

**DEVELOPMENT OF A MALAYSIAN
PRESCHOOLERS' ESL READING ASSESSMENT
INSTRUMENT TO SCREEN READING
READINESS**

OOI CHOON LEAN

UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

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PRESCHOOLERS' ESL READING ASSESSMENT
INSTRUMENT TO SCREEN READING
READINESS**

by

OOI CHOON LEAN

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PEMBANGUNAN INSTRUMEN PENILAIAN BACAAN ESL PRASEKOLAH UNTUK MENYARING KESEDIAAN MEMBACA

ABSTRAK

Keupayaan membaca adalah salah satu kemahiran yang paling penting yang dilakukan anak-anak muda untuk memulakan usaha akademik mereka. Pelajar memasuki bilik darjah dengan pelbagai latar belakang dan kemahiran dalam literasi. Oleh kerana kepelbagaian kepelbagaian, diperlukan untuk membuat penilaian standard untuk menyaring kesediaan membaca dan membaca kebolehan pelajar prasekolah sebelum melanjutkan pendidikan mereka di sekolah rendah. Objektif utama kertas ini adalah untuk membina instrumen ujian bacaan generik yang sah, boleh dipercayai dan praktikal yang boleh mendiskriminasi dan menyusun pelajar ke dalam kebolehan membaca tertentu. Ujian pembacaan generik ini terdiri daripada 40 item selaras dengan keperluan membaca Bahasa Inggeris dalam Kurikulum Prasekolah Kebangsaan Kebangsaan. Ujian itu kemudiannya dipandu dan data yang dikumpul dari ujian akan digunakan untuk membangunkan skor pemetongan untuk setiap peringkat dan satu set deskriptor bertulis yang akan menggambarkan keahlian membaca prasekolah. Data yang dikumpul boleh digunakan untuk profil pelajar prasekolah mengikut pembaca yang mampu, pembaca agak mampu dan belum dapat membaca kanak-kanak prasekolah. Pentadbiran ujian generik melibatkan 350 pelajar prasekolah dari 18 prasekolah yang dilampirkan ke sekolah rendah di Pulau Pinang dan Seberang Perai. Penemuan ini mendedahkan bahawa kebanyakan kanak-kanak prasekolah di Pulau Pinang dan Seberang Perai telah memperoleh kemahiran asas dalam membaca kesediaan tetapi memerlukan lebih banyak galakan untuk mengembangkan kemahiran membaca. Penemuan ini akan memberikan pendidik dengan maklumat yang berguna

untuk mengembangkan dan membangunkan bahan pengajaran yang relevan untuk prasekolah dan akan ada kesinambungan apabila pelajar memulakan pendidikan mereka di sekolah rendah.

DEVELOPMENT OF A MALAYSIAN PRESCHOOLERS' ESL READING ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT TO SCREEN READING READINESS

ABSTRACT

The ability to read is one of the most important skills that young children undertake in order to begin their academic endeavours. Students enter classrooms with diverse backgrounds and skills in literacy. Due to the various diversities, it was necessary to design a standard assessment to screen the reading readiness and reading abilities of preschool students before they further their education in Primary school. The main objective of this paper was to construct a generic reading test instrument which would be valid, reliable and practical that can discriminate and sort students into specific reading abilities. The generic reading test consists of 40 items in line with English reading requirements in the National Standard Preschool Curriculum. The test was then piloted and the data collected from the test would be used to develop the cut score for each level and a set of written descriptors that would describe the preschooler's reading proficiency. Data collected could be used to profile preschool students according to able readers, somewhat able readers and as yet unable to read preschoolers. The administration of the generic test involved 350 preschool students from 18 preschools annexed to primary schools in Penang and Seberang Perai. The findings revealed that the majority of preschoolers in Penang and Seberang Perai have acquired the basic skills in reading readiness but will need more encouragement to develop further reading skills. The findings will provide educators with useful information so as to expand and develop relevant teaching materials for preschools and there will be continuity when students begin their education in Primary school.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Reading is an essential skill for all children. Learning to read is one of the most important of all developmental tasks because success in other subjects depend on reading and success in reading equates school success (Slavin, 2006). Acquiring the ability to read is a great challenge to many learning English as a Second Language (ESL). This study intends to develop an ESL (English as a Second Language) reading readiness assessment instrument to screen Malaysian preschoolers for their reading readiness levels before they enter primary school. It begins with a background of study on the importance of reading readiness skills acquired in the early years. The researcher identify the objectives of the study as well as develop the research questions that determines preschoolers reading readiness levels. The discussion of the research is followed by an explanation of the significance of the study as well as its limitations. At the end of the chapter, terms used in this study are highlighted.

