

Teaching English Vocabulary in the Young Learner Classroom: Strategies and Struggles of Islamic Primary School Teachers

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Received: April 2025; Revised: May 2025; Published: June 2025

Abstract

In the context of early English language education, vocabulary instruction for young language learners plays a crucial role in laying the foundation for future language proficiency. However, many teachers face various challenges in selecting and implementing effective strategies that align with the cognitive and emotional development of young learners—particularly *madrasah ibtidaiyah* (Islamic primary school) teachers—such as limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, minimal parental support, and restricted English instructional time. This study aims to explore the vocabulary teaching strategies used by madrasah teachers and how these strategies help them address classroom teaching challenges. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with several EYL (English for Young Learners) teachers. The findings of this study reveal that teachers generally employed strategies such as “listening and repeating” and “question and answer,” while other strategies—such as “translation,” “modeling,” “brainstorming,” and “outdoor activities”—varied depending on the grade level. The challenges faced included low student motivation, varying levels of language proficiency, limited teaching aids, and insufficient instructional time. The study concludes that although teachers adapt their strategies to meet learners' needs, greater support and resources are needed to enhance the effectiveness of vocabulary instruction in Islamic elementary schools.

Keywords: English for Young Learners, *Madrasah*, Teaching Difficulties, Teaching Strategies.

How to Cite: Putera, L. J., (2025). Strategies and difficulties of Islamic primary school teachers in teaching English vocabulary for young language learners.. *Journal of Authentic Research*, 4(1), 375-387. <https://doi.org/10.36312/jar.v4i1.3108>

 <https://doi.org/10.36312/jar.v4i1.3108>

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INTRODUCTION

Young learners possess unique cognitive and affective characteristics that significantly influence their language learning process. As McKay (2009) observes, children at the primary level typically have short attention spans—around 10 to 15 minutes—which necessitates the use of varied, engaging, and adaptable teaching methods. In line with this, Nunan (2016) emphasizes that young learners acquire language most effectively through meaningful interaction, playful activities, and developmentally appropriate tasks. He also highlights the importance of contextualized learning, integrated skills instruction, and the incorporation of age-appropriate materials to sustain engagement and facilitate comprehension.

Furthermore, younger learners tend to benefit more from extended exposure and natural acquisition processes, in contrast to older learners who often rely on explicit grammar rules and structured instruction (Lichtman, 2012; Lichtman, 2016). Within this developmental window, vocabulary emerges as a foundational component in supporting the four key language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—

since it plays a central role in enabling learners to convey meaning effectively (Tifriyanta, Udin, & Putera, 2022). Early initiation into English learning, often referred to as the “golden age,” contributes to more successful and enduring language development, laying a strong foundation for future proficiency (Tuyen, 2021). During this period, children’s cognitive flexibility, strong memory, and natural ability to mimic pronunciation make them especially receptive to acquiring new vocabulary and accurate pronunciation (Asher & García, 1969; Peters, 2022; Tuyen, 2021).

Given these characteristics, teaching English vocabulary to young learners requires the use of effective, child-centered strategies. Since young learners are naturally inclined toward play and discovery, instructional approaches must integrate engaging, interactive methods that align with their developmental needs and learning preferences.

Effective vocabulary instruction is a cornerstone of early English language acquisition, significantly influencing young learners’ overall communicative competence (Güngör, 2020; Teng, 2025), surely without neglecting the roles of (Eriksson, 2014). Due to the distinct cognitive and linguistic characteristics of young learners, instructional approaches must be carefully tailored to sustain engagement and support long-term vocabulary retention. A multifaceted strategy that integrates a variety of methods is often the most effective, as it accommodates the diverse learning styles typically present in elementary classrooms. Direct instruction plays a pivotal role in introducing new vocabulary by offering systematic and explicit guidance on word meaning, pronunciation, and contextual usage (Biemiller, 2003; Ebbers & Denton, 2008). Equally critical is the use of contextualization – embedding vocabulary within meaningful narratives, authentic real-life situations, or visually enriched materials. This strategy supports learners in grasping subtle differences in meaning and applying new words accurately (Wood et al., 2011).

