Early Childhood Teachers' Challenges in Using English to Interact with Young English Language Learners

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Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia

Abstract
This phenomenological study explores the challenges faced by Malaysian early childhood teachers in using English as a second language to interact with young English language learners. The main participants of this study were six teachers from one early childhood centre. Research methods included observations and semi-structured pre- and post-observation interviews. Observations were carried out over a six week period which enabled a series of snapshots of challenges faced by the teachers as they used English to interact with the children. The findings were analysed using thematic analysis, and presented three themes: teachers' limited English proficiency, children's comprehension, lack of confidence and unsupportive environment. These themes impacted the learning experiences of the children attending the early childhood education centre as well as the teaching approaches of the early childhood teachers. The findings revealed that it is significant for the early childhood teachers to be proficient in English as this will affect their confidence and attitudes in using English as an interactional tool in early childhood settings.
Keywords: English Language Learners, Early Childhood, Second Language Acquisition.

Introduction
In response to national calls for producing proficient bilingual citizen through Malaysian Education Plan (2013-2025), the second wave of education transformation has highlighted on (i) teachers' quality which focuses on increasing the options for English language exposure, (ii) to improve overall language proficiency, and (iii) the additional language provision needs to be strengthened.

Early childhood teachers play important roles as primary and secondary English teachers in producing bilingual citizens in early years particularly for teaching English through effective

interactions. Several important matters are needed to ensure children acquire the second language successfully. Children learn language best through interactions with adults or capable people around them (Hakamäki, 2005; Sidek, 2011; Neu, 2013; Piker & Rex, 2008; Vygotsky, 1962) and children also learn effectively through scaffolding by adults (Bruner, 1983; Maybin, Mercer & Stierer, 1992; Shamsipour & Allami, 2012). Early childhood (EC) teachers are responsible for optimizing their interactions with children during school sessions to assist their second language acquisition and development.

This study is significant particularly for children, ECE teachers, ECE operators as well as Ministry of Education. The importance is explained as follows:

Children
Children can gain benefits from this research as they will be learning and practicing English through effective interactions with the ECE teachers. Since early years are a crucial period for children (Pinter, 2006), it is important for children to acquire the second language through effective interaction.

Early Childhood Education Teachers
Early childhood education teachers could facilitate young children's second language acquisition through the effective interaction whether in or outside the classroom. This study will provide the information needed by ECE teachers to teach English effectively through interaction. Early Childhood Education teachers are expected to know the needs, skills and knowledge of English language to optimise interaction with the young children in daily life conversation.

Early Childhood Education Operators
This study is also beneficial for ECE operators who operate the early childhood centres or kindergartens. Early Childhood Education operators could use the insights for selecting and recruiting the ECE teachers according to the needs, skills and knowledge needed to teach English as a second language. Furthermore, ECE operators could consider the findings of the study as indicator to provide continuous professional trainings for teachers.

Ministry of Education
This study aligns with the Malaysian Education Plan (2013-2025), which is to produce bilingual citizens. Ministry of Education could recognise EC teachers' needs, skills and knowledge needed for teaching English as a second language to improve the quality of ECE teachers. Ministry of Education could also consider the intake of pre-service teachers to have good English background. The professional trainings may also facilitate ECE teachers to interact effectively in English with young children in early childhood centre.

Background of the Study
In order to prepare skillful bilingual children, the curriculum document provides a standard of learning for the English language which comprises of listening and speaking skills, reading skills and writing skills (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2016). The English language also should be

used as a medium of instruction for at least ten hours (600 minutes) a week as recommended for the preschools that use the Malay language as the main language of instruction.

Statement of the Problem

English language education remains an undefined area in ECE. The Education Act 1996 (Ministry of Education, 1996) states that language education is an obligatory subject in all early childhood programmes. However, there is no clear definition or direct indication when and how second language should be used as a tool for interaction and teaching and learning processes taught in ECE. Due to its ambiguous state, it affects the quality of English language in ECE. There is a critical need to investigate the needs, skills, knowledge and strategies employed of EC teachers because they are not professionally trained to teach English as a second language. They might find it difficult to interact with children in English and carry out lessons and/or activities in English due to their low English proficiency and competency level as well as limited knowledge and skills to effective English teaching approaches. According to Rohaty (2013), one of her findings on teaching English to young children highlighted that preschool teachers have low proficiency in English, cannot speak fluently and have no self-confidence to speak in English. Early childhood teachers who are not well trained in teaching English will have challenges to support children to acquire English as a second language.

