
Challenges Faced In Teaching English To Young Learners:

A Case Study of Gresik Islamic School

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Abstract

Teaching English to students who lack prior knowledge, have a different first language, and possess diverse cultural backgrounds presents a significant challenge. This study employed a case study design to explore the perspectives of teachers regarding the instruction of English to young learners attending an Islamic school in Gresik, Indonesia. The study involved six English teachers from the selected school as participants. A qualitative methodology was utilized, and data were collected through interviews. The findings indicate that the teachers who participated in the study faced various challenges during their teaching, including (1) limited prior knowledge of English, (2) lack of motivation, (3) negative attitudes towards the English language, (4) time constraints for English study, (5) inadequate teaching and learning resources, (6) disorderly classroom environments, and (7) speaking anxiety. With assistance from others, the creativity of teachers, and collaborations with their peers, the teaching and learning process can be facilitated under certain conditions. Keywords; English Young Learners (EYL), Elementary school, English teacher, and teacher perception.

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English to students with no prior background, a diverse first language, and varying personalities is indeed challenging. Some teachers find it difficult to establish connections with the material, choose suitable teaching methods, and explain concepts clearly (Aziz, 2020). They may underestimate the challenges involved, assuming that the material is straightforward for them, but fail to consider the confusion it may cause to students who are unfamiliar with the given vocabulary. Learning a foreign language like English can be especially challenging for students who struggle to acquire an extensive vocabulary. While it might be easy for teachers, it proves difficult for some students (Aprilliani, 2021).

The primary concern lies not only in the teachers' subject knowledge but also in their background knowledge, methods, and prior experiences with teaching and learning strategies, which significantly impact the English teaching process (Aziz, 2019). It is essential for teachers to be well-versed in various teaching and learning methods. This study aims to investigate the obstacles encountered while teaching English as a foreign language and how teachers address them by utilizing their creativity (Ilyas, 2018).

Numerous researchers have conducted studies in the field of teaching and learning English as a foreign language, exploring various aspects such as the challenges faced

by teachers and students, potential solutions to address these issues, and other related topics. These investigations have been approached from diverse perspectives, including those of teachers, students, and even parents. It is evident that issues arise within the teaching and learning process, not confined to the English subject.

In recent times, there has been a notable increase in studies that specifically examine students' perspectives. For instance, (Sabelina, 2021) conducted a research study that delved into students' perceptions of English learning materials during full online learning within the Indonesian senior high school context. Additionally, (Andriyani, 2022) conducted a study that focused on students' perceptions of learning English through blended learning, utilizing an explanatory mixed-method research design. Both studies emphasize the importance of understanding students' perspectives in the learning process.

In a study conducted by (Mohammad, 2021), the focus was on examining the challenges faced by young second language learners in reading, specifically in terms of accuracy, comprehension, and reading speed, utilizing the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability test. Another research by (Nenotek, 2022) explored the difficulties students encounter when writing English academic essays and identified the prevailing challenges using a mixed-method approach. While studies on teachers' perceptions are

relatively limited in recent literature, this study aims to contribute to the existing of knowledge by investigating teachers' perceptions of teaching English to young learners in an Islamic-based elementary school. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the difficulties encountered by teachers when teaching English as a foreign language to young learners in an Islamic school?
2. How do teachers handle and address these challenges in their teaching practices?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been numerous studies dedicated to exploring the challenges in teaching and learning English skills. For example, (Humairoh, 2021) conducted research on students' writing difficulties and identified that the main obstacle lies in organizing grammatical structures, including verb agreement, tenses, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structures. The study utilized various research instruments such as non-test instruments, close-ended questionnaires, documents, and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that students faced difficulties in utilizing grammar rules related to subject-verb agreement, tenses, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure. It was concluded that reading extensively prior to writing can be a solution to alleviate students' difficulties in writing essays.

In a similar case, (Husni, 2020) conducted a study to examine the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English within an Indonesian state senior high school setting. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, the research revealed several issues encountered by teachers, including: 1) a lack of student interest in learning, particularly in English language lessons, 2) limited availability of school facilities to support instructional media, 3) difficulties in maintaining student focus and concentration during lessons, 4) limited teaching hours, and 5) unstimulating classroom environments. Similarly, (Zamzami, 2019) conducted research on the teaching and learning of English in an Islamic primary school located in Gresik. The study shed light on how the curriculum, teaching methods, and teachers' perspectives collectively influence the approach to English instruction in the school.

