



EXPERIENCE OVER THEORY: WHAT SHAPES ELEMENTARY EFL TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL CHOICES

Nita Kaniadewi^{1*}, Heni Novita Sari²

^{1,2}Universitas Muhammadiyah Prof. Dr. Hamka

E-mail: ^{1,2}nitakaniadewi@uhamka.ac.id

Accepted :

20 Agustus 2026

Published :

25 September 2026

Corresponding Author:

Nita Kaniadewi

Email Corresponding :

nitakaniadewi@uhamka.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the instructional practices elementary school English teachers consider appropriate for young learners, the factors shaping their pedagogical beliefs, and their perceptions of students' responses. Addressing a gap in Indonesian elementary EFL research, it explores the practical and professional foundations underlying teachers' instructional decisions. Using a qualitative design, data were collected from 40 English teachers across elementary schools in Jabodetabek, Indonesia, through three open-ended interview questions administered over six months. Data were analyzed inductively using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. Six recurring instructional categories emerged: enjoyable learning activities; contextualized and habitual language exposure; drilling and repetition; gestures, physical demonstrations, and visual scaffolding; adaptive and learner-centered instruction; and affective and relational support. Teaching experience emerged as the most prominently articulated influence on teachers' instructional beliefs. Teachers generally perceived students' responses positively, although confusion, individual variation, and instructional challenges were also reported. The findings indicate that practical experience was more explicitly articulated than theoretical knowledge in teachers' accounts, without implying that theory was absent or less valuable. The study highlights the importance of integrating experiential knowledge with formal pedagogical understanding and using classroom experience as a basis for reflective professional development and pedagogical adaptation.

Keywords: *Elementary EFL, young learners, teacher beliefs, teacher cognition, instructional practices, teaching experience*

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English to young learners (TEYL) requires instruction that responds to children's developmental, linguistic, affective, and participatory needs. Effective elementary EFL teaching therefore extends beyond linguistic knowledge to include engaging, accessible, and context-sensitive learning experiences (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2017; Garton & Copland, 2019). In Indonesia, this complexity is intensified by differences in teachers' educational backgrounds, institutional settings, and instructional conditions, all of which may influence pedagogical beliefs and classroom decisions

(Meisani, 2022; Susanto et al., 2024). Teachers consequently play a central role in determining how young learners encounter English through activities, interaction, repetition, visual and physical support, and affective encouragement (Asher, 1977; Arnold, 1999; Brewster et al., 2002).

These instructional choices can be understood through teacher cognition, which encompasses what teachers think, know, and believe and how these dimensions interact with classroom practice (Borg, 2003, 2006). Rather than representing direct applications of formal pedagogical knowledge, teachers' decisions emerge through interactions among

prior beliefs, professional knowledge, experience, and contextual demands (Shi, 2021; Sun & Zhang, 2021; Chen & Abdullah, 2022). Experience is particularly important because teachers continually interpret and adapt pedagogical knowledge through classroom encounters. Professional knowledge may therefore develop through both formal preparation and reflection on practical experience (Schön, 1983; Shulman, 1987; Borg, 2006).

Recent studies reinforce this relationship between beliefs, experience, and practice. Indonesian elementary English teachers have been shown to develop instructional beliefs in relation to learner characteristics, classroom conditions, educational backgrounds, and teaching environments (Kaniadewi, 2022; Meisani, 2022; Susanto et al., 2024; Zain et al., 2024). Other studies similarly demonstrate that teacher cognition is closely associated with professional and contextual experience and reported classroom practices (Yulianto et al., 2024; Yunita et al., 2026; Wahyudin et al., 2026; Zhong et al., 2026). Teaching experience may consequently function not merely as length of service but as a source of practical knowledge through which teachers interpret and justify instructional decisions (Zare, 2026).

Despite these developments, less attention has been given to where elementary EFL teachers themselves locate the foundations of their instructional beliefs. Previous research has extensively examined teacher beliefs and their relationships with classroom practice (Phipps & Borg, 2009), yet comparatively limited attention has been directed toward how teachers articulate the relative influence of classroom experience, formal pedagogical knowledge, professional development, learner responses, and contextual factors when explaining why they prefer particular practices. Building on Kaniadewi (2022), the present study therefore moves beyond identifying teachers' general beliefs about TEYL to investigate the reasoning underlying their everyday instructional choices.

Accordingly, this study addresses three questions: (RQ1) What instructional practices do elementary school English teachers consider appropriate for teaching English to young learners? (RQ2) What

sources shape teachers' beliefs about their preferred instructional practices? and (RQ3) How do teachers perceive students' responses to the instructional practices they use? By examining these dimensions together, the study seeks to clarify how elementary EFL teachers construct and justify practical pedagogical knowledge. Importantly, *experience over theory* does not imply that experience is superior to theoretical knowledge; rather, it captures the empirical question of which knowledge sources are most visible in teachers' explanations of their instructional decisions. The study thus contributes to TEYL and teacher-cognition scholarship by examining how formal knowledge, classroom experience, contextual conditions, and perceived learner responses intersect in teachers' accounts of what works for young learners.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Teacher Beliefs, Teacher Cognition, and Instructional Decision-Making*

Teachers' beliefs constitute an important dimension of instructional decision-making because they shape how teachers interpret classroom situations, evaluate pedagogical possibilities, and select appropriate practices. Although beliefs are closely related to professional knowledge, the two constructs are not synonymous (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992). In language education, professional knowledge is developed not only through formal preparation but also through interactions among teachers, teaching activities, pedagogical contexts, and accumulated experience (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). This perspective is further reflected in Borg's (2006) concept of teacher cognition, which encompasses what teachers think, know, and believe and how these dimensions interact with classroom practice.

