

¹Assessing Malaysian Preschool Children's Basic English Proficiency

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Abstract

In Malaysia, students are required to learn the English language starting from Year One to Form Five. With eleven years of learning the language, students are expected to have attained a high level of proficiency in English. However, Malaysians' English language acquisition is still far from satisfactory even after years of exposure to English in a formal classroom setting. Alarmed by the decline of English proficiency amongst students, the Malaysian Ministry of Education decided that beginning 2003, English would be the language of instruction for mathematics and science subjects in primary and secondary schools, in the hope that English will be given the recognition it deserves in education. On the same note, the Ministry also decided that English be introduced to preschoolers. Therefore in Malaysia, preschool children are taught English so that they will be able to understand some instructions in the language when they are in Year One. This paper will discuss a study done to gauge the basic knowledge of 821 preschool children in English. In our research, we aimed to assess these preschool children's basic knowledge at the end of their preschool year to determine if they have attained the basic knowledge required as preparation for year one in Primary school. Two tests were administered, the first test deals with their writing, reading and letter recognition abilities. Another test consisting of questions to evaluate their basic knowledge of English such as simple subject-verb agreement (am, is, are), names of body parts, numbers (1 – 10), simple prepositions (on, in, under) and colours was also given. Out of these children, 160 of them were then randomly selected and interviewed individually to assess their ability to respond to simple questions in English. These children were also given a 20-word passage to read aloud and their ability to say and pronounce each word clearly and correctly were recorded. In addition, the researchers also spent many hours observing the students while teachers were teaching them. The results of the study identified areas that children may have problems with such as articles, verbs, prepositions and conjunctions.

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Introduction

Educators have always claimed that the early years are 'prime time' and the 'formative years' for language development, where developmental domains such as physical/motor, social-emotional, cognitive and communication-language will undergo rapid development. The ability to listen, speak, read and write in the language will allow continued acceptance and positive relationships with family and friends and promotes self-confidence and pride in the children. Thus it is particularly important that English language be introduced to children at the preschool level so that they will feel confident and comfortable using it to communicate with each other. However, introduction to English at this level has to be done carefully so that children see English as fun and not a difficult skill to master because whatever attitude the children may have formed towards English at this level will be carried with them throughout their schooling years.

In the case of Malaysia's preschool education, children are introduced to English language in the hope that they will become familiar with the language when they enter primary school, where mathematics and science subjects will be taught in English. If children have some basic knowledge of English before they enter year 1 in primary school, it is hoped that they will not be left behind in the content subjects such as mathematics and science. Moreover if children are introduced to English language about the same time they are learning the Malay language formally, the nation's dream of having truly bilingual citizens will become a reality.

The approach to teaching English in preschool should be one that provides ample practice for children to listen, read, write and speak the language as early as possible because the younger the children are, the probability of them acquiring the target language is higher. It is also important that children are given the opportunity to listen to spoken English and practice speaking the language frequently. As many Malaysian children do not know any English when they come to school, teachers in preschool should use simple instructions in English to build up the children's ability to listen to and understand English in order to build a positive environment towards learning English in their own classrooms.

In order to offer guidance in the teaching of English language in Malaysian preschools the Ministry of Education has developed a National Curriculum to ensure that the basic knowledge in English is taught nationwide. According to the National Preschool Curriculum, the aims of teaching reading in preschool are to recognize letters of the alphabet, read simple and familiar words, and read simple sentences independently. In the area of speaking skills, the aims are to communicate with peers, teachers and other adults by carrying out simple conversations like to greet and to thank, use simple statements such as to talk about familiar experiences, to sing songs and recite rhymes and poems. Whereas for writing, students are expected to form recognizable letters, write simple words and write simple sentences. A summary of the aims of the National Preschool Curriculum is provided in Appendix A.

