

## **The Portrait of Challenges in Teaching English to Young Learners: A Case Study in an Indonesian Islamic School**

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### **Abstract**

*Teaching English to students with no prior knowledge, a different first language, and varied characters is challenging. This research is a case study design that focused on the teachers' perceptions of teaching English to young learners situated in one of the Islamic schools in Malang, Indonesia. The participants involved were six English teachers at the chosen school. A qualitative approach was employed in this study. Data were generated through interviews. Findings suggest that the participating teachers encountered multiple challenges in their teaching enactment, such as (1) non-English prior knowledge, (2) lack of motivation, (3) negative perceptions of the English language, (4) time constraints for studying English, (5) insufficient teaching and learning devices, (6) messy classroom conditions, and (7) speaking anxiety. With some help from others, teachers' creativity, and some collaborations with other teachers, the teaching and learning process can run conditionally.*

*Keywords: EYL, Elementary School, English Teacher, Teacher Perception*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as a foreign language is challenging, especially if it is a foreign language in a place where English serves a very limited purpose (Songbatumis, 2017). Nowadays, many people can teach English. Whether they are graduated, ungraduated degree or civil servants, even students from Senior High School can explain material in class. Certainly, as long as people prepare the lesson plan, understand the material, and have the ability to deliver it, the teaching-learning method will run conditionally.

However, the fact is, teaching English to students who do not have any background knowledge, have a different first language, and have varied characters is challenging. How teachers connect the material, match the method, and explain clearly is an uneasy job to handle for some teachers. Sometimes teachers themselves unrealize the difficulty. They thought that the material explained is easy for them, but students who were unfamiliar with the vocabulary teachers given will be confused. Some students who learn a foreign language such as English don't find it easy to have many vocabularies. Easy for teachers but difficult for students (Aprilliani, 2021).

The main problem is not only about the knowledge of the teachers but their background knowledge, their method, and even their experiences in teaching and learning strategies are having more effects on teaching English. Teachers have to know the teaching and learning methods. This study aims at exploring the challenges of teaching English as a foreign language and how they handle it based on teachers' creativity (Ilyas, 2018).

Many other researchers conducted research related to this field. The challenges teachers and students face in teaching and learning English as a foreign language, the solution to fix the problems, and many other topics are trending to be observed through different perceptions. Teachers' perceptions, students' perceptions, and even parents' perceptions are found in some research. There must be a problem in the teaching and learning process, not only in English subjects.

Extensive studies have recently focused on students' points of view. For example, recent research by Sabelina (2021) explored students' perceptions of English learning material during full online learning in an Indonesian senior high school sector. Another study by Andriyani (2022) investigated students' perceptions of learning English through blended learning using an explanatory mixed-method research design. Those two kinds of research are discussed through students' perceptions. Other research by Mohammad (2021) examined the difficulties in the reading of young second language learners in terms of accuracy, comprehension, and rate using the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability test. Another work by Nenotek (2022) discussed students' difficulties in writing English academic essays and the dominant challenges using a mixed-method approach. Research on teachers' perceptions seems to be under-explored recently. To extend the literature, this study explores teachers' perceptions of teaching English to young learners in an Islamic-based elementary school. Two research questions are addressed in this study:

1. What are teachers' challenges in teaching English as a foreign language to young learners in an Islamic school?
2. How do the teachers cope with the challenges?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Studies focusing on challenges in teaching and learning of English skills have been widely conducted. For instance, Humairoh (2021) explored students' difficulties in writing and revealed that the main problem of their difficulties in writing is hard to arrange the grammatical structure related to the use of verb agreement, tenses, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structures. Her study used non-test instruments, close-ended questionnaires, documents, and semi-structured interviews. The students' felt difficulty in using grammar which covered in using subject-verb agreement, tenses, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure. She concluded that reading a lot before writing becomes one solution to eliminate students' difficulties in writing essays.

In the same vein, Husni (2020) explored the problems faced by teachers in teaching English in an Indonesian state senior high school context. By using a descriptive qualitative method, the result of the research indicated that teachers faced some problems in teaching English, including 1) lack of student interest in learning, especially English language lessons, 2) limited school facilities to support learning media, 3) lack of focus or concentration of students in learning, 4) limited hours, and 5) classroom condition is boring. Furthermore, Zamzami (2019) investigated the teaching and learning of English in an Islamic primary school in Malang. In his research, he found that the curriculum, teaching methods, and teachers' perspectives influence the way English is taught at the school.