Accordingly, the present study conceptualizes teachers' instructional beliefs as part of a broader cognitive and experiential system rather than as direct applications of formal theory. Teachers may employ theoretically consistent practices without explicitly identifying their theoretical foundations, just as possessing theoretical knowledge does not necessarily mean that

teachers will explicitly invoke it when explaining classroom decisions. This distinction is particularly important for RQ2, which examines the sources teachers identify as shaping their instructional preferences. It enables teaching experience, formal pedagogical knowledge, and other professional influences to be examined as interconnected but analytically distinct sources of instructional decision-making (Borg, 2006).

2.2 *Instructional Practices for Teaching English to Young Learners*

Teaching young learners requires attention to their developmental characteristics and to the types of classroom activities through which language can be experienced meaningfully. Cameron (2001) emphasizes that teaching children requires teachers to consider learners' cognitive and linguistic development and to provide activities that create meaningful opportunities for language use.

Brewster, Ellis, and Girard (2002) similarly provide extensive guidance for primary English teaching, including the use of songs, games, stories, and other activity-based practices. Scott and Ytreberg (1990) also highlight the usefulness of repetition, rhythm, movement, and varied activities in teaching English to children. Slattery and Willis (2001) emphasize classroom practices that help teachers make English meaningful and accessible to primary learners.

Pinter (2017) further emphasizes the importance of age-appropriate interaction, activities, and learning opportunities in teaching young language learners. More broadly, Garton and Copland (2019) demonstrate the contextual and pedagogical complexity of teaching English to young learners across different educational settings.

This literature provides a useful framework for interpreting the practices reported by participants in the present study. However, the study does not assume that participants adopted any particular established teaching method. Instead, it examines the practices that teachers themselves described and subsequently considers how those practices relate to existing pedagogical literature.

2.3 *Experience, Prior Learning, and Professional Development*

Teachers' experiences can contribute substantially to the development of instructional beliefs. Lortie's (1975) concept of the *apprenticeship of observation* suggests that teachers begin constructing understandings of teaching through their experiences as learners long before entering the profession. These prior experiences may subsequently interact with formal preparation, classroom encounters, and contextual demands in shaping professional cognition. From a teacher-cognition perspective, experience therefore functions not as a substitute for theoretical knowledge but as one component of an evolving system of beliefs, knowledge, and pedagogical judgment (Borg, 2006). In Indonesian primary English education, the continuing importance of teacher preparation and professional development further highlights the need to examine how teachers draw on different sources of professional knowledge when making instructional decisions (Zein, 2016, 2017).

Accordingly, practical experience and theoretical knowledge should not be conceptualized as opposing influences. Teachers may rely primarily on classroom experience when explaining their instructional choices while still possessing theoretically informed knowledge, and theoretical principles may shape practice without being explicitly articulated. The present study therefore examines the relative visibility of teaching experience, professional development, personal learning experience, institutional context, self-directed learning, and theoretical knowledge in teachers' accounts rather than presuming the superiority of experience over theory.

2.4 *Affective and Relational Dimensions of Young Learner EFL*

Affective and relational factors are also relevant to young learners' experiences of language learning. Arnold (1999) brings attention to the role of affect in language learning, including learners' confidence, emotions, and classroom relationships. Krashen's (1981) affective perspective provides another theoretical lens for considering how anxiety and emotional

conditions may interact with language learning.

These perspectives are useful for interpreting teachers' emphasis on enjoyable activities, supportive classroom relationships, and creating comfortable classroom environments. However, the present study does not directly measure learners' anxiety, motivation, or affective states. Such concepts are therefore used only as interpretive perspectives when discussing teachers' accounts rather than as variables empirically established by the study.

2.5 *Practical Experience and Theoretical Knowledge in Teacher Learning*

The literature reviewed above suggests that teachers' instructional knowledge develops through multiple sources. Formal teacher education and professional development provide theoretical and pedagogical knowledge, while classroom experience provides opportunities to test, adapt, and evaluate instructional practices. Teachers' own experiences as learners may also shape their assumptions about what constitutes effective teaching.

The present study uses this distinction to examine a central question suggested by its title: when teachers explain why they trust particular instructional practices, which sources become most visible in their accounts? The purpose is not to determine whether experience is objectively more valuable than theory. Instead, the study investigates whether teachers' explanations foreground practical experience, prior learning, professional development, institutional conditions, self-directed learning, or explicit theoretical knowledge.

This framework provides the conceptual basis for interpreting the six categories of sources identified in Q2. The thematic-analysis document likewise identifies teaching experience, personal learning experience, professional development, institutional context, self-directed learning, and theoretical/academic knowledge as the principal sources emerging from participants' accounts.

3 METHODS

3.1 *Research Design*

This study adopted a qualitative research design to investigate elementary school

English teachers' instructional beliefs and the experiential foundations underlying their pedagogical choices. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand how teachers articulated, interpreted, and justified their instructional decisions within their professional contexts rather than to quantify relationships among predetermined variables. Such an approach is particularly relevant to research on teacher cognition, where teachers' beliefs, knowledge, experiences, and interpretations of classroom practice constitute important dimensions of professional thinking (Borg, 2003, 2006).

