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Core pedagogical principles for teaching English to young learners: A review

Loso Judijanto



IPOSS Jakarta, Indonesia.
Email: losojudijantobumn@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines five core pedagogical principles that underpin effective English language teaching for young learners through a qualitative literature review. The study synthesizes research on play-based and experiential learning, multisensory and physical approaches, task-based learning, meaningful context and authentic materials, and the integration of language skills. The review demonstrates that successful English instruction for children requires fundamentally different methods from those appropriate for older learners, emphasizing child-centered methodologies aligned with developmental characteristics, cognitive capacities, and natural learning processes. Evidence indicates that when pedagogical practices incorporate active engagement, physical movement, social interaction, and joyful learning experiences, children acquire linguistic competencies more effectively while developing positive attitudes toward English learning. The findings highlight implications for teacher education programs, which must provide specialized training in young learner pedagogy, child development, and age-appropriate instructional strategies rather than generic language teaching approaches. Educational policies must establish systemic conditions that enable effective implementation, including appropriate class sizes, high-quality materials, adequate teacher preparation, and realistic curriculum expectations. Practical integration of these pedagogical principles requires ongoing reflection, contextual adaptation, and teacher agency within collaborative professional learning communities. Future research should expand comparative studies across diverse contexts, conduct longitudinal investigations to track the long-term effects of different pedagogical approaches, and examine emerging technologies that integrate with developmentally appropriate practices. The article concludes that systematic application of research-informed, child-centered pedagogical principles is essential for creating learning environments where young learners joyfully engage with English while developing linguistic competencies and positive self-concepts as language learners.

Keywords: Child-centered pedagogy, Language acquisition, Multisensory learning, Pedagogical principles, Play-based learning, Young learner pedagogy.

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Contribution of this paper to the literature

This study contributes to the existing literature by synthesizing five core pedagogical principles for teaching English to young learners. The primary contribution is finding that child-centered, developmentally appropriate methodologies, integrating play-based learning, multisensory approaches, task-based instruction, authentic materials, and integrated skills, fundamentally enhance linguistic acquisition and positive learning attitudes among young learners.

1. Introduction

The early years of childhood represent a critical period for language acquisition, during which children's brains exhibit remarkable plasticity and receptiveness to linguistic patterns and structures that form the foundation for future communication competencies (Jansen, 2024). Teaching English to young learners has emerged as a global educational phenomenon, with increasing numbers of countries introducing English instruction at the primary and even preschool levels in response to globalization and the growing recognition of English as an essential tool for international communication. Research consistently demonstrates that early exposure to English not only enhances linguistic capabilities but also contributes significantly to cognitive development, including improved memory, problem-solving, critical thinking, and mental flexibility. The window of opportunity during early childhood, particularly before age twelve and optimally before age eight, when children's brain development reaches approximately 80 percent of adult capacity, makes this developmental stage ideal for introducing foreign language instruction (Zein, 2017).

Despite widespread recognition of the benefits of early English language education, the pedagogical approaches employed in teaching young learners must fundamentally differ from those used with adolescents or adults, requiring child-centered methodologies that align with children's developmental characteristics, cognitive capacities, and natural learning tendencies (Zein & Hamied, 2025). The core of effective pedagogy for young English learners emphasizes prioritizing the learner dimension over mere language transmission, focusing on creating child-friendly, engaging, and developmentally appropriate learning environments rather than implementing adult-oriented instructional methods. However, significant gaps persist between ambitious educational policies that advocate for communicative, English-only instruction and the complex realities teachers face in classrooms, including large class sizes, limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and diverse student backgrounds. Research from Indonesia and other non-native English-speaking contexts indicates that teachers frequently face multiple challenges when implementing appropriate pedagogical principles, including students' limited prior knowledge of English, low motivation, inadequate teaching materials, time constraints, and classroom management difficulties (Zein, 2017).

The urgency of establishing sound pedagogical foundations for teaching English to young learners stems from the recognition that inappropriate teaching methods can undermine rather than support children's language development, potentially creating negative attitudes toward English learning that persist throughout their educational journey (Zein & Hamied, 2025). Studies examining teachers' perspectives consistently emphasize that developing pedagogical competence tailored to young learners requires a comprehensive understanding of language-teaching methodologies, child development theories, learners' individual differences, and culturally responsive practices. The pedagogical competence of English teachers encompasses multiple dimensions, including understanding students' developmental needs, designing age-appropriate materials and activities, selecting effective teaching methods, managing classroom dynamics, integrating language skills, and conducting meaningful assessments. Furthermore, research indicates that teachers' pedagogical competence significantly influences students' learning outcomes, engagement, and overall achievement in English language acquisition, with studies demonstrating moderate to strong correlations between effective pedagogical practices and student success (Aulia, 2021).

Contemporary research in the field of teaching English to young learners has identified several core pedagogical principles that form the foundation for effective instruction, including play-based and experiential learning, multisensory and physical approaches, task-based learning, meaningful context and authentic materials, and the integration of language skills (Zein & Hamied, 2025). These principles draw on constructivist learning theories, cognitive development frameworks, and second-language acquisition research to provide evidence-based strategies that honor children's natural learning processes while systematically building linguistic competencies. Play-based approaches, recognized as one of the most developmentally appropriate pedagogies for children from birth to eight years, engage learners in active, hands-on experiences that support emotional, social, cognitive, language, and physical development. Similarly, multisensory methods that incorporate visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic elements create more robust neural pathways and memory traces than single-sensory instruction, while reducing language anxiety and increasing student confidence (Shobikah, 2018).