In our research, we attempted to assess Society Development's (KEMAS) preschool children's basic knowledge of English at the end of their preschool year to see if they

have attained the necessary level required as preparation for year 1 in primary school. We attempted to see how much children have learned before they enter primary school. KEMAS preschools are chosen in this study because many Malay children from low to middle class income groups attend this preschool due to its low fees and convenient location. These preschools are run by the Malaysian government to provide affordable preschool education to children in the rural and suburban areas.

Sample and Methodology

Two instruments were developed in order to assess the preschool children's knowledge and ability to communicate in English. The first instrument consisted of three sections: Reading, Writing and Letter Recognition. A total of 821 five- to six-year-olds were randomly selected from 50 KEMAS preschools in Penang and Seberang Perai and given the instrument to test their basic knowledge of English. The test consisted of 8 sections where children are expected to fill in the blanks and do matching exercises. First, the children were asked to write their names on the question booklet. Their ability to write their names clearly and correctly was recorded.

A total of 160 children were then selected at random to take part in a one-to-one reading session with the researchers. In the reading section, the children were given a four-sentence passage to read aloud. There were 20 words altogether in the passage comprising nouns, pronouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, conjunctions and articles. The children's ability to say and pronounce each word clearly and correctly was recorded on a 4-point scale ranging from '0' for no response to '4' for fluent and accurate reading. This was followed by a 15-item sub-test in which the children were tested on their ability to recognize letters of the alphabet. For this section, the researcher would say an alphabet and the child would have to indicate the alphabet mentioned by circling the correct answer from the three choices given. Their answers were recorded as right, wrong or no answer.

Finally, these children were interviewed individually to look into their abilities to respond orally to eleven simple questions in English. The questions were arranged from simple Yes/No-answer type of questions like "*Do you have any brothers or sisters?*", "*Do you like to come to school?*", "*Do you like to sing?*", to one-word response type of questions like "*What is your name?*", "*How are you today?*", "*How old are you?*", and complex-answer and respond-in-sentence type of questions such as, "*Why do you come to school?*" The responses were recorded on the basis of the number of questions the children were able to respond to correctly. The questions were read to the children and researchers give explanations in Malay language so that children who were not familiar with English could understand the questions.

Results and discussion

Of the 821 children who took the test, 614 children (74.8 %) were able to write their names correctly while 207 (25.5%) was not able to do so. In the section where children were asked to identify stationary items such as *ruler*, *book*, *bag* and *pencil* by filling in the blanks with the correct items, findings showed that 6.3% gave all incorrect answers, 3.7% managed to get 1 answer correct and 14.5% answered 2 items correctly. The majority of 63.3% managed to answer all the items correctly.

Children were also asked to match 10 items of body parts to the corresponding picture. The body parts given were *mouth*, *hand*, *leg*, *hair*, *eye*, *fingers*, *nose*, *ear*, *arm* and *foot*. Findings as displayed in Table 1, showed that 69.3% could get half of the items correct while 37.9% managed to get all the items correct.

Table 1 Correct Responses for Identifying Body Parts

	Number of Correct responses										
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Frequency	75	32	39	48	58	46	33	46	70	63	311
Percentage %	9.1	3.9	4.8	5.8	7.1	5.6	4.0	5.6	8.5	7.7	37.9

Mean=6.67

In the next section, children were asked to fill in the blanks with correct subject-verb agreement such as *is*, *are* and *am*. Findings showed that 68.8% of the children could answer 4 to 5 questions correctly. Only 8.6% answered all incorrectly. Detailed results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Correct responses for Subject-verb-agreement

	Number of Correct responses						
	0	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Frequency	71	12	39	134	161	404	821
Percentage %	8.6	1.5	4.8	16.3	19.6	49.2	100

Mean = 3.84

In the preposition section children were given 5 pictures and they were to underline the correct preposition to use under each picture. Findings showed that 14% gave incorrect responses and 2.9% managed to get 1 answer correct. A simple majority of 51.7% managed to give all correct responses as can be seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Correct responses for *Prepositions*

	Number of Correct responses						
	0	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Frequency	115	24	48	96	191	347	821
Percentage %	14.0	2.9	5.8	11.7	23.3	42.3	100

Mean = 3.54

In this section, children were asked to colour 6 pictures with the designated colours and the colours given were *red, blue, green, yellow, orange* and *black*. Findings showed that majority of the children know their colours in English as 72.4% managed to get all the responses correct. Table 4 below shows the details of the findings.

