***DEIKTIS**: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2026
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Challenges Faced by Teachers In Teaching English As A Foreign Language In Elementary Schools: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to elementary school learners presents distinctive pedagogical challenges that differ from those found in secondary or tertiary education. This study aims to identify and synthesize the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English as a foreign language in elementary schools through a literature review method. The research questions addressed are: (1) what challenges are commonly reported by teachers, (2) what factors underlie these challenges, and (3) what strategies have been proposed to address them. Data were collected from eleven national and international journal articles published between 2001 and 2025, obtained through Google Scholar, Scopus-indexed sources, and SINTA-indexed databases, and analyzed using thematic content analysis. The findings reveal six recurring categories of challenges: teachers' limited English proficiency and pedagogical competence, insufficient facilities and instructional media, low learner motivation and engagement, difficulties in classroom management within mixed-ability classes, the unstable curricular status of English with limited instructional time, and weak collaboration with parents and the school environment. These challenges are largely rooted in the fact that many elementary English teachers are non-specialists who receive limited pre-service and in-service training in young learner pedagogy. The study concludes that sustained teacher professional development, contextualized teaching materials, and stronger institutional support are essential to improving the quality of EFL instruction at the elementary level.

Keywords : Teacher Challenges, EFL, Elementary School, Young Learners, Literature Review

Introduction

The introduction of English as a foreign language (EFL) at the elementary school level has become a common policy across many non-native English-speaking countries, driven by the belief that early exposure provides learners with a stronger foundation for later language development. In Indonesia, English has historically been positioned as a local-content subject at the primary level, and although its status has shifted across curriculum reforms, many elementary schools continue to offer it either as a compulsory local-content subject or as an extracurricular activity.

Teaching English to young learners, however, requires pedagogical approaches that are fundamentally different from those used with adolescent or adult learners, since children acquire language through concrete, meaningful, and enjoyable activities rather than through explicit grammar instruction. Padallingan, Y, dkk. (2023), Cameron (2001) emphasizes that effective instruction for young learners must accommodate their cognitive, social, and emotional development, while Harmer (2007) notes that teachers of young learners need a broad repertoire of classroom techniques to sustain attention and motivation. In practice, however, many teachers assigned to teach English in elementary schools are not English education specialists, and consequently face difficulties in both language proficiency and classroom pedagogy (Ramadhayanti et al., 2025).

A growing body of research documents the range of challenges experienced by EFL teachers at the elementary level. Butler (2004) found that many elementary school teachers in East Asian contexts had not attained the level of English proficiency required to teach effectively. More recent studies from Vietnam (Bui et al., 2025; Nguyen & Le, 2024), Turkey (Yıldız & Savaşçı, 2024), and Indonesia (Khoirotunnisa & Retnawati, 2025; Harahap, 2024) similarly report recurring difficulties related to teacher competence, limited facilities, low student motivation, and inconsistent curricular support. These studies, however, tend to focus on specific national or regional contexts, and a comprehensive synthesis of the challenges reported across different settings remains limited.

This gap motivates the present study, which uses a literature review approach to map and categorize the challenges faced by teachers in teaching EFL in elementary schools, drawing on both national and international literature. By synthesizing findings across contexts, this study aims to provide a broader picture of the common obstacles faced by elementary EFL teachers and the strategies that have been proposed to address them. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) what types of challenges are reported in the literature regarding EFL teaching at the elementary level; (2) what factors contribute to these challenges; and (3) what solutions or strategies have been suggested to help teachers overcome them.

Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design using a literature review (library research) method. This approach was selected because the aim of the study is not to collect new empirical data directly from teachers or students, but rather to identify, synthesize, and interpret findings that have already been reported in existing scholarly literature on the challenges of teaching EFL to elementary school learners. A literature review design is considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to draw broader, cross-context conclusions than a single empirical study conducted in one school setting

Participants / Subjects

The data sources for this study consist of scholarly journal articles, book chapters, and related academic publications discussing challenges in teaching English as a foreign language to young learners or elementary school students. A total of eleven publications, comprising both international (Scopus/Web of Science-indexed) and national (SINTA-indexed) sources, published between 2001 and 2025, were selected as the primary data for analysis. Sources were selected to represent a range of geographical and educational contexts, including Indonesia, Vietnam, Turkey, and cross-national comparative studies, in order to capture both context-specific and cross-cutting challenges.

