

Preschool Teachers' Perspectives on Using English Language to Teach

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ABSTRACT

In the Malaysian National Preschool Standards-based Curriculum context, preschool teachers are being asked to use English as a medium of instruction for part of their teaching activities. However, there have been criticisms that low English language proficiencies among these teachers may have hindered their ability to provide meaningful educational experiences for the children in their care. Yet, little is understood about the language proficiency of these teachers in their own context. An explanatory mixed methods design has been used in the present study with data collected in two phases. In the quantitative phase, a survey is used to investigate 204 preschool teachers' current levels of English proficiency, the levels they think necessary for using it effectively, and the gap between the two levels. The qualitative phase uses semi-structured interviews with 12 preschool teachers. The preschool teachers believe that high or advanced language proficiency would be needed for its effective use. However, in the interviews, they also consider empathy for the children, a passion for teaching, the ability to make the class fun and interesting as equally important. There is also a lot of 'language switching' between English, the Malay language and the mother tongue to meet the requirements of the day's lesson. Although preschool teachers in general showed positive stances about the decision to use English for part of the instructional time, they also suggest that some form of benchmarks that address the kinds or levels of English language proficiency needed for its effective use would be useful.

Keywords: Preschool teachers; English language proficiency; teachers' perspectives, medium of instruction; gaps in language proficiency

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, the Ministry of Education of Malaysia decided that the use of English as an instructional language, together with the Malay language and other mother tongues, should begin in the preschool level to better prepare young children before they attend the primary schools (Azman, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2010). Existing research (e.g. Cuticelli et al., 2017; Hagen, 2018; Neuman, 2010; Vellutino, Tunmer, Jaccard & Chen, 2007) have indicated the importance of English language development and impact of early language use on later proficiency of the language among preschool children. Therefore, since 2010, as part of the National Preschool Standards-based Curriculum 2010, Malaysian preschool teachers are to instil the use of English at the preschool as a strategy to get children ready to master the English language before Primary One through teachers' own use to teach in the classroom ("More hours in English to bring positive results", 2010).

Research (e.g. Blazer & Kraft, 2017; Goh, Yusuf & Wong, 2017; Goh, Canrinus & Wong, 2019; Goh & Canrinus, 2019) have shown that high quality teaching are through teachers who tend to possess high pedagogical competence. However, it has been alluded in the literature (e.g. Butler, 2004; Mariage, Englert & Garmon, 2000; Richards, 2017) that teachers do require a certain level of language proficiency to be able to be successful in their professional practice. Evans and Cleghorn (2010) surmise "... regardless of the particular context, language is the thread that ties teacher, text, activity, use of space and learner

together in the overall process of meaning making” (p. 142). It has been suggested that preschool teachers in Malaysia do not often use the English language to teach or engage in activities that support English language use and development in the early years (Pandian, 2006). In addition, for those who do not have adequate proficiency in the language tend to shy away from the use of the language in instructional classroom use (Lim, 2013). Several write-ups (e.g. Ramiaida, Fariza, Hazlina, Ramiza & Wahiza, 2018; Selvaraj, 2013; Wong, 2014) have implied that teachers still lack the proficiency to teach in the language and has resulted in low proficiency of English among Malaysian pupils or that teachers are struggling with the use of English to teach in schools, especially those in the rural areas. This suggests that the lack of proficiency has hampered teachers’ competency in teaching leading to an unsatisfactory quality of educational performance (Halim, 2015; Ramiaida, Fariza, Hazlina, Ramiza & Wahiza, 2018). However, expecting teachers to acquire a high overall proficiency is not always possible or necessary, and many times, not needed (Freeman, Katz, Gomez & Burns, 2015; Richards, 2017). Therefore, it is rather premature to imply that the ills of young children’s underachievement is due to poor language proficiency among teachers without carefully giving an opportunity for this particular group to ‘speak’ or to inquire into their own proficiency in their own context. As such, the significance of this study lies in its potential to give ‘voice’ to a group of under-represented segment of the educational community – teachers, but more specifically, preschool teachers. Few studies, if any, has set out specifically to seek preschool teachers’ own perceptions of their English language proficiency in their own context. Some form of empirical evidence regarding preschool teachers’ language proficiency could provide a reference to educational stakeholders to assist these teachers with appropriate support and training.

THE NATIONAL PRESCHOOL STANDARDS-BASED CURRICULUM

The National Preschool Standards-based Curriculum’s aims follow closely with that of the Malaysian Education Blueprint (Ministry of Education, 2015a) to ensure all children from age 5 onwards be provided with affordable preschool education from a set of standardised national curriculum. Preschool teachers would also need a minimum of a diploma in early childhood education to be allowed to teach. There are six components (communication, spiritual attitudes and values, humanity, self-portrayal, physical activity and aesthetics, and science and technology) in the curriculum of which the promotion of good communication of the Malay and English languages and the mother tongue feature prominently. Out of the 1,200 minutes of time allotted for instruction per week, the Malay language (600 minutes) and the English language (600 minutes) are equally allocated as the medium of instruction for the national preschools. National type preschools (use of Mandarin and Tamil as the medium of instruction) have to allocate equal instruction time using either Mandarin or Tamil (400 minutes), the Malay language (400 minutes) and the English language (400 minutes).

