

Chapter 5

Maintaining Young Learners’ Attention in Early Childhood English Classrooms

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A. THE CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE

Maintaining learners’ attention is a continuing challenge in early childhood English classrooms. Young children are still developing the cognitive and self-regulatory capacities needed to sustain attention, manage distractions, and remain engaged in learning activities (Savina, 2026). This developmental characteristic becomes particularly relevant in English learning, where children may encounter a language that is not commonly used in their everyday communication. Their participation in learning can therefore be influenced by their developmental characteristics, interest, and familiarity with the learning context. Research on English learning for young learners emphasizes the importance of designing learning experiences that correspond with children’s developmental needs and interest rather than simply applying approaches intended for older learners (Muthmainnah et al., 2019; Sumarni et al., 2022).

The challenge has become increasingly relevant in contemporary childhood contexts, in which children encounter diverse

forms of stimulation through digital media, audiovisual content, interactive applications, and rapidly changing form of entertainment. These experiences are not inherently negative and may provide opportunities for learning and exploration. However, they create a more complex context for educators who seek to sustain children's involvements in classroom learning. UNICEF highlight that children's experiences of play are increasingly influenced by digital technology and emphasizes the importance of balancing digital experiences with play, physical activity, and social interaction. For early childhood English education, this context calls for greater attention to how learning environments support children's continued involvement without losing sight of the developmental nature of early childhood learning (Britto et al., 2025).

The challenge, however, is not simply about keeping children focused during English lessons. An important unresolved issue is how teachers can sustain children's attention while respecting the developmental nature of early childhood learning. In young learners' classrooms, teachers' efforts to regain attention are closely related to children's responses and participations (Recard & Nathania, 2021). This suggests that maintaining attention involves more than classroom control, it requires teachers to understand how children engage with learning and to consider whether classroom practices are appropriate for their developmental characteristic, addressing this challenge is therefore essential to creating English learning experiences that are both purposeful and responsive to young children's need.

B. THE PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

Maintaining young attention in early childhood English classrooms requires teachers to move beyond the expectation that children should remain focused on one type of activity for an extended period. Instead, attention can be supported through learning experience that provide appropriate variation in pace, interactions, and level of physical involvement. Practical solutions should therefore consider how activities are sequenced, how children are invited to participate, and how different learning resources are used without losing sight of developmental characteristics of young learners. The

following four approaches offer practical ways to sustain children's attention while maintaining the playful and developmentally appropriate nature of early childhood English learning.

Varying Activity Types to Sustain Young Learners' Attention

The young learner has a much shorter attention span and is likely to become bored if they are required to sustain an activity for too long, especially when that activity is not sufficiently interesting (Harmer, 2007). There are significant implications of this trait for planning the activities related to English learning. Instead of asking children to sustain the same attention span and type through a lesson, teachers can offer different lengths, speeds, and forms. Xadicha (2025) recommends using a variety of short activities and alternating lively or "stirring" activities with calmer or "settling" ones when working with young learners. Such variation can provide changes in pace and help maintain children's interest throughout the lesson. The purpose is not to establish a rigid time limit for every activity, but to create a learning rhythm that responds to children's changing levels of attention and involvement.

A teacher may begin an English lesson with a relatively calm activity, such as introducing vocabulary through pictures or objects. After children have listened and responded to several words, the teacher can change the pace by inviting them to stand and move. For example, after introducing animal vocabulary, the teacher might say, "*Show me a rabbit! Hop, hop!*" or "*Show me an elephant! Walk like an elephant!*" The children can then return to a calmer activity, such as matching pictures or drawing one of the animals. The same vocabulary is maintained across the activities, but the form of participation changes.

The sequence does not need to follow a fixed fifteen-minute rule. Instead, teachers can observe children's responses. If children begin to look distracted, talk to friends, move away from the activity, or show reduced participation, this may indicate that the pace or activity needs to change. Classroom-based physical activity has been associated with attention and on-task behavior, providing further

support for incorporating appropriate opportunities for physical movement into learning (Ruhland & Lange, 2021). Thus, varying activity types is not simply a strategy for avoiding boredom; it is a way of organizing the rhythm of learning according to young children's changing attention and engagement.

