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TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS IN URBAN AND SEMI-URBAN MAHARASHTRA

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Abstract

This study examines the challenges experienced by teachers while teaching English to young learners in a non-native English-speaking context, with particular reference to Thane, Mumbai, and the neighbouring sub-cities of Kalyan, Ulhasnagar, Bhiwandi, Badlapur, and Kasara. The study is situated within the broader context of multilingual Indian classrooms, where learners may have limited opportunities to use English beyond school. A mixed-methods approach with a dominant qualitative orientation was adopted. The reported study involved 50 primary-school English teachers and used questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and focus-group discussions to explore instructional practices and contextual barriers. The findings indicate that limited exposure to English outside school, large class sizes, learners' low confidence and fear of making mistakes, inadequate teaching resources, and insufficient teacher preparation are important challenges. Teachers also reported positive outcomes from interactive approaches, including games, storytelling, role-play and group activities, as well as phonics-based instruction. The paper argues that effective English teaching for young learners requires an integrated response involving child-centred pedagogy, teacher professional

development, supportive classroom environments, appropriate resources, technology, and parental involvement. The study contributes a context-sensitive perspective on English language teaching in urban and semi-urban settings and offers implications for teachers, school leaders, parents, and educational policymakers.

Keywords: English language teaching; young learners; teacher perspectives; multilingual classrooms; linguistic challenges; classroom environment; phonics; interactive learning; teacher training; Maharashtra

1. Introduction

English occupies an important position in Indian education and is widely introduced during the early years of schooling. Early exposure can provide learners with opportunities to develop communicative competence; however, teaching English to young learners is not simply a matter of introducing vocabulary and grammar at an earlier age. Young learners differ from older learners in attention span, cognitive development, emotional needs, prior language exposure, and learning pace. Consequently, English instruction requires developmentally appropriate, engaging, and supportive pedagogical practices.

The challenge becomes more complex in multilingual and non-native English-speaking environments. Many children encounter English mainly in school, while their home and community interactions take place in regional or other Indian languages. Limited opportunities for authentic English use may influence pronunciation, vocabulary development, sentence formation, and confidence in speaking. Teachers must therefore create meaningful opportunities for communication while responding to different levels of readiness within the same classroom.

The present paper focuses on Thane, Mumbai, and its surrounding sub-cities—Kalyan, Ulhasnagar, Bhiwandi, Badlapur, and Kasara. These settings provide a relevant context for examining how teachers negotiate linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and environmental challenges in English language classrooms. The study also considers teaching practices that teachers perceive as useful for increasing learner engagement and supporting early English development.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing emphasis on English education at the primary level, teachers working with young learners continue to encounter difficulties related to learners' limited English exposure, differences in learning pace, confidence and anxiety, classroom size, teaching resources, and teacher preparedness. There is therefore a need to understand these challenges from the teachers' perspective and to identify practical approaches that can be implemented in multilingual urban and semi-urban classrooms.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the major challenges experienced by teachers while teaching English to young learners.
2. To examine linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and environmental factors that influence English language teaching.
3. To examine teachers' perceptions of interactive and phonics-based approaches for teaching young learners.
4. To suggest contextually appropriate measures for strengthening English language teaching through teacher development, classroom support, resources, and parental involvement.

4. Research Questions

5. What are the major challenges faced by teachers when teaching English to young learners in the study area?
6. How do limited English exposure, learner development, confidence, class size, and teaching resources influence classroom teaching?
7. Which teaching approaches are perceived by teachers as effective for increasing engagement and supporting language development?
8. What measures can schools and other stakeholders adopt to strengthen English language teaching for young learners?

5. Review of Related Literature

Research on teaching languages to young learners emphasises the importance of age-appropriate pedagogy, meaningful interaction, and opportunities for learners to use language in context.

Cameron (2001) highlights the distinctive cognitive and linguistic characteristics of young language learners and the need for teaching approaches that are responsive to these characteristics. Pinter (2017) similarly emphasises learner participation, meaningful activities, and classroom interaction.

Language learning is also influenced by the quantity and quality of comprehensible input available to learners. Krashen's (1985) work on language input provides a theoretical basis for considering the role of exposure and comprehensible language in second-language development. In multilingual settings, learners' existing linguistic repertoires can also influence their developing English, making classroom support and opportunities for purposeful communication particularly important.

Teacher knowledge and professional preparation are central to effective language instruction. Lightbown and Spada (2013) underline the importance of understanding how additional languages are learned and how instructional practices interact with learner characteristics. Shin and Crandall (2014) specifically address the practical requirements of teaching English to young learners, including classroom management, materials, activities, and developmentally appropriate instruction.

Within the Indian context, the National Education Policy 2020 places emphasis on foundational learning, multilingualism, and learner-centred education. These priorities reinforce the need to examine how English teaching can be made developmentally appropriate while respecting the multilingual realities of learners.

6. Conceptual Framework

The study conceptualises challenges in English language teaching as an interaction among four broad domains: (a) linguistic factors, including limited exposure, vocabulary, pronunciation and sentence formation; (b) learner-development factors, including attention, learning pace and difficulty with abstract concepts; (c) psychological factors, including confidence, fear of mistakes and anxiety; and (d) environmental and teacher-related factors, including class size, resources, teacher training and instructional support. Teaching approaches such as storytelling, games, role-play, group activities and phonics-based instruction are considered practical responses to these challenges.

7. Methodology

7.1 Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive mixed-methods design with a dominant qualitative orientation. The design was selected to capture teachers' perceptions and experiences as well as contextual information concerning classroom practices.

7.2 Participants

The reported study involved 50 primary-school English teachers working in schools across Thane and its sub-cities. The source paper also identifies teachers, students, parents, and school administrators as participants or stakeholders considered in the broader study context; however, the reported quantitative survey sample consists of 50 teachers.

