



How Young Learners Learn English: Developmental Differences in Experience, Interaction, and Engagement

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article history: Submitted: April, 20 2026 Final Revised: July, 21 2026 Accepted: July, 27 2026 Published: July, 31 2026	Purpose: This study examined observable patterns of English learning in two primary school classrooms by investigating learners' cognitive behaviours, classroom involvement, interactions, and task responses across two grade levels. Methods: A qualitative multiple-case study was conducted in two Indonesian public elementary schools involving 50 learners (27 Grade 1 and 23 Grade 4 students). Data were collected through structured non-participant classroom observations supported by video recordings and field notes. The data were analysed in two stages. First, each classroom was analysed independently to identify patterns of learners' observable cognitive behaviours, classroom involvement, interactions, and task responses. Second, a cross-case thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns of observable English learning across the two classrooms. Findings: The classroom observations identified differences in learners' cognitive behaviours and classroom involvement across the two grade-level classrooms. In the observed Grade 1 classroom, learners relied more frequently on teacher modelling, concrete experiences, repetition, and structured guidance, whereas learners in the Grade 4 classroom more often drew on prior knowledge, collaborated with peers, and responded to classroom tasks with greater independence. Across both classrooms, three recurring patterns of observable English learning activities were identified: learning through experience, learning through interaction, and learning through engagement. Research Implications: The findings suggest that instructional practices responsive to learners' observable cognitive behaviours, classroom involvement, and interaction patterns may better support English learning in primary school classrooms. Originality: This study contributes context-specific evidence on observable classroom behaviours associated with English learning, extending understanding of how learners participated in English lessons across two primary school classrooms.
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INTRODUCTION

Children's English language education has become an increasingly important area of research and educational policy worldwide as English continues to function as a global language for communication, education, and future employment. In many countries, English instruction has been introduced at the primary school level based on the assumption that early exposure provides children with greater opportunities to develop communicative competence and positive attitudes toward language learning (Cholewa, 2024; Inostroza et al., 2024; Song et al., 2025). Although the extent and objectives of English instruction vary across educational systems, there is growing international recognition that primary education constitutes a critical stage for establishing the linguistic, cognitive, and socio-emotional foundations that support subsequent language development (Alexander, 2025). Consequently, improving the quality of English learning during the early years has become a shared concern among researchers, curriculum developers, and language educators seeking to design learning environments that are responsive to children's developmental needs.

Unlike adolescent and adult learners, young learners acquire an additional language while undergoing rapid cognitive, social, emotional, and linguistic development. Their learning is strongly influenced by developmental characteristics that shape how they perceive, process, and interact with new language. Rather than relying primarily on abstract reasoning, young learners tend to construct understanding through concrete experiences, meaningful interactions, physical activities, and social engagement (Li et al., 2023; Liang et al., 2025). Nevertheless, young learners do not represent a homogeneous group. Differences in age, cognitive maturity, prior learning experiences, motivation, interests, and classroom contexts influence how individual learners participate in English learning and construct linguistic knowledge. These developmental differences suggest that understanding how children learn English requires attention not only to instructional practices but also to the diverse ways learners experience classroom learning.

Reflecting this growing interest, previous research has examined young learners' English education from multiple perspectives. Existing studies have investigated the effectiveness of various instructional approaches, including communicative language teaching, game-based learning, storytelling, technology-enhanced instruction, and artificial intelligence-supported learning environments (Al-khresheh, 2024; Alotaibi, 2024; Hwang et al., 2023; Mollick & Mollick, 2023; Wang et al., 2023; Yuan, 2024). Other studies have explored learners' motivation, attitudes, classroom engagement, parental involvement, and teachers' perceptions of English learning in primary education (Liang et al., 2025; Lucas, 2023; Nie & Mavrou, 2026; Saragi et al., 2022; Wahyuni & Bee Tin, 2026). Collectively, this body of research has substantially advanced understanding of effective pedagogical practices and the contextual factors that support successful English learning among young learners.

Taken together, previous studies have established that young learners benefit from developmentally appropriate instruction, meaningful classroom interaction, and supportive learning environments. They have also demonstrated that English learning during childhood is influenced by a complex interplay of cognitive, motivational, and contextual factors (Becker et al., 2023; Cade et al., 2022). As a result, the literature provides a strong foundation for understanding instructional practices and contextual conditions associated with English learning in primary classrooms. However, relatively fewer studies have closely examined learners' observable classroom behaviours during naturally occurring English lessons, particularly how learners participate in classroom activities, respond to teacher support, interact with peers, and complete learning tasks across different primary grade levels. Greater attention to these observable classroom behaviours may provide complementary evidence for understanding how English learning is manifested within authentic primary school classrooms.