Implementing appropriate pedagogical principles in English young learner classrooms requires planning, continuous professional development, and contextual adaptation rather than rigid adherence to predetermined curricula (Rashid, Singh, & Singh, 2025). Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), a framework that guides early childhood education by matching teaching strategies to children's developmental stages, socio-cultural contexts, and individual characteristics, offers valuable guidance for creating effective English-learning environments. Within this framework, teachers function not as knowledge transmitters but as facilitators who create language-rich environments, scaffold learning experiences, ask open-ended questions, provide specific feedback, and adjust challenge levels to maintain optimal engagement within each child's zone of proximal development. The shift toward learner-centered, meaning-focused instruction that prioritizes comprehensible input, authentic communication, and purposeful language use over decontextualized grammar drills and memorization represents a fundamental reconceptualization of language pedagogy for young learners (Arifin, 2024).

In the Indonesian context, where English functions as a foreign language rather than a second language and children have limited exposure to English outside classroom settings, the application of evidence-based pedagogical principles becomes even more critical for creating opportunities for meaningful language acquisition (Zein &

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Hamied, 2025). Indonesian educators face particular challenges related to inconsistent educational policies regarding the timing and scope of English instruction at primary levels, inadequate pre-service and in-service teacher training specifically addressing young learner pedagogy, disparities in access to quality materials and resources between urban and rural settings, and cultural expectations that may favor traditional teacher-centered approaches over child-centered methodologies. Nevertheless, research conducted in Indonesian contexts has demonstrated the effectiveness of various pedagogical approaches, including game-based learning, storytelling, Total Physical Response (TPR), technology integration, and collaborative activities, when appropriately adapted to local conditions and learner characteristics (Fentari, 2025; Liu, Chen, & Chen, 2024).

The primary objective of this article is to provide a comprehensive examination of core pedagogical principles that underpin effective English language teaching for young learners, synthesizing theoretical foundations with empirical evidence to offer teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum developers practical guidance for creating engaging, developmentally appropriate learning environments that facilitate language acquisition while supporting children's holistic development (Nguyen, 2021). Specifically, this article explores five fundamental pedagogical principles: play-based and experiential learning, multisensory and physical approaches, task-based learning, meaningful context and authentic materials, and integration of language skills, analyzing how each principle aligns with young learners' developmental characteristics and contributes to successful language acquisition. By grounding pedagogical recommendations in research from reputable academic sources and providing examples of implementation in diverse contexts, including Indonesia, this article aims to bridge the gap between educational theory and classroom practice, ultimately contributing to enhanced quality and effectiveness of English instruction for young learners in the critical early years of language development (Zein & Hamied, 2025).

2. Method

This article employs a qualitative literature review approach, also known as a narrative or traditional literature review, to synthesize and critically analyze existing research on core pedagogical principles for teaching English to young learners. Unlike systematic reviews, which follow rigid protocols and predefined inclusion criteria to achieve comprehensive coverage, qualitative literature reviews offer methodological flexibility and interpretive depth, allowing researchers to exercise scholarly judgment in selecting, analyzing, and synthesizing literature to generate meaningful theoretical insights and identify emerging patterns across diverse bodies of research. This methodological approach is particularly appropriate for exploring complex educational phenomena such as pedagogical principles, where the goal is not to provide exhaustive statistical aggregation but rather to develop a nuanced understanding, establish theoretical frameworks, integrate multiple perspectives, and identify critical themes that illuminate effective teaching practices. The narrative review methodology enables the researcher to construct a coherent and comprehensive synthesis that goes beyond mere summarization of individual studies to offer interpretive analysis that reveals relationships between concepts, highlights consensus and divergence in the field, and provides context for understanding how knowledge about young learner pedagogy has evolved (Pare & Kitsiou, 2017).

Several key criteria guided the literature selection process for this qualitative review to ensure the relevance, credibility, and comprehensiveness of sources included in the synthesis. First, all selected literature was required to demonstrate direct relevance to the research focus on pedagogical principles for English language teaching to young learners, addressing theoretical foundations, empirical evidence, or practical applications of developmentally appropriate instructional approaches. Second, priority was given to scholarly publications from reputable sources, particularly peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in internationally recognized databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, to ensure the credibility and academic rigor of the reviewed literature. Third, the review emphasized currency by prioritizing recent publications from the past decade, while also incorporating seminal works that have shaped foundational understanding in the field, recognizing that pedagogical knowledge evolves continuously with emerging research findings and shifting educational contexts. Fourth, the literature selection sought diversity in perspectives, methodologies, and geographical contexts, intentionally including studies from various educational settings, including Indonesia and other non-native English-speaking contexts, to ensure balanced representation and identification of contextual factors that influence pedagogical effectiveness. The search process involved iterative cycles of database searching using keywords related to young learner pedagogy, English language teaching, child development, and specific pedagogical approaches, supplemented by citation chaining techniques to identify additional relevant sources referenced in key articles or citing influential works in the field (Schryen, 2015).

