

Case Study in Primary School: What Makes Gen Alpha Uninterested in English

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ABSTRACT

English plays an important role in helping young learners participate in a globalized world. However, many Generation Alpha students in rural areas show low interest in learning English. This study aimed to identify the factors contributing to the lack of interest in learning English among fifth-grade students at SDN 074046 Lolomoyo, Gunungsitoli Barat, North Sumatra. A qualitative case study design was employed. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview with one English teacher and classroom observations involving 17 students. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed four major factors affecting students' interest: limited foundational knowledge of English, difficulties in basic language skills, perceived irrelevance of English to daily life, and limitations in teaching methods and learning resources. The study concludes that interactive, meaningful, and contextually relevant learning activities are needed to increase Generation Alpha students' engagement and interest in learning English, offering practical implications for English teachers and schools in designing more engaging learning experiences in rural primary schools.

Keywords: *Gen Alpha, English Learning Interest, Primary School, Rural EFL Context, Qualitative Case Study*

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INTRODUCTION

English has been the main language used around the world for a long time. It is the main language for sharing knowledge in schools and universities, doing business between countries, and talking with people from different cultures. In Indonesia's education system, there has been continuous debate about when to start teaching English, with a focus on introducing it at the primary school level. It is generally thought that starting to learn a foreign language earlier in life leads to better long-term skills, as suggested by (Muñoz, 2011). As the world becomes more connected through globalization, it's now more important than ever to teach young students essential English skills. This is not just about doing well in school it is also about helping them fit into a wider more global society.

Even though English is seen as important, many primary schools in Indonesia, especially those in rural or remote island areas, still struggle with teaching the subject effectively. These challenges are not just about how difficult the language is, but they also come from other problems like not enough teaching materials, not enough time spent on lessons, and students not having a good starting point for learning the language. The situation at SDN 074046 Lolomoyo in Gunungsitoli Barat shows how this bigger problem looks in real life. Fifth-grade students there show a clear lack of interest in learning English, even though the subject is officially part of the school curriculum.

What makes this case especially interesting is the group of Gen Alpha students involved. The kids who are going to primary school in Indonesia right now are mostly from Gen Alpha, which is the group of people born between 2010–2020. They have spent their whole lives around smartphones, digital media, and things that involve interaction

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([McCrindle & Fell, 2020](#)). These kids are usually called the most tech-savvy generation ever, and they really like things that are visual, quick, and fun to interact with. However, what is actually happening in many classrooms, like the one at SDN 074046 Lolomoyo, shows a different picture.

The noticeable mix between Gen Alpha's strong skills with technology and their limited interest in learning English during school has started to draw more attention from researchers. [Swandhina & Maulana \(2022\)](#) mention that even though Gen Alpha is good at using technology, they get bored quickly, which makes it hard for teachers to create interesting and challenging learning activities. So strict discipline and strict routines are not suitable for Gen Alpha students. Teachers have noticed that students who grew up with digital technology seem to learn better when lessons are more flexible and tailored to their needs ([Saifudin et al., 2026](#)).

Learning English can be especially difficult because of its unique features. In many Indonesian primary schools, teaching English as a foreign language still mainly uses traditional methods like teachers explaining lessons, doing exercises from textbooks, memorizing vocabulary lists by heart, and sometimes giving writing assignments. These methods, which older teachers might recognize, do not match what research shows about how Gen Alpha students interact with information. The difference between how teachers teach in class and how students learn is a major reason for low motivation and lack of interest in learning English.

Gen Alpha as Language Learners

Gen Alpha includes kids born from around 2010 up to now. These children have spent their whole lives growing up with digital technology being a normal and important part of daily life. These learners grew up around smartphones, internet communication, digital entertainment, and interactive media, which is different from earlier generations. Because of this, their way of learning and what they expect from learning is influenced by constantly using technology. Recent research shows that Gen Alpha likes learning through activities that involve interaction, multiple senses, and the use of technology, instead of just listening to lectures or watching videos ([Ziatdinov & Cilliers, 2021](#)). Studies show that they enjoy visual cues, fun learning games, stories pictures, and activities where they can take part and learn by doing instead of just listening or watching ([Höfrová et al., 2024](#)).

In the area of learning languages, these traits affect how Gen Alpha interacts with other languages. Learning a language for young students is not just about how smart they are; it also depends on how much the activities keep them interested and involve them in real ways. [Pinter \(2017\)](#) says that kids learn languages better when the lessons are linked to their everyday activities and let them use the language in real, useful situations. Because of this, teaching methods that focus a lot on memorizing and doing the same exercises over and over might not be enough for students from Gen Alpha.

