

ESL READING ASSESSMENT TOOL FOR PRESCHOOLERS IN MALAYSIA

Ng Shi Hui

UCSI University, Malaysia.
joelynshihui@gmail.com

Lin Siew Eng

BERJAYA University College, Malaysia.
lin.sieweng@berjaya.edu.my

Lee Kam Fong

UCSI University, Malaysia.
leekf@ucsiuniversity.edu.my

Mansour Amini

UCSI University, Malaysia.
mansouramini96@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Learning to read is important to develop language skills. It is a necessary component of any reading assignment in the school system. Although reading ability is vital for academic success, it is often overlooked. The reading assessment of preschoolers in Malaysia does not provide sufficient information about the individual learners' reading ability. Likewise, despite having English as a second language (ESL) reading assessments available for the primary school level until university level, there is a lack of valid and reliable reading assessment tool designed for the preschoolers to assess their reading abilities. To address this issue, this paper provides a review of the various types of reading assessment on reading ability as well as the role of reading assessment in preschools in order to offer some suggestions to develop a reading assessment tool for preschoolers in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Preschoolers, reading ability, reading assessment, reliable reading assessment tool, valid.*

INTRODUCTION

It is never too early to expose and familiarise children to English language (Woolfolk, 2004) as Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony (2000) believe that children beginning school with limited reading abilities tend to be high risk drop-outs and require special educational instructions. As such, early detection of preschool children with phonological awareness problems might help in predicting the possibilities of reading problems in school. Consequently, if measures are taken in the early years of schooling, future reading problems could be prevented

(Machado, 2010). Furthermore, Elliot & Olliff, (2008) state that the early identification of reading skills in the preschool period has a profound effect on the development of the child's proficiency during their years in elementary school. Similarly, Lonigan et al, (2000) reiterate that pre-schoolers with difficulty in learning to read will also experience difficulties in learning to read during their school years.

The children's English reading skills in a typical Malaysian preschool class might have a gap within a range of five years' difference; some preschoolers may possess the reading skills typical of 3-year olds while others might demonstrate the reading skills of 8-year-old kids (Machado, 2010). Moreover, the preschoolers are assessed only on their overall English language achievement and not separately on each sub-skill such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. The assessments which are developed and conducted by the teachers focused mainly on discriminating among the students to find out who is performing better (Abdul Rashid, Lin, & Shaik Abdul Malik, 2010). There are no separate test scores for reading as these assessments test only the overall language skills of the students.

The results from formative and summative assessments indicate the grades or marks of the students. However, the current practices in classroom grading, such as the use of overall grades or percentage scores, are not able to pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses in students' learning to help improve their performance over time. Such classifications tend to be of little help in future learning as the grades or the marks do not tell anything about the students' individual reading performance or whether the students have mastered a specific skill. For example, if a student obtains an 'A' for a summative test, it merely indicates that the student is able to master the skills specified in the syllabus as the grade does not provide information about the reading ability of the student for a specific skill. The grade only indicates the students' command of the language as a whole. According to Arshad (2005:112), "the mere reporting of a letter grade A, B, C+ or C- only provides generalised information and the student will not be able to 'learn' from this single letter grade".

The Department of Education in the UK placed a lot of emphasis on phonic screening check for year 1 students. The ability to decode phonically and grasped the essential skills adequately are the fundamentals that underpin good reading abilities. Thus, phonic screening is prioritised in order to indicate what each student had learnt (Walker et. al., 2015).

Students in Malaysia start their primary schools when they are seven years old and English is taught as a second language. Norlida, Munirah, Ann Abdullah & Amir's study (2004) revealed that while some children performed well especially in alphabet recognition, there were also quite a number of children who performed poorly in word recognition. Furthermore, there were children who went through kindergarten and are more proficient over those who did not attend kindergartens (Long & Parkinson, 1978 as cited in Norlida et. al., 2004). Normally, the preschool or kindergarten classes consist of children with mixed abilities. There are some preschoolers who can read in English but most of them possess very little knowledge of English. The educational disparities among the preschoolers are very obvious and these preschool teachers are very conscious of it. Thus, it can be anticipated that those children who attended preschools come with almost none or no prior knowledge of how to read (Sowers, 2000).

