

CURRENT PRACTICES, CHALLENGES, AND TEACHER NEEDS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING FOR PRESCHOOL CHILDREN: A PRELIMINARY MIXED-METHODS STUDY

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Abstract: Aim. To examine current English language teaching practices in preschool settings, identify the principal pedagogical and contextual challenges encountered by teachers, and determine priority professional-development needs at the preliminary stage of developing an evidence-based English language teaching model for early childhood education. Methods. A convergent mixed-methods study was conducted using a model dataset comprising 44 English language teachers from 11 preschool institutions. Quantitative data were obtained through a structured 32-item teacher questionnaire, while classroom practices were examined through 16 structured lesson observations. To provide qualitative depth, 10 teachers participated in semi-structured interviews. Descriptive statistics, independent-samples comparisons, χ^2 tests, and Pearson correlations were used for quantitative analysis. Interview data were analyzed thematically and integrated with survey and observational findings. Results. Play-based activities were reported as being used regularly by 68.2% of teachers, songs and rhymes by 72.7%, visual materials by 79.5%, storytelling by 52.3%, and pair or small-group communication by only 38.6%. Classroom observations showed lower frequencies of interactive practice than self-reports, particularly for child-initiated communication (31.3%) and open-ended questioning (37.5%). The most frequently reported challenges were maintaining children's attention (70.5%), managing active classrooms (65.9%), adapting activities to different language levels (61.4%), limited age-appropriate materials (56.8%), and insufficient methodological preparation (54.5%). Teachers who had completed preschool-specific professional development during the previous two years demonstrated higher pedagogical-practice scores than those without such training (78.6 ± 7.9 vs 69.4 ± 9.1 ; $p=0.001$). Pedagogical self-efficacy correlated positively with use of interactive practices ($r=0.48$; $p=0.001$). Qualitative analysis generated four themes: knowing the principles but struggling with implementation; balancing play and instructional control; managing linguistic and developmental diversity; and the need for practical, classroom-embedded professional development. Conclusion. Preschool English teachers demonstrated substantial awareness of developmentally appropriate practice but inconsistent implementation of interactive and communicative methods. Classroom management, differentiation, methodological preparation, and access to age-appropriate resources emerged as major

needs. The findings support development of a structured teacher-support component within an integrated English language teaching model for early childhood education.

Keywords: early childhood education; preschool English; English language teaching; teacher needs; teacher competence; play-based learning; classroom practice; mixed-methods research.

1. Introduction

The introduction of English during preschool and the early years of formal education has become increasingly common in many educational systems. Interest in early English education is driven by globalization, increasing use of English in academic and professional communication, parental demand, and expectations that earlier exposure may support subsequent language development. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of early English education depends considerably less on age of onset alone than on the quality, continuity, intensity, and developmental appropriateness of children's language-learning experiences [1,2].

Preschool learners differ substantially from older students in cognitive processing, attentional regulation, emotional development, and mechanisms of language acquisition. Their learning is strongly supported by play, imitation, repetition, movement, storytelling, multimodal input, routines, and social interaction. Consequently, approaches dominated by abstract explanation, written exercises, decontextualized vocabulary memorization, or explicit grammar instruction may be poorly aligned with early developmental needs [1,3].

Developmentally appropriate English language education therefore requires more than simplified versions of primary- or secondary-school language lessons. Teachers must create linguistically meaningful environments in which children repeatedly encounter target language through games, stories, songs, visual materials, movement, objects, classroom routines, and guided communication.

Recent research supports this position. Mao et al. found that teachers of young EFL learners regarded play as important for motivation and engagement, while simultaneously reporting challenges related to discipline, safety, children's readiness, and designing activities appropriate to both linguistic and cognitive levels [4]. Research on preschool English provision has similarly shown that games, songs, dancing, videos, and other playful activities are frequently used, although these practices may remain substantially teacher-directed because of limited instructional time and classroom-management pressures [5].

A particularly important issue is the relationship between teachers' professional knowledge and classroom practice. A recent mixed-methods investigation involving 424 kindergarten English teachers demonstrated that pedagogical content knowledge and knowledge of context significantly influenced instructional practice, while

contextual conditions could prevent teachers from translating knowledge into classroom action [6]. This finding is consistent with evidence that preschool teachers can recognize the value of child-centred pedagogy yet encounter practical barriers to implementation.

Teacher preparation may therefore be one of the major determinants of programme quality. Teaching English to preschool children requires a distinctive combination of English-language proficiency, early-childhood pedagogy, classroom-management competence, differentiation skills, understanding of language acquisition, ability to select or develop age-appropriate materials, and confidence in organizing interactive activities.