Researchers have also said that Gen Alpha should not just be seen as students who are good with technology. Even though they know a lot about digital tools, how much they learn still depends on how good the teaching experiences are that teachers provide. A study done by ([Höfrová et al., 2024](#)) showed that just because people think Gen Alpha is really good with technology does not mean their education will be better because of it. Good learning happens when teaching methods, the materials used, and how students interact in class are changed to fit what each student is like and what they need.

Another key trait of Gen Alpha is that they expect things to be right now and meaningful to them. Growing up with easy access to information whenever they wanted it has changed how they think about learning activities. When students think that the tasks they are learning are important, interesting, and helpful, they are more likely to take part actively. When learning activities do not connect with a student's real life or interests, they might lose interest and focus. ([Ziatdinov & Cilliers, 2021](#)) say that old teaching methods, which focus mostly on the teacher, can be hard for Gen Alpha learners. These methods do not allow much chance to interact, explore, or get quick feedback.

In English as Foreign Language settings, these features become especially important. Many Indonesian primary school students do not get much chance to see or use English beyond their classroom lessons. Cummins (2021) points out that learning a language needs ongoing exposure and chances to use it in real situations. Students who are not exposed much to English usually face challenges in learning new words, speaking clearly, understanding what they hear, and feeling sure about their language skills. As time goes on and these challenges add up, students might start to see English as something hard to learn instead of a helpful way to communicate.

The literature also shows that how relevant a language is seen to be plays a key role in learning it. Kholid (2017) says that instrumental motivation happens when learners see language learning as a way to get important practical benefits, like moving forward in their education and getting better job chances in the future. Similarly, Noels et al. (2019) find that learners are more motivated when the activities they do in class are meaningful to them personally, when they feel confident they can finish tasks successfully, and when they have positive and supportive relationships with others in the learning environment. This situation might lead to less interest and involvement in English, even though English is becoming more important in the worldwide connected world.

Recent studies have further emphasized that English learning motivation among Generation Alpha students is strongly influenced by learning environments that are interactive, meaningful, and responsive to learners' digital characteristics. Höfrová et al. (2024) argued that Generation Alpha learners demonstrate greater engagement when instructional activities are designed to match their developmental needs and digital learning preferences. Likewise, recent studies have suggested that students' motivation to learn English increases when they actively participate in authentic learning activities, receive immediate feedback, and perceive English as relevant to their daily lives and future aspirations. These findings indicate that fostering English learning motivation among Generation Alpha students requires not only appropriate language instruction but also teaching approaches that correspond to the characteristics of contemporary young learners.

Earlier research has looked at how Gen Alpha learns, what digital tools they prefer for learning, and how they interact with education (Höfrová et al., 2024). Some other research has looked into the difficulties students face when learning English, such as not getting enough practice, not having enough good learning materials, and not being very interested in learning English Cummins (2021). However, these studies have generally examined Generation Alpha characteristics and English learning challenges as separate issues. They have not sufficiently explored how the characteristics of Generation Alpha interact with the contextual challenges of English learning in rural Indonesian primary school EFL classrooms, where students often experience limited English exposure, inadequate learning resources, and restricted instructional support. Most existing studies have focused either on digital learning environments or on general English learning difficulties without considering the unique educational context of rural primary schools in Indonesia. Consequently, there is still limited understanding of why Generation Alpha students in rural Indonesian primary schools show low interest in learning English. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by conducting an in-depth qualitative case study at SDN 074046 Lolomoyo, a primary school in Gunungsitoli Barat District, Gunungsitoli City, North Sumatra. The focus is on fifth-grade students because their learning experiences provide valuable insights into the factors contributing to their lack of interest in learning English. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: What factors contribute to the lack of interest in learning English among fifth-grade students at SDN 074046 Lolomoyo?

METHOD

This study used a qualitative case study approach because it allowed for a thorough and in-depth look at a specific situation within its actual environment, providing rich insights into the context (Yin, 2018). A case study approach was most appropriate for this research because it focused on learning about the particular situation and how things work at one school, instead of trying to create broad statistical results that can be applied everywhere. The study aimed to better understand why fifth-grade students at SDN 074046 Lolomoyo are not very interested in learning English by looking at the situation from different angles and using various types of information.

