fully ready pedagogically to teach online English to young learners. The inadequate teachers' pedagogical aspects also hampered them in teaching young English learners effectively, with 65% of total disagreement and strong disagreement, and 35% of teachers agree that they can teach online English to their young students. The finding also shows more than half of teachers (70%) are difficult to encourage students' motivation in English during virtual class, while others can motivate students during online English 30%. Meanwhile, a minority of teachers, 50%, indicated that institutions/schools provided adequate support for online learning, especially in utilizing the online resources to design ESL materials.

Researchers and educators have pointed out that online learning might be insufficient or ineffective in involving young learners. They need more interactions and hands-on activities to bring their focus to learn compared to adult learners (Dong et al., 2020; Wedenoja, 2020). Chen et al. (2021) revealed that teachers seemed to agree that online learning is not as effective as classroom-based teaching, which led them to be least impressed with the effectiveness of the online environment for children. The downsides of remote learning have put children at risk in terms of emotional, behavior, and academic performance, which were more likely to be further behind (Chen et al., 2021). There was not only the ineffectiveness linked to online learning but also the insufficient teachers' pedagogical aspects of designing interactive and engaging lessons for children. Teachers seemed ill-equipped to switch their instruction online because their frequently structured and planned content was limited for primary schools (Subekti, 2021).

Table 2
Teachers' Challenges and Solutions

List of Challenges	Teachers' Solutions
Instructional activity	
Maintaining students' motivation and focus	Providing plenty of games and physical exercises
Building communication using English	Involving communication skills activities
Implementation of cooperative language learning	Combining several strategies
Difficulty in teaching writing skills	Having students practice with parents
Time Management	
Having a limited amount of time	Creating a to-do list before the online class
Difficulty in providing feedback timely	Providing feedback through WhatsApp audio

Student's Assessment

Assessing students' attitudes during learning online English	Observing attitudes (motivation, activeness, and discipline) directly through Zoom or Google Meet
Assessing the cognitive aspect of some English skills	Assessing through the tests only

Table 2 presents plenteous challenges encountered by teachers while teaching online English. The emerging challenges indicated that online English learning increased the burden on teachers since teaching young learners was different from the other levels of school stages which have been an inevitable part of the online learning process. Maintaining students' focus and motivation was the first problem during online English instructional activity. Online learning shows teachers' barriers to gaining children's encouragement and focusing on motivating them in English learning. Virtual learning deprived learners' attitude of being motivated in language learning (Ramkissoon et al., 2020; Satyawati et al., 2021; Widayanti & Suarnajaya, 2021). The finding has shown that online teaching English was challenging to utilize relevant interactive language activities to engage learners' motivation. As also noted by Dong et al. (2020), "The absence of young learners' motivation resulted in an uninterested, inactive, and unfocused learning environment". The primary point of motivation in virtual language learning is related to the quality of the language learning environment created by teachers (Gesche, 2009; Hansen & Broekhuizen, 2021). It can be concluded that the problem occurred because young learners were still low in learning initiative, had weak self-regulation, and short attention span, which resulted in online English being inefficient for young learners. Below are the comments of the teachers.

Young learners have very short attention spans, low self-regulation, and low initiative in learning. It is so hard to make them focus when teachers teach or give instruction. Online learning makes children, not in their learning tracks. That is why young learners need to be appropriately led to make them enjoy the learning while playing. (IA/T7)

In addition, teachers mentioned that the virtual English environment inhibited young learners from interacting physically with their teachers and other children to acquire the language through interaction. Most of the teachers reported that online learning deprived learners of the opportunity to extend children's language, especially speaking skills which encouraged them to interact and communicate using English. The finding revealed that online teaching did limit the number of interactions that were possible for children to build the value of their communications and language with each child to build a social environment (Dong et al., 2020). Besides, lacking social interactions with peers and teachers while online learning reduces children's opportunity to use English as a language interaction in the classroom (Cahyati & Rizqiya, 2021).

Building communication and interaction among learners play an essential role in acquiring language. English language teachers need to bridge active interaction among children in the learning process. However, the unavoidable situation always appears when online learning begins, which sometimes results in a lack of communication skills among children. (IA/T2)

Teachers also indicated that cooperative language learning seemed impossible to be done by the wayside when teachers were online teaching. The implementation of cooperative learning in the early grades of primary education raised an issue for teachers (Veldman et al., 2020). Cooperative learning might be particularly challenging to be performed in lower grades of primary education as much more guidance is needed. Thus, constructing cooperative language learning was particularly challenging for young learners' teachers through virtual learning since young learners still had inadequate self-control to regulate their own cooperative learning.

Online learning impedes teachers from promoting the children's learning of a second language by working together in small groups, such as completing the task, creating a product, building oral vocabulary, practicing English, etc., during online learning.

Furthermore, the utmost change in the learning system also contributed to the students' assessment system. Besides, young learners' teachers were challenged with trying to implement effective assessment during distant learning. The teachers pointed out young learners' language competence was challenging to measure

remotely. Still, a fair assessment of young learners was still vague for teachers since the presence of parental assistance affected young learners' cognitive skills (Murillo & Hidalgo, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020). It is closely connected to findings of a study by Lau et al. (2021) that indicated the involvement of parental control in children's attitudes and behaviors was contrary to the actual classroom learning, which was not entirely interpreted their motivations and feelings towards the learning. Moreover, a consistent result also shown by Dong et al., (2020) that the children acted different attitudes when learning online which led the involvement of parental control. Therefore, the greater parental influences might adversely impact young learners during the virtual learning environment.

This study has some inherent limitations, and further studies could be suggested on his topic. Firstly, because this study was conducted with a limited representation of elementary school teachers who employed online teaching in two provinces, the challenges may not be generalizable to general education system settings. Secondly, due to time constraints, this study relied mainly on participants' data from interviews and questionnaires regarding their views and challenges in teaching online English. Therefore, future studies about online learning could explore the stakeholders' perspectives and challenges by including students and parents among many participants and expanding to other provinces in Indonesia. Lastly, the observation process could be more comprehensive information in future studies.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study has highlighted a number of major issues teachers encounter in teaching English to young learners while switching their traditional teaching mode of delivery to online teaching. Firstly, the teachers' instructional challenges include students' motivation, interaction, learning strategy, and writing skills. Secondly, teachers' challenges regarding time management included time limitation and provision of feedback. Thirdly, there are challenges in conducting students' assessments, including assessing students' attitudes and cognitive assessment. Besides, this study also found solutions to cope with those problems teachers faced while teaching online English to young learners. Eventually, this study showed that most primary school teachers claimed online learning was ineffective, and they were least impressed with teaching online for elementary school students. The emergence of challenges is more evident that online learning might not offer young learners sufficient opportunities to interact more with their teachers and peers to build communication through a new language.

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- 5540 *Teachers' Challenges in Teaching Online English to Young Learners: A Case Study in Pandemic Era – Fahriany, Fitriani, Lulu Farhan, Nida Husna, Didin Nuruddin Hidayat, Mahlil*
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