

YOUNG LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ENGLISH LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN SURABAYA, INDONESIA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: English has become an important subject in elementary education because it helps young learners develop communication skills and prepare for future academic demands. In Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), various learning activities such as games, songs, storytelling, group work, and digital learning are commonly implemented to create meaningful learning experiences. However, many studies have focused on teaching strategies and learning outcomes, while limited attention has been given to young learners' own perceptions of English learning activities, particularly in Indonesian elementary school contexts. This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore elementary school students' perceptions of English learning activities in a TEYL classroom in Surabaya, Indonesia. The participants consisted of 18 fifth-grade students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and field notes. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021), involving familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme review, and interpretation. The findings revealed four major themes. First, students perceived interactive activities such as games and group work as enjoyable and motivating. Second, teacher support and positive classroom interaction contributed significantly to students' engagement in learning English. Third, students experienced several challenges, including limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and fear of making mistakes. Finally, students expressed a preference for more technology-assisted and collaborative learning activities. Therefore, students demonstrated positive perceptions toward English learning when classroom activities were engaging, meaningful, and supportive. The study concludes that young learners value interactive, enjoyable, and supportive English learning activities. Teachers should consider students' perspectives when designing TEYL instruction to create more learner-centered and motivating learning environments.

Keywords: young learners, perception, TEYL, English learning activities, qualitative study

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INTRODUCTION

English plays an increasingly important role in the contemporary globalized world. As an international language, English functions as a medium of communication across various domains, including education, business, science, and technology. Consequently, many countries have introduced English instruction at an early age to equip learners with the linguistic competencies necessary for future academic and professional success. In Indonesia, English has become one of the most widely taught foreign languages and is frequently introduced during elementary school years to develop learners' foundational language skills (Suyanto, 2022).

Young learners are generally defined as children between the ages of five and twelve who are enrolled in primary education. According to Cameron (2021), young learners possess unique cognitive, emotional, and social characteristics that distinguish them from adolescent and adult learners. They tend to learn more effectively through concrete experiences, physical activities, visual stimulation, and meaningful interaction. As a result, English instruction for young learners requires pedagogical approaches that differ substantially from those employed in secondary or higher education settings.

Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) has emerged as a specialized field within English language education that focuses on the design and implementation of age-appropriate instructional practices (Xu et al., 2023). TEYL emphasizes the importance of creating enjoyable, interactive, and learner-centered learning environments that encourage active participation and language use (Pinter, 2021). Teachers are encouraged to incorporate games, songs, storytelling, role-play, projects, and collaborative activities to maintain students' motivation and engagement throughout the learning process.

Numerous studies have highlighted the benefits of introducing English at an early age. Young learners are generally more receptive to language input and often demonstrate greater willingness to experiment with new language forms compared to older learners (Nunan, 2023). Early exposure to English can also facilitate pronunciation development, listening comprehension, and positive attitudes toward language learning. Furthermore, learning English during childhood may contribute to the development of intercultural awareness and global citizenship competencies.

Despite these potential benefits, English learning among young learners continues to present various challenges. Many students experience difficulties related to vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, comprehension, and confidence in language use (Simbolon, 2020). These difficulties may arise from limited exposure to English outside the classroom, differences between English and the first language, or instructional practices that fail to accommodate learners' developmental characteristics (Shin & Crandall, 2022).

To address these challenges, teachers often employ a wide range of learning activities designed to increase student engagement and facilitate language acquisition. Games are among the most frequently used activities in TEYL because they provide opportunities for meaningful interaction and reduce learning anxiety. According to Wright et al. (2021), games create enjoyable learning environments that

encourage students to use English naturally while focusing on communication rather than linguistic accuracy alone.

Storytelling is another widely implemented instructional strategy in TEYL classrooms. Stories expose young learners to authentic language input, contextualized vocabulary, and meaningful discourse structures. Research conducted by Isbell et al. (2022) demonstrated that storytelling activities enhance students' listening comprehension, vocabulary development, and language motivation. Through stories, learners are able to connect language learning with imagination, emotions, and personal experiences.

