# Revisiting Task-based Language Teaching to TEYL: Evidence from Indonesian Young Learners

| Metty Agustine P. [1] | Emi Emilia [2] | Didi Sukyadi [3] |
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| Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia | Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia | Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia |
| mettyap@upi.edu | emilia@indo.net.id | dsukyadi@upi.edu |

**Abstract**

The study aimed to investigate the values of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) in teaching English in non-formal setting to fifteen young learners (YLs) from five schools in Tasikmalaya, West Java, Indonesia. The study has been informed by the theory of TBLT in English teaching. The study used qualitative case study research design at the data when collected through a phase of teaching of six meetings where the researcher acted as teacher and interviews with five participants. The data were analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis, in terms of TBLT implementation to assist YLs learn English and participants responses to the values of TBLT implementation. The results show that two themes occurred, involving 1) the implementation of TBLT and students' learning which focuses more on the use of input-based tasks and 2) the students' responses on the TBLT implementation including positive attitudes and challenges towards TBLT. The use of input-based tasks can enhance YLs' vocabulary mastery and maintain their motivation to learn English. This is in line with the evidence that YLs are ready to learn English meaningfully when they have sufficient vocabulary input as a language element to learn a foreign language. It is recommended that TBLT be implemented in more diverse context in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Case study, Task-based language teaching, TEYL

## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of teaching English to young learners (henceforth TEYL) in Indonesia has moved forward intensively. The newest curriculum stipulates that English should be taught since grade 3 of elementary school. This phenomenon brings implications to the practice of English to young learners (henceforth EYL) instructions. At least teachers should understand how they select the methods or techniques for EYL context dealing with classroom management, students' characteristics, motivation, and their prior knowledge (Shin & Crandal, 2014;

Primary, et al. 2023) and the meaningful activities and physical activities for EYL should enable them to develop their English skills successfully (Pinter, 2019; Sulistyo, et al., 2019). One approach that has been reported valuable in helping young learners to learn English is TBLT (Butler & Zheng, 2022; Chou, 2019; Li & Thomas, 2023; Shintani, 2011; Shintani, 2013). Li and Thomas (2023) have reported the EYL Chinese teachers had basic understandings of TBLT implementation, but it was not congruent with the principles of TBLT regarding the negative effects of traditional assessment and their limited understanding in

teaching practice. Chou (2019) investigated task-supported language teaching which positively enhances young learners' comprehension and production of English phrasal verbs. Another study from Shintani (2013) revealed that Japanese young learners can engage actively in learning English through task-based teaching using the input-task based. Not only the instruction but also the assessment practice, task-based is useful for making young learners understand communicative interactive tasks in evaluation process (Butler & Zeng, 2013).

Regarding the implementation of task-based teaching, Zhou (2022) collaborated with a novice English language teacher to design and implement two repeated TBLT lessons for Chinese young learners in an action research design. Shintani (2011) employed two different tasks – input and output-based tasks, for Japanese children between 6 to 8 years old in vocabulary acquisition. The result indicates that there are similar levels of those tasks. However, there is richer interaction for the learners in input-based tasks than output-based tasks. This situation happens because YLs should be supported by input more especially in learning foreign language before they produce the language.

As mentioned in the previous section, the research has been influenced by the theory of TBLT. This section of the paper will describe principles of TBLT related aspects including the definition of TBLT, the basic principles of TBLT, the stages of TBLT, and values and issues in TBLT advantages and drawbacks.

The principles of TBLT focuses on how task employs and triggers students to use the language for a real-world communication and complete the meaningful tasks (Nunan, 2004; Long, 2015). Shintani (2016) reached the determination that task-based learning proves to be more efficacious in comparison to PPP when considering

young learners. The key of TBLT principle is "task". Ellis (2003) characterizes tasks as activities that chiefly emphasize meaning rather than form, wherein learners participate in problem-solving or communicative contexts. These tasks predominantly focus on the learners and emphasize the importance of fluency, thus motivating individuals to utilize the language within specific contextual frameworks.

According to scholars, the stages of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) are structured to facilitate communicative language use, while gradually incorporating a focus on form and accuracy. The stages are typically broken down into three main phases: pre-task introducing the task and providing learners with language input and context (Willis, 1996; Nunan, 2004), task cycle involving three activities – task, planning, and report (Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998), and post-task reflecting on and analyzing language used in the task. Then the post task focuses on accuracy and consolidation of learning (Willis, 1996, Skehan, 1998).

