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# CRITICAL CHALLENGES AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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## ABSTRACT

*Early English language instruction plays a crucial role in developing communication skills and fostering lifelong learning attitudes among young learners (YLS). However, teaching English at the primary school level presents unique methodological challenges such as maintaining learners' motivation, addressing diverse learning needs, and employing age-appropriate materials and assessment strategies. This study investigates these critical issues through a mixed-method research design involving primary school English teachers. Findings reveal significant gaps in teacher preparation, resource availability, and assessment practices. The study proposes adaptive, learner-centered methodologies to enhance engagement and language acquisition efficacy in early English education. Implications for pedagogy and policy are discussed.*

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**KEYWORDS:** English Language Teaching, Young Learners, Primary Education, Teaching Methodology, Motivation, Assessment.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition during childhood is recognized globally as a formative period shaping lifelong linguistic competence and cognitive development (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Correspondingly, teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to young learners in primary education is now prioritized in numerous countries, including Uzbekistan, where early English instruction has become compulsory across public schools (Ministry of Education, 2022). The early exposure aims at enhancing communicative competence and cultural awareness in an increasingly globalized world.

Despite its significance, teaching English to young learners (children aged approximately 6 to 11 years) entails distinct challenges compared to adult or adolescent ESL/EFL instruction. The cognitive and socio-emotional development stages of children demand methodologies tailored to their attention spans, learning styles, and motivational factors (Genesee, 2006). According to Tomlinson (2019), conventional teaching materials are often inadequate for young learners, lacking engagement and cultural relevance.

Recent international studies emphasize that digital learning tools and innovative pedagogical practices play a significant role in improving English language acquisition among young learners. The integration of technology into early language education has transformed traditional teaching methods and created more interactive, learner-centered environments. Researchers argue that digital platforms enhance learner motivation, engagement, autonomy, and communicative competence.

According to Chappelle (2020), digital technologies in language learning provide authentic communication opportunities and support individualized instruction. Young learners benefit from multimedia resources such as educational games, interactive videos, mobile applications, and AI-based learning systems that make language learning more engaging and enjoyable. Similarly, Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2018) state that mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) enables learners to practice language skills beyond the classroom, thereby increasing exposure to the target language.

In recent years, gamification has become one of the most widely discussed innovative pedagogical approaches in early language education. Deterding et al. (2019) define gamification as the application of game-design elements in non-game contexts to increase learner engagement and motivation.

Educational applications such as Duolingo, Kahoot, and Quizizz have demonstrated positive effects on vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation development, and learner participation among primary school students.

Another important development is the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in language education. Holmes, Bialik, and Fadel (2019) explain that AI-based educational systems can adapt learning materials according to learners' individual needs and performance levels. Intelligent tutoring systems, speech recognition technologies, and AI chatbots provide immediate feedback and personalized learning experiences, which are particularly beneficial for young learners with different cognitive abilities and learning styles.

Contemporary studies also highlight the importance of collaborative and interactive teaching methods. Project-based learning, task-based language teaching, and CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approaches have gained considerable attention in modern language pedagogy. According to Ellis (2017), task-based instruction encourages meaningful communication and develops learners' problem-solving skills while simultaneously improving language proficiency.

Furthermore, recent developments in early language education emphasize the importance of socio-emotional learning and learner-centered pedagogy. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory continues to influence modern educational practices by stressing the role of social interaction and scaffolding in children's cognitive development. Modern classrooms increasingly focus on creating supportive, low-anxiety learning environments that foster confidence and intrinsic motivation among young learners.

The COVID-19 pandemic also accelerated the adoption of online and blended learning models worldwide. Studies conducted after 2020 indicate that virtual classrooms, digital collaboration tools, and online assessment systems have become essential components of language education. Although challenges such as digital inequality and teacher preparedness remain, these technologies offer significant opportunities for enhancing language learning outcomes.