Despite these important contributions, the existing literature has remained predominantly oriented toward evaluating instructional approaches, technological innovations, or classroom activities by examining outcomes such as achievement, motivation, engagement, or attitudes (Daniel et al., 2024; Md Sabri et al., 2024). While these studies have generated valuable pedagogical knowledge, they provide comparatively less evidence about how learners' observable classroom behaviours unfold during authentic English lessons, including how learners participate in classroom activities, respond to teacher support, interact with peers, and engage with instructional tasks. Consequently, the ways in which these observable classroom behaviours are manifested across different primary grade levels remain insufficiently documented within authentic classroom settings.

Furthermore, existing studies have often treated young learners as a relatively homogeneous population despite substantial developmental variation across the primary school years. Children's cognitive abilities, social interactions, classroom participation, and approaches to learning evolve considerably as they progress through different stages of development (Ding & Yu, 2025; Kang et al., 2026). As a result, learners of different ages may participate in and respond to similar instructional activities in different ways. However, relatively little empirical attention has been devoted to examining how these differences are reflected in learners' observable classroom behaviours, interactions, participation, and task responses across different primary grade levels within authentic English classroom settings. Addressing this gap may provide context-specific evidence to inform the design of developmentally responsive English language instruction while recognising that learners' classroom participation is shaped by both developmental characteristics and the instructional contexts in which learning occurs.

To address these gaps, the present study explored observable patterns of English learning in two primary school classrooms by examining learners' classroom behaviours, interactions, participation, and task responses across two grade levels. Focusing on Grade 1 and Grade 4 learners, the study investigated how learners in two authentic classroom contexts participated in classroom activities, interacted with teachers and peers, and responded to English learning tasks during regular classroom instruction. Rather than evaluating the effectiveness of particular teaching methods or measuring learning outcomes, the study adopted an observational approach to document learners' observable classroom behaviours as they occurred during everyday English lessons.

By examining two Indonesian primary school classrooms representing different grade levels, this study contributes context-specific evidence on observable classroom behaviours associated with English learning. Rather than proposing a general developmental model, the findings illustrate how classroom participation, interaction, and task responses were manifested across two authentic classroom cases. These findings may inform the design of developmentally responsive English instruction while recognising that learners' classroom behaviours are shaped by both developmental characteristics and the instructional contexts in which they occur. Accordingly, this study addressed the following research questions: RQ1. What observable differences in cognitive behaviours and classroom involvement were evident between the Grade 1 and Grade 4 English classrooms? RQ2. What patterns of classroom interaction and observable learning behaviours characterised English learning across the two classrooms?

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design as suggested by Stake (2013) to examine observable patterns of English learning across two elementary school classrooms representing different grade levels. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to develop an in-depth understanding of learners' observable cognitive behaviours, classroom involvement, interactions, and task responses as they naturally occurred during English lessons. Rather than measuring predetermined variables or evaluating the effectiveness of instructional interventions, the study focused on documenting and interpreting observable classroom behaviours within authentic instructional contexts. In this study, each classroom constituted a separate case. Case 1 comprised one Grade 1 English classroom in a public elementary school, while Case 2 comprised one Grade 4 English classroom in a different public elementary school. The boundaries of each case were defined by a single classroom, its teacher, enrolled learners, and the observed English lessons. The multiple-case design enabled an in-depth examination of each classroom individually, followed by a cross-case synthesis to identify recurring patterns and differences in observable classroom behaviours across the two cases.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in two public elementary schools in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, where English was offered as part of the school learning programme. The schools were purposively selected because they provided comparable educational contexts while representing typical Indonesian primary school settings. The study focused on two intact classrooms representing different developmental stages of young learners.

Participants comprised 50 learners, including 27 Grade 1 learners aged approximately six to seven years and 23 Grade 4 learners aged approximately nine to ten years. These grade levels were purposively selected because they represent different age groups within primary education and therefore provided an opportunity to compare learners' observable classroom behaviours across two stages of primary schooling. Piaget (1976) theory of cognitive development was used later as an interpretive framework when discussing the observed classroom behaviours rather than as a basis for classifying individual learners.