The values of TBLT can give many advantages. TBLT emphasizes meaningful interactive tasks to promote communication among learners and teachers. It is learner-centered, focusing on using the target language for real-life tasks to enhance language proficiency. As stated by Shintani (2016) task-based learning proves to be more efficacious in comparison to PPP when considering young learners. It facilitates the enhancement of communicative skills and linguistic growth among children. Moreover, TBLT establishes authentic, meaning-focused exchanges within the educational setting. In terms of task objectives, EYL teachers can engage in a variety of activities, including the common use of group and pair work, the frequent use of authentic or semi-authentic sources of input, and the use of task-based assessment to assess students'

progress and performance, among others (Van Den Branden & Van Gorp, 2021). Type of tasks which are appropriate to young learners in learning English using TBLT is input-based tasks. As stated by Ellis (2020) that TBLT for young English learners can be effective when incorporating input-based tasks, which are suitable for beginner-level learners. Furthermore, it can challenge the concept that learners must acquire some language skills before engaging in tasks. This is also in line with Shintani (2016) argued that children as beginner English learners are appropriate learning English using input-based tasks. By considering and tailoring tasks to the age and proficiency level of young learners, teachers can create engaging and effective task-based English learning experiences. TBLT is ideal for young children because it reflects their concept of language as a tool for producing meaning. TBLT is also consistent with what is known about how L2 learners learn a language's grammar in stages (Shintani, 2016).

However, in the research site, especially in Tasikmalaya, West Java Indonesia, TBLT has not been well-known for any EYL teachers. This is in line with Primary, et al., (2023) arguing that EYL teachers still have challenges to determine the appropriate method to teach YLs English.

Thus, to fill the gap of the study this research focused on the researcher's implementation of TBLT in non-formal context of EYL. This paper also aimed to portray young learners' responses of implementing TBLT in learning English. This study contributes to gather the evidence from the student side as a learner, not from the teacher side/perception in enacting an approach or method of teaching English to young learner context. For this reason, the study described here examines the following research questions, which are in line with the objectives of the study:

1) How can TBLT assist young learners to learn English?
2) What are young learners' responses to the implementation of TBLT in English language classroom in terms of values and challenges?

## METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to portray the process of TBLT in YL context and young learners' responses and perceptions of TBLT implementation in English language classroom. To this end, a descriptive qualitative case study was employed. In the classroom, the researcher served as a teacher. This pertains to a teaching program in which the researcher acted as the teacher, as noted by Stake (1995).

### Context

The study was undertaken in a state university's English Education Department in West Java, Indonesia due to the reason regarding the ease of access as a faculty member to use the microteaching room due to the process of the implementation of teaching program – English for Kids. The researcher created the program for 6 meetings conducted from April to May 2024 by inviting young learners from different elementary schools.

### Participants

In this study, 15 young learners participated. They come from different elementary schools in Tasikmalaya, West Java, Indonesia. Their English proficiency is low because majority of students do not have experiences in learning English. They have English subject at the beginning of the academic year 2023/2024 at school. They learn English once a week with two course hours load. The participants' age is ranged from 9 to 11 years old.

## Materials and Pedagogical Procedures

The topics of the teaching program covered introducing yourself, colors, and family. They were introduced to common vocabularies supporting their language skills before having complex skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. Every meeting was conducted for 45 minutes. Employing the framework of TBLT for YLs (Willis, 1996) which has main four phases – longer Pre-task (with preparation), Task cycle more, Post-task, and Language focus.

## Research Design

The study followed a case-study design (Yin, 2018), with an in-depth analysis of young learners' attitude and voices as the phenomenon of teaching EYL enacting TBLT. A case study is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., activity, event, process, or individuals) based on extensive data collection (Creswell, 2007). In this study, YLs were explored based on their opinion on their experiences specifically to answer the research questions. Besides that, the nature of this study is also fitted with the characteristic of the case study phenomenon regarding a theory proposed using the framework of TBLT to young learners (Willis, 1996, Shintani 2016).

## Data Collection and Data Analysis

A phase of six meetings teaching and interviews were conducted to gather the data and analysed using Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). TA is appropriate for a kind of qualitative analysis since it can seek the themes patterned for answering the research questions. The steps of TA involve six phases as in the following table.

