

TEACHING YOUNG LEARNERS: THE ROLE OF THEORY ON PRACTICE

Christiana Sidupa
christiana.sidupa@binus.ac.id

DLLC, Interior Design Department, Faculty of Humanities
Bina Nusantara University,
Jakarta, Indonesia

Abstract. The concept of experiential learning is becoming more prevalent in education. The current study describes higher education participants' perspectives on English language learning methods to teach young learners and lessons learned from adopted English language learning methods during teaching practice. A qualitative method was adopted for data collection. The group of data is gathered from 8 English language students via written reflections. The findings show that they have acquired the required theoretical knowledge about English language learning methods for teaching young learners at a reasonably good and applied them in practices of teaching English to young learners. However, their perspectives on the experiential learning during teaching practices are less explored. A smaller consideration is given to focus attention on their perspective, value, personal behaviour, social pressure, or emotion.

Keywords: experiential learning, higher education students, reflection practices, teaching English to young learners

INTRODUCTION

Practicing theory will provide learners with the concept of experiential learning that applies knowledge to a new experience. Additionally, newly acquired knowledge can be generated through concrete learning experience and transformed into abstract generalisation (Hennissen, Beckers, and Moerkerke, 2017). Kolb (1984, 2015), taking from the writings of notable scholars of the twentieth century, asserted that learning is a four-step process that involves concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), and active experimentation (AE). In this way, students have the chance to apply their knowledge to new experiences (re-contextualising knowledge, AE, CE). The learners can start this process at any point in the learning cycle, but they must adhere to the four steps (experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting). According to Holman, Pavlica, and Thorpe (1997) and Tynjälä, Välimaa, and Sarja (2003), learners will gain a deeper and more significant understanding in this way. In the experiential learning, therefore, they can have a more meaningful experience. Through this approach, learners learn more than just basic concepts since they actively participate in the process, making learning an experience.

In the field of second language learning and teaching, learners need to develop their experiential knowledge (their opinions and beliefs about learning and teaching based on their own experience of language classrooms), and extending their received knowledge (for example, their knowledge of theories of language, of the psychology of language learning, and of opinions, beliefs and practices which are different from their own). Here, Wallace (1991) calls a reflective model of learners in which they engage both received knowledge and experiential knowledge in a process called the reflective cycle. In a certain higher education course, learners may find opportunities to put their "teacher knowledge" into practice during teaching practice, test their beliefs about teaching and learning, develop their teaching philosophy, draw on their prior experiences as learners, and create new ones as future teachers. This is the first step in developing experiential knowledge. As a result, when they acquire experience, their personal expertise grows. For them, it is the moment to assess how much or how effectively the received knowledge is put into practice. It is reasonable to believe that received scientific information serves as the foundation for experiential knowledge formation and is, therefore, essential for reflective practice.

Reflection practice enables the learners to explore their teaching experiences in order to develop understanding and promoting more critical thinking. The reflective teaching, therefore, enhances student learning that later serves to inform professional endeavours to address any given circumstance. Students can generalize their key concepts, tenets, and abstract ideas from experience through reflection (Rodek, 2019). According to Worthington et al. (2019), the reflection process consists of debriefing and re-framing to assist students expand their understanding and beliefs, using journals as a tool for reflection to help students become more conscious, and using prompts and feedback to direct their reflection. Reflective discussion, according to Tan (2020), can assist students in learning and converting real-world examples into explicit knowledge. Students "integrate and generalize the arguments received" in a reflective dialogue. They reflect on what they have done and draw lessons from it. The process of understanding and personalizing the information, procedures, and justifications for the knowledge gained is called reflection.

Putting higher education learners' received knowledge into practice, particularly when teaching English to young learners (TEYL) becomes the focus of the course, is stimulated by convenience of their age for second language acquisition. Here, the term "young learner" can potentially be applied to anyone under the age of 18. Teaching English to young learners is a lingua franca nowadays, and younger is better (Jazuly & Indriyani, 2018). This implies that TEYL is convenient for their age because they will learn the language more rapidly.

TEYL necessitates understanding child developmental theories, particular classroom management strategies, and the selection and application of certain teaching methods, resources, and activities suitable for young learners. For this particular age group, general methodological information regarding techniques to teaching English as a foreign language must be modified and adjusted. According to Gürsoy (2012), children have distinct features than adults, hence techniques and strategies that work for adults cannot be applied to them. Children bring their innate abilities and instincts from their L1 acquisition to the language classroom. Children learn visually and kinaesthetically because they naturally enjoy communicating and having fun. Besides, TEYL is essentially a unique activity that should attract them rather than force them to learn the language's structure (Nufus, 2018).

