

WHY DO THEMES MATTER? THE TEACHERS' VOICES ABOUT THEMATIC UNITS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS

Ivana Nabilah Qoriroh Mujahidah

*English Language Education, Graduate School
Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia
Email: ivanamimanarulislam2017@gmail.com*

Fardini Sabilah (Corresponding author)

*English Language Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education
Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia
Email: fardini@umm.ac.id*

Rina Wahyu Setyaningrum

*English Language Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education
Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia
Email: rina@umm.ac.id*

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Abstract: Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) in Indonesia has been an intriguing field that there never been ending studies about it. As a locally-tailored school subject that can be local content or elective subject without curriculum guideline, English for Young Learners (EYL) program is carried out in various ways by the primary schools in Indonesia. This present study aims to discover the essential role of implementing thematic model in TEYL. This paper discusses a phenomenological investigation of five EYL teachers who employ thematic units for teaching the pupils in different cities of Indonesia. Graduated from English education department, all participants have been teaching young learners English more than five years and planning their teaching based on their students' needs by utilizing themes. Using semi-structured interview questions, the teachers were guided to explain their experience in valuing the themes for teaching English thematically, how to incorporating themes into TEYL, and challenges in implementing EYL thematic units. The data were analyzed thematically to get the emerging themes which correspond to this research topic. The results revealed that teaching English thematically is critical for young learners as their English learning scaffolding to achieve language skills and ability to communicate in particular discourse. All participants agreed that their students enjoyed the EYL thematic activities for gaining new knowledge using English despites challenges faced by the teachers in preparing the lessons.

Keywords: *teachers' voice; TEYL; thematic unit; themes.*

INTRODUCTION

English continues to be taught as a foreign language in Indonesia, where it was originally part of the national elementary school curriculum. However, since the implementation of the 2013 curriculum, English at the primary school level is no longer included in compulsory subjects and can be taught through extracurricular program. This is in contrast with the fact clarified by Rixon (2019) that English has been a compulsory subject in primary school worldwide and it continues to be the medium of

instruction. Therefore, the exclusion of English subject in the compulsory curriculum provokes both positive and negative impacts for teachers. On the one hand, there is flexibility for the them to develop their own EYL curriculum. On the other, the absence of the government endorsed curriculum for TEYL, they are challenged to develop their own EYL syllabi, learning materials, and evaluation (Lestariyana & Widodo, 2018).

As matter of a fact, the wider arena for teachers of English in primary schools provided by the

government is not supportive for them to teach young learners (YLs) English creatively. Only some primary schools that conduct a need analysis before planning the EYL lessons and it affects the application of outmoded teaching learning process by vocabulary memorization, text translation, as well as teaching grammar in isolation. Fathimah (2014) evidenced the practice of how the YLs were introduced to English vocabulary by translating every single word into Bahasa Indonesia, then memorized them without experience in using them in various contexts. Additionally, Hawanti (2014) noted the previous situation existed because of the lack of school resources for running the EYL program and make the teachers used low quality textbook or workbook solely. It was a teacher-centered learning that the activity focuses on exercises provided by the textbook or workbook. Hence, these EYL program affect the unsatisfactory learning output of English to YLs because of the absence of teachers' awareness in considering the English veracity in everyday life.

In the contemporary research of EYL, teachers are the actors of the TEYL success because of their contribution in providing the learners meaningful and joyful activities. To respond the implementation of 2013 Curriculum of Indonesia, Setyaningrum and Purwati (2020) suggested thematic units to be adopted by linking the teaching materials with themes suggested by the curriculum for primary level. This suggestion is based on the rationales that TEYL program should be centered on young learners' linguistics exposure as well as unique age-related needs age (Parker & Valente, 2019). Moreover, topic-based/ task-based syllabus proposed by Bourke (2006) as well as Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) that provides the young learners experience to communicate effectively, acquire the language, engage in gradual reading introduction, as well as take part in topic-related unit activities for scaffolding around the language growth and development, was in line with Shin and Crandall (2014) who recommended thematic units for the sake of building a larger context for young learners' language learning. In addition, themes could be appointed based on the students age (Parker & Valente, 2019), including animals, friends and family, or units revolving around a story- book, such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle, which includes food and the days of the week (Shin, 2014). Convincingly, Rixon (2019) endorsed topic

as an organizing-principles in young learners' curricula in order to make the learning meaningful and interesting, as well as to provide the learners clear context for lexical sets to be introduced and practiced. Some scholars also believed that theme-based teaching for EYL is suitable with the 21st century learning (Cameron, 2001, 2003; Pratama, 2016) because integrating theme is claimed to better suit the way young children naturally learn.

