

Non-Native EFL Teachers' Beliefs and Classroom Practices in English Teaching for Young Learners: A Narrative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English to young learners poses challenges for non-native EFL teachers, particularly in balancing curriculum demands with fostering an engaging, supportive classroom environment. This study aims to explore the beliefs and classroom practices of non-native EFL teachers in teaching English to young learners. A narrative inquiry approach was employed to investigate how teachers' experiences and beliefs influence their instructional strategies. The study was conducted at an international primary school in Medan, Indonesia, involving three experienced non-native English teachers. Data were collected through narrative interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans and teaching materials. Findings indicate that teachers' beliefs are shaped by their personal teaching experiences, caregiving roles, and ongoing interactions with young learners. They prioritize creating enjoyable, emotionally supportive, and student-centered learning environments, which is reflected in practices such as games, songs, storytelling, movement-based activities, and positive reinforcement. Despite challenges posed by curriculum requirements and full-day school schedules, teachers adapt their strategies while maintaining their core beliefs. The study highlights that teachers' beliefs are dynamic and enacted through classroom experiences, providing insights into the meaningful connection between beliefs and practices in EFL teaching for young learners.

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most interesting aspects of teaching English as a foreign language over the years has been working with young learners. Some interesting questions include whether young learners need to learn the language, when is the best time for them to start teaching it, and whether it is possible to teach them in a classroom setting where they only speak English. Some experts argue that the use of full English in classroom instruction is essential to facilitate the acquisition of a foreign language, which closely mirrors first-language

acquisition [1]. This raises a research problem regarding the effectiveness of non-native EFL teachers in delivering English instruction to young learners and how their beliefs shape classroom practices.

Primary School promotes positive attitudes toward language acquisition and lays the foundation for future proficiency [2]. Alghanmi and Shukri [3] noted that English is widely regarded as a key language, serving as a vital link for communication between native and non-native speakers worldwide, especially amid globalization and the rapid march of technological progress. English's role in Indonesian primary education has changed as a result of curriculum modifications. According to the 2013 Curriculum, English is now an optional or extracurricular program in many schools rather than a required subject. In response to this situation, the researcher plans to explore how non-native EFL teachers effectively adapt their beliefs and practices to teach English to young learners despite curriculum constraints.

With the rapid development of the education world, the improvement of English Education is considered a global need that significantly affects the demand for educational institutions in Indonesia to pursue internationalization and survive in this advanced era. One of the goals of this program is to have International curriculum schools work together to improve their English programs. Nowadays, the number of International curriculum-based schools in Indonesia is rising, especially in Medan. These schools also hired international teachers, who they said were very good at teaching English and international culture. So, these institutions train their students to be global citizens by introducing them from primary school through lower secondary school and upper secondary school.

In line with that idea, Ahmeed et al [4] claimed that the internationalization of academics is also a manifestation of interdependence. Numerous schools currently use different versions of the International Curriculum. Because of this, the foreign teacher is also expected to help the school and its EFL students improve their English, in addition to teaching the international curriculum. If a native or foreign teacher is invited, the community and the students will probably pay attention. Native English teachers are being hired worldwide because they know the language well. Both native and non-native EFL teachers are frequently seen as the top choices for teaching English. A bunch of researchers argue that native speakers make the best language instructors and are the go-to option for English education. The reason is that they are viewed as pros at using English correctly [5].

In numerous international educational contexts, educators who acquired English as a second language commonly assume responsibility for delivering English language instruction. Ellis advocates for non-native English teachers, citing their ability to deliver effective structural grammar lessons and their empathy for students' learning difficulties. [6].” Additionally, Thomas points out that “students do not come so far to be taught by someone who does not speak English”. The belief that native-speaking teachers contribute more to effective language learning prevails in many EFL countries, to the point that, without careful examination, parents and school administrators perceive them as more qualified and efficient language teachers than their non-native counterparts [7]. This situation highlights the importance of examining the specific beliefs and classroom practices of non-native EFL teachers to understand their effectiveness in teaching young learners.

To provide effective teaching for young learners, one factor that plays an important role is teachers' beliefs. Teachers' beliefs play an essential role because the teacher is a facilitator of learners' multilingualism," claimed Nugraheni, Nurkamto, and Putra [8]. Teachers' beliefs play a significant role in shaping how they approach their lessons [9]. These beliefs do not just affect their teaching style; they also shape how they sift through new information, which means they have a huge say in how educational changes are put into practice and how teachers grow professionally [10]. Plus, they build on a framework of ideas pulled from classroom routines, past experiences, and the teacher's own character. That is why more and more people are realizing how crucial it is to dig into what language teachers really believe and how those beliefs show up in their daily classroom work [11].

