

Challenges Faced by Primary School Students in Learning English: Insights from Qualitative Evidence in Kinta Utara, Perak, Malaysia

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Abstract

This study explores the challenges faced by primary school students in learning English within the Kinta Utara district, Malaysia, as part of a broader initiative to inform the development of the PETeK framework a structured pedagogical model that integrates interactive, technology-enhanced, and reflective teaching approaches to build language skills and learner autonomy. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five experienced English language educators, including Master Trainers, SISC+ officers, and English Panel Heads, to capture rich insights into the obstacles encountered by students. Thematic analysis revealed four key challenges: (1) foundational language difficulties, particularly in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary; (2) mother tongue influence and interference, where students frequently revert to Tamil or Malay; (3) low engagement with traditional, textbook-heavy teaching methods; and (4) a strong preference among students for interactive, game-based, and digital learning activities. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of English learning barriers at the primary level and underscore the need for holistic, context-sensitive instructional interventions. The insights generated provide critical direction for shaping the PETeK framework, ensuring it directly addresses both linguistic and motivational gaps while fostering an engaging environment that enhances students' language confidence and essential 21st-century competencies.

Keywords: Primary English Education, Language Learning Challenges, Digital Self-Efficacy, Gamification, Mother Tongue Influence

Introduction

English language proficiency plays a vital role in shaping the academic and future career prospects of Malaysian students, especially in a multilingual society where English functions as both a second language and a key medium of instruction. However, despite national policies that emphasize English mastery and digital learning such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 many students continue to struggle with foundational English skills, particularly at the primary level (Ministry of Education Malaysia MOE, 2021). Recent data from the Kinta Utara district reveal that the majority of lower primary students remain within

TP3 and TP4 proficiency levels, indicating only partial command of core language competencies such as vocabulary, grammar, and communication skills (MOE, 2024).

This stagnation in achievement is compounded by low student motivation, limited exposure to interactive pedagogical methods, and a lack of confidence in using English beyond structured classroom exercises (Wen, 2023; Yaccob et al., 2022). Moreover, traditional teacher-centered approaches remain prevalent in many schools, with classroom activities still heavily reliant on rote exercises and textbook usage (Pan & Mow, 2023; Haryadi & Aminuddin, 2023). While there is increasing advocacy for integrating technology to enhance language learning, actual implementation is hindered by infrastructural barriers, large class sizes, inconsistent internet connectivity, and teachers' limited access to quality digital resources (Mustapha & Narinasamy, 2023; Rahim et al., 2023).

Another pressing concern is students' low digital self-efficacy their confidence in using digital tools for learning. Although many students are familiar with mobile phones and computers, they often lack the structured skills needed to use these tools for meaningful language acquisition (Yang & Du, 2024; Alamer, 2022). This digital confidence gap contributes to student passivity in tech-supported learning environments, thus limiting the potential of educational technologies to improve outcomes.

To address these challenges, this study investigates the key obstacles faced by primary students in learning English through qualitative insights obtained from expert educators in the Kinta Utara district. These findings form the basis for the design of the PETEk framework, an instructional model that integrates pedagogical and technological dimensions with reflective practices. By exploring student-related learning barriers through the lens of experienced teachers, this study provides a grounded understanding of what hinders effective English learning, and how future instructional innovations such as PETEk can bridge these gaps.

Research Objective

The main objective of this study is to identify the challenges faced by students in learning English at the primary level.

Research Question

Based on this objective, the study addresses the following research question

What are the challenges faced by students in learning English at the primary level?

Literature Review

Challenges in Primary English Language Learning

Globally, mastery of English at the primary level is essential for students' long-term academic and career pathways. However, studies across Southeast Asia reveal that while English is positioned as a vital skill, persistent barriers hinder effective learning, particularly in multilingual and exam-oriented systems like Malaysia's (Rahim et al., 2023; Wen, 2023). Recent assessments in Malaysia confirm that many students remain at moderate proficiency levels (TP3–TP4) into Year 3, reflecting only partial mastery of grammar, vocabulary, and communicative competence (MOE, 2024).

Traditional pedagogical approaches rote learning, repetitive grammar drills, and textbook reliance dominate many classrooms (Pan & Mow, 2023; Haryadi & Aminuddin, 2023). These methods fail to sustain engagement or foster authentic language use. Zakaria and Md Yunus (2020) emphasize that young learners require interactive, multisensory, and playful strategies for meaningful internalization of linguistic structures. When deprived of these opportunities, students often become passive, affecting both confidence and retention (Yaccob et al., 2022).

Motivation and Self-Determination in Language Learning

The Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) explains the relationship between motivation and language learning success. Learners thrive when their psychological needs autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. When classroom practices are rigid, teacher-dominated, and exam-driven, these needs are undermined, leading to disengagement (Howard et al., 2021; Wen, 2023). In contrast, interactive, game-based approaches enhance intrinsic motivation (Alrabai, 2021). Recent research confirms this link: Waluyo and Mahmud (2024) found that gamification significantly improved learners' enjoyment and persistence, while Tamim et al. (2023) reported that technology-supported grammar instruction enhanced not only skills but also attitudes toward learning.

