



Language Teaching and Educational Research

e-ISSN 2636-8102
Volume 7, Issue 1 | 2024

Navigating Turkish EFL teachers' perceived challenges with very young learners

**Gizem Rojda Yıldız
Merve Savaşçı**

To cite this article:

Yıldız, G. R., & Savaşçı, M. (2024). Navigating Turkish EFL teachers' perceived challenges with very young learners. *Language Teaching and Educational Research (LATER)*, 7(1), 37-50. <https://doi.org/10.35207/later.1356067>

View the journal website



Submit your article to *LATER*



Contact editor



Copyright (c) 2024 *LATER* and the author(s). This is an open access article under CC BY-NC-ND license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)



Navigating Turkish EFL teachers' perceived challenges with very young learners

*Gizem Rojda Yıldız ✉ ORCID

English Language Teacher, Ministry of National Education, Sakarya, Türkiye

Merve Savaşçı ✉ ORCID

Assist. Prof. Dr., Department of Foreign Language Education, Faculty of Education, Sakarya University, Türkiye

Article Info

Abstract

Type: Original research

Received: 6 September 2023

Accepted: 5 February 2024

Keywords:

Challenges
EFL teachers
Very young learners

DOI:

10.35207/later.1356067

***Corresponding author**

gizem.yildiz7@ogr.
sakarya.edu.tr

This study sought to investigate teachers' perceived challenges in teaching English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) to very young learners (VYLs) (2 to 6 years-old pre-schoolers) in Türkiye, with a two-fold aim: 1) to explore the challenges that EFL teachers experience in teaching VYLs, and 2) to investigate whether there is a significant difference in the challenges they encounter regarding their gender and years of teaching experience. The participants were Turkish EFL teachers (N= 35) teaching English to VYLs in preschools. A mixed method convergent research design was adopted within the scope of the study: Quantitative data were collected by a Likert Scale Questionnaire, while qualitative data were gathered via semi-structured interviews. The data elicited via the questionnaire were analyzed through descriptive statistics and a Mann-Whitney U Test using SPSS, and the data gathered from the interview were analyzed by inductive content analysis. Several challenges emerged, and findings revealed that teachers mostly encounter challenges in managing the classroom and involving students in teaching English to VYLs. However, findings did not illustrate a statistically significant difference in the challenges teachers face regarding their gender or years of teaching experience. Exploring these challenges can help teachers and other stakeholders understand the potential problems in teaching English to VYLs and help improve their instructional practices accordingly. The article concludes with suggestions for further research.

Suggested APA citation: Yıldız, G. R., & Savaşçı, M. (2024). Navigating Turkish EFL teachers' perceived challenges with very young learners. *Language Teaching and Educational Research (LATER)*, 7(1), 37-50. <https://doi.org/10.35207/later.1356067>

Ethics statement: We hereby declare that research/publication ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of the study. We take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of dispute.

Statement of interest: We have no conflict of interest to declare.

Funding: None

Acknowledgements: None

INTRODUCTION

With the spread of globalization and digitalization, English has become the lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2005) during the past half-century and has been taught as a second or foreign language (L2) in many countries all around the world (Broughton et al., 2002). Today, in line with the global rise of English, more and more people are taught English in many non-English speaking countries, and children are no exception in this realm (Butler, 2015; Cameron, 2003; Copland & Garton, 2014). In this respect, there has been a rapid increase in the number of educational institutions catering to the crying need for addressing a diverse population of language learners with wide-ranging backgrounds and characteristics, so has there been a collateral dynamic increase in the necessity to train more English language teachers in terms of number and high quality, too. Especially with the policies promulgated for teaching the English language in primary or pre-primary schools in many non-English speaking countries (Copland & Garton, 2014; Nguyen, 2018), the need for English language teachers that would implement age-appropriate pedagogies has become even more critical. Nonetheless, teacher training processes appear to fall short in preparing these teachers to teach English to young learners (YLS hereafter) (Copland & Garton, 2014).

As a matter of fact, it has been stated that a “one-fits-all” standpoint seems to be dominant, oftentimes ignoring the context-specific theories and practices in instructing teachers teaching English to young learners (TEYL) (Nguyen, 2018, p. 13), and the Turkish context is not an exception. As in most educational systems worldwide, English is the primary and first foreign language being learned and taught in Türkiye. In primary school, students start learning English officially as a school subject in the 2nd grade (for 2 hours per week). In the preceding pre-primary school years, however, the provision of English lessons is not compulsory and, therefore, is not a part of the curriculum in state pre-primary schools. Yet, most private schools or institutions generally start teaching their students English from a very young age. Nevertheless, teachers are not generally provided with extra in-service training opportunities that would further specialize them in TEYL, and consequently, it can be a very common situation for English language teachers to encounter some challenges when they start TEYL. In that sense, although English language teachers already face a wide range of challenges both inside and outside the classroom environment, such as managing the classroom (Akçor & Savaşçı, 2020; Pertiwi et al., 2020), involving the students (Widodo & Dewi, 2019), and monitoring learning (Inostroza-Araos, 2015), the challenges experienced by those teaching English to YLS can take on varied forms, given that such challenges could diverge according to the age of the students being taught. Since teaching different age groups requires very different sets of teaching skills and competencies, the scope of challenges in TEYL could greatly vary at this level of education, namely pre-primary education.