An inductive thematic analysis was employed to examine teachers' accounts of the instructional practices they considered appropriate for young learners, the sources informing those preferences, and their perceptions of students' responses to the practices implemented in their classrooms. The analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, comprising familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, development of candidate themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the analytical report. Thematic analysis provides a flexible approach for systematically identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). Consistent with an inductive orientation, the analysis prioritized patterns emerging from participants' accounts rather than imposing predetermined theoretical categories on the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022).

3.2 *Participants and Research Context*

The participants comprised 40 English teachers working at the elementary school level across the Jabodetabek metropolitan area of Indonesia, encompassing Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, and Bekasi. They represented diverse institutional contexts, including public elementary schools, integrated Islamic schools, *madrasah ibtidaiyah*, and general private schools. Participants' teaching experience ranged from 2 to 17 years. This variation provided access to perspectives developed across different levels of professional experience and institutional settings, both of which are relevant considerations in understanding the

situated nature of teacher cognition and instructional decision-making (Borg, 2006; Chen & Abdullah, 2022). The diversity of school contexts was also pertinent given evidence that Indonesian elementary English teachers' instructional beliefs may be associated with their educational backgrounds and teaching environments (Susanto et al., 2024).

3.3 Data Collection

Data for the present analysis were drawn from participants' responses to three open-ended interview questions specifically addressing instructional practices, sources of pedagogical beliefs, and perceived student responses. Open-ended questioning was used to allow participants to articulate their pedagogical reasoning in their own terms rather than restricting their responses to predetermined categories. This orientation was particularly appropriate for examining teacher cognition because teachers' stated beliefs and explanations can provide insight into how they interpret their classroom practices and professional experiences (Borg, 2003, 2006).

The questions were:

Q1: What instructional practice(s) do you consider appropriate for teaching English at the elementary school level?

Q2: What underlies or informs your beliefs about those instructional practice(s)?

Q3: How do students respond to the instructional practice(s) you use?

These questions corresponded directly to the three analytical dimensions of the study: teachers' preferred instructional practices, the sources shaping their instructional beliefs, and their perceptions of students' responses. The present study therefore concentrated specifically on Q1–Q3 within the broader interview dataset. This focus was consistent with contemporary teacher-cognition research emphasizing the interconnectedness of teachers' beliefs, contextual experiences, and reported pedagogical practices (Shi, 2021; Sun & Zhang, 2021; Chen & Abdullah, 2022).

3.4 Data Analysis

The interview responses were analyzed inductively using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Following familiarization through repeated reading,

meaningful data segments were coded according to instructional practices, sources of beliefs, and perceived student responses. The codes were then compared and grouped into candidate themes based on conceptual similarity and recurring patterns. These themes were iteratively reviewed, refined, defined, and named against both the coded extracts and the broader dataset, consistent with the flexible and recursive nature of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022).

The analysis generated six categories of instructional practices for RQ1, six sources of instructional beliefs for RQ2, and four patterns of perceived student responses for RQ3. Theme frequencies were used only to indicate their relative recurrence and were neither inferential nor mutually exclusive. Because participants could express multiple practices, belief sources, or response patterns, they could appear in more than one category; therefore, frequencies were not expected to total 40. Consistent with qualitative thematic analysis, these counts were treated as supplementary descriptive information rather than indicators of statistical significance or thematic importance (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022).

3.5 Trustworthiness and Interpretive Considerations

Several procedures were used to strengthen the credibility and transparency of the thematic interpretation. Responses were systematically compared across participants to identify both recurring patterns and contrasting accounts. Particular attention was given to whether candidate themes were supported by multiple responses rather than isolated statements. Participants' original statements were retained as evidentiary excerpts to maintain a transparent connection between the analytical claims and the underlying dataset. Such attention to coherence between the data, coding process, thematic development, and analytical claims is consistent with contemporary recommendations for rigorous reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022).

Interpretive caution was particularly important for the analysis of Q3. The data represented teachers' perceptions of how students responded to instructional practices

rather than direct observations or independent measurements of students' engagement, motivation, anxiety, achievement, or other learning outcomes. Accordingly, findings concerning student responses were interpreted strictly as teacher-reported perceptions and were not treated as objective evidence of students' psychological states or learning outcomes. This distinction is particularly relevant because teacher cognition research recognizes that teachers' interpretations of classroom events constitute an important component of professional cognition while remaining distinct from independently observed classroom behavior or learner outcomes (Borg, 2003, 2006).

A further methodological consideration concerns the retrospective nature of the data. Teachers reconstructed and explained their instructional beliefs and experiences through interview responses collected at a particular point in time. The study therefore provides insight into how participants articulated the foundations of their instructional choices but does not establish how those beliefs emerged, evolved, or changed longitudinally. Although professional and classroom experience can contribute to the development of teacher cognition (Borg, 2006), the present design does not establish causal relationships between length or type of teaching experience and particular instructional choices. Instead, experience was interpreted as a source articulated by participants when explaining their pedagogical beliefs and practices.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Instructional Practices Teachers Consider Appropriate for Young Learners

Analysis of Q1 identified six recurring categories of instructional practices: (1) fun-learning practices, (2) contextual and habitual exposure, (3) drilling and repetition, (4) gesture, physical demonstration, and visual support, (5) adaptive and student-centered practices, and (6) affective and relational support. The thematic analysis reports these categories at approximate frequencies ranging from seven to thirty-two participants.

