

The Malaysian Preschool Syllabus: An Analysis on Reading Component

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Abstract: This paper discusses the Malaysian Preschool Curriculum with regard to its Reading Skill Component. This particular syllabus is chosen because of its vital significance and effect on the Malaysian students' early literacy. Among the areas covered are the backgrounds of the curriculum, its strengths and limitations, as well as the missing elements. Apart from that, the writer's personal experience in applying the syllabus during her involvement in conducting field research in a private preschool; and her observation towards its implementation in other privately-run centres are discussed. Finally, this paper discusses the author's view that is; the limitations in the syllabus outnumbered its positive aspects, leading to failure in preschool reading skill with regards to the centres which have no supplementary syllabus. Some recommendations on improving the syllabus are provided to overcome these limitations.

Keywords: Reading skill, early literacy, pre-school curriculum

INTRODUCTION

English literacy and proficiency is a concern in Malaysia. Many efforts are put in to ensure students improvement in this language. However, the measures planned are focused on primary school level onwards (Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2012). The root of the problem, which is education before formal schooling is briefly touched. Since many children are now attending preschools, their education at this level is worth to be analyzed at a deeper level.

The National Preschool Curriculum, which targets children of 4 to 6 years old, with regards to English Curriculum aims “to enable children to listen actively with understanding, to express themselves orally in simple English, to read common words and simple sentences independently, and to write words and simple sentences” (Curriculum Development Centre [CDC], 2009). From 2001, the time allocated for English learning is at least one hour per week, with equal emphasis on all four skills. However, effective from January 2011, this time allocation is added to at least 2 hours per week with extra focus on speaking component.

Although there are various views in literature in relation to this subject, many scientists argue that learning a foreign language should begin at an early age (Bilcentayev, 2004, Iltter & Er, 2007).

One of the problems in the English syllabus is the students' ability to read and comprehend English texts. Recently, much of the literature has supported attention to literacy development which starts with the use of connected text, not for the purpose of developing reading vocabularies or teaching phonics but for displaying words in meaningful settings (Durkin, 1990).

The groups at highest risk for reading difficulties include children from low-income and minority families and children with limited English proficiency (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). English language learners (ELLs) typically exhibit lower academic achievement, particularly in literacy, than their non-ELL peers (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000; Slavin & Cheung, 2005; Snow et al., 1998). Longitudinal data show that beginning school with lower reading skills will lead

to low academic achievement (Davison, Seo, Davenport, Butterbaugh, & Davison, 2004).

In multilingual educational settings, differentiating normal second language reading acquisition from signs of reading failure is particularly challenging (Geva, 2000; Wilkinson, Ortiz, Robertson, & Kushner, 2006).

School often overlooks or delay addressing the possibility that ELLs may be having difficulties due to a reading disability as opposed to a lack of English language proficiency (Lesaux & Siegel, 2003). It happened because general education teachers hesitate to refer ELLs to special education because they are unable to determine whether they are having difficulties learning to read due to second language acquisition issues or disabilities (Klingner, Artiles, & Barletta, 2006).

Changes in federal legislation (of some western countries) allowing school to use Response-to-Intervention (RtI) models to identify and treat academic performance problems may provide ELLs with additional support within general education without waiting for students to fail for a long period of time (Linklater, O'Connor, Palardy, 2009). ELLs may perform poorly in school due to lack of exposure or instruction in English, or due to learning problems (Klingner, Sorrells, & Barrera, 2007). The use of curriculum-based measurement is a critical component of the RI model, which allows for local norms to be used in determining expected levels of performance and goals (Linklater, O'Connor, Palardy, 2009). Most studies analyzing student growth evaluate literacy once students should be capable of reading text through oral reading fluency measures (Deno, Fuchs, Marston, & Shin, 2001). Several studies have demonstrated that growth in early literacy skills in kindergarten is related to word reading (Lesaux et al., 2007).