Indeed, teaching YLS a foreign language could be pretty demanding for teachers (Cameron, 2003). Nevertheless, the empirical inquiry is very scant since there have been few investigations into what teachers go through in teaching YLS, particularly VYLs (from 2 to 6-year-old pre-schoolers). Drawing on this gap and so-called need, this study seeks to investigate teachers’ perceived challenges in teaching English to VYLs as a foreign language (EFL).

Background to the study

Ellis (2014) provides a ubiquitous but obsolete definition of the term “young learner” by referring to it as “any learner under the age of 18” (p. 75) and then puts forward new terms by drawing attention to many different confusing definitions in the field. Ellis (2014, p. 77) refers to pre-schoolers (also referred to as pre-primary, early years, nursery, and kindergarten) as those whose ages range between 2–5 years. The proposed term is “Early years/pre-primary.” Ellis (2014) stated that primary school students’ age ranges between 6–10/11 years. Although some of their characteristics are similar, pre-schoolers and primary school students learn languages in different ways.

According to Piaget (1970), VYLs, whose ages range between 3-6 years, tend to learn languages through interacting with their environment and exploring the immediate setting. When compared to YLs, whose ages range between 6 and 12, the attention span of VYLs is very short, and they are very curious to explore the world around them (Degirmenci-Uysal & Yavuz, 2015). Vygotsky (1962) stated that children acquire language through social interaction and interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD); they reach maximum capacity in language learning with scaffolding. When all the characteristics of VYLs are taken into consideration, it might be challenging for many EFL teachers to teach English to children at kindergartens (Moore, 2010). Some of these challenges include lack of time (Kusmaryati, 2020), lack of teaching resources (Copland et al., 2014), students' involvement (Khulel, 2021), and classroom management (Pertiwi et al., 2020). VYLs can also easily get distracted from the lesson and feel alienated because of their age. If teachers frequently use L2 in classrooms, making students participate in the lessons, monitoring their learning, and managing the classroom could be pretty challenging.

Accordingly, the challenges faced by teachers teaching teenagers or adult learners are likely to be different both in scope and number than those encountered by teachers teaching YLs, namely those whose ages range from 6-12 years. They are so because young learners differ from adult learners, not only in terms of literacy but also in terms of their cognitive, social, and emotional growth (McKay, 2006; Nguyen, 2018). To exemplify, YLs have great imagination and energy (Kusmaryati, 2020). They also pay more attention to their surroundings and are more interested in physical and tangible materials (Pertiwi et al., 2020). Therefore, English language teachers might encounter challenges in student involvement (Widodo & Dewi, 2019) or classroom management (Inostroza Araos, 2015) while teaching English to a group of YLs. However, since only a few studies focus on the challenges teachers encounter in teaching English to VYLs, this study aims to investigate the challenges Turkish EFL teachers face in teaching English to this specific group of learners. Exploring such challenges can help teachers and educators identify the possible challenges they might face in very young learners' classrooms and solve them beforehand in the teaching process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges faced by English language teachers teaching young learners (YLs)

Young learners possess different characteristics when compared to teenagers or adult learners because they are generally more energetic; they like playing games, and they have great imaginations (Kusmaryati, 2020). Since young learners are very active and energetic during the learning process, teachers might face some difficulties when teaching English (Widodo & Dewi, 2019). For example, Inostroza Araos (2015) indicated that many teachers worldwide encounter the challenges of insufficient student involvement, classroom management, assessing learning, and limited resources. So, the challenges faced by English teachers teaching young /very young learners generally center around student involvement, classroom management, and monitoring learning, as indicated in the literature.

Accordingly, there are several studies in the literature focusing on the challenges encountered by English language teachers teaching YLs in different contexts around the world (e.g., Inostroza Araos, 2015; Keskin, 2019; Khulel, 2021; Kusmaryati, 2020; Pertiwi et al., 2020; Widodo & Dewi, 2021). For example, Pertiwi et al. (2020) studied the perspectives on the challenges of teaching English to YLs in the Indonesian EFL context. Findings illustrated that Indonesian teachers face difficulties with class size, classroom management, different characteristics of students, and difficult language skills, referring to some difficulties in reading and writing. Findings showed that the most challenging one was classroom management for teachers. In another study in the same context, Widodo and Dewi (2021) investigated the problems Indonesian EFL teachers face when teaching English to second-grade students. They found out that the problems stemmed from students' lack of discipline during the lessons, differences in their English abilities, difficulty in creating a habit of using English as a daily language, and lack of support from parents. Another

study was conducted by Kusmaryati (2020), who investigated teachers' perspectives on teaching English to YLs in Indonesia. The researcher reported that teachers encounter problems of lack of time, students' poor vocabulary and pronunciation skills, students' interest in English, and limited learning facilities and materials. Also, students' characteristics were a problem as they were very active and energetic. Khulel (2021) also conducted a study on the difficulties that English teachers face when teaching English to elementary students in rustic primary schools in East Java, Indonesia. Findings showed that teachers encountered three significant challenges: students' socioeconomic conditions, which refer to parental income or educational background; the status of English in the schools, referring to the allocated time for English in the curriculum; and the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected both students and teachers.

