

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH PLURAL  
EXPRESSIONS AMONG MALAYSIAN  
KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN**

**BY**

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the development of English as a second language in Malaysia among public preschool children. In Malaysia, children learn English as early as 4 years of age. However, it is largely unknown how most Malaysian children acquire English in a Malaysian context, as studies investigating early English development are scant. Therefore, this study investigates the development of English, specifically the English plural expressions, among Malaysian kindergarten children. This study also investigates the effectiveness of developmentally moderated focus-on-form (DMFonF) instruction on learning English plurals in the Malaysian context within ten weeks. The participants in this study were six kindergarten children from two preschools under the Ministry of Education. They are divided into two groups: group A (experimental) and group B (control). The developmentally focus-on-form instruction is designated to group A and administered by trained undergraduate research assistants throughout the study period. Meanwhile, group B continued their lessons without any intervention. At the beginning of the study, a pre-test was administered to establish the children's English baseline (T0). After six lessons, post-test 1 (T1) was administered, and after another four lessons, post-test 2 (T2) was administered. T0 was conducted physically at school, while T1 and T2 were done online via ZOOM due to school closure. The data from the pre-test and post-tests were audio and video recorded. The development of plural expressions between group A and B is analysed and compared. The findings indicate that the plural expressions of children in group A, who received the DMFonF instruction, developed significantly faster than children in group B who did not receive the DMFonF instruction in their English lessons.



## ملخص البحث

اللغة الإنجليزية هي ثيوقلا ميناثلا مغللا في ماليزيا، تنعكس في أهميتها في التعليم والحوكمة والثقافة الشعبية (هاشم، 2014م). في ماليزيا، يتعلم الأطفال اللغة الإنجليزية منذ سن الرابعة. ومع ذلك، فمن غير المعروف كيف يكتسب الأطفال الماليزيون اللغة الإنجليزية في سياق ماليزي لأن الدراسات التي تبحث في التطور المبكر للغة الإنجليزية تردان. لذلك، تبحث هذه الدراسة في تطور اللغة الإنجليزية، وتحديدًا النظر في تعبيرات الجمع الإنجليزية بين أطفال رياض الأطفال الماليزيين. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تبحث هذه الدراسة أيضًا في فعالية تعليم التركيز على النموذج (DMFonF) الخاضع للإشراف تطويريًا على تعلم صيغ الجمع في اللغة الإنجليزية في السياق الماليزي في غضون 10 أسابيع. المشاركون في هذه الدراسة هم ستة أطفال من رياض الأطفال من حضانتين تابعتين لوزارة التربية والتعليم. وهي مقسمة إلى مجموعتين: المجموعة أ (تجريبية) والمجموعة ب (مراقبة). يتم التركيز على التعليمات التنموية على شكل مجموعة أ من قبل مساعدين بحثيين جامعيين مدربين من خلال دروس اللغة الإنجليزية طوال فترة الدراسة. في غضون ذلك، تواصل المجموعة "ب" دروسها دون أي تدخل. في بداية الدراسة، تم إجراء اختبار تمهيدي لتحديد خط الأساس للغة الإنجليزية للأطفال (T0). بعد ستة دروس، تم إجراء الاختبار اللاحق 1 (T1) وبعد أربعة دروس أخرى، تم إجراء الاختبار اللاحق 2 (T2). تم إجراء T0 لهجوا هجو في المدرسة بينما تم إجراء T1 و T2 عبر الإنترنت عبر ZOOM بسبب إغلاق المدرسة. كانت البيانات من الاختبارين القبلي والبعدي مسجلة بالصوت والصورة. يتم تحليل ومقارنة تطور التعبيرات الجمع بين المجموعة أ والمجموعة ب. تشير النتائج إلى أن تعبيرات الجمع للأطفال في المجموعة أ الذين يتلقون تعليمات DMFonF تتطور بشكل أسرع مقارنةً بالأطفال في المجموعة ب الذين لا يتلقون تعليمات DMFonF في دروس اللغة الإنجليزية الخاصة بهم.



## APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences in Applied Linguistics

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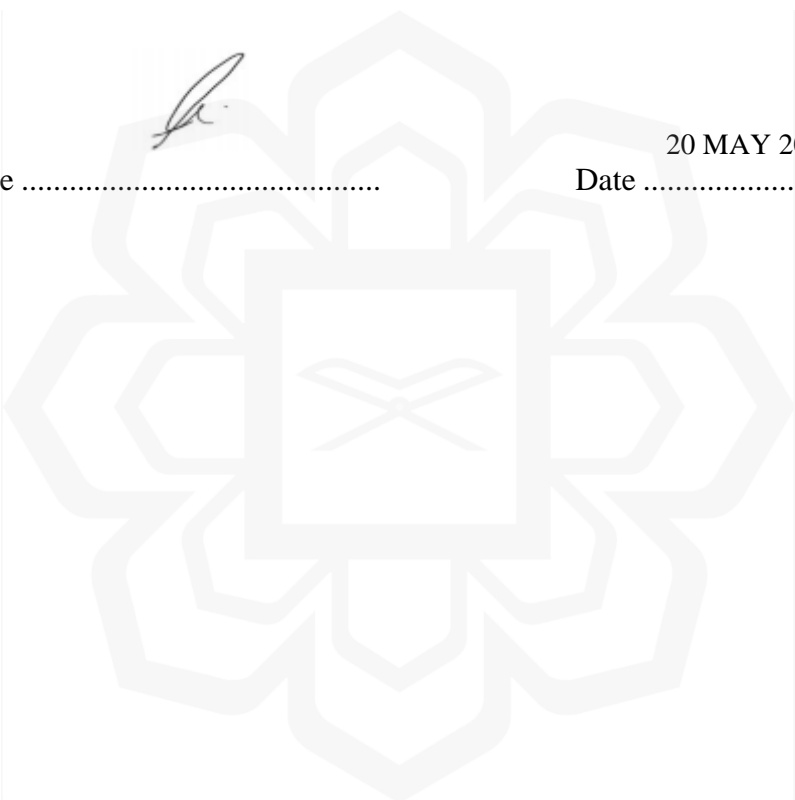
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## DECLARATION

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
ETeMS	English for Teaching Mathematics and Science
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference
MOE	Ministry of Education
PT	Processability Theory
LFG	Lexical Functional Grammar
DMFonF	Developmentally Moderated Focus-on-Form
FonF	Focus-on-Form
ESL	English as a Second Language
EFL	English as a First Language
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
FLA	First Language Acquisition
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
CHILDES	The Child Language Data Exchange System
NP	Noun Phrase
VP	Verb Phrase
HFASD	High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder
MCO	Movement Control Order
ELAN	EUDICO Linguistic Annotator
KWIC	Key Word In Context
FRGS	Fundamental Research Grant Scheme

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter presents a general outline of the current study. The study's background is introduced at the beginning, followed by the statement of the problem leading to why the study is conducted. The research objectives and questions are also presented as well as the significance of the study.

### **1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Malaysia is one of the post-colonial countries where the English language is spoken and used as a second language (L2), alongside other ethnic languages like *Bahasa Malaysia*, Mandarin, and Tamil, to name a few. Furthermore, the Malaysian education system adopts a bilingual approach, aiming to establish a balance between national and international necessities and challenges (Darmi & Albion, 2013). Due to its global importance, the English language is introduced to children as early as preschool level and continues to be taught as a compulsory subject at primary and secondary school as well as post-secondary and tertiary levels of education (Azman, 2016).