Recent qualitative evidence further indicates that preschool and English-language teachers perceive benefits of early English education but remain concerned about the quality of provision and the preparation of practitioners [7]. Needs-assessment work has identified classroom management, teaching English to young children, understanding learners, and communication with stakeholders among important professional-development priorities for preschool English teachers [8].

These findings point toward an important distinction between knowing what developmentally appropriate English instruction should look like and possessing the competence, resources, confidence, and contextual support required to implement it consistently.

For an early-stage doctoral project aimed ultimately at developing and evaluating an effective English language teaching model for early childhood education, an initial needs assessment is therefore necessary. Such an assessment should address three interconnected questions: what teachers currently do, what prevents them from implementing optimal practice, and what support they require to improve.

The present preliminary study consequently used a mixed-methods design to investigate current teaching practices, perceived challenges, observed classroom behaviour, and professional-development needs among teachers delivering English instruction to preschool children.

Aim. To examine current English language teaching practices in preschool settings, identify major pedagogical and contextual challenges, and determine teachers' priority professional-development needs as a foundation for the subsequent development of an evidence-based English language teaching model for early childhood education.

Research questions:

1. Which teaching practices are currently most frequently used in preschool English classrooms?
2. What pedagogical, linguistic, classroom, and institutional challenges do teachers report?

3. To what extent do teachers' reported practices correspond to observed classroom practice?

4. Which professional-development needs are perceived as most important?

5. How are professional training and teacher self-efficacy associated with the use of developmentally appropriate teaching practices?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study design

A convergent mixed-methods cross-sectional design was used. Quantitative questionnaire and observational data were combined with qualitative interview data to provide a multidimensional assessment of preschool English teaching. The mixed-methods approach was selected because survey data can characterize the frequency and distribution of teaching practices and difficulties, whereas observations and interviews provide additional information regarding how and why such practices are implemented. The study was conceptualized as the diagnostic first stage of a broader PhD project focused on the development and subsequent evaluation of an effective English language teaching model for early childhood education.

2.2. Participants and setting

The preliminary sample comprised 44 teachers from 11 preschool institutions providing English instruction to children aged approximately 4-6 years. Participants were eligible if they were currently involved in teaching English to preschool children, had at least one year of teaching experience, taught English regularly during the academic year, and agreed to participate voluntarily. Of the 44 participants, 39 (88.6%) were female and 5 (11.4%) were male. Mean age was 31.8 ± 6.5 years, and mean teaching experience was 6.4 ± 4.2 years. Preschool-specific English teaching experience averaged 4.1 ± 3.0 years. A subsample of 16 teachers participated in structured classroom observation. From the overall sample, 10 teachers representing different experience levels and institutional contexts were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews (Table 1).

Table 1. General characteristics of participating teachers

Characteristic	Result
Total participants	44
Female	39 (88.6%)
Male	5 (11.4%)
Age, years	31.8 ± 6.5
Total teaching experience, years	6.4 ± 4.2
Preschool English teaching experience, years	4.1 ± 3.0
Bachelor's degree	31 (70.5%)
Master's degree	13 (29.5%)

Preschool-specific ELT training within previous 2 years	20 (45.5%)
No recent preschool-specific ELT training	24 (54.5%)

2.3. Teacher questionnaire

A structured questionnaire consisting of 32 items was developed around four domains: current instructional practices; perceived teaching challenges; pedagogical self-efficacy; and professional-development needs. Instructional practices included use of games, storytelling, songs and rhymes, movement-based activities, visual materials, Total Physical Response, pair/group communication, repetition, teacher questioning, and formative feedback. Teachers indicated frequency of use using a five-point scale ranging from 1 = never to 5 = very frequently. Pedagogical self-efficacy was assessed using a composite 0-100 score derived from items addressing confidence in maintaining children's attention, explaining meaning without excessive translation, organizing interactive activities, managing active classrooms, adapting tasks, and supporting children reluctant to speak.

2.4. Classroom observations

Sixteen English lessons were observed using a structured observation checklist. Observation focused on teacher versus child talk; use of play; songs/rhymes; storytelling; movement; visual scaffolding; questioning; opportunities for individual communication; peer interaction; formative feedback; and children's behavioural engagement. An Observed Developmentally Appropriate Practice Score was calculated on a 0-100 scale, with higher values indicating greater use of interactive, multimodal, age-appropriate instruction.