Apart from the studies in the Indonesian context, another study focusing on teachers' challenges was conducted in the Chilean context by Inostroza Araos (2015). The study focused on the challenges teachers face in Chilean young learners' classrooms. Findings illustrated that monitoring learning was the major challenge for teachers. Time limitations, lack of support from parents, and the differences between school reality and policy were the other problems that teachers encountered in young learners' classrooms. Findings also showed that teachers rarely used group work because of time limitations. Additionally, female teachers used teaching styles better, so they had a more positive attitude towards teaching English to YLs. In addition to Chilean young learners' classrooms, Keskin (2019) explored the challenges teachers face in teaching English to YLs in public primary schools in İstanbul, Türkiye. Teachers reported a variety of challenges such as institutional (e.g., time constraints and crowded classrooms), instructional (e.g., inadequate learning materials), community-related (e.g., lack of support from parents), learner-related (e.g., lack of motivation and nature of learners), and teacher-related (e.g., training and knowledge of English) challenges. Lastly, extensive research was implemented by Copland et al. (2014) to investigate the challenges faced by teachers from both global and local perspectives. As findings illustrated, teachers face challenges due to lacking training, knowledge, and resources. Additionally, it was demonstrated that teachers encounter challenges in teaching skills in the global context, yet they face challenges of confidence and time pressures locally.

When the aforementioned studies are considered, English language teachers appear to face several challenges (e.g., classroom management and monitoring learning) while teaching YLs in different contexts. However, since young learners' characteristics differ from those of very young learners, they tend to have different needs in English language education. Teachers might, therefore, encounter different challenges while teaching English to very young learners.

Challenges faced by English language teachers teaching very young learners (VYLs)

Very young learners (VYLs) have maximum energy but minimum concentration, and they need to be involved in more physical activities than young learners do (Uysal & Yavuz, 2015). These characteristics of VYLs might cause difficulties for teachers in teaching English, but there are only a few studies that focus on the challenges that teachers encounter in teaching English to this group of learners. For example, the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English to VYLs in Indonesia were studied by Malik et al. (2021), who concluded that lack of motivation, limited time and teaching resources, inadequate materials, and crowded classrooms were the challenges encountered by English language teachers. Another study revealed that the challenges stem from teachers not knowing how to prepare a lesson plan and not having enough training. Moreover, the study showed that an unsupportive learning environment was another challenge for teachers in teaching English to VYLs (Masnan & Ngajib, 2016). Teachers' challenges when teaching English in Utah kindergarten were investigated in another study (Moore, 2010), and large class size, lack of resources and time, students' school readiness, academic curriculum, and lack of parental involvement were indicated as the challenges that teachers encounter.

These challenges teachers encounter could also vary according to different variables, particularly those stemming from teacher-related variables, such as their gender and years of teaching experience. For example, gender has been indicated as a significant variable in this respect.

According to Pavlenko and Piller (2008), in foreign language teaching, females have more positive attitudes than male teachers, and they use teaching and learning strategies better, so female teachers might face fewer challenges in the profession. In addition to gender, teaching experience could be another important variable since it might influence teachers' challenges in teaching English to young/ very young learners (Inostroza Araos, 2015). However, as Inostroza Araos (2015) illustrated, the challenges teachers face in young learners' classrooms did not vary across teachers' teaching experience.

Significance and purpose of the study

As the literature review suggests, the earlier studies mainly focused on challenges faced by teachers who teach YLs (e.g., Copland et al., 2014), in other words, primary school students. Nevertheless, a few studies focus on the challenges faced by teachers who teach VYLs in kindergartens (e.g., Malik et al., 2021; Moore, 2010), namely pre-primary school students. Also, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, only one study focuses on teachers' challenges (i.e., Keskin, 2019); however, that study was conducted with those teaching English to YLs in primary schools. Accordingly, it appears there is no study in the literature addressing teachers' challenges while teaching VYLs. Taking these limitations and gaps into consideration, this study sought to investigate the challenges faced by Turkish EFL teachers in teaching English to VYLs and was guided by the following research questions:

1. Do Turkish EFL teachers encounter challenges in teaching English to very young learners? If yes, what challenges do they encounter regarding
 - 1.1. students' involvement?
 - 1.2. monitoring learning?
 - 1.3. classroom management?
2. Is there any difference in the challenges they encounter according to their
 - 2.1. gender?
 - 2.2. years of teaching experience?

METHODOLOGY

Design

In accordance with the aim of the study, this study followed the mixed method sequential convergent research design, where the researchers first carried out a quantitative method, and then the qualitative method was used to gather additional detailed information to flesh out the results (Fraenkel et al., 2015). So, the researchers wanted to achieve an elaborate and comprehensive understanding of the target phenomenon (Dörnyei, 2007). As Cohen et al. (2002) stated, mixed-method research enables a more comprehensive and complete understanding of a target complex phenomenon than using single-method approaches. Considering that collecting only quantitative data would not be enough for answering the research questions of this study, the researchers also collected qualitative data to elaborate more on the phenomenon and have a fuller understanding of the issue, so the explanatory mixed method research design was adopted for the present study. Moreover, a cross-sectional research design was used in the study since it took place at a particular time; in other words, the data were collected at one point in time (a day or few weeks) (Fraenkel et al., 2015).