The study was conducted at SDN 074046 Lolomoyo, a public primary school located in Gunungsitoli Barat district of North Sumatra, Indonesia. The school had one English teacher who taught Grades 3 to 6. Each class received approximately 80 minutes of English instruction per week, divided into two class periods. The participant was the school's English teacher (Mrs. M.B.Z.), who held a bachelor's degree in education and taught the fifth-grade class consisting of 17 students. The students were between 10 and 11 years old and belonged to Gen Alpha. Purposive sampling was employed to select the participant because the English teacher was directly responsible for teaching the fifth-grade students and possessed extensive knowledge of their English learning behaviors, classroom participation, and learning challenges. The fifth-grade students were included because they had received English instruction since Grade 3, enabling the researcher to obtain comprehensive information regarding the factors influencing their interest in learning English. This participant selection was considered appropriate for achieving the objective of the present case study, which sought an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within its real-life context. The study was carried out following proper ethical guidelines, and all personal details were kept safe and confidential.

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected using two main methods: a semi-structured interview with one English teacher and classroom observation. The teacher interview took place on April 6, 2026, and went on for about an hour. The interview focused on the students' experience with English, the difficulties they encountered, the teaching approaches the teacher used, and the teacher's thoughts on why students might not be motivated. The interview was conducted in Indonesian to ensure a natural and comfortable conversation. It was then transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

The classroom observation was conducted on May 13, 2026, during a regular English lesson for fifth-grade students. The observation lasted throughout the entire lesson and followed a 40-item observation checklist. The checklist examined teacher-student interactions, students' level of engagement, teaching techniques, the use of instructional media, and the overall classroom atmosphere. During the observation, the researcher recorded detailed field notes, documenting classroom activities, students' participation, and other relevant events to gain a comprehensive understanding of the teaching and learning process.

Data Analysis

The data were looked at using thematic analysis, which followed the six-step framework proposed by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process started by reading the data many times to get to know it better, then creating first codes, looking for patterns or themes, checking those themes again, giving them clear names, and finally writing the complete report. The analysis used both the interview notes and the observation records, which helped check the findings from two different sources. Themes were discovered through careful analysis of the data, and they were also guided by existing theories from studies on motivation in English as a Foreign Language and teaching young learners. Four key topics came up from the analysis and are explained in the Findings and Discussion section below.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Looking at the teacher interview and the classroom observation, four related themes were found. These themes together help explain why fifth-grade students at SDN 074046 Lolomoyo show little interest in learning English. These themes include: first, there is a lack of strong Basic English knowledge, second students continue to struggle with fundamental language abilities, third perceived irrelevance of English to daily life, and fourth limitations in teaching methods and instructional facilities. Each theme is talked about one after another and the evidence supporting each theme comes from the data.

Theme 1: Lack of Strong Basic English Knowledge

One of the biggest challenges for English learners at SDN 074046 Lolomoyo was that most students have almost no previous knowledge of the English language. The English teacher said most students started Grade 3, which is when they began learning English properly, without having learned the language before. In her words, the students could not even say the English alphabet correctly when they first came to her class, which shows that this community was not exposed to English before school. The situation was clearly explained by the teacher during the interview. She said, "When students enter Grade 3, they are often confused because they have no background in English. They should already be learning vocabulary and simple language concepts, but many of them are still learning the alphabet. Even pronouncing the letters A, B, C, and D is often difficult for them." This shows that students had no basic exposure to the language before starting formal schooling.

This situation was closely related to the structure of the Indonesian national curriculum, which does not require teaching English in Grades 1 and 2. Some schools in cities have started teaching English as part of their local curriculum in the early grades. However, many schools in rural areas, like SDN 074046 Lolomoyo, have not introduced English in this way. The teacher mentioned that in past years, she could use the school's allocated teaching hours to start teaching English in Grade 1. But this changed, and now students start learning English properly in Grade 3 without any prior introduction.

The effects of this basic problem are really big. When students started Grade 3, the curriculum already expected them to work with basic vocabulary, simple sentence structures, and started learning reading and writing tasks. When students had not been introduced to English before, they often felt really confused right away, which makes them think the subject is too hard to understand and created a bad first impression. This matches what [Lightbown & Spada \(2013\)](#) talk about, which is how important it is to be ready when learning a second language. They say that how well someone learns depends a lot on how prepared they are mentally and in terms of language skills for new information.

By the time students reached Grade 5, the initial difference had become very clear and difficult to change. The teacher saw that only three to five students in the fifth-grade class really understood English well. Among those students, only one was able to keep up consistently, mainly because that student was taking English tutoring classes from a private foundation. The other students kept feeling confused and uncertain, and this started in Grade 3. Over time, this confusion turned into a general lack of interest in the subject. The teacher noticed this uneven level of ability and said, "about three to five students are capable, and only one truly excelled because that student already has a foundation from attending a free English program at a private foundation." This shows that learning outside of school, not just what happens in the classroom, made the biggest difference in how well the students did.