In a study of second grade growth in oral reading fluency, it was found that a main effect for semester, such that fall-to-winter growth was greater than winter-to-spring growth (Ardoin & Christ, 2008). It would be useful to determine typical student growth over the kindergarten year on early literacy measures and to compare the growth of English only and ELL students.

Diamond and Onwuegbuzie's (2001) study of reading achievement in elementary schools found higher achievement for girls than for boys. The advantage for girls was also apparent in kindergarten in McCoach, O'Connell, Reis, and Levitt's study (2006). McMillan (2000) reported an advantage for girls in his study of growth in reading rate; the difference was only equivalent to one month's growth. In contrast to these studies, Scarborough (1995) found no significant contribution of gender toward predicting reading difficulties in 2nd grade.

This issue regarding English proficiency also exists among primary schools in Malaysia. The roots of the problem are the learning process as well as the curriculum use in preschool. All preschools in Malaysia are required to use The National Preschool School Curriculum in running their centers, regardless of their status as either government or private institutions. Most of the private centers use supplementary syllabus to complement the one prescribed by the Ministry of Education. Their decision actually depicts the practice of many other centers in Malaysia, which suggest that there must be something lacking in the prescribed syllabus that lead to this phenomenon. For preschool education, there is no text book supplied by the ministry. Thus, center operators have to develop one on their own. Since most of the operators are business people, it is very unlikely for them to spend time developing it. Instead, they will choose the easier and faster way out which is, they will just buy any children's book in the market and just use them in class. The wealthier operators would choose a more systematic, but very expensive way, that is, they subscribe to various education franchisors like Smart Reader, Q-DEES, Kinderland and Montessori. These franchisees find the programs very useful and practical since they come in complete set namely the manual, teachers' lesson plan, teachers' and students' text books, engaging storybooks and students' activity books. The package is even inclusive of trainings for two teachers. Needless to say, the centers will have an advantage over the rest of the unsubscribing centers since their materials for teaching and learning of the reading skills have been developed and tailored by education professionals.

This gap between these two types of private preschools lead to significant difference in students' reading performance. It is found that the students' of the unsubscribing centers often lagged behind by their counterparts.

To overcome this situation, I would like to suggest that the syllabus enclose a brief guideline on the types of books that are suitable for preschoolers. This information might not be of significance if the teachers have background knowledge on early childhood education. However, most of the private preschool teachers have no such academic qualification. With no experience and low education background they would not be able to justify which book is suitable in terms of the size, font, genre, illustration as well as the content of the story. To them, any illustrative fairytale children's book is a good book for preschoolers. It is true that Albert Einstein said "if you want your children to be bright, tell them fairytales; if you want them to be brilliant, tell them more fairy tales" (Ananda Laxmi S.M Poniah et al., 2009), but since many fairytales are from western culture, their suitability to be used in preschool classrooms in terms of moral values must be exposed to these kindergarten educators. With regards to the size of the book Landers (1990) states that Big Book should be made a compulsory material.

The research problem is, preschool operators and teachers face difficulties in teaching English to preschool children. They feel that the syllabus provided by The Ministry of Education is insufficient to reach the standard proficiency level intended. Due to this insufficiency, preschool operators and teachers resort to supplement the syllabus by adding extra English syllabus and materials of their own judgment. As a result, every preschool will have its unique English curriculum; which will eventually lead to different proficiency level among the children.

The research objective of this study is to identify current preschool English syllabus' limitation with regard to the reading component.