When English is used as the medium of instruction, preschool teachers teach listening and speaking through the use of common greetings and courtesy, small talks and repeating after the teacher. Other methods include listening to songs and stories. Reading is taught by asking children to recognise letters and sounds. The teaching of writing focusses on pre-writing and writing skills. The pre-writing stage involves teaching children to hold and use a pencil, and the ability to draw, write, copy, and colour. Moving on the writing phase would see children hold and move a pencil fluently and effectively and therefore produce legible writing. The authors in the book - *English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025*, alluded that preschool teachers may not be able to sufficiently transform the process of teaching and learning in such a way that children become active communicators with the ability to listen, speak, read or write effectively due to preschool

teachers' own lack of proficiency in the English language. It further suggested that preschool teachers' poor spoken language, and their poor phonemic awareness, phonics and fluency could have added onto some of the problems identified in the book (Ministry of Education, 2015b). It would appear that any perceived gaps in the learning of the English language is the result of preschool teachers' lack of language proficiency. Such biases are risky because they could result in preschool teachers feeling demotivated and disheartened leading to them being discouraged during their instructional interactions. The author of this study situates herself, that such strong judgement made about the lack of proficiency or the inability of these preschool teachers to perform well in English during instructional tasks is a disservice to this group of teachers without empirical support as without it, criticisms could be conjectures on the part of the book writers only. Therefore, this study sets out to fill this empirical void, by first, listening to the preschool teachers most affected and most criticised as a first step towards better understanding their language challenges which could interfere with their pedagogical tasks and thereafter suggesting avenues for intervention to address any shortcomings on their part. Therefore, the two questions asked in this study are:

1. To what extent do preschool teachers who are tasked to teach in the English medium perceive their own English language proficiency?
2. To what extent do preschool teachers who are tasked to teach in the English medium perceive their own minimum desired English language proficiency?

THE STUDY

The study uses the "explanatory mixed methods design" (Creswell, 2005, p. 515). Using both the quantitative and qualitative is helpful when the researcher(s) in the study "want to follow up a quantitative study with a qualitative one to obtain more detailed specific information than can be gained from the results of statistical tests" (Creswell, 2005, p.510). Numbers and scores from an instrument can provide useful general outcomes about the research questions, however, when a qualitative data is included in the study which can be obtained from interviews, it serves to provide many "different perspectives on the study topic and provide a complex picture of the situation" (p.510). Such rationale seems appropriate for this study and could provide a more comprehensive understanding about preschool teachers' language proficiency and, in their own words, how proficiency could inhibit (or otherwise) their instructional tasks.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY QUESTIONNAIRE

The English Language Proficiency Questionnaire was used to seek preschool teachers' self-reported current level of English proficiency and the level of English proficiency they believed necessary for them to use English to effectively teach in the preschool classrooms. Butler's (2004) instrument was adapted for use. The instrument had four language domains: Listening, Speaking, Reading Comprehension, and Writing. This questionnaire required preschool teachers to rate both their current level of English proficiency and the desired minimum level of English proficiency needed to effectively use the language to teach on each domain using a scale from one to six. They could also rate the proficiency between levels (e.g., Level 2.5). The scale for Listening proficiency are provided as an example in Table 1.

TABLE 1. The English Language Proficiency Questionnaire* – Listening proficiency

Level	Listening (Description)
1	I can understand a limited number of frequent words and a common conversational set of expressions such as “How are you?” or “My name is....”
1.5	Between 1 and 2
2	I can understand simple questions and statements in short dialogues or passages if they are repeated at slower-than normal speed.
2.5	Between 2 and 3
3	I can understand the main point(s) of a short dialogue or passage if spoken at slower-than-normal speed. I may need some repetition.
3.5	Between 3 and 4
4	I can understand most of what is said (all main points and most details) at near normal speed.
4.5	Between 4 and 5
5	I can understand nearly everything at normal speed, although occasional repetition may be necessary.
5.5	Between 5 and 6
6	I can understand everything at normal speed like a native English language speaker.

* Note: permission has been obtained from original author to use and modify the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was translated into the Malay language to avoid possible misunderstanding on the preschool teachers’ part due to language. The translation entailed two important processes. One, the questionnaires were first translated into the Malay language and then back translated into English for verification by two independent professional translators

THE INTERVIEW

A semi-structured type of interview in which “the interviewer has a general idea of where he or she wants the interview to go, and what should come out of it, but does not enter the interview with a list of predetermined questions” (Nunan, 1992, p. 149) was used. In this manner, the interviewer ‘goes with flow’ but provided transitions between major topics and prompts for the conversation to continue and allowed the interview to provide in-depth understandings about the current research interest. The interviews were therefore, useful towards providing a deeper insights and added information about preschool teachers’ proficiency when English was used as the medium of instruction. The guiding questions asked the preschool teachers about how they felt using English to teach, difficulties encountered while using it, whether there were support for the language use, and whether they felt their proficiency was sufficient for their teaching.

PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

Preschool teachers were randomly selected from preschools nationwide and have registered with the Ministry of Education Malaysia. Altogether 650 surveys were sent out. A total of 204 preschool teachers returned the questionnaire, giving a response rate of 31.3%. Among the 204 preschool teachers, 96% were female teachers ($n=196$), and in terms of age, the percentage of teachers in their 40s was high at 21.6%, while those in their 60s was low with only 0.5% in the sample. Those in the 50’s were higher at 15.7% when compared to those in the 20s (14.7%).

Participants for the interviews were based on those who have indicated in the survey data collection stage that they were willing to be contacted. As the participants were from various parts of Malaysia, telephone interview was chosen as the most appropriate way to

conduct the interview. The potential benefits associated with using telephone interviews as a mechanism of data collection include: a) using economic and human resources efficiently, b) minimizing disadvantages associated with in-person interviewing, c) developing positive relationships between researchers and participants, and d) improving quality of data collection. There were 12 preschool teachers (10 females and 2 males) who wrote their contacts in the survey form. All were contacted and interviewed. All the interviews were conducted in the Malay language except one who preferred to have the interview in English. Every session lasted for approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the preschool teachers' consent.

DATA ANALYSES AND VALIDATION

To ensure that the sample was appropriate for the analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy index was conducted and presented an index of 0.87. The second test, the Bartlett's test of Sphericity, had a significant result of $\chi^2=1392.8$, $p<0.01$. These two indicators revealed that the sample and correlation matrix were within an acceptable range for the analysis.

Validation began with piloting to assess content quality of the questionnaire and the guiding interview questions and the use of peer debriefing as an external check of the data analysis process for the interview questions. Two faculty members from the author's own educational institution and another two from a teacher's training college conducted the content validity. A draft version of the questionnaire was given to the faculty members and they were instructed to provide feedback on the items of the questionnaire and the guiding interview questions.

Based on the feedback, a final version of the English Language Proficiency Questionnaire was piloted with 80 postgraduate preschool teachers who were studying at the author's institution at the time to ensure there were no discrepancies and misunderstanding towards the items of the questionnaire. These postgraduate students were all qualified preschool teachers from various preschools in Malaysia. The pilot testing was carried over three Fridays in the month of March 2018 (on days that the postgraduate students had their classes). They reviewed whether the instrument was clear and easy to understand. Opinions were sought from these preschool teachers about whether they were able to understand the items, and whether the items asked about knowledge that were actually taking place in the preschool environment. Minor changes were made to make the questionnaire appropriate for use.

As for the interview questions, four of these postgraduate preschool teachers were interviewed. Varying sub-questions arising from the main questions were noted during the pilot interviews. Inter-rater reliability was used to validate the themes arising from the data analysis of the main question. Themes from the data analyses were again checked by the second and third authors. Any discrepancies were discussed to decide on the final thematic analysis from the interview data. The interviews in the Malay language were translated as best as possible so that the original intentions were not lost. Each quotation was allocated a pseudonym and gender for purpose of identification, for example (Faridah, Female).

FINDINGS

CURRENT LEVEL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Table 2 shows the four domains of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing for preschool teachers' current level of English language proficiency. About 92% of the respondents rated their listening proficiency Level 3 or higher (Level 3 - "I can understand the main point(s) of

a short dialogue or passage if spoken at slower-than-normal speed. I may need some repetition”). This meant that preschool teachers felt that they could understand the “main point(s) of a short dialogue or passage if spoken at slower than normal speed”. About 22% rated their level above Level 3 but below Level 4 “I can understand most of what is said (all main points and most details) at near normal speed”). However, 58% perceived they were at Level 4 and above, with 7% felt they were very proficient at listening (Level 6 –“I can understand everything at normal speed like a native English language speaker”). Only a small proportion (7%) were below Level 3.