An active and engaging teacher's performance can create a lively, enjoyable classroom atmosphere that stimulates students' interest and motivation to participate actively in the learning process [12]. Teachers do not always do what they say they believe in the classroom. There is often a gap between what they say and what they do. Shavelson & Stern noted that what teachers do in the classroom is said to be governed by their beliefs, which often serve as a filter through which instructional judgments and decisions are made [13]. Classroom practices such as script preparation, rehearsals, and the use of visuals or realia help students apply their language skills in real-life contexts. These activities enhance their oral and literacy abilities, promote creativity, and support diverse intelligences as described by Puchta and Rinvoluceri [14]. These insights form the theoretical framework for understanding the interplay between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices.

Much earlier research has examined the beliefs and classroom practices of non-native EFL teachers worldwide. For instance, Cheng and Zhang [15] explored what Native English-speaking and Non-Native English-speaking teachers think about written feedback in EFL classes at Chinese universities. They did in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight teachers, four native speakers, and four non-native ones to get their views on the purpose, scope, focus, strategy, and overall approach to giving feedback. On top of that, Tajeddin et al. [16] in Iran studied the beliefs of native and non-native English-speaking teachers about their roles in teaching English as an International Language (EIL). They held panel discussions with 10 native and 10 non-native teachers to explore their views on EIL, native speakerism, and what their teaching roles entail. The findings showed that at first, non-native teachers felt less confident and saw native teachers as somehow better.

Even research with teachers as participants, such as that by Deng et al. [17], often focused more on the perceptions of native and non-native teachers than on their classroom experiences. Nevertheless, these studies have primarily focused on general language and identity practices, paying less attention to how teachers' beliefs and classroom practices interact in international settings for young learners. To better understand the beliefs and classroom practices of non-native EFL teachers in teaching young learners, the researcher is conducting this study.

To address this gap, the present study employs a narrative inquiry approach to explore both the teachers' beliefs and classroom practices of non-native EFL teachers in teaching young learners. This research is considered significant because teachers' beliefs and practices directly shape student learning outcomes, and examining them in this unique

educational context offers new insights into how pedagogy, culture, and religious identity intersect. By foregrounding the voices of non-native teachers and their lived experiences, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how teachers' beliefs are enacted in daily classroom practices and expands the limits of research on teaching young learners. The researcher hopes that the findings of this study will provide practical guidance for teacher training, curriculum design, and school policies to support effective English language teaching for young learners in international school contexts.

2. METHOD

To gain a deeper understanding of teachers' beliefs and Classroom Practices in Teaching Young Learners, this study will employ a qualitative approach, using narrative inquiry to examine participants' life experiences and stories. The nature of the narrative inquiry approach is to understand and inquire into experiences through "a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus" [18].

To complement the qualitative data, a semi-structured interview was used as a supporting instrument to provide an overall description of teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in teaching young learners. However, the primary emphasis of this study remained on the qualitative exploration of teachers' stories. The study was conducted in an international primary school located in Medan, Indonesia.

The three participants in this study were selected based on their significant experience as teachers to young learners in primary school. Their professional backgrounds provide significant, contextually relevant narratives that align with the Objective of narrative inquiry to understand teachers' lived experiences and the impact of these experiences on their pedagogical practices. By incorporating these experienced teachers, this study aims to investigate how their beliefs, experiences, and classroom practices intersect in shaping effective teaching in an EFL primary school context.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the study's findings on Non-native EFL teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in teaching young learners in primary school classrooms. The findings are based on data collected through exploring teachers' beliefs about teaching English to young learners through their personal stories over time. Data from interviews, backed up by document analysis, show how these beliefs appear in teachers' lesson plans and classroom choices.

3.1 Teachers' Stories Revealing Beliefs about Teaching English to Young Learners

Teacher 1 was born in East Java and is currently 32 years old. She is a non-native EFL teacher whom I first met at the current international full-day primary school. She has a master's degree from UIN Tulungagung, East Java, and holds a certified teacher qualification in English language teaching from the Ministry of Education. At the school, she teaches English to students in Grades 1, 2, and 5.