Figure 1
 Malaysia's Kindergarten English Curriculum

| No | Contents | Learning Outcomes |
|----|--|---|
| 1 | 1.1 Reading skills | 1.1.1 Link sounds to letters 1.1.2 Name and sound the letters of the alphabet |
| 2 | 1.2 Hear and say initial and final sounds, and short vowel sounds within words | 1.2.1 Hear and say the initial sound in words and know which letters represent some of the sounds 1.2.2 Hear and say vowel sounds |
| 3 | 1.3 Read simple words | 1.3.1 Recognise and sound simple words 1.3.2 Point to letters, words, labels and read or name them 1.3.3 Recognise some familiar words |
| 4 | 1.4 Read simple sentences | 1.4.1 Show interest in illustrations and print in books and print in the environment 1.4.2 Read a range of simple sentences independently |
| 5 | 1.5 Knowledge of print and ethics in reading | 1.5.1 Read print moving from left to right and top to bottom 1.5.2 Identify the features of a book 1.5.3 Handle books carefully |
| 6 | 1.6 Develop interest in reading | 1.6.1 Talk about books being read 1.6.2 Read different texts |
| 7 | 1.7 Writing skills a. Pre-writing skills | 1.7.1a Engage in activities requiring hand-eye coordination 1.7.2b Draw lines and circles using gross motor and fine motor movements 1.7.3c Draw anticlockwise and up-and-down letter movements |
| 8 | b. Writing skills | 1.7.1a Form recognisable letters 1.7.2b Write simple words 1.7.3c Write simple sentences |

The above syllabus shows that there is limitation in the English syllabus with regard to its focus and arrangement. These weaknesses lead to difficulties in understanding and mastering the English language. These difficulties actually arise due to the following reasons:

Similarity in L1 and L2 Reading Syllabus.

The preschool reading syllabus of Bahasa Melayu (L1) and English (L2) are ordered in almost the same way that leads to same implementation.

Emphasis On Ability To Sound Letters And Words

The syllabus puts extra focus on children's ability to sound letters and words (item 3.1 *Recognise letters of the alphabet*, 3.2 *Hear and say initial and final sounds, and short vowel sounds within words* and 3.3 *Read simple words*). A child is considered literate if he manages to pronounce a word correctly. Whether he knows the meaning of the word (semantically) or not is not given any attention to. The same goes with his ability to put the word in a sentence correctly (syntactic structure). No preschool teacher would mind to test the child's proficiency in terms of him being able to use the words in context.

Context Drilling

The way reading syllabus is implemented in preschool education is through isolated drilling. Item 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3 (please refer to the above section) are carried out in a way that students are asked to repeat after teacher the individual letter sound for around 30 minutes. At the end of the lesson the students normally able to produce the sound intended and the teacher will consider her objective for the day as achieved.

Arrangement of Syllabus

It is stated in the preschool curriculum that the syllabus is arranged from easy to difficult (CDC, 2001). However, if one takes a closer look at the English reading syllabus, the items are actually in a mix order. According to Campbell (2002) the first step in promoting early literacy with regard to English reading is by exposing the children to the joy of reading. The next step would be to introduce them to various reading materials so that print words give them some meanings. The last thing to do is to make them learn the technical process of reading.

From observation, the initial stage of making the children able to associate letter shapes with their sounds and names alone are very time consuming. This long period end up to waste as in the end they simply show no interest in print words.

Word Formation Process

The most detrimental missing element in the reading syllabus is the word formation process. The syllabus jump from exposing the children to the individual letter sound (item 3.1 *Recognize letters of the alphabet*, 3.2 *Hear and say initial and final sounds*) to children able to read simple words and sentences (item 3.3 *Read simple words*, 3.4 *Read simple sentences*). How these individual letters make up a word is not introduced.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a field research, and the data collection method used was observation and interview using semi structures questions. The observation took two forms. One, the writers observed how the preschool they were stationed in use the national syllabus in preparing and conducting their English lesson. The other form was through interview. There were two types of interviews conducted; informal and formal ones.

There were three open-ended and structured questions asked to respondents; whereby the answers to those questions were used to generate semi-structured questions.