1.1 Background of the Study

The process of learning to read is a lengthy one that begins early in life before children enter preschool. Children's prior acquisition of certain skills dictated when formal reading instruction began (Sowers, 2000). Reading words may take several forms. Readers may utilize decoding, analogizing, or predicting to read unfamiliar words. Readers read familiar words by accessing them in memory, called sight word reading. With practice, all words come to be read automatically by sight, which is the most efficient, unobtrusive way to read words in text.

Early identification of reading readiness in the preschool period affects the development of proficiencies in elementary school (Elliot & Olliff, 2008). Reading programmes place emphasis on symbol recognition, whole word or sight word learning, learning of letter names and letter sounds and rhyming strategies. Preschool programmes in the United States such as Head Start begin work with children when children are three or four years of age (Machado, 2010). Many researchers believe that earlier intervention is needed for children who are at risk for school failure such as those from the lower socio-economic status and those from families with little literacy support. Research in Head Start found that disadvantaged children who participated in reading programmes did better in school than children who did not participate (Slavin, 2006).

In Malaysia, students are taught English as a second language when they enter primary school at seven. A study conducted by Norlida, Munirah, Ann Abdullah & Amir in 2004 reported that some children did well, especially in alphabet recognition, but quite a number of children did poorly in word recognition. Children who attend kindergartens have an advantage over those who do not (Long & Parkinson, 1978 as cited in Norlida et. al., 2004). There is a wide gap between the development of children from affluent middle-class families and children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Norlida Ahmad et al. 2004). All children who turn seven in a particular year will enter primary school. The children with preschool experience in English reading might get demotivated in English classes because the teacher might be repeating things they already know and it could lead to behavioral problems for the teachers. This study will attempt to find out the ESL reading readiness of the children before they go to primary school so that teachers can teach according to the abilities of the children in their classes. Many children fail to learn how to read in English

proficiently with serious consequences for their overall well-being and long-term success in school (Norlida Ahmad et al., 2004; Sowers, 2000).

1.2 Problem Statement

Not many research on reading ability have been conducted with kindergarten children in Malaysia. It has been well documented that the early years involved the highest rate of learning and the reading ability formed at a young age will stay with them for a lifetime (Machado, 2010; Sowers, 2000). Reading difficulty contributes to school failure. Children who develop poor reading skills are more likely to experience academic and behavioural difficulties at school and be at risk for later problems (Russo,2012) By reading, children can acquire the skills, knowledge and values essential for success in school and in adulthood.

The first step in implementing good reading instruction is to determine the baseline performance of the preschooler (The Access Center, 2005). A baseline is a measurement of a known configuration that is used as a reference for subsequent measurements. Children enter the classroom with diverse backgrounds and levels of reading skills. It is necessary to design instructions to meet the individual needs of each child. Individual needs can be determined by initial and ongoing reading assessments (The Access Center, 2005). These assessments provide information needed to develop appropriate lessons and improve instruction for all students (The Access Center, 2005). In Malaysia, students are taught English as a second language when they enter primary school at seven. Children who attend kindergartens have an advantage over those who do not (Long & Parkinson, 1978 as cited in Norlida et. al., 2004).

The problem that arises is that there is a gap between preschoolers' ESL reading abilities. It is assumed that children come to preschool with little or no prior knowledge of how to read (Sowers, 2000). Therefore, young children must learn about letters, phonics, sight words and decoding within the school setting (Sowers, 2000). The gap between children starting school who are ready to learn and those who are not has always been wide. In a typical preschool class, children's English reading skills may span a 5 year range; some may possess skills typical of 3 year olds and others, those of 8 year olds (Machado, 2010).