The current study aims to identify higher education learners' perceptions about teaching English to Young Learners and how their beliefs found body in their classroom practices. Therefore, the study aims to find answers to the following research questions:

- 1) What kind of English language learning method is adopted to teach young learners?
- 2) What are lessons learned from application of the adopted English language learning methods?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research. A qualitative methodology is characterized by some points, such as exploring a problem, developing a detailed understanding of a phenomenon, collecting data based on words, analyzing the data for description using text analyzing form, and interpreting the more significant meaning of the finding (Li, Dursun, and Hegelheimer, 2017). A qualitative interpretive approach was designed wherein learners' conditions become the focus (Swanborn, 2012). Here, their reflective writings were submitted as a written assignment requirement to be completed in order to finish the course.

The participants in this study consist of eight Indonesian learners at one of the private universities in Jakarta, Indonesia. Purposive sampling is used to select the participants. They come from three different fields of study. Six learners come from English Literature Study Program, one from International Relations Study Program, and one from Hotel Management Study Program. They take the course that focuses on TEYL in odd semester 2024/2025 academic year.

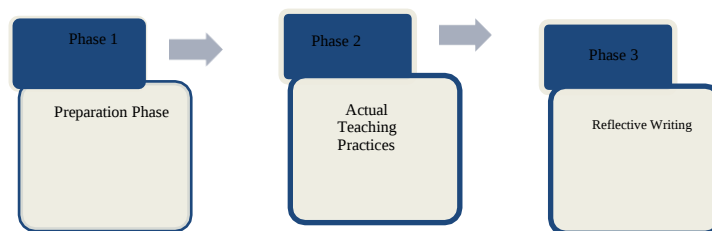


Fig. 1. Research procedures.

This study employs reflective writing of the student participants. At first, students were assigned to have field teaching practices in three groups. They had to find the place to have teaching practices and coordinate with the main English teachers about the materials needed by the young learners. In the preparation phase, students had responsibility to develop lesson plans covering teaching techniques, media, and materials for young learners before implementing them in EYL classes. The second phase is the actual field teaching practices. In this experience, they applied what they had learned about English language learning methods in young learners classrooms. The third phase is reporting in the form of reflective writing that teacher will read and comment. Here, they can include jottings of events, remarks, thoughts and even feelings or emotions felt during the teaching practices.

As Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1996:11) explained, there are three points of this activity that the teacher identified. The first is self-evidently that learners are capable of learning from and reflect on their own experiences. The second is that the activity is meant to encourage critical reflection that is goal-directed. The third is the complexity of the reflecting process that incorporates both cognition and feelings that are strongly interrelated and interactive. This activity, therefore, enables the learners to evaluate their teaching practice.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Participants' perspectives on adopted English language learning methods to teach young learners and lessons learned from adopted English language learning methods. A description of the results is provided below.

1.1 Adopted English Language Learning Method to Teach Young Learners

Participant 1 mentioned that the language learning method that she has adopted in her teaching is phonics, which is effective for developing early language and literacy skills. She wrote, "This method focuses on teaching students in the sound of letters in English language, assisting them to decode words and build a strong foundation for reading, writing, and speaking. The sounds introduced in the lesson are s, a, t, i, p, n, which can form basic words such as 'cat', 'tap', or 'mat'. I believe that this approach can easily help children to grasp how combined sounds can form simple CVC words (consonant-vowel-consonant)."

Participant 2 explained that evaluating the method is simple. He wrote, "We make five stations which includes different activities for the students. The stations are literacy stations where students are being introduced to the first five phonics letters and also being explained to the CVC words. The second station being numeracy which focuses on introducing numeracy to the students, and also activities that teach students to infinity numbers. Third station is the reading station where the main focus of this station is reading where the activity consists of the teacher assessing and also guiding the students when reading a simple CVC books with introduction to new vocabulary and training their pronunciation, and the fourth station being the arts and craft station where the activity consists

of a worksheet where there is a letter on a sheet of paper and the students are assigned to cut the letter and guess what the letter stands for. Lastly, the fifth station is memory game that consists of an activity where students are being assessed for their number and word matching. When we see this method, it involves some types of interaction between the students and the teacher which are aligned with the theory I mentioned beforehand and also after conducting the teaching I do observe that the students were having fun with the teacher and also being very interactive with the teacher itself.”