Dealing with situation in Indonesia, it is suggested to connect English and other curriculum context for the EYL program within modest time allotment (1 – 1,5 hours per week). Therefore, Johnstone's (2019) concept could be adapted by endorsing thematic units for EYL program. By time limitations, teacher's confidence in teaching, English language exposure, teaching materials, as well as authentic models, EYL teachers in Indonesia need to instill the basic concept of teaching English through this experiential learning process using English. By thematic units, teachers are required to choose theme or topic to plan a range of teaching and learning activities and incorporate aspects such as mathematics, science, art, language, history, geography, and music.

Creative and innovative TEYL that have been practiced were reported in the following scenes. Empirical evidence, Lestariyana and Widodo (2018) showed that engaging activity for YLs had been carried out to avoid textbook-based activities with test-oriented exercise, by making Digital Stories that are relevant to their daily life. Furthermore, Setyaningrum and Purwati (2020) reported that the urgency of English for the pupils has encouraged the teachers in three schools surrounded by a well-known tourism destination of Indonesia, to teach the young learners English thematically. Exposure of using English contextually like in the real-life situation were provided for the students. They implemented "soft" Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) for teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). They urged to connect the existing regular lesson themes to English lesson as the background knowledge for students before learning English. The findings showed that the students engaged in the teaching and learning process by voluntarily practice to use English. More recently, Waloyo, Khoiriyah, & Farah (2021) disclosed that CLIL-tailored program in a primary school of Indonesia was feasible to be conducted by integrating content,

supported by the ICT platforms and the teachers scaffold their students learning by translanguaging.

It is crystal clear that TEYL should be planned carefully to be meaningful and engaging (Rixon, 2019) lesson. Themes for TEYL were strongly suggested by the scholars from the previous research, however, the researchers hardly found the Indonesian EYL teachers' voices about the implementation of thematic units for their teaching. To fill the gap, this study aims at investigating the rationales of Indonesian EYL teachers in employing thematic units, how they practice it in the teaching and learning process, as well as challenges that they face. Most importantly, this research would promote the feasibility of thematic units' adaptation for different primary education institutions in Indonesia.

METHOD

This phenomenological study was conducted since thematic units in teaching EYL is expected to accommodate the students' needs of learning English. Yin (2016); Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that in phenomenological study, the focus is participants' description that they have in common as they experience a phenomenon. Then, the description culminates in the essence of the experiences for several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon. This design has a strong philosophical-underpinnings and typically involves interviews. Thus, the data of this research were gained by in-depth semi-structured interviews to five teachers as research participants. Furthermore, the researchers transcribed the interviews and grouped them based on the emerging themes to answer the research questions: 1) What are the urgency of themes for TEYL?, (2) What classroom activities work well with YLs?, and (3) What are the challenges encountered by the teachers?

The participants of this study were selected based on the criteria designated by the researchers, such as educational background and experience in TEYL. All participants agreed and obtained permissions for their school principals to participate in this phenomenological study because they had experience that they could share as the research data. The following table explains the participants' demographic information.

Table 1. *The participants' demographic information*

No	Name	Gender (F/M)	Age (Year)	Education	Institution	Experience (Year)
1.	JY	F	25	English Education	Private Primary School	5
2.	ZI	F	25	English Education	Private Primary School	5
3.	MA	F	31	English Education	Private Primary School	8
4.	JA	F	28	English Education	Private Primary School	5
5.	IH	F	28	English Education	Intensive English Course for Young Learners	5

All of the participants were teaching in non-government institutions which had specific excellences including English as locally-tailored subject offered to all students. JY and ZI were specialist teachers, teaching English across grades and using different approaches while teaching English thematically. Both of them were lucky because the school also assigned them to develop module for their students so that all their teachings had been planned carefully. JA experienced teaching very young learners English when she worked at a kindergarten before shifting to teach English in an Islamic primary school. MA experienced teaching thematic lesson in Japan and she turned to be specialist teacher, teaching English across grades, once she was back to Indonesia. Different from other participants, IH owned her institution, teaching English to young learners across grades and providing the lessons based on the students' needs. She offered the programs for beginners and advanced students.

To gain the data for this study, semi-structured interviews questions were developed. By carrying out these interviews, the researchers got the opportunities to ask some extended questions to complete the participants' answers. All of five participants were interviewed based on their availability, through various online platforms as well as face-to-face interview. JY and ZI attended interview session on the 26th of July 2021 by a video conference. Due to incomplete data gained from the interview sessions, they were also interviewed via text messaging on the 18th of August, 2021. IH had an interview session on the

29th of July 2021. Meanwhile, MA and JA had a face-to-face interview session on the 3rd of August.