Overall, contemporary international research demonstrates that integrating digital technologies and innovative pedagogical practices into early English language education can significantly improve learner motivation, engagement, and communicative competence. These developments strengthen the theoretical foundation of language

teaching methodology and support the transition toward more adaptive and learner-centered educational models.

Motivation is another core issue: young learners naturally have shorter attention spans and require varied, playful activities to sustain interest (Smith & Jones, 2021). In addition, the increasing heterogeneity of classrooms in terms of learner proficiency, socio-economic background, and linguistic exposure calls for inclusive, differentiated methodologies (Kumar & Lee, 2018). Furthermore, assessment of young learners' language acquisition remains controversial due to the inadequacy of conventional testing formats for this age group (Brown, 2017).

Teacher preparation forms a critical cornerstone in addressing these challenges. However, research indicates that many primary English teachers lack specialized training in child language acquisition and age-appropriate pedagogy (Garcia, 2020). This shortfall is exacerbated by limited resources, inadequate continuous professional development, and systemic constraints.

With these concerns in the foreground, this study aims to explore the following research questions:

What are the principal methodological challenges faced by primary school English teachers in teaching young learners?

How do teachers perceive the adequacy of available teaching materials and assessment tools?

What adaptive strategies and methodologies are currently implemented or needed to enhance young learners' motivation and language acquisition?

By addressing these questions, the study seeks to contribute to the literature on early English education and support improvements in teaching practices and policy formulation.

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1. Research Design

This investigation employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to comprehensively explore teachers' perceptions and experiences.

### 2.2. Participants

Fifty English language teachers from ten public primary schools in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, participated in the study. They represented diverse teaching experiences ranging from 1 to 15 years, with 68% holding undergraduate degrees in linguistics or education. Teachers were selected via purposive sampling to ensure representation across different school districts.

## 2.2. Data Collection Instruments

### 1. Questionnaire:

A structured questionnaire was developed based on existing literature (e.g., Tomlinson, 2019; Smith & Jones, 2021) and comprised four sections:

Teaching materials adequacy (7 items)

Learner motivation and attention (6 items)

Teacher training and professional development (5 items)

Assessment practices (6 items)

Respondents were asked to rate their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

### 2. Semi-Structured Interviews:

In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 volunteer teachers to gain nuanced insights. Interview questions addressed:

Experiences with teaching materials

Strategies for maintaining learner motivation

Challenges in evaluating language proficiency

Views on existing teacher training programs

Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each and were audio-recorded with consent.

### Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed physically during teacher meetings over a two-week period in autumn 2023. Interviews were scheduled individually and conducted in quiet school offices, ensuring confidentiality and comfort.

## 2.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, percentages) with SPSS v26. Qualitative interview transcripts were thematically coded using NVivo 12 software, identifying recurrent themes aligned with research questions.

## 2.5. Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the Tashkent State University of Languages Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent and were assured anonymity.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. Quantitative Findings

#### Teaching Materials Adequacy

78% of teachers indicated that available textbooks lack age-appropriate content.

71% reported insufficient supplementary materials such as visuals, audio-visual aids, or culturally relevant stories.

#### Learner Motivation and Attention

85% agreed that sustaining learners' attention is a significant challenge.

77% cited time constraints as a barrier to incorporating interactive activities (games, songs).

65% perceived learner motivation as fluctuating and heavily dependent on teaching methods.

#### **Teacher Training and Professional Development**

64% felt unprepared by their initial teacher education programs to address young learners' needs adequately.

Only 30% had access to ongoing professional training focused on early language acquisition.

#### **Assessment Practices**

70% recognized the inadequacy of standardized tests in reflecting young learners' communicative ability.

82% favored formative assessment methods but highlighted constraints related to time and expertise.

#### **Qualitative Findings**

Thematic analysis yielded four principal themes:

##### **1. Inadequacy of Teaching Materials**

Teachers expressed frustration that textbooks are often overly complex or culturally disconnected from learners. One respondent stated:

"The stories and vocabulary in textbooks feel distant from children's everyday lives. It's hard to keep them interested with such materials."

