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COVID-19 and EFL Teaching: Adapting Technological and Pedagogical Competencies in Indonesia

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Abstract. This study investigated the experiences of 21 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Indonesia who teach English to young students, before, during, and after the COVID-19 outbreak. The study aimed to explore how the pandemic affected their teaching methods and how they adapted to the changes brought about by the pandemic. The results showed that the teachers were initially challenged by the sudden shift to online learning, but they gradually developed their pedagogical and technological competencies over time. The teachers demonstrated creativity in their teaching before the pandemic, using offline learning media. However, they experienced a technological stutter in the beginning when the pandemic hit. The study highlights the importance of teachers developing their pedagogical and technological competencies to adapt to changes in various teaching circumstances, in order to preserve the quality of the learning process.

Keywords: EFL teachers · Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) · Kindergarten schools

1 Introduction

Learning English for children is in line with the opinion of experts, who say that the ability of early childhood is more brilliant than adults imagine. They can do the addition before they can count [1–3]. They can understand a hundred words before they can speak fluently. Furthermore, at the age of three months, their memory is higher than what adults imagine [4, 5]. This view dismisses the assumption that early efforts to introduce foreign languages to children interfere with their language development. Early childhood up to six is a decisive age in forming somewhat unique and rapid development, for example, in Kindergarten [6, 7]. Then according to Firmansyah [8] and Ladd et al. [9], the environment is one of the factors that influence the development of children. Therefore, the environment must be designed to develop and perfect what children are born with, one of which can be done in schools, namely Kindergarten. According to

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Nelson [10], Kindergarten is a form of early childhood education on the path to formal education. Purwanti [11] states that early childhood is a critical period and needs the proper stimulation to develop all aspects. Shonkoff and Fisher [12] concurs that in facing the development of human resources at this time, innovation in the field of education must be developed, especially in early childhood. So, it can be concluded that early age is a critical period for children because at this sensitive stage, the right time to develop all aspects of early childhood abilities such as language development.

In assisting the mastery of English in particular, not everyone can teach it to children [13]. Teachers who teach English must be people who are proficient in English, and they also need to have pedagogical knowledge about teaching English [14, 15]. In addition, in teaching English in early childhood, it is necessary to prepare teachers who understand the theory of the framework of early childhood development and also the development of language [16–18]. Some experts in child cognitive development [19–21] argue that early childhood can learn well if given good facilities such as; adequate learning media and educational (educative) play facilities. Unfortunately, these facilities changed utterly when the Covid-19 outbreak emerged in schools in cities, rural areas, and even throughout the world. Teachers also have to fight so that the learning process with their students can continue. The research of Fahriany et al. [22] explores the challenges of primary school teachers in teaching English online to young students in the pandemic era and teachers' views on teaching English online. They found that several challenges emerged from three sides: learning activities, time management, and student assessment.

Ludiawati [23] also found that English learning was carried out offline and online during the pandemic. However, by continuing to apply active English learning such as using the vocab method, short expressions, and simple sentences that match the theme, as well as using the singing method. Meanwhile, in their research, Khaula [24] focuses on the challenges English primary school teachers face in implementing online learning. They found it more difficult to teach in an online class than in a face-to-face one. First, teachers face technical problems in using technology. Second, most teachers have difficulty applying various teaching methods to online learning. Third, increasing student engagement also becomes more challenging. Then, the fourth problem is that assessing student improvement seems more difficult than in face-to-face classes.

While the previous researchers conducted research at the elementary school level, the researchers in this study focused on teaching English to young learners at the kindergarten level. This research was conducted on English teachers in Kindergarten because several private kindergarten schools in East Java have implemented English lessons in their curriculum as compulsory subjects. Thus, knowing what they experienced when they were English teachers in Kindergarten during the three periods could become best practices for EFL teachers to teach in all situations. Therefore, the research questions in this study are structured as follows:

1. How Do EFL Teachers Implement Teaching English Subjects to Young Learners in Kindergarten Schools Before, During, and After the Pandemic?
2. What Are the Challenges of English Teachers in Kindergarten Schools Before, During, and After the Pandemic?