This result agrees with [Sintadewi et al., \(2020\)](#), who discovered that elementary school students usually find English challenging, which leads to problems in learning and less interest as time goes on. Not having a strong foundation did not only create cognitive difficulties, but also emotional barriers, like losing confidence and believing that English is something they can't learn.

Theme 2: Students Continue to Struggle with Fundamental Language Abilities

A big part of the problem is that students often faced many specific challenges when learning the four main English language skills: listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Both the teacher's interview and the classroom observation showed that these problems were causing a lot of stress and making students lose interest.

Learning new words became the biggest challenge right away. Students often came across words they had never seen or heard before, and since they did not have the skills to figure out what they meant by sounds or the surrounding text, they usually gave up instead of trying to understand. The teacher described this pattern directly: "almost all of them struggle; when they are asked to listen to English, it is very difficult, even alarming." She added that in terms of writing, "the most they can do is copy vocabulary, only that" which meant the most they can do is copy vocabulary only that, indicating that productive language use remained far beyond the reach of most students. The teacher observed that when students heard an English word and tried to write it, they had trouble linking the sounds they heard with the word they wrote on paper. This is a commonly known problem in English as foreign language classes, where students did not get much chance to use the language beyond the classroom (Nation, 2022). Pronunciation was another major area of difficulty. During the observation, students often had to say vocabulary words out loud, and the teacher used a method that involved repeating words to help them get closer to saying them correctly. However, many students still did not feel sure even after trying several times, and some seemed to lose their confidence after their attempts did not work. The teacher said this was partly because of the Nias language, which did not have some sounds that are in English, making it hard for students who had not learned it before to copy those sounds correctly.

Writing had its own set of difficulties, especially for students in lower grades. Even in fifth grade, students had trouble writing English on their own and mostly copied from the board. The observation showed that students usually lost focus during the writing part of the lesson. This suggests that the thinking required for writing on their own was more than what many students were able to handle at that time. This matches what Sintadewi et al., (2020) found in their research, where they explained that writing was a very tough skill for primary EFL learners because it needed them to use vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and the ability to create meaning all at the same time.

Listening comprehension is probably the best way to tell how skilled students were in their language overall. The teacher said that when students were asked to listen to English, their responses were usually very limited. During the observation, even when the teacher spoke slowly and clearly, many students in the class still had trouble understanding the English instructions without them being translated into Indonesian. This finding matches the work of Vandergrift & Goh (2012), who point out that listening was usually not given enough attention in EFL classes, but was very important for building strong language skills overall.

All these challenges in different language skills led to a cycle of repeated failures, which was very discouraging for young learners. According to Deci & Ryan (2000) self-determination theory, students had to feel competent, meaning they believed they could do something, in order to stay motivated. When students kept facing things they could not understand or do, it eventually led them to stop trying and slowly lose interest in the subject.

Theme 3: Perceived Irrelevance of English to Daily Life

A third main idea that came up clearly from both the interviews and what was observed was that students felt English was not very useful or connected to their daily lives. The teacher kept thinking about this attitude that kept coming up in class. She explained during the interview, "They often say, 'This is not my ancestral language' (*tenga bahasa duagu*)." She had to make an effort to stop that belief from spreading before any real learning could happen. She said, "I have always tried to push that idea aside first so those words wouldn't come up again." This showed that students believed that English belonged to a

different world, not connected to their own community. The teacher often mentioned that seeing English as a foreign and unimportant subject was one of the biggest obstacles that kept students from being motivated.

Observation data corroborated this finding. At the end of the observation session, the field note clearly stated that the students who showed the least interest were the ones who either directly or indirectly expressed that they did not see how English was useful in their everyday lives. Unlike mathematics or the Indonesian language, which students used in real-life situations both inside and outside of school, English seemed to them like just a school subject with no clear link to their everyday lives in Gunungsitoli Barat.

This result matched what the self-determination theory by (Deci & Ryan, 2000) said, which suggested that students were more likely to be motivated from within when they see an activity as something that mattered to them and connected with their personal life. When English was seen as just something required by the school schedule instead of a useful skill that could actually create new opportunities, students were less likely to put in the long-term effort needed to learn a language. This problem was especially clear in rural or semi-urban areas where people had little contact with the English-speaking world. In these places, kids in primary school did not yet see English as something useful for getting a job or going to college. Yusuf et al., (2023) found the same things happening in rural elementary schools, where students had little chance to use English and no good support for learning the language, which made them less interested in learning English. The challenge for teachers in these situations was to connect what was taught in the curriculum with what students experienced in their daily lives by designing learning activities that showed how English could be useful in real-world situations. Without these links, English might seem far away and not important, instead of being a useful way to communicate.

