Challenges in Teaching of English to Pre-schoolers: A Case Study in Malaysian Schools

Maskanah Mohammad Lotfie-Ainul Azmin Md Zamin-Rabiah Tul Adawiyah Mohamed Salleh

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Abstract

This paper investigates the challenges preschool teachers face in an environment where they are expected to use English as a language of instruction alongside Malay, the national language. The researchers gathered information on the teachers' educational background in teaching and training, their perceptions of the problems they face in facilitating the teaching and learning process of the children, as well as their suggestions on effectively overcoming the setbacks. In-depth online interviews were conducted, and data analysis was carried out using Atlas-ti. The results indicated that the teachers lack skills in teaching English due to the different bachelor's degrees they obtained. However, this can be rectified if continuous training and development are offered, especially when there is a change in the syllabus. Apart from the teachers' initiatives in tackling the various problems related to teaching, recommendations were made to encourage parents and school administrators to join forces in improving the quality of education. Teacher training needs to be further enhanced to ensure the effectiveness of implementing English as one of the instructional languages used in preschools. Students' low level of proficiency in English is also a

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challenge faced by the teachers as well. Although technology is integrated into school, optimizing it in class can sometimes be difficult for teachers due to software issues.

Keywords: English as a preschool instructional language, Malaysian public preschools, teaching English to pre-schoolers

INTRODUCTION

The use of English in Malaysia is an indelible mark of its colonial period. Since that era, however, the language has evolved into one that provides a bridge between speakers of many languages, as well as a means of communication in trade and commerce, and in foundational sectors such as education. It is a second language of many Malaysians and its importance as a nationwide communicative tool comes second after Malay, the national language. The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013) states that school-leavers are expected to be able to use English in work environments where the language is spoken. The stated aim should guide the implementation of the National Preschool Standards-based Curriculum (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2017). One of the objectives of Malaysian pre-schools is for children to use English in everyday life suiting its status as the nation's second language (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2017.). This is significant in conceptualising the nation's preschool curriculum as one of it is quantifiably materialised in the use of English in preschools where children are exposed to it through the teaching and learning activities of 600 to 400 hours per week, depending on a preschool's main language of instruction (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2018).

Nevertheless, Malaysians still have a considerably low (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2015) to moderate (EF, 2020) level of English language proficiency and the necessary improvement requires an exploration into the roles of preschool teachers as this is the level where most Malaysian children are first exposed to the language. Studies such as Aziz and Mamat (2017) and Goh (2019) identified limited proficiency in English as a hindrance to effective teaching of the language. Goh also suggests limited resources as a problem in teaching pre-schoolers. Therefore, of great concern is the quality of teaching and learning at this crucial level and in particular how English is incorporated into the syllabus and its actual implementations at preschool. Thus, the
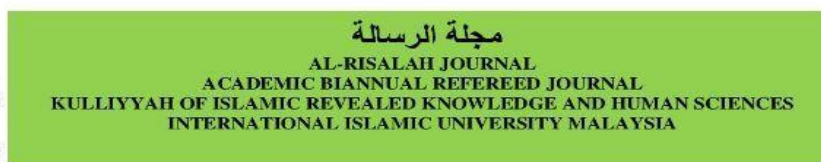
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focus of this case study, research that is part of a more extensive ongoing project, is to identify challenges faced by preschool teachers in teaching English. It also seeks teachers' opinions on making the teaching of English more fruitful to young learners.

PRESCHOOLS IN MALAYSIA

This study focuses on Malaysian public preschools of which there are three main types consisting of KEMAS, PERPADUAN and MOE preschools (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2018). KEMAS is the Malay acronym for Jabatan Kemajuan Masyarakat (Department of Social Advancement, Ministry of Rural Development), while PERPADUAN, another Malay acronym, is for Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional (Department of National Unity and Integration, Prime Minister's Department) and MOE stands for Ministry of Education. Children who are enrolled in these schools are from four to six years old and as of June 2019, the Ministry of Education reported that there are 9056 MOE preschools nationwide with 207,227 enrolled children (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2017).

The National Preschool Standard Curriculum (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2017) must be used in all preschools in Malaysia. Apart from the above mentioned weekly 600-minute instructional usage of English for teaching and learning activities, English is allocated 60 minutes per week to be taught as a subject. The approach to teaching and learning at the preschool level tends to be thematical and project-based, focusing on all four communicative skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2017). Simple constructions of the language are expected which may indicate an emphasis on the formulaic use of English. It can be deduced that the constraints in terms of time and the expanse of content delivery do not allow much emphasis given to specific aspects of the English language such as grammar and morphological features.