Interactive strategies – such as educational games, language-based games, role-playing, and group tasks – enhance vocabulary learning by making it more engaging and dynamic. These activities promote active participation, peer collaboration, and verbal practice, all of which contribute to deeper comprehension (Klimova, 2015; Ornaghi, Brockmeier, & Gavazzi, 2011; Palmer & Rodgers, 1983). Games, in particular, have been shown to be especially effective when embedded in culturally relevant contexts, as they make vocabulary more meaningful and easier for young learners to retain. Additionally, visual aids – such as flashcards, illustrations, and real objects (realia) – are instrumental in clarifying meaning and making abstract vocabulary more tangible. By addressing multiple learning modalities, these tools not only enhance comprehension but also support long-term vocabulary retention (Sedita, 2005). Together, these strategies create a rich and engaging learning environment that supports early language development in meaningful and effective ways.

However, teaching vocabulary to young learners presents numerous challenges. Our preliminary observations and informal discussions with EYL (English for Young Learners) Islamic primary school teachers revealed several common problems in vocabulary instruction. Teachers noted low student motivation, wide disparities in language ability, and difficulty sustaining attention. Many relied on limited methods such as translation and repetition due to a lack of professional training and access to appropriate teaching materials. Other issues included inadequate infrastructure,

minimal English exposure outside the classroom, and limited instructional time—since English is only taught as a local content subject.

A numerous studies also revealed that teaching English to young learners (EYL) involves numerous challenges that vary across global and local contexts. In developing countries, Kuchah (2018) emphasizes that early English instruction often occurs in under-resourced settings where learners are taught in a language different from their mother tongue, frequently in overcrowded classrooms with limited exposure to English outside school. These difficult circumstances make effective instruction particularly challenging. In Europe, Nilsson (2024) highlights that Swedish teachers face significant issues related to the heterogeneity of students' proficiency levels, a lack of differentiated materials, and difficulty in engaging all learners—especially in oral language practice. Although picturebooks are recognized as promising resources, their use remains limited. Camlibel-Acar (2016) reveals that Turkish pre-service teachers often feel unprepared due to insufficient classroom observation opportunities during their training, affecting their confidence and perceived competence in managing young learners. Copland, Garton, and Burns (2013) also identified issues such as large class sizes, limited resources, mixed-ability classrooms, low student motivation, and insufficient teacher training, with some challenges being global and others shaped by local educational and socio-cultural contexts. These findings emphasize the need for context-sensitive teacher education and targeted support.

In the Indonesian context, Anggraini (2018) identifies key challenges such as large class sizes, lack of teaching aids, and students' low motivation and varying attention spans. Similarly, Pertiwi et al. (2022) find that Islamic primary school teachers in Indonesia struggle with managing mixed-ability classrooms, limited instructional time, and inadequate English proficiency among both students and some teachers. Collectively, these studies underline the urgent need for context-sensitive teacher education, access to appropriate materials, ongoing professional development, and exposure to real teaching environments to equip teachers with the skills necessary for addressing the diverse challenges in EYL instruction.

To address these challenges, primary school teachers must apply engaging, developmentally appropriate strategies that align with young learners' needs and classroom contexts. Although the importance of vocabulary instruction is well recognized, there remains limited research on how English vocabulary is actually taught in primary schools where English is treated as a local content subject. Furthermore, little is known about the challenges faced by EYL Islamic primary school teachers face in applying these strategies effectively. In order to explore the instructional strategies and challenges the EYL teachers encountered in the classroom setting, the current study proposed two research questions: What strategies do Islamic primary school teachers use to teach English vocabulary to young learners? And What challenges do Islamic primary school teachers face when implementing these strategies in the classroom?