Songs and chants also play an important role in English instruction for young learners. Music facilitates language learning by providing repetitive and memorable language input. According to Paquette and Rieg (2021), songs improve pronunciation, vocabulary retention, and listening skills while simultaneously increasing learners' enjoyment and participation. Young learners often perceive music-based activities as less intimidating than traditional language exercises.

In recent years, technology-assisted learning activities have become increasingly prevalent in TEYL classrooms. Digital tools, educational games, videos, and interactive applications offer new possibilities for enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes. Studies have shown that technology integration can support language learning by providing multimodal input, immediate feedback, and opportunities for autonomous learning (Chapelle & Sauro, 2022). Young learners, who are often familiar with digital technologies in their daily lives, may find technology-assisted activities particularly appealing.

Although numerous instructional activities have been developed and implemented within TEYL contexts, understanding how students perceive these activities remains essential. Learners' perceptions influence their motivation, engagement, participation, and overall learning experiences. According to Borg (2023), students are not passive recipients of instruction but active participants whose perspectives provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of educational practices.

Student perception refers to learners' interpretations, evaluations, and experiences regarding educational activities and learning environments. Positive perceptions are generally associated with higher levels of motivation, participation, and achievement, whereas negative perceptions may lead to disengagement and reduced learning outcomes (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2023). Therefore, exploring learners' perceptions can contribute to the development of more effective and learner-centered instructional practices.

Despite increasing recognition of the importance of student voice in educational research, relatively few studies have focused specifically on young learners' perceptions of English learning activities. Existing research has predominantly examined teachers' perspectives, instructional effectiveness, or learning outcomes. While these studies provide valuable information, they often overlook learners' subjective experiences and viewpoints.

Furthermore, many previous studies have employed quantitative survey designs that limit opportunities for students to express their thoughts in depth. Although questionnaires can identify

general trends, they may not capture the complexity of learners' experiences, preferences, and challenges. Qualitative approaches are therefore needed to provide richer and more nuanced understandings of how young learners experience English learning activities.

The Indonesian context presents additional reasons for investigating young learners' perceptions. English instruction in Indonesian elementary schools varies considerably depending on school policies, teacher expertise, and available resources. In urban areas such as Surabaya, schools often implement diverse instructional activities, including games, projects, storytelling, and technology-assisted learning. However, little is known about how students perceive these activities and which aspects they find most meaningful or challenging.

Several recent studies have highlighted the importance of learner perspectives in language education. For example, Butler (2022) found that young learners' attitudes toward classroom activities significantly influenced their willingness to communicate in English. Similarly, Garton and Copland (2023) reported that learners' enjoyment of classroom activities contributed positively to their motivation and engagement. These findings suggest that understanding students' perceptions can provide valuable insights for improving teaching practices.

Nevertheless, there remains a scarcity of qualitative studies examining elementary school students' perceptions of English learning activities in Indonesian TEYL classrooms. Most existing studies focus on learning achievement or teacher perspectives rather than learners' lived experiences. Consequently, there is limited understanding of how Indonesian young learners experience English lessons and what factors contribute to their positive or negative perceptions.

This gap is particularly evident in Surabaya, one of Indonesia's largest metropolitan cities, where educational institutions increasingly adopt innovative teaching approaches. Despite these developments, research exploring students' voices regarding English learning activities remains limited. Understanding learners' perspectives may assist teachers in designing instructional practices that better align with students' needs, preferences, and expectations.

Previous studies have extensively investigated teaching strategies, learning media, and learning outcomes in TEYL contexts. However, relatively few studies have explored young learners' perceptions of English learning activities from a qualitative perspective. Existing research has largely focused on teachers' viewpoints and quantitative measurements of learning achievement, leaving students' voices underrepresented. Furthermore, studies examining elementary school students' perceptions of English learning activities in Indonesian urban contexts such as Surabaya remain scarce.