##### **2. Creative Strategies to Boost Motivation**

Interviewees shared various techniques, such as incorporating games, songs, and storytelling, but noted challenges in balancing curriculum demands and time.

A teacher commented:

"We try to make lessons fun, but sometimes pressure to cover syllabus slows us down."

##### **3. Gaps in Teacher Training**

Most participants reported limited exposure to child psychology or young learner-specific pedagogy during their training. Several expressed a wish for more workshops and seminars focused on practical classroom strategies.

##### **4. Assessment Challenges**

Teachers voiced concern about the stress standardized testing causes young children and the difficulty interpreting test results accurately. Alternative assessments like portfolios and observational checklists were favored but rarely implemented due to workload.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

The findings corroborate prior research underscoring the unique challenges of teaching English to young learners (Tomlinson, 2019; Smith & Jones, 2021). The widespread perception of

inadequate teaching materials calls for targeted curriculum development that is culturally relevant and cognitively suitable for children aged 6–11. This aligns with the pedagogical principle that materials should reflect learners' backgrounds and interests to foster engagement and comprehension (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Motivation difficulties identified link closely to cognitive theories emphasizing the necessity of interactive, multisensory learning for young children (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978). While teachers recognize the value of games and songs, systemic barriers such as syllabus pressure and lack of time impede their full integration. This situation necessitates policy adjustments allowing greater flexibility and innovation in lesson planning.

Teacher training gaps reflect Garcia's (2020) observation that many initial educator preparation programs inadequately address young learners' specific needs. Continuous professional development must be prioritized, focusing on child development theories, communicative language teaching (CLT), and classroom management techniques pertinent to young learners.

Assessment challenges highlight the ethical and practical limits of standardized tests for young learners (Brown, 2017). Formative and alternative assessments, including portfolios and observational checklists, provide more nuanced insights but require additional teacher support and manageable workloads.

Addressing classroom diversity through differentiated instruction is essential, in line with Kumar and Lee's (2018) recommendations. Peer collaboration, scaffolded tasks, and tailored feedback can accommodate heterogeneous learner profiles. However, these approaches demand advanced pedagogical skills and resource support.

Limitations of this study, including its focus on urban schools and relatively small sample size, suggest future research should include rural contexts and longitudinal studies measuring outcomes of implemented interventions.

Although the present study was conducted with English teachers and young learners at Termiz State University and selected primary educational institutions in Uzbekistan, the findings may be generalized to broader educational contexts with similar pedagogical and sociolinguistic conditions. The challenges identified in this research, including limited access to age-appropriate instructional materials, insufficient teacher training, learner motivation issues, and assessment-related difficulties, are not unique to Uzbekistan. Similar

concerns have been reported in many developing and transitional educational systems worldwide.

Recent international studies indicate that primary school English teachers in various countries face comparable methodological challenges when teaching young learners. For example, research conducted in Central Asian, Middle Eastern, and Eastern European educational contexts demonstrates that insufficient technological infrastructure, limited professional development opportunities, and traditional teacher-centered methodologies often hinder effective language acquisition among young learners.

The findings of this study can therefore be relevant to other higher educational institutions and teacher-training universities where future English teachers are prepared. In particular, the pedagogical implications observed at Termiz State University may provide valuable insights for regional universities with similar educational environments, curriculum structures, and teacher preparation systems.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of learner-centered and technology-enhanced instruction, which aligns with current global trends in language education. International educational frameworks increasingly support communicative teaching approaches, digital literacy integration, and adaptive learning environments. Therefore, the proposed recommendations, such as integrating digital learning tools, improving teacher-training programs, and applying formative assessment strategies, can be effectively adapted to different educational settings beyond the selected sample.