In addition, children's basic knowledge of English is still at unsatisfying level (Munirah, Christina, & Yazid, 2004). Children need competent English teachers that could help them to master the English language as aspired by Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) through interaction which acts as mediated tools. Therefore, it is important to examine the performance and quality of Malaysian EC teachers as they support young children's English acquisition.

Since teaching English is included as one of the learning areas early childhood education, it is important to ensure the teachers are trained to teach English through effective interactions. However, there is no any specific prerequisite on the English language for ECE pre-service teachers to apply for ECE course in the university. Therefore, one cannot determine whether they have a sound English proficiency background upon the admission to the course.

English should be used not only as a subject in early childhood classrooms but also during teacher-child interactions as they engage in indoor as well as outdoor activities. In most cases, their teaching often emphasise mechanical conversation practices, instead of using English in real-life interactions within early childhood settings.

Objectives

Based on the problems highlighted, the objective of the study is to determine the challenges faced by early childhood teachers to teach English through effective interaction with young children.

Methodology

Qualitative research design was chosen for this research as it provided an opportunity for the researchers to focus on the phenomenon of early childhood teachers' challenges as they interact

in English (Merriam, 2009). Thus, the researcher attempts to "get down and sit" with the teachers in the ECE centre as suggested by Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 3).

According to (Merriam, 2009) the main instrument of collecting data in qualitative researcher is the researcher herself. The researcher is the one who manages the process of collecting data and analysing them.

Methods of the study were observations and semi-structured pre- and post-observation interviews. In this study, the researcher observed interactions between teachers and children in English during. Another data gathering tool used in this study was a semi structured interviews. DeMarrais (2004, p. 55) interprets an interview as "a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study and the interview is the best way and appropriate method to reveal the sample's personal thought, affection and passion (Patton, 2002).

Participants
Samples were selected from an early childhood education centre and they taught English through interaction as well as through teaching and learning sessions with children age range from four to six (4 - 6) years old. The participants of this study are qualified ECE teachers underwent pre-service training and took courses on teaching English for young children at university level.

Findings
Thematic analysis was adopted as a useful research tool as it offered flexibility yet provided a rich, detailed and complex account of data. For individual case study analysis, three steps were involved which were in line with thematic analysis:

The first step was to review the transcripts and field notes to get a sense of early childhood teachers' challenges in supporting English acquisition among ELLs. The researchers read and reread the field notes, listened to the audio recordings of interviews with teachers and watched the video several times to gain sensitivity to the entire data. The researchers jotted down early impressions that were thought would be significant for the analysis.

The second step of the data analysis was to scrutinise the data to develop preliminary codes for clustering around topics. It involved extracting the notes and transcripts that directly pertained to understanding early childhood teachers' challenges in supporting English acquisition among ELLs and putting aside data which were not relevant to the research phenomenon.

The final stage of the data analysis was to discover the themes. This was achieved through close examination of the data and studying the preliminary codes many times to see whether some of them illustrated a similar point.

The following themes emerged from the analysis:

Lack of English Proficiency

Proficient teachers are important as it is one of the factors that influence the language acquisition (Richards, 2010). Early Childhood teachers who could not accommodate children with adequate English proficiency will face difficulties to carry out the language lesson in terms of their pronunciation, grammar or else they would sometimes have tough times to think the right word to make a complete sentence in daily instruction. Examples highlighted are to illustrate the lack of English proficiency among the early childhood teachers:

Pronunciation

In order to deliver instruction, teachers must say the words in a correct manner, which means they must have good pronunciation as it leads to clarity and comprehensibility for the children. P5 was asking a child about the celebration of Hari Raya. The teacher's pronunciation was not clear when she asked a child if this year is her first time to celebrate Hari Raya Eve.

> T: Raya.. Aisyah (pseudonym) this.. the first time you *celebrating* Raya at Malaysia?
> C: Emm.. [her voice too slow, I couldn't catch what she was saying]
> T: Oh, first time hari raya, celebrating raya
> C:.. (her voice too slow, I couldn't catch what she was saying)
> T: Oh, OK, right. Oh, last year.. already celebrating raya at Malaysia?
> C: Emm yes, at hospital (not sure what she was saying)

The teacher stuttered when she was asking the child as she was indecisive to complete the sentence. Fortunately, the child understood the teacher's question and managed to answer her question. However, when the researcher asked the teacher if there was any misunderstanding when she interacted with the children. In the post-observation interview, she admitted that there were times that children would misunderstand her instruction. For example, she will always remind the children to put their chairs at the back of the classroom. Once a child has understood 'bag' instead of 'back'. He took his bag and brought it in the classroom. Hence, she demonstrated the bag is the thing that we carry on our back and back is the place that we put our chair by pointing at the back. Furthermore, in the pre-observation interview with P6, she told the researcher that she faced a problem with her pronunciation. She said most of the time she could not decide whether her pronunciation is right or wrong. Without any contemplation, she just would just follow her instincts and sometimes she would ask her colleagues how to say it or else she would listen to the children's pronunciation in her class as she said:

> "Not sure if pronunciation is right. 'eh, is it my pronunciation is right or wrong.' that's how"

According to the Tsang (2017), the teachers who cannot speak English well, will not be convincing to use English with the students. In this context, children might not be judging the teacher on how bad she speaks the English language. But as a teacher, they would be the one to model the right pronunciation to the children so that they will learn to pronounce words correctly from their teachers.

Limited English Vocabulary

When teaching English in the class, teachers tend to mix English and their first language to make a complete sentence due to limited vocabulary. As the researcher could see in the observation, most of the teachers tended to mix their home language and English. As in the pre-observation interview, P1 said sometimes when she used English in full sentences; children would be confused and could not understand what she was saying. Hence, she mixed between English and Malay to ensure comprehensible input for the children. Whereas P5 will try to ask children in the classroom or the Assistant Teacher if any of them know the forgotten English term while teaching. And usually the same children who are good at English, Misha (pseudonym) will help her providing the right term or they will look up the word in the dictionary. Moreover, P6 in the pre-observation interview admitted that she is using a mix of language while teaching English as she is not good enough in English but as long as the children understand what she is saying, then it is enough for her:

"If I'm stuck while talking English, sometimes I will just speak Malay"

P6's statement is then reflected in the observation during her lesson. After teaching tongue twister to the children, P6 wanted to instruct the children to stand and push their chair under the table. However, she did not finish her instruction in English and after a child asked her what she said, she changed the instructions in Malay;

T: "OK, thank you. OK, stand up.."
C: "Stand up."
T: "OK."
C: "*Cikgu kata apa*? (What did you say?)""
T: "err aaa.. OK, *tolak kerusi masuk dalam* (push the chair under the table) OK, stand up."

Grammatical Errors

During the first observation, P6 had taught the children a new tongue twister. She prepared a tongue twister of a mommy who baked mango muffin every Monday. She projected the script on the Smart Board in her class and led the read-aloud of the tongue twister followed by the children word by word. She repeated the tongue twister almost three times. After that, she asked the girls first to read aloud by themselves and the boys read after girls. She would assist them when they stuttered. The children are all read the tongue twister with loud and clear voice. Right after they are reading the tongue twister, the teacher asks them to write it on their notebook. P6 has done a good job to make sure the children learn new vocabulary through tongue twister. The tongue twister was also easy to follow and to remember. However, there were grammatical errors on the tongue twister and even though P6 already read aloud the tongue twister, she could not realise that the tongue twister has some errors as:

"My mommy make me manggo muffins on every Monday"

The first error here is the incorrect verb form. The verb *make* does not seem to agree with the subject, mommy. Secondly, the word *manggo* is misspelled and she could not spot the errors although she read the sentence aloud more than three times. After the children wrote the tongue

twister in their notebook, the teacher asked them to read it one more time. This time she asks the children who knew the meaning of the tongue twister.

Gass (2013) refers to input as "... the language to which the learner is exposed, either orally or visually ...", in other words, the language which "surrounds learners living in a second language environment". In the context of this paper, teachers are responsible for an inadequate language input due to their own limited English proficiency. Furthermore, Krashen (1982) found that the important thing for second language acquisition is comprehensible input through teacher talk. The teacher should talk on a learner's level of comprehension, that is, the learner should be able to understand what the teacher is saying. When teachers have limited proficiency of English, it was very likely that they would be able to provide comprehensible input to the children as they interact in English.

Lack of Interest
Interest in teaching English is one of the important factors in making teaching English effectively. As stated in the Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), people who possess high affective filter will limit their language learning as they tend to have low motivation, negative attitude, possess foreign language anxiety and low self-confidence. Affective filter is a psychological barrier that filters the intake of language learning thus inhibit the learning progress. Motivation could drive the learner to accomplished a goal with effort. It is also may lead to the learning interest. The loss of interest to teach English was due to their schooling experience schools back then when they could not comprehend the teachers' input during interaction. Consequently, when it was time they should teach children English language, found it challenging, too.