TABLE 2. Current proficiency level (n=204)

Level	Listening		Speaking		Reading		Writing	
	Frequency	Percent (%)						
1	-	-	2	1.0	1	0.5	2	1.0
1.5	1	0.5	3	1.5	-	-	3	1.5
2	7	3.5	8	4.0	5	2.5	9	4.5
2.5	6	3.0	10	5.0	3	1.5	10	5.0
3	26	12.9	45	22.6	18	9.0	37	18.5
3.5	44	21.9	49	24.6	21	10.5	4	20.5
4	40	19.9	32	16.1	47	23.5	42	21.0
4.5	28	13.9	24	12.1	17	8.5	21	10.5
5	30	14.9	15	7.5	51	25.5	23	11.5
5.5	12	6.0	9	4.5	24	12.0	8	4.0
6	7	3.5	2	1.0	13	6.5	4	2.0

As for ‘Speaking’, when compared to ‘Listening’, more preschool teachers tended to rate their speaking proficiency lower whereby about 86% perceived that their current level of speaking were at Level 3 or higher (Level 3 “I can express myself using simple language but make mistakes and pause a lot when I try to express complex ideas”). Nevertheless, it also showed that most preschool teachers felt they could speak sufficiently well although expressing complex ideas might prove more challenging. A higher proportion (about 12%) also rated that they were below Level 3 in ‘Speaking’ when compared to ‘Listening’. But at above Level 3 and below Level 4 “I can effortlessly express myself at near normal speed. Occasionally, I have to slow down when expressing complex ideas and less common expressions”), there were a slight increase when compared to the ‘Listening’ domain (at 24% versus 22% for ‘Listening’).

In the ‘Reading’ domain, about 96% of preschool teachers felt they had the proficiency level of 3 and above (Level 3 – “I can understand the main point(s) of a short passage written in ordinary English if I can have some assistance, such as the use of a dictionary and a grammar book, although there are usually some parts that remain unclear to me”), and have been rated the highest compared to ‘Listening’ and ‘Speaking’. Unlike ‘Listening’ and ‘Speaking’, about 26% of preschool teachers rated their proficiency at Level 5 “I can read nearly everything with ease, although it is still slower for me to read in English than in Bahasa Melayu”. I occasionally may encounter some unfamiliar words and expressions). Only a small proportion of preschool teachers (about 5%) rated themselves below Level 3.

With regards to ‘Writing’, approximately 88% rated their writing proficiency as Level 3 or higher (Level 3 – “I can write letters and light essays using relatively simple language. I can produce a few complex sentence constructions but with noticeable mistakes in grammar and vocabulary. I usually take a long time to write when I try to express complex ideas”). The percentage for ‘Writing’ was almost similar to ‘Speaking’ (86%), but lower than ‘Listening’

(92%) and ‘Reading’ (96%). Similar to ‘Speaking’, about 12% also rated that they were below Level 3 in ‘Writing’ when compared to ‘Listening’.

The mean score for each domain was also calculated. The mean score indicated that ‘Reading’ ($M = 4.38, SD = 0.98$) had the highest mean, followed by ‘Listening’ ($M = 4.01, SD = 0.94$), ‘Writing’ ($M = 3.75, SD = 0.98$) and ‘Speaking’ ($M = 3.65, SD = 0.94$). According to Butler (2004), such results could be inferred that preschool teachers rated their proficiency towards receptive skills (‘Reading’ and ‘Listening’) higher than their productive skills (‘Writing’ and ‘Speaking’).

DESIRED MINIMUM LEVEL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

The four domains of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing for preschool teachers’ desired minimum level of English language proficiency is shown in Table 3. Levels 5 to 6 had the most responses. Compared to the perceived current level, the largest percentage of preschool teachers who felt that the desired levels for minimum proficiency to effectively use English in instruction was between Level 5 (‘Listening’ had 26%; ‘Speaking’ had 27%; ‘Reading’ had 18%; ‘Writing’ had 21%) and Level 6 (‘Listening’ had 26%; ‘Speaking’ had 19%; ‘Reading’ had 40%; ‘Writing’ had 27%). The proportion of those who felt that the minimum desired proficiency at Level 5 and above was at about 66% for ‘Listening’; 61% for ‘Speaking’; 73% for ‘Reading’; and 61% for ‘Writing’.

TABLE 3. Desired minimum English proficiency level ($n=204$)

Level	Listening		Speaking		Reading		Writing	
	Frequency	Percent (%)						
1	1	0.5	-	-	-	-	-	-
1.5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2	-	-	2	1.0	-	-	3	1.5
2.5	-	-	1	0.5	-	-	5	2.6
3	7	3.6	17	8.6	8	4.1	13	6.6
3.5	19	9.7	22	11.2	11	5.6	16	8.2
4	26	13.3	17	8.6	20	10.2	21	10.7
4.5	13	6.6	18	9.1	14	7.1	18	9.2
5	51	26.0	54	27.4	36	18.4	42	21.4
5.5	29	14.8	28	14.2	27	13.8	25	12.8
6	50	25.5	38	19.3	80	40.8	53	27.0

When comparison were made between preschool teachers’ current level and their perceived desired minimum proficiency, it would appear that they would have preferred a higher desired proficiency levels at Level 3 and above: 99 % perceived they need Level 3 and above in ‘Listening’ as compared 93% who reported their current proficiency level; 98% perceived they need Level 3 and above in ‘Speaking’ as compared to 88% who reported their current proficiency level; 100% perceived they need Level 3 and above in ‘Reading’ compared to 96% self-reported current level; and 96% perceived they need Level 3 and above in ‘Writing’ compared to 88% self-reported current level. The gaps were biggest in ‘Speaking’ and ‘Writing’ compared to ‘Listening’ and ‘Reading’.