**Table 1**
*Thematic analysis procedures*

| No. | Phase | Description of the process |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Familiarizing yourself with your data | The process of reading and rereading the data to get initial codes from the observation and interview data about the students' attitude and their perceptions on TBLT. |
| 2. | Generating initial codes | The data were coded into three codes – Task initiation, authentic materials, scaffolding, student engagement/participation, focus on meaningful communication, feedback and reinforcement. |
| 3. | Searching for themes | The code is organized into potential themes which involved the input-based tasks and positive experiences and challenges of YLs toward TBLT. |
| 4. | Reviewing themes | Themes are reviewed (creating a thematic map). |
| 5. | Defining and naming themes | Refining and naming the specific themes addressing to answer research questions proposed. |
| 6. | Producing the report | Writing a research report to publish. |

Classroom Observations (COs) were taken from six meetings of TBLT practices recorded with young learners (see Table 1). The data of COs were used to answer the first research question – how young learners learn English enacted TBLT especially using input-based task in learning English vocabulary. They were introduced to common vocabularies supporting their language skills before having complex skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. Every meeting was conducted for 45 minutes. Employing the framework of TBLT for YLs (Willis, 1996) which has four phases – longer Pre-task, Task cycle more, post-task, and Language focus.

The second instrument was the semi-structured interview to answer the second research question dealing with participants' responses on their experiences and attitudes during the teaching program. This session was conducted after all the processes of English for Kids program finished. Each participant had an interview duration of about 20 to 30 minutes. The questions consist of principles of TBLT approach in three phases (pre-task, task cycle (main task), and language focus (post task) regarding what students like or not with the approach, what students experience with the tasks, and what students' attitudes toward the use of its approach.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Based on the data from classroom observations and interviews, two main themes emerged due to address the research questions: 1) How can TBLT assist young learners to learn English? 2) What are young learners' responses to the implementation of TBLT in English language classroom in terms of values and challenges? The two themes are about the implementation of TBLT and students' learning and the students' responses on the TBLT implementation. Those findings refer to the use of input-based tasks, positive attitudes toward TBLT, and learners' challenges to TBLT. The findings are given in a narrative way since the researcher had the TBLT intervention of case study, followed by a discussion. To display data, I used the code for example SS means students, P1 means Participant 1, P2 means participant 2, and so on followed by pseudonym for keeping the participant's confidentiality.

**The Implementation of TBLT and Students' Learning**

During the intervention of my study, I prepared the lesson plan covered different topics regarding "introducing yourself", "colours", and "hobbies" for six meetings. I used TBLT approach focusing on how participants learn vocabulary. Various tasks were given to provide them use language meaningful based on the context given. The first and second meeting were showing participants English song related to introduce themselves in English with simple expressions. At the third and the fourth meeting, participants had them interact with communicative task using pictures talking about colours with group and individual activities such as labelling, jumbling letters, and playing game of colours. At the fifth and sixth meeting, they were introduced to like and dislike expression regarding hobbies using survey tasks and pictures. Because I implemented TBLT approach in my classroom, I set the principles of teaching into three phases as Willis (1996) and Shintani (2106) suggested. At the first phase of pre-task, I introduced the participants to the topic of the tasks and how to do the tasks. This is very important when young learners should be prepared to be ready and engaged in the tasks. In this phase, I used more input-based tasks which focused them on the activities that trigger and stimulate them to relate the topic and their prior knowledge. Besides that, the duration of pre-task phase is longer than main-task phase. This happened

because YLs should be prioritized to have more input first rather than output tasks. The following examples of excerpts provide empirical evidence towards the implementation of the input-based task which involves all participants engage and understand in doing various tasks.

Situation of meeting #3

Teacher showed the pictures of colours in PowerPoint slide. Students should say the expression of *I see …* (colours' name) and after that teacher extended to the task to the real-world communication by asking them to tell what colours they have on their clothes.

*Excerpt (Classroom Observation)*

| | |
|---|---|
| Teacher: | *Good and. what are the colours? I see purple.* (Teacher gave an example and students repeated it) |
| SS: | *I see purple.* (All students repeated) |
| Teacher: | *What else? What colours do you see* |
| P1: | *in the picture of umbrellas?* |
| P2: | *I see grey.* |
| P3 | *I see yellow.* *I see blue.* |
| P4: | (one of the students said another colour based on the picture) *I see pink.* |
| Teacher: | Great, Fai. Next colour? |
| Teacher: | *I see green, I see purple. What is purple? Okay, like my dress today it is colourful. Can you mention what colours they are?* |
| P4: | *black* |
| Teacher: | *Okay, besides black? Okay now. Please another colour.* |
| P4: | *pink* |
| Teacher: | Ahaa... *look at – what is this?* (The teacher pointed to another colour of her dress). |
| P4: | *red* |
| Teacher: | *Great… Okay, I would like to ask you, Chika* (pointed to one of the girls), *please mention the colours of your clothes you are wearing. Just mention the colour.* |
| P5: | *I see white, blue, and black on my clothes.* |
| Teacher: | *Very good, Chika. Thank you.* |

