



## **Navigating Early Childhood Challenges: Teachers' Approaches to Managing Behavioral, Emotional, and Developmental Differences in Young Learners**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Early childhood education represents a fundamental stage in shaping children's cognitive, social, emotional, and language development. Then, this study aims to identify and analyze the challenges experienced by early childhood teachers in the learning process, particularly in foreign language instruction, as well as the strategies used to address these challenges. A qualitative approach was employed, using in-depth interviews with five early childhood teachers from five different schools in Makassar. The data were analyzed through a process of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing to gain their experiences, perceptions, and strategies in early childhood education. The findings reveal five major challenges in teaching practice: (1) difficulties in maintaining children's focus and attention; (2) diverse abilities and characteristics among children; (3) the presence of children with special needs and the challenges related to supporting them; (4) difficulties in establishing emotional closeness; and (5) variations in children's moods and learning readiness. Teachers addressed these challenges by implementing engaging activities, adapting learning materials, providing additional time for children with special needs, fostering warm interactions, and allowing children to calm themselves before rejoining learning activities. These findings are expected to offer important implications for the development of early childhood teacher training programs, particularly those focusing on behavior management, emotional support, and differentiated instruction.

**Keywords:** early childhood education; teacher challenges; behavior; emotions; child development.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Early childhood education represents a crucial foundation for children's cognitive, social, emotional, and language development. At this stage, children learn through direct experiences, social interactions, and environmental stimulation. Then, the role of early childhood teachers is highly complex, as they function not only as learning facilitators but also as caregivers, behavior guides, and providers of emotional support. This complexity gives rise to various challenges that teachers must navigate in their daily instructional practices or learning.

Observable behaviors, such as being easily distracted, highly active, or resistant to instructions, are often not merely "misconduct" but manifestations of developmental needs (e.g., sensory needs, exploration, or coping strategies). Therefore, early childhood teachers must interpret this children's behavior not simply as disruption, but as a form of communication that reflects underlying needs requiring appropriate pedagogical responses.

Children's emotional regulation plays a central role in shaping their engagement and the smooth flow of learning activities. A child's ability to manage emotions, such as calming down after frustration, waiting for their turn, or responding to correction, is directly related to their capacity to follow instructions, collaborate with peers, and maintain focus on tasks. Aldrup et al., 2024; Ethridge et al., 2022 found that teachers' support for the development of social emotional skills (e.g., modeling emotional regulation, teaching prosocial skills) enhances children's engagement and reduces the frequency of challenging behaviors in preschool classrooms.

In a fact, however, early childhood teachers often face difficulties in maintaining children's learning focus, adapting instruction, addressing differences in ability levels, and building emotional closeness with children who are shy or highly active. Additional challenges arise when children are not in a stable emotional state, such as when they refuse to participate in activities or prefer to play instead. Aksoy, 2020; Vural et al., 2021 studies show that challenging behaviors and difficulties in sustaining attention are common issues that disrupt the flow of learning in preschool classrooms. These situations demand that teachers employ flexible strategies, demonstrate a high level of patience, and intuitively understand each child's individual needs. These factors highlight that early childhood teaching is not merely an academic process, but a socially and emotionally intensive interaction filled with complex challenges.

The urgency of this study lies in the importance of empirically understanding the challenges faced by early childhood teachers, particularly in foreign language instruction and within real classroom contexts. Although numerous studies have discussed early childhood education, research that directly foregrounds teachers' voices through their lived experiences remains limited. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of studies focusing on local contexts such as Makassar, which has unique social, cultural, and institutional characteristics distinct from other regions. This study aims to address this gap by exploring teaching challenges from the perspectives of early childhood teachers through in-depth interviews that position teachers' voices as the primary source of data, particularly in urban settings which is Makassar.

Based on these considerations, this study was undertaken to capture teachers' experiences, perceptions, and strategies in early childhood education. The findings are expected not only to enrich academic discussions on the dynamics of early childhood learning but also to provide practical recommendations for teacher training programs, inclusive education policies, and classroom practices that are more responsive to children's developmental needs.

## METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by teachers in early childhood education. This approach was chosen because it enables a comprehensive portrayal of teachers' experiences, perceptions, and strategies in responding to the dynamics of learning in early childhood classrooms.

The research data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five early childhood teachers from five different schools in Makassar. Participants were selected using purposive sampling techniques, targeting teachers with a minimum of two years of teaching experience and willing to provide information regarding the challenges of early childhood instruction. The interviews were conducted face to face and lasted between 10 and 20 minutes per participant.

The primary instrument of this study was an interview guide focusing on three key aspects: (1) the challenges that most frequently arise in the learning process, (2) children's

characteristics that influence learning, and (3) the strategies teachers use to address these challenges. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis. This analysis involved coding, categorizing, and identifying themes to reveal important patterns across the teachers' responses.

Data validity was ensured through source triangulation by comparing the findings from the five teachers representing different institutions to confirm the consistency of information. This procedure provided a more complete and accurate depiction of the challenges faced by early childhood teachers in teaching young learners in the Makassar context.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

This section presents the findings of the study regarding the challenges faced and the strategies used by teachers in early childhood instruction, particularly in foreign language learning. Based on a series of in-depth interviews with five early childhood teachers from different schools in Makassar, a comprehensive overview was obtained of the challenges they encounter during the learning process. Through careful analysis, the study identified five main themes that represent the core challenges experienced by early childhood teachers, as described below:

#### 1. Teachers' Difficulties in Maintaining Children's Focus and Attention

Several teachers reported that one of the greatest challenges is sustaining children's attention when the researcher ask about the challenges they face in teaching young learners. In their opinion, young children have very short attention spans and are easily distracted by their surroundings. As stated by teacher 1:

*Teacher 1: Keeping their focus... children their age get distracted easily.*

Preschoolers' attention is strongly influenced by immediate stimuli, busy environments, and their still-developing self-regulation skills. Teachers must therefore design engaging activities, apply diverse instructional methods, and ensure children's readiness before learning begins. Consequently, teachers require instructional strategies that can sustain children's engagement through concrete, hands-on experiences. In response to this challenge, teachers develop strategies that are quick, practical, and adaptable to classroom dynamics. When children begin to lose focus, teacher 1 explained that she immediately involves them in an activity to redirect their attention. It can be seen the following excerpts:

*"I immediately involve them in the activity so they stay focused on one thing."*

She also added that she uses songs as a tool to shift children's attention when necessary:

*We also use songs to redirect their attention when needed."*

The use of songs reflects a multisensory approach that has proven effective in re-engaging children, as musical rhythm and patterns can stimulate positive cognitive and emotional responses. These strategies demonstrate that maintaining children's focus is not merely about managing distractions, but also about the teacher's ability to manage transitions, create a stable emotional atmosphere, and provide developmentally appropriate activities.

#### 2. Diversity in Children's Abilities and Characteristics

Early childhood teachers work with children whose developmental abilities vary widely. The interviews revealed significant differences in children's cognitive, language, and motor skills. As one teacher expressed:

*Teacher 2: Ada yang bisa, ada yang kurang, ada yang bahkan tidak bisa. (Some can do it, some struggle, and some cannot do it at all)*

These differences require teachers to implement differentiated instruction by adjusting activities to match each child's abilities so that all children can participate and gain meaningful

learning experiences. This challenge becomes even more complex when children require individualized approaches or specialized materials to help them follow the lessons. Teachers explained that the strategies they use often involve modifying the content or difficulty level according to each child's developmental capacity. This is illustrated in the following statement from teacher 2:

*"Strateginya itu... saya kasih kadang-kadang materi lain yang khusus. Misalnya saya number, saya tulis dulu, dia 1-5."* (The strategy is... sometimes I give them different, special materials. For example, when I teach numbers, I first write them out, from 1 to 5.)

