Preschool English Teachers' Practices and Early Literacy Instruction:Montessori vs. International Preschool Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

The practices preschool teachers implement in their classrooms are vital in their students' literacy development. Preschool teachers are always expected to implement research-based literacy practices to ensure children are ready to learn when they enter school. This multiple-case study intended to address four non-native in-service preschool English teachers' practices in early literacy instruction. Data collection involved interviews and videotaping of classroom practices along with documents from ten full English lesson observations in each classroom. For this multiple case study, the analysis for each case was conducted to identify themes and subthemes. A cross case analysis was also conductedto find overall themes and subthemes common to both cases.The overall conclusion generated from the results of the data analyses is that though teachers and preschool principals in the same school district using various curriculum perceived that they were effectively applying early English literacy instruction, there was actually a divide between the curriculum and what they implemented in classrooms. There was not enough interaction between the teacher and children. Therefore, it is necessary to help teachers improve their understanding of the links between learning, teaching and social interaction in the area of early English literacy.

Keywords: *Preschool,Early Literacy Instruction, Practices, ESL Teachers*

INTRODUCTION

Today preschool teachers are educating a diverse population of children, with many from homes where English is not the first language. In light of this growing number of English Language Learners (ELLs) in preschool, researchers have investigated ways to support ELLs' early literacy development. Preschool teachers have a significant role in children's literacy development. "They actually have the power to influence early literacy skill development and potentially impact children's later success in school" (Dennis and Horn, 2011, p. 30). Sandvik, Van Daal and Ader (2013) define emergent literacy as the emergence of literacy-related behaviors due to both direct instruction and social interaction. Advocates of the emergent literacy perspective acknowledge that children's early literacy emerges through primarily social interaction.

Regarding teachers' early literacy instruction, Snow, Griffin, Burns, and the NAE Subcommittee on Teaching Reading (cited in Porche, Pallante & Snow,2012) state that how teachers practice instruction is as significant as the content they provide in their classroom, and to certify that all teachers know how to implement outstanding literacy instruction, constant professional development and support are critical.Pray (2010) believes that "most local ESL teachers have little experience working with ELLs, learning a second language, and working with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds" (p. 217). Tang et al. (2011) in a study in Malaysia indicated that majority of preschool teachers were of low or average quality. They stated that this can be inferred that low quality teachers lack both the content knowledge and the pedagogical skills.

Furthermore, considering the role of preschool teachers in developing early literacy and identifying this role in early childhood education curriculum are critical. Paciga, Hoffman and Teale (2011) worry that drill-and-skill activities and practices replace some richer language and literacy activities. Given these points, itcan be impliedthat there may be a contradiction between preschool curriculum standards focusing on social interaction between teacher and children (and the role of play) along with various literacy activities and the actual practices that preschool teachers implement in their classrooms.

Statement of the Problem

In 2010, the Malaysia Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced the National Preschool Curriculum which all preschools, public and private, are required to follow. The National Preschool Curriculum is based on the principles of Rukun Negara (Malay for "National Principles") which is the Malaysian declaration of national philosophy and the National Philosophy of Education. It indeed aims to develop social, intellectual, physical, spiritual as well as aesthetic values in children (Malaysian International ECEC Conference,2009).

Along with the National Preschool Curriculum and the National Philosophy of Education, two famous preschool curricula are used in most private preschools in Malaysia; IPC and Montessori. Both curricula consider interaction and play crucial to develop early literacy in young children. Yet, there is a lack of focused interactions and little peer support in preschool classrooms (Grieshaber, 2010). Grieshaber (2010) refers to a study in which "children were trying to work together but had not been taught skills of how to do this effectively and so learning outcomes were compromised" (p.70).

It is actually recognized that the actual practices of teachers contradict with the curriculum. This indicates that there is a contradiction between preschool curriculum focusing on social interaction between teacher and children and the actual practices that preschool teachers implement in their classrooms. This might be due to the fact that how to implement early literacy teaching in relation to the policy domains, curricula and indicators, and the children's own perspectives seems a real challenge (Jensen, 2011). Dickinson and McCabe also (cited in Scull, Brown & Deans, 2009) confirm that teachers are uncertain as how to construe literacy and how to decode existing knowledge and teaching strategies in practice.Besides, it was observed in a study by Tang et al. (20110 that the preparation and implementation of the lessons in the classroom by teachers were of low quality.