The excerpt above reveals several aspects involving 1) YLs' vocabulary development, 2) YLs' interaction in using English, and 3) learner-centered activities, 4) the use of authentic materials. In the classroom interaction, it can be concluded that the teacher begins by asking YLs about the colours they can see, providing an example with the colour purple. They responded in turn, identifying various colours such as grey, yellow, blue, pink, and red. I encouraged and affirmed their responses, engaging them further by asking for the next colour and relating the colour purple to her dress. In the latter part of the interaction, I asked a specific student, Chika, to identify the colours of her own clothing. Chika responded by listing white, blue, and black. I acknowledged and praised Chika's response, thus reinforcing the lesson on colour identification. To sum up, the interaction emphasizes vocabulary building around colours, encourages observational skills, and promotes verbal participation (Rolin-Ianziti, 2014; Wang, 2018; Dinh, 2022). The teacher's use of real-life examples (such as her dress) and personalized questions (asking about students' clothing) help create a relatable and engaging learning experience (Putri, 2022). Besides that, this kind of task highlights the teacher's strategies in facilitating language acquisition and comprehension with familiar concepts, visual aids, and positive reinforcement. They also reflect a student-centered approach that encourages active participation and personal connection to the lesson content. This is in line with TBLT concept that it emphasizes a learner-centered approach, focusing on fulfilling real tasks to enhance English language skills (Almefleh et al., 2023; Li, 2023) and to promote active learning, shifting from teacher-dependence to learner independence, and to utilize authentic materials to engage students (Chellam,

2023). Authentic materials play a crucial role in enhancing TBLT for YLs by providing real-world contexts that resonate with students' interests and experiences, fostering a more profound motivation and active involvement in the learning process.

Excerpt 2

| Situation meeting #6 : | (At this time teacher invites students to play a game related to the hobby. Each student has a picture card with hobby's name. Then student should practice what he/she is doing with the hobby) |
|---|---|
| Teacher | *Rey and Andra, please come forward. Both of you is different team. And you have to act the hobby in the picture. Are you ready? Okay, first will be Rey* |
| P2 (leader) | (He saw a picture of someone's swimming, then he acted out of swimming style) |
| Teacher | *What is the hobby?* |
| P1 | *swimming* |
| Teacher | *Great, group 1 has score one. Next group 2. Andra, please be ready.* |
| P13 (leader) | (He saw a picture of someone's running and he did the action of running) |
| P3 | *running* |

Based on excerpt 2, it indicates that input-based tasks through playing the game using physical activity can enhance the participants' vocabulary about hobby. Learners can grasp the meaning of words and the real action they see. This activity involves physical actions, collaboration, and language use, b engagement and practical language application. TBLT can effectively support vocabulary acquisition in young learners by creating an engaging, interactive, and supportive learning environment. By integrating these methods, TBLT helps young learners actively use English in meaningful contexts, promoting better vocabulary acquisition and language skills (Chellam, 2023; Hu, 2024).

**Students' Responses on the TBLT Implementation**

The implementation of TBLT in the English language classroom received varied responses from young learners. All of participants appreciated positively the use of visual aids, interactive tasks, and practical activities, which made the lessons more engaging and understandable. However, while Berin was more enthusiastic and found most activities enjoyable, Atta had mixed feelings, particularly disliking singing and finding some tasks challenging. All learners acknowledged improvements in specific language skills and expressed a desire to continue developing their English proficiency, albeit with different levels of enthusiasm and for different reasons. The TBLT approach seemed to cater well to the learners' need for practical, interactive learning experiences, although individual preferences for specific types of activities varied (Chellam, 2023; Chen, 2023; Hu, 2024). The students' responses cover the values of each response from young learners that can be concluded into several themes 1) Teaching program implementation causing the improvement of YLs in learning English, 2) The benefits of TBLT principles, 3) the benefits of each stage of TBLT in learning English. Those themes are associated with their positive attitudes and challenges toward TBLT implementation. The following vignettes (translated version) show as the evidence.