The data analysis and synthesis process followed established procedures for qualitative literature reviews, involving multiple stages of reading, coding, thematic development, and interpretive analysis to transform individual research findings into a coherent narrative synthesis. Initially, all selected articles were carefully read to gain familiarity with their content, identifying key findings, theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and practical implications related to pedagogical principles for young learners. Subsequently, a thematic analysis approach was employed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and conceptual categories across the literature, organizing findings around five core pedagogical principles: play-based and experiential learning, multisensory and physical approaches, task-based learning, meaningful context and authentic materials, and integration of language skills (Naeem, Ozuem, Howell, & Ranfagni, 2023). For each theme, the literature was critically evaluated to assess the strength of theoretical foundations, the quality of empirical evidence, the consistency of findings across studies, and the practical applicability to diverse teaching contexts. The synthesis process involved interpreting relationships between themes, identifying areas of consensus and debate, recognizing gaps in current knowledge, and generating analytical insights that extend beyond simple description to offer new interpretive constructs about effective pedagogy for young English learners. Throughout the review process, reflexivity was maintained by acknowledging that the researcher's professional expertise in English language education and familiarity with Indonesian educational contexts shaped the selection and interpretation of literature, while simultaneously striving for balanced representation of diverse perspectives and transparent reporting of the analytical process (Susanto, Yuntina, Saribanon, Soehaditama, & Liana, 2024).

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3. Results and Analysis

The effectiveness of English language teaching for young learners hinges on implementing pedagogical principles that align with children's developmental characteristics, cognitive capacities, and natural learning tendencies (Zein & Hamied, 2025). This chapter examines five core pedagogical principles that form the foundation of successful young learner instruction: play-based and experiential learning, multisensory and physical approaches, task-based learning, meaningful context and authentic materials, and integration of language skills. Each principle draws on theoretical foundations and empirical research to provide teachers with evidence-based strategies for creating engaging, developmentally appropriate learning environments that facilitate language acquisition while supporting children's holistic development (Astuti & Hasibuan, 2025).

3.1. Play-Based and Experiential Learning

Play-based learning is among the most developmentally appropriate pedagogies for children from birth to 8 years, engaging them in active, hands-on experiences that promote development across all domains. This approach provides children with self-directed opportunities to engage with content in integrated ways while simultaneously supporting emotional, social, cognitive, language, and physical development, as well as academic achievement (Morris & Rohs, 2023). Within the Indonesian context of teaching English to young learners, play-based approaches offer compelling opportunities to create natural, low-anxiety environments where children can experiment with language without fear of making mistakes (Hamdi, Astutik, & Novita, 2025; Zein & Hamied, 2025).

The theoretical foundation for play-based learning rests upon constructivist principles, recognizing that young children construct knowledge through active engagement with their environment rather than passive reception of information. Play allows children to explore the world around them in safe, controlled environments while simultaneously developing essential social skills (Van Tonder, Kloppers, & Grosser, 2022). When applied to English language teaching, play-based learning creates opportunities for children to recognize and respond to language nonverbally, produce language chunks in contexts that require enjoyable repetition, and use English naturally and spontaneously. These experiences create sturdy bridges between home and school environments, making language learning feel continuous with children's everyday lives rather than artificially separated (Happiness & Busari).

Research demonstrates that play-based learning approaches have moderate to strong positive effects on learning outcomes, including early literacy, language development, and numeracy. A recent meta-analysis examining studies from 2020-2025 found that well-implemented play-based STEM and literacy integration significantly enhanced student engagement while promoting equity and inclusion. When play and learning are intentionally woven together, children develop more positive dispositions toward learning (Lapidow & Walker, 2022). The approach works because young children are not developmentally ready to engage with abstract concepts or highly structured lessons; learning outcomes can be addressed through play in fun, engaging, integrated ways that support the whole child (Darling-Hammond, Schachner, Wojcikiewicz, & Flook, 2024).

Empirical studies from Indonesia demonstrate the effectiveness of play-based approaches, specifically for English vocabulary learning. Research conducted with 18 kindergarteners aged 4-6 years over eight weeks revealed that three types of play, open-ended, modeled, and purposefully framed, promoted active participation, contextual vocabulary use, and peer collaboration. The study showed that children demonstrated mastery of vocabulary, text comprehension, and retelling skills, and displayed greater enthusiasm during play-based activities. Importantly, the research identified emergent behaviors reflecting empathy and cognitive initiative not captured in traditional play frameworks, leading researchers to propose a new category called "Interpersonal Constructive Play" that emphasizes emotionally rich, idea-based interactions (Pujiani, Zuhrufillah, Sukmawati, & Yani, 2022).

However, effective play-based learning requires planning and appropriate scaffolding rather than simply allowing children free play without an educational purpose. Teachers must find a balance between child-led and adult-initiated guided play, create rich environments that draw on children's prior knowledge and interests, present activities and materials in ways that provoke and invite, ensure documentation of learning remains visible, and facilitate meaningful conversations that enhance critical thinking (Mohiyeddini, 2024). This intentional approach distinguishes directed play from free play, ensuring that specific learning objectives are met while maintaining the engagement and motivation that make play so effective for young learners (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

Game-based learning represents a specific application of play-based principles, particularly relevant to contemporary Indonesian classrooms. Research examining game-based learning for elementary children in Indonesia found that this approach makes learning more engaging, facilitates comprehension of the material, including vocabulary mastery, develops imaginative abilities and critical thinking, and increases students' motivation to learn English (Rui, Nasri, & Mahmud, 2024). The ease and novelty of conveying language through games allow for simplified and fun repetitions and production of target language, which may be responsible for the positive impacts on young learners' vocabulary learning (Khudaverdiyeva, 2024; Ningsih, 2023).