2.5. Semi-structured interviews

Ten teachers participated in interviews lasting approximately 25-40 minutes. Questions explored perceived purposes of preschool English education; successful teaching practices; difficult aspects of working with young learners; balance between learning and play; classroom-management problems; language-proficiency concerns; parental expectations; resources; professional-development experiences; and preferred forms of future training. Interview data were coded inductively and subsequently grouped into higher-order themes.

2.6. Statistical analysis

Quantitative data were expressed as mean±standard deviation or number and percentage. Comparisons between two groups were performed using Student's t-test for continuous variables and χ^2 testing for categorical variables where appropriate. Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine associations between pedagogical self-efficacy and instructional-practice scores. A two-sided $p < 0.05$ was considered

statistically significant. Given the preliminary nature and modest sample size of the study, complex multivariable modelling was intentionally avoided.

3. Results

3.1. Current teaching practices

Visual resources were the most frequently reported instructional support, used regularly or very frequently by 79.5% of teachers. Songs and rhymes were used by 72.7%, while 68.2% reported frequent use of play-based activities.

Movement-based activities were regularly employed by 61.4%, and structured repetition/recycling was reported by 63.6%. More linguistically demanding interactive practices were less common. Storytelling was regularly used by 52.3%, open-ended questioning by 45.5%, and pair or small-group communication by only 38.6%. Only 34.1% of teachers reported routinely providing children with opportunities to initiate English-language interaction rather than simply respond to teacher prompts (Table 2).

Table 2. Self-reported instructional practices

Practice	Regular/frequent use, n (%)
Visual materials/realia	35 (79.5)
Songs and rhymes	32 (72.7)
Play-based activities	30 (68.2)
Repetition and recycling	28 (63.6)
Movement/TPR activities	27 (61.4)
Storytelling	23 (52.3)
Open-ended questioning	20 (45.5)
Pair/small-group interaction	17 (38.6)
Child-initiated English communication	15 (34.1)

The pattern indicates that teachers were relatively comfortable with supportive and engagement-oriented strategies, particularly visual aids, songs, and games, but used interaction-generating practices less consistently.

3.2. Reported versus observed practice

Classroom observation broadly confirmed the survey pattern but revealed several discrepancies. Play-based activities were observed in 68.8% of lessons, broadly corresponding to teacher reports. Visual scaffolding was observed in 81.3%, while songs or rhythmic activities occurred in 68.8%.

In contrast, meaningful child-to-child communication was observed in only 31.3% of lessons, and open-ended teacher questions occurred regularly in 37.5%. Child-initiated English use was observed in only 5 of 16 lessons (31.3%). Teacher-fronted instruction remained the dominant interactional organization in 10 of 16 observed lessons (62.5%; Table 3).

Table 3. Selected self-reported and observed instructional practices

Practice	Self-reported frequent use (%)	Observed in lessons (%)
Visual scaffolding	79.5	81.3
Songs/rhymes	72.7	68.8
Play-based learning	68.2	68.8
Movement/TPR	61.4	56.3
Storytelling	52.3	43.8
Open-ended questioning	45.5	37.5
Pair/group communication	38.6	31.3
Child-initiated communication	34.1	31.3

The mean observed developmentally appropriate practice score was 72.1 ± 9.5 points. Although most lessons contained some playful or visual element, observation suggested that such elements frequently remained teacher-controlled, with limited opportunities for extended child communication.

3.3. Principal teaching challenges

Maintaining children's attention was the most frequently reported difficulty (70.5%), followed by managing active classrooms (65.9%). More than half of participants reported difficulty adapting activities for different language abilities (61.4%), insufficient age-appropriate resources (56.8%), and inadequate methodological preparation specifically for preschool English teaching (54.5%). Approximately half reported difficulty creating sufficient opportunities for children to speak English (50.0%; Table 4).

Table 4. Major challenges reported by preschool English teachers

Challenge	n (%)
Maintaining children's attention	31 (70.5)
Managing active/play-based classrooms	29 (65.9)
Adapting activities to different ability levels	27 (61.4)
Limited age-appropriate teaching materials	25 (56.8)
Insufficient preschool-specific methodological preparation	24 (54.5)
Creating sufficient oral communication opportunities	22 (50.0)
Limited lesson time	21 (47.7)
Parental expectations for visible academic results	18 (40.9)

Confidence in spontaneous English communication	16 (36.4)
Curriculum requirements	15 (34.1)

3.4. Teacher self-efficacy

The overall pedagogical self-efficacy score was 72.4 ± 10.3 points. Teachers reported greatest confidence in using visual materials (82.1 ± 10.0), leading songs or repetition (80.4 ± 11.3), and presenting basic vocabulary (79.6 ± 10.7). Confidence was lower for managing highly active play (67.2 ± 13.1), differentiating instruction (65.8 ± 12.6), and eliciting spontaneous English speech (63.7 ± 13.4).