Providing specialized materials reflects the teacher's effort to ensure that children with slower development or additional needs can still engage in the learning process without feeling left behind. By adjusting the materials, teachers create a more inclusive learning environment that responds to children's diverse developmental needs. It also demonstrates that teachers must combine flexibility with developmental sensitivity to address the wide range of abilities in the classroom. It highlights that diversity in children's abilities is not merely a pedagogical challenge but requires teachers to act as facilitators who can provide equitable learning experiences for all children.

### **3. The Presence of Children with Special Needs and the Challenges of Supporting Them**

Teachers also encounter situations in which some children have special needs, such as ADHD-like behaviors or speech delays. As noted in the interview:

*Teacher 3: Ada beberapa anak berkebutuhan khusus... mereka aktif, tidak bisa tenang dan tidak bisa dipaksa.* (There are several children with special needs... they are active, cannot stay calm, and cannot be forced)

The presence of children with special needs requires individualized approaches, the use of sensory-based strategies, and an understanding that certain behaviors are not signs of disobedience but rather manifestations of their developmental characteristics. This, then, needs demands individualized attention, additional patience, and strategies that take into account their sensory and emotional needs from their teacher. Teacher cannot rely on uniform approaches because these children respond differently to instructions and activities compared to their peers. Therefore, teacher must learn to understand their behavioral patterns, recognize triggers of distraction, and adjust the pace and structure of activities accordingly.

Further interview excerpts illustrate how teachers adapt strategies to reduce disruptions and enhance the focus of children with special needs during simple routines such as lining up. The teacher explained:

*"Biasanya saya, ketika line up, saya memberikan dia kesempatan paling terakhir, jadi tidak ada gangguan dari temannya yang lain. Dia lebih fokus kalau dia di akhir daripada dia bersama teman-temannya yang lebih fokus."* (Usually, when lining up, I give him the last spot so that he is not distracted by other children. He focuses better at the end than when he is with his more attentive peers)

This strategy demonstrates the teacher's understanding that environmental arrangement and activity sequencing can help children with special needs remain more regulated and better able to follow instructions. Such small adjustments reflect the practice of individualized support, in which teachers modify activity structures based on each child's specific needs. These adaptations not only help children with special needs participate more effectively but also help maintain a conducive classroom environment. This finding highlights the importance of teacher sensitivity to developmental differences and their ability to create an inclusive and responsive learning environment.

#### 4. Challenges in Building Emotional Closeness

One of the essential aspects of early childhood education is the teacher's ability to build emotional closeness (emotional bonding) with each child. This closeness serves as a foundation for children to feel safe, comfortable, and accepted, enabling them to engage more readily in the learning process. However, based on the interview findings, teachers face specific challenges in establishing this emotional connection, particularly with children who are more reserved, sensitive, or defensive.

*Teacher 4: Ada yang sulit didekati... harus lembut, tidak boleh dengan suara keras atau kasar.* (Some children are difficult to approach... you have to be gentle and must not use a loud or harsh voice)

Teacher 4 emphasized that not all children are easy to approach or immediately respond positively when teachers attempt to build rapport. This indicates that sensitive children require a much more careful and empathetic approach. Therefore, teacher must be able to adjust their tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions to prevent feelings of fear, anxiety, or rejection. In addition, nonverbal communication strategies, such as gentle touch, reassuring eye contact, and friendly gestures are crucial for fostering a sense of emotional security. In some cases, teachers may also need more time to gain a child's trust, especially those who tend to have tantrums, feel easily threatened, or have prior experiences that make it difficult for them to accept authority figures.

Thus, the challenge of building emotional closeness involves not only the teacher's communication skills but also the sensitivity to recognize and respond to each child's emotional needs. Teachers are required to maintain patience, demonstrate consistent warmth, and create a psychologically safe classroom environment so that every child can learn comfortably without emotional pressure.