The following table contains the questions asked to the research participants which were adapted from some sources (i.e. Akyeampong, 2017; Hawanti, 2014; Irby, Tong, Lara-Alecio, Guerrero, Guo, Abdelrahman, & Serrano, 2020; Kilinc, 2016; Murphy, Haller, & Spiridakis, 2019).

Table 2. *Primary questions for interview*

No.	Questions
1.	Do you think that thematic units are suitable for TEYL? Why or why not?
2.	What are your opinions about implementing thematic units for TEYL in teaching and learning activities?
3.	How do you agree/ disagree about the effectiveness of activities based on the selected themes for TEYL?
4.	What factors influence your decision to use thematic units for TEYL in your classroom?
5.	How did you implement the thematic lessons for TEYL in your teaching and learning activity?
6.	How far are your thematic units' implementation for teaching young learners in your classroom?
7.	Would you please mention the advantages of implementing thematic units for your EYL class dynamic?
8.	What is the most challenging fact that you faced when implementing thematic units for TEYL?
9.	What factors make you give up implementing themes if you find they do not even fit your teaching at a certain point?
10.	Do you intend to continue using thematic units for TEYL?

In analyzing the data from the interviews, Widodo (2014) proposed methodological considerations including (a) listening to talking data, (b) shaping talking data, (c) communicating talking data with an interpretative intent, (d) reproducing or (re)constructing talking data, and (e) building data credibility. By those considerations, the data from the interviews were transcribed and grouped based on the objectives of this research. They were analyzed thematically (Saldana, 2013) in which the emerging themes were arranged and described as the research findings. Moreover, the data credibility was built by member checking. Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter (2016) urged member checking by inviting all participants to

attend a group discussion to check the data accuracy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that out of all teachers as the participants of this study showed their positive attitudes towards thematic units for TEYL. They consider thematic units are critical for providing the learners experience of using the language contextually. They also expressed their idea about linking the TEYL with other subjects in order to relate their English learning with real life experience. Significant challenges in implementing thematic lesson were showcased specifically by a lower grade (i.e. grade one) teacher because of the students limited background knowledge about English.

Thematic lesson for clear context of English lexical, grammatical features, and discourse

For providing YLs experience in using English contextually, Shin and Crandall (2014) suggested themes for TEYL because of some reasons such as providing the YLs with activities contextually, focusing the learning to communication on the other language structure as well as linking the lesson with other subjects. JY agrees the essence of implementing thematic units for TEYL in association with the previous theories and confirms,

“Pembelajaran berbasis tema dalam pengajaran bahasa Inggris akan memudahkan murid saya karena hal itu berhubungan dengan mata pelajaran Tematik yang ada di kelas reguler. Tentunya, hal tersebut berbasis pada kurikulum yang ada di sekolah dasar. Saya bisa mengeksplor berbagai macam mata pelajaran secara fleksibel berdasarkan kemampuan dan ketertarikan siswa dalam belajar” (JY, Zoom, Juli 26, 2021)

“Thematic lesson will ease my students to learn English because it is linked to their thematic regular lesson based on the Indonesian primary school curriculum. I can explore various lessons flexibly based on the students' ability and interest.” (JY, Zoom, July 26, 2021)

Her positive attitudes towards the thematic lesson because of its strength in providing YLs with contextual settings. As the YLs learn new vocabulary related to the theme, they will use the English grammar contextually. Ching & Lin (2019) asserted the contextualized grammar focuses on

various linguistics choices in the context. It implies that by understanding the vocabulary usage in particular grammar or sentence patterns, the YLs will get opportunity to practice English for communication. Shin (2014) suggested the teachers to provide enjoyable classroom atmosphere for YLs to hear sounds of English, build vocabulary and improve their listening and speaking skills. She asserted that YLs should be familiarize with oral language for communication in particular discourse.