Digital Self-Efficacy and Technology Integration

Despite familiarity with devices, many primary students lack structured digital literacy for learning, resulting in low digital self-efficacy (Yang & Du, 2024). This gap often prevents learners from fully benefiting from technology-supported lessons. In Malaysia, Azizah et al. (2024) found that digital self-efficacy directly influenced students' ability to engage with online learning platforms. The TPACK framework also highlights that teachers need strong technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge integration to deliver effective lessons (Bouton et al., 2021). Regional studies show similar issues: Tan (2022) identified that even Singaporean schools, despite strong infrastructure, faced teacher readiness gaps, while Thongmak (2022) noted rural–urban divides in Thai ESL contexts.

Constructivist and Connectivist Perspectives

Constructivist approaches emphasize that children learn best through active, meaningful experiences (Keser et al., 2020). This supports incorporating collaborative and playful strategies in English instruction. In Malaysian contexts, Nurhasnah et al. (2024) showed that collaborative, constructivist tasks fostered critical thinking and confidence. Connectivist theory (Siemens, 2005) highlights the role of diverse networks in language acquisition, but Subramanian (2024) observed that in multilingual Malaysian classrooms, over-reliance on the mother tongue limits networked exposure unless carefully scaffolded. Comparative insights from Indonesia and Vietnam reinforce this: Sari and Setiawan (2023) noted exam-driven constraints on interactive English learning, while Le and Pham (2023) found digital literacy crucial for sustaining learner engagement in Vietnam. These perspectives collectively stress the urgency for context-responsive frameworks like PETEK.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design within the broader framework of a Design and Development Research (DDR) approach. The qualitative phase focused on a needs analysis aimed at uncovering the challenges faced by primary school students in learning

English, as perceived by experienced English language educators. A qualitative design was deemed appropriate for this objective, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of complex, context-bound issues that cannot be fully captured through quantitative instruments (Nassaji, 2020; Hands, 2022).

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants who could provide insights into the challenges encountered by students in English learning. The participants consisted of seven English education experts in the Kinta Utara district, including Master Trainers (JU), SISC+ officers, and English Panel Heads. Each participant had more than five years of experience in English language instruction and teacher professional development, ensuring they were well positioned to comment on both student learning difficulties and broader classroom dynamics. This focus on experienced educators aligns with recommendations for qualitative needs analyses in education, which emphasize the importance of selecting respondents deeply familiar with local pedagogical contexts (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016).

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews guided by a protocol developed from the study's research questions and informed by prior literature on challenges in primary English learning (Rahim et al., 2023; Mahat & Ariffin, 2022). The interviews explored areas such as students' linguistic competencies, engagement levels, technology-related learning behaviors, and contextual barriers impacting English acquisition.

Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes and was conducted face-to-face depending on participant preference and scheduling feasibility. With participant consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim to facilitate rigorous analysis. Ethical procedures were observed, including guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymizing all data. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw at any point without repercussions.

Data Analysis

Theme Development Process

Thematic analysis of the interview data followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, ensuring a rigorous, systematic approach. After transcribing and immersing in the data, initial codes were generated directly from repeated phrases and ideas shared by participants, such as "*struggle with grammar*," "*mother tongue problem*," "*bored with textbook*," and "*ask for online games*."

These first-level descriptive codes were then clustered into broader analytical categories that captured shared meanings— for instance, codes related to grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary were grouped under *language structure challenges*, while comments about students' enthusiasm for Kahoot, Wordwall, and smartboards formed a category on *digital and playful learning preferences*.

Through iterative comparison and discussion, these categories were refined into four overarching themes that encapsulate the primary challenges faced by students in learning English: (1) foundational language difficulties, (2) mother tongue influence and interference,

(3) low engagement with traditional approaches, and (4) preference for interactive and digital activities.

This thematic construction ensured that the final themes were both deeply grounded in participants' own words and analytically aligned with the study's objective of identifying barriers to primary English learning.

Validity

Several strategies were employed to establish the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the data and triangulation across multiple expert perspectives. Member checking was conducted by returning synthesized thematic summaries to participants for feedback and confirmation. Dependability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions and analytical memos in Atlas.ti. Additionally, to enhance confirmability, peer debriefing sessions were held with fellow researchers to challenge interpretations and minimize researcher bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical guidelines stipulated by the university's research ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Identities were anonymized through the use of pseudonyms, and all digital files were securely stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. Participants were made aware that their insights would be used solely for academic purposes, including publications and conference presentations.