3.2. Multisensory and Physical Approaches

Multisensory learning engages young learners through multiple sensory channels, including sight, hearing, touch, and physical movement. This approach acknowledges the fundamental reality that children learn best when using their senses to perceive and assimilate information. When multiple sensory pathways activate simultaneously, children build stronger mental associations, making learning more intuitive and memorable. For young learners whose cognitive development requires concrete experiences rather than abstract instruction, multisensory approaches provide essential bridges between physical sensation and linguistic meaning (Anh, 2024).

The neurological foundation for multisensory learning lies in how the brain processes and retains information. When children engage with language through multiple senses, neural pathways form between different brain regions that receive multisensory information. This creates more robust, interconnected memory traces than single-sensory input. Research demonstrates that the coordinated use of multiple senses helps children gather more comprehensive information, enhance concentration and attention, connect new information with existing

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knowledge, understand and solve problems, and use non-verbal problem-solving skills (Anh, 2024; Khasawneh, 2024).

The Total Physical Response (TPR) method exemplifies effective multisensory teaching by linking language with physical actions. This approach, based on the principle that language learning should be coupled with physical movement, proves particularly effective for young learners whose kinesthetic learning preferences align with their developmental need for active engagement (Janikulovna & Diyora, 2025). Activities based on TPR include listening and responding to commands, choosing pictures, drawing based on instructions, and numbering action sequences. These tasks allow children to demonstrate comprehension non-verbally before producing language, respecting natural acquisition stages where receptive skills develop before productive abilities (Abdumutaljonovna & Xasanboyqizi, 2025).

Empirical evidence from recent Indonesian studies confirms the effectiveness of multisensory approaches. Research applying multisensory strategies, including TPR, color-coding, storytelling, art and craft, and interactive presentations, demonstrated that these methods positively impact student participation and comprehension. A quantitative study examining TPR's effectiveness in teaching English number recognition to early childhood students revealed significant improvements between pre-test and post-test scores, with one study reporting increases in understanding of up to 27%. The research confirmed that TPR, combined with supplementary media, significantly improved listening skills and vocabulary acquisition in early childhood (Theresia & Recard, 2021).

The effectiveness of multisensory approaches extends beyond basic vocabulary to more complex literacy skills. A study examining multisensory methods for fourth-grade students experiencing reading difficulties found that implementing visual (sight), auditory (hearing), tactile (touch), and kinesthetic (movement) sensory tools led to improvements in reading speed, alphabet memorization, spelling, word combining, and symbol recognition (Mitak, Fitriah, & Chesoh, 2023). The approach also increased students' confidence and motivation, making them more active and interactive in their learning (Cosentino & Giannakos, 2023; Mitak, Fitriah, & Chesoh, 2023).

Physical movement and hands-on activities prove particularly crucial for young learners whose cognitive development requires concrete manipulation of objects and active participation. Language learning should be linked to physical activities in which children use and hear English while making things, drawing pictures, completing puzzles, labeling pictures, matching words to images, playing games, and acting out movements in response to instructions (Akram & Oteir, 2025). These activities engage the hands, eyes, and ears simultaneously, creating comprehensive learning experiences that address multiple learning modalities (Prošić-Santovac & Savić, 2021).

Research focusing on the role of multisensory approaches in fostering student well-being reveals additional benefits beyond purely linguistic gains. Studies demonstrate that multisensory techniques help reduce language anxiety, a significant barrier for EFL learners, while simultaneously enhancing language acquisition and overall student well-being. The method proves beneficial for young learners by helping reduce learning difficulties, supporting essential development for early-age students, and strengthening memories through sensory engagement. When teachers prepare learning materials and activities based on multisensory principles, they create environments that motivate students to learn, boost their self-confidence, and maximize their developmental potential (Putri, Sutapa, & Yuliana, 2024).

3.3. Task-Based Learning for Young Learners

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) focuses on completing meaningful, real-life tasks rather than isolated grammar exercises, representing a fundamental shift in pedagogical approach from form-focused to meaning-focused instruction (Wei & Zhao, 2024). For young learners, input-based tasks make TBLT possible even at beginner levels, allowing children to engage with language through comprehensible input and context-rich activities that mirror authentic communication. This approach aligns with young learners' natural tendency to learn through doing and their need for purposeful, contextualized language use rather than decontextualized drills (Ruswandi et al., 2025).

TBLT is purportedly the only L2 pedagogy rooted in SLA theory and research, unique in its psycholinguistic foundations (Khamroeva, 2024). The approach defines tasks as activities that involve language use across various classroom settings to develop students' language skills. Effective tasks for young learners are coherent and unified, convey meaning and purpose, include clear language-learning goals, and actively involve learners. Rather than simply memorizing food vocabulary through flashcards and repetition, for example, students might work collaboratively to create a menu for a fictional café, using English authentically to accomplish a concrete goal (Ikawati, 2017).