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design with a case study approach to explore the strategies used by English for Young Learners (EYL) *madrasah*

teachers and the challenges they encounter in teaching English vocabulary. A qualitative approach was adopted to gain a deep understanding of the participants' experiences, perspectives, and classroom practices within their natural teaching environments. As Creswell (2014) explains, qualitative research aims to explore and interpret the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to social or educational phenomena. The case study method was considered appropriate for this research, as it enables a detailed, contextualized analysis of specific cases within real-world settings. This study focused on a small number of Islamic elementary school EYL teachers who teach English as a local content subject, providing rich insights into their instructional strategies and the challenges they encounter.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in August 2024 at an Islamic elementary school in Lombok, Indonesia. The school was purposively selected due to its alignment with the objectives of the research—namely, the integration of English as a local content subject and the presence of dedicated English for Young Learners (EYL) teachers. This setting provided a relevant and meaningful context for examining the instructional strategies employed and the challenges encountered in teaching English vocabulary to young learners in an Islamic primary school environment.

Research Participants

The participants in this case study were two English for Young Learners (EYL) teachers at a *madrasah ibtidaiyah* (Islamic elementary school) who are currently assigned to teach English across various grade levels. The first teacher is responsible for teaching English to first-grade students, while the second teacher teaches third-grade students. For the purpose of this study, data were collected from both teachers to gain insights into their teaching practices and classroom experiences. These participants were selected based on their active involvement in teaching English vocabulary as part of the local content curriculum and their experience in handling young learners at the elementary level.

Data Collection Procedures

The empirical data in the present study were collected through observations and interviews. The data collection process followed a structured and rigorous approach to ensure the validity and depth of the findings. The main objective of this study was to explore the strategies employed by English for Young Learners (EYL) teachers in teaching vocabulary and to identify the challenges they encountered in implementing these strategies within the classroom context. Two primary instruments were used for data collection: classroom observations and semi-structured interviews.

1. Observation

The initial stage of data collection involved non-participant classroom observations, enabling the researcher to directly examine the teaching and learning processes without interfering with classroom activities. These observations were carried out over several sessions with two EYL teachers at a selected *madrasah aliyah* elementary school in Lombok. During these sessions, an observation checklist was used to systematically record the vocabulary topics being taught, the specific instructional strategies applied (such as listen and repeat, question and answer,

translation, modeling and demonstration, brainstorming, and outdoor activities), student engagement, classroom management techniques, and the use of teaching aids or media. To supplement the checklist, field notes were taken to capture additional contextual information, such as non-verbal teacher-student interactions, student reactions, and classroom atmosphere. These observations provided a rich, real-time understanding of how strategies were implemented and adapted to meet the needs of different grade levels.

2. Interview

The second stage involved semi-structured interviews with the same teachers observed in the classroom. These interviews were conducted individually and scheduled immediately after the observations to ensure that participants could accurately reflect on their practices and experiences. Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and was guided by a set of open-ended questions that allowed teachers to elaborate on their instructional choices and challenges encountered. Topics included the rationale for using certain teaching strategies, difficulties related to student behavior (e.g., lack of motivation, short attention spans, writing difficulties), classroom management, time constraints, availability of learning materials, and infrastructure limitations. Teachers were also encouraged to share their perceptions about their dual roles as both educators and emotional supporters of young learners. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Research Instruments

The present study employed two primary instruments for data collection: observation sheet and interview guide, both of which are commonly used in qualitative research to explore participants' experiences and classroom practices in depth.

1. Observation Sheet

An observation checklist was used to guide the process, focusing on key aspects such as the vocabulary topics taught, specific strategies applied (e.g., listen and repeat, question and answer, translation, modeling and demonstration, brainstorming, and outdoor activities), classroom interaction, use of teaching aids or media, student engagement, and overall classroom atmosphere. Field notes were also taken during each session to document contextual details and non-verbal cues. This approach enabled the researcher to assess how strategies were implemented across different grade levels and topics, and how students responded to each instructional method in real-time.

2. Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain deeper insights into the teachers' experiences and the challenges they faced in teaching English vocabulary. Each interview, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes, was held individually following the classroom observations and was guided by open-ended questions to ensure both flexibility and thematic consistency. The interviews explored the rationale behind the teachers' choice of strategies, their responses to student behavior, classroom management practices, and the limitations of available resources. Additionally,

teachers reflected on challenges related to strategy implementation, including students' writing abilities, emotional states, classroom conditions, and their dual responsibilities as both educators and emotional support figures.

Data Analysis Technique

This study applied a qualitative data analysis technique based on the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three main components: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the Data Reduction stage, the researchers selected, simplified, and organized raw data obtained from classroom observations and interviews. Observation notes were sorted to identify specific teaching strategies used in vocabulary instruction, while interview transcripts were reviewed to highlight key themes related to challenges faced by teachers. Unnecessary or repetitive information was removed to focus on relevant patterns and insights.

In the Data Display stage, the reduced data were presented in the form of tables and diagrams to clarify relationships and highlight findings. For example, tables were used to display vocabulary topics taught and the strategies used by each teacher, while diagrams illustrated challenges associated with the implementation of certain strategies. This visual organization helped systematically compare practices between the two teachers and identify both common and unique issues.

Finally, in the Conclusion Drawing and Verification stage, conclusions were drawn based on emerging patterns and themes. The researchers interpreted the meaning of strategies and challenges in the context of teaching English vocabulary to young learners. Data triangulation from observations and interviews was used to ensure the validity of findings. Conclusions were continuously verified throughout the analysis process to maintain accuracy and consistency. Through these steps, the researchers were able to build a comprehensive understanding of how vocabulary is taught to young learners and what challenges EYL teachers in Islamic elementary schools face in implementing various strategies in real classrooms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion of the study, with a focus on the instructional strategies employed by madrasah ibtidaiyah teachers in teaching English vocabulary to young learners, as well as the challenges they encountered in applying these strategies within the classroom context.

RQ1. What strategies do Islamic primary school teachers use to teach English vocabulary to young learners?

Figure 1 displays a Venn diagram that illustrates the vocabulary teaching strategies employed by two English for Young Learners (EYL) teachers at a madrasah ibtidaiyah. The diagram highlights both shared and distinct strategies observed during classroom instruction.

The figure clearly illustrates that both Teacher A and Teacher B employed the strategies "Listen and Repeat" and "Question and Answer," as shown in the overlapping area of the Venn diagram. These two approaches appear to be commonly favored by EYL teachers due to their simplicity and effectiveness in engaging young learners. "Listen and Repeat" reinforces accurate pronunciation and vocabulary

retention, while “Question and Answer” promotes active participation and serves as a tool for checking comprehension.

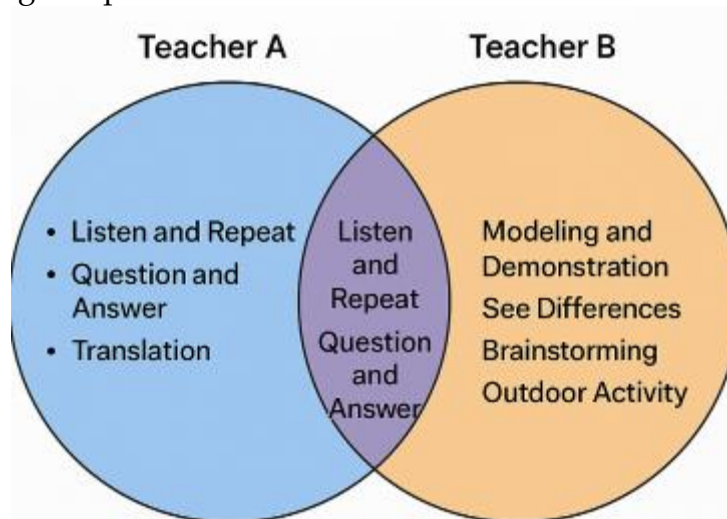


Figure 1. Strategies used by Islamic primary school teachers in teaching vocabulary to the EYLS.