Table 4 shows the calculated means scores of preschool teachers’ desired minimum proficiency and differences in mean scores (using paired t-tests) between their perceived current and desired minimum level. ‘Reading’ had the highest mean score, followed by ‘Speaking’, ‘Listening’, and ‘Writing’. The order was not identical with the current proficiency levels. However, all the means exceeded 4, which could indicate that the preschool teachers felt that they do need a higher proficiency in English (Level 5 and 6) to

use it effectively during instruction time. The differences between the current and desired minimum proficiency levels were all statistically significant with an alpha level of 0.01. The preschool teachers felt that they do need a higher proficiency level to be able to use the language effectively in the preschool classrooms.

TABLE 4. Differences between the current and desired minimum English language proficiency levels

Skills	Proficiency Level	Mean	<i>s.d</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	Sig.
Listening	Current	4.03	0.933	193	-12.609	0.000
	Desired	4.93	0.942			
Speaking	Current	3.67	0.927	193	-14.884	0.000
	Desired	4.76	0.995			
Reading	Current	4.39	0.983	193	-12.779	0.000
	Desired	5.17	0.912			
Writing	Current	3.77	0.983	193	-14.131	0.000
	Desired	4.84	1.058			

THE PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' 'SPEAK' ABOUT THEIR ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

A semi-structured type of interview is used to explain, extend and to contextualize the survey findings. The readings of the transcripts find that ten preschool teachers felt that they needed a higher level of proficiency to be effective in the classroom compared to two preschool teachers who perceived that they had a high level of proficiency. However, many explained that their proficiency is also dependent on the classroom environment. Sometimes, high proficiency and the need of the pupils in the classroom are two different spectrum of the issue. Themes from the interviews include 'Classroom tasks at hand', 'Mixed use of languages to maximize learning', 'Passion for teaching' and 'The government policy'. Excerpts from the conversation are used to illustrate these themes emerging from the interviews.

CLASSROOM TASKS AT HAND

Despite the need for higher proficiency, the preschool teachers highlighted the fact that their proficiency is highly dependent on the classroom tasks at hand. It would appear that the preschool teachers' had no problem using the language during class management or when they had to reprimand a child. Faridah (Female) was confident using English when she wanted to get her class to pay attention to her:

... in getting the class in order, is much easier. I use simple one or two words like: "listen to me", "pay attention"; "look at me" etc.

Hashim (Male) explained that he found it easier to use English in class management because the children have heard it so many time, it becomes like a "trigger":

I tend to use the same sentence when I want my class to pay attention. Maybe because of this, whenever, they hear me say those words, they know they must stop and listen to me. When the pupils are noisy or disruptive, I would rap the ruler on the table, together with sentences like "Please keep quiet".

It was a different scenario when English was used during instructional tasks or trying to engage the children. Faridah (female) was not confident using English when she wanted to explain something new:

... for me, I am less able to use English to explain some important work from the lesson...

Similarly, Amira (Female) also reiterated:

... I don't feel confident to teach in English because I do not have a high command of the language. During teaching, so many things have to happen. I have to explain the concepts and the principles of some things. It is difficult to find the words or to make sentences in English. I tend to hesitate.

On the other hand, Hashim (Male) was concerned about his "poor" pronunciation:

... I don't think my pupils would know if I make a wrong pronunciation, since in the rural preschools, most of them are not really exposed to the language. Still, I am worried if I make a wrong pronunciation, the pupils will follow and for the rest of their life, they have learnt something wrongly.

Sharul (Male) felt rather insecure to teach in English:

I get the languages mixed up ... especially the vocabulary ... using English to actually teach is different ... I get the active and passive voice mixed up ... or I get stuck and cannot remember the words, it is there at the back of my mind, but cannot remember ... makes me feel insecure.

Cheng (Female) and Amira (Female) found that their limited proficiency affected their abilities to narrate stories or to inject jokes during teaching and learning.

... in the new curriculum, we must also instil values in some of their learning [preschool pupils], so it is important to tell stories, I find it difficult in English (Cheng).

... when the standards-based curriculum was first introduced, I was worried whether I can teach using English. I like to make jokes with the pupils, but in English it is almost impossible for me. I was worried the class became very dull. But it is better now, of course, got used to it ... enough practice [said laughingly] (Amira).

Jamilah (Female) was succinct in her own ability to use English during the teaching and learning activities:

... a bit ashamed to say, but I need to become better at using English or have a higher command of the language ... especially now that it is a requirement. I am actually a good teacher [said laughingly], I can plan well, used appropriate teaching aid, but because I am quite weak in the language, when it is time to teach in English, I find I am quite dissatisfied with the lesson especially in trying to make my point across to the pupils.