There is a lack of consistency in the teaching of English reading skills in Malaysia because of the two preschool systems. The public preschool system which is fully funded by the government but the private preschool system where parents pay fees and other expenses are borne by the operator. Although, all preschools have to abide by the curriculum guidelines set by the MOE under the Education Act of 1996, the pedagogy approaches are different. Therefore, the approaches in the teaching of English reading are also different in both systems. The curriculum standard published in Malaysia (Kementrian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2010) required English to be taught with all the four skills listening, speaking, reading and writing, integrated as one subject (Ahmad Norlida et al., 2004). A study by Ng and Yeo (2011) found that it is a common practice in Malaysia to emphasize early literacy instructions geared towards alphabetic code, alphabetic principle and writing skill (copying letters). The curriculum also required English as a Second Language (ESL) to be taught for only one hour each week in Government-aided preschools but most private preschools claim they practice teaching fully in English (Lily Muliana Mustafa & Mohamed Nor Azhari Azman, 2013).

Many preschool teachers are aware of the educational disparities they see among their students (Russo, 2012). The teachers at preschool or kindergarten often have to teach a class of children with mixed abilities. Some of the children in their class will already be able to read in English but some will come with very little knowledge of English. This study will attempt to find out the abilities of the children at reading in English before they go to primary school, where the main language is Bahasa Malaysia, so teachers can adjust their teaching according to the abilities of the children in their classes. Preschoolers from the public system do not get as much exposure to English as a language while the preschoolers from the private system would get more exposure.

It should be noted that there is no formal assessments or testing of students' language learning abilities. According to the National Standard Preschool Curriculum (2010), the aims of teaching reading in preschool are to recognize letters of the alphabet, read simple and familiar words and to read simple sentences independently (Norlida Ahmad et.al.,2004). In Malaysia, there is no assessment of preschoolers' English reading readiness before they enter primary school, unlike the public assessment test, UPSR, before students move from primary school to secondary school. However, informal tests are often carried out. Informal testing is common to gauge the students reading level (Machado, 2010). Teachers use a variety of assessment tools and practices to plan and evaluate effective reading instructions. Assessments provide teachers with information on what students have and what they have not mastered. Teachers assess their students by observation and an overall grade for English is given.

The reason why children undergo assessments is to enable teachers to know how well the children are learning or if they are making progress and meeting proficiency benchmarks (Machado, 2010). Data from assessments provide valuable

information for planning instructions and for determining programme quality. Most Malaysian preschool English teachers assess their students using a checklist twice or three times a year. Reading is not taught separately as in kindergartens in native speaking countries, so there is no item for reading in the checklist.

The teachers in preschools do not have a clear indicator and benchmark to refer to with regards to student's English reading skills. The indicators and benchmark should be general to enable all preschool students to utilize and specific enough to show each preschooler's abilities. Benchmarking can be helpful in identifying the strength and weaknesses of students. In Malaysian context, benchmarking has not been used to identify the level of English reading skills that preschool students have. Therefore a descriptor is necessary for teachers to make reference in preschool classroom on the competency of their students in reading.

There is a need to identify the reading skills of children at preschool level in order to help children before (Machado,2010). Each child is unique in the rate of growth and development of skills. Benchmarking and descriptors of students' level will be able to help preschool teachers to assess their skills and implement guidelines and offer extra help with reading. The standards in benchmarking is to provide teachers with useful information that is directly needed as part of their daily classroom work (Machado,2010) . There is a need to adapt teaching pedagogy to children's standards so that they can be successful in achieving a particular benchmark.