There is a broad array of teaching qualifications and training obtained by those involved in the teaching of English among pre-schoolers. There are four levels of training for the childcare sector under the National Occupational Skill Standard (NOSS) (Nor, 2013). In the second wave of early childhood education, preschool teachers were expected to have at least a diploma by the year 2015 (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013), indicating that the qualifications were once lower. Today, preschool teachers teaching in public schools are made up of those who have a minimum of a diploma level of academic qualification (Nor, 2013). This should provide the preschools with teaching staff who are better equipped to help lay a good foundation for children to master the English language at the later stages of their lives.

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TEACHING ENGLISH TO PRESCHOOLERS

Early exposure to a language that is to be mastered is crucial so that its development can be expended and enforced over the formative years. Those Malaysian pre-schools where Malay is the language of instruction has now both that language as well as English as a language of instruction is a great development towards a stronger foundation of the language before children use it at the primary school level. Various studies, however, provide insightful information on the challenges that teachers face in teaching English to pre-schoolers and the possible reasons for those challenges.

One area of concern is the level of English language proficiency among the teachers. Majzub's (2013), Zainal and Majzub's (2014) and Chee et al.'s (2015) studies found that teachers lack proficiency in the language. Goh (2019) highlights that preschool teachers rated themselves as having low proficiency in English, especially in productive skills of speaking and writing. In relation to that, or perhaps more accurately, as a consequence of that, the teachers' did not have the confidence to use the language and thus limiting teachers' use of the language in interacting with pre-schoolers, preventing them to be an accurate source of input of the language.

Another area of concern is inadequate training of teachers in implementing nationally assigned curricula (Chee et al, 2015) which includes the use of English as one of the languages of instruction and as a subject to be taught to the children. It has also been noted that limited resources can also hinder teachers' exposure to the language of the children (Goh, 2019) and there is inadequate technological equipment including computers and access to the internet (Chee et al. 2015). Collaborations among teachers are also encouraged where ideas can be shared among colleagues. In a study conducted in the United States, it was found that there is a significant interaction effect between teachers' perceptions of collaboration and children's engagement at the preschool level. In other words, teachers who share ideas and resources may result in their students' performance (Guo, Justice, Sawyer, Tompkins, 2011).

It should be reiterated here that Malaysians are expected to at least be bilinguals, i.e. to be operationally proficient in both Bahasa Malaysia and English (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013). However, there are indicators at the preschool level that teachers face problems in helping pre-schoolers to acquire English. In particular, the challenges have been caused by the low level of proficiency among teachers. Difficulties in helping children to acquire the language are amplified by inadequate training and resources, and in the current scenario, problems that have

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been stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic have exceedingly restricted the normal face-to-face classes needed especially for young learners.
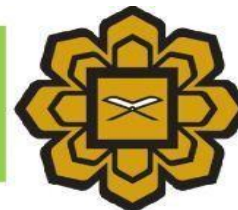
In an effort to ensure its system is globally competitive, Malaysia has taken a step to align its English language education system to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). However, any policy change is not without problems as studies have shown that challenges were inevitable and stakeholders' buy-in on the new change is necessary. The change in the syllabus does not exclude the preschool level and teachers have to deal with the reform in the teaching of the English language. They have very little clue as to what needs to be done and how it should be done (Alih, Abdul Raof & Md.Yusof, 2021). This in turn has an adverse impact on the effectiveness of the lessons delivered.

Similar to other subjects, the teaching of English requires preparation and careful planning. The use of teaching aids is an essential part to the classroom activities. Teachers need to constantly plan their lessons in such a way that students will stay focused but have fun at the same time. To teach young learners at preschool level, the challenges for the teachers can be both daunting and demanding. The use of songs, storybooks and storytelling activities have been found to be effective in lexical acquisition (Albaladejo, Coyle, de Larios, 2018). Children whose English is not their first language found the use of storytelling activities to be the best as they are engaging for the students. In a similar study conducted in Norway, findings showed that singing activities offered children different communicative resources, such as lyrics, gestures, rhythm, artefact, and opportunities for repetition of the activity (Kultti, 2013). As shown is a local study on preschool students, Augustine (2015) discovered that the use of music indicated an improvement in reading skills although none was found in terms of phonological awareness. Another avenue for improving teaching and learning is the use of social media. In an investigation of Malaysian schools, Aziz, Hashim and Md. Yunus (2019) found that the use of various platforms contributed to the enhancement of the English language writing skills among Malaysian second language learners.

With those in mind, the current study has been carried out to further elicit information and opinions of preschool teachers. The study was guided by the following research questions.
1. What are the backgrounds of the teachers teaching English in preschools?
2. What are the problems faced by public preschool teachers in assisting children to acquire English?
3. What do teachers suggest as solutions to the problem?
   The next section of the paper succinctly presents the method implemented in the study.