Using thematic units has indirectly broadened YLs vocabularies and phrases. The class' atmosphere has automatically encouraged the students to speak English. Although not all the students spoke English well because they were in the beginner level of English, they, at least, still tried to use English. Their effort in using English to communicate shows the successful teacher teaching English using thematic lessons. Therefore, thematic environment can make the YLs get easier ways in mastering the language target. Bourke (2006); Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) proposed the best type of syllabus and learning model for teaching young learners English should make the learners master the acquisition-poor environment of the classroom. Thematic units could make the YLs learn English contextually by experiencing to use the language for communication. MA and JA on similarly state,

"Anak-anak yang belajar bahasa Inggris tidak akan terkukung lagi. Mereka akan belajar secara kontekstual dan belajar bagaimana menggunakan bahasa untuk berkomunikasi. Itulah mengapa, tematik model adalah sebuah cara yang efektif dalam mengajar bahasa Inggris. Terlebih untuk level pemula." (MA, Personal Communication, 12 July, 2021

"The YLs won't learn English in isolation anymore. They will contextually learn to use the language for communication. That's why it is an effective way to teach YLs English, especially for the beginners." (MA, Personal Communication, 12 July, 2021; JA, Personal Communication, 18 July, 2021)

MA and JA's ideas require their careful preparation for teaching YLs which include young learners' holistic needs (Setyaningrum & Purwati, 2020) for making the communication run smoothly. The teachers should analyze the students' needs and schools' goals before they decide the learning materials and wrap them into activities related to YLs' real-life experience, like daily activities.

Nikolov & Djigunović (2019) suggested that teaching must be in harmony with learning. It is essential to discover and understand the learners' activities to participate and respond to the question using their daily life experience. In addition, Littlejohn (2016) suggested that English syllabus content in the thematic model should enable YLs to develop High Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). Meanwhile, Shin and Crandal (2014) stated that thematic instruction gives the learners many chances to learn English by integrating it into other learning contexts. MA and JA agree and they add,

"...ketika mengajar anak-anak menggunakan pembelajaran tematik, kita juga mengajarkan berbagai macam pelajaran seperti Sains, Matematika, IPS, dan agama. Unit-unit di dalam tematik untuk mengajar bahasa Inggris pun bisa digunakan untuk mengajar bahasa Inggris melalui berbagai macam mata pelajaran." (MA, Personal Communication, 12 July, 2021)

"...while teaching EYL using thematic lesson we also teach various lesson including science, math, social, and religion. Thematic units for TEYL could be carried out by teaching English through various subjects." (MA, Personal Communication, 12 July, 2021)

Meanwhile, JY elucidates,

"Saya hanya butuh menambahkan penguatan materi tata bahasa menggunakan permainan untuk membuat mereka menikmati pelajaran tanpa harus merasa takut dengan tata bahasa. Intinya, semua hal bisa diintegrasikan di dalam unit-unit tematik." (JY, Zoom, July 26, 2021)

"I just need to add grammar awareness by using games in order to provide them less threatening lessons. All can be integrated in thematic units." (JY, Zoom, July 26, 2021)

JY's consideration to teach English grammar through games was conforming Chou's (2017) notion that YLs do not easily understand the complex language components like grammar and expression before their eight. In addition, the teachers need to re-discover how to make the YLs' English learning is not labeled as lexis, phonology, grammar or discourse. Therefore, since the students are engaged with the technology right now, it is not the time to teach them grammar textually, tell them the meaning of each vocab and phrase, ask them to memorize the vocabularies and expressions, and many more. However, it is time to let them know

and realize the use of language itself. In this point, JA firmly believes,

"...saya rasa, ini bukanlah lagi waktu untuk menghafal kosakata dengan diartikan secara langsung karena itu adalah cara lama untuk mengajar bahasa Inggris. Menurut saya, anak-anak perlu memahami bahasa secara kontekstual berdasarkan tata bahasa yang sesuai." (JA, Personal Communication, 18 July, 2021)

"...it's not the time to memorize the vocabularies from its direct translation because that's the old way of teaching English, I think. To me, students need to understand the language from its context based on appropriate grammar." (JA, Personal Communication, 18 July, 2021)

Then, MA also conveys,

"Mereka juga harus tahu bagaimana menggunakan bahasa Inggris dalam hidupnya. Mereka akan memiliki pengalaman belajar dalam menggunakan bahasa Inggris. Selain itu, keuntungan menggunakan tematik di pengajaran bahasa Inggris akan memudahkan mereka untuk membuat lingkungan yang bilingual." (MA, Personal Communication, 12 July, 2021)

"They have to know how to use English in their life. They will have learning experience in using English. Besides, the use of thematic learning in TEYL will help them to make a bilingual environment." (MA, Personal Communication, 12 July, 2021)

Those statements are highly related to the concept of thematic learning in TEYL that provides a learning environment to make students learn collaboratively as active participants in the class. Cameron (2003) stated that theme-based teaching and learning focus on linked activities. Therefore, the young learners who experience learning English in thematic units are expected to understand better how they use the language to communicate with others. In addition, Shin and Crandall (2014) affirmed that the EYL teachers could use thematic units in their teaching by incorporating some activities ranging from singing some English songs to reading or telling stories. They could be followed by Total Physical Responses (TPR) activities suggested by Nuraeni (2019) as well as Xie (2021). Teachers play their pivotal roles in introducing some language skills or components in actions. They should be order takers, model providers, and action monitors and YLs could serve as models and action performers until they are ready to speak out.