Setting and participants

The study was conducted in the Turkish EFL context, where a total of 35 Turkish EFL teachers (30 females, five males) teaching English at private/public kindergarten schools in the Turkish educational context voluntarily participated. All of them were pre-primary and non-native English teachers. Participants sampled through snowball sampling had different years of teaching experience ranging from 1 to 17 years ($M = 6$ years). The snowball sampling method is "a principled

list of key respondents, who are then asked to recruit further participants who are similar to them in some respect central to the investigation” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 129).

Instruments

Data for this mixed-method study came from quantitative and qualitative instruments: Quantitative data came from a questionnaire adopted from Inostroza Araos (2015) (see Appendix A), which comprises two main sections: The first section includes items about the demographic information (e.g., gender and years of teaching experience) of the participants. The second section includes a total of 12 items delving into the challenges they face in teaching English to VYLs, which are categorized into three main categories: students’ involvement (Items 1, 2, 3), monitoring learning (Items 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9), and classroom management (Items 10, 11, 12). Items were in the form of 5-point Likert-scale items ranging from very difficult (5) to very easy (1), where the respondents were invited to rate the degree of difficulty in accomplishing the specified activities. Thus, the questionnaire was specifically chosen, considering that it was the most suitable questionnaire that would serve the aims of the current study. Additionally, the reliability and validity of the questionnaire were ensured by Inostroza Araos (2015) in her Ph.D. dissertation.

The qualitative data, on the other hand, were collected by semi-structured interviews (See Appendix B) administered individually. The researcher developed the interview protocol and asked three experts their opinions of the interview questions to see if there were any problems or if the questions were to the point and unbiased. The interview protocol includes a total of five open-ended questions about the challenges teachers encounter when teaching English to VYLs. The interviews were designed in a way to have a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges teachers experience.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected in several different steps. First of all, ethical permission was obtained from the Ethical Committee of the university where the authors study and work. After receiving the ethical permission followed by expert opinions, a pilot study was conducted with conveniently sampled two EFL teachers teaching English to YLs in a kindergarten so that they would be demographically similar to the target participants, who were not involved in the actual study. The questionnaire and interviews were piloted so that the researchers could foresee the instruments’ applicability and identify possible problems that might occur during the data collection process. The instruments (namely, the questionnaire and interviews) were administered to the teachers, and their opinions about the questions in the questionnaire and interview were asked by recording their voices. They stated that the questions in the questionnaire and in the interview were straightforward and to the point. So, the instruments were finalized with some slight changes.

After ensuring the instruments were ready, the researchers invited participants to the study by informing them about the ethical issues. Upon their invitation, they were informed that involvement in the study was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw their consent at any time. Since they were not required to write their names on the questionnaire, they kindly provided anonymous information. The questionnaire was transformed into an online form and was sent to the participants. After gathering quantitative data via the questionnaire, the researcher invited six of the participants randomly selected for semi-structured interviews, and meetings were recorded upon their informed consent. Interviews lasted between 15-20 minutes (M= 15 minutes).

Regarding analysis procedures, the quantitative data were analyzed by administering descriptive and inferential statistics analyses through SPSS. Descriptive statistics were initially run to identify the mean and standard deviation of the items and subcategories (i.e., students’ involvement, monitoring learning, and classroom management). Then, a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was run to understand whether there was a significant difference in the challenges teachers face regarding their gender and years of teaching experience because parametric tests are used when the researchers have a larger sample or when the data are distributed normally (Fraenkel

et al., 2011). As for the analysis of the qualitative data, they were transcribed and analyzed through inductive content analysis with the three other coders to avoid any bias and ensure inter-rater reliability. After labeling the data with the codes that were related to the research problems, they were gathered under relevant themes. The researchers followed the procedure of Dörnyei (2007) during the content analysis. Data elicited from the interviews were not analyzed using codes of the existing categories but rather using inductive content analysis.

FINDINGS

In order to answer the first research question, namely whether Turkish EFL teachers encounter challenges in teaching English to VYLs and, if so, what challenges they encounter concerning students' involvement, monitoring learning, and classroom management, quantitative data comprising participants' responses to the questionnaire were analyzed in three subcategories. Findings of the descriptive statistics analyses regarding the three subcategories (i.e., students' involvement, monitoring learning, and classroom management) are illustrated in Table 1.

As presented in Table 1, teachers had the highest mean score on the challenges of classroom management ($M= 3.14$, $SD= 1.05$), whereas the mean scores regarding the other two challenge categories (i.e., students' involvement and classroom management) were comparatively lower. In other words, teachers overall found classroom management much more challenging than arranging students' involvement ($M= 3.11$) or monitoring learning ($M= 2.97$), which had the lowest mean score. Overall, although teachers experienced all the challenge categories, namely students' involvement (e.g., keeping students interested), monitoring learning (e.g., monitoring learners' progress), and classroom management (e.g., managing discipline), the most challenging category was classroom management for them.