7.3 Data Collection

Data collection tools included a teacher questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and focus-group discussions. These methods were intended to capture both measurable perceptions and contextual descriptions of teaching practices and challenges.

7.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative survey responses were summarised using percentages. Qualitative information from interviews, observations, and discussions was examined thematically to identify recurring patterns related to linguistic, cognitive, psychological, environmental, and instructional challenges.

8. Findings

8.1 Major Challenges Reported by Teachers

The findings indicate that limited English exposure outside school was the most frequently identified challenge. Seventy-two percent of teachers identified limited exposure outside school as a significant barrier. Sixty-five percent reported large class sizes as a major challenge affecting the amount of individual attention available to learners. Fifty-eight percent identified low learner confidence and fear of making mistakes as factors reducing classroom participation.

Challenge	Reported percentage	Interpretation
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Limited English exposure outside school	72%	Restricted opportunities for English use beyond the classroom.
Large class sizes	65%	Reduced scope for individual attention and interaction.
Low confidence / fear of mistakes	58%	Reduced willingness to participate orally.

8.2 Linguistic and Developmental Challenges

Teachers reported difficulties associated with pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, sentence formation, and mother-tongue influence. Learners' developmental stage also creates challenges when instruction relies heavily on abstract grammatical explanations. Differences in attention span, learning pace, and prior English exposure contribute to variation within the same classroom.

8.3 Psychological and Participation-Related Challenges

Fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, and anxiety about speaking English were identified as barriers to active participation. These findings highlight the importance of emotionally supportive classrooms in which errors are treated as a natural part of language learning.

8.4 Perceived Effectiveness of Teaching Strategies

Teachers reported positive outcomes from interactive approaches such as games, storytelling, role-play, and group activities. Approximately 70% observed increased learner engagement, while nearly 60% reported improvements in vocabulary and pronunciation. The source study also reports that phonics-based instruction was associated with improved pronunciation and reading skills among approximately 65% of learners. Because the available study document does not provide the underlying item-level dataset, these percentages should be interpreted as reported study findings rather than independently re-analysed results.

Strategy	Reported outcome	Potential contribution
Interactive learning	About 70% reported increased engagement	More participation and opportunities for meaningful language use
Interactive learning	Nearly 60% reported vocabulary and pronunciation improvement	Repeated contextualised practice

Phonics-based instruction	About 65% reported improved pronunciation and reading skills	Support for sound-letter relationships and decoding
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9. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the challenges of teaching English to young learners are interconnected rather than isolated. Limited exposure outside school places greater responsibility on teachers to create opportunities for meaningful English interaction inside the classroom. At the same time, large classes can restrict individual feedback and oral practice. This combination may be particularly challenging for learners who are hesitant to speak.

The reported benefits of interactive activities are consistent with the developmental needs of young learners. Games, storytelling, role-play, and group activities can provide repeated exposure to language without relying exclusively on formal grammar explanation. Such approaches may also reduce anxiety by making participation less threatening and more purposeful.

Phonics-based instruction is also relevant for early literacy because it provides systematic attention to sound recognition and decoding. However, phonics should be integrated with vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading, and meaningful language use rather than treated as an isolated technique.

The findings further indicate that teacher preparation and school-level support are important. Professional development should address child-friendly pedagogy, classroom management, multilingual classrooms, phonics, assessment, technology integration, and strategies for building learner confidence. Parental involvement can complement school-based learning by creating additional opportunities for age-appropriate English exposure at home.

10. Educational Implications

- Teachers should use interactive, learner-centred activities that provide frequent opportunities for listening and speaking.
- Phonics can be integrated systematically with stories, vocabulary, reading, and oral-language activities.

- Schools should provide ongoing professional development focused specifically on teaching young language learners.
- Classroom resources should include age-appropriate storybooks, visual materials, audio resources, and suitable digital content.
- Teachers should create psychologically safe classrooms in which learners can attempt English without fear of ridicule or excessive correction.
- Parents can be guided to support English exposure through stories, songs, conversation, and simple home-based activities rather than relying only on formal worksheets.
- School leaders should consider class size, resource availability, teacher support, and opportunities for collaborative planning when designing English language programmes.

11. Limitations of the Study

The study is based on a reported sample of 50 primary-school English teachers and therefore should not be generalised to all English language classrooms in Maharashtra. The available manuscript does not provide the full item-level questionnaire, sampling frame, demographic breakdown, reliability statistics, interview transcripts, or raw dataset. Consequently, the quantitative findings are presented as reported percentages and are not independently recalculated in this paper. Future studies should use larger and stratified samples and report instrument validation and detailed statistical procedures.

12. Conclusion

Teaching English to young learners in multilingual, non-native English-speaking environments involves a complex interaction of linguistic, developmental, psychological, environmental, and teacher-related factors. In the present study context, limited English exposure outside school, large class sizes, low learner confidence, resource constraints, and teacher preparation emerged as important concerns. At the same time, teachers reported encouraging outcomes from interactive and phonics-based approaches.

Improving English language education for young learners therefore requires more than changing individual classroom activities. It calls for coordinated support from teachers, school leaders, parents, and policymakers. Child-centred pedagogy, systematic phonics, meaningful

communication, professional development, appropriate resources, supportive classroom environments, and constructive parental involvement can collectively strengthen young learners' opportunities to develop English. The Thane and surrounding sub-city context demonstrates the importance of designing English language teaching responses that are sensitive to local multilingual and educational realities.

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Author Note

This manuscript is a substantially reframed journal-paper version of the supplied research manuscript. The title, structure, argument, and presentation have been revised for journal use

while retaining the study setting, reported sample, methodology, findings, and core references available in the source document.