Young learners' needs, teacher's deeds: YLs' knowledge advancement through English learning

Young learners need to feel comfortable and self-confident when they involve in learning situation. The teacher needs to identify the students' expectation towards learning. As they like to play than listen to the teacher's explanation, the teacher should pay attention to the most appropriate learning materials. Identifying materials could not be done by only classifying the materials' difficulties level. Teachers should consider the use of English materials in the students' real life, the student's understanding of English contextually, the student's interest and motivation in learning English at a very young age. In this case, the thematic units for teaching and learning English provides the integrated activities in which YLs can learn English contextually from different aspects based on their needs. This is in line with the JY's perspective.

"Fleksibilitas dalam mengajar anak-anak menggunakan tema yang bervariasi telah memberikan pengaruh terhadap kemampuan mereka dalam menggunakan bahasa yang telah mereka pelajari dan tema tersebut untuk berkomunikasi." (JY, Zoom, July 26, 2021)

"Flexibility in teaching YLs from various themes has influenced their ability in practicing to use the language that they learned from the themes into communication." (JY, Zoom, July 26, 2021)

JY's statement shows that teachers can scrutinize and decide the materials that support the students' daily life. The learning output from the English lesson using the thematic units is a proper understanding of the English lesson contextually. Context-based teaching and learning English will make the students learn something unconsciously. They will gain more knowledge than they expect. MA illustrates,

"Pembelajaran tematik memiliki cakupan yang sangat luas. Siswa akan mendapatkan banyak sekali kosakata dan mereka akan menggunakannya di dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Kemudian, berdasarkan kosakata yang berhubungan dengan tema, anak-anak bisa membangun ilmu pengetahuan yang baru dari kegiatan-kegiatan yang mereka ikuti." (MA, Personal Communication, 12 July, 2021)

"Thematic lesson has a large learning scope. The students will gain a lot of vocabularies and they will use them in their daily life. By those vocabularies related to themes, the YLs could build new knowledge over activities they involve

in.” (MA, Personal Communication, 12 July, 2021)

That statement also supported by JA and IH’s perceptions,

“...siswa akan belajar berbagai macam mata pelajaran menggunakan bahasa Inggris dalam unit tematik. Mereka akan mendapatkan kosakata lebih dibanding belajar bahasa Inggris seperti pada umumnya. Mereka akan mengetahui bagaimana cara menggunakan kosakata tersebut di dalam kehidupan sehari-hari dan memahami budaya dari bahasa tersebut.” (JA, Personal Communication, 18 July, 2021; IH, Video Call, July 29, 2021)

“...the students will learn various lesson in English using thematic units. They will get more vocabularies than learning English as usual. They will know how to use the vocabularies in daily activities and also understand the language culture.” (JA, Personal Communication, 18 July, 2021; IH, Video Call, July 29, 2021)

Teaching English thematically could be considered suitable for enhancing foreign language development in such context and fulfilling broader, more far-reaching educational goals (Ellison, 2019). Themes are also employed in soft CLIL approach for ELT. It integrates content learning of various subjects such as science, math, social science, and many more. This approach aligns with the thematic concept where the students learn other subjects through English contextually. As EYL thematic units aim at teaching young learners English through specific themes or content, advanced knowledge will be obtained from learning content from particular theme and using English to communicate that knowledge. In this case, MA and JY shared their experience of their teaching. MA justifies,

“Saya memberi mereka tema yang menarik seperti tata surya dan saya biasanya bercerita tentang hal tersebut. Saya juga bertanya kepada mereka untuk membuat karya seni terkait tata surya untuk meningkatkan praktik mereka saat bercerita tata surya.” (MA, Personal Communication, 12 July, 2021)

“I gave them an interesting theme such as solar system and I usually tell a story related to it. I also asked my students to make art about solar system to scaffold their practice in telling the story about Solar System.” (MA, Personal Communication, 12 July, 2021)

In addition, JY also explains,

“...contohnya, bagaimana cara menghemat energi di rumah, muridku bisa praktik dengan cara mengucapkan: Mama, tolong hemat energinya! Bisakah kamu mematikan lampu?” (JY, Zoom, Juli 26, 2021)

“...for example, how to save energy at home my students could practice to say: “Mama, please save the energy. Could you please switch off the light?” (JY, Zoom, July 26, 2021)