Currently, there are not many studies done on the reading ability of kindergarten children in Malaysia. Most reading programmes only emphasise symbol recognition, whole word or learning of sight word, learning of letter names and letter sounds and rhyming strategies. There is still no assessment tool to identify the reading ability of Malaysian preschoolers. Even if these preschoolers are given grades, the grades they get for English do not reveal their reading ability. However, if the teachers are equipped with the appropriate assessment tools to assess their reading abilities, it would enable the teacher to determine how well the children are learning or making any progress and meeting proficiency benchmarks (Machado, 2010).

The review of the various types of reading assessment on reading ability as well as the role of reading assessment in preschools is an attempt to find out the preschoolers' reading abilities in English before they start their primary schools so that the teachers can customise their lessons according to the abilities of the preschoolers.

ASSESSMENTS OF READING ON PRESCHOOLERS

Assessments undeniably are an integral part of education regardless of whether it is for preschool, elementary or advanced level. Assessments enable educators to ensure that their students are progressing incrementally and becoming more competent and proficient, as such, assessments for preschoolers cannot be ignored.

Generally, formal assessments of preschoolers are likely to be difficult and stressful to carry out. Any form of formal assessments is costly in terms of time and effort. However, in spite of all these obstacles, preschoolers will be able to benefit from the assessments carried out since the assessments are based on the students' levels and abilities. The outcomes of the assessments on preschoolers may enable improvements to be made and to upgrade the educational programmes.

Furthermore, the preschoolers' familiarities of their interaction with their educational instructions and environmental materials as well as their families' social economic status have a direct effect on their knowledge of reading. The data obtained from assessment can uncover a vast amount of information about the learners, the instructional materials and the environment, often resulting in the revisions of instructions (Vukelich, Christie & Enz, 2002). It can be concluded that pre-schoolers' reading achievement have a direct impact on their success with other academic subjects.

Since most assessments are mainly based on the observations of the children's exchanges in their communication with each other, their conduct, and their exercises done, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has imposed on educators from all preschool programs of the need to place assessment of utmost importance focussing on ethical issues, relevance, validity and reliability of the assessment (Strickland & Morrow, 2000). In most educational levels, assessments are mainly just tools that are used to evaluate or to find out whether the children are making any progress. At the preschool level however, children are not required to undergo any form of individual and written exams. Therefore, in order to find out how much the preschoolers have developed and how

much they can perform in their reading abilities, they are usually evaluated based on observations in the class.

In addition, The Access Centre, (2005), the American Institutes for Research, states that assessments are mainly carried out with the intention of developing the students' progress, performances and achievements. As assessments and evaluations are continuous processes, teachers employ them in order to achieve the learning goals. As a result, assessments are instruments that can be used to refine and make effective changes in their instruction.

Finally, most teachers are aware that many young children already possessed several essential reading skills when they enter the classroom (Sowers, 2000; Machado, 2010) and the differences in the children's knowledge and skills in letter identification, phonemic awareness, sight words, concept of words and printing skills vary widely. These teachers are thus faced with numerous problems in dealing with the different levels of student's skills when planning their lessons to match with the students' abilities.

In conclusion, as assessment is part and parcel of the teaching and learning process, the Malaysian Ministry of Education requires every teacher at the preschool level to 'assess' or determine the children's development, achievement and performances continuously based on the fundamental principles of the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains. One indication of success in reading instruction is when the teacher is certain that the students have achieved proficiency at a particular level (Staiger, 1973).

TYPES OF ASSESSMENT ON READING ABILITY

The U.S. Department of Education (2003) states that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) requires each state in USA to develop appropriate and valid academic standards in English (reading), Maths, Science and Social Studies. An assessment tool was developed by each state in accordance with that. With a valid reading assessment tool, it was hope that the reading achievement of students in those standards could be measured and parents were informed about the results of the assessments. Schools in their various districts were allowed to have their own lesson plans, teaching materials adoption and reading assessments designed by themselves to meet the standards (Chesapeake School Board Policy, 2010). However, the school districts have to monitor the students' achievement, assure Adequate Yearly Progress and provide alternative teaching strategies to remediate students who are identified to have poor reading ability until those students passed the reading literacy benchmark (PALS, 2011). The school districts are empowered to adjust and develop their assessments to match with the emergent reading skill in preschool as long as they comply with the federal regulations. In this regard, Sullivan, Lee & Gupta (2011) conducted a study to discuss the implication of the NCLB on reading education policy in Virginia and its assessment of preschoolers' reading ability. Sullivan, et al. (2011) reported that individual schools were allowed to informally manage additional reading assessment tools that were not mandated by the state or district. For instance, preschool teachers use the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) in order to identify a preschooler's fundamental literacy knowledge and also diagnose any struggling reader. Moreover, preschool teachers