Therefore, the current study aimed to fill the gap in literature which is the effective early language and literacy instruction for ELLs and the way preschool teachers can implement social interaction in practice. As Phoon, Abdullah and Abdullah (2013) confirm, it is necessary to investigate what is really happening on the actual contexts and what is required to be implemented to assure that encouraging learning environment is provided in preschool classrooms.

Theoretical Basis for the Study

There are four major components that repeatedly surface in the literature and have been identified as particularly significant in the study of emergent literacy: alphabet knowledge, oral language skills, phonological awareness, and print awareness (see Regalado, Goldenberg &Appel, 2001, Parette et al., 2009; Piasta, 2014 & Rohde, 2015). Yet, without examples or models to help teachers identify what the policies, standards or curriculum are calling for in practice, teachers remain unsure of how to teach early literacy through a developmentally appropriate practice.

Therefore, the current study drew on the Comprehensive Emergent Literacy Model of Rohde (2015) since this research was intended to examine preschool teachers' practices through investigating how these

teachers implemented early literacy components (alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, print awareness &oral language) in their classrooms.

Additionally, language and literacy are social events which do not only require skills, knowledge and understanding, but also involve complex interactions and responses. Therefore, this research is also informed by a social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Social constructivist is looked through as the present research examines the practices and interactions of preschool English teachers with young children since both curricula in this study (Montessori and IPC) consider play and interaction as necessary in the development of early literacy in young children.

At the core of Vygotsky's theory was the idea that child development was the result of interactions between children and their social environment. Rowe (cited in Kissel, Hansen, Tower & Lawrence, 2011) considers classroom as a social world and children's interactions shape both their writing and their literate identities. This view emphasizes the critical role of the more knowledgeable other, preschool teachers, in facilitating learning. The role of the teacher, in Vygotskian terms, is to develop a strong relationship between oral and written language. A second element of Vygotsky's theory is that learning requires student interaction and engagement in activities, and that without this engagement, learning does not take place. Social interaction hence is the basis of emergent literacy.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the early English literacy practices of four non-native in-service preschool teachers through the association of their strategies and approaches they applied in their classrooms. Gaining an understanding of actual practices in early English literacy helps teachers open up the world of communication for students by expanding the potential for students to share thoughts and needs (Shagoury, 2009).

Given the acknowledgement of preschool teachers' practices and their role in early literacy instruction specifically early English literacy, investigation in this area was not only favorable, but at this junction, was warranted. Therefore, the following questions guided the current research:

Question 1: What practices are applied by preschool teachers in early English literacy instruction?
Question 2: How do preschool teachers implement social interaction in practice?

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was employed in the current study. It also adopted a multiple-case study in which "multiple cases are described and compared to provide insight into an issue" (Creswell, 2012, p. 465). In order to have a better understanding of the four selected items, several sources of information were gathered. They included semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and reviewing syllabuses, teachers' lesson plans or worksheets.

Participants

In the present study, preschools'principalswere interviewed to explore the type of curriculum they were using in their centers. Also, their view- points concerning the materials provided to ELLs and teachers' role on developing early English literacy in young children was examined. Additionally, four non-native in-service preschool teachers were selected to participate in this study from the list of teachers in two privatepreschools in Malaysia.

For the privacy of participants, each potential participant was contacted only after the researcher had an initial exchange with the preschool principal regarding the teachers' participation.

Research Sites

Two private preschools under the franchises of IPC and Montessori were considered as the research sites. The selection of these two preschools for this project was based on three factors. First, they are highly popular and recognized in Malaysia. Second, both preschools' curriculum considers social interaction and play crucial in developing early literacy in young children. Third, the demography of the preschools providedthe researcher with an important venue for examining the role of the practices of early English literacy preschool teachers and early literacy curriculum on developing early literacy on ELLs. The principals

in both preschools tried to create a classroom environment based on their specific curriculum and provide teaching materials.