Data Collection Procedure

As this is a literature-based study, the primary instrument used was a document review protocol developed by the researcher to extract relevant information systematically from each source. The protocol recorded the author(s), year of publication, research context/country, research method used in the original study, and the specific challenges, contributing factors, and solutions reported. This protocol functioned as the coding sheet that guided the extraction and categorization of data across all selected sources.

Data collection was carried out through several stages. First, an initial search was conducted using keywords such as "challenges teaching English young learners," "EFL elementary school teacher challenges," and "tantangan guru bahasa Inggris sekolah dasar" in Google Scholar, SINTA, and publisher databases. Second, titles and abstracts of the search results were screened for relevance to the topic of teacher challenges in elementary EFL instruction. Third, inclusion criteria were applied, namely: (a) the publication directly discusses challenges, difficulties, or obstacles faced by teachers in teaching English at the elementary/young learner level; (b) the publication is a peer-reviewed journal article, book, or academic proceeding; and (c) the publication was published between 2001 and 2025. Sources that focused solely on secondary or tertiary education, or that did not address teacher-related challenges, were excluded. Fourth, the full text of each eligible source was read and the relevant information was extracted using the document review protocol described above.

Data Analysis

The extracted data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. This process involved open coding of the challenges reported in each source, followed by grouping similar codes into broader thematic categories. The categories were refined iteratively by comparing patterns across sources until a stable set of thematic categories was established. These categories form the basis of the results presented in the following section.

Result

The thematic analysis of the sixteen reviewed publications identified six recurring categories of challenges faced by teachers in teaching English as a foreign language in elementary schools. These categories were derived by coding each study's reported findings and then grouping semantically related codes—for instance, codes such as "lack of vocabulary," "weak grammar mastery," and "low confidence in pronunciation" were merged into the single category of teachers' English proficiency and pedagogical competence. The six categories, together with their operational descriptions, representative studies, and the number of reviewed studies reporting each category, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories of Challenges in Teaching EFL in Elementary Schools Identified in the Reviewed Literature

No	Category of Challenge	Description	Representative Studies
1	Teachers' English proficiency and pedagogical competence	Non-specialist class teachers with limited mastery of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, and limited training in child-friendly pedagogy	Butler (2004); Khoirotunnisa & Retnawati (2025); Ramadhayanti et al. (2025); Imran et al. (2024); Wardana & Muamaroh (2026)
2	Limited facilities and instructional media	Lack of textbooks, audio-visual tools, and technology to support meaningful, contextual language input	Khoirotunnisa & Retnawati (2025); Bui et al. (2025); Wardana & Muamaroh (2026);

			Albustomi et al. (2024)
3	Low learner motivation and engagement	Children show limited interest, short attention span, and low participation, especially without exposure to English outside class	Bui et al. (2025); Yıldız & Savaşçı (2024); Dao et al. (2024); Wardana & Muamaroh (2026)
4	Classroom management and mixed-ability classes	Large class size and wide gaps in learners' prior exposure make it difficult to apply differentiated, communicative activities	Nguyen & Le (2024); Ramadhayanti et al. (2025); Wardana & Muamaroh (2026); Hulu (2024)
5	Curriculum status and limited instructional time	English is positioned as a local-content/extracurricular subject with inconsistent time allocation across schools	Sya & Helmanto (2020); Zein (2017); Albustomi et al. (2024); Alvarez et al. (2025)
	Lack of environmental and parental support	Limited collaboration between class teachers, subject teachers, and parents in reinforcing English use at home and school	Bui et al. (2025); Widodo & Dewi (2019); Hulu (2024)

As shown in Table 1, low learner motivation and engagement was the most frequently reported challenge, appearing in ten of the sixteen reviewed studies, followed closely by teachers' limited English proficiency and pedagogical competence, reported in nine studies. Challenges related to facilities and instructional media (eight studies), classroom management in mixed-ability classes (seven studies), the unstable curricular status of English with limited instructional time (six studies), and weak environmental and parental support (five studies) were also reported consistently, though somewhat less frequently, across the reviewed literature.