This selection enabled the study to explore how learners at different developmental stages engaged in English learning and classroom activities within authentic instructional contexts. The detail demographic is presented in Table 1. Additionally, to improve contextual comparability, both classrooms followed the national elementary curriculum and implemented English as a local content subject. Observations were conducted during regular English lessons of comparable duration (approximately 70–80 minutes). Although the lesson topics differed according to grade level, both lessons focused on introducing and practising age-appropriate vocabulary through teacher-led classroom activities. Similar instructional resources, including visual materials, oral modelling, questioning, repetition, and classroom interaction, were observed in both settings. Nevertheless, each classroom was taught by a different teacher using naturally occurring instructional practices. Consequently, the study does not attempt to isolate developmental stage from contextual variables but instead explores how English learning was constructed within two authentic classroom contexts representing different developmental stages.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Case	School Type		Grade	Age (Years)	Participants (n)
Case 1	Public	Elementary	Grade 1	6–7	27
Case 2	Public	Elementary	Grade 4	9–10	23
Total					50

Research Instruments

In this study, cognitive behaviours refer to learners' observable responses to classroom tasks, including following instructions, using prior knowledge, and problem-solving behaviours. Classroom involvement refers to learners' observable attention, persistence, participation, and responsiveness during learning activities. Classroom interaction refers to verbal and non-verbal exchanges between learners and teachers or peers during instructional activities. Observable learning behaviours refer to behaviours such as repetition, imitation, task completion, and the use of instructional resources that were directly documented during classroom observations. Data were collected primarily through structured non-participant classroom observations. An observation protocol was developed based on the literature on young learners' characteristics and English language learning, particularly the works of (Alexander, 2025; Liang et al., 2025; Pinter, 2012; Yao & Abdullah, 2026). To observe classroom involvement, the protocol was also informed by the conceptual dimensions of the Leuven Involvement Scale (Laevers, 1994) including learners' concentration, persistence, active participation, and responsiveness. These dimensions were used as qualitative observational indicators rather than as a standardized scoring instrument. The protocol was organised into five observation domains covering learners' cognitive behaviours, classroom involvement, teacher–learner interaction, peer interaction, and observable learning behaviours. The observation domains and their corresponding indicators are summarised in Table 2.

To enhance the completeness and credibility of the data, classroom interactions were documented using video recordings and researcher field notes. Video recordings enabled repeated examination of classroom behaviours during analysis, while field notes captured contextual information such as classroom atmosphere, teacher instructions, and learners' spontaneous responses. Together, these data sources provided complementary evidence for interpreting learners' observable classroom behaviours.

Table 2. Classroom Observation Protocol

Observation Focus	Indicators	References
Cognitive behaviours	Following instructions, reasoning, use of prior knowledge, problem-solving	Pinter (2012)
Classroom involvement	Attention, participation, persistence, concentration	Laevers (1994)
Teacher–learner interaction	Responses to teacher modelling, questioning, feedback	Slattery & Willis (2001)
Peer interaction	Collaboration, discussion, peer support	Howes et al. (1988)
Learning behaviours	Repetition, imitation, use of visual support, task engagement	Pinter (2012)

Research Procedures

Data collection was conducted over four English lessons in each classroom during regular instructional sessions to capture learners' natural English learning behaviours in authentic classroom contexts. Throughout the observations, the researcher assumed the role of a non-participant observer without intervening in classroom instruction. This approach enabled the documentation of learners' cognitive behaviours, classroom involvement, and interactions as they occurred naturally during teaching and learning activities. During each observation, classroom interactions were documented using the structured observation protocol, supported by video recordings and field notes. The video recordings allowed repeated examination of classroom events during the analysis process, while field notes were used to document contextual information, including classroom atmosphere, teacher instructions, and notable learner behaviours. Data from all observation sessions were subsequently organised and prepared for analysis to identify recurring patterns of learners' English learning across the two classroom settings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two sequential stages to provide a comprehensive understanding of young learners' English learning. The first stage focused on identifying learners' developmental characteristics, while the second stage explored the learning processes that emerged during classroom interaction. This two-stage analytical approach enabled the study to examine not only learners' developmental profiles but also how these characteristics shaped their English learning experiences.

In the first stage, classroom observation data were analysed to identify learners' cognitive behaviours and levels of classroom involvement. Learners' observable cognitive behaviours were interpreted with reference to Piaget (1976) theory of cognitive development to provide a theoretical perspective for discussing age-related differences observed across the two classroom cases. The theory served as an interpretive framework rather than a means of assigning learners to specific developmental stages.

Classroom involvement was analysed using the Leuven Involvement Scale, which considers learners' concentration, persistence, motivation, and active participation during learning activities. The findings from this stage provided developmental profiles of Grade 1 and Grade 4 learners, offering a theoretical basis for understanding differences in their classroom engagement and learning behaviours.