Every classroom is composed of a wide range of learners. As preschoolers enter the classroom with diverse backgrounds and levels of reading skills it will be useful to profile their reading characteristics in to high performers, average performers and low performers. With data from assessments teachers will be able to profile their

students. Profiling students provides teachers with powerful information to provide targeted instruction to students with differing literacy needs (Ward & Murray-Ward, 1999). A reading profile is a picture of a reader's strengths and needs in the component skills. Developing reading profiles for students will help teachers to plan better, be more focused on reading instruction and help prepare instructional plans for students.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify the English reading readiness level of 6 year old children in Malaysian kindergartens or preschools before they enter Primary schools. Being able to read in English is important for academic success. However, preschoolers may have unsatisfactory reading ability even after being in preschool for some time. The development of the standardized reading assessment test, will enable preschool teachers and educators to profile their students into able readers, somewhat able readers and as yet nonreaders.

In order to identify preschoolers reading readiness, an instrument to gauge the reading readiness levels of preschool children will be developed. This will be achieved by first developing a set of descriptors that would indicate the performance level of the preschool children's reading. Based on the National Preschool Curriculum (KSPK), this prototype reading assessment test will be able to evaluate preschoolers reading abilities in letter recognition, and reading simple and familiar words and sentences.

Assessment is an ongoing process that includes collecting, synthesizing and interpreting information about pupils, the classroom and their instruction. Testing is one form of assessment that, appropriately applied, systematically measures skills such as reading. Children who are interested in literacy activities and voluntarily engage in

them are likely to become better readers than children with less literacy interest. Literacy interest, along with engaging literacy activities and responsive teaching, are important components in children's early literacy experiences.

Baroody and Diamond (2010) examines associations among children's self-reported literacy interest, their parents' reports of home literacy environment (HLE), and their code-related skills. Overall, literacy interest was related to code-related skills like letter-word identification and alphabet knowledge. Further analyses reveal different patterns of relations among interest and code-related skills for children with low receptive language scores compared to their peers with age-level receptive language scores. These results suggest that taking advantage of individual children's interests as well as planning activities that are likely to be interesting may be effective strategies for promoting children's learning of important school readiness skills. Malaysian preschools do not have standardized benchmark indicators on ESL reading. Therefore, this study will provide teachers a tool that will enable teachers to make changes to improve the level of reading readiness among preschoolers in their care.

1.4 Objective of Study

Based on the research problem, the main objective of this study is to develop an instrument that can test identify the English reading readiness level of 6 year old children in Malaysian kindergartens or preschoolers before they enter Primary schools. This will be achieved through the following objectives:-

1. To develop a standardized reading test to identify the preschooler's English reading abilities which involves:
 - a) Developing a prototype reading test
 - b) Determining the validity of the prototype reading test
 - c) Determining the reliability of the prototype reading test.
2. To identify preschoolers who can read in English and non-readers which involves:
 - a) Determining how reading is taught
 - b) Determining preschoolers' reading readiness
 - c) Determining the learning environment at preschools
3. To profile the respondents with different reading abilities according to:
 - a) Level 1 - Able readers
 - b) Level 2 – Somewhat able readers
 - c) Level 3 – None readers
4. To determine other factors in preschoolers' reading readiness including:
 - a) Biological
 - b) Environmental
 - c) Social
 - d) Pedagogical

1.5 Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

1. How is a standardized reading test developed?
 - i. What would be the best combination of reading questions selected for the prototype reading test?
 - ii. What is the validity of the standardized reading test?
 - iii. What is the reliability of the standardized reading test?
2. Who are the preschoolers who can read in English and who are the non-readers?
 - i. How is reading taught?
 - ii. What is the level of preschoolers' reading readiness?
 - iii. What is the learning environment like at preschools?
3. What are the profiles of the respondents?
 - i. Who are the able readers?
 - ii. Who are the somewhat able readers?
 - iii. Who are the non readers?
4. What are the other factors affecting preschoolers' reading readiness?
 - i. What are the biological issues?
 - ii. What are the environmental issues?
 - iii. What are the social issues?
 - iv. What are the pedagogical issues?

1.6 Significance of Study

The reading assessment test designed for and used in this study is a generic test which transcends the skills required for learning to read in preschool. Preschoolers are not provided a grade which indicates whether the preschooler is performing well or deteriorating as compared to their peers. This study attempts to design an assessment test to identify what the preschoolers can and cannot do. The test attempts to provide teachers with a set of reading descriptors of preschoolers' reading abilities according to their level. Teachers can then prepare their instructional materials according to their students' levels.