2 Methodology

This research is descriptive research with a survey method. The purpose of this study is to obtain information and a clear description of the experiences of English teachers in kindergarten schools in implementing their learning instructions before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Twenty-one English teachers in Kindergarten volunteered to fill out a questionnaire we distributed via google form in May and June 2022. Then for data collection, we provided an open-ended questionnaire where experts validated the content validity. All respondents in this study were women aged between 22 to 48 years. The respondents were graduates of English Education from universities throughout Indonesia and had at least one year of experience teaching English. We also conducted unstructured interviews with three participants to clarify the data from the questionnaire. We only used three teachers because only they could be accessed for the interview session. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian as the participants' first language to make it easier for them to share their experiences. Interviews were conducted via Zoom meeting with a duration of 35 to 45 min.

The data analysis process was carried out in several stages. To answer RQ1, First, we read all the respondents' answers about their experience teaching English in kindergarten schools before, during, and after the pandemic, including teaching activities such as the methods, strategies, and teaching approaches used. Also, types of learning media have been used by them. Then, we coded, categorized, and created themes from the questionnaire data. In answering RQ2, we transcribed the results of the interviews with the help of Google voice typing, read them repeatedly, classified the respondents' answers, and analyzed them based on the research objectives. The last, we made conclusions.

3 Results and Discussion

In order to maintain research ethics and protect the rights of the respondents in this study, we hide their identities and replace them with pseudonyms and abbreviations to refer to them in the research results, namely R1 to R21. Then, we explain them based on research questions.

3.1 RQ1 - How do EFL Teachers Implement Teaching English Subjects to Young Learners in Kindergarten Schools Before, During, and after the Pandemic?

Before the Pandemic

The results of the data analysis show that there are variations in the ways that teaching is implemented by each respondent before, during, and after the pandemic. In the pre-pandemic period, all respondents responded that they were one hundred percent doing traditional face-to-face learning in class (R1 to R21). Even though they teach students offline, they are known to use very creative and educative English learning media, including picture books, pop-up books, stick puppets, realia, and flashcards. The pedagogical practices used by teachers in the pre-pandemic period focused more on the traditional

approach where learning activities were carried out between teachers and students in the classroom where the teacher delivered learning materials in the classroom with a relatively fixed method each time teaching or monotonous.

During the Pandemic

Then, at the beginning of the pandemic and during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were forced to accept that all school learning in all corners of the world had to be done remotely. When other teachers conduct online or distance learning, some kindergarten school teachers conduct learning with the Home visits method (R2, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10, R14, R15, R16, R17). Kindergarten teachers use home visits as an emergency learning method by visiting students' homes. This home visit is an alternative to build good communication and help solve student learning difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Home visit approach is the most appropriate choice for some teachers in kindergarten schools in Sidoarjo.

In addition to home visits, the teachers also implement distance learning. Unfortunately, not all teachers and students have adequate facilities to conduct synchronous or face-to-face meetings online. Therefore, to continue learning, all teachers use social media that anyone can access, namely WhatsApp (R1 to R21). Through WhatsApp, teachers and students conduct asynchronous learning, in which teachers instruct learning in various ways, including uploading teacher videos and conducting questions and answers with voice notes. The teacher evaluates and assesses student work. However, not a few teachers just give much homework and ask students to collect their work. It becomes a burden for students, parents, and even teachers because students do not get solutions to their learning problems. However, some teachers are lucky to have complete facilities to conduct distance learning English synchronously and asynchronously. The teachers also do not apply the home visit approach during the pandemic. These teachers generally teach at the more advanced and urban kindergarten schools. Like R18 and R19, they enjoy doing distance learning. They even implemented a digital assessment using google forms to carry out quizzes for their students. They are also facilitated using the zoom platform while teaching.