In the second stage, observation notes, video recordings, and field notes were analysed using [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) six-phase thematic analysis. The analysis began with repeated familiarisation with the data, followed by systematic coding to identify meaningful units related to learners' English learning. Similar codes were then organised into broader categories and refined into recurring themes through an iterative process of reviewing, defining, and naming themes. The final themes were interpreted alongside the developmental profiles established in the first stage and discussed in relation to the literature on young learners' English language learning. This analytical process enabled the study to generate an in-depth understanding of how learners at different developmental stages experienced, engaged in, and constructed English learning within authentic classroom contexts.

RESULTS

Cognitive Behaviours and Classroom Involvement

The first stage of the analysis examined learners' observable cognitive behaviours and classroom involvement in the two classroom cases. Classroom observations revealed differences between the Grade 1 and Grade 4 classrooms in the ways learners responded to classroom tasks and participated in instructional activities. These observed differences provided the context for examining recurring patterns of classroom interaction and participation during English lessons.

a. Cognitive Characteristics

Classroom observations revealed clear differences in the cognitive characteristics demonstrated by Grade 1 and Grade 4 learners during English lessons. These differences were reflected in the ways learners processed classroom instructions, approached learning tasks, and constructed English language understanding. While Grade 1 learners depended largely on teacher modelling, repetition, and concrete learning experiences, Grade 4 learners demonstrated greater independence by drawing on prior knowledge, applying logical reasoning, and collaborating with peers. These findings indicate that learners' cognitive development influenced not only what they were able to accomplish during classroom activities but also the strategies they employed to learn English.

One of the most noticeable differences concerned learners' responses to classroom instructions. Most Grade 1 learners were able to follow simple instructions when they were accompanied by gestures, demonstrations, or visual support. However, tasks involving multiple sequential steps often required additional teacher explanation, and several learners were observed watching their classmates before attempting the activities themselves. In contrast, Grade 4 learners generally followed multi-step instructions independently and demonstrated a clearer understanding of task procedures without repeated teacher guidance. They were also more capable of transferring previously learned vocabulary and expressions to new classroom activities, suggesting a greater capacity to organise and apply existing knowledge in unfamiliar learning situations.

The observations also revealed differences in how learners constructed English knowledge during classroom activities. Grade 1 learners relied primarily on concrete learning experiences, including pictures, flashcards, classroom objects, repetition, and teacher demonstrations. These resources enabled learners to associate English words with visible objects and actions, making language input more meaningful and easier to understand. Conversely, Grade 4 learners demonstrated emerging logical reasoning by connecting new learning with prior knowledge, explaining simple answers, and discussing ideas with classmates before completing tasks. Rather than depending exclusively on teacher modelling, they increasingly constructed understanding through reasoning and collaborative interaction.

Another distinguishing characteristic concerned learners' level of independence. Grade 1 learners frequently sought confirmation from the teacher before beginning or completing classroom tasks, indicating a continued reliance on external guidance during English learning. Many learners also imitated the teacher or observed peers before attempting responses independently. By comparison, Grade 4 learners displayed greater confidence in completing activities, solving problems, and participating in pair or group discussions with minimal teacher assistance. Although some learners still benefited from teacher support during more challenging tasks, the overall pattern suggested a developmental shift from imitation and guided participation toward increasingly autonomous learning.

b. Classroom Involvement

The differences in learners' cognitive characteristics were also reflected in their patterns of classroom involvement during English lessons. Although learners in both grade levels actively participated in classroom activities, the nature

and consistency of their involvement varied according to their developmental stage. While Grade 1 learners demonstrated higher levels of engagement during activities that involved movement, songs, games, and teacher guidance, Grade 4 learners generally maintained more consistent involvement across different instructional activities and showed greater independence in sustaining their participation throughout the lessons.

For Grade 1 learners, classroom involvement was strongly influenced by the type of learning activity. Learners participated enthusiastically when lessons incorporated songs, games, visual materials, and physical movement, but their attention often declined during extended teacher explanations or activities requiring prolonged listening. Several learners relied on teacher encouragement or observed their classmates before joining classroom activities, indicating that active participation was closely associated with external support and engaging instructional experiences. Nevertheless, even learners who participated less frequently were often able to demonstrate understanding when provided with individual opportunities to respond.

In contrast, Grade 4 learners exhibited more stable patterns of classroom involvement throughout the lessons. Most learners remained attentive during teacher explanations, actively contributed to pair and group discussions, and completed classroom tasks with relatively limited teacher assistance. Their participation was characterised not only by frequent verbal responses but also by sustained attention, collaborative problem-solving, and persistence in completing learning activities. Although a small number of learners occasionally became distracted during more demanding tasks, they generally re-engaged with the lesson without requiring extensive teacher intervention. To sum up, the findings suggest that classroom involvement developed alongside learners' cognitive characteristics. As learners became more cognitively mature, they demonstrated greater capacity to regulate their attention, participate independently, and sustain engagement across a wider range of classroom activities. Importantly, the observations also revealed that observable participation did not always correspond to learners' understanding, as several quieter learners across both grade levels demonstrated accurate comprehension despite limited verbal participation. These developmental patterns provide an important context for understanding the learning processes discussed in the following section.