Joyce (Female) gave a deeper perspective why proficiency in using the language was dependent on the tasks at hand:

... I have no problem with using English to teach, but I can see why some of my colleagues face problems. When they want to use English to engage the pupils, they find it harder because they will need more words or need to explain in long sentences ... I see some of them are not proficient in the language so will find it difficult. When you start to teach, it becomes even more challenging, trying to find the correct word ... many had to memorise.

During the interviews, sentences such as "have a higher command", "improve proficiency" were very prevalent. Interestingly, when asked what they meant about having 'high proficiency', many were not able to explain.

... can speak like those who study in English schools? ... like in the movies, can speak fluently (Hashim, Male)

... become better ... (Faridah, Female)

... can perform in English ... (Sharul, Male)

... actually we don't know. The Ministry does not have a benchmark to say that preschool teachers should have a certain level of proficiency (Joyce, Female).

To sum it up, the interviewees emphasised that their proficiency is context specific. The preschool teachers' ability to use English varied depending on whether it is used for class management or during teaching and learning. They had never heard about any kind of benchmarks that address the domain or degree of English language proficiency needed for preschool teachers.

MIXED USE OF LANGUAGES TO MAXIMIZE LEARNING

Every interviewee made comments about the need to use both English, Malay and the mother tongues in their classroom.

... I used both English and Malay in my classroom ... the pupils from my school [a rural school] are all Malays, and they have very little exposure to English. So I will repeat in the Malay language to ensure that they understood the lesson (Hashim, Male).

... when my teaching session should be in English, at times, I use both languages [English and Malay], especially during a topic that requires my pupils to learn something new or difficult ... when I question them, I allow them to use any languages they feel comfortable (Sherry, Female).

... the best way for these young children to learn is still in their mother tongue, so I tend to switch between languages ... we must remember the diversity in the classroom, some are faster, some are slower (Hamidah, Female).

... preschools in Malaysia need to use the mother tongue too, simple words are okay to use in English, but when it comes to learning or activities, the pupils will be lost because they do not understand the instructions (Maria, Female).

In summary, the preschool teachers have highlighted the fact that it is not a simple matter of merely achieving high proficiency that is important in the classroom or that high proficiency is the cure all for effective teaching and learning. They are saying that there are other important factors to consider, besides proficiency, such as pupils' learning and interest in teaching. In addition, some had some reservations that introducing English as an instructional language may have negative impacts on the preschool children's mother tongue development and may confuse them. Many of those interviewed (11 preschool teachers) stated that they used Malay, English and the mother tongue in the classroom to maximise their pupils' learning.

PASSION FOR TEACHING

The interview excerpts below makes it apparent that teaching is more than just language proficiency.

... pupils in preschools need to be nurtured and understood. The teacher must be able to use all sorts of teaching strategies to make learning interesting. (Joyce, Female)

... having high proficiency does not necessary mean he or she is a good teacher. I personally think a teacher must love teaching small children, must have passion and interest. (Sharul, Male)

The preceding interview excerpts highlighted another recurrent theme, that is, having a high English language proficiency may be ideal but it is not the most important factor as it relates to a preschool classroom. Many felt that a teacher must have empathy, love of teaching and a passion for the vocation.

THE GOVERNMENT POLICY

There were some elements of misgiving with how the National Preschool Standards-based Curriculum were implemented.

I think the decision to ensure that English is used as a medium of instruction together with the Malay Language is good ... it is good to let them [the children] hear the language early. But my concern is that it was implemented too fast, and I worry if the teachers were really ready. Those [the preschool teachers] who do not have command of the language [the English language] - it is not their fault, I think ... this will happen because of the quick implementation (Maria, Female).

Joyce (female) added:

Many of my colleagues are not very good in the language, so I wonder if they can carry a class in English. Probably better to make sure there are enough teachers who can conduct the classes in English before implementation ... sure there will be some preschools which will do well and some totally won't follow the policy.

Hisham (Male) also felt that preschool teachers be given enough time to prepare for the new curriculum:

I will be frank. It was quite difficult for me at first when it was implemented as I think my English is not so good. It got even more stressful when we were visited by the district supervisors. They were nice, but demanded that we implemented English as the medium of instruction. I felt quite embarrassed sometimes using the language. I tried my best to pronounce as accurately as possible. The ministry should allow us more time to assimilate another language into our classroom ... but now it is better, I am more used to it.

Nevertheless, despite his misgivings in using the language, he also felt that it was still a good decision to use it as a medium of instruction:

But I feel that it is a good idea to use the English for half of the teaching time. If we only teach English as a subject, may not be enough for the children to be exposed to the language.