Data Collection Procedures

Throughout this research, the data collection procedures reflected the socio-constructivist lens in which classroom interactions were viewed. Several types of qualitative instruments wereused to collect data on how teachers implement the materials in their classrooms and how the interactions take place. As a result, the present research utilized the following sources of data:

-**Semi-structured interviews**: First, the principals of both preschoolswere interviewed. Next, each teacher was interviewed following an interview protocol. Some interview questions originated from a study of preschool literacy beliefs in Australia (Ure and Raban, 2001) and a study of Lynch (2009). The questions were modified and rephrased depending on the participants' attitudes or mood. The interviews were conducted before the classroom observations to elicit information and collect appropriate data. During the interviews the researchertook notes about the most remarkable features stated by the principals and ESL teachers, the variations and unplanned questions.

-**Classroom observations**: The researcher askedpreschools principals to obtain permission to observe each preschool teacher in their class. The descriptive observational visits were occurred during regularly scheduled English literacy instruction which lasted no longer than ten sessions. The purpose of the instrument was to collect data that reflects classroom environment, instruction and social interaction. The next type of observation was focused observations. Focused observations limit the scope of area in the investigation and occur after the descriptive observations have occurred (McGoun, 2007). Focused observations for this study included an examination of the literacy practices that four preschool teachers implemented in their classrooms to enhance phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness and oral language in children.

-**Document review**: Another important source of information was the analysis of existing documents such as reports, data files, lesson plans and other written artifacts in order to complement the information from class observations and interviews. This helped to better understand the program and establish a connection among all different types of data. They were processed using the drawing features of Microsoft Word 10. Written lesson plans were compared with the observed lessons to match the content. They were used to explore to what extent the lesson plans' content matched teachers' actual practices.

Data Analysis

The last step involved looking across the four cases to analyze the four preschool teachers' stories relating to the two research questions. It is imperative that the material under scrutiny is analyzed in a methodical manner if qualitative research is to yield meaningful and useful results. "Thematic analyses seek to unearth the themes salient in a text at different levels, and thematic networks aim to facilitate the structuring and depiction of these themes"(Attride- Stirling, 2001, p.387). "The procedure of thematic networks provides a technique for breaking up text, and finding within it explicit rationalizations and their implicit signification (p.388)".

The analysis for each case (within-case) was conducted to identify themes and subthemes. Furthermore, cross-case analysis was conducted in order to find overall themes and subthemes common to both cases.

Table 1: Case Studies, Research Sites & Participants

Case Study 1		Case Study 2	
Research Site	Participants	Research Site	Participants
Montessori Preschool	- Maria	IPC Preschool	- Carla
	- Sally		- Maya

RESULTS

Based on the analyses of the entire data set and comparison of themes across the two cases, three themes were identified in order to understand how the preschool teachers implemented early English literacy instruction in their classroom: (a) early literacy learning environment; (b) early literacy instructional practices; and (c) social interaction. However, the subthemes varied in the two cases. The two cross cases themes and subthemes that were identified by the researcher are listed below (see Table 2). A is the first case (two teachers in Montessori preschool) and B is the second case (two teachers in IPC preschool) which were identified as different subthemes. The other subthemes were similar between two cases.

Table 2: Themes and Subthemes of Four Preschool Teachers in Montessori and IPC Preschools

Themes and Subthemes		
Early Literacy Learning Environment	early Literacy Instructional Practices	Social Interaction
Physical environment	Alphabet Knowledge & Phonological Awareness: Flash cards & worksheets/ Sound object boxes (A)	One on one teaching (B)
House environment (A)	Print Awareness: Tracing,coloring & Sand paper letters, worksheets/ Big Books (A)	Working with puzzles & Big Books (A)
colorful painted walls (B)	Oral Language: Story books (B)	Color pencil sharing (B)
The location of classrooms A)		Playing games
The size of classrooms		Group teaching (A)
		Communication (B)

Analysis of Findings

The preschool teachers in the current study clearly knew the rhetoric of early childhood education and through play they could encourage children. However, the data in the present study points to the fact that it is hard to implement all the teaching theories in actual practice. Farrell (cited in Farrell & Ives, 2015) mentioned that for teachers to be more aware and understand how their beliefs can affect their practices, it is necessary to put tacitly held beliefs in words.