Because participants could refer to more than one practice, these categories are non-exclusive and should not be interpreted as six mutually exclusive teaching methods.

4.1.1 Fun-Learning Practices

Fun-learning practices were the most frequently mentioned category, referred to by approximately 32 of the 40 participants. Participants described songs, games, videos, stories, and role-play as ways of making English more engaging and accessible to children. One participant stated:

"Do something fun. Because, they need to love English first. Meyakinkan mereka bahwa Bahasa English itu tidak sulit." [T04]

Another participant described the use of stories, songs, and games:

"Cara yang tepat menurut saya yaitu melalui cerita, melalui lagu, melalui games. Anak-anak dapat mengalami dan melihat langsung jadi mudah diingat. Karena melalui fun learning seperti ini siswa tidak sadar jika mereka sebenarnya sedang belajar." [T12]

A further participant emphasized the importance of building students' readiness to participate:

"Games yang ada korelasi sama pelajaran... paling enak ngebangun mood mereka dulu buat ngajar supaya mereka mau ikutin kita." [T01]

These accounts suggest that teachers did not regard enjoyment simply as an additional classroom feature. Rather, many participants viewed students' willingness to participate as an important condition for classroom learning. This orientation is broadly consistent with young learner pedagogy, which emphasizes meaningful, engaging, and age-appropriate activities (Cameron, 2001; Brewster et al., 2002; Pinter, 2017).

The findings can also be interpreted through affective perspectives in language learning (Arnold, 1999; Krashen, 1981). However, the data do not establish that fun-learning practices reduced students' anxiety. Rather, teachers described enjoyable activities as associated with participation, comfort, and willingness to engage. Thus, affective theory provides an interpretive lens rather than an empirically measured outcome.

4.1.2 Contextual and Habitual Exposure

Approximately 12 participants referred to the importance of exposing children to English through familiar classroom routines and everyday expressions. For example, one participant described introducing English through everyday classroom conversations:

"Pelajaran bahasa Inggris dengan cara memperkenalkan percakapan sehari-hari... agar siswa menjadi terbiasa berbicara bahasa Inggris... seperti halnya ketika ingin menanyakan kabar, ingin izin ke toilet." [T20]

Another participant explicitly connected their practice to language-learning theory:

"Karena teori dari language acquisition. Sangat membentuk anak-anak di sini." [T34]

These accounts indicate that some teachers sought to make English part of recurring classroom routines rather than limiting it to formal lesson content. Such practices can be interpreted in relation to approaches emphasizing meaningful and contextualized language use (Cameron, 2001; Garton & Copland, 2019).

Although these practices may resemble principles associated with comprehensible input and contextualized exposure, the present data do not establish whether the input provided corresponded to students' specific proficiency levels. Therefore, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence that teachers were deliberately implementing a particular second-language acquisition hypothesis.

4.1.3 Drilling and Repetition

Approximately 8 participants described drilling, repetition, and repeated practice as useful for elementary English learning. These practices included repetition of vocabulary, expressions, or classroom language.

The use of repetition is consistent with pedagogical literature emphasizing rhythm, repetition, and repeated exposure in teaching children (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990). Importantly, the participants' accounts also suggest that repetition was not necessarily used as a stand-alone method. Some teachers combined repetitive practice with songs, games, and other enjoyable activities.

This combination illustrates the pragmatic character of participants' instructional choices. Rather than identifying with one methodological tradition, teachers appeared to select practices they perceived as workable for particular learners and classroom conditions.

4.1.4 Gesture, Physical Demonstration, and Visual Support

Approximately 10 participants described the use of gestures, facial expressions, physical demonstrations, pictures, flashcards, or other visual materials. One participant explained:

"Menggunakan banyak variasi dalam kegiatannya, serta tidak lupa untuk menambahkan gestur, ekspresi serta demonstrasi ketimbang dengan memberikan banyak materi." [T25]

Another stated:

"Guru mengajarkan menggunakan gesture agar lebih menarik untuk peserta didik." [T17]

These practices can be understood as ways of making meaning accessible when verbal explanation alone may not be sufficient for young learners. They also resemble principles associated with Total Physical Response (Asher, 1977). However, the interview data do not establish that participants explicitly conceptualized their practices as TPR. Therefore, gesture and physical support are treated here as empirical categories of practice, while TPR is used only as a theoretical point of comparison.

This distinction is important because teachers may arrive at similar classroom practices through experience without explicitly identifying them with a particular methodological framework.

4.1.5 Adaptive and Student-Centered Practices

Approximately 8 participants emphasized that no single instructional practice was appropriate for all learners or all classroom situations. Instead, they described adapting activities according to students' interests, abilities, classroom conditions, and levels of engagement.

One participant explained:

Vol 9, No 2 (2026): ESTEEM

“Menurut pengalaman beliau, cara yang paling tepat adalah dengan mengombinasikan berbagai teknik di dalam kelas.” [T13]

Another emphasized students' interests:

“Paling tepat adalah untuk mengetahui peserta didik itu sendiri. Mereka menyukai apa? Yang pertama adalah ketertarikan terlebih dahulu.” [T32]

A further participant stated:

“Tidak memaksakan anak tersebut karena ketertarikan seorang anak berbeda-beda.” [T23]

These accounts suggest that some teachers conceptualized instructional appropriateness as contextual rather than absolute. Rather than searching for one universally effective method, they described selecting or combining practices according to classroom circumstances. This is consistent with teacher-cognition perspectives that emphasize the situated relationship between teachers, learners, classroom contexts, and instructional decision-making (Borg, 2006; Freeman & Johnson, 1998).