Participant 3 mentioned that the learning method that was adopted was Harmer’s (2007) Engage-Study-Activate model. She explained, “This model is a way to effectively plan lessons that was designed for the purpose of teaching English, but can be applied to all other subjects as well. By using this model, the lesson is divided into three stages: the engage stage is to activate students’ background knowledge and get them interested in what they are about to study; the study stage is for the students to learn about a new topic in language; and the activate stage is where students will practice what they have learned.” She continued, “She thought that this model was a useful and helpful way to plan the lesson as it is a flexible model and can be used in various contexts. For example, while the study stage is usually only used to “study”, she can still interact with the students, as a way to make sure that they are understanding what they are studying. In her opinion, planning the lesson this way made the lesson itself go smoothly, and prepared them for how the students would be in the class.”

Participant 4 mentioned that evaluating the learning method, it became clear that combining visual aids, repetition, and interactive tasks was highly effective for engaging young learners. She elaborated, “The use of flashcards, where students could see images of animals alongside their names in both Bahasa Indonesia and English, helped reinforce vocabulary. Repetition through group chants and writing tasks further ensured that the vocabulary was internalized. However, the writing task posed a challenge for some students who were still developing their fine motor skills, which suggests that a more tactile approach might have been beneficial, such as using letter blocks or tracing activities. The method also worked well for accommodating different learning styles—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Yet, considering the developmental stage of my students, incorporating more movement-based activities could enhance engagement and learning outcomes.”

Participant 5 described that the aim was to provide a learning experience that targeted phonics, numeracy, vocabulary, reading skills, and memory retention. She explained, “The five learning stations included: Station 1 (Literacy Station), Station 2 (Numeracy Station), Station 3 (Reading Station), Station 4 (Arts and Craft), and Station 5 (Memory Games Station). My team members and I are each responsible for leading one station. The Literacy Station aligns with Krashen’s Input Hypothesis (1985), exposing students to phonics and simple CVC words, encouraging gradual language development. The Numeracy Station connects to Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory (1978), where students collaborated and received support through flashcards and number games to reinforce their understanding of numbers in English. The Reading Station supports both Krashen’s and Swain’s theories by providing comprehensible input through simple CVC books and promoting language production through reading aloud, reinforcing retention. The Arts and Crafts Station exposed students to new vocabulary through visual aids, supporting Vygotsky’s emphasis on social interaction and contextual learning. Finally, the Memory Games Station reinforced word-number matching and CVC vocabulary, helping solidify learning through repetition and active engagement, aligning with both Krashen’s and Swain’s theories.”

Participant 6 elucidated that in evaluating the learning methods adopted in the lessons, she found that incorporating a variety of interactive stations aligned well with the principles of Rudolf Steiner’s Waldorf education. She wrote, “Waldorf theory advocates for holistic education that nurtures the intellectual, artistic, and practical skills of children. By creating stations focused on literacy, numeracy, reading, arts and crafts, and memory games, I enabled students to engage with language in diverse, meaningful contexts. This approach fosters active learning and addresses multiple intelligences, enabling children to engage with language through diverse modalities. For example, the arts and crafts station not only reinforced phonics through creativity but also allowed students to express themselves artistically, facilitating deeper cognitive connections. Additionally, the use of guided reading sessions fosters a love for literature while enhancing comprehension skills, as students interact with texts that resonate with their interests. By rotating through these stations, students experience a dynamic learning environment where they can build confidence and

competence in their language abilities. Overall, this multifaceted approach aligns with Waldorf principles, ensuring that learning is not only effective but also enjoyable and engaging for young learners, ultimately fostering a lifelong love of learning.”

Participant 7 pointed out that the methods used to teach numbers in English through interactive games and flashcards has proven successful for young students. She disclosed, “Engaging kids with visual aids such as flashcards allow for fast recognition and recall of numbers, catering to their developmental stage in which visual learning is essential. The usage of games not only makes learning more entertaining, but also reinforces students’ comprehension via repetition and practice.”