The existing literature has explored the teaching and learning technique, difficulties in one skill, and the difficulties in teaching Senior High School. These are just a few research observations about Elementary Schools. The present study investigates the challenge of teaching English to young learners. Those are the Elementary School teachers in one of the Islamic schools in East Java, specifically.

To extend the literature, the present study was designed to portray challenges experienced by EFL teachers in teaching English to young learners. The study also sought to uncover how these teachers deal with the challenges. Findings from the study are expected to shed light on the effective strategies teachers use to cope with their teaching problems in an EYL context and to yield kinds of the challenges they face in teaching practices.

## **3. RESEARCH METHODS**

This research focuses on one of the private Islamic schools located in Malang city, East Java. This is an Elementary school with "bilingual and full-day school" as its motto. This school has 37 teachers with more or less 400 students from first grade until sixth grade. Besides the Indonesian language, there are two more languages in this school, which are Arabic and English. Of six teachers in the English language, two teachers did not graduate with Bachelor's English Education Degree. Some of them are also homeroom teachers, who are not supposed to teach other subjects outside "Tema".

### **3.1 Research Design**

The present study employed a qualitative approach. According to Berg (1989), qualitative research refers to the meaning, concepts, definition, characteristics, metaphor, symbol, and description of things. The design used was a case study. Data were generated through interviews. The researchers do an interview for more or less ten minutes each, which

means 60 minutes in total. By using Indonesian language, the researchers do the interview with all of the participants face-to-face. There are five main questions which are followed by three to five other questions, so there are eight to ten questions in every interview. The interview questions are: 1) How long have been teaching English 2) Is there any challenge in teaching English 3) How does the teacher handle the challenge 4) Do teachers need other teachers' help in handling the challenge 5) Is the challenge faced by teachers are from students themselves. The researchers recorded the interview and transcript it into written text.

### 3.2 Participants

The participants of this research are six English teachers in one of the Islamic schools in Malang, East Java, Indonesia.

No	Name (pseudonym)	Gender	S1 Study	English Teaching Experiences
1	Aisyah	Female	S1 English Education	6 months
2	Marikha	Female	S1 English Education	10 years
3	Aarumi	Female	S1 English Education	3 years
4	Nuris	Female	S1 Elementary School	4 years
5	Ayu	Female	S1 English Literature	3 years
6	Surya	Male	S1 English Education	13 years

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The participants of this research are six English teachers in one of the Islamic schools in Malang. In analyzing the data, first, the researchers reread the theories to confirm the data, the outcomes of the recording and listening were transcribed, so the second step the researchers analyze based on the theory and data transcript which is the result of the interview, and last make the conclusion. The objects that were recorded by the researchers were the participant's words and sentences, so they can get deeper data about the teachers' way of handling all of those challenges in teaching English to young learners from the participants themselves.

## 4. FINDINGS

English teaching and learning will be boring if teachers have minimum creativity and did not understand the material well. For example, playing games. Playing games in the middle of the teaching and learning process is better than just writing. In the same vein, Armanda (2022) revealed that gamification can increase the fun while learning and that the same time encourage student performance. Writing on the whiteboard and making students copy them is the old way of the teaching and learning process. In this era, the way teachers make the class alive is more important.

Those are such kinds of challenging problems. Luckily, because of the creativity of teachers in this Islamic School, they can face most of them easily. But of course, all of their struggles are built from a discussion among those six teachers. In this case, the researchers will explain them one by one.

#### Non-English prior knowledge

*For students who learn English in kindergarten will be much easier, but for those who are not, will take more time. So, it is based on their background knowledge.*

There are 80 students in each grade. This year, of those 80 students only 35 students graduated from English kindergarten school. The difference is they have wider background knowledge of basic English than others. According to Smith (2021), background knowledge impacts differentially stronger and weaker readers. Some of their friends will think that they are experts in English, although the fact is just, that they learned it first. In this case, the teachers utilize this condition to motivate others. Those who already have the background knowledge have to share knowledge with their friends. They can work together, whether in groups or even work in pairs.