Fatimah (Female) was more critical of the government policy:

I feel the decision was good and I know the Ministry had good intentions when they implemented the new curriculum ... but, most of our preschool environment is not conducive for English to be used as a medium of instruction. One, suddenly we get the syllabus and must achieve the learning outcomes – are teachers ready? ... Sure, we get to attend training, but personally, is it effective? The facilitators themselves do not conduct the training in English. Two, suddenly we are told to use this and that books in English, I know some teachers do not really follow or also use the Malay language to explain.

When asked if after eight years, the situation has improved:

I wonder if it has been successful. If you go to the rural preschools, I think not la (Faridah, Female).

Fatimah (Female) felt that the Ministry should had better teacher preparation before the nation-wide implementation of the curriculum:

It would be better if the training came a few years before the implementation – not implement and then start training simultaneously. Can be stressful for many of the teachers. Now, I am concerned, some use, some don't ... some feel that since they have to switch languages so much since the pupils cannot comprehend English instructions at that age, it would be better to just use one language.

Joyce on the other hand suggested that trainings should cater to their needs rather than a blanket type of trainings that sometimes might have little relevance to them:

It is better to ask us what we need in the training. Most of the training involved teaching approaches when the issue is language proficiency.

In summary, the core takeaway from the preceding interviews was that all the preschool teachers felt that the implementation process of the National Preschool Standards-based Curriculum was not well thought out or too swift. Despite their reservations, all were quick to express that the introduction of English as a medium of instruction together with Malay and the mother tongue was a correct decision. They felt that if the preschool children were introduced to the language at an earlier stage could help them be more confident in its use later in the primary schools. Some touched on their in-service professional training and suggested that it should be conducted fully in English and that they should have been consulted about their training needs.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to answer two questions regarding preschool teachers' English language proficiency when asked to use English as a medium of instruction in the classroom. Using self-report type of questionnaire and interviews, this study asked: 1) to what extent do preschool teachers who are tasked to teach in the English medium perceive their own English language proficiency? 2) to what extent do preschool teachers who are tasked to teach in the English medium perceive their own minimum desired English language proficiency?

Pertaining to preschool teachers' self-assessment of their current level of English proficiency, they are more likely to be more proficient in receptive skills (i.e. Reading and Listening) than productive skills (i.e. Speaking and Writing). More specifically, more preschool teacher reported mean scores lower than 3 for productive skills than for receptive skills. According to Butler (2004), receptive skills are also known as 'passive skills', and for most second language user, they have the opportunity to read or listen to the language as many times as they want to understand the gist of the language. They do not need to 'produce' anything. This is in contrast to productive skills where concentration and confidence is needed to produce the language. In the Malaysian context, since the 1970s, during the shift of language of instruction from English to Malay in the national school syllabus, English has been considered a second language to the Malay language. As such, English has been accorded a 'subject' to be taught (Ramiaida et al., 2018). In the national type of schools, English was a subject and given even less hours to learn the language. According to Ferris and Tagg (1996) and Flowerdew and Miller (2005) productive skills require practice. However, with the education system, English is taught as an examination subject with students reverting back to their mother tongue outside of the classroom. Possibly

then, Malaysian learners have few opportunities to speak or write for communicative purposes. In such context, the current preschool teachers of this study would feel more proficient in receptive skills and less confident in their productive skills.

Regarding preschools teachers' desired minimum level of proficiency, there was a significant gap between their current level and their desired minimum proficiency needed to be competent to use the language effectively in the classroom. The largest gap was for 'Speaking' and the smallest was for 'Reading'. The significant differences in the findings between preschool teachers' current and desired level of English language proficiency (in Speaking, Listening, Writing and Reading) have indicated the importance placed by the teachers for a high proficiency of the language. Preschool teachers are saying that there is a need for them to improve their proficiency in all areas of the language when they are required to use the language in their instructional tasks.

Notably, the preschool teachers in this study reported a desired English proficiency to exceed level 5 in all language skills to be able to use it in their teaching tasks. These teachers have considered the 'spoken' domain to be the most important qualifications for them to teach well when English is the medium of instruction. These preschool teachers' perceptions seem to resonate with previous studies (e.g. Asiah, 2013; Cirino et al., 2007) which have indicated a strong relationship between teachers' verbal abilities and learners' achievement. A critical factor in any classroom is the ability for the teacher to be fluent in the skills of questioning and explaining of which a strong command of the spoken language is imperative (Kyeyune, 2003). Those teachers who are considered 'excellent' tend to have an above-average verbal proficiency compared to those who have a lower verbal command in the language (Andrew, Cobb, & Giampietro, 2005). Due to the preschool teachers' limited verbal ability, the interviews indicated that there is generally anxiety among them about mispronouncing words or hesitating because they have forgotten some words in English, thus believing that they are less competent in the abilities to provide content in English. The preschool teachers did not feel particularly very competent in carrying out tasks related to teaching using English, and therefore, there is a need to consider adequate training in methods of teaching content in English, and simultaneously boost teachers' confidence in their abilities to provide content in English (Goodman, 2014). In relation to providing adequate training, preschool teachers also mentioned that there seemed to be a disconnect in their training regarding what they need and what was provided. It appears that most of the training did not help their proficiency although it provided good suggestions of various instructional strategies. Effective training must engage the participants and to focus on their actual needs (Goh & Blake, 2015). It is must be mentioned that some of the interviewees stated that proficiency is not something that can happen over a few days training session, and therefore, questioned the objectives of these training sessions. In addition, some have also mentioned that if the objective was to improve proficiency, then the facilitators themselves should use the language and not switch between English and the Malay language as it further added to the confusion. However, all of the preschools were, nevertheless grateful for the training provided by the Ministry, but would have liked a more focused training.