4.1.6 Affective and Relational Support

Approximately 7 participants emphasized the importance of creating a supportive and comfortable classroom atmosphere. Their accounts referred to students' confidence, relationships with teachers, and the importance of reducing pressure during participation.

These findings can be interpreted through affective perspectives on language learning (Arnold, 1999). Krashen's (1981) affective perspective also provides a possible theoretical lens for understanding why teachers may perceive a supportive classroom environment as conducive to participation.

However, the findings do not establish changes in students' anxiety levels. What the teachers reported was their perception that students participated more comfortably or enthusiastically under supportive conditions. This distinction is maintained throughout the interpretation.

4.2 Sources Shaping Teachers' Instructional Beliefs (RQ2/Q2)

Q2 produced six categories of sources: personal teaching experience, personal learning experience, formal training/professional development, institutional context or policy, self-directed learning, and explicit theoretical or academic knowledge. Teaching experience was the most frequently articulated source, mentioned by approximately 30 of the 40 participants. Because participants could mention multiple sources, these frequencies are non-exclusive.

4.2.1 Personal Teaching Experience

Teaching experience emerged as the most frequently articulated source of instructional beliefs. Approximately 30 participants referred to their classroom experience when explaining why they trusted particular practices.

Rather than describing particular methods as effective because they had learned them theoretically, many participants referred to what they had experienced when teaching their own students. One participant summarized this source simply as:

“Berdasarkan pengalaman mengajar selama ini.” [T24]

This finding is central to the study because it shows that practical experience was highly visible in teachers' explanations of their instructional choices. It is consistent with teacher-cognition perspectives that recognize experience and classroom context as important components of professional knowledge (Borg, 2006; Freeman & Johnson, 1998).

However, the finding should not be interpreted as evidence that experience is objectively more valuable than theoretical knowledge. The frequency indicates how often a source was articulated, not how important that source objectively is to teachers' professional competence.

4.2.2 Personal Learning Experience

Approximately 12 participants referred to their own experiences as learners. These experiences appeared to function in different ways: some teachers drew on classroom practices they remembered positively, while others appeared to use previous learning experiences as examples of what they did or did not want to reproduce. This pattern is compatible with Lortie's (1975) concept of

EXPERIENCE OVER THEORY:

WHAT SHAPES ELEMENTARY EFL TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL CHOICES

Vol 9, No 2 (2026): ESTEEM

the apprenticeship of observation, through which teachers' long histories as learners may contribute to their later conceptions of teaching.

The finding also illustrates that teachers' professional beliefs may begin developing before formal teacher education, as teachers accumulate observations of classroom practices throughout their own schooling.

4.2.3 Formal Training and Professional Development

Approximately 15 participants referred to formal training, workshops, seminars, or professional development. These accounts demonstrate that formal learning was not absent from teachers' belief systems. However, formal professional development was mentioned less frequently than teaching experience. This difference is analytically important but should not be interpreted as evidence that professional development was ineffective. The study did not measure the quality, duration, or impact of participants' professional development experiences.

In the Indonesian context, previous research has documented continuing professional-development needs among primary EFL teachers (Hawanti, 2014; Zein, 2017). The present findings reinforce the relevance of this issue while also suggesting that teachers' practical experiences should not be treated as separate from professional learning.

4.2.4 Institutional Context and Policy

Approximately 8 participants referred to institutional expectations, school policies, or contextual conditions when explaining their instructional choices. This finding supports a situated view of teacher cognition. Teachers do not make instructional decisions in isolation; they work within particular schools, curricula, schedules, expectations, and available resources. Freeman and Johnson's (1998) emphasis on the context of teaching is therefore particularly relevant to understanding this category.

4.2.5 Self-Directed Learning

Approximately 7 participants referred to informal or self-directed sources of professional learning, including online materials, YouTube, seminars, and trial-and-error experiences. These accounts suggest

that teachers' professional learning extends beyond formal training. Teachers may actively search for activities, examples, materials, or solutions to classroom problems and then incorporate what they find into their teaching. Such learning may be highly practical and immediately relevant to classroom needs, although the present study does not assess the quality or theoretical adequacy of the resources participants used.

4.2.6 Explicit Theoretical or Academic Knowledge

Explicit references to theoretical or academic knowledge were relatively uncommon, appearing in approximately 3 of the 40 participants' accounts. One participant, for example, explicitly referred to language acquisition theory:

"Karena teori dari language acquisition. Sangat membentuk anak-anak di sini." [T34]

The relatively low frequency of explicit theoretical references is noteworthy given the prominence of practical experience. However, the finding should not be interpreted as evidence that teachers lacked theoretical knowledge.

A teacher may use a theoretically informed practice without explicitly naming the theory when asked to explain its source. Likewise, teachers may have acquired theoretical concepts through formal education without drawing on those concepts when describing a particular instructional decision. The appropriate conclusion is therefore narrower: explicit theoretical knowledge was less frequently articulated than practical teaching experience in participants' explanations of their instructional choices.

This distinction is central to the title of the article. The data do not demonstrate that experience is "better than" theory. They show that experience was more visible in teachers' accounts of why they trusted particular practices.