The available literature has examined various aspects such as teaching and learning techniques, specific skill difficulties, and challenges in teaching English at the Senior High School level. However, there is a scarcity of research focusing on the Elementary School context. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the challenges faced by Elementary School teachers in teaching English to young learners, specifically in an Islamic school located in East Java. To contribute to the existing literature, this study was conducted

to depict the challenges encountered by English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in teaching young learners. Additionally, the study aimed to explore the strategies employed by these teachers to address these challenges. The findings of this research are anticipated to provide insights into effective teaching strategies employed by teachers in the Early Years English Language (EYL) context and shed light on the specific challenges they encounter in their instructional practices.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

The research focuses on a specific private Islamic school situated in Gresik city, East Java. This school operates as an Elementary school and emphasizes a "bilingual and full-day school" approach. It employs a total of 37 teachers and caters to approximately 400 students across first to sixth grade. Apart from the Indonesian language, this school also incorporates Arabic and English into its curriculum. Among the six English language teachers, two do not possess a Bachelor's degree in English Education. Additionally, some of the teachers also serve as homeroom teachers, responsible for subjects within their assigned area.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The current study utilized a qualitative approach, which aligns with (Berg's, 1989) definition of qualitative research focusing on capturing the meaning, concepts,

characteristics, and descriptions of phenomena through methods such as interviews. The research design employed for this study was a case study. Data collection involved conducting face-to-face interviews with the participants, with each interview lasting approximately ten minutes. The interviews were conducted in the Indonesian language. The researchers prepared a set of five main questions, accompanied by three to five additional questions, resulting in a total of eight to ten questions in each interview. The interview questions covered topics such as the teachers' years of experience in teaching English, the challenges they encountered, the strategies they employed to address these challenges, the need for assistance from other teachers, and whether the challenges stemmed from the students themselves. The researchers recorded the interviews and transcribed them into written text for analysis. The research participants consisted of six English teachers from an Islamic school located in Gresik, East Java, Indonesia.

NO	NAME	GENDER	TEACHING EXPERIENCE
1	Abdul Halim	Male	10 years
2	Achmad Fachrudin	Male	6 years
3	Hilmi	Male	4 years
4	Nasrullah	Male	7 Monts
5	Safinatul Hikmah	Female	5 years
6	Luluk Wardah	Female	9 years

DATA ANALYSIS

In analyzing the data, the researchers initially reviewed relevant theories to validate the collected data. The recorded interviews were transcribed, and in the second step, the researchers conducted an analysis by comparing the theory with the data transcripts, which represented the participants' responses during the interviews. Finally, the researchers drew conclusions based on their analysis. The recorded data primarily focused on the participants' words and sentences, providing a deeper understanding of how the teachers addressed the challenges encountered in teaching English to young learners, as conveyed by the participants themselves.

IV. FINDINGS

English teaching and learning can become monotonous if teachers lack creativity and a thorough understanding of the material. For instance, incorporating games into the teaching and learning process can make it more engaging compared to traditional writing activities. Similarly, Armanda (2022) highlighted that gamification can enhance the enjoyment of learning while simultaneously motivating student performance. The traditional method of writing on the whiteboard and having students copy them is outdated. In the present era, it is crucial for teachers to employ dynamic approaches that bring the classroom to life.

Fortunately, the teachers in this Islamic school have demonstrated remarkable creativity, enabling them to overcome many of these challenging problems. However, it is important to note that their collective efforts and solutions are the result of ongoing discussions among the six teachers. In this study, the researchers will provide a detailed explanation of each challenge and how it was addressed by the teachers.

Non-English Prior knowledge:

“Students who have prior knowledge of English from their time in kindergarten will find learning English easier compared to those who do not have any prior exposure. Therefore, the ease or difficulty of learning English is influenced by the students' individual background knowledge.”

In each grade, there are a total of 80 students. However, only 35 students in the current year have graduated from an English kindergarten school, giving them a wider background knowledge of basic English compared to their peers. Smith (2021) emphasizes that background knowledge has a differential impact on stronger and weaker readers. Some students may perceive these English kindergarten graduates as experts in English, even though they simply had the advantage of learning it earlier. The teachers in this case leverage this situation to foster motivation among all students. The students with prior knowledge are encouraged to share their knowledge with their peers, promoting collaboration in groups or pairs.

Lack of Motivation:

"Some students exhibit a lack of motivation in learning English and question its importance by asking, "Miss, why do we have to learn English? It's difficult." However, they may not realize that English is widely used in various contexts and settings."