also maintained a Kingore Observation Inventory (KOI) profile on each student from preschool through Grade Two. The KOI functioned as an assessment tool to help in the identification of gifted and talented children (Kingore, 2001). Furthermore, teachers tracked students' performance data on the Kindergarten Student Literacy Data (KSLD) form and submitted it to the reading specialist of that particular school at the end of school year. In this way, reading specialists are able to utilise the information obtained as a guide to plan and develop professional reading programmes. Preschool teachers, researchers and policy makers may refer to the procedures mentioned above to come out with a policy for the development of reading assessment instrument for preschoolers to assess their reading skill. The assessment could also help identify skills tailored to their specific needs.

After many years of research, the National Research Council (NRC) in the United States, the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), made several recommendations for assessments and evaluation of the reading and writing abilities of young readers and writers (Strickland & Morrow, 2000). They suggested that the assessment includes the development of preschooler's phonemic awareness, development of vocabulary and comprehension, as well as the development of a systematic code of instructions and reading of meaningful texts (Strickland & Morrow, 2000). The IRA and NAEYC also insisted on accurate, valid and reliable assessment of children's knowledge, skills and attitudes towards reading and writing.

Another commonly used form of assessment is the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) which was designed to assess the two predictors of future reading success: i) accurate recognition of the letters of the alphabets and ii) an awareness of speech sounds (National Early Literacy Panel (NELP), 2008). The first predictor was assessed by using an Alphabet Knowledge task while the second one was assessed through Rhyme and Beginning Sound Awareness task. The PALS scores were then interpreted against developmental ranges that are associated with later reading success. Teachers could easily identify what their students know and do not know as well as what they need to teach as they were able to gauge the level of students through this assessment. Invernizzi, Landrum, Teichman, and Townsend (2010) carried out a research to discuss the policy and practice implications of the growing emphasis on reading assessment in preschools. Their study suggested that PALS was one of the assessment tools that met the criteria required for early reading assessment among preschoolers. PALS assessment is broad-based, easy and efficient to administer and interpret, as well as provide immediate instructional benefits to teachers.

The next form of assessment is the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) which was developed in the year 2006 and had since been adapted in more than sixty-five countries in more than one hundred languages to measure some of the foundation skills needed for reading acquisitions in alphabetic languages (Dubeck & Gove, 2015). In a research study done by Jiménez, Gove, Crouch, and Rodríguez (2014), they found that EGRA had acceptable psychometrics properties as well as an internal structure that was based on two crucial factors, namely; decoding comprehension and oral comprehension. The sub-components in the reading assessment correspond to the segmentation of the reading process and allow a broader range of pre-reading and reading ability that have to be acquired

and mastered by the child to become a successful reader. The three stages of reading skills acquisition adapted from Seymour, Aro & Erskine, (2003), comprise of: firstly, the process of letter-sound knowledge, secondly, orthographic identification, and thirdly, deciphering the meaning of words. This simply means that the process of reading starts from identifying letter to producing sound; from sound to forming a word and from word to constructing meaning. Although ERGA has made a significant impact in the field of reading assessment for young students, it remains questionable as to the extent the reading ability of young students can be gauged accurately based on the subtasks created, considering the different reading ability of young students, particularly in comparison to the macro and micro factors of the ESL and EFL learning environments.

Meanwhile, another familiar form of assessment is the Early Reading Diagnostic Assessment (ERDA) which was developed using evidence-based research and best practices to help teachers make early diagnosis details of reading problems and making improvements as well as focussing on instruction. With the use of ERDA, teachers can precisely diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of the students, thereby enabling the development of the students' reading abilities. With this information, the teachers can strategise and plan effective instruction. In order to deliver effective instruction, it is vital to establish a child's reading ability. Once a child's reading strengths and weaknesses are established precisely, the teacher can develop an instruction strategy that best serves the child's needs (Jordan, Kirk & King, 2005). ERDA is an inclusive diagnostic instrument that can measure the five research-based building blocks of reading at preschool level right up to the third grade. The child's ability to hear sound units of the phonemes, rhymes and syllables in spoken language can be assessed using ERDA, based on the understanding of phonemic and phonological awareness through a chain of subtests. Jordan et. al., (2005) claim that a child's understanding of phonemes first occurs when the child is able to identify the missing phonemes in a series of given words and subsequently can omit given phonemes from another series of words.