Theme 4: Limitations in Teaching Methods and Instructional Facilities

The last theme looked at how the way lessons were taught and the tools and spaces available affected how interested students were in learning. Information from both the interview and the observation showed that the English teacher at SDN 074046 Lolomoyo was very dedicated and came up with creative ideas within the limits she had. As the teacher explained, "We lack learning media. There is a smart TV, but not every classroom can use it. I am also the only English teacher in the school, so I have limited time to create teaching materials and activities." These challenges significantly limited the range of teaching approaches that could be implemented in the classroom.

During the classroom observation, the lesson was mainly taught through the teacher explaining at the front, writing on the board, and repeating things orally. The teacher used a song as a memory aid to help students learn vocabulary, and this made the students more focused for a short time. However, most of the lesson followed a usual, traditional teaching style. Students started to get distracted when the teacher spent a lot of time explaining things or writing on the board without giving them any active activities to do. This matched what researchers had found about Gen Alpha learners, who were used to things that changed quickly and were interactive, and who had a hard time staying focused when they just listened without doing anything (Seemiller, C. and Grace, 2017).

In the interview, the teacher said she knew it was important to use different and engaging teaching methods. She often used songs, games, board competitions, and activities with classmates to keep the students interested. However, she also expressed frustration regarding institutional constraints. The school had one projector and one smart TV, but not all classrooms had these items for every class. There were no special English learning books besides a regular textbook, and the teacher did not have any help from a teaching assistant or another teacher to share the work of making extra materials. Since she was the only English teacher at the school, she was responsible for teaching English to students in four different grades. This responsibility took up a lot of her time, leaving her less time to create new and creative lesson plans.

The topic of instructional time was also brought up clearly during the interview. With just two class sessions each week for every grade, there was not enough time to develop the gradual, ongoing knowledge that language learning needed. The teacher expressed this frustration openly: “Each class only receives two English lessons per week, how could that ever be enough?” The teacher mentioned that the lessons often ended before she could finish all the planned activities, and there was not enough time to properly review or go over the earlier material again. This problem was not just happening in SDN 074046 Lolomoyo; studies from Indonesian primary schools have shown again and again that not enough time spent in class was a big problem for teaching English well (Renandya et al., 2018).

The gap between how lessons were taught and how Gen Alpha students like to learn was especially big. These students got the most involved when their learning included games, challenges, colorful visuals, and working with classmates. Yet the conditions, which included limited media, heavy dependence on textbooks and the board, and a mostly teacher-centered approach, did not easily fit these preferences. The result was a classroom experience that often felt boring and not connected to the ways students usually enjoyed and got involved in things outside of school.

The teacher's effort to use creative methods, like making her own songs based on social media and having students compete in board games, showed she understood Gen Alpha characteristics and was really trying to meet their needs. Even so, the teacher's resourcefulness was evident. She described how she adapted: “sometimes I create my own songs inspired by social media,” and that she often structured lessons around “competitive games so that students become more involved.” However, without proper support from institutions, enough resources, and training focused on teaching English to young students, these personal efforts were not enough to solve the bigger issues in the system. Renandya et al., (2018) stated that to make progress in English education in Indonesian primary schools, there needed to be a big effort to train teachers, create better lesson plans, and provide more resources, instead of just depending on each teacher to do their best on their own.

The observations and interviews together showed that student disengagement was not just about a student's own attitude or ability, but was heavily influenced by the conditions that affected how teaching and learning happened. To deal with the low interest in learning English at SDN 074046 Lolomoyo, it was important to look at both what motivated the students and the bigger system and school structures that affected how English was taught and what it was like to learn it there.

CONCLUSIONS

This study found that low interest in learning English among fifth-grade Gen Alpha students at SDN 074046 Lolomoyo is influenced by four interconnected factors: limited early exposure to English, difficulties in basic skills such as vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, and writing, limited opportunities to use English in daily life, and ineffective teaching methods, materials, and learning time. The findings imply that English instruction should begin earlier and incorporate interactive, technology-supported, and contextually meaningful activities such as songs, games, videos, and digital tools. Schools should provide adequate learning resources, sufficient instructional time, and teacher professional development, while curriculum developers should strengthen English education in the early grades. However, this qualitative case study was limited to one school, one teacher, and one classroom observation, limiting generalizability. Future research should involve more participants, include students' perspectives, and conduct longitudinal observations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of factors influencing English learning interest.

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