According to Dhillon (2017), learning English as a second language is complex and subjective, and the development of the language in each individual varies. Even though English is a second language in Malaysia, unfortunately, most ESL learners find that the 'communicative English' that they were taught in school is not sufficient in getting them through the tertiary level of education, particularly in some academic areas like accountancy, business studies, and more (Dhillon, 2017). Since the beginning of 2001, there have been reports that the standards of English in Malaysia were declining

compared to the standards achieved from the 60s to the 80s (Doshi, 2012). Change in language policies in the country was identified as one of the factors in causing the alleged declining standards of English as the 1967 National Language Act enforced the shift to Malay in all English-medium primary and secondary schools in 1976 and 1982, respectively. The shift to Malay was also extended to tertiary education in 1971 (Hashim, 2020). As a result of the policy changes, Bahasa Malaysia became the main language of education and expanded as the sole national and official language, while English eventually phased out over 14 years (Hashim, 2020). Despite Malay being the central medium of instruction in the Malaysian school system, there is a complete opposite demand for English in the higher education setting. According to Hashim (2020), English has become increasingly significant, as the language is required in working life and global competition. Therefore, there is an urgent need for young Malaysians to raise their standards of English to face the challenges in the globalised world. Having a good command of English is a quality that would provide a competitive edge to Malaysian learners in the international arena.

The declining English proficiency attainment among Malaysian students has always been the country's concern for decades. Mohamed et al. (2008) argues that the decreasing English proficiency among Malaysian students, affecting the standard of English in the country was mainly caused by the shift of the medium of instruction from English to Bahasa Malaysia in 1961. Realising the severity of this issue, the government took initiatives and introduced various reforms to improve the standard of English in the Malaysian education system. The first initiative was the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) on the Integrated English Language Syllabus for Primary School or KBSR in 1982. CLT is a learner-centred approach which focuses on learning the language for communication without giving much

attention to the grammatical aspects (Abdul Aziz et al., 2018; Nunan, 2003). However, Che Musa et al. (2012) stated that this initiative was rejected by teachers in the 1990s as it was responsible for the students' less satisfactory results in examination than as it was the times where Malaysia's education system was still heavily exam-oriented. Then in 2002, the government introduced the Standard English Language Curriculum for Primary School or KSSR, also adopting CLT again by having a continuous School Based Assessment in their effort to revive and enhance the concept. Nevertheless, outcome was the same with the previous initiative whereby it faced the same problem with the implementation of CLT (Abdul Aziz et al., 2018). Around a year later, the English for Teaching Mathematics and Sciences policy or ETeMS was introduced, only to face many negative feedbacks and criticisms of its implementation and was abolished later in 2009 (Abdul Aziz et al., 2018). The most recent initiative is the implementation of Common European Framework of Reference or CEFR in the English Language Education Roadmap 2015-2025 that was launched as part of Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Abdul Aziz et al., 2018; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). Despite the reforms, Malaysian students still face difficulties in achieving proficiency in English (Che Musa et al., 2012). Abdul Rahman (2005) opines that the root of the issue is due to the Malaysian education system being highly focused on teaching reading and writing skills as well as mastering selected grammatical rules that are to be tested in examinations (as cited in Che Musa et al., 2012).

Therefore, based on the current situation of English language performance among Malaysian learners, there is a need to investigate how Malaysian children acquire English as a second language in the local context. Understanding Malaysian children's acquisition of English may help teachers and policymakers develop an English syllabus that is more appropriate to the Malaysian context. Hence, this study

aims to investigate the development of English plural expressions among Malaysian kindergarten children. This is extremely crucial for the pre-schoolers' development of English proficiency in the future as the significance of the language will be rising as their education levels progress (Darmi & Albion, 2013). Early childhood education in Malaysia mainly focuses on the age group of 4-6 years old and it falls under the jurisdiction of three ministries, namely the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development and the Department of National Unity and Integration under the Prime Minister's Department. The MOE is responsible for the preschools that are annexed to the existing primary schools known as *prasekolah*. Meanwhile, the other two Ministries hold the responsibilities for the KEMAS and PERPADUAN preschools, respectively (Mustafa & Azman, 2013). In this study, the pre-schoolers involved are those from the MOE public preschools. Details of the participants of this study will be further illustrated in Chapter Three (Methodology).