Attitudes towards English language
During pre-observation interview, participants were asked whether they like English language. Apparently, they were really fond in English language. Nevertheless, there was also a teacher who did not like English at schools, but now she became excited and felt encouraged to learn English to accommodate the foreign speaking children in her classroom. P4 said she was scarcely exposed to English since she enrolled in Tadika KEMAS that used fully Malay language as the medium of instruction. Her parents also never used English language at home thus making her less motivated to learn English at school:

> "… from my experiences, I was attending to tadika KEMAS. Which the teachers are only taught in Malay. OK, so from the earlier we did not receive English language exposure from.. my parents did not speak English with us. So, and then.. I have no interest until I enrolled in high school. I am not fond in English language."

In contrast to P5, she said she liked English, but she had no idea why she could not master the language. When asked about the experiences at school, she said the English teacher made her having issues when learning English. She told that the English teacher was fluent in English and used English throughout the lessons but she could not understand a bit but because of there are students that respond to the teacher, she felt neglected and lost her interest but did not put the blame on the teacher as she felt it is her responsibility to learn the language. Similar to P6's

experiences, the teacher used to like English, but she lost her interest when she had been punished for someone's fault. It was a bad experience for her as she was being hit on her palm by using a steel ruler. The incident was the starting point of her losing interest in learning English.

Teachers' interest in relation to teachers' performance in encouraging teachers' interaction with children in English. Teachers who possess a minimum degree of interest produce least of English utterance frequency with children which lead to least interaction. They would have interaction but in their first language. Sometimes when the teachers could not find the right word to say, they would use Malay word instead. When checked on the pre-observation interview about their language usage in while interacting with children P6 said she is not that smart, but she could understand English, and about teaching English to children she can read to children and tell them what does it means. While P5 told the researcher that she could not master the English language, this makes her less desirable to speak English.

Lack of Comprehension
When children did not understand English, the teachers, then, felt the urge to speak the comprehensible language for children, which is Malay language, the first language. Teachers said that it was challenging to speak the language that children did not understand especially when teachers wanted to have a meaningful lesson to be done. Most of the teachers faced this difficulty as P1 said in the pre-observation interview:

> "if talked about the problem, there is only one. Children are not familiar with the English language, that's it."

When asked about the language usage in her classroom P4 said she knows it is better for her to speak English in the classroom, as she listened to the previous workshop courage the teachers to speak English. However, things did not work as she planned. Children did not focus on the teacher's talk and start talking to each other in class.

"Yes. They refused to focus on my talk. It's like.. because they are "blur" [not clear], right. They are talking to their friends. They played with their friends.."

According to P5, teaching English to children also depends on the acceptance of children. If they could not understand what she was saying, she needed to use dual language to translate what she said in English.
> "… this thing (opinion on teaching English) is depending on children as well. It is not that I don't like to teach English.."

> "… their friends who are real.. really incapable to understand English, I can't.. I have to use dual language…"

P3 told that except the two English speaking children in her class, the other children will never respond to her question in English. But only one person who will sometimes respond to her in English, Alia (pseudonym). The children would ask her what she is saying

"Haikal do not know, teacher. Emm what did you say, teacher?"

In the observation made, P3 using English language to ask children to begin the lesson. After several times she asked in English, she asked again in Malay. The observation showed more children participate when she speaks Malay and it shows the children only understand her question in Malay.

T: Who is fasting today?
A boy: Saya. (Only him responded)
T: Are you sure?
A boy: Yes!
T: Who is fasting today?
A girl : Saya.
T: Yes. Shima (pseudonym). Others? Who else? (no one responded)
A boy : *Saya*.(I)
T: *Puasa? Siapa yang puasa harini*? (Fasting? Who is fasting today)
C: Saya (I)! (other children started to raise up their hand)
T: Betul ke Adam (pseudonym) puasa? (Is it true that you fast?)
Another boy: *Saya lagi tak kuasa*. (he means *puasa* as in fasting)

The observation reflected teachers' comment on the children who had difficulty to be engaged to the lesson when they did not understand what teacher was saying in English. Children only listened and did not respond. But after the teacher switched the language to English (with the same question) they started to respond and give their opinion. Similar to P6, she also initially asked the children question in English, but after several attempts, she changed her question's language to Malay to seek answers from children:

> T: Where you can see the flowers?
> C: … (silent)
> A boy: Hey look, macam Kak Lily.
> T: Kak Lily? Which one, this one?
> A boy: Yes.
> T: Macam Kak Lily.
> A boy: (nodded his head)
> T: Where you see the flowers? More flowers.
> C: … (silent)
> A girl: Honey flower. Ya. Ni.
> T: OK listen, listen. (touching her ear). Listen the question first. Where you can see the flowers?
> A girl: In the garden.
> T: In the garden! And then? Others?
> A girl: In the.. in the.. water.
> T: Water? Also have a flowers?
> A girl: *Yang bunga Lily tu*.