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METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Interviews gauging preschool teachers' perceptions of the teaching of English to preschool children were carried out in this qualitative case study. Two public preschool teachers from the Klang Valley consented to be the participants. It should be pointed out that the teachers have been involved in a related study on the teaching of English morphological structures using the Developmentally Moderated Focus-on-Form (DMFonF) instructional approach (Salleh et al, 2020). There were inevitable constraints in obtaining more respondents due to movement restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. An initial attempt to incorporate classroom observations as a means to triangulate data had to be abandoned as the attempts were unsuccessful because of Covid-related school closures. However, the interviews of the two participants were in-depth in nature and thus provided rich data for analysis.

The utilised instrument was a semi-structured interview protocol listed below and it was designed to answer the study's research questions. The interviewer used prompts and additional questions as necessary.

RQ1. What are the backgrounds of the teachers teaching English in the preschools?
  i.   How long have you worked as a preschool teacher?
  ii.   What kind of training did you go through before becoming a preschool teacher?
        a. Since then, have you pursued other academic qualifications?
  iii. Have you attended any kind of in-service training?
        a. Does the school provide you opportunities for such training?
  iv.   What was your SPM/MUET/final university result for English?
  v.   How would you describe your use of English?
        a. Are you a proficient speaker/writer/reader/listener of the language?

RQ2. What are the problems faced by public preschool teachers in assisting children to acquire English?
  i.   Do you feel anxious about teaching English?
        a. In what way(s)?
        b. Why?
  ii.   Could you describe the syllabus your school use to teach English to the children?
  iii. How do you find the syllabus? Does your training help in executing them?
  iv.   Which resources are accessible to you to teach English?
        a. Are books/textbooks/readers available?

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b. Are there available computers for children to use?
c. Are there computers for teachers' use?
d. Is there an LCD Projector?
e. Are softwares available for teaching and learning activities?

RQ3. What do teachers suggest as solutions to their problems?
i. What are your recommendations to improve the teaching of English to preschool students?
ii. What do you suggest parents should do to help improve the situation?
iii. What are your hopes from the school administration?

In facilitating data analysis, collected data from the interviews were transcribed and they were then coded and categorised utilising the Atlas-ti software. The design of the study is summarised as follows:

Table 1
Summary of research design

Research Questions	Data Collection	Data Analysis
1. What are the backgrounds of the teachers teaching English in the preschools?	Interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol	Thematic analysis utilising Atlas-ti
2. What are the problems faced by preschool teachers in assisting children to acquire English?		
3. What do teachers suggest as solutions to their problems?		

FINDINGS

Qualitative methods are developed to have an in-depth and extensive understanding of the issues using their textual interpretation and one of the most common types is to conduct interviews. Creswell (2007) highlighted that qualitative research methodology is considered to be suitable when investigations of a new field of study are carried out or when the intention is to ascertain and theorize prominent issues. This study adopts the dynamics and complexity orientation in looking at teachers' perceptions, particularly into the insights of two preschool teachers who were directly

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involved in the teaching of the English language as a subject for the children in the school setting. Utilizing the semi-structured interviews, data were collected data from both teachers and thematic analysis was employed to identify the common threads across an entire set of narratives and further analyzed data in light of research questions (Creswell, 2007). Appropriate extracts were informed in the finding section, and the discussion section is as follows, leading to answer the research questions. It must be mentioned here that upon the request of both teachers, the interviews were conducted in their native language, Bahasa Malaysia.
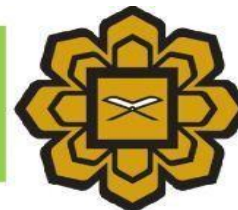
The interviews were recorded and the conversations were transcripted so that they can be easily transferred into Atlas.ti, the qualitative research tool that helps to arrange, manage, connect and code the responses based on the themes from the data. Both informants were given a consent form to agree to participate in the research and as with much other qualitative research, their names are kept confidential. This research study came from a larger project which was originally designed to understand pre-schoolers' English language learning trajectories at the primary level in Malaysia.

Two teacher respondents were approached for this study and both agreed to share their perspectives and thoughts on the subject matter. Both teachers became the focal point of this research, providing the information and data to address the research questions in the present study. For anonymity, both teachers are addressed as Teacher Nida (respondent one) and Teacher Noor (respondent two) respectively.

TEACHER BACKGROUND
To address the first research question, the following interview questions were posed to both respondents. Research question 1: What are the backgrounds of the teachers teaching English in the preschools?
i.   How long have you worked as a preschool teacher?
ii.   What kind of training did you go through before becoming a preschool teacher?
iii.   Since then, have you pursued other academic qualifications?
iii.   Have you attended any kind of in-service training?
iv.   Does the school provide you opportunities for such training?
v.   How would you describe your use of English?
vi.   Are you a proficient speaker/writer/reader/listener of the language?