This study is significant because it will allow teachers in preschools to identify the reading ability of the preschoolers entering their class so that they can plan their lessons to accommodate the levels or ability of the preschoolers to maximize learning. Individual differences in reading ability may be minimized through appropriate intervention before the onset of formal reading instruction. Structured interventions during preschool period have a significant impact on later reading acquisition.

Benchmarking preschoolers' ESL reading abilities would provide essential information to help schools, the education department and educators to understand the strength and weaknesses in preschoolers' reading abilities and make decisions to improve preschool education. The information gathered by the teachers could be used by the Ministry of Education to plan how to improve the ESL reading standards of the preschoolers in the country. Preschool teachers can examine the data obtained from benchmarking and make changes to their teaching to meet the needs of the students to improve their ESL reading standard.

1.7 Limitation

There were several limitations when conducting this study.

The first limitation of this study is that the reading assessment will be limited to only annex preschools in Penang. Even though Penang cannot be considered rural, there are still pockets of communities that do not have the chance to use English and thus their children may not have as much interaction with the language in order to learn to read before they enter primary school. The findings may not be generalized to preschoolers of other states in Malaysia. The findings from this study will provide in-depth information pertaining to the level of preschoolers reading ability.

Secondly, learning to read is a process that may take many years. This study profiles the performance of preschool respondents at a given time. The methods for assessing reading in preschools to suit the needs of the preschoolers are not included in this study. This study only attempts to assess reading ability using paper and pencil method. There are many other assessment methods which may be more relevant at preschool level such as observation method and portfolio method. Teachers may prefer a different assessment method more relevant to their students.

Finally, the last limitation is that the assessments designed in this study are written pencil and paper assessments which do not test the actual oral reading skill. It is difficult to test for phonological knowledge with a written test. The test is also designed to be used with a large number of preschoolers at any one time.

1.8 Definition of Terms

The terms used in this study are:

Benchmarking

A benchmark is a standard point of reference for comparing or assessing things. In literacy evaluations, benchmarks are a way to measure reading skills (Machado, 2010). Rather than using the grades A to E, which are often inaccurate descriptions for sub-skills such as reading ability, benchmarks offer a more complete description of preschoolers' reading skills, of what they can or cannot do at a certain time (Slavin, 2006).

In the context of this study, the assessment test is administered to benchmark the preschoolers ESL reading ability. It will test the preschoolers' knowledge of the alphabet, phonological knowledge as well as words and sentences.

Reading

Reading is how we make sense of the world. A fisherman reads the weather before he goes out to sea and a child reads his mother face to see if she is angry. In education, reading begins when children first notice that the marking or prints they see around them have meaning. They begin to make sense of the prints they see. Reading is to be able to decode written words by producing the sounds of the letters of the alphabet.

The primary method of teaching reading remains the same with all preschool children - exposure to books and reading materials through daily, purposeful experiences with print. Psychologist such as Thorndike, encouraged the idea of reading

readiness because the process of reading required a strong foundation in skills like the names of the letters and their corresponding sounds.

Reading descriptors

Reading descriptors refer to the descriptive schemes that describe the learners' reading progress (Cambridge University Press, 2001). For the purpose of this study, a set of descriptors will be developed based on the skill required in the KSPK. They describe the learners' abilities in detail at each level. It explains the learners' strengths and weaknesses in answering the reading items based on quantitative analysis. In this study, the reading descriptors are developed based on the test scores obtained from the prototype reading assessment test.

Reading Readiness

Reading is a foundational skill that provides the avenue to learning especially in language acquisition. Reading is part of the communication process. The goal of communication is a whole process in which speaking, listening, using written symbols and reading those symbols are closely connected (Gunning,2006; Machado,2010). The ability to read is present if the child understands and acts appropriately when he sees a printed word.

In this study, reading readiness is a criterion-referenced benchmark which is normally individually based against a set of criterion. Preschooler's reading readiness level refers to the pre reading skills such as the ability to recognize prints, the phonetical sounds corresponding to the letters of the alphabet and simple word recognition.