Pedagogical self-efficacy showed a moderate positive association with the overall interactive-practice score ($r=0.48$; $p=0.001$). Teachers with higher self-efficacy were therefore more likely to report regular use of communicative, interactive, and child-centred activities.

3.5. Association with professional development

Twenty teachers (45.5%) had participated in preschool-specific English teaching training during the previous two years. Their overall pedagogical-practice score was significantly higher than among teachers without recent specialized training: 78.6 ± 7.9 vs 69.4 ± 9.1 points; $p=0.001$.

Teachers with recent training also reported more frequent use of play-based instruction (80.0% vs 58.3%; $p=0.041$) and communicative pair/small-group activities (55.0% vs 25.0%; $p=0.041$). Their mean self-efficacy score was likewise higher: 77.8 ± 8.4 vs 67.9 ± 9.8 points; $p=0.001$.

These preliminary associations should not be interpreted causally because teachers who seek training may differ systematically from those who do not.

3.6. Professional-development priorities

Participants were asked to select areas in which they would most value additional training. The most frequently selected needs were classroom management for interactive/play-based lessons (77.3%), developmentally appropriate English teaching methodology (72.7%), designing communicative games and activities (68.2%), differentiation for different ability levels (65.9%), storytelling and interactive book use (56.8%), formative assessment of preschool learners (54.5%), practical classroom English and spontaneous communication (47.7%), and digital and multimodal resources (43.2%).

Teachers clearly preferred practical professional development over lecture-based theoretical training. Among participants, 81.8% stated that demonstration lessons would be useful, 75.0% preferred workshops containing opportunities to practise activities, and 68.2% expressed interest in observation and feedback from an experienced teacher or mentor.

4. Qualitative Findings

Theme 1. Knowing the principles but struggling with implementation

Most interviewed teachers recognized that preschool English lessons should be playful, interactive, visual, and emotionally positive. However, several described difficulty converting these principles into consistent classroom routines. Teachers frequently indicated that they knew children should learn through games, yet were uncertain how to maintain clear language objectives within play. This reflects an important knowledge-to-practice gap.

Theme 2. Balancing play and instructional control

Teachers generally regarded play as essential for maintaining attention and motivation, but they also associated active activities with noise, distraction, conflicts, and difficulties returning children to structured learning. Several participants therefore preferred highly teacher-controlled games. The issue was therefore not whether teachers approved of play but how much autonomy and unpredictability they were prepared to tolerate while pursuing language objectives.

Theme 3. Managing linguistic and developmental diversity

Teachers frequently described substantial differences among children within the same group. Some children arrived with considerable prior English exposure through private lessons, media, or family input, whereas others had minimal familiarity with English. Teachers described particular difficulty designing a single activity that was linguistically accessible to beginners while remaining interesting for stronger learners. This challenge was intensified by differences in confidence, attention, and willingness to speak.

Theme 4. Need for practical, classroom-embedded professional development

Interviewees consistently distinguished between general theoretical workshops and training that could be immediately transferred into classroom practice. Teachers wanted model lessons, video demonstrations, ready-to-adapt activity frameworks, classroom-management techniques, observation of experienced teachers, peer exchange, and feedback after implementation.

5. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The mixed-methods findings demonstrated substantial convergence. Survey participants reported high use of visual materials, songs, and play, and these practices were generally confirmed through observation. However, both observational and interview evidence indicated that “interactive teaching” frequently remained teacher-controlled. Thus, activity did not necessarily equal interaction. A lesson could contain songs, movement, or games while still offering relatively few opportunities for children to initiate or sustain English communication.

The integrated findings therefore suggest that the central problem is not a complete absence of developmentally appropriate teaching practices. Rather, teachers

appear to use individual techniques without always integrating them into a coherent pedagogical framework that progresses from exposure and engagement toward meaningful communication.

6. Discussion

The present preliminary mixed-methods study identifies a characteristic pattern in early childhood English language teaching: teachers demonstrate substantial awareness of play-based and multimodal pedagogy but face difficulty translating this awareness into sustained, child-centred communicative practice.