Based on the identified research gaps, this study aims to explore elementary school students' perceptions of English learning activities in a TEYL classroom in Surabaya, Indonesia. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how young learners experience English learning activities, identify the activities they perceive as enjoyable and beneficial, and explore the challenges they encounter during English

lessons. By giving voice to students' perspectives, this study is expected to contribute to the development of more engaging, meaningful, and learner-centered English learning environments.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore young learners' perceptions of English learning activities in a Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) classroom. Qualitative research was selected because it allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, perspectives, and interpretations regarding a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus of the study was not to measure students' achievement statistically but rather to understand how elementary school students perceived and experienced English learning activities in their classroom.

Participants of the Study

The participants of the study consisted of 18 fifth-grade students aged between 10 and 11 years old. The students were selected through purposive sampling because they had sufficient experience participating in English learning activities and were capable of expressing their opinions regarding classroom experiences.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Male	8	44.4%
Female	10	55.6%
Total	18	100%

The participants represented a diverse range of English proficiency levels. Some students demonstrated high confidence and active participation during English lessons, while others showed moderate or limited participation. This diversity provided rich information regarding students' perceptions and experiences.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in an elementary school located in Surabaya, Indonesia, during the second semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. English was offered as a local content subject and was taught once a week for approximately 90 minutes.

The school was selected because it actively implemented various interactive English learning activities that aligned with the principles of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). During classroom observations, students regularly participated in games, songs, storytelling sessions, group discussions, role-play activities, and digital learning activities. These classroom practices provided a suitable context for exploring students' perceptions of English learning activities.

Research Instrument

Three sources of data were employed in this study: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and field notes are Semi-Structured Interviews, Classroom Observations, Field notes were recorded during and after each observation session. The field notes documented classroom events, student behaviors, interactions, and reflections that were not fully captured through interviews.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted over a six-week period. First, the researcher observed several English learning sessions to gain a comprehensive understanding of classroom practices and student participation. During the observations, detailed field notes were recorded. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students to obtain deeper insights into their perceptions of English learning activities. Each interview lasted approximately 15–20 minutes and was conducted in a comfortable setting to encourage students to express their opinions freely. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and later transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis began with familiarization through repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation records, and field notes. The researcher then generated initial codes and grouped similar codes into broader categories. Emerging themes were identified, reviewed, and refined to ensure consistency with the research objectives. Finally, the themes were interpreted and supported by representative excerpts from the interview data and observation findings. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, data triangulation was conducted by comparing findings obtained from interviews, observations, and field notes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore young learners' perceptions of English learning activities in a TEYL classroom in an elementary school in Surabaya, Indonesia. The findings were obtained from semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and field notes. Through thematic analysis, four major themes emerged from the data: (1) enjoyable and interactive learning activities, (2) teacher support and positive classroom environment, (3) challenges in learning English, and (4) students' expectations for future English learning activities.

The themes represent students' experiences, feelings, and perspectives regarding English learning activities implemented in their classroom. The findings provide insights into how young learners perceive English instruction and how these perceptions influence their engagement and participation.

Enjoyable and Interactive Learning Activities

The first theme identified from the data was students' positive perceptions of enjoyable and interactive learning activities. Most participants reported that they enjoyed English lessons when teachers used games, songs, storytelling, and group activities. Students explained that these activities made learning more interesting and prevented them from feeling bored during lessons.

Several participants stated that games were their favorite learning activity because they allowed them to learn while having fun. During classroom observations, students appeared enthusiastic and actively participated whenever game-based activities were introduced. Many students voluntarily answered questions, collaborated with classmates, and showed excitement throughout the activities.

One participant explained:

"I like English when teacher gives games because I can learn and play together with my friends. It makes me happy and not sleepy."

Another student stated:

"Games make English easier because I can remember words and answers faster."

Classroom observations also revealed that game-based activities increased students' willingness to participate. Students who were usually quiet became more active during interactive activities.

Table 2. Students' Favorite English Learning Activities

Activities	Frequency
Games	8
Songs	4
Storytelling	3
Group Work	2
Digital Learning Activities	1
Total	18

Table 2 shows students' favorite English learning activities identified during the interviews. Games emerged as the most preferred activity, selected by eight students, followed by songs and storytelling. The findings indicate that learners tend to favor activities that are interactive, enjoyable, and involve active participation. These activities provide opportunities for students to engage with English in meaningful ways rather than merely memorizing language forms. The results also suggest that enjoyment plays an important role in shaping students' perceptions of English learning activities.