According to Riyanti (2019), some students lack motivation to learn English despite it being a compulsory foreign language for secondary students. They often question the relevance of learning English. However, motivation and ambition play crucial roles in the teaching and learning process. Similarly, Yuzulia (2021) found that students' motivation is closely related to their performance and achievement in learning. In order to address the lack of motivation, teachers can engage students by asking them about their future aspirations. For example, if a student wants to become a police officer, teachers can highlight the importance of English in communicating with foreigners. Likewise, for students aspiring to become doctors, teachers can emphasize the need for English proficiency when dealing with international patients.

To provide students with motivation, teachers can ask them about their future aspirations. This can serve as a reference point for students. For instance, if a student expresses a desire to become a police officer or soldier, teachers can emphasize the importance of English proficiency in those professions. They can explain that being unable to speak English might hinder their ability to communicate with foreigners who

may have inquiries or need assistance. The intention is not to scare students, but rather to inspire and motivate them to acquire English language skills.

Negative perceptions of the English language:

"Due to English being a second language, many students perceive it as difficult. It is common for them to express their struggles and claim that it is the most challenging subject. They may use various reasons to justify their difficulties, without making an effort or attempting to overcome them. The most challenging situation occurs when they firmly believe that English is the most difficult subject they have to learn."

English is often perceived as the most difficult subject because students have limited exposure to it in their everyday lives. Sutra (2020) discovered that students rarely engage with English lessons outside of school and do not gradually build their English vocabulary. In their daily conversations, they are more comfortable speaking Indonesian or their local language, which makes them feel unfamiliar with even basic English words. To address this, teachers can take action by introducing common English words and simple questions to the students. For example, they can use greetings like "Hello, how are you?" or give instructions in English such as "Close the door!" or "Open page 23!" These strategies can help students gain confidence in speaking English and expand their vocabulary.

"One effective approach is to give commands or instructions in English for basic and general tasks. For instance, instead of saying "Tolong

tutup pintunya" (Please close the door), teachers can use English and say "Please close the door." By incorporating English commands in daily classroom routines, students become more familiar with using English in practical situations.

However, in the sixth grade, I was surprised to hear some students saying, "Why should I learn English when I will continue my studies at Islamic boarding schools after graduation?" This statement caught me off guard."

"I don't care about English. I will not learn English anymore because I am going to continue my study at Islamic boarding schools." This statement was found in Husna's (2019) article, which highlights the significance of English as the world's largest language and its status as an international language. In the context of this Islamic school in Gresik, the teachers collaborate with parents, recognizing the crucial role of adults in a child's learning process (Cahyati, 2019).

If the students are planning to continue their studies at Islamic boarding schools, it is advisable for parents to seek schools that offer English as a subject. English holds immense importance as an international language widely used across the globe (Husna, 2019). Furthermore, Khalili (2021) suggests that English is often used in conjunction with other languages in many countries, rather than being the sole medium of communication. These factors can be used to persuade students to continue their English learning journey.

"My daughter is also in the sixth grade, and she has already informed her mother about her

future plans. She said, "Mom, when I go to an Islamic boarding school, please make sure to find a school that offers English as a subject, okay?"

Time constraints for studying English:

"Another challenge that teachers face is the limited time available for English lessons. In our school, students only have two class periods, which amounts to approximately 60 minutes, to cover the material, assign tasks, assess their performance, and provide practice without assigning any homework. It is a school policy that prohibits us from giving homework. Therefore, all the instructional material, assignments, and assessments need to be completed within that allocated time frame."

English classes in school typically have duration of 60-90 minutes per week, which is relatively limited for effective English learning. Therefore, it is crucial for students to supplement their learning at home with the support of their families. In line with the school's motto of "school without homework," English teachers are responsible for completing the instructional material, assigning tasks, and assessing students' work within the school hours. The students receive their books during class and return them at the designated time.

Insufficient teaching and learning devices:

"One of the main challenges I face is when I encounter a class that does not have access to an LCD. As a teacher, I rely on using videos from YouTube as a learning media, including "The Portrait of Challenges in Teaching English to Young Learners." However, without the availability of an LCD, I am unable to play the videos, which makes it difficult to deliver the material effectively to that particular class."

The effectiveness of a lesson plan is highly dependent on the availability of

proper teaching and learning devices. Without suitable tools, the learning process in the classroom may not be successful. Kholisoh's (2018) study supports the notion that using fun and engaging media is well-received by students, especially young learners. Fortunately, in this case, the six teachers in the study form a supportive team. If Miss A encounters any limitations in her teaching process, she can rely on Miss B, who can then turn to Miss C, and so on. They have established a system of mutual support, allowing them to count on each other when needed.