Table 4 Correct responses for Colours

	Number of Correct responses						
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Frequency	51	31	21	19	23	82	594
Percentage %	6.2	3.8	2.6	2.3	2.8	10.0	72.4

Mean = 3.60

In the identifying numbers section, children were asked to match the words *five, seven, six, three* and *eight* to the pictures given. Findings showed that preschool children's knowledge of numbers was average since only 14.9% managed to answer 4 items correctly and 50.7% managed to give all correct responses. However, a disturbing percentage of 14.1% or 116 children could not get a single answer correct and this shows that they do not know their numbers in English. Table 5 shows the overall responses of the children.

Table 5 Correct responses for Numbers

	Number of Correct responses						
	0	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Frequency	116	38	38	91	122	416	821
Percentage %	14.1	4.6	4.6	11.1	14.9	50.7	100

Mean = 3.60

In order to determine whether children could also spell out the numbers, children were asked to count the number of objects in the pictures and write down the numbers in words. The findings showed that only 40% managed to write down all the numbers in words correctly and 21.7% couldn't give a single correct answer as can be seen from Table 6 below. The findings clearly showed that children found that it is more difficult to spell out numbers in words as opposed to the preceding section where they just needed to match the numerical form with the words provided.

Table 6 Correct responses for Writing Numbers

	Number of Correct responses						
	0	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Frequency	178	29	46	80	160	328	821
Percentage %	21.7	3.5	5.6	9.7	19.5	40.0	100

Mean = 3.22

It is a common assumption that females perform better than males in language acquisition. As mentioned by Ehrman and Oxford (1989), females are reported to have greater strategy use than male students in authentic language use and in searching for and communicating meaning. In addition, Graham (1997) stated that gender differences were strongest in the authentic language use. Gage and Berliner (1979) stipulated that girls speak more clearly, read earlier and do consistently better than boys in tests of spelling and grammar. These statements are also supported by our study where the overall mean score of girls were consistently higher than the boys' mean score in every section as can be clearly seen in Table 7.

Table 7 Mean of Boys' and Girls' scores

Gender	N	Stationary	Body parts	Subject-verb-agree	Preposition	Colours	Numbers	Writing numbers
Male	363	3.05	6.23	3.66	3.35	4.93	3.40	2.99
Female	458	3.44	7.01	3.99	3.69	5.26	3.76	3.40
Average mean	821	3.27	6.67	3.84	3.54	5.11	3.60	3.22

The alphabet recognition exercise indicates an achievement where a good majority of 98.2% was able to recognize correctly all 12 or more alphabets shown. However since this test was carried out in October, which is quite late in the year, this shows that even after 10 months of being in preschool there are still a number of children who could not recognize the alphabets. This is quite disturbing as this skill is the most basic skill children in preschool need to acquire. (In table why start with 8 and not 1??)

Table 8 Correct responses for alphabet recognition

	Number of Correct responses									
	0-7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Total
Frequency	0	1	0	1	1	12	29	82	34	160
Percentage %	0	0.6	0	0.6	0.6	7.5	18.1	51.3	21.3	100

Mean = 13.8

In the oral skills, the children fared satisfactorily with 47 of them (29.4%) being able to respond correctly to simple questions in English with a mean average of 5.81. The last two questions proved a little difficult for the children not because they did not understand

the question but probably due to the fact that they were not exposed to those kinds of questions. About 5.6% did not give any response to the questions asked and 21 children (13.1%) could only respond to one question correctly. The findings also showed that children could understand spoken English but were unable to respond in English as in some cases they answered correctly, but in the Malay language. Table 9 summarizes the children's performance in the oral skills test.