Another important aspect of generalization concerns the role of socio-cultural factors in language learning motivation. Although cultural and institutional differences may influence classroom practices, the fundamental psychological needs of young learners – such as engagement, interaction, encouragement, and meaningful communication – remain universal across educational contexts. Consequently, the motivational strategies identified in this study may be applicable in diverse teaching environments where young learners require supportive and interactive language instruction.

Additionally, the increasing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), gamification, and online learning platforms in global education systems strengthens the broader applicability of this study. The experience of implementing innovative pedagogical approaches at Termiz State University illustrates how digital technologies can support both teachers

and learners in improving language learning outcomes. Similar strategies may be adopted by educational institutions in other regions seeking to modernize English language instruction.

However, while the findings have broader relevance, certain limitations should also be acknowledged. Differences in technological access, educational policy, teacher qualifications, and socio-economic conditions may affect the direct transferability of the results. Therefore, future studies should investigate larger and more diverse samples across different educational institutions and countries to ensure greater external validity and cross-cultural applicability.

Overall, the results of this study contribute to the growing body of international research on teaching English to young learners and demonstrate that adaptive, learner-centered, and technology-supported methodologies can improve learner motivation and classroom engagement in a wide range of educational contexts.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study elucidates significant methodological challenges confronting primary school English teachers in Uzbekistan regarding young learners: inadequate materials, motivation maintenance hurdles, insufficient training, and assessment constraints. Addressing these issues demands systemic reforms including:

Development of age-appropriate, culturally relevant teaching resources.

Institutional support for incorporating interactive, learner-centered activities.

Enhanced teacher training programs emphasizing young learner pedagogy.

Adoption of formative and alternative assessment models.

Policy adjustments allowing flexibility and resource allocation for inclusive classrooms.

Implementing these recommendations can improve the quality and effectiveness of early English education, fostering positive language learning experiences and outcomes for young learners.

First, policymakers should prioritize the development and implementation of age-appropriate English language curricula that emphasize communicative competence, learner engagement, and interactive teaching methods. Educational policies should encourage the integration of modern pedagogical approaches, including task-based learning, gamification, and technology-enhanced instruction, into primary

education programs.

Second, greater investment is needed in digital infrastructure and educational technologies. Schools should be provided with access to reliable internet connections, multimedia classrooms, language learning applications, and AI-supported educational tools. Such technologies can significantly enhance learner motivation, participation, and individualized learning opportunities.

Third, teacher-training institutions, including pedagogical universities such as Termiz State University, should strengthen pre-service and in-service teacher education programs. Future English teachers need comprehensive preparation not only in language proficiency and teaching methodology but also in digital pedagogy, classroom management, and motivational strategies for young learners.

Additionally, professional development programs should be organized regularly to help teachers adapt to contemporary developments in language education. Workshops, online courses, and international collaboration projects can support teachers in implementing innovative instructional practices and assessment methods.

Another important recommendation concerns assessment practices. Policymakers and educational institutions should promote formative and competency-based assessment systems rather than relying exclusively on traditional examinations. Alternative assessment approaches, such as

portfolios, project-based evaluation, peer assessment, and continuous feedback, may reduce learner anxiety and improve classroom engagement.

Furthermore, educational institutions should create supportive and learner-centered classroom environments that encourage creativity, communication, and active participation. Psychological support and motivational guidance should also be incorporated into primary education to help young learners develop confidence and positive attitudes toward language learning.

The study also highlights the importance of collaboration between schools, universities, and educational authorities. Strong partnerships can facilitate the exchange of best practices, research findings, and innovative teaching experiences. In this regard, higher educational institutions such as Termiz State University can play a key role in conducting applied research and preparing highly qualified English teachers for modern educational contexts.

Finally, future educational reforms should focus on developing adaptive and inclusive teaching models that respond to learners' individual needs, socio-cultural backgrounds, and technological realities. By supporting innovation, teacher development, and learner-centered pedagogy, policymakers and teacher-training institutions can significantly improve the effectiveness of English language education for young learners.

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