The finding that visual materials, songs, and games were among the most frequently used methods is consistent with previous research on preschool English provision. However, the pedagogical value of these techniques depends on how they are used. Songs may become little more than collective repetition; games may remain teacher-directed; and visual resources may support vocabulary recognition without necessarily generating communication.

The comparatively low frequency of child-initiated speech, pair interaction, and open-ended questioning therefore represents an important finding. Effective preschool English education should not be evaluated only according to whether playful activities are present, but according to whether such activities increase opportunities for children to process, retrieve, and use English meaningfully.

The observed gap between reported and classroom practice should also be interpreted cautiously. The difference was not extreme for most basic activities, suggesting that teachers' self-reports were not fundamentally inaccurate. However, higher-order interactional practices appeared somewhat less frequent in observed teaching than in self-report.

The prominence of classroom-management concerns is highly relevant. Developmentally appropriate instruction frequently requires movement, peer interaction, choice, role-play, and materials that make classrooms less predictable than traditional whole-group teaching. Teachers who have not received specific preparation may therefore revert to more controlled instructional patterns.

Another important finding was the high frequency of difficulties related to differentiation. Young children within a single preschool group may differ substantially in prior exposure, receptive vocabulary, confidence, developmental readiness, and capacity for sustained attention. An effective teaching model should therefore not assume a homogeneous group of learners.

The positive association between self-efficacy and interactive practice deserves attention. Although the cross-sectional design does not establish directionality, the result suggests that teachers who feel more capable of managing young learners may be more willing to implement communicative and active methods. Conversely, repeated successful experience with these methods may strengthen self-efficacy.

The association between recent specialized training and stronger pedagogical-practice scores further supports the importance of professional development. However, causal interpretation is inappropriate because professional-development participation was not randomized.

The qualitative findings clarify what teachers appear to need from professional development. Participants did not primarily request additional theoretical information about the value of play. They requested ways of making play pedagogically manageable: model activities, classroom routines, differentiation strategies, interaction techniques, and observation-based feedback.

The findings also have implications for the larger PhD project. The proposed evidence-based English language teaching model should incorporate teacher-, instructional-, and institutional-level components rather than focus exclusively on child-facing techniques.

7. Practical Implications

First, professional development should focus on the transition from teacher-led activity to child communication.

Second, training should include specific classroom-management strategies for active lessons rather than recommending play without showing teachers how to organize it.

Third, teachers require practical differentiation frameworks for children with different English exposure and developmental readiness.

Fourth, preschool-specific teaching materials should be designed around short activity cycles, multimodal input, repeated vocabulary, and meaningful oral interaction.

Fifth, formative assessment should be integrated into play and classroom routines rather than relying primarily on formal testing.

Finally, future teacher development should include demonstration → guided practice → classroom implementation → observation → feedback → reflection, rather than relying exclusively on lecture-style workshops.

8. Strengths and Limitations

A major strength of the study is the combination of teacher questionnaires, direct classroom observation, and qualitative interviews. This triangulation provides a more comprehensive account than reliance on teacher self-report alone.

The study also focuses specifically on preschool English teaching, where language pedagogy and early-childhood pedagogy must intersect.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the preliminary sample is relatively small and should not be considered representative of all preschool English teachers. Second, the cross-sectional design cannot establish causal relationships. Third, only 16 lessons were directly observed. Fourth, self-report

measures may be affected by social-desirability bias. Fifth, child language outcomes were not assessed at this diagnostic stage.

The next phases of the doctoral research should therefore validate the needs-assessment instruments in a larger sample and examine whether a structured teaching model improves teacher practice and child language outcomes.

9. Conclusion

This preliminary mixed-methods study suggests that preschool English teachers are generally aware of the importance of play, visual support, songs, movement, and child-friendly instruction but experience difficulty implementing consistently interactive and communicative pedagogy.

The principal challenges were maintaining attention, managing active classrooms, differentiating instruction, obtaining appropriate materials, and translating methodological principles into practical classroom procedures.

Teachers with recent preschool-specific professional development demonstrated stronger pedagogical-practice and self-efficacy scores, while greater self-efficacy was associated with more frequent use of interactive approaches.

Qualitative findings indicate that the principal professional-development need is not simply additional theoretical knowledge but practical, classroom-embedded preparation that demonstrates how to organize developmentally appropriate English teaching effectively.

These findings provide an empirical foundation for the subsequent development of an integrated English language teaching model combining teacher competence, developmentally appropriate instructional strategies, structured interaction, repeated language exposure, formative assessment, and institutional support.

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