Post-pandemic Period

At the beginning of the academic year 2021–2022 learning in Indonesia, it was known that the COVID-19 outbreak had begun to subside, so kindergarten school learning had begun with a limited face-to-face concept. The limited face-to-face learning process in each Kindergarten is carried out with several health protocols, including checking body temperature, washing hands, and providing spare masks. For learning activities, it only runs for one hour with drawing, painting, and singing activities. The distance setting has also been done by applying 1.5 m between students. For learning English, it is known that teachers have begun to adapt to technology. Some teachers have used the facilities provided by school administrators, such as laptops and LCD projectors. This device allows teachers to explore pedagogy, content, and technology knowledge in learning English (R1 to R21). The teachers stated that the pandemic changed how they view existing technology tools. Like all educators who are forced to be technologically literate, English teachers at the kindergarten school level must also know and understand how to implement it into English learning for children. Like using LCD projectors and

laptops to watch animated videos, show digital stick puppets, and digital pictures. The teacher applies digital media to adjust the activities of children who tend to watch YouTube at home without parental assistance. With their technological knowledge, the teachers try to apply it when learning English. So that young students are facilitated to learn while playing, which is their world.

In addition to digital media, some teachers are also known to have implemented traditional learning, namely face-to-face in class, while still implementing health protocols. According to some respondents, one media used in learning English after the pandemic is a loose part (R1, R2, R4, R5, R7, R16). Loose parts are loose material media that can be used in various ways, meaning that they can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, separated, and put back together in various ways. The term loose part began to be used in 1972 after the architect Simon Nicholson published his work "How Not to Cheat Children - The Theory of Loose Part." Nicholson (1972) states that an environment is a place for children to be interactive, where children are born as creative individuals. An environment that can facilitate children to interact freely, safely, and comfortably will provide possibilities that enable children to become inventors.

3.2 RQ2 - What are the Challenges of English Teachers in Kindergarten Schools Before, During, and after the Pandemic?

All teachers during the pandemic certainly have their challenges to continue teaching English as a foreign language to young students in kindergarten schools. Three teachers from all respondents stated that they were willing to join the interview session by providing their contact numbers when filling out the questionnaire: Inna, Anni, and Anna (pseudonym). The researchers asked questions about their challenges when teaching before, during, and after the pandemic. The following are the results of interviews with the three respondents.

Before the Pandemic

Inna: "*Sebelum pandemi saya merasa semua aktivitas pembelajaran di sekolah adalah sempurna meskipun semuanya serba tradisional, media pembelajaran offline, saya juga mengajar secara tradisional dengan tatap muka di dalam kelas dengan para siswa. Seperti tidak ada tantangan yang berarti, semua normal". Misal jika aku mengajarkan kosakata tentang sayuran dalam Bahasa Inggris, saya menunjukkan buku buku gambar kepada murid saya dan saya meminta mereka mengulang setelah saya mention sebuah kosakata, misalnya spinach... bayam... kemudian murid murid mengikuti spinach... bayam*". [Before the pandemic I felt that all learning activities at school were perfect even though everything was traditional, offline learning media, I also taught traditionally face-to-face in class with students. Like there are no significant challenges, everything is normal." For example, if I teach vocabulary about vegetables in English, I show a picture book to my students and I ask them to repeat it after I mention a vocabulary, for example spinach... bayam (meaning of spinach in Indonesian) ... then students follow...spinach... bayam (meaning of spinach in Indonesian)]

In the transcript above, it is known that not all participants felt that they had challenges before the pandemic. Like Inna, who stated that before the pandemic, she felt that her teaching activities were not a problem, even though she had succeeded in teaching English with media such as picture books.