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Educational background and training

The interview started with some demographic questions including the teachers' academic qualifications. In terms of educational background, both teachers started their teaching careers immediately after high school and only pursued their diplomas and degree while in service. As stated by teacher Nida;

> *Saya bermula dengan SPM. Kemudian saya sambung belajar.*
> *(I started with a high school certificate. Later, I continued my study.)*

Nida went on to complete her Bachelor in Education in 2007, while Noor pursued her Diploma Perguruan Belia at the Language Institute in Kuala Lumpur before completing her Bachelor in Early Childhood in 2011. Noor was already a pre-school teacher since 2006 before she earned her degree;

> *Saya ambil Pendidikan Awal Kanak-kanak di MSU (Management and Science University).*
> *(I studied Early Childhood learning at MSU Management Science University.)*

It is commendable that both teachers persevered in getting their degrees amid their full time teaching positions. Both pursued their degrees as registered part-time students and graduated with a Bachelor's in Early Childhood Education.

When asked about other training, Nida mentioned that only CEFR training was formally provided for her in the past and it was merely a one-day workshop conducted by the principal preschool teacher in the school she teaches.

> *Participant. Itu pun kursus tak lama. Dalam dua ke tiga kali lah. Sehari.*
> *Dia sebab yang cikgu pra sekolah yang pergi kursus untuk CEFR tu.*
> *([Attended as a] participant. It was a short program. Only two or three days. One day program. It was the principal preschool teacher who attended the CEFR training.)*

She frustratingly shared with the researchers that she has not been getting any other kinds of training either from the school management or from the district level where the English language subject is concerned.

> *Haa, tak berapa sangat lah. Tak ada pula.*
> *(Well, not really. None so far.)*

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In terms of their personal use of English, Nida admitted that she used very little English although her children at home are conversant in the language. Her daughter has a Bachelor's Degree in English Language and although Nida is not very competent, she does not feel uncomfortable using the language.

Noor, who confessed that she scored a credit pass in her Malaysian High School Certificate, felt that she has gained much better confidence in using the English language over the years with her students although she felt she needed to improve in using English in public.

> *Tapi, err, lepas dah mengajar apa semua, err, level of confidence tu,*
> *better kot, bila dah, dah berada dengan student. Err, dengan student,*
> *saya oklah, tapi kalau orang ramai tu, saya belum better lagilah.*
> *(But after I have been teaching, the level of confidence is better when I*
> *am with my students. But in public, I need to improve further..*

CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH AT PRESCHOOL

The second research question focuses on the teachers' day-to-day jobs at the school.

Research question 2: What are the problems faced by public preschool teachers in assisting children to acquire English?

i.   Do you feel anxious about teaching English? Why and in what way(s)?
ii.   Could you describe the syllabus your school use to teach English to the children?
iii.   How do you find the syllabus? Does your training help in executing them?
iv.   Which resources are accessible to you to teach English?
      a.   Are books/textbooks/readers available?
      b.   Are there available computers for children to use?
      c.   Are there computers for teachers' use?
      d.   Is there an LCD Projector?
      e.   Are software available for teaching and learning activities?

Teaching anxiety

Similar to other levels of English language teaching, preschool teachers have their set of challenges. Nida stated that she is the principal teacher of the only class of preschoolers in her school. Noor's school, on the other hand, has two classes and she single-handedly teaches one of them. The normal practice for preschool teaching in any Malaysian government school stipulates that one teacher is responsible for teaching all the subjects except for the Islamic Study. For this

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subject, a religious teacher or better known as *ustazah* is the instructor for the students. In general, Noor admitted that she enjoys teaching the children;

> *Saya dengan murid sahaja, masa saya mengajar saya enjoylah.*
> *(While I am with the students only, I enjoy my lessons.)*

Like many other teachers, Nida pointed out some of the difficulties she faced when teaching the English language to young students. Nida admitted that she experienced anxiety when she first started teaching but it subsided over the years.

> *Kalau awal dulu lah. Tapi sekarang kebimbangan tu berkurang lah*
> *sebab kita dah lama mengajarkan.*
> *(I was anxious at the beginning. But now, there is less anxiety because*
> *I have been teaching for a while).*

Noor shared her younger days as a teacher and even shared her experiences while being observed which left her feeling a bit apprehended. According to Noor, the frequency of the observations on the teachers depended a lot on the management of the school;

> *Tapi, masa saya mengajar, ada orang datang. Saya rasa macam err,*
> *terbataslah.*
> *(But while I was teaching, someone came [to observe]. I felt*
> *constrained.)*

Syllabus
Nida expressed her worry about the syllabus that was changed according to CEFR. In her opinion, the children can only grasp the basics in English lessons and it is a far cry from the targeted CEFR level.