“I started teaching in 2014 at an elementary school in my hometown. After I got married, I moved to Medan in 2020 and kept teaching at this full-day primary school. For four years in a row, I have taught Grade 1. Being a teacher is not my only role, I am also a mother of two daughters. I really enjoy working with young learners, and I think my cheerful personality makes it easier for me to connect with them, especially the students in Grades 1 and 2.” (T1)

This quote shows how Teacher 1 has spent a long time working with young learners and how her personal and professional lives are closely connected. Teaching Grade 1 for several years has helped her understand what children need and shaped her ideas about teaching English to young learners.

“I think young learners do best with English through fun, meaningful, and active activities, because young learners learn more effectively when they enjoy the lesson and feel happy about what they are doing.” Compared to older students, young learners need more games, pictures, repetition, and movement, since they cannot sit still for long and they learn better through hands-on actions and visual aids.” (T1)

She also feels that emotional support is key in helping children learn a language. In her view, young learners need encouragement, patience, and a safe space to build confidence in using English. Instead of pushing for perfect accuracy right away, she focuses on growing students' confidence and basic communication skills. For her, real success shows when students join in eagerly and are brave enough to try speaking English during activities.

“In my view, kids need encouragement, patience, and a safe place to learn, so they are not scared of making mistakes and feel at ease using English in class.” (T1)

“My main aim in teaching English to young learners is first to build their confidence and help them gain basic skills for communicating, without putting too much stress on grammar early on.” (T1)

“I can tell my students are succeeding when they join in class activities with energy and give English a try, even if they slip up sometimes.” (T1)

These ideas show how Teacher 1 sees English learning for young kids as a comprehensive process that integrates thinking, feelings, and physical involvement. Her focus on fun, emotional security, and growing confidence comes from her years of teaching young learners and watching how they respond over time.

Teacher 2 is a non-native EFL teacher who currently works at an international full-day school, teaching English to young learners in Grades 1-3. She is from Pekanbaru and has lived in Medan since she began studying at the University of Muhammadiyah North Sumatra. She has been trusted to teach lower primary students since 2015 and is considered one of the senior teachers at the school due to her long experience and steady performance. Besides her job, she is a mother of two sons and has been married since 2019, which deepens her understanding of children's emotional and developmental needs.

“I have been teaching English to young learners for nearly ten years. In my everyday life, I mostly use Indonesian outside the classroom, but inside, I mainly stick to English. Still, I sometimes switch to Indonesian when it is needed to help first-graders understand better.” (T2)

Teacher 2's story shows her firm belief that teaching English to young learners should align with children's developmental needs. From her own teaching experiences, she sees young learners as people who need interesting, helpful, and emotionally secure places to learn.

"From my teaching experience, I believe teaching English to young learners should be interesting, supportive, and right for their age and growth. It is very different from teaching older students because kids need more repetition, more patience, and more real exposure to English." (T2)

"I often choose games, songs, and storytelling because these help children enjoy the lesson and remember the language more easily." (T2)

She makes a clear difference between teaching young learners and older students. In her view, young ones need more repetition, patience, and real exposure to language through activities that suit kids. These ideas shape her choices in class, especially when picking games, songs, and stories as main tools for learning.

"I believe children need a safe learning space, emotional support, and positive encouragement so they feel brave enough to try using English." (T2)

Teacher 2's beliefs highlight a steady focus on emotional safety, on matching activities to kids' development, and on building confidence in early English learning. Her story suggests these ideas have grown over time through her classroom work, tying into the temporality side of narrative inquiry.

Teacher 3 is a non-native EFL teacher at her current school, teaching English to young learners. She earned a bachelor's degree from Muhammadiyah University of North Sumatera and finished her master's degree in English Literature at the Islamic University of North Sumatera in 2021. For the past nine years, she has been given the responsibility to teach students in Grades 1 and 3, showing the school's trust in her skills with younger primary students.

"To build my skills in teaching English, I took part in the English Teacher Competency Training run by the Ministry of Education in 2024. I already have a certified teacher qualification from the Teacher Professional Education Program." (T3)

This quote highlights Teacher 3's firm dedication to keeping her skills sharp through ongoing training. Her involvement in these programs and her drive to learn more demonstrate her ongoing efforts to improve her teaching knowledge and skills.