Table 1. Descriptives of subcategories

Subcategory	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.Deviation
Classroom management	35	1.33	5.00	3.14	1.05
Student involvement	35	1.33	5.00	3.11	1.02
Monitoring Learning	35	1.17	4.83	2.97	0.99

As the findings illustrated, the most challenging aspect of teaching VYLs for Turkish EFL teachers was classroom management ($M= 3.14$, $SD= 1.05$). As tabulated in Table 2, teachers found managing time effectively in the lessons more difficult than other activities regarding classroom management ($M= 3.20$, $SD= 1.30$).

Table 2. Challenges regarding classroom management

Items	M	Mdn	SD	Very Easy (1)	Easy (2)	Neutral (3)	Difficult (4)	Very Difficult (5)
10. Managing time effectively in the lessons	3.20	3	1.30	4 (11.4%)	8 (22.9%)	6 (17.1%)	11 (31.4%)	6 (17.1%)
11. Managing discipline	3.14	3	1.30	5 (14.3%)	7 (20%)	6 (17.1%)	12 (34.3%)	5 (14.3%)
12. Managing classroom setting	3.08	3	1.40	6 (17.1%)	6 (%17.1)	10 (28.6%)	5 (14.3%)	8 (22.9%)

Following classroom management, student involvement was the second most challenging aspect of teaching VYLs ($M= 3.11$, $SD= 1.02$). More specifically, findings indicated that teachers found keeping students interested ($M= 3.17$, $SD= 1.36$) and making all students participate in activities ($M= 3.17$, $SD= 1.29$) the most challenging among others. The findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Challenges regarding student involvement

Items	M	Mdn	SD	Very Easy (1)	Easy (2)	Neutral (3)	Difficult (4)	Very Difficult (5)
1. Keep students interested	3.17	4	1.36	6 (17.1%)	6 (17.1%)	4 (11.4%)	14 (40%)	5 (14.3%)
2. Make all students participate in the activities	3.17	3	1.29	5 (14.3%)	6 (17.1%)	7 (20%)	12 (34.3%)	5 (14.3%)
3. Give learners the opportunity to express themselves in English	3.00	3	1.05	2 (5.7%)	10 (28.6%)	12 (34.3%)	8 (22.9%)	3 (8.6%)

Among the three subcategories, monitoring learning ($M= 2.97$, $SD= 0.99$) was comparatively much less challenging for participants. As the findings illustrated, participating teachers considered assessing learners' progress more difficult than others ($M= 3.05$, $SD= 1.18$). Accounting for different individual learning styles ($M= 3.02$, $SD= 1.04$) and monitoring learners' progress ($M= 3.02$, $SD= 1.33$) were similarly challenging for them, whereas they did not find providing feedback or providing remedial actions to learners that challenging. Findings are illustrated in detail in Table 4.

Table 4. Challenges regarding monitoring learning

Items	M	Mdn	SD	Very Easy (1)	Easy (2)	Neutral (3)	Difficult (4)	Very Difficult (5)
4. Assessing learners individually	3.05	3	1.18	5 (14.3%)	5 (14.3%)	11 (31.4%)	11 (31.4%)	3 (8.6%)
5. Accounting for different individual learning styles	3.02	3	1.04	1 (2.9%)	12 (34.3%)	10 (28.6%)	9 (25.7%)	3 (8.6%)
6. Monitoring learners' progress	3.02	3	1.33	5 (14.3%)	9 (25.7%)	7 (20%)	8 (22.9%)	6 (17.1%)
7. Identifying learners' difficulties	3.00	3	1.32	7 (20%)	5 (14.3%)	8 (22.9%)	11 (31.4%)	4 (11.4%)
8. Providing feedback	2.97	3	1.31	7 (20%)	5 (14.3%)	9 (25.7%)	10 (28.6%)	4 (11.4%)
9. Providing remedial actions to learners	2.77	3	1.28	7 (20%)	8 (22.9%)	10 (28.6%)	6 (17.1%)	4 (11.4%)

In order to answer the second research question, a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to further investigate whether the challenges teachers encounter vary between male and female teachers. Findings illustrated a slight difference across genders in the mean score of challenges categories. As reported in Table 5, regarding the challenges of student involvement, the mean score of female teachers ($M= 18.23$) was higher than those of male teachers ($M= 16.60$), suggesting that they reported experiencing more challenges. When it comes to the challenges of monitoring learning, on the other hand, male teachers ($M= 18.70$) had higher mean scores than female teachers ($M= 17.88$), who reported experiencing more challenges in this subcategory. Lastly, as for classroom management challenges, the mean score of female teachers ($M= 19.37$) was comparatively higher than that of males ($M= 9.80$), meaning that male teachers found classroom management comparatively less challenging. Overall, as findings showed, student involvement and classroom management were more challenging for female teachers, whereas male teachers found monitoring learning more challenging. However, there was no statistically significant difference

between female and male teachers in the challenges they encounter when teaching English to young learners. Findings are reported in Table 5.