4.3 Teachers' Perceptions of Student Responses to Instructional Practices (RQ3/Q3)

Q3 generated four recurring patterns: predominantly positive or enthusiastic responses, initial confusion followed by improvement, individual variation, and

EXPERIENCE OVER THEORY:

WHAT SHAPES ELEMENTARY EFL TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL CHOICES

Vol 9, No 2 (2026): ESTEEM

challenges. Approximately 33 participants described predominantly positive responses, while smaller groups described the other patterns.

Because these are teachers' perceptions, the findings describe how teachers interpreted students' responses, rather than providing direct evidence of students' actual attitudes or learning outcomes.

4.3.1 Predominantly Positive and Enthusiastic Responses

Approximately 33 participants described students as enthusiastic, interested, comfortable, or willing to participate. One participant stated:

"Overall sih suka, namanya anak-anak biasanya nyanyi sama games. Favorit mereka itu." [T01]

Another reported:

"They are very enthusiastic about it. Most of them like the English material that I taught." [T02]

A further participant stated:

"Respon siswa sangat senang dan antusias." [T06]

These accounts indicate that teachers generally perceived enjoyable and interactive practices as being well received by their learners. The finding is compatible with young learner literature emphasizing engaging activities and meaningful classroom interaction (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2017; Garton & Copland, 2019). Nevertheless, these findings should be interpreted as teachers' perceptions rather than direct measures of engagement. The study did not collect independent student reports or behavioral measures of engagement.

4.3.2 Initial Confusion Followed by Improvement

Approximately 5 participants described students as initially confused, uncertain, or hesitant but gradually becoming more responsive.

One participant explained:

"Ketika guru tersebut mengajar Bahasa Inggris, siswa terlihat kebingungan pada awalnya karena guru tersebut menjelaskan

dengan Bahasa Inggris. Setelah guru tersebut mencoba menjelaskan materi dengan bantuan bahasa tubuh dan alat peraga lainnya, siswa dapat memahami." [T20]

This account is particularly relevant to the earlier Q1 finding concerning gesture and visual support. It suggests that teachers perceived nonverbal support as useful when students initially had difficulty understanding English used as classroom language.

Rather than interpreting this as evidence of a particular acquisition mechanism, the finding can more cautiously be understood as teachers' perception that students' comprehension improved when verbal input was accompanied by contextual and visual support.

4.3.3 Individual Variation

Approximately 6 participants described variation among students or across grade levels. One participant observed:

"Respon siswa kelas atas speaking English belum siap untuk menjawab. Tetapi bahasa untuk kelas bawah ini bisa dan mampu menjawab." [T34]

Another participant reported:

"Tidak 100% antusias, 70% mereka menerima dan senang dengan metode tersebut." [T18]

The latter statement should be understood as one teacher's estimate of the proportion of students responding positively in that teacher's classroom. It does not represent 70% of the study participants. These accounts reinforce the adaptive dimension identified in Q1. Teachers did not describe students as responding uniformly to the same practice. Instead, their accounts suggest that learner characteristics and classroom contexts may shape how particular activities are received.

The reasons for these differences, however, were not directly investigated in the present study. Explanations concerning developmental stage, previous learning habits, or classroom history therefore remain possibilities rather than established findings.

4.3.4 Challenges in Student Responses

EXPERIENCE OVER THEORY:

WHAT SHAPES ELEMENTARY EFL TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL CHOICES

Approximately 5 participants reported challenges associated with particular instructional practices. These challenges included hesitation, difficulty responding in English, and differences in students' willingness to participate.

Rather than undermining the broader finding of positive responses, these accounts provide an important counterpoint. Teachers generally described positive reactions, but they also recognized that instructional practices did not work identically for every learner or in every situation. This pattern supports the adaptive perspective identified in Q1: instructional appropriateness was often described as contextual rather than universal.

Discussion

Taken together, the findings across RQ1–RQ3 portray teachers' instructional decision-making as a situated and multifaceted process rather than adherence to a single pedagogical method. Teachers reported combining enjoyable learning activities with contextualized exposure, repetition, physical and visual scaffolding, adaptive instruction, and affective support. Such diversity is consistent with the view that teaching young learners requires responsiveness to learners' developmental, linguistic, and affective characteristics rather than rigid application of a particular methodology (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2017; Garton & Copland, 2019). Recent Indonesian research similarly indicates that elementary EFL teachers adapt their pedagogical practices to learner characteristics and contextual conditions (Meisani, 2022; Zain et al., 2024).

Teaching experience emerged as the most frequently articulated source of instructional beliefs. This finding is particularly relevant from a teacher-cognition perspective, which conceptualizes teachers' pedagogical decisions as being shaped through interactions among beliefs, knowledge, prior experiences, and classroom contexts (Borg, 2003, 2006). Recent studies likewise demonstrate that teacher cognition and classroom practice are closely connected

to professional and contextual experiences (Chen & Abdullah, 2022; Susanto et al., 2024; Zhong et al., 2026). The present findings therefore suggest that practical classroom experience was especially visible in teachers' explanations of why they trusted particular instructional practices. Nevertheless, given the retrospective and cross-sectional nature of the data, experience should be interpreted as an articulated source of belief rather than as a demonstrated cause of particular instructional choices.