The findings support Cameron (2021), who argues that young learners learn more effectively when they participate in engaging and meaningful activities. Similarly, Wright et al. (2021) emphasize that games can increase motivation, interaction, and language practice among young learners. The current findings demonstrate that enjoyable activities contribute positively to students' learning experiences and encourage greater classroom participation.

Teacher Support and Positive Classroom Environment

The second theme concerns the importance of teacher support and classroom atmosphere. Students consistently emphasized that teachers played a significant role in helping them enjoy English lessons. Participants reported that supportive teachers made them feel comfortable asking questions and participating in classroom activities.

Many students described their English teacher as friendly, patient, and encouraging. They appreciated teachers who provided assistance when they encountered difficulties and who praised their efforts during learning activities.

One participant commented:

"My teacher always helps me when I do not understand. She explains again slowly."

Another participant explained:

"I am not afraid because my teacher never gets angry when I make mistakes."

Classroom observations confirmed these perceptions. The teacher frequently provided encouragement, positive feedback, and assistance during classroom activities. Students appeared comfortable interacting with the teacher and asking questions when needed.

Table 3. Students' Perceptions of Teacher Support

Perception Category	Frequency
Helpful and Supportive	9
Friendly	5
Encouraging	3
Patient	1
Total	18

Table 3 shows students' perceptions regarding teacher support during English lessons. Most students described their teacher as helpful and supportive, indicating the importance of teacher assistance in the learning process. Other students emphasized friendliness, encouragement, and patience as important teacher characteristics. These findings suggest that teacher behavior significantly influences students' classroom experiences and perceptions of English learning. A supportive teacher can create a positive learning atmosphere that increases students' confidence and willingness to participate.

These findings are consistent with Mercer and Dörnyei (2023), who argue that positive teacher-student relationships contribute significantly to learner motivation and emotional well-being. In TEYL contexts, teacher support is particularly important because young learners often depend on teachers for guidance, encouragement, and emotional security.

Challenges in Learning English

Although students generally expressed positive perceptions of English learning activities, they also reported several challenges. The most frequently mentioned difficulties included limited vocabulary, pronunciation problems, and fear of making mistakes.

Many students indicated that they sometimes struggled to understand unfamiliar English words. Limited vocabulary often prevented them from understanding instructions, texts, and classroom discussions.

One student explained:

"Sometimes I do not know many English words, so I cannot answer the teacher's question."

Another participant stated:

"Pronunciation is difficult because English words are different from Indonesian."

Classroom observations also revealed that some students hesitated when speaking English because they were afraid of making mistakes in front of their classmates.

Table 4. Challenges Experienced by Students

Challenges	Frequency
Vocabulary Difficulties	7
Pronunciation Problems	5
Fear of Making Mistakes	4
Understanding Instructions	2
Total	18

Table 4 shows the challenges experienced by students during English learning activities. Vocabulary difficulties emerged as the most frequently reported challenge, followed by pronunciation problems and fear of making mistakes. These findings indicate that linguistic barriers continue to influence young learners' classroom experiences. Furthermore, emotional factors such as anxiety and fear of negative evaluation also affect students' participation. Understanding these challenges is important because it allows teachers to design instructional strategies that better support students' learning needs.

The findings support Shin and Crandall (2022), who note that vocabulary limitations often represent one of the greatest challenges faced by young EFL learners. Similarly, Butler (2022) emphasizes that anxiety and fear of making mistakes can reduce learners' willingness to communicate in English.

Students' Expectations for Future English Learning Activities

The final theme concerns students' expectations regarding future English lessons. Most participants expressed a desire for more interactive and technology-assisted learning activities. Students reported that they enjoyed lessons involving videos, educational games, and digital learning tools because these activities were interesting and easy to understand.

Several students also expressed interest in having more group work and collaborative activities because they enjoyed learning together with their classmates.

One participant stated:

"I want more learning with videos because it is fun and easy to understand."

Another student explained:

"I like group activities because my friends can help me when I do not know the answer."