Table 5. Findings of the Mann-Whitney U test

Subcategory	Gender	<i>n</i>	Mean rank	U	<i>p</i>
Student involvement	Female	30	18.23	68.00	0.74
	Male	5	16.60		
Monitoring learning	Female	30	17.88	71.50	0.86
	Male	5	18.70		
Classroom management	Female	30	19.37	34.00	0.52
	Male	5	9.80		

**p* < .05

Any potential difference in the challenges teachers encounter was also investigated across teachers having different years of teaching experience. In other words, whether these challenges vary between novice (i.e., those having 0-3 years of experience) or experienced (i.e., those having 4-12 years of experience) teachers according to their years of professional teaching experience, a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was run. Although findings did not reveal a statistically significant difference across these two groups of teachers, differences were observed in their mean scores in all the subcategories. Regarding student involvement, the mean score of novice teachers (*M*= 18.04) was higher than those of experienced teachers (*M*= 12.33), meaning that novice teachers found student involvement more challenging. When it comes to the challenges of monitoring learning, the mean score of novice teachers (*M*= 17.39) was likewise higher than that of experienced teachers (*M*= 15.25), so novice teachers found monitoring learning comparatively more challenging. Lastly, novice teachers similarly found classroom management more challenging since their mean score (*M*= 17.87) was higher than that of experienced teachers (*M*= 13.08). Findings are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Findings of the Mann-Whitney U test for teachers having different years of teaching experience

Subcategory	Gender	<i>n</i>	Mean rank	U	<i>p</i>
Student involvement	Novice	21	18.04	53.00	0.18
	Experienced	14	12.33		
Monitoring learning	Novice	21	17.39	70.50	0.62
	Experienced	14	15.25		
Classroom management	Novice	21	17.87	57.50	0.26
	Experienced	14	13.08		

**p* < .05

Qualitative data findings from the semi-structured interviews, which were collected to support the quantitative data, were also in line with the quantitative data. Codes and themes identified in the transcribed data are presented in detail in Table 7.

Table 7. Findings of the inductive content analysis

Themes	Codes	Frequency (f)
Classroom management	Playful students	6
	Physical situation of the classroom	3
	Energetic/Active students	3
	Behavior problems	2
	Modelling/Imitation	2
	Time management	1
Students' involvement	Tired students	3
	Bored students	2

	Learning desire	1
Monitoring learning	Providing feedback	3
	Learning pace	2
Technology	Technology-literate families	1
	Internet	1

According to the interview findings, teachers generally reported that they encounter the challenges of playful students, and they stated that students wanted to play games during the lessons. An example excerpt from one of the participants is as follows:

“I told you before they are young, you know they are very playful, sometimes they are not listening to you, they want to play with the toys, and you have to get their attention” (Int. 1).

Moreover, the interview findings revealed that teachers face some difficulties with students’ involvement in teaching English to VYLs. For example, teachers stated that students get bored or tired and do not want to participate in the lessons. One of the teachers commented on the issue as follows:

“Of course, some of the students are not interested in English or maybe some students are just tired maybe they did not have their breakfast, they are just tired to participate in the class, I can say that” (Int. 2).

Findings also indicated that teachers encounter challenges in providing feedback or students’ different learning paces under the category of monitoring learning. The following excerpt may give a better idea about the interviewees’ perspectives on this issue:

“I mean, I can monitor their learning very well, but when providing feedback, I am not sure, I think I am not perfect while providing feedback. I think I have challenges regarding that” (Int. 3)

Apart from the challenges mentioned above, teachers reported that they encountered some challenges regarding technology-literate families and the internet. The following excerpt is an example:

“They are kids that their families became famous via internet, WhatsApp or Instagram they feel like they got the teacher’s all attention they should be in the middle of attention, they are just like you know destroying the other ones” (Int. 4).

DISCUSSION

Quantitative data findings revealed that classroom management was the most challenging aspect for teachers in teaching English to VYLs, followed by students’ involvement and monitoring of learning. This finding implies that teachers generally face challenges in managing discipline, managing time effectively, and managing classroom settings. These findings corroborate those of some earlier studies (e.g., Malik et al., 2021; Petiwi et al., 2020), which similarly showed classroom management as the major challenge for teachers teaching YLs. The presence of similar findings among different contexts suggests that classroom management is a problematic issue for English teachers when teaching both YLs and VYLs (e.g., Keskin, 2019; Kusmaryati, 2020; Widodo & Dewi, 2021). Moreover, questionnaire findings also indicated that teachers also faced some challenges with respect to students’ involvement and monitoring of learning. Likewise, students’ interests were highlighted in the previous studies as a challenge for English teachers (e.g., Keskin, 2019; Kusmaryati, 2020; Malik et al., 2021; Petiwi et al., 2020; Widodo & Dewi, 2021).

Moreover, the findings of this study demonstrated that although there were differences in their mean scores, there was not a statistically significant difference between male and female

teachers in the challenges they face when teaching English to VYLs (see Table 5). In other words, it can be stated that both female and male teachers encounter similar challenges when teaching English to VYLs. Besides, findings showed no significant difference in the challenges teachers face regarding their years of teaching experience (see Table 6), suggesting that they tend to encounter similar problems in very young learners' classrooms regardless of their professional years of teaching experience. This result was in congruence with the study of Inostroza Araos (2015), which similarly reported no significant variance in challenges they faced according to teachers' years of teaching experience.