Teacher 3's views on teaching English to young learners are deeply shaped by her role as a non-native English teacher and her nearly ten years of experience in an international full-day school. Having taught primary students for so long, she feels that her own path in learning the language helps her better relate to her students' struggles, especially with vocabulary and grammar.

"As a non-native English teacher with nine years of teaching primary students, I feel my background lets me better understand the challenges my students face in learning. I know vocabulary and grammar can be tough, so I aim to explain things in simple, clear ways. Working in an

international full-day school also pushes me to help students learn English step by step, without adding too much pressure.” (T3)

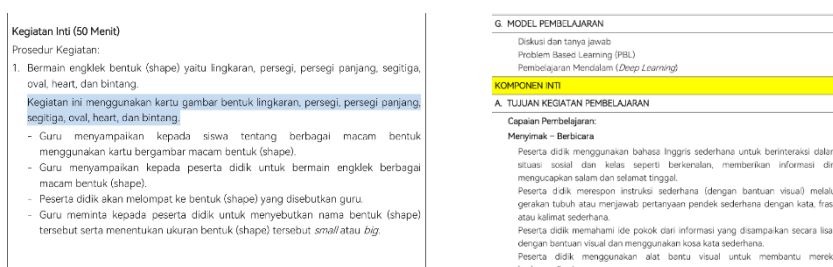
Moreover, the full-day school setting has a big impact on Teacher 3’s teaching beliefs and methods. The long hours mean she has to keep adjusting her approaches to hold students’ interest and drive. Even though school rules, curriculum requirements, and goals can sometimes make it hard to stick to fun, interactive lessons, she believes being flexible and adaptable is essential to balancing what the school wants with what students truly need.

“Teaching in a full-day school affects how I approach lessons because I have to keep things interesting and adjustable. At times, the school’s expectations, curriculum, and workload make it tough to do fun activities. Nevertheless, I work to mix interactive tasks with curriculum aims so my teaching beliefs and actual classroom methods can still line up.” (T3)

This part of her story shows how Teacher 3 handles her beliefs amid school limits. While recognizing external pressures, she takes a thoughtful approach by adjusting her methods to keep her beliefs in line with the real classroom situation.

3.2 Teachers’ Beliefs Reflected in Classroom Practices in Teaching English to Young Learners

This part examines how teachers’ views on teaching English to young learners manifest in their classroom practices. Using the sociality aspect of narrative inquiry as a guide, the analysis examines how teachers interact with students, make teaching choices, and manage classroom energy as ways to express their beliefs. The results are based on combining classroom observations, analysis of lesson plans, students’ school books, and the Cambridge Primary English Curriculum Outline, along with interview data from the teachers.



Figures 1 and 2. Lesson Plan

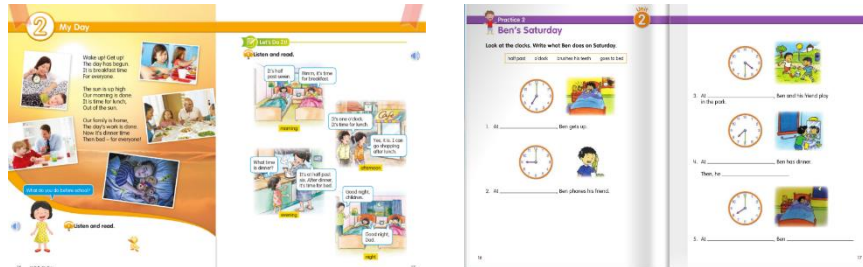
Looking closely at the lesson plan document (Figure 1), I can see a clear “Learning by Doing” method at work. Instead of just sitting and memorizing shape names, students actually get to jump onto the shapes the teacher calls out. This matches exactly what T1 shared in our talk:

“Compared to older students, young learners really need more games, visuals, repetition, and movement, because they cannot sit quietly for a long time and they learn more through actions and visual support.” (T1)

Looking at the Learning Objectives and Assessment sections (Figure 2), I noticed a clear focus on “Menyimak – Berbicara,” which means Listening and Speaking. The teacher

aims to build students’ ability to respond to simple directions and use basic words (Figure 3) rather than pushing them toward complicated sentence structures.

“My main goal in teaching English to young learners is to build their confidence first and help them develop basic communication skills, not to focus too much on grammar at the beginning.” (T1).