Messy classroom conditions:

“Maintaining student focus in the classroom can be a challenging task. Many students tend to engage in conversations with their friends, daydream, or even feel sleepy during class. One common issue is the tendency for students to engage in conversations with their peers, making it difficult for them to pay attention to the teacher's explanations. This can pose challenges in delivering the material effectively and hinder students' ability to comprehend and retain the information being taught. Additionally, some students may resort to drawing or writing on their desks, further diverting their attention away from the lesson.”

Ensuring students' focus and engagement in the classroom can indeed be a challenging task. Students may become absorbed in their own thoughts, feel drowsy, or indulge in daydreaming, making it difficult for them to pay attention to the teacher's instructions or explanations. However, research by Cicekci (2019) suggests that teachers can enhance student engagement by demonstrating a genuine

interest in their students, adopting a positive approach, and employing diverse teaching methods tailored to individual students' learning levels. These strategies can help capture students' attention and make the learning experience more interactive and meaningful.

To address the challenge of maintaining student focus and engagement in the classroom, the teachers employ English songs as icebreakers. Fitriana (2021) supports the use of songs as a learning medium in the classroom. For instance, they may use the song "If You're Happy and You Know It" and have students clap their hands accordingly. Moreover, when students engage in conversations with their friends, teachers can use English icebreakers to redirect their attention. Astuti (2020) found that icebreakers are effective in creating a more relaxed and comfortable atmosphere in the classroom. An example of an icebreaker activity is the rhythmic clapping sequence: "Everybody claps one (students clap once), clap two (students clap twice), silent clap (ssstt sstt), silent clap (ssstt sstt), silent (ssssttt)." This icebreaker activity helps refocus students' attention on the lesson material, as emphasized by Aniuranti (2021), who highlights the role of icebreakers in preparing students for class participation and introducing the upcoming lesson.

“One of the most commonly used icebreakers in my class is the song "Clap Your Hands." The song's lyrics go, "If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands (clap clap clap)," and

students enthusiastically follow the instructions by clapping their hands three times. The phrase "clap your hands" can be substituted with various other actions or words to re-engage and energize the students, helping them regain focus and attentiveness."

Speaking anxiety:

"Despite being capable of speaking, some students may exhibit shyness or reluctance to actively participate in speaking activities. This can be attributed to a lack of practice or confidence in their speaking skills."

Initially, students may lack the confidence to speak, even for simple words or phrases. Studies by Kencanawati (2016) and Jaelani (2020) suggest that speaking is often perceived as a challenging skill due to various factors, including fear of making mistakes, shyness, and lack of confidence in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. To address this, teachers collaborate with class teachers to incorporate English into daily routines, such as leading prayers in English before studying or engaging in other activities like eating or going home. By integrating English into familiar and routine contexts, students can gradually build their confidence and speaking skills.

"At this school, daily conversations, including prayers, are mastered by both teachers and home teachers themselves. These simple phrases and commands can serve as a reference for students. For instance, before starting activities like eating or studying, students always begin with a prayer. Teachers can utilize English to give commands before the prayer, such as "Everybody hands up, on the shoulder, in front of the chest, praying before the study, praying start." Through this approach, students indirectly learn vocabulary related to

body parts, such as chest and shoulder, and practice actions like raising their hands."

In summary, the teachers in this elementary school face seven challenges in teaching English as a foreign language. These challenges primarily stem from the students themselves. The interview data revealed that some students lack background knowledge in English, have low motivation, hold negative perceptions of English prior to trying, and struggle with speaking confidently. Additionally, there are technical challenges related to limited time for English instruction, classroom conditions that may be chaotic, and a lack of adequate teaching and learning devices.

V. DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, the creativity of teachers plays a vital role in addressing each challenge. Roustae (2015) also emphasizes that teachers' perspectives on creativity can significantly impact students' learning process. The way teachers deliver the material, select teaching methods, and choose appropriate learning media are crucial in the teaching and learning journey. While many individuals may have a good understanding of English content, not all of them can effectively convey the material to students without employing suitable instructional methods. Furthermore, Nurhayati (2021) suggests that teachers should enhance their skills in creating learning media, as it is essential for improving students' learning outcomes and

motivating them to learn. Teachers must develop their own learning media to identify the most suitable ones for their students.

