

**PROBLEMS OF TEACHING ENGLISH TO PRE-SCHOOL LEARNERS**

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**Abstract:** Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to pre-school learners presents complex pedagogical and psychological challenges. This expanded paper explores the cognitive, methodological, and sociocultural barriers faced by teachers working with children aged 3–6. The research includes an analysis of international literature, case studies from Uzbekistan, and practical classroom observations. It discusses attention span, motivation, language exposure, teacher qualification, material availability, and parental involvement as critical factors influencing EFL success in early childhood education. Finally, the paper offers pedagogical recommendations for enhancing early language teaching effectiveness through child-centered, play-based, and communicative methods.

**Keywords:** pre-school education, English as a foreign language, early childhood learning, EFL teaching, pedagogy

**Introduction**

In today's interconnected and multilingual world, English language proficiency has become an essential skill for academic achievement, professional success, and cross-cultural communication. As globalization continues to influence educational priorities, many countries have begun to introduce English instruction at the pre-school level, aiming to provide children with an early linguistic advantage. This trend reflects the growing belief among educators, policymakers, and parents that earlier exposure to English can result in higher levels of fluency and more natural pronunciation in later years.

A substantial body of cognitive and linguistic research supports this view, indicating that young children possess heightened sensitivity to phonological patterns and greater neuroplasticity, which facilitate the acquisition of new sounds and language structures. Early English instruction, therefore, is often regarded as a long-term investment in children's communicative competence. Nevertheless, while early exposure offers clear benefits, it also poses a number of pedagogical and developmental challenges that must be carefully addressed.

Pre-school learners differ markedly from older students in terms of cognitive development, emotional maturity, attention span, and learning motivation. Drawing on Piaget's theory of cognitive development, children aged three to six fall within the preoperational stage, during which learning primarily occurs through play, imitation, repetition, and sensory experiences, rather than through abstract reasoning or formal instruction. As a result, traditional EFL methods that rely on grammar explanation, vocabulary drills, and rote memorization are often ineffective and developmentally inappropriate for this age group.

In addition to psychological and methodological factors, there are significant institutional and systemic barriers that affect the implementation of early English education. Many teachers lack specialized training in early childhood language pedagogy, and schools frequently operate with large class sizes, limited teaching resources, and inconsistent curricular standards. These challenges not only limit instructional effectiveness but also contribute to teacher stress and learner disengagement.

Given these complexities, it is crucial to investigate how English is currently being taught to pre-school learners and what factors most strongly influence its success or failure. Accordingly, this article adopts a multi-perspective approach that combines a theoretical review, classroom observations, and interviews with teachers and parents to explore the problems,

practices, and potential solutions in early English instruction. The study aims to identify the most pressing challenges and to propose practical, evidence-based recommendations for improving the quality and effectiveness of pre-school English education in the context of Uzbekistan and similar non-English-speaking environments.

#### Literature review

The foundation of early foreign language education is rooted in theories of language acquisition and child development. According to Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current level of competence. For pre-school learners, this input should be meaningful, visual, and repetitive. Similarly, Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive and linguistic development. These theories highlight that pre-school English instruction must be play-based, interactive, and contextually rich.

However, research indicates that many early language programs fail to align with these principles, leading to ineffective outcomes (Pinter, 2017). Teachers often rely on rote learning and translation rather than communicative activities suited for young learners.

One of the primary challenges in teaching English to pre-school learners is their limited cognitive development. At this stage, children have short attention spans, limited memory capacity, and underdeveloped abstract thinking (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990). Consequently, lessons that are too long, grammar-focused, or teacher-centered fail to engage them. Studies by Moon (2000) and Cameron (2001) show that pre-school learners learn best through songs, stories, games, and visual aids, yet many classrooms lack such materials or employ them ineffectively.

Furthermore, affective factors—such as anxiety, motivation, and confidence—play a significant role. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) suggests that emotional barriers can impede language acquisition. In many non-native contexts, children experience anxiety due to unfamiliar sounds and cultural references in English. Teachers need to create a low-stress, supportive atmosphere, but not all educators are trained to manage young learners' emotions effectively (Linse, 2005).

A recurring problem highlighted in the literature is the lack of age-appropriate methodologies. Many pre-school teachers use techniques designed for older learners, focusing on vocabulary memorization and translation (Shin & Crandall, 2014). According to Brewster, Ellis, and Girard (2002), early learners require a holistic approach integrating language with movement, music, art, and play.

Another pedagogical issue is teacher qualification and training. In many contexts, pre-school English is taught by teachers who lack both English proficiency and training in early childhood pedagogy (Copland, Garton, & Burns, 2014). This leads to low-quality instruction and limited child participation. Pinter (2017) stresses that effective early English education demands teachers who understand both language teaching principles and child psychology.