Analysis and Discussion

This study explored the challenges faced by primary school students in learning English, drawing on thematic analysis of interviews with experienced English educators including Master Trainers, SISC+, and English Panel Heads from the Kinta Utara district. The analysis revealed multi-layered issues, encompassing foundational linguistic difficulties, mother tongue interference, limited motivation under traditional teaching methods, and a pronounced preference for interactive, technology-enhanced learning activities. These findings not only deepen understanding of students' struggles but also highlight key considerations for designing effective instructional frameworks like PETEK.

Foundational Language Difficulties

Across interviews, educators emphasized that many primary students exhibit significant struggles with basic English language structures, particularly grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. For instance, one respondent observed:

"Struggle with grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. They can't frame sentences without errors and avoid speaking in English." (E1)

Such difficulties are consistent with recent assessment data from the Kinta Utara district, which showed that most lower primary students remain clustered within TP3 and TP4 bands, reflecting only partial mastery of CEFR-aligned competencies (MOE, 2024). This aligns with Rahim et al. (2023), who found similar plateaus in rural Malaysian schools, often linked to limited early exposure and minimal opportunities for authentic language use. According to

constructivist theories (Piaget, 1954; Vygotsky, 1978), language skills are best developed through active, meaningful practice an element often lacking in classrooms dominated by rote grammar exercises (Wen, 2023).

Mother Tongue Influence and Interference

Educators also highlighted the strong role of students' first languages Tamil and Malay in shaping English learning, often resulting in code-switching or interference. As two participants explained:

"Mother tongue problem. They cannot understand fully in English; they switch back to Tamil or Malay." (E2)

"Interaction distracted by mother tongue (Malay, Tamil). They slip into it when they struggle." (E1)

This finding resonates with Subramanian (2024), who argued that in multilingual Malaysian classrooms, students frequently default to their mother tongue when faced with unfamiliar English structures, which can impede the sustained immersion necessary for language acquisition. From a connectivist perspective (Siemens, 2005), effective learning requires exposure to diverse language networks; mother tongue dominance may limit these opportunities unless teachers actively scaffold code-switching transitions (Pan & Mow, 2023).

Low Engagement with Traditional Pedagogies

Another recurring theme was students' lack of engagement when exposed primarily to textbook-driven, teacher-centered lessons. Teachers noted that conventional grammar drills and written exercises tend to bore students, reducing both attentiveness and willingness to participate:

"They feel bored with traditional... enjoy games and activities more." (E3)

"Students light up during competitions or group games. They even participate more actively." (E4)

These observations echo Wen (2023) and Mustapha and Narinasamy (2023), who contend that heavily structured instruction undermines the intrinsic motivation essential for sustained language learning. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) suggests that when students experience limited autonomy and competence, they disengage a pattern evident in classrooms overly reliant on workbook drills.

Preference for Interactive and Digital Approaches

Importantly, educators reported that students themselves often express enthusiasm for interactive, gamified, and technology-supported tasks. Examples included requests to use platforms like Kahoot, Wordwall, or smartboards for quizzes and language puzzles:

"They ask for quizzes through online games... can we do something like Kahoot or Wordwall?" (E4)

"Some want to use the smartboard more often, for videos or puzzles. They enjoy tech things." (E2)

This student preference aligns with recent evidence showing that gamification and multimedia tasks can significantly boost engagement and language confidence (Alrabai, 2021; Waluyo et al., 2024). Tamim et al. (2023) further demonstrated through meta-analysis that

technology-enhanced language learning improves not only vocabulary and grammar retention but also learners' positive attitudes toward English. Such findings underscore the importance of embedding enjoyable, student-centered activities in language instruction a central tenet of the PETEk framework.

Implications and Conclusion

Collectively, these insights highlight that the challenges faced by primary school students in learning English are not merely linguistic but are deeply tied to motivational, cognitive, and contextual factors. Addressing these requires more than superficial changes to curriculum content; it demands pedagogical designs that foster autonomy, competence, and social connection (Howard et al., 2021), integrate constructivist exploration (Keser et al., 2020), and support gradual development of digital self-efficacy (Yang & Du, 2024).

The PETEk framework proposed by this research by embedding gamified activities, leveraging digital tools, and encouraging reflective, student-centered practices directly responds to these multifaceted needs. It illustrates how locally informed insights can drive the creation of holistic models tailored to the realities of Malaysian classrooms.

This research extends theoretical understanding by linking constructivist, self-determination, and connectivist perspectives with challenges in Malaysian ESL classrooms. Theoretically, it advances knowledge on how gamification, digital self-efficacy, and interactive pedagogy can address motivational and linguistic barriers at the primary level. Contextually, the study provides empirical insights from Kinta Utara, a semi-urban Malaysian district, highlighting how mother tongue dominance, infrastructural limitations, and exam-oriented practices shape English learning. By embedding these insights in the PETEk framework, this research demonstrates how global theories can be localized to guide teaching innovation. Hence, the study contributes both to academic discourse and to practical solutions for teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers in multilingual, resource-constrained contexts.

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