The respondents for the former type were chosen using selective sampling method; based on their availability and readiness to share the information regarding their preschool. Meanwhile, the respondents for the latter type were selected based on judgment sampling; they were among ten most famous preschools in Kelantan. Respondents of this study include 10 preschool operators and 10 preschool teachers who teach English. This study takes place at 10 preschool centers in Kota Bharu, among them are Kaizen preschool, Kinderland and Q-dees.

The preschool that the writers were based in initially used only the preschool national syllabus. However, to teach reading, the teachers find the task of making the children able to read almost impossible. They resorted to complement the syllabus with reading materials available in the market. The material was not helpful enough; they subscribed to one of the franchise methods. Meanwhile, out of 10 private centers interviewed, five subscribe to commercial syllabus while another five complement the national syllabus with their own syllabus. In brief, all 11 centers/respondents do not rely solely on the national syllabus.

DISCUSSION

Having analysed the findings and the national preschool syllabus, there are several issues that are discussed in this paper. This study found out that the limitation of the current preschool syllabus is as follows:

Disadvantages Of Similarity In L1 And L2 Reading Syllabus

According to Haja Mohideen (1995) mother tongue can either facilitate or interfere the process of learning the second language. If the structures are similar the former will take place. On the other hand, when the structures of both

languages are different, the latter situation will surface. Thus, in planning reading syllabus for Bahasa Melayu and English, the order and process should be different since they employ different features. For example, Bahasa Melayu is a syllable-timed language where spelling corresponds to pronunciation. On the other hand, English is a stress-timed language where the ways the words are spelt do not relate to the way they are pronounced. Thus, if the teaching strategies of both languages are same, it might lead to overgeneralization, resulting in wrong pronunciation and stress placement.

For instance, since most preschool teachers are not yet familiar with the different phonetic sounds of the letters of both languages, especially the vowels and diphthongs, they tend to pronounce them the way they are pronounced in Bahasa Melayu. For example the word [long] /lorŋ/ is pronounced as /lorŋ/ or [go] /gəu/ as /go/. Meanwhile, unlike English, Bahasa Melayu gives every syllable an equal weight. Hence, when a teacher employs the same teaching steps to English, it is most likely that she will give each English syllable an equal stress as well.

One of the ways to ensure that this scenario is overcome, the syllabus should highlight the different features of English language as compared to three major first languages, namely Bahasa Melayu, Mandarin and Tamil; and how it can be utilized in teaching reading to preschoolers. One way to do it is by adding a section on stress placement and the varieties of English vowel sounds.

Effect of Extra Emphasis On Phonetic And Phonology

The effect of putting too much emphasis on phonology over semantic in isolation is the students see no reason for them to learn to read. This happens as they see no connection between the sounds of the words and the real world.

The drilling method makes the situation even worse. They find no pleasure in learning to read as the process is boring and stressful. Being demotivated, the children put a mental block to reading, resulting in them not able to read.

Arrangement of Syllabus

Besides revising the arrangement of the syllabus, I would like to propose item 3.5 *Knowledge of print and ethics in reading* and 3.6 *Develop interest in reading* be merged into one item and renamed as 3.5 *Teacher- child shared story book reading*. Under this heading, the syllabus will have 3.5.1 *Dialogic Reading*, where a teacher will tell a story from a book while asking open-ended questions and soliciting responses from the children (Whitehurst, 1999) and 3.5.2. *Print Referencing*, where a teacher will employ both verbal and non-verbal references to print. For instance, a teacher can ask the children, “Where should I start reading this book?” (Ezell et al., 2000).

Having introduced these new items, my suggestion for the new order of the syllabus is, it will start with 3.1 *Teacher-child shared story book reading*, followed by technical reading aspect in this order, item 3.2 *Hear and say initial and final sounds, and short vowel sounds within words*, 3.3 *Recognize letter names*, 3.4 *Read simple words* and 3.5 *Read simple sentences*.