Several studies (Butler, 2015; Shin, 2017) identify inadequate teaching materials as a key obstacle. Many pre-schools either lack English teaching resources or use textbooks not tailored to local contexts. Visual and interactive materials, such as flashcards, puppets, and digital tools, are essential for maintaining children's interest and aiding comprehension. In developing countries, economic constraints often prevent access to such resources (Garton, Copland & Burns, 2011).

Furthermore, overcrowded classrooms and insufficient teaching time reduce opportunities for individualized attention, which is vital for early learners. The lack of parental involvement and exposure to English outside school also limits language reinforcement (Ellis, 2009).

Cultural differences and linguistic distance between English and the child's first language can further complicate learning. Butler (2015) notes that in EFL contexts, children rarely encounter authentic English input outside the classroom, making it difficult to develop natural

pronunciation and fluency. Teachers often resort to using the native language, reducing exposure to English and undermining immersion-based learning.

In addition, culturally irrelevant content in imported textbooks may fail to engage learners or may conflict with local values (McKay, 2003). Therefore, adapting materials to suit the cultural and linguistic background of pre-school learners is essential.

### **Methods**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology designed to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges and dynamics involved in teaching English to pre-school learners. A combination of literature analysis, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews was used to ensure triangulation and enhance the validity of the findings.

The research was conducted in ten pre-school institutions located in Tashkent and Samarkand, Uzbekistan, over a five-month period from January to May 2025. These institutions were selected to represent a diverse range of educational contexts, including both public and private kindergartens.

Classroom observations were carried out to explore the practical aspects of English teaching in early childhood education. The observations focused on several key dimensions: the structure of the lessons, the interaction patterns between teachers and children, the use of teaching aids and materials, and the overall level of learner engagement. Detailed field notes were taken during each observation session, and a standardized observation checklist was used to ensure consistency across different settings.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 EFL teachers and 20 parents whose children attended the observed institutions. The teacher interviews aimed to identify their attitudes toward early English instruction, teaching strategies, challenges encountered, and perceptions of learners' responses. The parent interviews explored their expectations, involvement, and perspectives on the benefits and difficulties of introducing English at the pre-school level.

All collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which allowed the identification of recurring themes and patterns within the responses and observations. Emerging themes were then cross-checked with existing theoretical frameworks in early language acquisition and EFL pedagogy to ensure analytical depth and theoretical relevance. The integration of multiple data sources provided a comprehensive picture of the current situation of English teaching in pre-school contexts in Uzbekistan.

### **Results**

The analysis of classroom observations, teacher interviews, and parental feedback revealed five major recurring challenges in the teaching of English to pre-school learners. These findings highlight the multidimensional nature of early EFL instruction, encompassing pedagogical, institutional, and socio-cultural factors.

#### **1.Limited Attention Span and Motivation**

One of the most frequently observed issues concerned the short attention spans typical of children aged three to six. Both teachers and parents reported that learners often lost focus after approximately five to ten minutes of continuous instruction. Teachers noted that children responded more positively to multisensory and kinesthetic activities, such as songs with actions, colorful flashcards, and interactive games involving movement or sound. However, maintaining consistent motivation proved challenging, as lessons required constant variation and creativity to keep children engaged.

#### **2.Inadequate Teacher Preparation**

A second recurring issue was the lack of specialized training among EFL teachers working in pre-school settings. Although most teachers demonstrated solid linguistic competence, many lacked knowledge of early childhood developmental psychology and pedagogy. As a result, their

teaching practices tended to rely heavily on rote repetition, translation, and choral drilling, which are not developmentally suitable for pre-school learners. Teachers expressed a need for targeted professional development focusing on child-centered methodologies and creative classroom management strategies.

### **3.Insufficient Learning Materials**

A significant limitation identified across nearly all observed institutions was the scarcity of appropriate teaching and learning materials. Classrooms often lacked visual, auditory, and tactile aids necessary for multisensory learning. Many teachers were compelled to adapt or improvise materials, while others relied on textbooks originally designed for primary school learners, which were linguistically and cognitively demanding for pre-school children. The absence of age-appropriate resources restricted opportunities for active learning, imagination, and communicative interaction.

### **4.Environmental and Institutional Constraints**

Environmental conditions and institutional organization also emerged as key obstacles. Large class sizes—often ranging from 20 to 25 children per group—made it difficult for teachers to provide individualized attention or manage group dynamics effectively. Additionally, poor classroom acoustics and limited physical space hindered the use of songs, games, and movement-based activities. Many kindergartens lacked dedicated English learning areas, such as English corners, posters, or multimedia devices, which could otherwise reinforce exposure to the target language.