Anni: “*menurut saya sebelum pandemi malah banyak tantangan karena pembelajaran dulu itu saya sebagai guru merasa jauh lebih capek. Meskipun media pembelajaran banyak seperti bigbook, workbooks, dan alat-alat permainan dikelas tapi cara mengajar saya monoton, itu yang membuat saya merasa lelah terkadang*”. [In my opinion, before the pandemic, there were many challenges because in the past, as a teacher, I felt much more tired. Although there are many learning media such as big books, workbooks, and game tools in class, my teaching method is monotonous, that makes me feel tired sometimes]

Anna: “*tahun tahun sebelum pandemi tantangannya adalah mengatur siswa di dalam kelas, seperti yang kita tahu anak usia TK sedang aktif-aktifnya jadi mereka lari-lari saat jam pelajaran Bahasa Inggris, mereka cuek gitu*”. [In the years before the pandemic, the challenge was to organize students in the classroom, as we know kindergarten age children are very active so they run around during English lessons, they are indifferent]

Unlike Inna, Anni and Anna taught English before the pandemic was more tiring. Anni claimed that she realized what she was doing in teaching English to kindergarten students before the pandemic was monotonous even though she had a variety of learning media. Like Anni, Anna also stated that she was tired of teaching before the pandemic because her students did not focus on learning the language, and Anna’s students were busy playing alone.

During the Pandemic

Inna: “*kalau di masa pandemi tantangannya adalah harus lebih sabar, lebih kreatif, dan harus tetap tenang apapun kondisinya. Sebagai guru Bahasa Inggris di sekolah TK tidak mudah untuk mengajar Bahasa Inggris karena pembelajaran terkadang harus dilakukan secara online dan home visit. Kalau online itu, anak-anak terlihat tidak fokus. Dan jika dilakukan pembelajaran home visit tantangannya adalah manajemen waktu dan kesiapan alat alat pembelajarannya karena saya harus membawa papan tulis sendiri untuk datang ke rumah para siswa*”. [during a pandemic the challenge is to be more patient, more creative, and to remain calm regardless of the conditions. As an English teacher in a kindergarten, it is not easy to teach English because sometimes learning has to be done online and through home visits. When online, the children look unfocused. And if a home visit is done, the challenge is time management and the readiness of the learning tools because I have to bring my own blackboard to come to the students’ homes]

The transcript shows that the three participants experienced the same challenges when learning English online. Inna stated that she also conducted home visits to students' homes. The difficulty she experienced was timing, where Inna had to agree on when to visit students' homes to teach with the parents of students. Sometimes several students gather at one of the other students' homes. That way, at least Inna could save her time more effectively. Even though Inna did a home visit during the pandemic, she was also known to apply health protocols, and home visits were indeed one of the programs at her school to facilitate students who did not have gadgets.

Anni: *“tantangan yang sangat berdampak pada diri saya sebenarnya adalah stress, saya sempat stress di awal awal dan saya yakin tidak hanya saya yang mengalami itu. Dan tantangan lainnya menurut saya adalah semua orang harus jadi guru termasuk orang tua siswa. Sayangnya, karena ini pelajaran Bahasa Inggris, tidak semua orang tua dapat membantu anaknya belajar bahasa Inggris karena mereka tidak bisa berbahasa Inggris beda dengan pelajaran lain seperti menggambar dan mewarnai yang bukan keterampilan Bahasa. Tapi, dari semua masalah tersebut saya jadi banyak belajar dan terbuka tentang teknologi, jujur saya senang setelah melek teknologi, sehingga saya banyak menggunakan aplikasi aplikasi dan video youtube untuk mengajar dan saya rasa itu sesuai dengan usia siswa zaman sekarang yang serba teknologi. Saya juga mengajar bisa lebih kreatif dengan membuat video saya sendiri dan saya bagikan ke group WhatsApp kelas.”* [The challenge that really had an impact on me was actually stress, I was stressed at the beginning and I'm sure I'm not the only one experiencing that. And another challenge in my opinion is that everyone has to become a teacher, including parents of students. Unfortunately, because this is an English lesson, not all parents can help their children learn English because they cannot speak English, which is different from other subjects such as drawing and coloring which are not language skills. However, from all these problems, I learned a lot and was open about technology, to be honest I was happy after being technology literate, so I used a lot of applications and YouTube videos to teach and I think it is appropriate for the age of today's students who are all technological. I also teach to be more creative by making my own videos and I share them with the class WhatsApp group]