**Participant Vignette 1**

*Learning English using games, it's easy to play, it's fun to play with friends. Then, if I learn by using pictures, I really like it because I can see the picture and the words directly. I also like the short story that you have taught me, about The Farmer's Vegetable. It's very interesting to me listening to the story.*

## Participant Vignette 2

*I now know the English words that I didn't know before, they are like vocabularies such as family, fruits, pea, cabbage, eggplant. I understand because I learn using colourful pictures. And that's fun for me.*

## Participant Vignette 3

*When I learned how to play role play, there was a conversation with friends. I asked my friend to use the expression of greeting, then my partner responded. We have turn-taking conversations. It's interesting for me because I can speak in English directly when I saw the example of conversation using English song. And I'm happy also to sing a song to practice how to say the expression.*

## Participant vignette 4

*Hopefully my English gets better, and I can master it well. I want to go abroad Ms, so I have to be able to communicate using English with the user of English in the world. So, I have to learn English diligently.*

Regarding the challenges of participants in learning through TBLT implementation, there are various responses which cover the difficulties of learning vocabulary, how to write English words they listen related to novice learner's writing dependence and limited use of English as second language or foreign language (Kim, 2019). One of participants had a problem with writing in English that it was a source of anxiety, particularly due to the fear of making mistakes. He also expressed that reading in English posed difficulties because of differences from Indonesian, his native language. Another participant revealed that he struggled with writing due to unfamiliarity with English vocabulary and had difficulty with speaking and listening tasks. Besides that, he found it challenging to understand spoken English, except when listening to songs, which still were not particularly enjoyable for him. The following vignettes indicate that the challenges occur when learners learn English using input-based task approach.

## Participant vignette 5

*If I write in English, it's sometimes difficult. It is because of unfamiliar of using English words. I don't know the spelling of English words. But fortunately, I can know later after the teacher gave me the video including the English songs and pictures inside.*

## Participant vignette 6

*I don't know how to pronounce English words when I speak or read aloud, sometimes for the new words, I can't identify them well. It's a little bit hard especially when the pronunciation is very strange in my ears. Then, sometimes I feel tired and cannot focus on long attention span.*

The task-based approach to vocabulary learning offers significant cognitive and affective benefits for young learners. Research indicates that engaging in task-based activities, such as those utilizing the input-based tasks (song, picture, role play, labelling the words), enhances students' active participation and vocabulary acquisition, fostering a positive perception of their learning experience. Additionally, task-based vocabulary instruction has been shown to improve learners' lexical knowledge and overall feelings towards the learning process, although some low-achieving students may express concerns about their confidence and time constraints (Dinh & Hoang, 2022). Furthermore, integrating task-based activities with engaging content, like short stories, not only promotes vocabulary development but also boosts motivation and communication among peers (Vela, 2023). Overall, these findings suggest that task-based approaches not only enhance cognitive skills related to

vocabulary mastery but also positively influence learners' attitudes and engagement in the language learning process. To sum up, Lu & Fan (2021) argued that students engaged more actively in TBLT settings, suggesting that interaction may facilitate vocabulary comprehension and retention. In addition, the challenges associated with the implementation of TBLT ought to be regarded as a pragmatic concern for educators in determining diverse tasks that align with the specific requirements of young learners, as articulated by Butler (2024), emphasizing that such characteristics must be integrated when educators create/select tasks and materials, execute instructional methodologies, and administer/interpret assessments that directly facilitate the learning process of young learners.

## CONCLUSION

Revisiting Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) in the context of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) reveals its potential to enhance communicative skills and practical language use. TBLT emphasizes learner-centered approaches where YLs engage in real tasks to improve their English proficiency. Research indicates that younger learners interact differently with tasks compared to older students, necessitating age-appropriate task designs that consider their unique learning needs. In other words, TBLT fosters a more interactive and engaging learning environment, which enhances YLs' motivation and involvement especially in vocabulary acquisition. The method has been shown to foster essential skills such as cooperation, independent learning, and problem-solving, addressing the limitations of traditional grammar-focused teaching. However, challenges remain in effectively implementing TBLT in diverse educational settings, particularly in TEYL context, where specific strategies must be tailored to enhance communication skills.

Overall, TBLT presents a promising framework for TEYL, but further research is needed to optimize its application for younger learners.

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