Recent empirical research from Indonesia demonstrates TBLT's effectiveness for young learners. A study investigating the value of TBLT in teaching English in non-formal settings to 15 young learners from 5 schools in Tasikmalaya, West Java, found that the use of input-based tasks enhanced young learners' vocabulary mastery and maintained their motivation to learn English (Agustine, Emilia, & Sukyadi, 2025). This aligns with evidence that young learners are ready to learn English meaningfully when they have sufficient vocabulary input as a language element for acquiring a foreign language. The research revealed two major themes: the implementation of TBLT focused on input-based tasks, and students' positive responses to TBLT despite some challenges (Agustine et al., 2025).

A mixed-methods study examining TBLT's effectiveness in improving high school students' English listening and speaking skills found significant improvements in both areas, with the impact on speaking stronger and more consistent across school contexts. Quantitative results indicated that TBLT significantly improved listening ($W = 461.5$, $p < .001$) and speaking ($W = 11.0$, $p < .001$). Importantly, qualitative findings revealed that TBLT's effectiveness was strongly mediated by its ability to create positive affective-motivational cores; students and teachers reported increased enjoyment, confidence, and engagement as key factors for pedagogical success (Efriza, Zainil, Syarif, & Zaim, 2023).

Task-based learning offers numerous advantages, particularly for young learners' developmental characteristics. It increases motivation as children realize they can use English in everyday situations and real

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contexts rather than merely completing grammar exercises or reciting memorized texts (Huang & Gandhioke, 2021). Students develop improved communication skills as they interact, express thoughts, argue ideas, and listen to others in group settings. The interactive, engaging nature of tasks also reduces language anxiety, creating environments where the fear of mistakes diminishes. Through the consistent use of TBLT, students show significant improvement in English vocabulary, writing accuracy, and pronunciation (Gurzynski-Weiss, Long, & Solon, 2017).

Research examining TBLT for elementary students found that the approach emphasizes learner-focused activities while enabling teachers to guide facilitators and supervisors. During exercises and activities, students participate in tasks organically as authentic learning experiences (Mora & Mora-Plaza, 2023). Group discussions form a core component, with students working collaboratively on assigned tasks while teachers provide minimal intervention, allowing students to negotiate meaning and solve problems independently. This promotes autonomy and critical thinking in language use. Azmy & Nanda, 2024).

Implementation of TBLT requires careful consideration of young learners' developmental needs and classroom realities. Tasks must be developmentally appropriate, with an emphasis on accuracy, fluency, and negotiation for meaning. Teachers should model expectations clearly for lower-level students while providing written instructions for mixed-level or higher-level classes (Fang, Yeh, Luo, & Chen, 2021). Regular monitoring helps ensure students remain on track while encouraging independent problem-solving through leading questions rather than giving direct answers. Technology integration enhances task-based learning, with digital tools such as interactive worksheets and multimedia presentations increasing student engagement and supporting multimodal interactions (Fentari, 2025; Mapiro & Permata, 2024).

3.4. Meaningful Context and Authentic Materials

Context proves essential in language teaching because language without it lacks meaning and relevance. Contextualizing new language activates learners' schemas, brain areas related to relevant prior experiences—creating landing pads for new language in short- and long-term memory. When the target language is presented within strong contexts, it becomes more likely to be remembered and used later in authentic communication situations (Yao, Kanjanakate, & Jantharajit, 2024b). For young learners whose cognitive development requires concrete connections to real-world experiences, meaningful context transforms abstract linguistic forms into comprehensible, usable communication tools (Yao, Kanjanakate, & Jantharajit, 2024a).

From a neurolinguistic perspective, setting context effectively at the beginning of lessons activates brain areas related to learners' experiences, known as schemas (Sukamolson, 2025). This neurological activation provides students with frames of reference to draw on when new content is presented (Meylani, 2024). Studies show that when children learn language through familiar contexts closely aligned with their everyday experiences, they demonstrate greater engagement and understanding. Research examining word learning during play demonstrated that children learned more words when those words referred to objects they were playing with than when they did not. For example, block play provides an excellent context for children to learn shapes, colors, and spatial vocabulary, which positively impacts later outcomes in science (Schmitt et al., 2025).

Meaningful learning in language contexts involves understanding and applying language in real-life, relevant situations rather than simply memorizing isolated words or grammar rules. This reflects real-world communication, making it relevant and engaging for learners. Teaching language through meaningful contexts helps learners understand how language operates in different situations, making it easier to apply and remember (Kumar, Akhter, Yunus, & Shamsy, 2022). For young learners in Indonesia, meaningful contexts might include familiar topics from their cultures, such as stories and events related to national holidays, traditional foods, family structures, or cultural practices, making language easier to acquire as learners already discuss these topics in their native language (Kristiawan, Ferdiansyah, & Picard, 2022).

Authentic materials provide real-life examples of language used in everyday situations, offering high-quality input that learners need for acquisition (Ngan & Dan, 2025). These materials, created by native speakers for native speakers, include newspapers, menus, stories, songs, videos, advertisements, and other genuine sources. Using authentic materials helps improve students' language ability and enthusiasm for learning English. Research demonstrates that integrating authentic materials into language learning not only enhances language skills but also students' motivation and engagement, which are essential for more effective and meaningful learning (Procel, Medina, Sotomayor, & Tacuri, 2024).