Despite its limitations, there are still some strengths of this English syllabus, namely:

Use Of Phonics Approach

Phonics refers to a widely used method for teaching language users to read and write a particular language. California’s National Reading Panels (NRP) defines phonics as a method which stresses on teaching how to connect the sounds of spoken English with letters or groups of letters (for example the sound /ŋ/ can be represented by [ng] spelling) and teaching how to connect these different letter sounds together (Garan, 2002). In brief, learning English reading using phonics requires students to learn the connection between letter patterns and the sound they represent. Research shows that systematic phonics instruction combined with reading is the most effective way to develop good reading skill

(Riley, 1996). A good number of preschool operators whom I met mentioned that they have experimented teaching reading through phonics and whole language approach (combination of embedded phonics, sight word recognition, and comprehension). They found the former more effective than the latter as their focus is more on the ability to read print words in isolation. Anyhow, based on the experience of utilizing these two approaches in my two centers, I found both work wonders on different groups of students. Thus, I believe the government's decision to use phonics actually refers to the term *phonics* in a broad sense, which gives liberty to the educators to choose at least one out of its 5 types namely Analogy Phonics, Analytic Phonics, Embedded Phonics, Phonics through Spelling and Synthetic Phonics (Garan, 2002) .

Use Of Thematic, Integrated, And Learn Through Play Approach

The above mentioned approaches make our preschool national curriculum a very comprehensive one. They play a vital role in making the learning process a joyful experience to the young learners. I can still remember how panicked I felt when 8 out of 10 children whom I was teaching reading showed signs that they were about to cry due to inability to pronounce the words on cards showed to them correctly. In order not to start a crying scene, I immediately stopped what I was doing and told the children that we were going to play game. All the sad faces suddenly lit up. When I asked them to close their eyes, turn around and open them to search for a card that has the word 'cat' on it, everyone sprang to movement and surprisingly 3 of them managed to identify the right card in no time. Within one hour, the cards that contain the words 'fat, mat, rat, bat, sat, and at' were successfully identified and read. In the end, I achieved my objective for the day and the children had a fun time 'playing'.

This experience conforms to DES's (1990) statement; "Play that is well planned and pleasurable helps children to think, to increase their understanding and to improve their

language competence. It allows children to be creative, to explore and investigate materials, to experiment and to draw and to test their conclusions ...Such experience is important in catching and sustaining children's interest and motivating their learning as individuals and in co-operation with others" (cited in Abbott & Rodger 1994).

However, it is sad to say that this study found some private preschools choose not to employ them since they think these approaches are time consuming to be focused on since they are more concerned with students' literacy skill and numerical competence. However, these centers are not to be blamed as it is their responsibility to meet parents' expectation in producing students who are able to read and count well. Regardless of this constraint, the centers can take some effort to educate parents on this need as it is the children's right to experience meaningful and exciting learning process.

CONCLUSION

Malaysian National Preschool Curriculum with regards to English reading syllabus has been constructed by education professionals who are very concerned with the total development of preschool children. The aim can be summarized as putting a holistic approach to raise children who are excellent both intellectually and emotionally. This noble intention is undisputable. However, to the privately-run preschool centers, this syllabus is too theoretical. Since the competition in this education business is stiff, more focus is given on the practicality of the syllabus to be implemented. This leads to a scenario where many find this national syllabus to be good but insufficient. To complement it, some of them resort to subscribe to franchise programs while others who are not that established, create one of their own.

Should this situation not addressed soonest possible, our young generations will be victimized by the various experimentation reading process. The reason for calling all the process as experimentation is because there is no comprehensive guideline in the national English reading syllabus that serves as a common ground for them to refer to.

It is suggested that if the English reading syllabus is to be revised, the limitations, missing elements and impracticality mentioned would be looked into. It is hoped that once these aspects are improvised, the need to depend on other syllabus can be reduced; creating a less diversified and confusing process of teaching and learning the reading skill. The outcome of this is we would be able to produce more literate and avid readers of tomorrow.

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