

THE BARRIERS IN TEACHING ENGLISH SKILLS ENCOUNTERED BY MALAYSIAN RURAL-AREA PRESCHOOL TEACHERS: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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Abstract

This qualitative study aims to examine the complexities encountered by rural-area preschool teachers in teaching and learning English skills by interviewing six rural-area teachers from preschools in the Air Tawar Zone, Johor Bahru, Malaysia. The study data were thematically analysed under Braun and Clark's framework. Three primary themes were identified with one counterpart denoting two sub-themes: (i) theme 1 involved preschoolers' low English proficiency; (ii) theme two encompassed the teachers' challenges (classroom and home-based situations); (iii) theme three outlined the intricacies posed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) curriculum. Overall, the current study has expanded the current body of literature with pivotal implications and a holistic understanding of the issues encountered by rural-area English skills preschool teachers. This comprehension to resolve the perpetually low English quality among rural children.

Keywords: English skills in preschool; English skills teaching and learning; Teaching at rural preschools

INTRODUCTION

As one of the languages imbibed at the preliminary stage of schooling, English is introduced to catalyse Malaysia as a highly competitive nation. The MOE has meticulously established the early education or preschool system, which includes disadvantaged children from low socio-economic status (SES). Preschool programme quality is regulated through the mandatory National Standard Preschool Curriculum (NSPC) for preschools registered under MOE. The six-component curriculum was developed in 2010 and subsequently revised in 2016 for preschool education. On another note, the National Key Result Areas or NKRA was launched by MOE under the Government Transformation Programme (GTP 1.0) to elevate preschoolers' enrolment [Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015 - 2025 (Education, 2013)]. The GTP 2.0 functioned to optimise the programme with a minimum standard and early childhood literacy learning. In this vein, both GTP 1.0 and 2.0 enhanced the preschool programme quality.

Preschool-stage early reading skills in English is deemed essential for children to achieve literacy, optimal reading (Nicholas, 2005; Liberman et al., 1989; Brown, 2014), and overall achievement.

The English language has been employed as a communication medium from the British colonisation era for administration and educational purposes from the 1940s. The 1951 Barnes Report initially developed for the then-Malayan educational system has since structured the Malaysian education identity with a six-year primary education in Malay and English as the primary communication medium. As such, English has gained much significance and importance in envisioning Malaysia on a global scale. The MOE has strived to ascertain the education quality in multiple stages, including early childhood, through the education development plan (2001 - 2010). The aforementioned plan presents specific approaches involving the development of support programming, financial management, and information and technology (ICT)

integration while the the education development master plan (2006 - 2010) entailing six thrusts served to mitigate the urban-rural education gap. Educational advancement through NKRA (2010 - 2012) has induced high preschool enrolment and education access two years after implementing the education programmes. Several MOE-based programmes, such as Tadika Perpaduan, Tadika Kemas, and annex preschools were duly implemented for high-quality early-stage learning among rural and underprivileged students with low SES.

The MOE designed NSPC [first developed in 2010 and subsequently revised in 2017 following new NEP (2013 - 2025) policy demands] as a learning, teaching, and assessment guideline for optimal preschool programmes and local and global standards among the registered preschools. The English language constitutes one of the six learning cores incorporated into NSPC with the development of content and learning standards to ensure that preschoolers are equipped with the most pivotal English skills. The MOE also presents Teacher's Kit, a specified English module encompassing listening and responding, speaking, reading, and writing skills, to facilitate and guide preschool teachers. Despite the essentiality of such skills for early literacy, recent research has revealed the inability of the local education system in resolving the complexities underlying English learning, particularly in remote regions (Ainon, 2016).

The MOE-identified gaps in the national examination ['Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR)' and 'Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM)'] results between urban and rural areas were 4% and 8% percentage, respectively (Education, 2013). This failure was cumulative as students who failed in SPM inevitably failed in UPSR. Additionally, English-illiterate children with restricted educational access and resources primarily hail from rural areas where English is merely used in academic situations (Hazita, 2016) (Kartini, 2016). Unsurprisingly, a gap exists in the English language examination results between students from local rural and urban areas (Education, 2013).