A quasi-experimental study involving 90 students measured language skills before and after six weeks of applying authentic materials, finding significant improvements across all skill areas. Average improvements included speaking (23.8%), listening (28.2%), reading (24.4%), and writing (15.5%). Another study examining the effectiveness of authentic materials for ESP students' reading comprehension found post-test scores of 52.07 compared to pre-test scores of 29.87, demonstrating that authentic materials help students become more proficient readers, particularly in identifying primary ideas, supporting details, vocabulary recognition, and word meaning (Faiz, 2023).

For young learners specifically, authentic materials must be carefully selected and adapted to ensure age-appropriateness while maintaining the benefits of genuine language exposure. Teachers face challenges in choosing authentic materials that are suitable for children's specific needs and characteristics. Research examining teachers' perceptions of authentic materials for teaching English to young learners found that while teachers recognized the value of such materials for connecting children to real-world language use, careful selection and modification were necessary to match children's developmental levels (Park & MacDonald, 2025).

Recent studies of Indonesian elementary students found that using authentic materials significantly improved English language skills. An experimental study with 28 first-grade students showed average scores increasing from 12.9 on pretests to 70.0 on posttests after using authentic materials, leading researchers to conclude that authentic materials can be an effective teaching medium for improving young learners' English language skills. A separate study with 35 first-year students found that authentic materials significantly improved vocabulary

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acquisition, with statistical calculations showing sig (2-tailed) values smaller than 0.05 (0.00<0.05) (Saputri, Dwi, & Rina, 2025).

Online authentic materials have become increasingly relevant in contemporary Indonesian contexts (Mandarsari, 2023). Research investigating the use of online authentic materials, including YouTube videos, Google images, online articles, news, podcasts, and web short stories, found that teachers perceived these materials similarly to face-to-face authentic materials, but with different media delivery methods (Patricia & Asmiyah, 2022). Teachers appreciated the ability to adapt materials based on needs and purposes, though challenges included internet connection issues, classroom management difficulties, and language complexity requiring additional scaffolding (Mandarsari, 2023).

Thematic approaches, using topics such as family, animals, food, and travel, provide continuity across activities and enable English learning to connect meaningfully with children's everyday experiences (Jones & Bear, 2025). When teaching is built around content familiar to children, such as stories about their communities or situations they encounter daily, the language becomes more accessible because children already have conceptual frameworks for understanding it. This reduces cognitive load, allowing children to focus on language forms rather than struggling to understand both content and language simultaneously (Meisuri & Fitriani, 2025).

3.5. Integration of Language Skills

Integrating language skills in teaching creates well-rounded learners who develop a comprehensive understanding of language and its practical applications. Rather than isolating reading, writing, listening, and speaking into separate lessons, integrated approaches teach language holistically through meaningful, authentic contexts where skills work together as they do in genuine communication (Ryshina-Pankova, Albrecht, & Kormos, 2021). This integration reflects how language actually functions outside classroom walls, where successful communication typically requires the simultaneous deployment of multiple linguistic competencies (Lønsmann, 2023).

Integration emphasizes teaching language in ways that mirror real-world usage. Instead of isolated grammar drills or decontextualized vocabulary lists, teachers create contexts in which students can analyze news articles, discuss implications, and write informed responses, activities that require multiple skills simultaneously. This authentic integration helps children understand how language functions in actual communication situations. For example, a lesson about animals might involve listening to a story about jungle creatures, discussing favorite animals with classmates, reading information cards about different species, and writing or drawing about an animal they would like to meet, thus weaving all four skills together around a unified theme (Wahyudin, Sari, & Hidayat, 2024).

Research demonstrates that integrated approaches enhance communication abilities, promote holistic learning, and improve language retention and application. When students engage in activities that require multiple skills, such as role-plays, group discussions, and multimedia projects, they enhance their fluency, accuracy, and confidence in English. The simultaneous practice of multiple skills reinforces learning and makes language more memorable, as each skill supports and strengthens the others. The application of integrated skills provides real language experience for students by enabling natural interaction in English, helping learners understand target-language elements and rules while developing the ability to use them communicatively (Kalsum, Ahmad, & Yani, 2023).

Studies examining the implementation of integrated language skills in Indonesian contexts demonstrate practical effectiveness. Research found that integrating the four language skills significantly enhanced participants' language proficiency (Spencer & Pierce, 2023). Students who previously struggled in groups became good storytellers, and many who had known little success found success by performing for others. It was exciting to see students communicating and having fun, with motivated students spending considerable time working on their stories. Students noted that vocabulary learned through storytelling experiences helped them use everyday language to facilitate discussion (Nguyen & Phillips, 2025).

For young learners specifically, integration occurs naturally through activities such as storytelling, which stimulate listening, speaking, reading, and writing while developing positive attitudes toward language. When teachers read or tell stories in class, students improve their listening and comprehension skills (Wisnumurti, Sari, & Fitriani, 2021). Follow-up activities might include discussing characters and plot (speaking), reading the story independently or in groups (reading), and creating related artwork or written responses (writing). Songs, games, and collaborative projects similarly engage multiple skills while maintaining the playful, engaging atmosphere necessary for young children (Nguyen, 2021).