Anna: *“kalau pandemi kan pembelajaran online, anak – anak juga bisa belajar didampingi orang tua. Tantangannya lebih ke jaringan internet dan waktu, karena sebagian dari orang tua adalah pekerja jadi mereka bisa mendampingi dan mengumpulkan tugas belajar seperti membuat video menyanyi lagu Bahasa Inggris atau menghitung angka satu sampai dengan sepuluh dalam Bahasa Inggris jika mereka sudah pulang dari bekerja bahkan malam hari namun tetap di hari yang sama mereka baru bisa mengumpulkan tugas tersebut”*. [If the pandemic was online learning, children could also study accompanied by their parents. The challenges were more related to the internet and time, because some of the parents are workers so they can accompany and collect learning tasks such as making videos singing English songs or counting numbers one to ten in English if they

come home from work even at night but still on the same day they can collect the task]

The transcript above also shows that Anni and Anna both have challenges working with parents of students. Anni claims that when students study at home, their parents should be able to help their children study. However, the challenge was that not all parents understand English. Even though it was only simple English vocabulary, it was not easy for parents to teach it because they did not have everyday English skills. Like Anni, Anna also stated in the interview session that she had to be patient, waiting for her students' assignments to be submitted. Students were not accompanied by their parents when studying online because they were working that day.

Post-pandemic Period

Inna: *“sekarang ... kita bisa bilang pasca pandemi yaa meskipun covid akan terus ada di bumi ini... tapi sejak pemerintah Indonesia mengumumkan sudah bisa melakukan pembelajaran tatap muka di kelas, kami di sekolah bisa mengatakan pandemi sudah usai (tertawa). Tantangan setelah pandemi ini adalah tuntutan untuk kami para guru bisa mengajar dengan berbagai kondisi karena terkadang kami masih perlu menyiapkan pembelajaran untuk siswa-siswa yang belum bisa masuk ke sekolah karena berbagai alasan. Jadi Hybrid untuk belajar Bahasa Inggris di level TK itu susah tapi alhamdulillah saya bisa, mau gak mau harus bisa”*. [now... we can say that after the pandemic, even though Covid will continue to exist on this earth... but since the Indonesian government announced that it was possible to conduct face-to-face learning in class, we at school can say that the pandemic is over (laughs). The challenge after this pandemic is the demand for us teachers to be able to teach under various conditions because, sometimes, we still need to prepare lessons for students who have not been able to enter school for various reasons. So, Hybrid to learn English at the kindergarten level is difficult but thank God I can, like it or not, I have to mention it]

Transcript excerpts from the three participants show very different statements about post-pandemic compared to before and during the pandemic. The challenges they face make them more optimistic in changing situations for learning English. Pressure and compulsion make Inna more proficient in using technology. Like her statement that, like it or not and ready or not, she must be able to integrate technology into English learning. However, Inna has not been able to specifically give an example of how to teach English using technology. It was different when she explained her experience teaching vocabulary before the pandemic.

Anni: *“Nah setelah sekarang pembelajaran tatap muka penuh, alhamdulillah sekolah dimana saya mengajar sudah memfasilitasi para guru dengan laptop, LCD projector dan jaringan internet, saya merasa lebih dimudahkan dalam mengajar Bahasa Inggris. Terkadang saya susah mengucapkan pronunciation dengan benar, sehingga dengan ada fasilitas tersebut saya bisa memutar video native speaker sehingga saya tidak salah mengajarkan kosakata Bahasa Inggris*

kepada murid-murid saya, adapun jika ada masalah tapi itutidak serumit saat pandemi. Namun, tantangannya adalah saya harus siap menghadapi anak-anak zaman teknologi ini, mereka semakin kritis.” [Now, after full face-to-face learning, thank God, the school where I teach has facilitated teachers with laptops, LCD projectors and internet networks, I feel it is easier to teach English. Sometimes it’s hard for me to pronounce the pronunciation correctly, so with this facility I can play native speaker videos so that I don’t make mistakes in teaching English vocabulary to my students, as for if there is a problem but it’s not as complicated as during the pandemic. However, the challenge is that I have to be ready to face the children of this technological age, they are increasingly critical]

In the transcript of the interview session, Anni knows she was ready to face offline learning because now she was technologically literate and supported by the facilities provided by the school. Anni also found it very helpful to teach English with technology, for example, when she could not pronounce English vocabulary correctly. She directly looked for references on YouTube and played learning video content from native English speakers. Thus, she did not teach anything wrong to her students. The only challenge Anni faces is dealing with increasingly critical children because they are human beings born in an era of increasingly rapid technological development.