Academic gaps have caused grave concern on a global scale. A World Bank report on rural academic quality disclosed the schooling accessibility-quality incongruencies to adversely influence rural school development

and poverty alleviation. Teachers were also found to struggle with their teaching tasks (Hazita, 2016; JNJK, 2013; Blueprint, 2013; Rabindra, Nooreiny, & Hamidah, 2016; Tandika & Kumburu, 2018; Ying & Mariani, 2018) owing to low language proficiency as they are compelled to teach a language they are relatively unfamiliar with. Intriguingly, the teaching guideline provided for preschool teachers to teach English skills has instigated more drawbacks than benefits due to constant revisions. Such adoptions of novel teaching techniques inevitably hampered the teaching process. For example, the shift from the whole language method to the phonics counterpart under NSPC-EL (version 2010) led to notable language barriers for rural-area students and teachers with the responsibility to deliver English skills. As such, it is deemed crucial to analyse the substantial gap from rural-area preschool teachers' perspective and the reasons underpinning the ongoing complexities in teaching and learning English skills in remote regions.

Methodology

This qualitative research employed physical semi-structured interviews, a more flexible form of a structured interview in realistic studies (Gilham, 2000), to explore respondents' feedback for further questioning. This type of interview is. Several pre-determined questions were posed to the study respondents followed by subsequent queries to explore their response(s) for optimal data organisation, response patterning, thematic analysis (Patton, 1987), enriched feedback, and holistic comprehension. The current study selected six preschool teachers (five female and six male) from annexe preschools with a Diploma or Degree in Early Childhood Education and between one and 22 years and one year 13 years of general and preschool teaching, respectively. All the teachers taught preschoolers from five to six years old. As the interviewer, the researcher actively listened to interviewees' responses to ascertain the feedback authenticity and quality (Patton, 1990). The interviews were conducted in Malay or Bahasa Malaysia (BM) in line with respondents' preferences.

The aforementioned teachers taught in remote Felda areas (primarily allotted for palm

oil plantation) with a 30 to 40-kilometre distance from the nearest town. This area, which mainly encompassed palm oil workers, was selected given the barriers highlighted in teaching and learning English skills. Respondents' answers were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim manually, and thematically analysed under Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework to (i) derive themes and subthemes, (ii) become familiar with the study data, (iv) generate initial codes, (iv) identify themes, (v) review themes, and (vi) define themes for write-up or reporting. The interview outcomes are elaborated in the following subtopic and sub-sub topics (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results and Findings

The study data analysis demonstrated in-depth and significant implications. The empirical outcomes were classified into three themes with subsequent discussions as follows:

3.1 Preschoolers' Low English Proficiency Level

The first outcome highlights preschoolers' English proficiency with all the teachers sharing relatively similar answers. A total of six teachers who reflected the fluency level of approximately 150 rural-area preschoolers (tentatively 25 students to one teacher) were interviewed. The following excerpts depict the teachers' responses.

Teacher 1: 'Mereka ni tak tahu apa-apa masa mula-mula datang. Saya kena ajar ABC dulu. Dorang punya

tahap kelancaran memang sangat lemah'

'They knew nothing when they first came. I had to teach ABC first. Their proficiency was so low.'

Teacher 2: 'Mereka datang dengan tiada apa-apa pengetahuan. ABC pun tak tahu. Pengetahuan English

dorang kosong'...'Dorang ni main-main je masa Tabika (persekolahan sebelumnya)'

'They came with zero knowledge. They did not even know ABC. They had zero English

knowledge'.

Teacher 4: 'Sangat lemah (kelancaran). Sangat-sangat kosong'.

'So low (proficiency). Total zero'.

Teacher 5: 'Sangat lemah (kelancaran). Dorang mula-mula datang ke sekolah tanpa pengetahuan English.

Dorang ni ABC pun tak tahu...'Dorang ni budak luar bandar'.

'So low (proficiency). They first came to the school with no English knowledge. They did not

even know ABC'...'They were rural kids'.

Teacher 6: 'Dorang tak mahir bahasa ni'...'Dorang tak ada pendedahan English'.

'They did not master the language'...'They did not have English exposure'.

Conclusively, all the rural-area preschoolers possessed insufficient or zero English knowledge when first enrolling in preschool, which amounts to extremely low or zero English fluency as opined by all six respondents. Three reasons underpinned the insufficiency or absence of English literacy. First, the preschoolers were merely taught to sing and play with no emphasis on early literacy skills during their previous schooling (Tabika) or formal education. Second, the remoteness of their living area and subsequent factors renders them to be English-illiterate. Third, the preschoolers were unfamiliar with the target language.