The theoretical framework used in this study is the Processability Theory (henceforth PT) (Di Biase et al., 2015; Pienemann, 1998, 2005). PT will be the framework used in designing the lessons for the pre-schoolers and the analysis of the children's language development in terms of plural expressions in English. Details on the lesson plans and data analysis method adopted in this study according to PT will be provided in Chapter Three. The Processability Theory is briefly explained as a language processing theory originally devised for second language acquisition. PT is constructed based on two underpinning theories: Levelt's model of speech production (1989) and the Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG) (Kaplan and Bresnan, 1982). Levelt's model of speech production (1989) is a psycholinguistic theory for language generation that theorises human language processing in real-time, which also considers the constraint of human memory. For the representation of grammar, PT depends on LFG which was



produced by Kaplan and Bresnan (1982) and further developed by Bresnan (2001), Dalrymple (2001), and Falk (2001), among many others. These two underpinning theories (Levelt's model and LFG) allow PT to make predictions about learners' language development, which can be applied cross-linguistically (Bettoni & Di Biase, 2015).

In a later work by Pienemann and Hakansson (2005), they stated that PT might also be used to analyse the sequence of development in first language acquisition (L1) and Bilingual First Language Acquisition. Di Biase and Bettoni (2015) state that PT is a progressive theory that continues to expand its domain and refine its concepts; hence, it attracts more research across different populations around the world.

Following the PT stages, Di Biase (2002, 2008) devised an instructional approach in an L2 English programme known as the *Developmentally Moderated Focus on Form* (DMFonF). DMFonF instruction and its theoretical underpinning will be further discussed in Chapter Two (Literature Review) of the dissertation. This study uses DMFonF instruction as a novel pedagogical method in English lessons used on kindergarten children in the experimental group.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

From pre-independence to post-independence, various reforms were introduced by the government to elevate the standard of English among Malaysian students. Nevertheless, these reforms have yet to yield positive outcomes (Gill, 2005). It may not necessarily mean that the reforms were totally ineffective, however, the students have achieved various levels of proficiencies, and not as much as anticipated have achieved the targeted level of English proficiency. Moreover, it was found that the education system in Malaysia has yet to produce a specific English syllabus that is developmentally

moderated, locally- appropriated, and based on empirical linguistics findings (Mohamed Salleh, 2020; Kok and Abdul Aziz, 2019). The most recent education reform is the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference or CEFR in 2015 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). The implementation of CEFR is one of the many reform initiatives taken by the Malaysian government, aiming to transform the existing English language education system to international standards. Apart from that, the implementation of CEFR intends to improve teacher education in Malaysia (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). The highlight of the reform is to promote the development of Malaysian ESL learners to be proficient users of the language, enabling them to actively participate in both professional and academic contexts from schools right up to the tertiary level of education. Thus, the implementation of the framework involves all levels of education in Malaysia, ranging from preschool to tertiary level of education (Azman, 2016).

However, the current CEFR syllabus does not reflect the reality of learning a second language in the Malaysian context, especially at the preschool level. This may cause children to find it challenging to acquire English. Despite its widespread use, studies on how the CEFR levels (A1-C2) relate to empirical learner language are scant. According to Wisniewski (2017), the CEFR scales were never matched to empirical learner language, making its empirical validity questionable. Wisniewski (2017) also notes that the main limitation of the CEFR scales is that its relationship to the development of second language acquisition (SLA) may be described as vague as the scales are primarily based on teachers' perceived evaluation. Hence, this study will adopt the DMFonF instruction, incorporated into the English lessons on Malaysian kindergarten children to see whether it might help them acquire English, specifically the English grammatical plurals.