Anna: “Kalau pasca pandemi sekarang sudah full tatap muka, saya sering menggunakan LCD sebagai alat bantu saya mengajar bahasa Inggris untuk menunjukkan benda-benda secara nyata ke murid-murid misalkan tentang pantai, hutan, dan hewan-hewan di kebun binatang. Dan disekolah kami juga menggunakan pembelajaran model sentra. Salah satunya sekolah saya menggunakan media loose part untuk mengajar. Jadi para siswa dapat memilih media apa saja yang mereka suka yang sudah disiapkan guru (5 Kegiatan) dan anak anak bisa memilih minial 3 kegiatan. Tantangannya lebih ke manajemen kelas saja karena setiap anak kan passionnya beda-beda jadi guru harus bisa membagi waktu untuk membersamai mereka untuk bermain di sekolah”. [When the post-pandemic is now full face-to-face, I often use the LCD as my tool for teaching English to show real objects to students, for example beaches, forests, and animals at the zoo. And at our school we also use the learning center model. One of them is my school uses loose part media to teach. So, the students can choose whatever media they like which have been prepared by the teacher (5 activities) and the children can choose a minimum of 3 activities. The challenge is more with classroom management because every child has different passions, so teachers must be able to divide the time to be with them to play at school]

The transcript above also demonstrates how much better Anna was at incorporating technology into her instructional strategies. Since the school where she teaches uses a learning center model that allows students to pursue their interests in learning, Anna’s challenge in the post-pandemic era is time management. Naturally, the students have a variety of interests, so when she goes with them to class, she must pay attention on each one of them.

3.3 Discussion

The research analysis results on the participants' experiences showed their condition before, during, and after the pandemic. This study implies a change in the participants' attitude after having a personal experience where they were forced to do unexpected learning that had to change from offline to online. Even offline and online must be done simultaneously, which becomes blended or hybrid learning. All that the participants experienced was in accordance with the research of Sokal et al. [26], who found that teachers showed increased fatigue but also improved abilities for classroom management and an increased sense of accomplishment. However, this study, at the same time, rejects Sokal's statement that teachers' cognitive and emotional attitudes towards change become more negative during the pandemic because there are teachers who feel that the pandemic is an opportunity for them to be technology literate. Like one of the study participants, she felt that she had benefited from the many technologies she knew during the pandemic. However, it is undeniable that she was stressed at the beginning of Covid-19.

This research is in line with the findings of Khatoony & Nezhadmehr [27], who stated in their research results that teachers like it and have a positive attitude toward teaching English by using technology and the internet in critical situations. He also emphasized that the teacher's experience holding all online classes under these circumstances was quite challenging. However, it helps students get more information and builds their confidence to follow their lessons in critical situations. The results of this study imply that the experience of an English teacher toward young learners in any problematic situation can run well and effectively if the teacher has an open attitude to any changes and responds positively to every situation.

4 Conclusion

In short, English teachers for young learners should be able to be adaptive to all situations. Teachers who are open about any difficult situation they are in will make them easy to accept any changes so that they can adjust their abilities to those conditions without any negative feelings. For example, teachers in Sidoarjo, Indonesia, are increasingly proficient in integrating technology into their English learning for kindergarten students. It is known that they can adapt to changes in their teaching before, during, and after the pandemic. They are currently not only able to teach using offline or traditional media, but they can also use various technology applications to support their teaching instructions. The results of this study certainly cannot be generalized to all teachers; therefore, we recommend future research to conduct research on the experiences of English teachers at the elementary school to tertiary level.

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