#### Lack of motivation

*Students lack motivation in learning and some of them are asking “Miss, why we should learn English? It’s difficult.” Even though they do not know that English is used everywhere.*

As stated by Riyanti (2019), not all students are motivated to learn English even though it is a compulsory foreign language for secondary students. Some students have a big question in their heads. “Why we should learn English?”. Sometimes, motivation or even ambition is very useful in the process of teaching and learning. In the same way, Yuzulia (2021) also revealed that students’ motivation will be correlated with their performance and achievement during the learning process. For those students who don’t have any motivation, teachers can ask them back. “What do you want to be, in the future?” no matter their answers later, teachers can lead them to learn English. To be the police, you will talk with foreigners so you have to speak English. To be a doctor, you will speak with patients from abroad, so you must speak English.

Give them motivation; what do you want to be in the future? That can be a reference for the students. If you want to be a police or soldier, you have to be able to speak English. How if there is any foreigner who wants to ask, then you can’t answer because you didn’t speak English. We do not try to frighten them. Just try to motivate.

#### Negative perceptions of the English language

*Because English is a second language, they feel English is difficult. Maybe that is the most difficult subject they feel difficult. Miss, it’s difficult, I can’t do this or that. So, they just made any possible reason. They don’t even try or give any struggle but already said it’s hard. The most challenging thing is when they said, “Fixed. This is the most difficult subject that I have to learn.*

English is the most difficult subject because students rarely used it in everyday life. Sutra (2020) uncovered that students rarely repeat English lessons at home and do not memorize English vocabulary gradually. Especially in their daily conversation. They are fluently speaking Indonesian or their local language and seldom speak English. It makes

them feel strange, even with basic English words. The teachers can do an action by asking them some common words and the simplest questions. For example: Hello, how are you, what are you doing, etc. or maybe teachers can put more instructions using English, such as: Close the door!, Open page 23!, Silent please! and so on. Those words will give some brave in their mind to speak English and can increase their vocabulary.

*So, we can give a command for them to do something. The basic and general one, but using English. For example, "Please close the door, please turn on the lamp." (In Indonesia). Those commands can be changed into English "Open the door please, close the door please, and so on."*

*But in the sixth grade, I just found out students said that "Why I should learn English since after my graduation, I will continue my study at Islamic boarding schools." This is a little bit shocked me.*

"I don't care about English. I will not learn English anymore because I am going to continue my study at Islamic boarding schools." Husna (2019) revealed in her article that Everyone knows that English is the biggest language in the world, and is known as an international language. In this case, teachers in this Islamic school Malang collaborate with their parents. Thus, the adult's role is very important in a child's learning process (Cahyati, 2019). If their children are going to continue their studies at Islamic boarding schools, try to find a school with English as a subject. Because English is the most international language used around the world. Additionally, Khalili (2021) argues that English is used alongside other languages in many countries, rather than being the only means of communication. So, it can be the reason to convince them in learning English continuously.

*My daughter is also in the sixth grade, later I will take her to an Islamic boarding school. but she already told her mother. "Mom, later in my Islamic boarding school. Please try to find a school with an English subject, okay?"*

#### Time constraints for studying English

*Mmm, the other challenge is maybe lack of time or less time. In the school, students learn just 2 times allocations, so it's around 60 minutes. And in 60 minutes, we have to deliver the material, give an assignment, give a score, and drill without giving any homework. So, in our school, we are not allowed to give any homework. So, the material, assignment, and score have to be done on that day and at that time.*

In school, English subject is around 60-90 minutes a week. It is a little time for learning English. Therefore, they have to learn more at home with their family. This Islamic school also has the motto "school without homework". So, the English teachers have to finish the material, do the assignment, and score at school. Then give the books back to the students at one time.

#### Insufficient teaching and learning devices.

*My main challenge is when we teach, there is a class that cannot use the LCD. While my media learning is a video from YouTube, I sometimes use YouTube as my media*

*for my students. So, if that class cannot use the LCD, I can't play the video, and difficult to deliver the material.*

No matter how perfect the teachers' lesson plan is, if there are no proper teaching and learning devices, then the learning process in the class will not run well. The present study by Kholisoh (2018) proved that fun media once again was well accepted by students, especially young learners. Fortunately, these six teachers are complete with each other. If Miss A has one missing thing in her teaching process, she will ask for Miss B, so will B to C, and so on; they can count on each other.