> T: Oh *Bunga Lily.. OK. Lagi? Lagi? Kat mana kita boleh nampak bunga?* (Oh Lily, Anyore? What else? Where can see the flowers?)
> Another girl: Cameron Highland.

Most of the teachers said they must mix the use of English with Malay language when they interact with the children. In the post-observation interview, P6 was asked about the situation she faced during asking children where they can find the flowers. P6 said only one girl understood what she was saying. The rest of the children keep silent because they did not understand her question in English. She explained her strategies of asking the children three times to ensure whether the children understand her question in English and the last attempt she made she asked the children to listen carefully by showing her ear and repeat the same question. Finally, only one person answered her question. She said there were a few children who could understand English, but they might be distracted at that time.

> "At the third time, only Mei Mei who was responded to the question because she canunderstand. Actually, Hakim can understand.. err Daniel also understand. But I don't know maybe they are playing at that time. They did not pay attention."

Children were influenced by the teachers' motivation to speak English in the classroom. When teachers attempted to encourage the children to talk, they feel they need to use both English and Malay languages to gain children attention and respond. Teachers' motivation is influenced by the children responses in this context. At the same time, teachers' personal motivation had declined as they lost their interest. Eventually, the teachers' motivation is getting low and this created a challenging situation for the teachers to teach English.

Lack of Self-Confidence
Apart from the interest, confidence is also one of the important factors of teaching English as it is included in Krashen's Affective Filters Hypothesis. Affective filters are not good when it comes to teaching English to the children. It will filtrate teachers' confidence to teach English and make teachers demotivated to perform well. Teachers with self –confident would dare to communicate in foreign language and could gain more knowledge. While those teachers who lack self-confidence most probably would make mistakes and afraid to try.

Lack of Confidence
In the pre-observation interview, P4 admitted that she had confidence problem of using English language while interacting with children. Despite she is dealing with limited proficiency English learner, she insisted that she is doubt of her ability to speak English with the children.
"sometimes I become not confident when it's time to use full English with children."

P4's lack of confidence was detected when she could not performed well when interacting with children in English as result of translating English language to Malay language and mix it up while delivering instruction. It was shown in the observation that when the teacher could hardly get feedback from the children in English, teacher doubted that the children could understand

what she wass saying and at the same time fear that the children could not answer her questions and follow her instructions.

P4: *Cakap apa? Cikgu bagi tak cakap apa pun (*What must you say? You did say thank you. Say thank you lah, say   'thank you teacher.' (Giving the Raya cookies to the children)
C: Say thank you teacher.
P4: Say 'thank you teacher'.
C: Say thank you teacher.
P4: **Cakap apa** (What must you say)? Say. 'Thank you teacher'.
C: Thank you teacher.

Nevertheless, the teacher felt that she could use a short and simple sentence without hesitation. P4's lack of confidence was apparent in the post-observation interview when she said there was no feedback from children when she tried to speak English with them. Initially, she tried to speak English with the children and expect them to give responses when she gave them instruction. However, when the children seemed to ignore what she said, she finally used both of Malay and English language in delivering instruction. P6, she was also told the researcher that she did not feel confident to talk when she thinks she knows people are better than her.

Unsupportive Culture
In the pre-observation interview, most teachers said the practice of English language is not a culture among their colleagues. Even if the officer has put conditions of only English language is allowed to use during the meeting, the teachers still use Malay language or they would keep silent. P2 said that the reason why she rarely using English in daily interaction because of her environment is not using English. Even though her husband is an English teacher, it does not affect her to speak in English. Her colleagues also did not speak English even the officer already reminded them to only use English in the meeting:

"I think it is because of my environment. I think I could be fluent in English, but my husband and I did not even speak English…" (P2)

P4 also confirmed during the meeting held with the officer, the teachers were quiet. She said that she is afraid if she makes a mistake while talking in English.

P5 said if everyone is talking in English, she would also talk in English.
"if everyone else is speaking in English, I would speak in English.."

During the observation, most of the teachers did not use English as a language of interaction with the children. They would use English as a medium of instruction, and it is more likely a scripted instruction because the same sentence is used in every instruction.

Conclusion
This study has explored Malaysian early childhood teachers' challenges in supporting English acquisition for young English language learners (ELLs). The central significance of the findings is

that through the exploration of the challenges, important insights have been offered that have the power to improve educational practices in early childhood settings for young children to acquire English as a second language.

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Corresponding Author
Mazlina Che Mustafa, Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia.
Email: mazlina.cm@fpm.upsi.edu.my
35900 Tanjung Malim, Perak.