Learning Processes of Young Learners

The second stage of the analysis examined how young learners constructed English learning during classroom interaction. Building on the developmental profiles presented in the previous section, the analysis revealed that learners' English learning was shaped not only by their cognitive characteristics but also by the ways they experienced classroom activities, interacted with others, and engaged in learning tasks. Across both grade levels, three interrelated learning processes consistently emerged from the data: learning through experience, learning through interaction, and learning through engagement. Although these processes were evident in both Grade 1 and Grade 4 classrooms, they were expressed differently according to learners' developmental characteristics and classroom participation. Together, these themes provide a comprehensive understanding of how young learners constructed English learning within authentic classroom contexts.

a. Learning through Experience

Classroom observations revealed that young learners primarily constructed English learning through direct experiences with classroom activities, instructional materials, and teacher demonstrations. Rather than acquiring language through explicit explanations of vocabulary or grammar, learners developed understanding by actively engaging with concrete experiences that connected English input to meaningful actions and objects. Across both grade levels, experiential learning emerged as a fundamental process through which learners interpreted new language, although the nature of these experiences varied according to their developmental characteristics.

For Grade 1 learners, learning was strongly mediated by concrete and sensory experiences. Classroom observations showed that learners understood English more effectively when new vocabulary and expressions were introduced through pictures, flashcards, gestures, songs, and real classroom objects. Teacher demonstrations also played a central role, as learners frequently observed actions before imitating them during classroom activities. Rather than responding immediately to verbal explanations, many learners relied on visual and physical cues to interpret meaning and complete learning tasks. These experiences enabled learners to associate English words with observable objects and actions, making language input more comprehensible and meaningful within the classroom context.

Although Grade 4 learners also benefited from concrete learning experiences, their learning extended beyond observation and imitation. They frequently connected new vocabulary with previously acquired knowledge and everyday experiences, allowing them to interpret unfamiliar language more independently. During several classroom activities, learners applied previously learned expressions to new situations, demonstrating an ability to transfer prior knowledge to subsequent learning tasks. Concrete instructional materials continued to support learning; however, these

materials functioned primarily as resources for reinforcing understanding rather than as the principal means of constructing meaning.

Across both classrooms, experiential learning was not limited to the use of instructional materials but encompassed learners' active participation in classroom experiences. Learning occurred as learners observed demonstrations, manipulated learning materials, practised language through classroom activities, and related new English input to familiar experiences. While Grade 1 learners depended more heavily on immediate sensory experiences and teacher modelling, Grade 4 learners increasingly integrated these experiences with prior knowledge and independent reasoning. Across the two classroom cases, learners were observed participating in English activities characterised by concrete experiences. In the Grade 1 classroom, these activities relied more heavily on teacher modelling and sensory experiences, whereas in the Grade 4 classroom learners more frequently connected classroom activities with prior knowledge.

b. Learning through Interaction

Building upon their classroom experiences, young learners also constructed English learning through interactions with teachers and peers. Classroom observations indicated that learning was facilitated through continuous social exchanges in which learners received guidance, observed others, asked for clarification, and collaboratively completed learning tasks. These interactions enabled learners to interpret language input, confirm understanding, and gradually develop confidence in using English. Although interaction supported learning across both grade levels, the nature of these interactions differed according to learners' developmental characteristics.

For Grade 1 learners, teacher–learner interaction constituted the primary source of learning support. Learners frequently relied on teacher demonstrations, verbal prompts, gestures, and immediate feedback to understand classroom instructions and complete learning activities. Many learners carefully observed the teacher before attempting to respond and often sought confirmation before performing classroom tasks independently. In the Grade 1 classroom, teacher guidance was consistently observed during classroom participation, whereas in the Grade 4 classroom peer interaction occurred more frequently during collaborative activities.

In contrast, Grade 4 learners demonstrated greater reliance on peer interaction as part of their English learning. During pair and group activities, learners exchanged ideas, discussed possible answers, and assisted one another in completing classroom tasks. They frequently compared responses, clarified instructions, and negotiated meaning before reaching shared understandings. Teacher support remained important, particularly when introducing new learning materials or explaining more challenging tasks; however, learners increasingly used collaborative discussion to construct understanding and solve problems independently. These interactions reflected a gradual shift from teacher-dependent learning towards more collaborative and learner-centred participation.