Besides, teacher-child interaction is an important factor affecting effective implementation of the related practices for establishing a language context. . Berry and O'Connor (cited in Nurmi&Kiuru, 2015) emphasized that "children with a higher-quality teacher–child relationship demonstrated greater social skills from kindergarten through to sixth grade than their peers with lower quality relationships" (p. 450).However, there was lack of activities preschool teachers implemented to promote English literacy in young children.

Some teachers tried to communicate and speak with children around literacy activities. While parts of the schedule may have constrained their practice, they used particular time periods to get children to talk. The only limitation was that two teachers in IPC preschool preferred to work with children one-on-one or individually. In contrast, the other two teachers in Montessori preschool had limited time to do that so mostly they worked in large groups. However, Baroody and Diamond (2016) emphasize that "preschoolers aged 3 to 5 years are usually required to participate in a group time activity (i.e. an activity that is initiated and led by the teacher and that involves at least half of the children in the class, such as calendar time or whole-class book reading)" (p. 149).

Despite research on the efficacy of interaction between teacher and children being placed on early childhood education, results from the current study indicated the lack of interaction in preschool classrooms. Teachers tended to compartmentalize literacy learning, and viewed circle time/large group as the opportunity to directly teach academic skills. Despite being familiar with the rhetoric of the field and the notion that children learn through play, this belief system was not consistently translated into practice.

Supporting the theoretical framework and sociocultural approach to literacy learning, the examination of teacher early literacy practices during data analysis evolved to become more about the teacher's overall goals for children rather than specific practices and teacher-child interactions used to help children gain the key English literacy skills including phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness and oral language. This could be due to the lack of sophistication of the teachers in the study and their inability to name and implement research based early language and literacy practices, which emerged as a major finding of the present study. Rohde (2015) refers to a gap between research and practice of Emergent Literacy in Early Childhood Education programs. She believes that this inconsistency can be the result of the absence of knowledge and resources in providing high-quality English language learning opportunities in Early Childhood Education classrooms.

Furthermore, social interaction is the integral piece to the early English literacy learning and teaching. "Language use is thus not limited to ideational exchanges of messages, but is actively and agentively used to forge – achieve and renew – social relations, and to explore and manipulate the social world" (Cekaite & Björk-Willén, 2012, p. 175).

CONCLUSION

Despite teachers' being familiar with the rhetoric of the field and the notion that children learn through play, this belief system was not consistently translated into practice. Although teachers did engage in playful methods to teach the children literacy and numeracy skills, enacted practices were not in line with the child initiated and play based foundations of the Creative Curriculum of Montessori and IPC program. Surely, "early childhood educators must find more effective ways to provide children, in particular those who struggle, with ample opportunities to encounter and practice literacy targets and patterns in engaging instructional activities" (Bingham, Hall-Kenyon, & Culatta, 2010, p.39).

In the final analysis, it appears as if the teachers in the investigation lacked a comprehensive understanding of the integrated nature of early learning, and tended to view the development of socialization skills as the primary form of social emotional development. During the data collection period, the researcher observed many missed opportunities for teachers to build on children's interests and provide them with meaningful activities that required higher order thinking skills. Tang et al. (2011) mentioned that "most of Malaysian preschool programmes are not required to hire teachers who meet even the most basic professional requirements" (p.98). They stated that the majority of teachers observed in their study were required "a further training for professional development so as to understand the importance of lesson planning and implementation especially for preschool teaching" (p.97). Hence, it is critical to focus on ensuring that preschool teachers are developed professionally to implement appropriate practices in early English literacy instruction. By receiving suitable instructional training and support, preschool teachers can obtain the knowledge and the required skills in early English literacy instruction and consequently be able to promote early literacy skills and motivation of young children.

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