Therefore, their examples evidenced how EYL thematic units were practiced and English could be internalized to the YLs’ daily communication. The teachers should let the students create opportunities to apply new knowledge and express their understanding using additional language. Although this is a complex process for teachers and students to achieve the right balance of cognitive and linguistic demands, they could compromise how to use English without neglecting the content concepts (Ching & Lin, 2019)

To get the right balance of cognitive and linguistic demands, Setyaningrum and Purwati (2020) suggested theme-based teaching should be carefully planned by considering the YLs’ needs. At this point, the teachers can decide whether they adopt the themes from the regular thematic classes endorsed by the 2013 curriculum for primary school or adapt the themes from the designated curriculum with respect to the YLs’ English learning needs and new knowledge advancement.

Movements from effortless to challenging tasks

Implementing thematic units in TEYL brings out the acceptances and challenges simultaneously. Teaching English thematically will automatically enhance the students’ general knowledge. They can learn other subjects like, mathematics, science, arts, and others using English as the medium of instruction. Thematic teaching allows YLs to learn English by incorporating it into other learning contexts. Implementing thematic lessons in teaching English will make the teaching concept more meaningful and flexible to the teacher and students (Shin & Crandall, 2014; Sehan, 2018).

However, the teachers also faced challenges while implementing thematic units in TEYL. Teaching preparation is the most challenging of all while the other efforts should be put during teaching and learning activities. The teachers have been struggling since lesson planning by

determining the theme, skills to be emphasized, target structure, vocabulary focus, objectives, materials, and activities. Then, they have to make all activities work with the YLs as well as provide additional activities once particular activity does not work. The teachers should be flexible and adaptable towards the class situation. Classroom management's skill is necessarily needed to operate the teaching and learning process in EYL thematic lesson. The teachers should facilitate the learning process without ignoring the essence of teaching thematically. In this case, MA states her judgement.

"...meskipun saya telah mendapatkan banyak manfaat dari mengajar bahasa Inggris menggunakan unit tematik, saya sebenarnya harus menyiapkan segala sesuatu sebelum mengajar dengan baik. Hal itu akan membantu saya untuk manajemen aktivitas belajar mengajar agar dapat berjalan lancar." (MA, Personal Communication, 12 July, 2021)

"...although I got so many advantages from EYL thematic units, I actually need to prepare everything before teaching properly. It will help me manage the teaching and learning activities to run smoothly." (MA, Personal Communication, 12 July, 2021)

In addition, JA also acknowledges the complexity of the preparation in TEYL thematic units. She clearly declares,

"Sebagai seorang guru, saya menghadapi banyak kesulitan dalam menyiapkan hal-hal sebelum mengajar terutama mengajar anak-anak. Saya harus menyiapkan berbagai macam aktivitas agar proses pembelajaran menjadi berarti, terintegrasi, dan menarik." (JA, Personal Communication, 18 July, 2021)

"As a teacher I got a lot of difficulties in preparing my teaching especially for younger learners. I have to prepare various activities so that the learning process can be meaningful, integrated, and interesting." (JA, Personal Communication, 18 July, 2021)

Those statements illustrate how challenging their teaching preparations are. Teaching TEYL must be planned carefully and adequately. Each activity should be meaningful and engaging (Rixon, 2019). A meaningful and engaging activity means the activity which significantly impacts the students' real life. The students can independently reflect on the values after doing the activity. They can also

use new knowledge from class in daily life by communicating with others.

Moreover, the English materials in the thematic model should be systematically created. The materials have to respond to the students' specific needs and be originated on how young learners learn the language (Hayes, 2014). In addition, IH also reveals that,

"...bagian yang paling menantang dalam membuat materi bahasa Inggris tematik adalah menentukan struktur yang paling layak untuk anak-anak." (IH, Video Call, July 29, 2021)

"...the most challenging part in making thematic English materials is determining the most feasible scaffolding for the YLs' learning." (IH, Video Call, July 29, 2021)

Regarding to the IH's statement, the materials must be developed based on the students' language level. It should be from the easiest to the most complicated one. Additionally, JY adds,

"...nanti akan ada level untuk materi bahasa Inggris tematik tetapi saya akan membungkusnya sesempurna mungkin untuk melewati semua level tanpa harus peserta didik merasakan kecemasan." (JY, Zoom, July 26, 2021)

"...there will be levels for EYL thematic materials but I have to wrap them faultlessly in order to keep the YLs comfortable in getting through all levels without any significant anxiety." (JY, Zoom, July 26, 2021)