Using Playful and Interactive Learning Experiences

Playful and interactive learning experiences are another practical way of sustaining the attention of young learners in English classrooms. For young children, learning is closely connected to opportunities to explore, participate and interact, rather than simply listening to lengthy teacher explanations. In English lessons, playful activities can provide a context in which children can encounter and use language through meaningful participation (Hasbi, 2026). Activities such as games, songs, storytelling, role-play and simple interactive exercises encourage children to engage with language through movement, imitation, decision-making and communication (Nor et al., 2026). A systematic review of game-based English learning for young learners found that games are widely used in English learning and are associated with learners' motivation and interest. However, much of the reviewed research was conducted at elementary school level (Saputra et al., 2021). This suggests that playful activities should be considered as more than just entertainment, but also as a possible way of increasing children's involvement in language learning.

The interactive element is particularly important when the goal is to maintain attention. An activity may be enjoyable, but enjoyment alone does not necessarily guarantee meaningful engagement. Children are more directly involved when they are expected to interact with the language in some way, such as responding to a question, repeating a word while performing an action, selecting an image, impersonating a character, or taking part in a simple game. Recent evidence from a systematic review of gamification in young learners' English learning also identifies learner motivation and classroom participation as outcomes reported across the reviewed studies (Hamuddin et al., 2024). Therefore, teachers can design playful

activities in which children are regularly invited to respond and participate, rather than merely watching or waiting for their turn.

In practice, incorporating playful and interactive elements into English lessons does not mean that every lesson has to be game-based. Teachers can incorporate brief playful activities at various stages of the learning process. For instance, new vocabulary can be introduced using pictures or objects, followed by a guessing game, a movement-based activity or a role-play exercise that enables children to use the newly introduced words. Similarly, a story can be accompanied by gestures, repeated phrases or simple questions that encourage participation. Teachers should ensure that the playful element remains connected to the intended language objective. In this way, play becomes a means of encouraging active participation and meaningful language learning, rather than simply a strategy for keeping children entertained.

Using Meaningful Routines, Transitions, and Attention Cues

Maintaining young learners' attention also requires teachers to consider what happens between activities. In early childhood classrooms, transitions are not simply moments for moving from one activity to another; they are an important part of classroom routines that need to be planned carefully. Banerjee & Horn (2012) explain that classroom transitions can involve children moving from one activity or routine to another and that poorly planned transitions may create unproductive waiting time and make it more difficult for children to engage in the next activity. Well-planned transitions, in contrast, can reduce nonproductive time, support children's engagement, and facilitate smoother movement between classroom activities. In English classrooms, teachers can therefore use predictable routines and simple transition cues to help children understand what is expected while maintaining their exposure to English.

When the teacher wants children to move from a table activity to a group activity, for instance, the teacher can use a simple cue such as *"Let's make a circle!"* or *"Are you ready? Let's go!"* When children become distracted, a rhythmic cue can be used: *"Clap, clap,*

clap... look at me!” The teacher can demonstrate the action while children imitate it. Another possibility is a short movement chant: *“Shake, shake your body! Shake to the right, shake to the left!”* After the movement, the teacher can say, *“Now, sit down. Let’s listen to our story!”* In this way, the transition itself becomes a short English-learning experience. Children hear functional expressions such as *shake, right, left, sit down, and listen* while simultaneously changing their physical state and preparing for the next activity.

Attention cues can also be incorporated into these transitions. Recard & Nathania (2021) found that attention-grabbing techniques can help teachers regain young learners’ attention, although their effectiveness depends on children responding to and participating in the technique. This suggests that an attention cue should not simply be a signal for children to become silent; it should invite a response. For example, when the teacher says *“Clap, clap, clap... look at me!”*, children can clap and direct their attention toward the teacher. Similarly, *“Shake, shake your body!”* can invite children to respond through movement before they transition to the next activity. In this way, the process of regaining attention becomes an active interaction rather than an interruption to learning.

Teachers can develop a small number of consistent cues, such as a particular song, rhythm, gesture, or familiar phrase, and use them repeatedly in appropriate situations. For example, *“Hands on your lap, eyes on me”* can signal that children are preparing to listen, while *“Ready, steady, go!”* can introduce a movement activity. The purpose is not simply to make children quiet, but to provide a clear signal that helps them understand what to do next. When transition cues become familiar, children can gradually respond to them with less verbal explanation from the teacher.

However, teachers should avoid using too many different cues or repeating them so frequently that they lose their meaning. A small number of familiar cues can gradually become part of the classroom routine while still allowing flexibility according to children’s responses and classroom circumstances. The aim is to make transitions brief, predictable, and purposeful. In this way, moments between activities do not become periods in which children lose attention;

instead, they can become opportunities for continued English exposure, movement, interaction, and preparation for the next learning experience.