Qualitative data findings, similarly, correspond to the findings of quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire because teachers stated that they mostly faced the challenges of classroom management during the interview. Accordingly, this finding implies that teachers found classroom management as the most challenging aspect when teaching English in very young learners' classrooms. The interview results were in line with the study of Pertiwi et al. (2020), which indicated classroom management as the most challenging category for teachers when teaching English to VYLs. Furthermore, teachers stated that they encounter challenges of behavior problems of the students. This finding corresponds to the study of Widodo and Dewi (2021) because they likewise indicated that the problems stem from students' lack of discipline during the lessons. Findings also support Kusmaryati's (2020) and Copland et al.'s (2014) findings since they illustrated that teachers encounter problems of lack of time in teaching English to VYLs. Additionally, teachers stated during the interview that they encountered problems with energetic and active students. Kusmaryati (2020) also reported a similar finding, which showed the problems of students' characteristics as they are very active and energetic. Findings demonstrated that teachers face the challenges of physical circumstances of the classroom, which supports the study of Masnan and Ngajib (2016). Masnan and Ngajib (2016) found that difficulties come from unsupportive learning environments, so teachers should use fun activities in interesting environments (e.g., gardens) to teach language.

In addition to classroom management challenges, teachers also appeared to have problems with the challenges of students' involvement and their characteristics. They stated that students generally get bored and tired during the lessons. It can be concluded that teachers encounter some challenges in making the students participate in the lesson since they are bored or tired because of various circumstances. Similar findings were also highlighted in the studies of Pertiwi et al. (2020) and Kusmaryati (2020). Apart from students' involvement, teachers tend to have some challenges in monitoring learning, such as providing feedback and learning speed, in very young learners' classrooms. This finding suggests that teachers may not provide students with appropriate feedback because of their age and learning characteristics. Lastly, teachers reported during the interview that they have challenges with technology, the internet, and families who have technology literacy, so it can be deduced that this situation creates some challenges for English teachers when teaching VYLs because students learn everything from the internet, and they lose their interest in lessons. This finding was not in line with the study of Widodo and Dewi (2021) because they emphasized that using technology and applications could solve the problems that teachers face in the VYLs classroom. For example, teachers can use several different applications (e.g., ClassDojo) application to attract students' attention, manage discipline, control students' behavior, and progress even out of the classroom with the help of families.

CONCLUSION

The current mixed-method study was an attempt to investigate the challenges faced by Turkish EFL teachers in teaching English to VYLs. To this end, a total of 35 (30 female, five male) Turkish EFL teachers teaching English to VYLs in private/public preschools participated in the study. Within the scope of the aims of the study, quantitative data were gathered by a questionnaire, whereas qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Questionnaire findings revealed that teachers encounter challenges mostly in classroom management, student

involvement, and monitoring learning while teaching English to VYLs, encounter challenges mostly in students' involvement, monitoring learning, and classroom management respectively. As reported earlier, the most challenging category for the teachers was classroom management, suggesting that teachers mostly struggle with managing discipline, managing time effectively, and managing classroom settings.

However, with respect to their gender or professional years of experience, there was not a statistically significant difference in the challenges teachers face regarding their gender or years of teaching experience, so it can be implied that teachers have similar problems regardless of their gender and experience when teaching English to VYLs. Moreover, similar findings of the interview illustrated that teachers mostly encounter classroom management challenges, for instance, time management and playful students. Thus, it can overall be concluded from both quantitative and qualitative data that teachers mostly encounter challenges in classroom management.

Based on the findings, some pedagogical implications could be presented for teacher education programs. Teacher education programs should be redesigned in such a way that they contribute to EFL teachers' classroom management skills. Although there are such courses in undergraduate teacher education programs, they appear to fall short in catering to classroom realities and different age groups. For example, pre-service EFL teachers should be equipped with the necessary classroom management skills for teaching VYLs to provide a supportive learning environment and arrange activities suitable for students' age and learning characteristics.

Still, the findings of the study should be interpreted by taking into consideration its limitations. First of all, the current study collected data from foreign language teachers teaching VYLs in the Turkish educational context. Yet, future studies could elicit data from different contexts to ensure broader generalizability. Secondly, this study investigated the challenges Turkish EFL teachers face in VYLs' classrooms. However, further research can be conducted with more participants by adding the strategies used by teachers who have difficulties in teaching English to VYLs. In this way, both the challenges and the possible strategies for these challenges could be discovered. Thirdly, this study adopted a mixed-method design, collecting data via a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, yet future studies could adopt purely qualitative designs to elaborate on the challenges and address the needs of EFL teachers teaching VYLs. Indeed, ethnographic studies where teachers are observed in their classroom environments could also yield a fruitful avenue for further research and contribute to the literature.