Preschooler

The preschooler usually refers to children when they start kindergarten but before they begin their education in primary school. In this study, preschoolers refer to 6 year olds children before they enter primary school. Some children go to kindergarten from the age of three. However, in Malaysian annex preschools, children usually start their preschool years at age four + or five. They can be in preschool until they are six before they enroll into primary school at age seven.

The Malaysian government places a strong emphasis on early education or preschools and has formulated the National Policy for Early Childhood Education (KSPK, 2010). Pre-schoolers in this study refer to children who turn six years old in a certain year. Pre-schools are commonly referred to as kindergartens in Malaysia.

English as a Second Language (ESL)

English as a language has great reach and influence. It is taught all over the world. Learning English as a second language could be one of the best decisions that a person could ever make. Being fluent in English can help you in many ways, whether you are planning to travel, study in an English-speaking country, or improve your career prospects. Second language learners can be defined as children who speak their native language in social and cultural context in and out of school. English is a subject Malaysian preschoolers learn in school and there is a strong influence of the national language, Bahasa Malaysia over the learning of English. The curriculum (KSPK) stipulated that preschools need to only offer English for one hour in a twenty hour week.

Learning to read in one language often accelerates learning to read in other languages. When readers learn to read written text in a language they understand, they

transfer an intuitive understanding of what reading is and how to read when reading in other languages. According to Anita Woolfolk (2004), it is a myth that learning a second language takes little time and effort. Learning English as a second language can take students many years in a good quality program to be able to communicate face to face and even longer in order to master the academic language skills. It is also a myth that exposure to English is sufficient for second language learning. In order to learn English as a second language, children need to have a reason to communicate, have interactions in English, support, feedback and time (Woolfolk, 2004). Some people are worried that reading in a first language can be detrimental to learning to read in English. However, Woolfolk (2004) claimed that literacy-rich environments in either first language or second language support development of necessary pre-reading skills

Annex Preschool

The Ministry of Education (MOE) set up preschools to give opportunity to children whose family with very low income in the sub-urban, rural and remote areas. It has been decided by policy makers that 80% of the classes are to be built in the rural areas. Classes are built annex to the public primary school building with the expenditure borne by Ministry of Education. This opportunity is given to children with the age 5+ years. Besides the launching grant given to start a class, MOE provides a yearly allocation of the following:

- Each child is given an allocation of RM 2.00 every school day for food. The food is prepared by the school. Pre-schoolers are served twice a day, once in the morning when they come to school and again at 10.30 am. School is dismissed at 12 noon in Penang which may be different in other states.

- RM 100.00 yearly per child for learning materials, each preschool class can receive up to 25 children, thus yearly, school can get up RM2,500 to buy teaching and learning materials, including text books, workbooks, and books for the class library.

National Standard Preschool Curriculum 2010 (KSPK)

The aims of preschool is to develop children of age 4 to 6 with potential in a holistic and integrated manner in terms of physical, spiritual, social and intellect through safe conducive learning environment, fun, creative and meaningful activities. This is to increase skills, self-confidence, and positive self-esteem of the child in order for them to adapt and excel in primary school. The aim for reading skills in the English section is that by the end of two years of preschool, learners are able to identify letters of the alphabet, know basic phonics, read simple words with understanding, read phrases with understanding, read simple sentences with understanding and develop an interest in reading.

Assessment for Reading Readiness

There is no assessment in Malaysia to identify preschoolers' reading readiness in English, as the grades they get for English do not indicate their reading ability and there are no descriptors of reading ability. Teachers often need to assess preschoolers' progress on letter identification, phonemic awareness, sight words and concepts of words as reading assessment (Machado, 2010).

Students in Malaysian preschools are assessed on their overall English language achievement and not separately on the sub- skills such as reading, writing and speaking skills. Most assessments are developed and conducted by teachers which

merely discriminate who among the students are performing better than the other (Abdul Rashid, Lin, & Shaik Abdul Malik, 2010). These assessments test the overall language skills of the students and do not have separate test scores for reading. Research by Ng and Yeo (2011) on the common practice of kindergarten teachers, found that their early literacy instructions were geared towards alphabetic code such as letter naming, letter sound and capital and small letters and alphabetic principles such as syllable decoding (Ng & Yeo, 2011).