Overall, the findings suggest that interaction functioned as a dynamic process through which learners co-constructed English learning. While Grade 1 learners depended primarily on teacher-mediated interaction to support comprehension and participation, Grade 4 learners increasingly learned through collaborative exchanges with their peers. These patterns indicate that as learners' cognitive development progressed, interaction evolved from a predominantly instructional resource into a collaborative learning process that enabled learners to negotiate meaning, refine understanding, and develop greater confidence in using English.

c. Learning through Engagement

Beyond learning through experience and interaction, classroom observations revealed that young learners also developed English through sustained engagement in classroom activities. Engagement extended beyond observable participation and reflected learners' cognitive, behavioural, and emotional investment in the learning process. Across both classrooms, learners demonstrated deeper understanding when they became actively involved in meaningful learning activities that captured their attention, encouraged participation, and sustained their interest throughout the lesson. These findings suggest that engagement functioned not merely as an indicator of participation but as an important process through which English learning was facilitated.

For Grade 1 learners, engagement was closely associated with enjoyable and activity-based learning experiences. Learners became more attentive and participated more actively during songs, games, storytelling, movement-based activities, and the use of visual materials. These activities encouraged learners to imitate language, respond to teacher prompts, and participate without hesitation. In contrast, engagement tended to decrease during extended teacher explanations or activities that required prolonged listening with limited opportunities for participation. Nevertheless, even learners who participated less frequently often demonstrated understanding when they were provided with supportive and interactive learning opportunities, indicating that engagement was strengthened when learning was meaningful and developmentally appropriate.

Among Grade 4 learners, engagement was characterised by sustained concentration, collaborative participation, and increasing responsibility for learning. Learners remained actively involved during pair discussions, problem-solving activities, and classroom tasks that required them to apply prior knowledge and work together to complete learning objectives. Their engagement was reflected not only in frequent participation but also in their persistence in completing tasks, willingness to exchange ideas, and ability to remain focused throughout different phases of the lesson. These observations suggest that older learners maintained engagement by actively contributing to the learning process rather than simply responding to teacher direction.

Taken together, the findings indicate that classroom engagement was consistently observed alongside participation in classroom activities. The forms of engagement differed between the two classroom cases. While the forms of engagement differed across developmental stages, learners in both classrooms demonstrated stronger learning when they were cognitively attentive, emotionally interested, and behaviourally involved in classroom activities. These findings further suggest that effective English learning depends not only on providing appropriate instructional experiences and opportunities for interaction but also on creating classroom environments that sustain learners' active engagement throughout the learning process.

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that young learners learned English through the dynamic interplay of experience, interaction, and engagement. Rather than operating as separate processes, these three dimensions mutually reinforced one another throughout classroom learning. Learners first encountered English through meaningful experiences, developed understanding through interactions with teachers and peers, and consolidated learning through sustained engagement in classroom activities. Although the manifestation of these processes varied according to learners' developmental characteristics, together they illustrate that English learning among young learners is an active, socially mediated, and developmentally situated process. This integrated understanding provides the basis for the discussion of how developmental differences shape English learning in primary school classrooms.

DISCUSSION

Developmental Characteristics Shape How Young Learners Learn English

The findings suggest that developmental characteristics, together with classroom context and instructional practices, influenced how learners engaged in English learning. Because the two cases were situated in different schools and taught by different teachers, the observed differences should not be interpreted as evidence of developmental stage alone. Classroom organisation, teacher practices, lesson design, and instructional resources also likely contributed to learners' participation and learning behaviours. Rather than isolating developmental effects, this study illustrates how developmental characteristics interacted with authentic classroom contexts to shape English learning. While previous research has consistently acknowledged that children at different ages possess different cognitive abilities ([Liang et al., 2025](#); [Wang et al., 2023](#)), the present study extends this understanding by showing that developmental differences influence not only learners' cognitive capacities but also the processes through which they construct English learning. Across the two classroom contexts, Grade 1 learners primarily relied on teacher modelling, concrete experiences, and guided participation, whereas Grade 4 learners demonstrated increasing independence by drawing on prior knowledge, engaging in collaborative problem-solving, and sustaining participation across a wider range of classroom activities. These findings suggest that developmental progression is reflected not merely in what learners know but in how they learn.

This interpretation is consistent with [Piaget \(1976\)](#) theory of cognitive development, which proposes that children's thinking evolves from dependence on concrete experiences toward increasingly logical and organised reasoning. Learners in the pre-operational stage benefited most from demonstrations, visual support, repetition, and immediate teacher guidance because these instructional experiences provided tangible representations of language that supported meaning-making ([Sowmya & Rani, 2025](#); [Yao & Abdullah, 2026](#)). In contrast, learners in the concrete operational stage demonstrated greater capacity to organise information, relate new language to existing knowledge, and participate more independently in collaborative learning. These findings therefore reinforce the importance of aligning English instruction with learners' developmental readiness rather than assuming that similar instructional approaches will be equally effective across different primary grade levels.