On the other hand, several studies have investigated English plural acquisition on various populations (Hardini et al., 2019, 2020; Itani-Adams, 2013; Medojevic, 2014; Mohamed Salleh, 2017; Mohamed Salleh et al. 2016, 2019). Apart from the studies previously mentioned, studies utilising DMFonF are scarce. Therefore, more studies are needed to investigate the development of plural acquisition, especially among early English L2 learners in Malaysia, to examine the suitability and the effectiveness of DMFonF instructions. Understanding the nature of plural acquisition in the Malaysian context is fundamental as it will contribute to English developmental milestones for future research. In this study, the English plural development of early Malaysian English L2 learners is observed before and after the DMFonF instruction in the context of Malaysian public preschools.

### **1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

This study aims to investigate the development of English plural expressions in Malaysian kindergarten children. Specifically, the study fulfils the objectives below:

1. To identify the English lexical items and grammatical plural forms that Malaysian kindergarten children produce after undergoing the Developmentally Moderated Focus-on-Form instruction (DMFonF).
2. To investigate whether the development of English plural expressions in Malaysian kindergarten children follows the PT developmental stages.

### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

To address the objectives, the present study will be guided by the following questions:

1. What are the English lexical items and grammatical plural forms that Malaysian kindergarten children produce after undergoing the Developmentally Moderated Focus-on-Form instruction (DMFonF)?
2. To what extent does the development of English plurals adhere to the PT developmental stages?

### **1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY**

In Malaysia, the communicative approach has always been an option in the teaching of English whereby grammar is not taught as part of the English subject but is taught separately in different classroom sessions (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). The DMFonF introduced in this study is a novel approach, combining the communicative approach and the traditional grammar approach to help boost students' development in English acquisition. Although there is a number of research done on children's English L2 development within PT (e.g., Hardini et al. 2019, 2020; Itani-Adams, 2013; Medojevic, 2014; Mohamed Salleh, 2017; Mohamed Salleh et al., 2016, 2019, 2020a), those done in a Malaysian preschool setting, based on extensive literature search, are limited. Therefore, this study is significant as it examines the development of English plural expressions in Malaysian kindergarten children based on the implementation of DMFonF instruction.

The current syllabus does not reflect the reality of learning a second language in the Malaysian context due to the mismatch between the curriculum and the learner's linguistic behaviours (Mohamed Salleh et al., 2020b). Moreover, studies investigating one vs. more-than-one element i.e., the plural development in children is fundamental as it shows children's conceptual development. According to Clark and Nikitina (2009), one aspect of children's early ability is to distinguish one from more-than-one and how

they initially encode this distinction between languages. However, studies investigating plural marking distinction among early SLA learners are scarce. Mapping their English plural acquisitions is vital as it helps create normative data that contribute to establishing the milestones of Malaysian children's English development. This data would be valuable in adding some insights to policymakers in improving the English syllabus which caters to students across various levels of proficiencies. Besides that, teachers would benefit from the data as they will be able to assess their students' level of English proficiency and have more ideas in designing lessons which could help students progress to the next levels of proficiencies. For instance, the findings of the study show the effectiveness of the DMFonF instruction on students' English development whereby by the end of the study, all of the participants have acquired the targeted English plural structures according to the trajectories outlined by PT. The following chapter will discuss the works of literature relevant to the current study, including detailed elaboration on the building blocks of DMFonF, which are the Processability Theory as the theoretical framework and Focus-on-Form.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter discusses the Processability Theory (PT) and the developmentally moderated focus-on-form (DMFonF) imbued with task-based teaching, which are the theoretical frameworks of the current study. It also provides an overview of the current situation of English education in Malaysia in general, with a sub-section highlighting the educational context of Malaysian kindergarten children. Next, the chapter discusses previous studies conducted on children's plural acquisition in First Language Acquisition (FLA) and plural development among early ESL learners. Semantic association present in the children's production are also elaborated towards the end of this chapter.