On the left side of the diagram, a strategy unique to Teacher A is “Translation.” This suggests that Teacher A incorporates translation from English into the students’ first language (Bahasa Indonesia) to support vocabulary learning – particularly useful for lower-grade students (Grade 1) who are still developing foundational language awareness. Translation also helps bridge comprehension gaps efficiently, especially when students encounter unfamiliar or abstract terms.

In contrast, the right side of the diagram displays a broader array of strategies employed by Teacher B, who teaches Grade 4 students. These include “Modeling and Demonstration,” “Spot the Difference,” “Brainstorming,” and “Outdoor Activities.” These methods demand greater cognitive and communicative engagement and are more interactive in nature. “Modeling and Demonstration” involves contextualizing vocabulary through actions or tangible objects. “Spot the Difference” encourages analytical thinking by prompting comparisons between vocabulary items. “Brainstorming” fosters creative and collaborative thinking, while “Outdoor Activities” immerse students in dynamic, real-world contexts that enhance vocabulary application.

This figure highlights a key finding: Teacher A tends to rely on repetitive and translation-based techniques suitable for younger learners, whereas Teacher B adopts a more diverse set of interactive and exploratory strategies tailored to older students. These choices reflect the teachers’ adaptability to students’ grade levels, language exposure, and cognitive development. The Venn diagram thus underscores the importance of aligning instructional strategies with learners’ developmental needs and classroom conditions. Overall, it effectively showcases the variety of pedagogical approaches used and offers valuable insight into the decision-making processes involved in teaching vocabulary to young learners.

RQ2. What challenges do Islamic primary school teachers face when implementing these strategies to in the young learner classrooms?

The figure illustrates various challenges encountered by Teacher A and Teacher B in implementing vocabulary teaching strategies in their English lessons. Teacher A, who works with lower-grade students, primarily employed translation and listen-and-repeat techniques. One of the main difficulties associated with the translation strategy was that many first-grade students struggled with basic writing skills. At this developmental stage, students are still acquiring foundational literacy, and some lack the ability to write clearly or independently.

Teacher A also observed that students' emotional states had a significant impact on the effectiveness of listen-and-repeat activities. When students were unmotivated, distracted, or emotionally unprepared, they tended to withdraw from participation, often disengaging entirely from the task. Moreover, the typically short attention spans of early-grade learners limited the duration of focused instruction. The absence of stimulating teaching aids—such as colorful visual or audio materials—further hindered efforts to sustain student interest.

These instructional challenges were further exacerbated by limited parental support and frequent classroom disruptions, both of which interfered with consistent vocabulary practice and posed additional difficulties for classroom management.

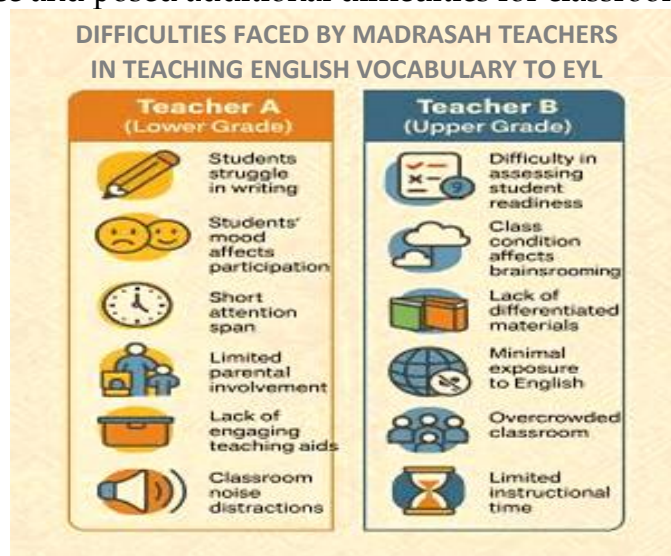


Figure 2. Difficulties experienced by Islamic primary school teachers in teaching vocabulary to the EYLs.