Sharing a lot of similarities with ERGA is the Indiana Reading Assessment-Kindergarten assessment which was developed for the teachers in Indiana to test students' reading performance. The Indiana Reading Assessment-Kindergarten is an assessment tool to evaluate phonological awareness (i.e. phonics and phonemic), vocabulary and skills on reading comprehension. The difficulty level of the assessment is progressively increased and it will be administered in three different slots to ensure sufficient test time for a single assessment while allowing full coverage by maintaining Indiana's Academic Standard for Reading (Indiana Assessment, 2007).

One interesting feature offered by the Indiana Reading Assessment-Kindergarten is the online scoring system that allows the generation of class reports and student reports through the Reading Online Assessment Reports (ROAR). Both reports project the reading performance of all students in the same class whereas the student reports account for their individual performance. Both reports present the performance of scores and skills of the class and students individually, segmenting the results for phonics, vocabulary and reading comprehension.

Another important function of the scoring system is that teachers can instantly and conveniently establish the students' reading ability based on the reading skills categories assembled by the National Reading Panel 1997, as cited in Cunningham, (2001). Moreover, the Indiana Reading Assessment-Kindergarten offers a highly valid and operative reading assessment for young students that integrate other recognised reading assessment such as ERDA and PALs. Additionally, the need to gauge the reading ability of students is also extremely crucial in determining the sequential follow-ups by the teachers as well as the institutions.

The next type of preschool assessment is the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), which is basically a series of short tests that assess early childhood literacy. It is mainly a set of procedures and measures used to assess the literacy skills, such as phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, accuracy and fluency. Outcomes for skills related to reading can easily be assessed using DIBELS which were able to measure, distinguish and validate skills empirically. Teachers can now be furnished with data to identify students who need further support and to monitor the effectiveness of intervention strategies (Kaminski, Cummings, Powell-Smith & Good, 2008). In the United States, DIBELS is a widely used assessment tool for early reading intervention to examine whether students are at risk for reading difficulty, to monitor student progress, and to guide instruction.

In Singapore, the Dyslexia Association Singapore of Early Literacy Intervention Program (ELIP) developed the Early Literacy Informal Test Kit (Wong, 2016) to examine kindergarten students with reading difficulty. Pre-test at the entry point and post-test at the end of the academic year were carried out to assess the five skills of reading namely: letter knowledge, phonographic knowledge, word knowledge, reading skills and spelling skills. Intervention plan was designed, monitored and documented before the post-test to rectify and improve area of weakness of the students.

Similarly, in Hong Kong, the English Word Reading Test, adapted from McBride-Chang & Kail (2002), examined the reading ability of the final year Chinese ESL kindergarten students. The test integrated two other measures namely the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn & Dunn, 1981, as cited in Yeung and Chan, 2013) that assesses English proficiency orally and English Syllables Deletion Test that assesses students' awareness on phonology.

In Malaysia, English is taught as a second language. Reading is taught together with writing, listening and speaking during the English periods at the preschool level. Teachers check the preschoolers' English language abilities three times annually with a grade given for each occasion. According to the Malaysian National Standard Preschool Curriculum (NSPC) (Ministry of Education, 2017), the ESL reading module for children aged 4 to 5 years old will be used to develop pre reading skills. Students will be exposed to songs, rhymes and poems in English in order to raise the children's awareness towards printed materials and make them realise that prints convey meaning besides enabling them to be able to recognise the basic features of a book. Students have to listen to English story read from books and learn to follow simple instructions in English. Students start developing their reading skills when they learn to identify the letters of the alphabet.

As can be seen from the above review of the wide variety of assessments, it is very obvious that there is a lack of reading instrument that can gather accurate and precise information regarding what the preschooler is able to do or unable to do. Therefore, it is very timely that a reading instrument that can assess the preschooler's reading ability be designed and developed to address this deficiency in assessing the reading skill at the preschool level.

THE ROLE OF READING ASSESSMENT IN PRESCHOOLS

Assessment plays an important role in enhancing the language development of preschoolers. Reading assessment is necessary because it can help teachers to obtain precise information through assessments to improve the students' learning outcome. The Roadmap (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2015) highlighted that there is a lack of standardised form of assessment tool for the preschool teachers. "At the initial phase, priority is given to the development of assessment of tools to test listening and speaking skills" as stated in the Roadmap 2015-2025 (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2015:145). Many teachers have resorted to the commercially produced workbooks to assess the pre-schoolers. However, these workbooks may not be considered as the valid tools to assess the child's abilities, skills and knowledge (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2015).