The survey findings showed that a high proportion of preschool teachers who reported that a level 5 proficiency is necessary to be effective (66% for 'Listening'; 61% for 'Speaking'; 73% for 'Reading'; and 61% for 'Writing'). It is irrefutable that these teachers do believe that it is necessary to possess a level 5 or higher when English is used as the medium of instruction would like to improve. However, it is noteworthy too, that there are also preschool teachers (although less than 50%) who also felt that it is not a necessary qualification and that a level lower than 5 would also suffice to teach competently. It is through the interviews that provided a more in-depth information as to why not all of the teachers felt that high proficiency is necessary.

First, despite understanding that fact that language proficiency remains a key characteristic to bind various teaching qualities, preschool teachers in this study also felt that there are other areas of teaching which are equally important. They indicate that as a preschool teachers, besides skills in managing the classroom, an understanding of each children is also considered important. They further elaborated during the interview that interest and passion for teaching young children together with a concern for the multiple diversity of the children in a classroom to be equally necessary. Darbars and Kagan (2001) have found that in preschool classrooms, sometimes high proficiency in the English language takes a secondary significance when the teachers are given such an important role to educate, cultivate and nurture very young minds.

Second, in the interviews, the teachers explained that it was a challenge to teach children in the English language who are hearing the language, possibly, for the first time. These preschool teachers were not able to draw on the full range of the language because the children would not be able to comprehend the same learning matter in English. Therefore, there was a lot of ‘language switching’ between English and the Malay language to meet the requirement of the day’s lesson. These teachers felt that having high proficiency may not be essential when teaching in the rural schools as the children would be more familiar with their own mother tongue.

For children in rural schools, they have very little opportunity to speak the language, therefore, teachers find it doubly difficult to use in the classroom and most have to switch between the national language, children’s own mother tongue and English. Therefore, a preschool teacher in the rural schools might find that level 2 would be sufficient proficiency to be able to carry out his/her instructional task in English and therefore, do not see the need for further improvement in their proficiency compared to a teacher in the city in which the parents would expect the teacher to have above level 5 proficiency. This conflict arose, possibly, because there is a lack of any sort of guidelines to address what kinds of and what levels of proficiency are required to teach in the preschools. Likewise, from the interviews, preschool teachers have alluded to the absence of what it entailed to be ‘proficient enough’ in the English language as teachers to be able to teach in the preschool classroom. Some sort of guidelines can assist preschool teachers assess themselves whether they have adequate proficiency or whether they need to improve their English proficiency. Some may argue that, currently, Malaysian pre-university students are already required to attend a certain level of the Malaysian University English Test for entry into university. However, academic use of the English language is different from how the language will be used in teaching (Butler, 2004), especially in the context of preschool teaching. After all, the kinds or degrees of English proficiency would be different from those for other purposes (e.g., outside school or daily use).

CONCLUSION

Since 2010, early childhood education has taken centre stage and efforts have been undertaken to improve the teaching and learning within the classroom especially towards improving the proficiency of young children in the English language. With that intention, in 2010, English as the medium of instruction must be used in preschool teaching and learning tasks together with the national language and other mother tongues. However, there have been criticisms that preschool teachers lack the high proficiency in the language to promote and instil the language into preschool pupils, and that those teachers with mediocre proficiency might do more harm than good. However, research is needed to unpack basic information about this particular issue plaguing preschool teachers, and one way is to give them ‘voice’ and to let them ‘speak’ about their own proficiency in their own context. This is

the very intention of the study and has provided information from both a quantitative and a qualitative perspective. Nevertheless, the limitation pertaining to self-reported measure (the English Language Proficiency Questionnaire) need to be noted. However, respondents are generally perceived as reliable sources of information and that self-reported data are accurate when individuals understand the questions and when there is a sense of anonymity (Brener, Billy & Grady, 2003; Maulana, Helms-Lorenz & Van de Grift, 2015) as is the case in this study. Despite this limitation but with a reminder for the need to be cautious, information from the current study can inform educational stakeholders and policy makers towards their endeavours to use English as a medium of instruction. It is the author's belief that issues such as English language proficiency is not limited to the Malaysian context, rather the methodology used and the data obtained in this study can also be expanded by its neighbouring countries such as Thailand and Indonesia.

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