> *Lepas yang biasa-biasa, yang mudah je dia orang faham. Kalau macam*
> *biasa pun, kita tanya pun hmmm. Sebab budak budak kat sini dia kurang*
> *bertutur dalam Bahasa Inggeris kat rumah.*
> *(In the past, the children can only understand basic English. Asking a*
> *simple question in English can be problematic. The reason is that the*
> *children here use very little English at home.)*

According to her, the CEFR syllabus is not making it easier for her although the training she receives does help her a lot.

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*Dia ubah, dari yang dulu ubah ke yang CEFR. Tapi masalahnya CEFR
pun kita tak berapa faham dengan sebetulnya. Membantu jugak lah. Kalau
tak ada training itu lagi tak faham.*
*(They changed from the old syllabus] to CEFR. The problem is, that we do
not fully understand it. [The training] does help. Otherwise, it would be
more difficult to understand.*

Noor expressed her worry over the high-frequency words that are found in the CEFR
syllabus. Her concern mainly stemmed from the students' illiteracy issue.

*Kalau kita nak mengajar murid membaca, Bahasa Inggeris ke, Bahasa
Melayu ke, murid kenal huruf dulu. Kalu terlalu lemah, dia perlu ambil
masa, err 4 bulan untuk tolong.*
*(If we are to teach reading; whether in English or Bahasa Melayu, the
students first need to recognize the alphabet [literate]. If they are weak,
they need time, at least four months for guidance).*

Noor chose to strategize her teaching by taking the step-by-step approach of introducing the
high-frequency words from the list of vocabulary in the CEFR syllabus to students.

*Awal-awal tu, saya ajar, err, tak boleh masuk terus high word frequency.
Kita buat perlahan-lahanlah, macam sebut dulu. Bila dah macam murid
dah kenal huruf. Kalau murid dah, dah boleh kuasai huruf semua. Bila
masuk third tu, baru saya kenalkan high frequency word.*
*(In the beginning, we cannot immediately teach high-frequency words. We
need to go slow, perhaps start with the pronunciation first. Once the
students have recognized the words, or become familiar with the words, in
the third stage I will introduce the high-frequency words.)*

Pictures, plays and songs
Teaching aids are an essential part of teaching. When discussing the materials used in her English
classes, Nida highlighted that she has always used lots of pictures in her English lessons. She found
that her students understood better;

*Macam sekarang ni pun saya lebih banyak guna gambar. Dia orang ni
suka gambar, perkataan nama, macam nama objek tu kan. Senanglah
untuk dia orang nak faham. Haa budak budak saya lah dia nak menyalin
dia kena tengok apa benda. Sentiasa.*

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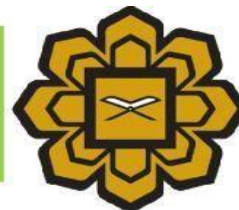
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(I am currently using many pictures [as teaching aids]. The children love pictures, and words such as the name of objects. It is easier for them to understand. My students will always want to see the object while they copy.)

Nida added that her use of pictures has even been adapted to the current pandemic situation. While the students needed to sit apart from each other following the Standard Operation Procedure (SOP) in schools, she had to make adjustments to the size of her picture cards.

> *Senang guna gambar kad saja. Sekarang tengah buat gambar tu kena besar. Budak sekarang kan kena duduk jauh jauh. So, kena buat besar. (It's easy to just use the picture cards. With the children now sitting a distance from each other, the pictures have to be enlarged).*

Nida further elaborated on how the cards played an important role in her lessons because the children would prefer something tangible and be easily seen or touched. She frequently uses the projector to teach, but that alone was inadequate. Thus, the cards act as a guide for the children.

> *Bagi saya lah, kalau kita gunakan benda yang kita pancarkan, bila kita nak buat latihan, dia akan berpandukan benda itu sentiasa ada depan itu. Jadi benda tu dia nak wujud lah. Kad tu, word cards, picture cards. Benda tu ada depan tu.*
> *(In my opinion, they will use the object displayed on the screen as a guide of the class when they are doing the exercises. So the object must be seen. The cards, the work cards, pictures. They are in front [of the class]).*

She admitted that she reached out for help from her colleagues. In their job scope as teachers, the information on the use of teaching material in their lesson plans in important for record-keeping.

> *Saya mintak bantuan daripada err, cikgu lain. Keperluan kita nak key-in bahan.*
> *(I do seek help from other teachers. We need to key in the information [on the teaching aids that we use]).*

Noor was happy to mention that their resources were shared among teachers and she contributed as well.

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Kira kita mutuallah, ya? Aaa, masing-masing pun share masing-masing punya bahan, kan?
(It has to be mutual, right? Everyone shares their resources, don't they?)

Despite the many teaching aids that they have to provide, Nida mentioned that the teachers would keep all their materials and they have a whole collection of the teaching aids.