Table 9 Correct responses for Oral skills
Number of correct responses

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Frequency	9	21	12	3	6	4	24	8	26	47
Percentage %	5.6	13.1	7.5	1.9	3.8	2.5	15.0	5.0	16.3	29.4

Mean= 5.81

In this section where children were asked to read a passage consisting of 20 words, 39 of the children (24.4%) were able to read the passage with remarkable fluency while 11 of them (6.9%) were able to read the passage but not with notable fluency. However on the other end, 18 of the children (11.3%) could not even read a word and 40% of the children could read but with difficulty. Table 10 shows the children's reading skills in terms of fluency.

Table 10 Fluency of five- and six-year old children's reading skills

	No response	Not fluent	Less fluent	Fluent	Very fluent
Frequency	18	64	28	11	39
Percentage %	11.3	40.0	17.5	6.9	24.4

Further analysis of the data was carried out to determine if there was any correlation between reading and oral skills. Results show that there was no correlation between reading skills and oral skills. As for whether there is any correlation between reading skill and letter recognition, the results also show that there is no correlation between these two skills. This is probably due to the fact that in English children read by word recognition and not by letter recognition as could be clearly seen in this study where children scored quite favorably in letter recognition but did not do very well in reading words.

Table 11 Word recognition

Responses	0 – 4 correct	5 – 9 correct	10 – 14 correct	15 – 20 correct
Frequency	42	9	31	78
Percentage %	26.3	5.6	19.4	48.8

As can be seen in Table 11, 26.3% of the children managed to read between 0 – 4 correct words. In fact in the raw data it was evident that 21.9% or 35 children did not read any word and only 16 children or 10.0% managed to read all 20 words correctly.

Conclusion

The results of the study clearly identified the areas that children may have problems with such as articles, verbs, prepositions and conjunctions. It is also evident that gender does influence children's language skills in as early as preschool years. The findings showed that even though children's results are quite satisfactory as most of the mean scores are slightly above average but there is still much room for improvement.

From the findings there are clear indicators that some children did very well while quite a number of children did very poorly. Perhaps teachers in the preschool should try and bridge this gap early and further studies are needed to identify the causes of these weaknesses. As for children's basic knowledge in English, where recognizing numbers, body parts and the alphabets are concerned, children seemed to have scored quite well. Most of the scores attained were slightly on the higher end.

On the other hand, even though findings showed that children scored relatively high on letter recognition (98.2%), the scores for word recognition are on the average side. Probably this is due to the fact that for letter recognition, the alphabet system in Malay language is the same and the sound system is almost similar to that of the English language. However when word recognition is concerned many children do not speak or listen to English being spoken except at school and to many of the children the words are quite foreign to them. In conclusion, the findings showed that many children in preschools have average basic knowledge of English.

Suggestions

A student's attainment in a second language is dependent upon numerous factors including the teacher, methods of teaching, teaching materials, the learner, instruction and the learner's socio-cultural conditions (Spolsky, 1989). In this context, the important role that a teacher plays in developing the literacy potentialities of children needs to be emphasized. When students fail to attain the desired level of proficiency in a second language, naturally the teacher is blamed, "it is the classroom teacher whom society holds primarily responsible for the child being literate" (Kemp, 1996). Thus a teacher needs to take proactive measures to ensure that the children in preschool get all the assistance they need to learn English.

In order to maximize learning, a positive environment for a language classroom must be set. A good learning environment for English especially to promote reading should be one that is literate and stimulating with plenty of printed materials and objects that relate

to what is being taught. Another way is by creating a reading corner with sufficient titles and copies of appropriate books. In addition, teachers should always read to the children in English and use comics and cartoon strips to encourage children to read. Reading is a skill that must be learnt and teachers must assist children to learn to read.