The findings also extend Kaniadewi's (2022) investigation of elementary teachers' beliefs about English instruction for young learners. Whereas that study primarily examined teachers' beliefs concerning early English learning and classroom language use, the present study shifts attention toward the practices teachers consider appropriate, the sources informing those preferences, and their perceptions of learner responses. In this respect, the findings complement emerging Indonesian research demonstrating that teachers' beliefs are closely intertwined with instructional practices, educational backgrounds, professional experiences, and teaching environments (Susanto et al., 2024; Yulianto et al., 2024; Yunita et al., 2026).

Several reported practices can also be interpreted through established pedagogical perspectives. Teachers' use of gesture, movement, and physical demonstration resembles principles associated with Total Physical Response (Asher, 1977), while their emphasis on emotional encouragement and supportive classroom relationships corresponds with affective perspectives on language learning (Arnold, 1999). Repetition, contextual exposure, visual support, and enjoyable activities are also consistent with established principles of young learner pedagogy (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2017). These connections, however, remain interpretive because participants did not consistently describe their practices through explicit theoretical terminology.

This distinction is central to understanding the study's notion of *experience over theory*. The relatively limited explicit reference to academic or

theoretical knowledge should not be interpreted as evidence that theory was absent from teachers' practices. Pedagogical practices may reflect theoretical principles even when teachers do not consciously identify or verbalize them as such. What the findings demonstrate more clearly is that classroom experience was more readily and frequently articulated than formal theoretical knowledge when participants explained the foundations of their instructional choices. This interpretation aligns with teacher-cognition scholarship emphasizing that professional knowledge is constructed through interactions among formal learning, prior beliefs, contextual demands, and accumulated teaching experience (Borg, 2006; Chen & Abdullah, 2022).

Accordingly, the contribution of this study lies not in positioning experience as a replacement for theory, but in demonstrating the prominence of experiential knowledge in teachers' accounts of pedagogical decision-making. This finding has implications for teacher professional development. Rather than presenting pedagogical theory as knowledge detached from classroom realities, professional learning may be strengthened by using teachers' existing experiences as resources for reflection, critical examination, and theoretical engagement. Such an approach is consistent with reflective perspectives on teacher development in which professional learning involves critically examining experience and connecting practical knowledge with broader pedagogical understandings (Farrell, 2015).

The findings concerning perceived student responses further complicate any straightforward relationship between experience and effective practice. Although teachers predominantly described students' responses positively, their accounts also included confusion, individual variation, and instructional challenges. Teacher cognition and classroom practice are inherently responsive to complex contextual and learner-related conditions (Shi, 2021; Sun & Zhang, 2021). Consequently, the present data do not establish that teachers' preferred practices caused positive student outcomes,

nor do they demonstrate a linear reinforcement process through which favorable learner responses necessarily strengthened existing instructional beliefs. Instead, the findings suggest a dynamic relationship among teachers' experiences, beliefs, instructional choices, and interpretations of learner responses. Further longitudinal and observational research is needed to determine how these dimensions interact and change over time.

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated elementary EFL teachers' instructional choices by examining the practices they considered appropriate for young learners, the sources informing those preferences, and their perceptions of students' responses. The findings revealed that teachers drew on a diverse repertoire of practices rather than adhering to a single instructional approach, with enjoyable learning activities such as songs, games, videos, stories, and role-play emerging most prominently, alongside contextualized exposure, repetition, physical and visual support, adaptive and learner-centered instruction, and affective or relational support. Teaching experience was the most frequently articulated source of instructional beliefs, followed by professional development, personal learning experiences, institutional contexts, self-directed learning, and explicit theoretical knowledge. Importantly, the limited explicit reference to theory should not be interpreted as its absence from teachers' pedagogical knowledge; rather, experiential knowledge was more visible in participants' explanations of their instructional decisions. Teachers also generally perceived students as responding positively to their practices, although confusion, individual variation, and classroom challenges were reported. Collectively, these findings position experience and theory not as competing forms of professional knowledge but as potentially complementary resources, suggesting that teacher development may be strengthened by connecting formal pedagogical knowledge with teachers'

accumulated classroom experiences through structured reflection. Nevertheless, the findings are limited by their reliance on retrospective teacher accounts, teacher-reported rather than directly measured student responses, and participants drawn exclusively from Jabodetabek. Future research should therefore integrate interviews with classroom observations and direct student data and employ longitudinal designs to investigate how experience, professional development, theoretical knowledge, instructional practices, and learner responses interact in shaping teachers' pedagogical beliefs over time.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

AI tools were used only for language editing and manuscript refinement. All data analysis, interpretation, and conclusions were conducted by the researchers.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Funding

This research received no specific financial support or funding.

6. REFERENCES

- Agustina, Y., Nazri, M. A., & Wati, L. (2026). From beliefs to practices: Understanding English teachers' literacy perspectives in the Indonesian context. *Alinea: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra dan Pengajaran*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.58218/alinea.v6i1.2383>
- Arnold, J. (Ed.). (1999). *Affect in language learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Asher, J. J. (1977). *Learning another language through actions: The complete teacher's guidebook*. Sky Oaks Productions.
- Astutik, Y., Setiawan, S., & Anam, S. (2022). The ambivalent students' cognition to be English teachers for young learners: A longitudinal study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 818883. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.818883>
- Borg, S. (2003). Teacher cognition in language teaching: A review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe, and do. *Language Teaching*, 36(2), 81–109. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444803001903>
- Borg, S. (2006). *Teacher cognition and language education: Research and practice*. Continuum.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 328–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE.
- Brewster, J., Ellis, G., & Girard, D. (2002). *The primary English teacher's guide*. Penguin English.
- Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chen, F., & Abdullah, R. B. (2022). Teacher cognition and practice of educational equity in English as a foreign language teaching. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 820042. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.820042>
- Copland, F., Garton, S., & Burns, A. (2014). Challenges in teaching English to