Reading Readiness level

A reading readiness level refers indicates a learner's reading ability at a particular level (Abdul Rashid, et al. 2010). In this study, the reading readiness level is developed to identify the respondents' reading readiness at Level 1, Level 2, Level 3 or Level 4.

Able readers

The able readers are at Level 1 in reading readiness. They are able to read and recognize most of the words and sentences. Preschoolers at Level 1 will be able to get all or most of part 1, 2 and 3 of the reading readiness test correct.

Somewhat able readers

Respondents at Level 2 are the somewhat able readers. They are able to recognize many of the words in short sentences and are able to get many items in part 1 and part 2 of the reading readiness test correct but are still not able to read items in part 3 of the test.

Ready to read readers

Ready to read readers are at Level 3 in reading readiness. They are able to recognize the initial sounds and some single words to get some items in part 2 correct. Level 3 ready to read readers know the letters and letter sounds but do not recognize most of the single words in the reading readiness test.

As yet non-reader

Respondents at Level 4 are the as yet non-readers. Preschoolers at Level 4 are unable to recognize the letters and initial phonic sounds. The teacher will have to design appropriate activities so these students will be reading ready for primary school.

1.9 Summary

This chapter provides a discussion on the importance of having an evaluation system which can be used to provide more information about preschooler's reading abilities. The benchmarking of preschoolers' English reading ability will provide teachers with a quick, convenient and reliable measure of reading skills so that they can identify the weaknesses in preschoolers' reading abilities. It also provides a discussion on the rationale of study, significance of study, limitations of the study, as well as the definitions of terms. In the next chapter, we will review literature related to this study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

The focus of the study is to develop a standardized instrument that will be able to benchmark the ESL reading abilities of preschoolers in Malaysia. This chapter reviews literature on reading, the theoretical framework and reading assessments in Malaysian kindergartens referred to as preschools. In this study, ESL reading is taught during English lessons. The discussion includes the tools used in assessing reading in the early years.

2.1 Reading

Reading skill refers to the ability to understand written text. It is advisable to develop this skill at early age of schooling. When students comprehend or understand written text, and combine their understanding with prior knowledge, they are able to perform across all subject areas (Morrow, 2001). Reading readiness, on the other hand has been defined as the point at which a person is ready to learn to read and the time during which a person transitions from being a non-reader into a reader (Villanueva, 2016).

Decoding is the ability to apply your knowledge of letter-sound relationships, including knowledge of letter patterns, to correctly pronounce written words. Understanding these relationships gives children the ability to recognize familiar words quickly and to figure out words they haven't seen before. Although children

may sometimes figure out some of these relationships on their own, most children benefit from explicit instruction in this area.

Phonics is one approach to reading instruction that teaches students the principles of letter-sound relationships, how to sound out words. Research and theory suggested that young children need to be actively engaged in experiences that will build language that eventually lead them to becoming readers (Sowers, 2000; Machado, 2010). Proponents for English believe that English ought to be introduced as early as possible (Woolfolk, 2004). Children who enter school with limited reading skills are at high risk of needing special education services (Lonigan, Burgess and Anthony, 2000; Sower,2000; Marchado, 2010). Children who had difficulty in learning to read are likely to continue to experience difficulties in learning to read throughout the school years. (Lonigan et al, 2000)

Despite the importance of literacy in society, there are many people who cannot read well enough to perform daily activities such as reading signs and public notices (Morris, 2008). There are also a large number of people who can read well but choose not to do so. Reading is a complex and purposeful sociocultural, cognitive, and linguistic process in which readers simultaneously use their knowledge of spoken and written language (Gunning, 2006). Reading is considered as one part of the communication process in which speaking, listening and using written symbols are closely connected (Machado, 2010).