Both IH's and JY's perceptions were in line with Pinter's (2011) recommendation that teacher and/or curriculum designer needs to consider how children engage in distinct communicative language tasks in order to provide materials appropriate for various age groups and to assist children in completing these tasks more effectively. An ideal development can be accomplished gradually and contextually so that the students can adequately understand the materials given by the teacher. Challenge in preparing the lesson for EYL thematic units was initially an effect of the teachers' earlier experiences in TEYL in Indonesian context. English has been taught theoretically rather than contextually. They experienced teaching English based on the existing curriculum with the availability of text-books. They just need to move forwards to get themselves accustomed to practice EYL thematic lesson with all its preparation. MA insists,

“...mengajar bahasa Inggris menggunakan tematik sebenarnya tidak sulit. Kita hanya perlu memahami konsepnya dan bagaimana cara kerjanya. Sayangnya, banyak guru yang memahami bahwasannya tematik adalah mata pelajaran. Padahal, tematik adalah model pembelajaran.” (MA, Personal Communication, 12 July, 2021)

“...TEYL using thematic lesson is actually not difficult. We just need to understand the concept and how it works. Sadly, the teachers themselves still believe that thematic is a name of lesson. In fact, thematic is a learning model.” (MA, Personal Communication, July 12th, 2021)

Shin and Crandall (2014) suggested thematic units in TEYL because it provides an integrated English lesson where the students can learn various subjects/contexts through learning English. Therefore, a teacher who teaches YLs English thematically needs a good proficiency in English and has a relevant educational background. In this case, IH and MA believe,

“...guru-guru yang mengajar bahasa Inggris terutama mengajar anak-anak harus menguasai pengetahuan pedagogi pada tingkat dasar. Mereka tidak hanya mengajar ilmu pengetahuan bahasa Inggris tetapi juga nilai-nilai dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris itu sendiri. Mentransfer ilmu pengetahuan dan menanamkan nilai-nilai pembelajaran memerlukan kualifikasi guru yang sangat spesifik.” (MA, Personal Communication, 12 July, 2021; IH, Video Call, July 29, 2021)

“...teachers who teach English, especially for young learners need to fulfill the knowledge of pedagogy in primary level. They are not only teaching the knowledge of English but also the values of learning English itself. Transforming knowledge and embedding the values of learning need a specific teachers’ qualification.” (MA, Personal Communication, 12 July, 2021; IH, Video Call, July 29, 2021)

The statement emphasizes that having a high level of English proficiency is not enough. There are many components to be an ideal English teacher who must be a proficient English user with specific teaching qualifications in primary pedagogy (Hayes, 2014). Some previous studies revealed that many who teach English to young learners are inconsistent, often ambiguous, have no formal qualifications of English but a qualified teacher or someone who is not qualified teacher but knows

English (Rixon, 2019). Furthermore, primary English teachers are expected to teach English, but they have no support in enhancing their teaching competencies. Thus, JA firmly believes that school management should provide intensive training before assigning the teachers to teach English thematically. By doing so, the teachers will understand the concept of teaching theoretically and practically based on the schools’ needs and goals.

In contrast, ZI, MA, and JA explained about additional challenge for making the YLs understand the meaning of vocabularies or expressions.

“terkadang memang tidak mudah untuk membuat murid saya memahami bahasa Inggris karena itu bukan bahasa kedua mereka. Saya mengajar anak-anak di kelas bawah dan kebanyakan dari muridku ada pada level pemula. Jadi, saya sering berpikiran kalau saya tidak mungkin membuat mereka mengerti tanpa memberikan pengertian secara langsung menggunakan bahasa Indonesia.” (ZI, Zoom, July 26, 2021; MA, Personal Communication, 12 July, 2021; JA, Personal Communication, July 18, 2021)

“Sometimes it’s not easy to make my students understand English because English is not their second language. I am teaching the lower grade and most of my students are in the beginner level of English and have no basic English. So, I frequently think that it is impossible to make them understand without giving them a direct understanding in Indonesian.” (ZI, Zoom, July 26, 2021; MA, Personal Communication, 12 July, 2021; JA, Personal Communication, July 18, 2021)

The statement implies that they believed to younger learners need to get sessions for vocabulary building before they integrate themes into TEYL. However, this should not be considered as challenge because themes could be integrated to all levels in primary schools without requirement of YLs English proficiency. Thus, if the teachers still consider this as a challenge, they should pay attention to their teaching strategies. They could use semiotic sources to support the YLs’ English learning while scaffold it with translation, translanguaging, and trans-semiotizing (Carbonara & Scibetta, 2020; Johnstone, 2019; Zein, 2017). It is necessary to keep in mind that young learners need to focus on how the language works, not what language says.