Research examining the implementation of storytelling for young learners found that this approach creates engaging learning experiences that integrate multiple language skills. A study using e-storybooks with kindergarteners found that students showed greater enthusiasm during storytelling activities. The digital format enabled students to re-read stories independently and control their reading pace, thereby increasing their active understanding. Results showed increases in students' vocabulary mastery, text comprehension, and retelling skills (Nair & Md Yunus, 2022). Qualitative data from interviews and questionnaires revealed that young learners considered digital storytelling more engaging, fascinating, and motivating for improving their vocabulary development (Maya, Widodo, & Fadli, 2022).

Similarly, songs and chants provide excellent vehicles for integrated skill development. Research examining the use of chants in EFL vocabulary instruction found that chanting works exceptionally well at stimulating young learners' vocabulary retention, a capacity associated with long-term memory. The nature of chants entails less complex musical composition than that of complete songs, favoring language development both receptively and productively. While both singing and chanting support learning in areas such as phonological awareness, pronunciation, and word retrieval, chanting appears particularly effective for vocabulary learning due to the ease and novelty of conveying language unconventionally. Simplified, fun repetitions and productions of the target language, made possible by chanting, represent virtues that positively impact young learners' vocabulary acquisition (Cedeño & Santos, 2021).

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Songs specifically help improve and extend vocabulary, develop awareness of rhythm and intonation, enhance understanding of individual English sounds, build foundational literacy skills, including waiting, listening, remembering, and predicting, and create enjoyable, memorable learning experiences (Sitompul, Fajriah, & Harahap, 2025). Songs that connect to themes like numbers, colors, and body parts make integration with the coursebook vocabulary straightforward. Songs incorporating gestures and physical movements prove particularly effective, engaging visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning channels simultaneously (Mejzini, 2016).

Practical implementation strategies for integrated language teaching include using journaling to help students express themselves in writing while building confidence, conducting "show and tell" activities in which students present objects and discuss them to improve speaking skills, and implementing story time, where reading or telling stories improves listening and comprehension. These strategies help students engage with language in interactive ways, naturally and enjoyably enhancing their language skills (Cents-Boonstra, Brown, & Peters, 2021; Hellín, Martinez, & Ruiz, 2023). International schools in Indonesia have successfully implemented these approaches, finding that they increase student engagement and motivation to learn.

The integration of language skills is crucial for young learners because it reflects how children naturally acquire their first language, through holistic, meaning-focused experiences rather than fragmented skill practice (Weadman, Thompson, & Willis, 2023). In early development, children use schemata developed through experience when learning language in both oral (listening and speaking) and written (reading and writing) forms (Abdalrahman, 2021). Integrated approaches build upon these natural learning patterns, creating coherence between how children naturally process language and how it is taught in classroom settings (Purwanti, 2024).

4. Conclusion

This qualitative literature review has examined five core pedagogical principles that constitute the foundation for effective English language teaching to young learners: play-based and experiential learning, multisensory and physical approaches, task-based learning, meaningful context and authentic materials, and integration of language skills. The synthesis of scholarly literature across diverse educational contexts reveals a consistent finding that successful English instruction for children fundamentally differs from approaches appropriate for adolescents or adults, requiring child-centered methodologies that honor young learners' developmental characteristics, cognitive capacities, natural learning processes, and holistic growth needs. The evidence demonstrates that when pedagogical practices align with children's developmental stages, incorporating opportunities for active engagement, physical movement, social interaction, meaningful communication, and joyful learning experiences, young learners not only acquire linguistic competencies more effectively but also develop positive attitudes toward English learning that sustain motivation throughout their educational journey. Conversely, inappropriate pedagogical approaches that emphasize rote memorization, decontextualized grammar instruction, excessive error correction, or adult-oriented teaching methods can undermine children's natural enthusiasm for language learning and create barriers to acquisition that persist well beyond the primary years. Therefore, the application of developmentally appropriate pedagogical principles represents not merely a methodological preference but rather an educational imperative grounded in both theoretical understanding of child development and empirical evidence of effective practice.

The findings of this review carry significant implications for teacher education programs, both pre-service and in-service, which prepare and support educators working with young English learners. Research consistently indicates that many teachers, despite possessing general English language proficiency and pedagogical knowledge, struggle to implement developmentally appropriate practices in young learner classrooms due to inadequate specialized training in child development, specific second-language acquisition theories for children, and young learner pedagogy. Teacher education programs must therefore shift from generic approaches that treat all learners uniformly to specialized curricula that emphasize child-friendly pedagogy, providing prospective and current teachers with a deep understanding of children's individual differences, psychological characteristics, cognitive development patterns, and age-appropriate instructional strategies. This specialized preparation should extend beyond theoretical knowledge to encompass practical competencies, including selecting and adapting materials suitable for young learners, designing engaging multisensory activities, managing classroom dynamics with children, scaffolding learning within each child's zone of proximal development, and conducting informal assessments that support rather than threaten children's developing confidence. Furthermore, professional development for in-service teachers must move beyond one-time workshops to sustained, collaborative, practice-based learning opportunities that enable educators to experiment with new pedagogical approaches, reflect on their implementation, receive mentoring support, and continuously refine their teaching practices based on student responses and learning outcomes.