#### 5. Variations in Children's Mood and Learning Readiness

In early childhood education, children's learning readiness is strongly influenced by their emotional state and overall mood. Teacher recognize that a child's mood is a key factor that determines their level of engagement in learning activities. It can be seen the following excerpt:

*"Tantangan yang paling sering itu kalau anak tidak mau mengikuti pembelajaran. Kadang mereka maunya main saja atau sedang tidak mood. Jadi yang kami lakukan biasanya membiarkan mereka menenangkan diri dulu. Kalau sudah agak tenang, baru kami ajak pelan-pelan kembali ke kegiatan. Tidak bisa dipaksa, harus sabar menghadapi anak-anak karena setiap anak punya suasana hati dan tingkat kesiapan belajar yang berbeda-beda."* (The most common challenge is when children do not want to participate in learning. Sometimes they just want to play or are in a bad mood. What we usually do is allow them to calm down first. Once they are a bit calmer, we gradually invite them back to the activity. They cannot be forced; we must be patient with the children because each child has a different mood and level of readiness to learn)

This statement illustrates that early childhood teacher pay attention not only to cognitive aspects but also to the emotional conditions that serve as prerequisites for effective learning. The strategies used reflect a child-centered teaching approach, in which teachers provide space for children to regulate themselves (self-regulation) before guiding them back into learning activities. By giving children time to calm down, teachers avoid coercion that may trigger resistance and ensure that each child returns to the activity when they are emotionally ready.

#### Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, it shows that early childhood teachers face a variety of challenges closely related to the developmental characteristics of young children. The first finding reveals that teachers struggle to maintain children's focus and attention due to the

natural tendency of early learners to become easily distracted. This is consistent with Aksoy (2020), who reported that preschoolers' attention span is strongly influenced by environmental dynamics and the type of activities provided. The practical strategies used by teachers in this study, such as immediately engaging children in activities and using songs to regain their attention, align with Williams et al. (2020), who emphasize the importance of multisensory approaches in supporting attention regulation. This finding indicates that the challenge of keeping children focused requires teachers to be highly sensitive to classroom conditions, individual child characteristics, and engagement patterns. Teachers are not only dealing with technical issues but must also understand child development to respond appropriately and effectively.

The second finding indicates that the diversity of children's abilities and characteristics constitutes a major challenge. Teachers encounter children with highly varied cognitive, linguistic, and motor skills, which necessitates differentiated instruction. The differences in ability and temperament within a single early childhood classroom highlight the need for teachers to remain flexible in designing activities that accommodate developmental variation. It is in line with Nilawarti, et al (2024) who demonstrated that using simple experimental methods (e.g., science games, object grouping, active exploration) with children aged 5–6 significantly improved their thinking, observation, and classification skills compared to before the intervention. This research reinforces the idea that with appropriate teaching strategies, those that allow for exploration and adjustments to task difficulty, children with different ability levels can still experience optimal cognitive development. Thus, the diversity in ability is not an obstacle but a natural classroom condition that requires teachers to consistently implement differentiated instruction so that every child, regardless of developmental level, can engage in meaningful and developmentally appropriate learning experiences.

The third finding illustrates that the presence of children with special needs, such as hyperactive behaviors resembling ADHD or speech delays, adds further complexity to the learning process. Teachers in this study adopted individualized support strategies, such as placing a child with special needs at the end of the line during line-up routines to minimize distractions. Such practices are consistent with inclusive education recommendations that emphasize environmental modification as an initial strategy before implementing more advanced interventions (Aksoy, 2020). The strategies used by teachers reflect realistic efforts, particularly given the limited availability of support personnel commonly found in early childhood education settings.