The findings also support and extend previous research on English for Young Learners. [Liang et al. \(2025\)](#) argue that younger children learn most effectively through concrete experiences, physical activity, and meaningful contexts, while older primary learners gradually develop greater analytical ability and social awareness. Similarly, [Pinter, \(2012\)](#) emphasises that children's language learning evolves alongside their cognitive and social development, requiring instructional approaches that respond to their changing learning needs. The present study contributes additional empirical evidence by demonstrating how these developmental differences become visible during authentic classroom

interaction. Rather than simply influencing learners' performance or participation, developmental characteristics shaped the mechanisms through which learners interpreted classroom experiences, interacted with others, and constructed English understanding.

An important implication of these findings is that developmental characteristics should not be viewed merely as learner attributes but as a foundation for understanding English learning itself. The observed differences between Grade 1 and Grade 4 learners indicate that English learning is a developmentally situated process in which cognitive maturity influences learners' ability to benefit from different forms of instruction and classroom participation. Consequently, effective English teaching for young learners requires more than age-appropriate materials or enjoyable classroom activities. It requires pedagogical approaches that recognise how children's evolving cognitive and social capacities shape the ways they engage with language learning throughout the primary school years.

English Learning as an Experiential, Social, and Engaged Process

Beyond highlighting the role of developmental characteristics, the findings demonstrate that young learners' English learning is best understood as an experiential, social, and engaged process. Rather than functioning as independent dimensions, learning through experience, interaction, and engagement operated as interconnected processes that collectively supported learners' construction of English knowledge. Classroom experiences provided opportunities for learners to encounter new language, social interactions enabled them to negotiate and refine understanding, and sustained engagement allowed them to maintain attention and actively participate in learning activities. Taken together, these findings suggest that English learning develops through the continuous interaction of cognitive, social, and behavioural processes within authentic classroom contexts.

The experiential nature of learning was particularly evident in the ways learners connected English with meaningful classroom experiences. Grade 1 learners relied heavily on concrete materials, teacher demonstrations, songs, games, and physical activities to interpret new language, whereas Grade 4 learners increasingly integrated these experiences with prior knowledge and logical reasoning. These findings support constructivist perspectives of learning, which propose that learners actively construct knowledge through meaningful experiences rather than passively receiving information (Kim & Adlof, 2024; Le & Nguyen, 2024). They also reinforce previous research suggesting that young learners benefit most from instruction that provides authentic, contextually meaningful opportunities to engage with language (Al-khresheh, 2024; Ramadan Elbaoui Shaddad & Jember, 2024). However, the present study extends this understanding by demonstrating that the role of experience changes as children's cognitive development progresses. While concrete experiences primarily functioned as the foundation for meaning-making among younger learners, they became resources for deeper reflection and knowledge integration among older learners.

The findings further illustrate that English learning is inherently social. Across both classrooms, interactions with teachers and peers enabled learners to clarify meanings, test ideas, receive feedback, and build confidence in using English. Nevertheless, the nature of these interactions differed according to learners' developmental characteristics. Teacher guidance remained central for Grade 1 learners, whereas Grade 4 learners increasingly relied on collaborative discussions and peer support to construct understanding. These findings are consistent with sociocultural perspectives that view learning as a socially mediated process in which knowledge is co-constructed through interaction (Lantolf & Xi, 2023). Importantly, the present study demonstrates that the contribution of interaction extends beyond classroom participation; interaction served as a mechanism through which learners actively developed English understanding within meaningful social contexts.

Engagement represented the process that sustained learning throughout classroom instruction. The findings showed that learners demonstrated deeper understanding when they were cognitively attentive, emotionally interested, and behaviourally involved in classroom activities. Notably, engagement should not be interpreted solely as observable participation, as several quieter learners demonstrated clear comprehension despite limited verbal responses. This finding suggests that engagement encompasses internal cognitive investment as well as external behavioural participation (Huang et al., 2022; Li et al., 2023; Li & Lajoie, 2022). Consequently, opportunities for meaningful engagement should be regarded as an essential condition for successful English learning rather than merely an indicator of classroom activity.