References

- Akçor, G., & Savaşçı, M. (2020). A review of challenges and recommendations for novice EFL teachers in Turkey. *Novitas-ROYAL (Research on Youth and Language)*, 14(2), 16-37.
- Broughton, G., Brumfit, C., Pincas, A., & Wilde, R. D. (2002). *Teaching English as a foreign language*. Routledge.
- Butler, Y. G. (2015). English language education among young learners in East Asia: A review of current research (2004–2014). *Language Teaching*, 48(3), 303-342. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444815000105>
- Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cameron, L. (2003). Challenges for ELT from the expansion in teaching children. *ELT Journal*, 57(2), 105–112. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/57.2.105>
- Copland, F., Garton, S., & Burns, A. (2014). Challenges in teaching English to young learners: Global perspectives and local realities. *Tesol Quarterly*, 48(4), 738-762. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.148>
- Copland, F., & Garton, S. (2014). Key themes and future directions in teaching English to young learners: Introduction to the special issue. *ELT Journal*, 68(3), 223-230. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccu030>
- Degirmenci-Uysal, N., & Yavuz, F. (2015). Teaching English to very young learners. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 197, 19-22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.07.042>

- Ellis, G. (2014). “Young learners”: Clarifying our terms. *ELT Journal*, 68(1), 75–78. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/cct062>
- Inostroza Araos, M. J. (2015). *Examining challenges and complexities in the Chilean young learners classroom: A case of teaching English as a foreign language* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Sheffield.
- Keskin, P. (2019). *Challenges faced by English language teachers in teaching English to young learners in public primary schools* [Unpublished master’s thesis]. Yeditepe University.
- Khulel, B. (2021). Teaching English for young learners in rural area: Teachers’ challenges. *Lingua*, 17(2), 115-130. <https://doi.org/10.34005/lingua.v17i2.1558>
- Kusmaryati, S. E. (2020). Teachers’ perspectives of teaching English to young learners (A descriptive study at primary schools in Kudus). *ELT Worldwide: Journal of English Language Teaching*, 7(2), 94-103. <https://doi.org/10.26858/eltww.v7i2.9723>
- Malik, H., Humaira, M. A., Komari, A. N., Fathurrochman, I., & Jayanto, I. (2021). Identification of barriers and challenges to teaching English at an early age in Indonesia: An international publication analysis study. *Linguistics and Culture Review*, 5(1), 217-229. <https://doi.org/10.21744/lingcure.v5n1.1485>
- Masnan, A. H., & Ngajib, S. H. M. (2016). Teacher’s challenges of teaching English in kindergarten in Kampot, Cambodia. *Australian Journal of Basics and Applied Sciences*, 10(11), 199-206.
- McKay, P. (2006). *Assessing young language learners*. Cambridge University Press.
- Moore, R. J. L. (2010). *Utah kindergarten teachers’ challenges and concerns about teaching kindergarten*. [Unpublished master’s thesis]. Utah State University.
- Nguyen, C. D. (2018). The construction of age-appropriate pedagogies for young learners of English in primary schools. *The Language Learning Journal*, 49(1), 13-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2018.1451912>
- Pavlenko, A., & Piller, I. (2008). Language education and gender. *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, 1, 57-69.
- Pertiwi, R. S., Salabiyati, I., Damara, D., Pratolo, B., & Dahlan, U. A. (2020). The teacher’s perspectives about challenges of teaching English for young learners: A case study at English course for young learners. *Atlantis Press Journal*, 397, 65-74. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.200129.009>
- Piaget, J. (1970). *The science of education and the psychology of the child*. (D. Coltman, Trans.). Orion.
- Seidlhofer, B. (2005). English as a lingua franca. *ELT Journal*, 59(4), 339-341. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/cci064>
- Vygotsky, L. (1962). *Thought and language*. MIT Press.
- Widodo, A., & Dewi, S. R. (2019). Revealing problems on teaching English for young learners at Al-Azhar 55 Islamic Primary School Yogyakarta and how to solve them. *Journal Varidika*, 30(2), 21-29. <https://doi.org/10.23917/varidika.v30i2.7571>

APPENDICES

A. The questionnaire (Inostroza Araos, 2015)

Items	Very Easy	Easy	Neutral	Difficult	Very Difficult
1. Keep students interested.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Make all students to participate in the activities.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Give learners the opportunity to express themselves in English.	1	2	3	4	5

4. Identifying learners' difficulties.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Accounting for different individual learning styles.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Monitoring learners' progress.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Assessing learners individually.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Providing feedback.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Providing remedial actions to learners.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Managing discipline.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Managing time effectively in the lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Managing classroom setting (Moving Furniture).	1	2	3	4	5

B. The interview questions

1. Do you encounter any challenges while teaching very young learners? If yes, what challenges do you encounter? Why?
2. Do you encounter any challenges regarding students' involvement in teaching English to very young learners? If yes, what kind of challenges do you face? Why?
3. Do you encounter any challenges in terms of monitoring learning or providing feedback in teaching English to very young learners? If yes, what kind of challenges do you face? Why?
4. Do you encounter any challenges regarding classroom management in teaching English to very young learners? If yes, what kind of challenges do you face? Why?
5. Which one is the most difficult for you when teaching English to very young learners: students' involvement, monitoring learning, or classroom management? Why do you think so?