*If I can't use an LCD in class A, I will teach class A in class B or other classes and vice versa. So, I need help from other teachers.*

#### Messy classroom conditions

*Sometimes, students are hard to be focused in class; sometimes they have a conversation with their friends, imagine something, and feel sleepy, but the most that happens in the class is having a conversation with friends. So, it's hard for them to pay attention to me when I'm explaining in front of the class. It's a little bit hard for me to deliver the material and hard for students to achieve it. Even students are drawing and writing on their desks.*

Making students focus on the teachers is a challenging thing to do. Since sometimes students are sinking into their own minds, feeling sleepy, and imagining many things. In this case, no matter what their teachers explain in front of the class, they will ignore it. In addition, Cicekci (2019) argues that students said teachers need to be more interested in students, approach them positively, and use different teaching methods depending on their level.

Fixing this challenge, the teachers have some ice-breaking using English songs. In similarity, Fitriana (2021) unpacked that the media of the song can be used for learning activities in the classroom. For example: If you're happy and you know it claps your hand (students clap their hands) and if the students have a conversation with their friends, the teachers do the English ice-breaking in their class. As found by Astuti (2020), an ice breaker is an effort to break or melt the rigid atmosphere that is like ice to become more relaxing and comfortable. Example: "Everybody claps one (students clap one time), clap two (students clap two times), silent clap (sstt sstt), silent clap (sstt sstt), silent (ssssttt)". This ice-breaking is always working great. Additionally, Aniuranti (2021) indicated that icebreakers are applied to prepare the student to join the class and introduce the material that is going to be taught. So that students can back focus on their material and teachers back focus on teaching.

*Actually, there are so many ice-breaking but the most I used is the song "clap your hand". So, the song lyric is "If you're happy and you know it claps your hand (clap clap clap)" then students clap their hands three times, following the instructions. And the words "clap your hands" can be changed into many things to make students back focus and wake up.*

### Speaking anxiety

*Actually, they are able to, sometimes they tried and they can speak. But I don't know, maybe they are shy or what. They can, but sometimes they don't want to. Maybe lack of speaking.*

First of all, students have not brave to speak although for a few words. Kencanawati (2016) revealed that it is believed that speaking is a difficult subject because it is not only about learning and pronouncing words. Teachers know that they can do it, they can speak, and they can say something. But somehow, they feel afraid of their friends, feel shy, and nervous about saying something in English. A study by Jaelani (2020) showcased that most students have some difficulties in speaking due to a lack of confidence and skills such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. So that the teachers collaborate with their class teachers to speak English in routine words. Such as before starting studying, teachers lead praying using English. "Everybody hands up, on the shoulders, in front of the chest, praying before the study, praying start" This command is used in some activities, like before eating, before going home, etc.

*In this school, there is a daily conversation which mastered even by the home teachers themselves. Those simple words can be a reference for them. For example, when they start to eat and study, they always start by praying. To give commands before praying, teachers can use English. "Everybody hands up, on the shoulder, in front of the chest, praying before the study, praying start." Indirectly they are learning, this one is chest, this one is shoulder, this is how students hand up, and so on.*

In summary, there are seven challenges in teaching English as a foreign language faced by the teachers in this Elementary school. Most of them are based on the students themselves. Based on the interview data, some of the students do not have any background knowledge of English, they have lack motivation, negative perceptions of English before trying, and have no brave in speaking. The rest are just technical challenges, such as time constraints for studying English, messy classroom conditions, and insufficient teaching and learning devices.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, teachers' creativity becomes the main role in handling every problem. Roustae (2015) also argues that teachers' perspectives on creativity can be effective in process of students' learning. The way they deliver the material, choose the method and choose the appropriate media learning are very important in the teaching and learning process. Many people can understand English material easily, but not all of them can deliver the material clearly to students without any method. Additionally, Nurhayati (2021) argues that even teachers need to improve their ability in creating media for learning because it is very important to improve students' learning achievement and motivate them to learn. They need to create their media learning to find the proper one for the students.

The first findings found that different kindergartens will have different effects on the students. Background knowledge is something that people can build. Souisa (2020) revealed



that if students do not have adequate background knowledge, teachers can help students build the appropriate knowledge. Hence, it doesn't matter that there are some different capacities of students' background knowledge. That's the teachers' job to build, activate, and create their background knowledge.