Tapi kumpul jugak. So campur lah.
(But [we] keep them. So, it is a collection of materials.)

The element of play was mentioned by Noor. In her effort to diversify her teaching techniques, she used the play technique during her lessons.

Ok, kalau untuk mengenal huruf tu biasa…murid kan sinonim dengan aktif, jadi belajar melalui permainan. Jadi, saya pelbagaikanlah kaedah pengajaran saya bila dia belajar, bermain, dia bernyanyi.
(Ok, to recognize words... students are normally active so they learn through play. Therefore, I diversify my teaching methods when they have to learn, play and sing songs).

The use of songs was also recommended by Nida. She felt the songs can trigger questions from the students although teachers may have to repeat them in Bahasa Malaysia.

Lagu memang dapat tarik minat budak kan? Ye lah kan. Sediakan lagu. Sediakan macam perbualan, untuk timbulkan dia bertanya. Tapi kita kena ulang dalam Bahasa Melayu.
(Songs can attract the students, right? Prepare a few songs. Prepare songs for conversations, to trigger the students' curiosity. But we need to repeat in Bahasa Melayu.)

Books
Despite the new CEFR, Nida does not have any textbook to refer to. According to her, there are in fact teachers in her district who write their book;

Tak tahu lah, saya tak ada. Ada cikgu sekolah yang buat. Ada cikgu dari Gombak yang hasilkan buku tu.
(I don't know [about the textbook]. I do not have any. Some school teachers write. There is a teacher from Gombak who's written the book.)

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Nida specifically mentioned that books by Fargoes Publication have topics based on themes. This was similar to what the CEFR syllabus has. The instructions are also given. Interestingly enough, Nida often creates her worksheets. According to her;

> *Dulu KPM macam dia bagi setiap sekolah ada bagi buku la. Sediakan untuk sebagai bahan mengajarlah. Tapi sekarang untuk ini, tak ada. Memang buku yang ada, tapi ayat panjang panjang.*
> *(In the past, KPM provided books for schools, as part of our preparation for the lessons. But currently, they no longer do that. There are books but the sentences are too long.)*

Noor, on the other hand, resorted to Peter and Jane series. She found the series easily available anywhere (*Kan senang dapat).* With 25 students in her class, she creatively used the projector to provide the 'book' on the screen for students to read.

> *Saya akan ambil daripada YouTube, saya pancarkan dekat dalam kelas.*
> *(I would get the material from YouTube and I will project it on the screen in class.)*

Technology

On the topic of using technology and social media, Nida adopted a strategy where she would share materials with her colleagues. Leveraging the use of social media, colleagues would share materials with her.

> *Kan, guna facebook. Err, pastu saya ada guna telegram. Kadang-kadang kawan bagi bahan.*
> *(Now, there is the use of Facebook. Then, I would use Telegram. Sometimes, friends will share materials).*

Both teachers owned laptops and this helps them not only in their teaching but also in getting connected with others. Noor echoed the same idea given by Nida where she got her ideas from social media;

> *Telegram tu kadang-kadang diaorang buat cerita.*
> *(Sometimes, they [other teachers], would make stories on Telegram).*

Noor added that she is an avid user of YouTube;

> *Saya guna YouTubelah. Saya akan ambil dari YouTube, saya pancarkan dekat kelas.Projector memang dah ada dalam kelas. Pastu kadang-kadang saya tengok Facebook.*

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(I will use YouTube. I will use [ideas from] YouTube and share them using the projector because we have projectors in class. Sometimes I will look at Facebook.)

Nida, however, highlighted the issue of using software;

Ada orang datang jual software. Tapi tak boleh nak guna sangat. Kalau mengajar Bahasa Inggeris kita nak sesuaikan dengan budak.
(The salesman would come to school to sell software. Unfortunately, we are not able to optimize its use. In terms of teaching the English language, we need to adapt to the children's needs.)

Different from Nida's situation, Noor expressed her relief that her school is helpful in getting resources for the teachers.

Saya boleh minta daripada sekolahlah sebab pra-sekolah ada peruntukan alat bahan bantu pelajar.
(I can request from the school because preschool has the allocation for student resources).

Noor commended the available projectors provided in class by her school. The equipment helped her in teaching. However, the same cannot be said about Nida's school. In Noor's school;

Sebab setiap kelas memang kelas digital. Setiap kelas memang ada projector.
(Every class is a digital class. Every class has its projector.)

Student incompetency

Nida reported that the majority of preschool students have no basic understanding of English. Although some may comprehend simple English words, none can respond using a proper sentence. Her example of a common simple request made by students to go to the loo is "*Teacher, toilet?"* which should otherwise be "*Teacher, may I go to the toilet?* She elaborated further that the students are not able to construct a sentence.