- young learners: Global perspectives and local realities. *TESOL Quarterly*, 48(4), 738–762. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.148>
- Farrell, T. S. C. (2015). *Promoting teacher reflection in second language education: A framework for TESOL professionals*. Routledge.
- Freeman, D., & Johnson, K. E. (1998). Reconceptualizing the knowledge-base of language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(3), 397–417. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3588114>
- Garton, S., & Copland, F. (Eds.). (2019). *The Routledge handbook of teaching English to young learners*. Routledge.
- Kagan, D. M. (1992). Implications of research on teacher belief. *Educational Psychologist*, 27(1), 65–90. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326985E2701_6
- Kaniadewi, N. (2022). An analysis of teachers' belief in teaching English to young learners. *Jurnal Basis*, 9(1), 51–62. <https://doi.org/10.33884/basisupb.v9i1.4534>
- Krashen, S. D. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Pergamon Press.
- Lortie, D. C. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ma'wa, J., & Madya, S. (2021). EFL teachers' beliefs in learner autonomy: A study on non-formal education context in Indonesia. *Indonesian Journal of EFL and Linguistics*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.21462/ijefl.v6i2.404>
- Meisani, D. R. (2022). Conditions for teaching English to young learners: Indonesian teachers' perspectives. *English Language Teaching Educational Journal*, 5(2). <https://doi.org/10.12928/eltej.v5i2.4989>
- Mercer, S., & Kostoulas, A. (Eds.). (2018). *Language teacher psychology*. Multilingual Matters.
- Pajares, M. F. (1992). Teachers' beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of Educational Research*, 62(3), 307–332. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543062003307>
- Phipps, S., & Borg, S. (2009). Exploring tensions between teachers' grammar teaching beliefs and practices. *System*, 37(3), 380–390. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2009.03.002>
- Pinter, A. (2017). *Teaching young language learners* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Riwayatiningsih, R., Setyarini, S., & Putra, R. A. A. (2021). Portraying teacher's metacognitive knowledge to promote EFL young learners' critical thinking in Indonesia. *International Journal of Language Education*, 5(1), 552–568. <https://doi.org/10.26858/ijole.v5i1.13043>
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
- Scott, W. A., & Ytreberg, L. H. (1990). *Teaching English to children*. Longman.
- Shi, Y. (2021). The interactive effect of EFL teachers' emotions and cognitions on their pedagogical practices. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 811721. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.811721>
- Shulman, L. S. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.57.1.j463w79r56455411>
- Slattery, M., & Willis, J. (2001). *English for primary teachers*. Oxford University Press.
- Sun, Q., & Zhang, L. J. (2021). A sociocultural perspective on English-as-a-foreign-language teachers' cognitions about form-focused instruction. *Frontiers in Psychology*,

EXPERIENCE OVER THEORY:

WHAT SHAPES ELEMENTARY EFL TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL CHOICES

- 12, 593172.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.593172>
- Susanto, A., Ratnasari, S. L., Susanti, E. N., Megah, S. I., Wilany, E., & Yuliani, S. (2024). Beliefs of English language instruction by Indonesian elementary school teachers: Exploring the influence of environment and educational background. *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan*.
- Tsui, A. B. M. (2003). *Understanding expertise in teaching: Case studies of ESL teachers*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wahyudin, A. Y., Abdul Hamied, F., Muslim, A. B., & Siti Rodliyah, R. (2026). English language teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in a postmodern era: A case from Indonesia. *Frontiers in Education*, 11, 1790354.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2026.1790354>
- Yulianto, S. W., Musthafa, B., & Gustine, G. (2024). Exploring critical pedagogy principles in EFL classrooms: Beliefs and practices of Indonesian teachers. *English Review: Journal of English Education*, 12(2).
<https://doi.org/10.25134/erjee.v12i2.9258>
- Yunita, E., Fithriani, R., & Daulay, E. (2026). Non-native EFL teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in English teaching for young learners: A narrative inquiry. *Journal of General Education and Humanities*, 5(1).
- Zain, F. A. N. S., Alifia, K. A. N., Awalia, I., & Saputra, A. H. (2024). Exploring teacher belief in teaching English to young learners. *UICELE*, 1(1).
- Zare, M. (2026). Teaching experience and oral corrective feedback: Cognitions and reported practices of Iranian in-service EFL teachers. *English Teaching & Learning*.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s42321-026-00230-w>
- Zein, S. (2016). Elementary English education in Indonesia: Policy developments, current practices, and future prospects. *English Today*, 33(1), 53–59.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078416000407>
- Zein, S. (2017). Professional development needs of primary EFL teachers: Perspectives of teachers and teacher educators. *Professional Development in Education*, 43(2), 293–310.
- Zein, S., & Garton, S. (Eds.). (2019). *Early language learning and teacher education: International research and practice*. Multilingual Matters.
- Zhong, W., Ismail, H. H., & Abdul Aziz, A. (2026). Understanding language teacher cognition in EFL education: A systematic review. *World Journal of English Language*, 16(3), 484.