Never-ending motivation for young learners to learning consistency

Teaching English thematically provides contextual language learning, integrating the variety of lessons and experience in using English. The YLs enjoy the fun and joyful learning as central to this teaching and learning process. Since English has become a global language, everyone is forced to understand English even fundamentally. Thus, teaching and learning English at a very young age is necessary. There are ten ideas of teaching EYL such as 1) using visual, realia, and movement; 2) involving students in making realia; 3) unstoppable activity; 4) teaching themes; 5) using stories and familiar context to the students; 6) conducting English classroom instructions; 7) using L1 as resources based on necessity; 8) involving helpers from the community; 9) collaborating other teachers at school; and 10) communicating with TEYL experts (Shin, 2006). Those activities have essential roles for making the English learning exciting and motivating. YLs like discovery activities in which they can respond to what are being asked by using imagination, or they can be involved in making things, in drawing things, in games, or physical activities (Harmer, 2007; Othman & Kiely, 2016; Zein, 2016)

In TEYL, YLs have more opportunities to express themselves and involve in each learning activity. The students' motivation is highly related to the materials and activities in the classroom. Bourke (2006); Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) stated that to enhance students' motivation in learning English; the teachers need to provide topics of interest to children, to tell stories, to play games, to do physical activities, to use the song, chants, or rhymes, to make pair work and group work tasks, and to introduce early childhood literature.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to learn English could be developed during the learning sessions. The students' motivated behavior can be seen while entering the classroom and enthusiastically following all the learning activities. They may start their day by saying 'good morning' to their teachers and friends, then they will enjoy the learning activities and try to be active in a class. They will get a reward when they get involved in every activity, finish their tasks, or answer the questions. Huang, Hoi, & Teo (2018) found that the first graders in the Content-Based Language Instruction class displayed more motivated

behavior, such as eagerly volunteering in class. They have high motivation in learning English because they learn and find something new from a delightful class atmosphere. As JA explains,

"Mereka mendapatkan sesuatu yang berbeda ketika belajar bahasa Inggris. Mereka secara bertahap mempelajari hal-hal baru menggunakan bahasa Inggris. Saya memiliki pengalaman yang tak terlupakan ketika siswa saya mengatakan bahwa mereka suka belajar bahasa Inggris karena menyenangkan. Mereka tiba-tiba berbicara kepada saya setelah membuat seni dan belajar matematika (dalam bahasa Inggris). Sehingga menurut saya, pelajaran tematik membuat siswa saya senang belajar bahasa Inggris." (JA, Personal Communication, July 18, 2021)

"They get something different when learning English. They gradually learn new things using English. I had a memorable experience when my students said that they love learning English because it's fun. They suddenly talked to me after making art and learning math (in English). To me, thematic lesson makes my students love to learn English." (JA, Personal Communication, July 18, 2021)

Hence, various external and internal factors inside or outside the classroom can affect young learners' dynamic motivation to learn English. Once they have a good impression at the first time they learn English; they want to learn and explore more.

CONCLUSION

Themes do matter to be integrated into the TEYL and requires significant understanding from the teachers of EYL in implementing it. The activities should be planned carefully to cater YLs' learning by practicing English contextually. They learned new vocabularies from new knowledge emerged from the thematic content and used them for communication which linked to their real-life experience. Hence, thematic units which cover English and the integration of multiple knowledge in different subjects like mathematics, science, arts or others should be considered for TEYL because of feasibility of activating YLs' multiple intelligences that should be sharpen during their age-period. All teachers as the participants of this study affirmed that this is as a solution dealing with the absence of EYL curriculum endorsed by the Indonesian government.

Shifting the TEYL pedagogical beliefs and practices requires the teachers' creativity in developing the materials and administering the tasks. It is challenging for the teachers as they needed to devote their time for careful lesson planning to cater the YLs with advanced knowledge through the English learning. Specifically, for younger learners who have less or no input of English, the teachers challenge to teach theme could be solved by incorporating themes by emphasis on vocabulary building that could be introduced by various activities (Shin & Crandall, 2014) like using songs and movements (Shin, 2014). The YLs should dominantly get involved in every learning activity to obtain knowledge of using English in a genuine context.

As this current study was participated by small numbers of EYL teachers within the researchers' TEYL circle who incorporated thematic units, the further research should involve more teachers as the participants. Also, additional instruments, like teaching documents, as well as observation checklist could be selected to strengthen the research findings. Despite the limited instruments used in this study, the thematic EYL lesson has the potential to motivate YLs to improve their English skills in accordance with their educational levels.

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