Kalau ayat yang panjang memang tak boleh lah. Kalau perkataan mudah, dia dengar mungkin dia fahamlah. Murid murid yang sekarang, dia faham. Tapi dia nak guna ayat Bahasa Inggeris tak boleh. Kalau perkataan mudah, dia dengar mungkin dia faham lah.

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(The students cannot [construct] any long sentence. If it is a simple word, they may understand. The current students may understand. But they are unable to construct a sentence. If the words are simple, they may understand.)

The concern on the students' incompetency was not specifically on any particular skill but on all skills in general.

Sama je speaking ke reading ke sebab untuk perbualan ke.
(It is the same for speaking or reading, basically for communication.)

Noor used the approach of starting with easy vocabulary first before she can continue with her syllabus. She expressed her worry when she said;

Setiap tahun, murid dia berbeza level. Jadi bila murid tidak kenal huruf, sangat sangat mencabarlah.
(*Every year we have students with different levels [levels of competencies].*
It gets extra challenging when they do not know how to read).

Noor further explained that the students come from different backgrounds and that contributes to their level of English proficiency.

Dia tak faham apa yang kita cakap. Sebabnya eerr murid ni , background dia tak da. Backgound dia memang kurang dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Adakah semestinya diaorang akan respon dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Tak semestinya kut.
(They would not understand what we say. The reason is due to their background. Their background lacks the English language. Will they respond in the English language? Highly unlikely.)

Parental assistance

In trying to keep the sources available for the class, it is not uncommon for the teachers to seek help from parents. The Parent-Teacher Association or popularly known as PIBG is one possible avenue.

Kalau beli, guna duit PIBGlah. Rasa kalau mintak InshaAllah lah
dapat.
(If we buy, we would usefunds from PIBG. If we ask, God willing, we will
get it).

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The assistance from the PTA was not specifically focused on English language teaching alone but anything about the students in general.

> *Tak lah berkenaan Bahasa Inggeris tapi macam saya mintak mohon duit untuk macam kutipan lima ringgit seorang untuk beli kertas A4 ke, macam tu lah.*
> *(It was not specifically focused on the English language but it was when I requested a five ringgit collection from each one to buy A4 papers.)*

SUGGESTIONS FROM TEACHERS

The final research question focuses on the teachers' recommendations on how to improve the teaching of English at preschool. Research question 3: What do teachers suggest as solutions to their problems?

   i.   What are your recommendations to improve the teaching of English to preschool students?
   ii.   What do you suggest parents should do to improve the situation?
   iii.   What are your hopes from the school administration?

Recommendation for parents

Noor gave a very practical recommendation. According to her, learning English should start from home;

> *Cadangan saya, senang je. Dia kena bermula dari rumah juga. Mudah ja, bukan mengharapkan cikgu di sekolah.*
> *(My suggestion is simple. It has to start from home. It's so simple. Stop relying on teachers in school.)*

Nida echoed the same recommendation. Parents should be using the language at home with their children.
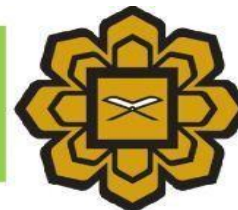
> *Setengah parents dia memang kat rumah dia banyak menggunakan Bahasa Inggeris. Kalau boleh banyakkan perbualan*
> *(For some parents, use a lot of English language at home. If possible, encourage a lot of conversations.)*

Noor further explained that this will help to reinforce learning.

> *Jadi, dia kena ada kesinambuangan pembelajaran. Kalau yang tu, err terpulang parentlah.*
> *(So, there needs to be continuity in the lessons. It depends on the parents.)*

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Teacher training

On the subject of teacher development, Nida made a strong suggestion about teacher training;

> *Tapi sebab sekarang ni, macam kursus tu tak lama. Macam CEFR tu tak lama lah. Mungkin cikgu pra sekolah sendiri yang pergi tu yang sampaikan balik, mungkin banyak hari lagi lah.*
> *(For now, the course is too short. For instance, the CEFR training. Perhaps the preschool teachers should be the ones attending for several days.)*

Noor ultimately gave a strong suggestion to have a specialized teacher focus on the teaching the English language to preschoolers.