### **5.Parental Attitudes and Expectations**

The final recurring theme involved parental perceptions and expectations regarding early English learning. Many parents equated success with rapid linguistic output, expecting their children to speak English fluently after only a few months of instruction. This misunderstanding of early language acquisition processes often placed undue pressure on teachers and shifted the focus away from play-based, natural learning. Teachers reported that children whose parents actively supported language exposure at home—through songs, cartoons, and storybooks—tended to show greater enthusiasm and confidence.

Overall, the data suggest that while early English education holds great potential, its effectiveness is limited by structural, methodological, and attitudinal factors. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive reforms that involve educators, institutions, and families in creating supportive and developmentally appropriate environments for young language learners.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study indicate that effective English instruction for pre-school learners requires a thoughtful adaptation of pedagogical strategies to suit the developmental, cognitive, and emotional characteristics of young children. At this early stage, language learning should not be limited to vocabulary memorization or mechanical repetition but should instead be interactive, playful, and emotionally stimulating. Such an approach aligns with constructivist and communicative theories of language acquisition, which emphasize the role of social interaction and meaningful engagement in learning.

Methods such as Total Physical Response (TPR), storytelling, songs, and language games were found to be particularly effective in maintaining children's interest and facilitating retention. These methods help learners connect new linguistic input to real-life experiences and familiar contexts, making English learning both enjoyable and memorable. For instance, TPR enables children to associate language with movement, while songs and stories foster imagination, rhythm, and emotional attachment to the language.

A significant finding of this study concerns the crucial role of teacher preparation and ongoing professional development. Many teachers, although proficient in English, lack specialized training in early childhood methodology. Therefore, teacher education programs

must integrate courses that focus on child-centered teaching techniques, classroom management for young learners, and the psychological aspects of early language acquisition. Furthermore, continuous professional development workshops and peer collaboration can support teachers in adopting innovative and age-appropriate practices that sustain learner motivation and creativity.

Another essential aspect highlighted by the research is the active involvement of parents in the language learning process. When parents participate by using simple English phrases at home, listening to songs together, or reading bilingual storybooks, children's exposure to the target language increases significantly. This home-school partnership reinforces classroom learning, enhances motivation, and builds children's confidence to use English spontaneously.

From a policy perspective, it is recommended that educational authorities and institutions provide greater structural and material support for early English education. This includes allocating funds for teaching aids and multimedia resources, reducing class sizes to allow for individualized attention, and establishing national guidelines that prioritize communicative competence over rote learning. Additionally, collaborative partnerships between kindergartens, teacher training colleges, and research centers could contribute to the development of standardized, evidence-based practices in early language education.

Overall, the discussion underscores that the success of English teaching in pre-school contexts depends on a holistic approach that unites pedagogy, teacher development, parental engagement, and institutional policy. Only through such a comprehensive framework can early English instruction become both effective and sustainable.

## Conclusion

Teaching English to pre-school learners represents both a promising opportunity and a complex pedagogical challenge. The findings of this study demonstrate that when early language instruction is implemented thoughtfully, it can lay a strong foundation for long-term linguistic competence and foster positive attitudes toward language learning. Early exposure to English not only enhances children's listening and speaking abilities but also promotes cognitive flexibility, creativity, and intercultural awareness from a young age.

At the same time, the research reveals that this potential can only be realized if systemic challenges are effectively addressed. Issues such as short attention spans among young learners, insufficient teaching materials, inadequate teacher preparation, and unrealistic parental expectations continue to hinder the quality of English instruction in pre-school contexts. Addressing these barriers requires a coordinated effort among policymakers, educators, and parents to create a more supportive environment for early foreign language education.

Teacher training institutions should prioritize early childhood pedagogy in their curricula, ensuring that educators possess both linguistic competence and methodological expertise suited to young learners. Likewise, schools should be equipped with age-appropriate teaching aids, interactive digital tools, and flexible curricula that encourage creativity and play-based learning. Parental awareness programs can further strengthen the home-school connection by aligning expectations and promoting positive reinforcement at home.

Looking ahead, future research should explore the development of localized teaching models that integrate national culture, children's interests, and modern technologies into early English instruction. Such approaches would make learning more meaningful and culturally relevant while preserving the joy and curiosity that characterize early childhood education.

In conclusion, the success of English language teaching at the pre-school level depends on adopting a holistic, context-sensitive, and child-centered framework. When pedagogy, teacher development, parental engagement, and educational policy work in harmony, early English education can become not only effective but also deeply enriching for young learners.

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