3.2 Challenges of Teaching English Skills

The second outcome elaborates on the barriers to teaching English skills. The challenges were categorised into two sub-themes and justified as follows:

3.2.1 Challenges at School

The study respondents struggled with classroom situations involving rural area students with significantly low or no language proficiency and poor lesson retainment, which required multiple reiterations for learning and memorisation to occur. Additionally, the

delivery of English skills lessons for reading through the phonics approach rendered teaching to be a highly complex phenomenon. Particularly, teachers struggled with this approach given their lack of knowledge and training. It is deemed challenging to teach phonics in English as this approach is not utilised in teaching BM reading skills. Lastly, the provided educational materials were not tailored to rural-area preschoolers' English proficiency and knowledge level. For example, the audio materials were recorded in a foreign accent that hampered both teachers' and students' language comprehension.

3.2.2 Challenges Rooted at Home

The first challenge associated with the preschoolers' homes is the absence of learning continuity. For example, students only utilised English in the classroom for academic purposes with no learning opportunities at home. Parents were also unable to support or facilitate their children's learning continuity and language fluency at home due to prolonged working hours and the need to earn more, which inevitably resulted in incomplete homework or at-home tasks. Lastly, minimal English exposure at home in the absence of English cartoons or movies and interactions proved inconducive for students' language fluency.

3.3 Problems with the MOE English Curriculum

Based on the thematic analysis, the teachers encountered multiple issues regarding the MOE-designed English curriculum and modules (NSPC), which must be adhered to. For example, the NSPC encompassed content and learning standards that are beyond rural-area preschoolers' language proficiency. It was repeatedly mentioned that the preschoolers were extremely weak in English learning. The wide NSPC-Year 1 curriculum gap poses another challenge. Based on the respondents' feedback, preschoolers are expected to learn to copy and write basic sentences in preschool in order to generate an 80-word essay in Year 1. This objective proved difficult to attain as most of them remain struggling to copy and write basic sentences in Year 1. Most of the respondents addressed the aforementioned concerns and strived to comply with the curriculum standards by conducting additional 30 to 60-minute classes for preschoolers who remain lagging.

The constant changes made by MOE on NSPC imply another curriculum-related intricacy. For example, respondents were expected to implement the NSPC revised in 2016 despite having just comprehended its past version. Such shifts potentially hampered the teaching of reading skills. The 2016 revision, which integrated phonics into reading skills, proved challenging to execute given the teachers' unfamiliarity with the approach and lack of understanding post-training. Consequently, all the six teachers resorted to implementing the previous curriculum as none were familiar with the phonics method. If they claimed of using the approach, they did not wrongly. Resultantly, most of the respondents developed their own English modules with workable modules and achievable learning standards.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore rural-area preschool teachers' challenges in delivering lessons on English skills. As previously discussed, the respondents struggled to teach preschoolers with extremely low or zero English proficiency following Blueprint (2013) and Hazita (2016) where English illiteracy is prevalent in remote areas. Three reasons underpin preschoolers' low proficiency. First, the children were not formally educated in their previous schooling (attended one year prior to preschool), which was mainly play-oriented. Second, the preschoolers originated from rural areas. Based on Kartini (2016), such remote regions restrict educational access and resources as parents in rural areas worked long hours for more income with no time to educate their children (Norazman, A.M., Faruk, M. & Fatimah, 2005). In other words, low SES parents inadvertently moulded children with low proficiency in English skills (Kartini, 2016 and Zalika, Faridah & Mohamad, 2009).

Third, preschoolers with minimal language exposure are pressured to imbibe a foreign language. The incorporation of English in Malaysia resembles that of a foreign language (EFL) rather than a second language (ESL). In line with Darmi and Albion (2013). In this vein, children struggle to learn ESL if their first language attributes differed from the second language (McBride-Chang, 2004). Such variations are exacerbated when English is

merely employed in educational settings with no genuine relevance and value among rural-area preschoolers (Hazita, 2016; Darmi & Albion, 2013) who are at risk of becoming English illiterates. The respondents also highlighted the challenges encountered by preschoolers in learning BM reading skills, which complicates ESL learning given the existing intricacies in first language learning. McBride-Chang (2004) asserted that rural-area children struggle to learn English and are at risk of becoming English-illiterates given their poor mastery over the first language.

Following the study outcomes, respondents were required to resolve classroom and home-based complexities involving preschoolers' English proficiency, which rendered the teaching process to be tedious. The teachers' insufficient knowledge in English skills, such as reading and phonics also led to teaching intricacies. The novelty of phonics in Malaysian primary schools has caused implementation-oriented issues despite its effectiveness in teaching reading skills (Prasad et al., 2016). Malaysian teachers also favoured rote reading to teach reading skills (Tee & Mariani, 2018) parallel to the current study as none of the rural-area preschool teachers have taught reading skills with the synthetic phonics technique given the absence of knowledge and expertise.