The initial findings indicate that the impact on students can vary depending on the kindergarten they attended. It is important to note that background knowledge is something that can be developed and cultivated. As highlighted by Souisa (2020) in "The Portrait of Challenges in Teaching English to Young Learners," teachers can assist students in building the necessary background knowledge. Therefore, the varying capacities of students' background knowledge should not be a hindrance, as it is the responsibility of teachers to foster, activate, and enhance their students' background knowledge.

The challenges faced by students in learning English are interconnected. The lack of motivation and negative perceptions of English contribute to difficulties in focusing and feeling sleepy in class (Aziz & Dewi, 2019). Consequently, students may lack confidence in speaking. It is crucial for parents to play an active role in motivating their children. Effective collaboration between teachers, parents, and students is essential in the teaching and learning process to address these challenges.

Latifah and Sitti (2021) conducted a study focusing on students' insufficient motivation in learning English. The study revealed that some students show disinterest and lack motivation in learning English.

These students are primarily concerned with achieving passing scores without actively engaging with the teacher's explanations. Consequently, they exhibit low English competency. The study highlights the correlation between students' motivation levels and their English language proficiency. Indeed, the lack of teaching and learning devices and limited study time are challenges that the school needs to address. It is crucial for the school to create a conducive and enjoyable learning environment for students. In addition to providing appropriate materials and achieving learning targets, the school should prioritize students' comfort during the learning process. If teachers feel that the allocated time is insufficient, the school can consider establishing an English club for students outside of the regular weekly schedule. This will provide additional opportunities for students to engage with the English language in a fun and relaxed setting.

The sixth challenge is the messy classroom conditions, which contribute to students feeling sleepy and struggling with unfamiliar words. To address this, teachers can familiarize students with the words by repeating them consistently and using them in various contexts. Continuous repetition helps students memorize and automatically apply the words in sentences. Additionally, parents can support their children's learning by paying closer attention to what they have learned in school and conducting additional

drills at home. This collaboration between teachers, students, and parents can be mutually beneficial. Teachers can facilitate easier drills, students can acquire more vocabulary, and parents can be satisfied with their child's progress. Pek (2020) highlights the significant impact of parental involvement on a child's academic achievement.

The research conducted by Mihara (2018) explores the issue of students falling asleep at Japanese universities, which is a common phenomenon. Several potential reasons for this phenomenon are identified, including everyday fatigue from commuting, difficulty in maintaining concentration during a 90-minute lesson, and lack of motivation to learn. The study also suggests that conducting a vocabulary test at the beginning of class proved to be an effective method of motivating students. While there is a similarity between this study and the present study in terms of the challenges faced in teaching English as a foreign language, the difference lies in the number of challenges identified. The present study identifies eight challenges and proposes solutions, whereas the previous study only identified three challenges.

In a previous study conducted by Husni (2020), similar to the present study, the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English as a foreign language were discussed. However, there is a difference in the number of problems identified. Husni (2020)

identified five problems, whereas the present study found eight challenges. Interestingly, the three additional problems identified in this research were also found in Husni's (2020) study. Another previous study by Humairoh (2021) focused on students' perceptions and specifically examined the writing skills in teaching and learning English as a foreign language. In contrast, the present study covers a broader scope of teaching and learning English in general and examines the perceptions of teachers rather than students. It is hoped that this research will provide valuable insights for other researchers conducting studies related to this topic. Furthermore, future researchers can explore students' perceptions in addressing the challenges of learning English as a foreign language, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the subject.

In conclusion, the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English as a foreign language predominantly stem from the students themselves. The findings discussed above reveal that students lack confidence in speaking, struggle to maintain focus, easily feel sleepy, perceive English as difficult, lack motivation, and hold negative perceptions of English. These student-related issues pose challenges for teachers. To ensure a successful teaching and learning process, the active participation and collaboration of students, teachers, and parents are crucial. The collective effort and support of all

stakeholders are necessary to create a conducive learning environment and facilitate effective teaching and learning experiences.

VI. CONCLUSION

Teaching English as a foreign language presents various challenges, particularly in an environment where English has limited practical use (Songbatumis, 2017). English teachers in this Islamic School in Gresik face several challenges, including students' lack of prior English knowledge, low motivation, negative perceptions of the English language, time constraints, inadequate teaching and learning resources, messy classroom conditions, and speaking anxiety.

Despite these challenges, teachers can overcome them by utilizing their creativity, seeking assistance from others, and collaborating with other stakeholders. By addressing these challenges, the teaching and learning process can proceed smoothly. This research aims to provide valuable insights for readers, particularly researchers interested in conducting studies related to this subject matter.

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