Educational policymakers and curriculum developers also bear a critical responsibility for creating systemic conditions that enable the effective implementation of appropriate pedagogical principles in English young learner classrooms. The review reveals persistent tensions between ambitious policies advocating early English instruction and inadequate implementation supports, including insufficient instructional time, inappropriate class sizes, high-quality teaching materials, inadequate teacher preparation, and unrealistic curriculum expectations. Policy decisions regarding the optimal starting age for English instruction, time allocation within the curriculum, the relationship between English and other languages in multilingual contexts, and transitions between educational levels must be informed by research evidence rather than solely by international trends or parental pressure. In contexts such as Indonesia, where English functions as a foreign language and recent policy changes have created uncertainty regarding the status of English in elementary education, there is an urgent need for coherent, research-informed policies that acknowledge both the benefits and challenges of early English instruction while providing teachers with clear guidance, appropriate resources, and adequate support. Curriculum frameworks should prioritize developmentally appropriate learning outcomes focused on communicative competence, positive attitudes, intercultural awareness, and foundational skills rather than premature demands for grammatical accuracy or academic language proficiency that exceed children's cognitive capacities. Moreover, curriculum development processes should involve English young learner specialists, classroom teachers, and child development experts to

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ensure that prescribed content, recommended methodologies, and assessment approaches accurately reflect children's learning capacities and classroom contexts.

The practical integration of pedagogical principles into classroom practice requires ongoing reflection, contextual adaptation, and teacher agency rather than rigid adherence to prescribed methodologies or imported models that may not align with local educational cultures, resource constraints, or student characteristics. Teachers must develop the professional capacity to thoughtfully select from available pedagogical approaches, combining elements of different principles in ways that respond to their specific students' needs, interests, prior knowledge, and learning contexts. This adaptive expertise develops through cycles of planning, implementing, observing student responses, reflecting on effectiveness, and adjusting practices, a process that benefits significantly from collaborative professional learning communities where teachers share insights, analyze challenges together, and support one another's growth. Technology integration, while offering valuable tools for enhancing English learning through digital applications, game-based platforms, multimedia resources, and artificial intelligence-supported practice, should complement rather than replace the human interactions, physical activities, social collaboration, and embodied learning experiences that remain central to effective young learner pedagogy. The future of English language teaching for young learners likely involves skillfully blending traditional child-centered principles with innovative technological affordances, requiring teachers to develop digital pedagogical competencies while maintaining a focus on children's developmental needs and the primacy of meaningful human communication.

This review identifies several limitations that suggest directions for future research in English young learner pedagogy. First, while the literature synthesis encompassed diverse geographical contexts, much of the empirical research derives from specific national contexts with particular linguistic, cultural, and educational characteristics, raising questions about the universality of pedagogical principles across dramatically different settings, including resource-constrained environments, multilingual communities, and contexts where English holds varying status as a foreign, second, or additional language. Future research should expand comparative studies examining how core pedagogical principles manifest differently across contexts and identifying context-specific adaptations that maintain developmental appropriateness while responding to local realities. Second, the majority of available studies employ qualitative methodologies or small-scale interventions, with limited longitudinal research tracking the long-term effects of different pedagogical approaches on children's sustained English development, attitudes toward language learning, and academic trajectories beyond primary education. Large-scale, longitudinal studies following cohorts of young learners exposed to different pedagogical approaches would significantly advance understanding of which principles yield lasting benefits and under what conditions. Third, emerging areas, including artificial intelligence applications, virtual and augmented reality tools, personalized adaptive learning systems, and online/blended learning models for young children, require rigorous investigation to determine how such innovations can appropriately integrate with developmentally appropriate principles rather than undermining them through inappropriate screen time, isolated learning, or activities misaligned with children's cognitive capacities.

In conclusion, the synthesis of research on pedagogical principles for teaching English to young learners confirms that effective practice rests upon the fundamental recognition that children are not simply small adults but rather distinctive learners whose educational experiences must align with their developmental characteristics, cognitive capacities, emotional needs, and natural learning tendencies. The five core principles examined in this review, play-based and experiential learning, multisensory and physical approaches, task-based learning, meaningful context and authentic materials, and the integration of language skills, provide evidence-based guidance for creating learning environments where children joyfully engage with English while developing linguistic competencies, intercultural awareness, cognitive abilities, and positive self-concepts as language learners. Realizing this vision requires coordinated efforts across multiple levels of the educational system: teacher education programs that prepare specialized young learner educators with a deep understanding of child-centered pedagogy; professional development initiatives that support teachers' continuous learning and reflective practice; educational policies that create systemic conditions enabling effective implementation rather than undermining it through unrealistic expectations or inadequate support; curriculum frameworks that prioritize developmentally appropriate content and assessment; and classroom practices that thoughtfully adapt pedagogical principles to specific contexts while maintaining focus on children's holistic development. As English continues its expansion as a global language and as increasing numbers of children worldwide begin English study at ever-younger ages, the field's commitment to developmentally appropriate, research-informed, child-centered pedagogy becomes not merely desirable but essential for ensuring that early English education genuinely benefits rather than burdens the youngest learners whose foundation years shape their entire educational futures.

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