> *Kalau boleh lah, kalu boleh saya nakkan err, cikgu Inggeris mengajar pra-sekolah . Ada cikgu Inggeris lah.*
> *(If possible, I would like a specialized teacher to teach English to preschoolers. There should be an English teacher.)*

DISCUSSION

Both teachers started their teaching careers immediately after high school and pursued their diplomas and degree while in service. Despite their commendable effort to further their studies, both teachers did not specialize in the teaching of the English language as their degrees were in Early Childhood education. Both teachers were not fully trained to teach English. This finding supports Goh's (2019) findings as limited proficiency is a hindrance to effective teaching of the language. This may have an impact on the way the subject is taught to the children at preschool. In-house training such as the workshop on CEFR was formally provided for the teachers but it was merely a one-day workshop that was slimmed down from the full course delivered by the principal English teacher of the school. For these teachers to improve in their teaching of English, it is imperative that more vigorous training should be provided. While conversational competency is an added value discovered among these two teachers, what should be enforced is regular training and development programmes to ensure that teachers are kept abreast with the latest trends in the teaching of the English language. Looking at the current trends, more training should be implemented and this concurs with what has been advocated by Chee et al. (2015). Teachers need to be properly trained and continuously be given the right exposure to upscale their teaching of English. Training and development for preschool teachers who are not English majors cannot be compromised if quality teaching is what we want to achieve.

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A point for concern among the teachers is also the policy of teaching all subjects to the students, except for Islamic studies. If the issue of English language incompetency needs to be addressed seriously, then the problem needs to be nipped in the bud. The teaching of English at preschool provides the best foundation that the students need. Teachers must be well equipped with experience and qualifications to teach. As Zainal and Majzub (2015) pointed out in their study, teachers lack proficiency and this may certainly have an adverse impact on the students and this is evident from the present study. Preschool teachers who teach English should be given more training and encouragement, not observation and monitoring.

In Malaysia's effort to be competitive at the international front, the new Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) was introduced in Malaysian schools and this includes the English language syllabus at the preschool level. Keeping up with the change is not an easy task for the teachers as they are not familiar with the content of the syllabus. The present data from this study align with the findings from Alih, Abdul Raof and Md.Yusof (2021) where teachers expressed their worry over the grey areas in CEFR. Unfamiliarity and uncertainty are contributing to the challenges faced by teachers at the preschool level. This situation is exacerbated by the poor performance of the students as many are still grappling with basic English as some have yet to recognize alphabets in reading. In the teachers' effort to strategize their teaching, the teachers emphasized on the reading literacy prior to the introduction of the high-frequency words in CEFR.

The use of resources in English language classrooms is essential and this was evident in the present study. Teachers discussed the use of picture cards and songs as part of their effort in making their lessons interesting and effective. Students understood better when pictures are displayed on the projectors and this helped them in completing their exercises and practice in class. The effectiveness of using songs supports the study conducted by Augustine (2115). This finding supports what Kultti (2013) found in her research on children's level of participation with the use of songs in class. What was interesting is the idea of sharing resources among the teachers at the interschool level. In trying to be proactive, the teachers cooperated by exchanging and sharing ideas as well as materials. Resources like books and online materials were gathered and collected for present and future use. These findings confirm the same results as shown by Guo et. al (2011). Despite the inadequate supply of books, the teachers showed resilience by creating their worksheets and other relevant materials. Technology was also utilized to good use by both teachers although the software provided by the schools could not be optimized at all times. Both teachers took advantage of the projectors for effective teaching although they both have their laptops. The use of social media helped them to connect with other comrades in the teaching profession. The various platforms provided them with the opportunity to exchange ideas and improve their English

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language lessons. Teachers need to embrace the use of technology regardless of which level of English language teaching they are involved in.

The concern about students' incompetency is a valid one and both teachers expressed their worry about the young learners' illiteracy. It is very challenging for the teachers when the students have no basic understanding of English and yet they have to align their teaching with CEFR syllabus. It is highly recommended that teachers need to strategize based on the context they are in. Basic exposure to easy vocabulary is better than introducing high-frequency words that are written in the syllabus. The teachers recommended for both parents and school administrators to play their part in improving the level of English proficiency among the students. Parental involvement at home and also their engagement in school are vital to ensure the continuous improvement of the English language learning for preschool children. The PTA has to play an active role in providing the assistance that schools need.

CONCLUSION
The present study explored the challenges that teachers have to face at the preschool level in the teaching of the English language. The interviews conducted have shown that there are many areas of concern including the teacher training and development, the resources available, the inadequate books to be used as well as the integration of technology that cannot be fully optimized. Apart from the teachers' initiatives in tackling the various problems like inadequate materials and books for teaching, they have recommended practical suggestions that can help improve the situation including ideas to have both parents and school administrators join forces in improving the quality of teaching. Teacher training needs to be further improved to ensure the effectiveness of the implementation of English as one of the instructional languages used in preschools. Though the way English reached Malaysia is part of the nation's history of being colonised, its current global importance position it as a language of tremendous importance for Malaysians to master. Much like Majzub (2013) findings, the teachers interviewed for this study confirm that the challenges and issues faced by teachers include low proficiency levels in English and lack of confidence in using the language. They can, however, be rectified by formally equipping teachers with the necessary skills. It is hoped the empirical account provided by this study will fuel the continuous improvement of preschool children in Malaysia in the teaching and learning of the English language.

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