Integrating Digital Media with Purposeful Interaction

Digital media can provide additional resources for capturing and sustaining young learners' attention, particularly through visual, auditory, and interactive features (Hasbi, 2023). However, children's attention to a digital device does not automatically mean that meaningful learning is taking place. Research on digital technology in early childhood education emphasizes the importance of considering how technology is used with and by young children, including the role of pedagogy, relationships, and teacher involvement (Mantilla & Edwards, 2019). Similarly, (Undheim, 2022) highlights the importance of children and teachers engaging together with digital technology rather than treating technology as a separate activity from social interaction. Therefore, in early childhood English classrooms, digital media is most useful when it becomes a stimulus for interaction rather than a replacement for interaction with teachers and peers (Astawa et al., 2026).

A teacher may, for example, show a short video introducing animal vocabulary. Instead of allowing children to watch the entire video passively, the teacher can pause it and ask, *"What is it?"*, *"What does the lion say?"*, or *"Can you move like a monkey?"* Children can answer, imitate the animal, or perform the movement before the teacher continues the video. After watching, the teacher can move to a non-digital activity such as matching animal pictures, acting out animals, or sorting them according to their characteristics. In this way, the digital material serves as a starting point for listening, speaking, movement, and interaction rather than becoming the main focus of the lesson.

The same approach can be applied to digital songs and stories. A teacher can play a short English song and invite children to perform specific movements when they hear particular words. For example, while using a song about body parts, the teacher can pause after *"head"* and ask, *"Where is your head?"* Children then point to their heads and repeat the word. The teacher can continue with *"eyes,"*

“nose,” and “ears” while combining the digital content with physical responses. A digital story can similarly be paused to ask children to predict what will happen next, identify objects or characters, or repeat a familiar phrase from the story. These interactions prevent children from becoming passive viewers and create opportunities to use English in meaningful contexts.

Digital media should therefore be selected according to its contribution to the learning objective rather than its ability to attract attention alone. Teachers can choose short, developmentally appropriate, and relevant content, while planning what children will do before, during, and after the digital activity. The use of technology can also be combined with physical movement, hands-on materials, peer interaction, and teacher-child communication. Evidence from research on young children’s digital play indicates that digital experiences can involve social interaction when children engage with others and when adults provide appropriate support (Disney & Geng, 2022). Thus, the goal is not to maximize children’s screen exposure, but to use digital media selectively and intentionally as one component of a varied early childhood English learning environment.

C. THE FUTURE DIRECTION

Looking ahead, it is important to recognise that maintaining the attention of young learners in early childhood English classrooms requires a shift in focus away from making children sit quietly, listen continuously and follow the teacher’s instructions for long periods. In early childhood, attention is better understood as part of children’s active engagement with people, language, materials, movement and learning experiences. This requires teachers to consider not only whether children are looking at the teacher, but also how they participate, respond, communicate, explore and stay engaged with an activity. Consequently, future English teaching for young learners should emphasise flexible classroom environments in which teachers can adjust the pace, activities, interactions, and level of support according to the children’s responses. Recent research on early childhood digital pedagogy highlights the importance of play-based, collaborative and child-centred approaches to shaping meaningful

learning experiences. This research suggests that new technologies should be integrated into, rather than separated from, developmentally appropriate pedagogy (Li et al., 2026).

Another important issue is the relationship between technology and how young children learn. Digital media are likely to become increasingly prevalent in early childhood education, presenting opportunities and challenges in terms of maintaining meaningful engagement. A recent systematic review of digital play in early years education found that digital play can be interactive, enjoyable and meaningful, and can be connected to learning and development. However, concerns remain regarding physical inactivity and problematic technology use (Chu et al., 2024). Therefore, the future should not be framed as a choice between technology and traditional play. Rather, teachers should consider how digital experiences can be combined with movement, hands-on exploration, communication, and social interaction. In English classrooms, for example, a digital story, song, or video could provide a starting point for children to speak, move, imitate, create, and interact, rather than leading to an extended period of passive screen viewing.

Maintaining attention should ultimately be viewed as an ongoing process of designing and adapting learning experiences, rather than applying a single technique. The practical strategies discussed in this chapter, such as incorporating playful interaction, managing transitions and attention cues, and using digital media purposefully can provide teachers with a flexible repertoire rather than a fixed formula. Future research and classroom practice should therefore focus more on how different combinations of movement, play, interaction, routines and technology influence children's engagement with English learning in different contexts. Teachers should gradually shift their focus from "How can I make children pay attention?" to "How can I design an English learning experience that motivates children to participate?". This shift places children's developmental needs and meaningful participation at the centre of attention management, providing a more appropriate direction for early childhood English education.

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