Meanwhile, Teacher B, who teaches upper-grade students, employed a broader range of strategies, including modeling and demonstration, as well as brainstorming. However, these approaches also posed distinct challenges. In applying modeling and demonstration, the teacher needed to carefully select students to serve as peer language models. This proved difficult due to the wide range of language proficiency levels—some students were linguistically capable but too shy to model, while others were confident yet demonstrated inaccurate usage.

The effectiveness of brainstorming activities also depended heavily on active class participation and the availability of media resources. In passive classroom

environments or when resources were limited, encouraging idea generation became particularly challenging. Additional concerns included the lack of differentiated instructional materials, which made it difficult to address the needs of students with varying levels of ability, and minimal English exposure outside the classroom, which limited students' vocabulary retention.

Teacher B also encountered structural barriers, such as large class sizes that hindered effective individual monitoring, and restricted instructional time, as English was taught only as a local content subject for a limited number of hours per week. These findings emphasize the need for more tailored support and context-responsive strategies in the teaching of English for Young Learners, particularly in semi-urban school settings in Indonesia.

Discussion

The findings of this study affirm the critical role of developmentally appropriate strategies in teaching English vocabulary to young learners in madrasah or Islamic elementary schools, aligning with well-established theories and empirical research in early language education. Both teachers in the study adapted their instructional methods to suit their learners' developmental stages—Teacher A employed simpler, more repetitive strategies for lower-grade students, while Teacher B utilized a broader range of interactive and varied techniques for upper-grade learners. This practice is supported by Nunan (2016), who asserts that children learn most effectively through enjoyable, meaningful, and contextually grounded experiences. Likewise, Biemiller (2003) and Ebbers and Denton (2008) emphasize the effectiveness of direct and explicit instruction, which is reflected in both teachers' frequent use of "listen and repeat" and "question and answer" techniques.

Teacher A's reliance on translation aligns with Pinter's (2017) observation that translation can function as a useful scaffold for younger learners, particularly in foreign language contexts where exposure to English is minimal. While some scholars caution that overreliance on translation may impede deeper language processing (Cook, 2010; Cook, 2018), in resource-constrained settings—such as those observed in this study—translation offers immediate clarity and facilitates vocabulary acquisition through first-language associations. This is especially relevant in the Indonesian context, where English is not part of everyday communication and learners depend heavily on their first language (L1) for comprehension.

The strategies employed by Teacher B resonate with Suyanto's classification of EYL strategies, including modeling, instructing, demonstration, and brainstorming (Shin, 2015; Suyanto & Rachmatika, 2014). These methods reflect constructivist approaches that promote active involvement and cater to the increased cognitive readiness of older students. The use of outdoor activities also mirrors recommendations by Scott and Ytreberg (1990 cited in İlter, 2015), who advocate for kinesthetic and experiential learning among children, particularly in settings where learners benefit from moving and interacting with real objects or environments.

The study also uncovered numerous challenges that echo and expand upon those reported in prior literature. For instance, the issue of varied student abilities and low motivation found in both classrooms corresponds with Copland et al. (2014), who documented that teachers often struggle to engage mixed-ability classes, especially where resources are scarce. In particular, the difficulty Teacher B faced when selecting student role models during modeling tasks highlights a tension between encouraging

peer motivation and ensuring language accuracy – a balance also noted by Zhang, 2025).

Challenges such as classroom management issues, short attention spans, and the lack of engaging teaching aids – experienced by Teacher A – are well documented in the literature (McKay, 2009; Anggraini, 2018). These issues are further intensified in semi-urban madrasah contexts in Indonesia, where English is offered only as a local content subject and is typically allotted very limited instructional time (Pertiwi et al., 2022).