Participant 8 elaborated that the method that they taught the learners involved discussions with other students and gamified learning activities that included both the students and all the teachers. She further clarified, “Not only that, but we also employed the communicative language teaching approach, as these students already had some proficiency in English, albeit not perfect. The gamified learning activities were conducted by having students pair up with each other, choose a written prompt, and create a dialogue focused on asking and expressing opinions. Afterward, the students selected a teacher to pair up with and continued their discussions, now engaging in a deeper exchange of opinions using the same prompts. This approach proved to be highly effective, as the students demonstrated a clear understanding and successful application of the concepts they had learned. Furthermore, gamified learning made the discussions more engaging, manageable, and productive, fostering a supportive environment where students actively participated and enjoyed the process.”

From the adopted English language learning method to teach young learners described above, the participants understand that in creating an effective teaching and learning process, they need to create a well-designed English language learning method by creating some fun and interactive learning activities. By doing so, they can enhance the learning motivation and interest of the young learners. For example, they include the games that enable to stimulate the students’ engagement in the learning process. Besides, it can be used as a warming up related to the material if it is conducted before the main material delivered. It can also be used to ensure that the students have understood the main material. Therefore, the process of learning should be fun and feel they are playing a game, not learning a language.

1.2 Lessons Learned from Adopted English Language Learning Method to Young Learners

Participant 1 wrote, “She learned several things from the conducted teaching practice. The whole idea of this lesson is to allow students to be in charge of their learning, allowing them on what activities they would like to do first.”

Participant 2 thought that during the teaching process as a teacher, he learned a lot from his colleagues. He put into words, “One of them has experience as a teacher already I observed that teaching requires a very detailed understanding of lesson plan making, constructing an activity and which part of the students needs to be improved, the importance of independence for the students when it comes to making choice one of the examples when we choose to make a station where the students can freely choose which area they feel like, with that also comes the importance of encouraging kids to be more independent and involved in their lesson by letting them to do things rather than guiding them at every step where it is ineffective for the students, Overall as someone who has zero experience in teaching language to children this assignment of us having to teach children have taught me a lot.”

Participant 3 expected that maybe their lesson would be too short in terms of duration, but it turned out that since they were talking to the students so much for all stages, it went on for at least an hour. After that, she reflected on the entire planning of the lesson. She wrote, “We had planned and completed the lesson before we could finalise our audience (the students). When we were able to confirm our audience, we realised that some of our content might need to be adjusted to their level. The students were already quite familiar with English, so we tried to edit our lesson plan to make it a bit more challenging for them and teach them something new. By the end of the lesson, we could also see that the students who were already familiar with using words such as “like” and “favorite”

(to express an opinion about one thing), learned something new when we taught them the phrase “better than” (to express an opinion comparing two things).”

Participant 4 mentioned that reflecting on my teaching experience, she realized the importance of adapting lessons to the students' abilities and being flexible with the methods used. She noted, “While the vocabulary task was successful overall, some children required more support in the writing component, highlighting the need for differentiated instruction. I also recognized that fostering a fun and encouraging atmosphere was key to boosting student motivation, as young learners are more likely to participate when they feel comfortable and supported. Moving forward, I will focus on balancing the introduction of new vocabulary with the review of previously learned words, as repetition is crucial for retention. I also plan to incorporate more hands-on and movement-oriented activities to keep the students engaged, such as games that involve physical actions, which would cater to their developmental needs. This experience reminded me of the importance of patience and creativity in teaching, especially for young learners, as each child progresses at their own pace, and it is my role to provide guidance and encouragement along the way. Ultimately, this lesson reinforced my understanding that teaching young learners requires a thoughtful approach that blends theory with practical strategies, and the key is creating a supportive and interactive learning environment.”

Student 5 revealed that looking back on my teaching experience, she learned how important it is for young learners to learn English as a second language. She wrote, “English is a key tool for communication, learning, and future opportunities. For young learners, teaching English requires methods that keep them interested and help them build strong language skills. The techniques my groups used in our lesson plan and teaching activity, like interactive activities, visual aids, and fun games, helped engage the students and made learning more enjoyable. By using activities such as phonics practice, memory games, and guided reading, I saw how young learners learn best when they can actively participate in the language. This shows how important it is to use a variety of teaching methods that cater to different learning styles. For example, I would recommend incorporating active learning activities, where students engage in the language learning experience directly. Additionally, I realized that the best way to teach is by creating a fun, supportive environment where students feel confident to try out the language. By using engaging and simple techniques like games, and arts & crafts, I can help my students develop strong English skills that will benefit them in school and later in life.”