Reading is defined as the ability to decode, decipher and identify written words and symbols. Unless we recognize the written words, we cannot even begin to read (Nuttall, 1996). Reading is the basis of instruction in all aspects of language learning

(Mikulecky, 2008). Learning to read is the most important work of students in their early years. Learning to read lays the foundation for future learning and understanding across all areas of the curriculum (Johnson, Pool & Carter, 2008). Reading is a conscious and unconscious thinking process. The reader applies several strategies to reconstruct the meaning that the author intended (Mikulecky, 2008).

Joseph K. Torgesen (2002) identified the instructional conditions that need to be in place to prevent the development of reading difficulties in children. He suggested several methods to prevent reading failure that is grounded in the new knowledge acquired about reading and learning to read. Recent research on reading has established a set of facts about reading and reading growth that is relevant to establishing instructional objectives and methods for the prevention of reading difficulties.

English is taught in Malaysian preschools as a second language in line with the Education Ministry's vision to have bilingual graduates at the end of their school life. Many Malaysian preschoolers from rural and also semi-urban areas are non-English speakers, having learned their native languages by living and being socialized into their particular communities. Second language acquisition in young children is similar to their acquisition of their first language (Petty, Petty & Salzer, 1989 as cited in) Preschoolers come to school where the English language is introduced to them gradually. Preschoolers find themselves learning English as a second language (ESL) and must develop new ways of using a language to help them learn. When they first encounter a new language, many young learners will continue to use their native language to communicate or they do not talk at all but attempt to communicate through gestures to get attention. There are a lot of individual differences in children's second language learning such as the rate at which they learn to read in English. In the ESL

setting both adults and other children tend to modify their ways of speaking to what they think the ESL learner will understand and respond to. Therefore, fluent English speaking teachers are important language models for their ESL learners.

There is no suitable time such as when they start school to learn to read. Children are always ready to begin to read (Cullingford, 2001). However, although members of the family have an important influence in helping to provide the necessary language and experience background for children, the teacher has the direct responsibility to teach them (Staiger, 1973). Both parents and teachers have to think carefully about the needs of individual children, in terms of their linguistic environment and of their sensitivity to their own approach to reading (Cullingford, 2001). Results of studies provide important understandings about the nature of children's literacy learning and the kind of environmental environment that best supports it (Strickland, 2002).

This study is done following on the Reading and Decoding System (READS) developed by Abdul Rashid, Lin and Shaik Abdul Malik in 2010. READS was devised based on the Malaysian school system to assess students' reading proficiency in secondary schools. This study will attempt to replicate READS with preschool children. An instrument to assess reading ability will be developed based on the many instruments already in use but will be tailored for the Malaysian preschoolers. This reading assessment can be used as a benchmark. It will help to get data on what the preschoolers really know and do not know at a particular level. The main purpose of this study is to develop a reading readiness test that is relevant to Malaysian English Syllabus according to the National Curriculum laid down by the Ministry of Education in 2010. In order to correctly target instructions and expectations, it is important to

recognize the different levels of language acquisition (Darling-Kuria, 2012). The data will help teachers to plan their lessons according to their students' reading ability.

2.2 Early Reading

Reading is an essential skill for all children. To read a book, your child needs to sound out words, recognize common ones like “the,” understand what the text means, and read fast enough to make sense of the story. The starting point, for all reading activities in any language, are the basic literacy skills, one of which is the need to be able to categorize letters. A child's reading skills are important to their success in school (Sower, 2000). In addition, reading can be a fun and imaginative activity for children.

Most of the available research in reading has been carried out in English speaking countries. The method the teacher use to teach reading would be different in Malaysia as students here learn English as a second language after a first language which might not be the mother tongue. The mainstay of any reading programme is to develop word recognition, the extension of vocabulary and accurate comprehension (Jenkinson, 1973) which may be problematic when children are learning another language that they have limited exposure to. The process of learning to read is a lengthy one that begins very early in life. Native English speaking children learn the language as they grow up in an English speaking environment. They listen to songs and stories in English. English is the language in school and at home. Children who learn English as a second language in English speaking nations learn to read according to the Immersion approach (Gonzalas et al., 2006) where everything in their environment is in English.