The absence of differentiated instructional materials for mixed-ability groups, as reported by Teacher B, also reflects global concerns. Similar findings have been noted by Nilsson (2024) in Sweden and Camlibel-Acar (2016) in Turkey, who identify inadequate pre-service training and a lack of adaptable teaching resources as widespread and persistent challenges across diverse educational settings.

However, unlike some international contexts where resources such as picture books or technology can supplement instruction (Nilsson, 2024), this study reveals that many Islamic schools in Indonesia lack even basic materials such as flashcards, posters, or audio aids. This infrastructural gap significantly constrains teachers' ability to implement recommended instructional strategies. Although the use of games and interactive techniques is widely supported in pedagogical research (Klimova, 2015; Ornaghi et al., 2011), their practical application remains limited in classrooms lacking adequate time, tools, and conditions.

Overall, the findings support existing pedagogical theory on the importance of developmentally appropriate, contextualized, and interactive strategies for teaching English vocabulary to young learners in Islamic elementary schools. At the same time, the study underscores several context-specific barriers – such as limited teaching resources, insufficient instructional time, and underprepared teachers – that hinder the effective implementation of these strategies. These challenges highlight the urgent need for more context-responsive teacher training, improved access to instructional materials, and greater institutional support for English language teaching in Indonesian madrasahs.

While this study contributes valuable insights into instructional practices and classroom realities, several limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size – restricted to two teachers from a single school in Lombok – limits the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the exclusive use of classroom observations and teacher interviews may have introduced both observer and participant bias. The absence of student perspectives limits the study's ability to capture how learners engage with the strategies employed. Additionally, the short duration of the research restricts conclusions regarding the long-term impact of these instructional practices. These limitations suggest the need for future studies that are broader in scope, conducted across multiple sites, and designed with a longitudinal perspective.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the strategies used by Islami primary teachers in teaching English vocabulary to young learners and the challenges they faced in a semi-urban area in Indonesia. Findings showed that teachers adjusted their strategies based on the developmental stage of their students, with lower grade teachers using more simple methods such as “listening and imitating” and “translation”, while upper grade teachers employed more interactive techniques such as “modeling”, “brainstorming”, and “outside-of-class activities”. These strategies are in line with previous research that emphasizes the importance of age-appropriate and engaging teaching approaches. However, the study also uncovered challenges, including limited writing skills, low motivation, classroom distractions, varying student ability

levels, lack of learning materials, and limited learning time. These barriers highlight the need for greater pedagogical support and systemic interventions to improve the effectiveness of vocabulary teaching in elementary madrasahs.

To address the identified challenges, education stakeholders need to prioritize providing ongoing professional training for EYL (English for Young Learners) teachers that emphasizes the use of diverse and age-appropriate vocabulary teaching strategies. Schools also need to be equipped with adequate learning media – such as visual media, realia, and audio aids – to enrich classroom activities. Policymakers should consider increasing the time for English language instruction and integrating it more fully into the primary school curriculum, not just as a local content subject.

In addition, teacher training programs should include classroom-based practicums and modules on managing classrooms with diverse student abilities and low-resource settings. Collaboration between schools and parents should also be encouraged to create more supportive language learning environments, both at home and in the community.

Further research in the context of English for Young Learners (EYL) should examine how teaching strategies vary across school types and settings, particularly in Islamic settings and low-resource settings. Longitudinal and intervention-based studies are needed to assess the long-term effectiveness of age-appropriate vocabulary teaching methods and the use of visual, audio, and contextual media. Research into teachers' pedagogical beliefs, parental engagement, and curriculum policies would also provide a deeper understanding of the systemic and socio-cultural factors that shape EYL teaching. Including young learners' perspectives is also important for evaluating engagement and learning outcomes more comprehensively.

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