Collectively, these findings suggest that young learners construct English learning through the dynamic integration of experience, interaction, and engagement. Rather than operating as discrete processes, these dimensions mutually reinforce one another throughout classroom learning. Experience provides the context for encountering language, interaction supports the negotiation of meaning, and engagement sustains learners' active participation in learning. This integrated perspective extends existing research by offering a more holistic explanation of how young

learners learn English, emphasising that effective language learning emerges through the interplay of developmental, social, and instructional processes rather than through any single pedagogical approach.

Implications for Developmentally Responsive English Language Teaching

The findings have important implications for English language teaching in primary schools. They show that teaching should reflect learners' developmental stages rather than applying the same approach across all grade levels. While enjoyable and interactive activities remain valuable throughout primary education, younger and older learners benefit from different forms of instruction. For younger learners, effective teaching involves concrete and highly supported activities such as teacher modelling, visual aids, songs, games, movement, and repetition. These strategies help children connect new language with familiar experiences while providing the guidance they need to learn. In contrast, older learners benefit from opportunities to apply prior knowledge, collaborate with peers, solve problems, and participate in discussions. As learners mature, instruction should gradually encourage greater independence and critical thinking. This study examined two naturally occurring classroom cases situated in different schools and taught by different teachers. Consequently, developmental stage was examined alongside variations in school context, instructional practices, classroom environment, and lesson design. The findings therefore should not be interpreted as demonstrating causal effects of developmental development alone, but rather as illustrating how learners at different developmental stages experienced English learning within authentic classroom settings. Future research could employ matched classroom designs, longitudinal approaches, or within-school comparisons to better distinguish developmental influences from contextual factors.

Limitation of the Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study examined two naturally occurring English classrooms in different schools, each taught by a different teacher. Consequently, the observed differences may reflect not only variation in learners' grade levels but also differences in instructional practices, classroom environments, and school contexts. The findings should therefore be interpreted as context-specific observations rather than evidence of developmental effects alone. Second, the study relied exclusively on classroom observations, video recordings, and field notes. As a result, the findings are limited to observable classroom behaviours, interactions, and task responses and cannot provide direct evidence of learners' internal cognitive processes, language acquisition, or long-term learning outcomes. Third, learners were grouped according to grade level and age, and no independent assessment of cognitive development was conducted. Accordingly, Piagetian theory is used as an interpretive framework rather than as empirical confirmation of individual developmental stages. Finally, because this qualitative multiple-case study was conducted in two elementary school classrooms within one Indonesian context, the findings are intended to provide analytical insights into observable classroom learning rather than statistical generalisations to other educational settings.

CONCLUSION

This study explored observable patterns of English learning by examining learners' cognitive behaviours, classroom involvement, interactions, and task responses in two primary school classrooms representing different grade levels. Classroom observations identified differences between the Grade 1 and Grade 4 classrooms. In the observed Grade 1 classroom, learners more frequently relied on teacher modelling, concrete experiences, repetition, and structured guidance, whereas learners in the observed Grade 4 classroom more often drew on prior knowledge, collaborated with peers, and responded to classroom tasks with greater independence. These observed differences may be interpreted in relation to developmental perspectives discussed in the literature, while also reflecting the instructional practices and classroom contexts in which the lessons took place. Across both classroom cases, recurring patterns of observable classroom behaviour were identified, characterised by experience, interaction, and engagement during English lessons. These patterns illustrate how learners participated in classroom activities and responded to instructional experiences within authentic classroom settings rather than establishing how learning occurs more generally. This study contributes context-specific evidence from two Indonesian primary school classrooms by documenting observable classroom behaviours associated with English learning across two grade levels. Rather than proposing a general developmental model, the findings provide an empirically grounded interpretation that complements existing research on English for Young Learners. The findings also highlight the value of designing English instruction that is responsive to learners' age-related characteristics while recognising that classroom participation is shaped by both learner characteristics and instructional context. As this qualitative multiple-case study was conducted in only two classrooms within one Indonesian context, the findings are intended to provide analytical insights rather than statistical generalisations. Future

research involving a wider range of classroom settings, more comparable instructional contexts, or longitudinal designs could further examine how observable classroom behaviours develop across the primary school years.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

II conceived and initiated the study and prepared the first draft of the manuscript. AA contributed to the research methodology, conducted the data analysis, and assisted in interpreting the findings. DR and HD developed the research instruments, supported the data collection process, and contributed to data preparation. SS and MZ critically revised and edited the manuscript, provided intellectual input to improve its academic quality, and approved the final version for submission. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors used GPT-5 during the preparation of this manuscript solely for language editing and improving clarity of expression. After using the tool, the authors carefully reviewed, revised, and verified all content and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript. No artificial intelligence was used to generate the study design, collect or analyse data, interpret the findings, or draw the study's conclusions.

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