#### **2.1 PROCESSABILITY THEORY (PT) AND ITS TRAJECTORIES**

PT is a theoretical framework developed for second language acquisition. In PT, second language acquisition is depicted as a hierarchical process whereby learners go through a specific sequence of language acquisition (Pienemann, 1998, 2005; Di Biase et al., 2015). According to Di Biase et al. (2015), the grammatical encoding procedures are arranged according to their sequence of activation in language development. The sequence is designed so that each procedure is a prerequisite for the following procedure. The PT developmental stages following the sequence are the lemma stage, category procedure stage, phrasal procedure stage, followed by the sentence procedure stage. PT is adopted in this study to analyse the English plural development of the preschoolers and to develop the DMFonF lessons.

PT, as initially introduced by Pienemann (1998), assumes that morphological information and syntactic arrangements that can be derived from language learners depend on the same processing procedure. Although this is accurate, scholars argue that there may be some issues regarding Pienemann's claim as the process of information exchange could not be the same for both morphology and syntax (Di Biase et al., 2015). Di Biase et al. (2015) then adopt an analytical approach that views morphological and syntactic developments separately as development in one grammatical area does not ensure the development in another. Qi and Di Biase (2020) conducted a longitudinal study on the bilingual acquisition of English and Chinese (*wh*-questions). Contrary to their predictions, the transfer of grammatical structure (*wh*- questions) from Mandarin to English or vice versa did not occur despite the options offered by the participants' two languages. The findings of the study suggest that the syntactic transfer is not 'an exclusively developmental phenomenon', which occurs across all languages (Qi & Di Biase, 2020, p.12). Besides that, a study by Itani-Adams (2013) on English and Japanese language learners recorded faster growth in syntax than in morphology by two PT stages in some cases of the study. Based on these findings, some issues may arise from Pienemann's PT. Therefore, this study will be based on the updated PT version by Di Biase et al. (2015).

Studies have shown that language development stages predicted by PT are compatible and the learners actually follow the trajectories, which refers to the chronology or order of stages in the development of their language acquisition, especially those conducted on children's bilingual language acquisition adopting PT as the framework (Hardini et al., 2019, 2020; Mohamed Salleh et al., 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020a; Medojevic, 2014; Itani-Adams, 2013). These studies suggest that the learners' L2 acquisition is parallel to the PT developmental path. Hence, the DMFonF lessons

used in this study are primarily based on PT. Then, the output of the tests (pre-test and post-tests) are analysed to evaluate the difference in their performance, and their plural development will be analysed based on PT developmental stages. Table 2.1 shows the procedural stages in English as the second language.

Table 2.1 Developmental Stages Hypothesis for L2 English Morphology  
(Di Biase et al., 2015; after Pienemann, 1998, 2005)

Processing Procedure	Structure	Example
4.Sentence Procedure	SV agreement: 3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular <i>-s</i>	“Peter loves rice”
3.Phrasal Procedure	NP Procedure	phrasal plural marking “these girls” “many dogs” “three black cats”
	VP Procedure	AUX + V <i>have</i> + V <i>-ed</i> MOD + V <i>be</i> + V <i>-ing</i> “they have jumped” “you can go” “I am going”
2.Category Procedure	past <i>-ed</i> plural <i>-s</i> possessive <i>'s</i> verb <i>-ing</i>	“he talked” “bananas”, “cats” “Peter’s book” “she dancing”
1.Lemma Access	single words and formulaic expressions	“my name is Ana”

As suggested by PT, learners begin learning a second language with the lemma access where they primarily produce single words/ formulaic expressions containing barely any grammatical annotations. As shown in the table, the first stage is the Lemma access and learners must be at this stage first before proceeding to the next stages. Some examples include names of animals, fruits, colours, numbers, greetings, and simple words such as ‘*My name is Ana*’. The next stage is the category procedure stage, where learners annotate lexical items. When learners can use lexical level morphemes like progressive *-ing*, plural *-s*, possessive *'s*, and past tense *-ed*, they are said to have