Figures 3 and 4. Student’s Book

The bright pictures, short sentences, and time-related words (morning, afternoon, evening, night) in the materials show Teacher 2’s belief that young learners do better when the content makes sense and relates to their daily life.

“I enjoy using stories and pictures about daily routines because they are very familiar to the students and make them feel at ease. When they see images of waking up, eating, or going to bed, they instantly grasp the meaning.” (T2).

She finds that relatable stories and visuals help students connect with the learning material. Students feel more comfortable when they can see familiar scenes from their own lives, which helps them understand English more naturally.

“When the topic is close to their daily life, students are more confident and willing to participate. Stories and pictures help young learners feel safe and interested. They do not feel like they are learning something difficult, but they still learn English naturally” (T2).



Figures 4 and 5. Cambridge Curriculum Outline

When I compared what Teacher 3 shared in the interviews with the documents she uses, I found a strong alignment between her beliefs about teaching English to young learners and the Cambridge Primary English Curriculum, especially at Stage 1. From the interviews, it is clear that Teacher 3 sees English learning as something that should happen slowly, keep students interested, and fit with how children grow and develop—all while still meeting

academic goals. This way of thinking shows up in the curriculum itself, which builds language skills step by step through listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities that really suit young learners. By looking at both her words and the curriculum together, it becomes clear that Teacher 3's beliefs are not just personal ideas she came up with on her own—they have been shaped and strengthened by the school framework in which she works.

3.5 Discussion

This finding aligns with the principles of narrative inquiry, which view teachers' stories as meaningful sources of professional knowledge that reflect educators' interpretations of their teaching realities [18]. Through storytelling, teachers articulate not only what they believe about teaching but also why those beliefs matter in their specific teaching contexts. Previous studies have emphasized that teachers' beliefs are shaped by accumulated teaching experiences rather than abstract pedagogical theories alone, forming a personal belief system that guides instructional decision-making [11]. Borg's research highlights that teachers' cognitive frameworks influence their pedagogical choices and how they enact their instructional roles in the classroom [19].

Their narratives demonstrated how beliefs about creating a supportive and enjoyable learning environment were reinforced through repeated classroom interactions and successful teaching moments. This is supported by research showing that teachers' classroom practices tend to reflect their underlying pedagogical beliefs, such as fostering communication and learner autonomy in EFL contexts [20]. Narrative inquiry provides an interpretive lens that allows researchers to link teachers' lived experiences with how they construct meaning and implement instructional strategies [21].

In this study, the three-dimensional framework of narrative inquiry proposed by Clandinin and Connelly [18] is evident in participants' narratives. Teachers' stories reflected temporality (drawing on past experiences), sociality (relationships with students shaping interactions), and place (classroom and school contexts influencing practice). Similar narrative research suggests that contextual factors, such as institutional expectations and student needs, continuously shape how teachers enact their beliefs in classroom activities [22].

Teachers' beliefs about the importance of enjoyment, emotional safety, and active participation were consistently embedded in their instructional strategies, classroom interaction patterns, and use of materials. This supports broader language teaching research showing that belief–practice alignment often manifests in communicative activities, positive reinforcement, and learner-centered pedagogies in EFL classrooms [23]. Moreover, studies on teacher autonomy reveal that although teachers may hold strong beliefs about learner empowerment, contextual constraints sometimes limit the full realization of those practices, demonstrating the dynamic nature of belief application [24].

These findings suggest that teachers' classroom practices were intentionally designed to embody their pedagogical beliefs rather than occur randomly. Narrative inquiry studies highlight that teachers' stories not only recount events but also provide deep insights into how beliefs shape reflective practice, professional identity, and instructional decisions within varied educational contexts [25].

4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical role of teachers' beliefs in shaping classroom practices for young EFL learners, showing that pedagogical values guide instructional decisions even in complex teaching contexts. The findings imply that teacher professional development programs should emphasize reflective practices and support teachers in aligning beliefs with adaptive strategies, particularly in international or full-day school settings. The study is bounded by its focus on a small group of experienced non-native EFL teachers in one international primary school, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or teacher populations. Future research could explore larger, more diverse teacher samples, examine longitudinal changes in beliefs and practices, or investigate the impact of teacher beliefs on measurable student outcomes. By foregrounding the interaction between beliefs and classroom ecology, this research contributes to the broader understanding of how teachers' values influence learning environments, offering insights for policymakers, teacher educators, and schools seeking to enhance the effectiveness of English instruction for young learners.

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