Basically, some reasons are connected to each other. Students lack motivation, have negative perceptions of English, students cannot focus easily and feel sleepy with uncommon words and have no brave to speak. First thing, students have a negative perception that English is difficult, so they don't have any motivation, then they can't focus in class and feel sleepy easily. Because of that condition, it makes them not brave to speak. In this case, parents are playing a role in motivating their own children. Teachers, parents, and students have to work together in the student's teaching and learning process.

A study related to students' insufficient motivation is from Latifah and Sitti (2021). Their study discussed students who are uninterested and unmotivated to learn English. Students are just focused on passing the score without paying attention to the teacher's explanation. They feel a lack of enthusiasm for learning English. In Latifah and Sitti (2021)'s article, they argue that students that are unmotivated to learn English have been characterized as having low English competency.

In point of fact, the lack of teaching and learning devices and limited time to study is back to the school itself. How the school gives the best for the students, to make them comfortable, have fun, and enjoy themselves although they are in school. How long the time school gives students? Therefore, not only the way they get the appropriate material and reach the target but also how students feel comfortable in the process of studying. If teachers think that the time is not enough, the school can make an English club for kids, outside the allocation of time every week.

The sixth problem is messy classroom conditions, which are signed by students who feel sleepy with uncommon words. Teachers just need to make those words common for students. Repeating and using the words continuously will make them easier to memorize and apply in sentences automatically. In addition, parents can also help by paying more attention to what their children have learned in school and drilling it at home. So that, it can be beneficial for each other. Teachers can drill easier, students get much more vocabulary, and parents are happy with that. Pek (2020) argues that parental involvement has had a big influence on their child's academic achievement.

Research related to this problem is from Mihara (2018). Falling asleep at Japanese universities is a common phenomenon. There are several possible reasons for this. Fatigue from everyday life such as commuting, inability to concentrate on a 90-minute lesson, or simply lack motivation to learn, are the possible result stated in Mihara (2018)'s work. The result of this previous study showed that taking a vocabulary test at the beginning of class was an effective method of motivating students. The similarity of both two research is the challenges in teaching English as a Foreign Language. However, the difference from this present study is that the present study found 8 challenges and some ways to solve them. While in the previous study, there are only 3 challenges found.

Related to another previous study by Husni (2020), the similarity with this study is both discussed teachers' challenges in teaching English as a Foreign Language, but the difference is she found that there are five problems faced by the teachers, while the present

study found eight problems of challenges in teaching English as a foreign language. So, there are three more problems found in this research. Fortunately, those three problems which are found in Husni (2020) discussion, are also found in this present study.

Another previous study is on students' perceptions by Humairoh (2021). Her research also discussed teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language. Besides, her research is discussed through students' perceptions and just focused on writing skills. Meanwhile, this research is not focused on just one skill but on teaching and learning English generally. This research is discussed through students' perceptions, not from the teachers' perceptions. Hopefully, this research can be beneficial for other researchers who are conducting research related to this study. Other researchers can also do other research through students' perceptions in facing the problems of learning English as a foreign language.

In summary, people understand that most problems faced by teachers are because of the students themselves. It explains from the findings above that they have no brave to speak, can't focus, feel sleepy, English is difficult, lack motivation, and they already have some negative perceptions of English. Those are the problems faced by the teachers because of the students. In succeeding in the teaching and learning process, the participation of students, teachers, and also parents is important to play roles. The way they complete and support each other is needed to make the teaching and learning process run conditionally.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Teaching English as a foreign language is challenging, especially if it is a foreign language in a place where English serves a very limited purpose (Songbatumis, 2017). Teaching students with various characteristics, different background knowledge, and different first language have to be faced and handled by the teachers in their own ways and methods. Based on the result of the interview, some challenges are faced by the English teachers in this Islamic School in Malang, such as (1) non-English prior knowledge, (2) lack of motivation, (3) negative perceptions of the English language, (4) time constraints for studying English, (5) insufficient teaching and learning devices, (6) messy classroom conditions, and (7) speaking anxiety.

Teachers faced many challenges in teaching English as a foreign language to young learners. But they can also know and find a way to fix them easily. With some help from others, their creativity, and some collaborations with other participants, the teaching and learning process can run conditionally. Hopefully, this research can be beneficial for readers, especially for other researchers who want to conduct research related to this study.

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