The next challenge relates to the development of emotional closeness between teachers and young children. Teachers in this study emphasized that emotional bonding can only be fostered through gentle, empathetic, and pressure-free interactions. This aligns with the findings of Ozcan et al. (2023), who assert that warm and responsive teacher–child relationships significantly contribute to children's self-regulation and social behavior. In addition, Byun et al. (2023) highlight that teachers' ability to manage their own emotions plays a crucial role in shaping how they respond to children's emotional needs. Furthermore, emotional closeness with early childhood learners can also be strengthened through the use of nonverbal communication strategies. Wahyuni et al. (2025) demonstrate that teachers' nonverbal behaviors, such as facial expressions, eye contact, gentle gestures, and controlled vocal intonation, play a central role in creating positive classroom interactions and supporting student engagement in the context of English as a Foreign Language learning. In early childhood settings, nonverbal communication functions not only as a medium for delivering instructions but also as an emotional mechanism that helps soothe children, foster a sense of safety, and prevent negative reactions such as tantrums or refusal to participate.

The final finding indicates that children's mood and learning readiness greatly influence their engagement in classroom activities. Teachers provided space for children to calm themselves before gently guiding them back to the learning tasks. Philpott-Robinson et al. (2023) demonstrate that children's emotional readiness is closely linked to their ability to regulate attention and follow instructions. This is further supported by Ethridge et al. (2022), who found that teachers' flexibility in responding to children's emotional states is a key factor affecting the quality of early learning experiences. Thus, this finding underscores that managing children's moods and emotional readiness is a critical component of early childhood education, and that teachers' sensitivity in adjusting their approaches based on children's emotional conditions not only supports learning engagement but also fosters a more responsive, supportive, and effective classroom.

Overall, the five findings of this study demonstrate that foreign language instruction in early childhood requires an adaptive, responsive, and developmentally appropriate approach. Warm and communicative social interactions were found to be a fundamental component in enhancing children's engagement. It also highlights the central role of emotional factors, such as children's mood, sense of security, and readiness to learn, significantly influence the dynamics of the learning process, and teachers' flexibility in responding to these emotional conditions is crucial for creating effective learning experiences. Thus, high quality instruction in early childhood is not solely determined by the materials or techniques employed, but by the teacher's ability to holistically integrate stimulation, differentiation, social interaction, and emotional support to create meaningful learning experiences for young children.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the process of foreign language learning in early childhood education is strongly influenced by the dynamics of children's behavior, emotions, and developmental stages, which are highly diverse. Teachers face challenges in maintaining children's focus and attention, which can fluctuate due to the naturally distractible characteristics of early childhood, requiring a flexible teaching approach. Differences in cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional abilities among individuals demand that teachers adjust activities, instructions, and support to ensure that each child can participate according to their developmental stage. The presence of children with special needs also presents a unique challenge, requiring teachers to provide individualized guidance and strategically manage children's positioning, duration, and engagement rhythms. Furthermore, the emotional relationship between teachers and children has proven to be a crucial foundation for creating a safe and supportive learning experience. Children's moods and learning readiness, which vary from day to day, significantly affect the learning process, requiring teachers to be sensitive and allow children time to self-regulate before re-engaging in activities. These findings emphasize that the success of foreign language learning in early childhood education largely depends on teachers' ability to read children's developmental needs, manage classroom dynamics, and implement adaptive and responsive strategies according to emerging situations.

In line with these findings, this study recommends strengthening professional training for early childhood education teachers, particularly regarding adaptive teaching strategies, behavior management, emotional support, and understanding self-regulation techniques for young children. Teachers also need more comprehensive guidance in supporting children with special needs through collaboration with relevant experts. Early childhood institutions are advised to provide flexible and emotionally supportive learning environments and to foster stronger collaboration with parents, considering that children's learning readiness is significantly influenced by home conditions. Nevertheless, this study has limitations due to the

relatively small number of participants, even though they were drawn from five different early childhood institutions in the Makassar area. While the variation in school contexts and teacher characteristics provides broader insights, the limited sample size restricts the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study primarily explores teachers' perspectives without including parents' views or longitudinal observations of children's development. Considering these limitations, future research is recommended to involve more diverse contexts and participants, as well as multi-perspective collaborations, to enrich the understanding of foreign language learning dynamics in early childhood education.

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