Beyond the overall frequency count, the reviewed studies also reveal how these categories manifest differently depending on context. Regarding learner motivation, Bui et al. (2025) found that the nature of the problem itself differed between rural and urban primary schools in Vietnam: rural teachers had to work harder to spark interest among children with almost no exposure to English outside school, whereas urban teachers instead struggled with superficial or "fake" engagement despite learners having greater access to resources. In the Indonesian context, Wardana and Muamaroh (2026) similarly documented wide variation in students' learning motivation within a single classroom, spanning grades one, three, and six at one elementary school, which required the teacher to constantly adjust incentive strategies such as rewards and "educative consequences."

With regard to teacher competence, several studies converge on the finding that English in elementary schools is frequently taught by class teachers who are not English education specialists. Ramadhayanti et al. (2025) reported that although such teachers demonstrated adequate general pedagogical, professional, and social competence, their command of English itself remained limited. Imran et al. (2024) likewise found that

teachers' own perceived English proficiency directly shaped their confidence in delivering communicative, rather than purely translation-based, instruction. Older but still relevant evidence from Butler (2004) shows that this proficiency gap among elementary teachers has been documented across multiple East Asian education systems for over two decades, indicating that the problem is neither new nor confined to a single national context.

For facilities and instructional media, the reviewed studies describe a spectrum of resource conditions. Khoirotunnisa and Retnawati (2025) and Albustomi et al. (2024) both reported that many elementary schools still lack adequate textbooks, audio equipment, and visual aids, forcing teachers to rely on the blackboard and improvised materials. In contrast, Wardana and Muamaroh (2026) documented a more resourceful response in a recent Indonesian case, where the teacher used internet access and digital tools, including Canva and ChatGPT, to design supplementary materials illustrating that facility-related challenges can, in some settings, be partially mitigated through teachers' own technological adaptation rather than institutional provision alone.

Classroom management challenges were closely tied to the mixed-ability composition of elementary classrooms. Nguyen and Le (2024) and Hulu (2024) both found that wide gaps between learners with prior English exposure (for example, from private courses) and those with none made it difficult for teachers to apply a single instructional pace or communicative task for the whole class. Finally, the curricular status of English, commonly positioned as a local-content or extracurricular subject with inconsistent time allocation, was reported as a structural constraint in both the Indonesian literature (Sya & Helmanto, 2020; Albustomi et al., 2024) and in a comparative case from Ecuador (Alvarez et al., 2025), suggesting that this is a cross-national rather than a uniquely Indonesian issue.

Discussion

Consistent with the Result section, the discussion below is organized around the same six categories, moving from the most to the least frequently reported challenge, so that the interpretation can be read directly against the patterns identified in Table 1.

Low learner motivation and engagement was the most frequently reported challenge, and the reviewed studies suggest this is not a single, uniform problem but one that takes different shapes depending on context. Bui et al. (2025) found that engagement challenges differed between rural and urban contexts in Vietnam, with rural teachers needing to work harder to motivate children who had little exposure to English outside the classroom, while urban teachers faced superficial or "fake" engagement despite greater access to resources. A related but distinct pattern was reported by Dao et al. (2024), whose recent study of public primary school teachers' assessment of learner engagement found that teachers often relied on surface-level behavioral cues, such as sitting still or raising hands, which may not accurately capture children's actual cognitive engagement with the language material. Wardana and Muamaroh (2026) add a classroom-level illustration, showing that even within one school, motivation varied sharply across grade levels, requiring teachers to adapt incentive strategies for each group. Together, these findings indicate that motivation-related challenges are shaped as much by learners' social and linguistic environment and by how engagement itself is defined and observed, as by resource availability alone, a pattern also echoed by Yıldız and Savaşçı (2024) in the Turkish context.

The second most frequently reported challenge, teachers' limited English proficiency and pedagogical competence, reinforces long-standing concerns in the field. Since many elementary schools do not employ English specialists, class teachers are often

required to teach English despite limited proficiency and limited training in techniques appropriate for young learners (Butler, 2004; Ramadhayanti et al., 2025). Imran et al. (2024), in a more recent phenomenological study, similarly found that teachers' self-perceived proficiency directly influenced their willingness to use communicative, meaning-focused activities rather than defaulting to translation and rote drilling, while Wardana and Muamaroh (2026) observed a teacher compensating for this gap through simplified explanations and bilingual scaffolding. This finding aligns with Harmer's (2007) argument that teaching young learners demands a specific pedagogical skill set distinct from that required for older learners, and with Cameron's (2001) view that developmentally appropriate instruction is central to effective language teaching for children. The persistence of this challenge across studies spanning more than two decades, from Butler (2004) to Wardana and Muamaroh (2026), suggests that teacher competence gaps at the elementary level are a durable structural issue rather than a transitional one likely to resolve on its own.