Table 5. Students' Expectations for Future English Lessons

Expectations	Frequency
More Games	6
More Technology-Based Activities	5
More Group Work	4
More Songs and Storytelling	3
Total	18

Table 5 shows students' expectations regarding future English learning activities. More games emerged as the most frequently mentioned expectation, followed by technology-based activities and collaborative learning opportunities. These findings indicate that students prefer learning environments that are interactive, engaging, and socially supportive. The results also suggest that technology integration has become increasingly important in contemporary TEYL classrooms. Teachers may therefore consider incorporating more digital resources and collaborative activities to accommodate students' preferences and enhance engagement. The findings align with Chapelle and Sauro (2022), who argue that technology-assisted learning can increase learner engagement and provide meaningful language learning opportunities. Similarly, Garton and Copland (2023) emphasize the importance of creating learner-centered classrooms that respond to students' interests and preferences.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that young learners generally hold positive perceptions toward English learning activities when those activities are interactive, enjoyable, and supportive. The emergence of four major themes highlights the complex relationship between instructional activities, teacher support, learning challenges, and students' expectations.

First, students strongly preferred enjoyable and interactive learning activities such as games, songs, storytelling, and collaborative tasks. These findings support previous research suggesting that young learners learn more effectively through activities that combine language learning with enjoyment and active participation (Cameron, 2021; Pinter, 2021). Interactive activities appear to create opportunities for meaningful language use while reducing boredom and increasing engagement.

Second, teacher support emerged as an important factor influencing students' perceptions. Students appreciated teachers who were patient, encouraging, and supportive. Positive teacher-student relationships contributed to learners' confidence and willingness to participate in classroom activities. These findings support sociocultural perspectives emphasizing the role of social interaction in learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Third, despite generally positive perceptions, students continued to face challenges related to vocabulary, pronunciation, and language anxiety. These difficulties are common among young EFL

learners and indicate that language learning remains a demanding process. Teachers should therefore provide sufficient scaffolding, vocabulary support, and opportunities for low-anxiety language practice.

Finally, students expressed clear preferences for future learning activities that involve games, technology, and collaboration. These findings suggest that contemporary young learners value learning environments that are interactive, technology-enhanced, and socially engaging. By incorporating students' perspectives into instructional planning, teachers can create more meaningful and motivating English learning experiences. Thus, the findings indicate that effective TEYL instruction extends beyond the selection of teaching methods. Teachers must also consider students' perceptions, emotions, and preferences when designing learning activities. Understanding learners' voices can help educators develop classroom environments that promote engagement, confidence, and successful language learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study explored young learners' perceptions of English learning activities in a TEYL classroom at an elementary school in Surabaya, Indonesia. The findings revealed that students generally held positive perceptions toward English learning when instructional activities were interactive, enjoyable, and meaningful. Through thematic analysis, four major themes emerged: enjoyable and interactive learning activities, teacher support and positive classroom environment, challenges in learning English, and students' expectations for future English learning activities.

The findings showed that games, songs, storytelling, and collaborative activities were perceived as the most enjoyable learning experiences. These activities increased students' motivation, engagement, and participation during English lessons. Students also emphasized the importance of supportive teachers who provided encouragement, assistance, and positive feedback. A positive classroom atmosphere helped learners feel more confident and willing to participate in English learning activities.

Despite these positive experiences, students reported several challenges, particularly related to vocabulary mastery, pronunciation difficulties, and fear of making mistakes. These challenges indicate that young learners still require continuous support and appropriate scaffolding to develop their English language skills effectively. Teachers should therefore provide learning activities that balance enjoyment with opportunities for language development.

Future researchers are encouraged to explore young learners' perceptions in different educational settings and geographical regions. Comparative studies involving multiple schools may provide broader insights into TEYL practices. Researchers may also investigate the relationship between students' perceptions and language achievement. Additionally, future studies could examine the effectiveness of specific learning activities such as storytelling, project-based learning, digital learning, or gamification in promoting positive learning experiences among young learners.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical considerations involving participant information. However, the data are available from the

corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to appropriate ethical approval and institutional regulations.

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