Participant 6 elucidated that reflecting on her experiences as a teacher, she recognized the profound impact of Maria Montessori's educational philosophy on her approach. She wrote, “Montessori emphasized the importance of individualized learning and the role of the teacher as a facilitator rather than a direct instructor. This perspective encourages teachers to create an environment that allows students to explore and learn at their own pace. In my lesson, we planned to have five to six kids, but unfortunately, we ended up with only two. Despite this, the kids enjoyed all five stations. Although there were last-minute changes, we still set up the five stations according to our lesson plan. I observed how providing choices, such as letting students select their own books or choose their next station, fostered independence and motivation. This independence empowers students, making them active participants in their learning process. The hands-on activities also aligned with Montessori's emphasis on experiential learning, allowing students to manipulate materials and engage directly with the content. This hands-on engagement is essential for young learners, as it reinforces abstract concepts through meaningful experiences. As a result, I saw increased enthusiasm and engagement among my students, demonstrating the effectiveness of a learner-centred approach. Moving forward, I do aim to further integrate Montessori principles by continuing to cultivate a classroom environment that values choice, exploration, and most importantly respect for each child's unique learning journey. This self-reflection underscores the importance of adapting teaching strategies to meet the diverse needs of students, ultimately enhancing their learning experiences. By embracing these educational philosophies, I can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment that promotes not only language acquisition but also holistic development.”

Participant 7 reflected that she discovered the value of flexibility in her teaching style. She wrote, “Young learners frequently have variable levels of comprehension and attention spans; hence, being adaptive throughout lessons allows me to better meet the needs of individual students. For example, if some children struggled to identify numbers, I could offer extra help through focused activities or

one-on-one instruction. Overall, my teaching experience strengthened my trust in the efficacy of interactive and child-centered learning approaches. By creating an environment in which children feel comfortable to explore and make errors, we may dramatically improve their language acquisition journey while also making learning pleasurable.”

Participant 8 revealed, “While this is not necessarily an issue, it highlights the need for me to improve my ability to teach effectively in a group setting. Managing a classroom requires a different set of skills, including engaging multiple students, maintaining their attention, and ensuring everyone participates equally. Developing these skills will help me become a more versatile and capable teacher in the future.”

According to the result of this study, the reflection practices they have completed on their teaching practices were able to characterize their learning of the theories covered in the TEYL sub course. However, they also could hardly convey their positive and negative teaching experiences as well as generate self-evaluation in the form of their experiences and their capacity for creativity, critical thinking, communication, and teamwork. Only some students' learning challenges during instructional teaching practices are revealed through reflection practices. Participants 1 and 2 highlight the importance of student independence that allows young learners to choose class activities that foster autonomy and motivation. Participants 3 and 4 stress the lesson adaptation that the teachers adjust the content with students' abilities to ensure effective learning. Participants 5 emphasizes interactive methods that active participation through games, arts & crafts, and hands-on activities supports learners' diverse learning styles. Participant 6 thinks that holistic approach that incorporating theories, like Montessori and Waldorf, that highlight the value of experiential and individualized learning. Participants 7 and 8 highlight on flexibility that adapting teaching to varying comprehension levels ensures inclusivity and engagement. They realize that to be professional English teachers, they should be proficient in the language and maintain it up to date. Along with developing their teaching skills and ethical behavior, they should also be able to manage the students at their class. A lesser amount of thought is given to how they respond to the new circumstance as a result of incorporating their old and new knowledge, how they interpret the experience, and how they emphasize the significance of other elements, like perception, value, individual habits, peer pressure, or assessments of their mental state.

CONCLUSION

The current study aims at investigating English language learners' understanding of beliefs about basic theory on teaching English to young learners and how this knowledge affected their teaching philosophy during implementation in field teaching practices. In this matter, the learners are given the chance to apply knowledge in the authentic learning environments. Reflective writing is done in order to understand applied English language learning method to teach young learners and the lesson learned from it. Developing an understanding of how much and how well the student teacher knowledge is reflected in teaching practice is expected to enable them to evaluate learning methods. In fact, there was very little written reflection from the higher education participants. The majority of them provided an informative and unified story. Here, moments and experiences during the teaching practices are described. The researcher may, therefore, draw the conclusion that reflections, particularly when presented in written form after teaching practice, can be hardly a powerful tool for promoting the initiation of the reflective practice.

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