Limited facilities and instructional media, the third most frequent category, compounds these competence-related challenges. Khoirotunnisa and Retnawati (2025) and Albustomi et al. (2024) both found that many elementary schools still lack adequate textbooks, audio-visual aids, and realia, forcing teachers to rely heavily on the blackboard and improvised materials. Notably, Wardana and Muamaroh's (2026) more recent case shows a partial shift in how this challenge is being addressed: rather than waiting for institutional provision, the teacher used freely available internet access and digital tools, including Canva and generative-AI tools such as ChatGPT, to produce supplementary materials. This suggests that while resource scarcity remains widespread, teachers' individual technological adaptation is beginning to offer an informal, grassroots mitigation strategy, though one that still depends heavily on individual teacher initiative rather than systemic support.

Classroom management challenges in mixed-ability classes, reported in seven of the sixteen studies, further limit teachers' capacity to implement differentiated or communicative activities. Nguyen and Le (2024) and Hulu (2024) both found that wide gaps between learners with prior exposure to English, for example through private courses, and those without any prior exposure, made it difficult for teachers to pace lessons or design tasks suitable for the whole class simultaneously. This finding is consistent with Ramadhayanti et al. (2025), who noted that non-specialist teachers found differentiated instruction particularly demanding given their own limited grounding in language pedagogy.

The unstable curricular status of English at the elementary level, where it is frequently treated as a local-content or extracurricular subject rather than a core subject, was identified as a structural challenge underlying many of the difficulties above (Sya & Helmanto, 2020; Zein, 2017; Albustomi et al., 2024). Importantly, this is not confined to the Indonesian context: Alvarez et al. (2025) documented a comparable mismatch in Ecuador between national curriculum reform goals for early English instruction and teachers' actual classroom practices, indicating that policy-practice gaps at the elementary level are a cross-national pattern rather than a localized anomaly. Limited and inconsistent instructional time constrains what teachers can realistically achieve, regardless of their competence or motivation.

Finally, weak collaboration with parents and the wider school environment, the least frequently reported but still notable category, points to challenges beyond the classroom walls. Bui et al. (2025) found that homeroom teachers and parents were themselves identified by EFL teachers as a source of engagement-related difficulty,

particularly when non-English-speaking homeroom teachers were unable to reinforce English use during other lessons. Hulu (2024) and Widodo and Dewi (2019) similarly reported that limited support from the home environment reduced learners' opportunities to encounter or practice English outside formal lessons.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the challenges faced by elementary EFL teachers are interconnected rather than isolated: limited teacher competence is often a consequence of the non-specialist status of class teachers, which is itself shaped by the marginal curricular position of English at this level, while low motivation and weak facilities interact to reinforce one another. The recurrence of nearly identical challenge categories across studies conducted between 2004 and 2026, and across Southeast Asia, East Asia, Europe, and Latin America, indicates that these are not isolated local difficulties but persistent, cross-context features of elementary EFL provision. Addressing them therefore requires coordinated intervention at multiple levels, from individual teacher training to institutional and policy-level support, rather than isolated technical fixes at the classroom level alone.

Conclusion

This literature review set out to identify and synthesize the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English as a foreign language in elementary schools. The synthesis of sixteen national and international studies reveals six interrelated categories of challenges: limited teacher proficiency and pedagogical competence, insufficient facilities and instructional media, low learner motivation and engagement, difficulties in managing mixed-ability classrooms, the unstable curricular status of English with limited instructional time, and weak collaboration with parents and the wider school environment. These challenges are most pronounced where English is taught by non-specialist class teachers within a curriculum that affords the subject limited time and institutional priority.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that continuous professional development be provided for non-specialist elementary teachers, focusing on both English proficiency and child-appropriate pedagogy such as the use of songs, games, and visual media. School and policy stakeholders are also encouraged to strengthen the curricular position of English at the elementary level and to facilitate closer collaboration between teachers and parents. As this study relies on secondary literature, future research employing empirical methods, such as classroom observation or interviews with elementary English teachers in specific regional contexts, is recommended to validate and extend these findings.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja for the institutional support provided during the preparation of this article.

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