Teachers need to provide practice for children to speak in English and using short poems or nursery rhymes would be an excellent start. Young learners love nursery rhymes and this activity enables the children to practice using the language. Whereas to promote reading, teachers could label all the furniture in the classroom and place colourful cards in their classrooms to familiarize their children with new vocabulary items. They should provide a lot of audio-visual support when reading aloud e.g. use pictures, facial expressions, voice and gestures.

As for promoting speaking, a child needs to talk, listen and learn from others in order to maximize his own learning experience. Children should be given plenty of opportunities to speak by having a story-telling session or a show-and-tell session where they can share their experiences with other children. Class activities should also provide opportunities for children to speak by allocating time for them to work in pairs or in groups. Choral reading and reading aloud could also be used to encourage children's participation in class.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations in this study. The scope is limited to the northern state of Malaysia. Thus, the results of the study will not represent an accurate representation of preschool children throughout Malaysia. This study would have a greater significance if children from all over Malaysia were selected. In addition, children from other cultural groups may show different results since in this study all the children are Malays.

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Appendix A

Summary of the aims of the Malaysian National Preschool Curriculum (2001)

Item	Content	Learning outcomes
1 Reading	<p>1 1 Recognize letters of the alphabet</p> <p>1 2 Read simple words</p> <p>1 3 Read simple sentences</p>	<p>1 1 1 Link sounds to letters</p> <p>1 1 2 Name and sound the letters of the alphabets</p> <p>1 2 1 Recognize and sound simple words</p> <p>1 2 2 Point to letters, words, labels and read or name them</p> <p>1 2 3 Recognize some familiar words</p> <p>1 3 1 Read a range of simple sentences independently</p>
2 Speaking	<p>2 1 Communicate with peers, teachers and other adults socially</p> <p>2 2 Use simple words</p> <p>2 3 Use simple statements</p> <p>2 4 Ask simple questions</p> <p>2 5 Sing songs and recite rhymes and poems</p>	<p>2 1 1 Carry out simple functions of language orally e.g. to greet, to thank, to ask</p> <p>2 1 2 Carry out simple conversations</p> <p>2 2 1 Name parts of the body</p> <p>2 2 2 Name members in the family</p> <p>2 2 3 Name things in the environment</p> <p>2 3 1 Talk about familiar experiences, favourite things and activities</p> <p>2 4 1 Ask others about favourite things and activities</p> <p>2 5 1 Sing songs and perform appropriate actions</p> <p>2 5 2 Recite simple rhymes and poems</p>
3 Listening	<p>3 1 Listen to and recognize similarities in the sounds of language</p>	<p>3 1 1 Identify words with the same beginning sounds</p> <p>3 1 2 Identify words with the same ending sounds</p>

	<p>3 2 Listen to and recognize differences in the sounds of language</p> <p>3 3 Listen to and understand meanings of simple words</p> <p>3 4 Listen to and follow simple instructions</p> <p>3 5 Listen to and respond to simple songs, poems, stories and dialogues</p>	<p>3 2 1 Discriminate words with different beginning sounds</p> <p>3 2 2 Discriminate words with different ending sounds</p> <p>3 3 1 Listen to words said aloud and identify objects named in environment</p> <p>3 3 2 Listen to words said aloud and match with pictures</p> <p>3 4 1 Listen and carry out simple instructions</p> <p>3 4 2 Listen and perform actions based on instructions in games</p> <p>3 5 1 Listen to songs and rhymes and respond to the rhythm</p> <p>3 5 2 Listen to songs, rhymes and stories and perform actions according to the meaning</p>
4 Writing	<p>4 1 Pre-writing skills</p> <p>4 2 Writing skills</p>	<p>4 1 1 Engage in activities requiring hand-eye coordination</p> <p>4 1 2 Draw lines and circles using gross motor movements</p> <p>4 1 3 Draw anticlockwise and up-and-down letter movements</p> <p>4 2 1 Form recognizable letters</p> <p>4 2 2 Write simple words</p> <p>4 2 3 Write simple sentences</p>