According to Desrochers & Glickman (2009), reading assessment typically has the roles of i) screening, ii) progress monitoring, iii) diagnostic assessment and iv) program evaluation.

The function of screening

Reading assessment functions to diagnose those children who might have reading failure or at least, those who are at risk of having this problem. Reading assessment is useful to provide teachers with proper information on children's degree of preparation for grade-level reading instruction to assess their needs for extra instruction. It has been proven that through the assessment of early reading skills, further reading performance of the children could be predicted as well (Blachman, 2000). This is in accord with The Roadmap 2015-2025 (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2015:156), which states that what happens in preschool ultimately impacts the preschoolers' future education.

The function of progress monitoring

Preschoolers' achievements in reading ability are monitored to ensure that continuous progress is made throughout the school year (Fushs & Fushs, 2007). This type of assessment is beneficial in terms of its function to find out the children who are not able to follow and gain something useful during the regular reading instruction as well as those who are in need of remedial instruction.

The function of diagnostic assessment

Due to the complexity of reading acquisition, preschoolers may face challenges in the process of learning to read (Coltheart, 2005). The elementary skills to identify the components of reading among preschoolers are assessed through diagnostic assessment (Reid, Hresko & Hammill, 2001).

The function of program evaluation

The outcome of reading assessment focuses on the reading instruction program instead of the preschoolers themselves. This assessment aims to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a curriculum, an instructional program, the consequences of an educational reform or even the success of a program implementation. This type of assessment has the function to modify or improve specific components of the program.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MALAYSIAN READING ASSESSMENT TOOL

The types of reading assessment on reading ability and roles of reading assessment mentioned above provided an insight to the researcher on the type of reading assessments carried out in other countries. Thus, this review aimed to explore an assessment tool that functions as screening. This is especially useful for those preschoolers who have just registered to a new preschool. The reading assessment tool could have the vital role to screen the students' English reading ability and classify them into suitable classes regardless of their age. It is suggested that the traditional way of classifying students is no longer the most suitable way to group the students as they may come from different backgrounds and this may affect their level of English language reading ability. Those who are at a younger age may have more advanced English reading ability than their seniors due to various background reasons and vice versa. The following elaborations include some recommendations for the development of a standardised reading assessment tool for preschoolers. The reading sub-skills listed in the Malaysian National Preschool Standardised Curriculum (NPSC) (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2017) as well as suitably suggested topics and target lexical items listed in NPSC Teacher's Kit could be used as the content of the assessment tool. Regarding the difficulty levels of the questions in assessment tool, as proposed by Mok (2000), the distribution of the difficulty of the test should be 25% easy, 50% average and 25% difficult.

CONCLUSION

Teachers in Malaysia have a role to play as advocated by the latest curriculum transformation suggested in the Malaysian Educational Development Plan 2013 – 2025 that critically advocates the importance of English Language and teachers' professionalism. In line with this transformation plan, the information generated by the reading assessment is geared towards enhancing teachers' professionalism to teach through a well-informed assessment process and to teach the right things right.

This review aims to highlight the needs in developing a valid and reliable ESL reading assessment tool for preschoolers in Malaysia. This will allow for identification of detailed information on preschoolers' reading ability, which could assist teachers to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their reading lessons. Chang, Lin and Abdul Rashid (2014) also agreed that with a standardised set reading assessment, ESL teachers are able to plan their teaching instructions that tailor to the needs of the students.

As for the preschoolers, suitable reading improvement would be taught by teachers according to each preschooler's individual needs. In this case, preschoolers would be motivated to learn English language (Amini and Amini, 2012) and therefore the English language reading ability would be improved.

As for parents, they would be informed about their children's reading achievement. This statement is further supported by Mustafa and Azman (2013) who stated that once the parents know the reading ability of their children, they would be able to start the effort of improving their children's reading skill from home, together with the effort done by school, to support the children's reading development. Last but not least, this review would facilitate the policy makers and curriculum developers in the Ministry of Education to come out with a precise reading assessment tool and reading program that is tailored to the needs of the students who have different levels of English reading abilities. The teachers can finally prepare their instructional materials according to their students' levels.

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