In line with the research results, preschool teachers encountered challenges arising from preschoolers' home environments due to SES: parents' lack of (i) facilitation towards children's English-learning efforts, (ii) learning continuity, (iii) assistance, and (iv) exposure. Such parents are mainly non-governmental workers employed in palm oil plantations who need to work for long hours for more income, thus limiting the quality time spent for children's education at home. Likewise, Siti and Narimah (2018) and Norazman et al. (2005) revealed that local parents in rural areas with low SES had limited time to supervise their children's English-learning activities and resources to purchase additional educational materials. The low SES instigates low education quality among rural-area children (Zalika, Fardiah & Mohamad, 2009) following educational resource scarcity and the remoteness of the area (Hazita, 2016). Such drawbacks proved significant in

determining the success or failure of early literacy skills (Fantuzzi-Chapman (2012). In line with Jacob and Ludwig (2009) and Cheng and Wu (2017), low SES parents are inevitably related to children with low proficiency in reading skills.

In terms of teachers' conflicts with NSPC (MOE-designed curriculum), the curriculum appears to be highly demanding with a broad NSPC-Year 1 curriculum learning gap. The content standard of BI 2.2 (apply sounds of letters to recognise words) was also incorrectly arranged as learning begins with letter name (LN) as opposed to letter sound (LS) under the synthetic phonics method. Such inaccuracies further exacerbated the errors committed by rural preschool teachers in delivering lessons on reading skills, particularly amidst frequent curriculum updates and changes. As such, respondents resorted to utilising the highly-familiar previous curriculum to independently establish English modules by modifying the content for attainable learning standards. The aforementioned outcomes depicted the authentic challenges encountered by Malaysian rural-area preschool teachers who teach English. The aforementioned complexities originating from preschoolers with extremely low English proficiency must be regarded to enhance the English learning quality in remote areas. Meanwhile, the intricacies originating from children's home environments owing to low SES parents further complicate the current situation. Lastly, Malaysian preschool teachers struggled to teach English due to NSPC-associated issues.

4.1 Limitation

The study outcome could not be widely generalised as only six preschool teachers were selected as research samples. Notwithstanding, the semi-structured interviews generated enriched and detailed findings which could be regarded as the occurrence of authentic circumstances. Additionally, the current research only encompassed rural areas in one part of Malaysia: the Kota Tinggi Felda areas. Although the limited coverage failed to characterise other situations, similar circumstances involving preschoolers with low English proficiency could be outlined. The third limitation denoted the lack of a proven and workable synthetic module on local or global scales with only the effectiveness of the Jolly

Phonics module under synthetic phonics having been studied to date. This research paucity limited the number of scholarly references on the most optimal synthetic phonics module structure for rural and at-risk preschoolers with specified reading needs. Specific alternatives and efforts could alleviate the aforementioned limitations that could adversely impact the study outcomes. Controlling detours such as adverse implications from prevailing and causing major shortcomings or insignificance to the overall study and its empirical results.

4.2 Implication

This study aimed to explore rural-area preschool teachers' issues in teaching English, which provided more avenues to comprehend their challenges and facilitate the MOE to undertake the necessary measures. This study proved to be advantageous for preschool teachers, specifically on how to prepare themselves in teaching English to rural-area preschoolers to prevent fresh graduates from experiencing culture shock in rural area situations. The current study also proved to be beneficial for rural-area preschoolers. The in-depth analysis of both teachers' and preschoolers' challenges could facilitate the MOE towards resolving the highlighted concerns and forecasting future intricacies. Lastly, this study has contributed significant guidelines for MOE regarding English-teaching, such as the optimal development of reading manuals tailored for rural preschoolers for an enjoyable, comprehensible, and impactful educational experience.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore English skills teaching and learning issues encountered by rural-area preschool teachers. Specifically, preschoolers demonstrated English proficiency ranging from low to very low as the children merely engaged in play during their previous schooling, originated from rural areas, and lacked the necessary exposure to English. Teachers also encountered complexities in classroom settings due to students' low levels of proficiency and their own lack of knowledge in teaching English skills (reading), particularly with the novel implementation of synthetic phonics. Regarding home-based intricacies, lack of parental engagement was identified due to

long working for higher earnings. Lastly, the MOE-issued curriculum proved to be too demanding with inaccurately arranged content standards and constant changes that are deemed incomprehensible. The depicted issues encountered by the study respondents could be resolved with an appropriate and specified English teaching manual to educate rural-area preschoolers in terms of English skills, preschool teachers' teaching requirements, preschoolers' learning requirements and proficiency, and the integration of the parental engagement to provide quality time for their children's education.

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