

**EXPLORING PRESCHOOL CHILDREN’S ENGLISH
VOCABULARY LEARNING THROUGH PLAY-BASED
LEARNING ACTIVITIES: A CASE STUDY AT A
PRESCHOOL IN SELANGOR, MALAYSIA**

BY

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**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the
degree of Master of Education**

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary is the heart of any language. It has long been suggested that for a successful foreign or second language learning, learners must have a strong vocabulary knowledge of the target language. Studies have shown that early childhood is the best time to build a good vocabulary skill. 'Play' has been exposed as an effective vocabulary learning approach for early childhood education. Similar to many English-speaking countries, education in Malaysia also stresses on 'play' to improve early education for students' forthcoming academic endeavours. This qualitative case study explored preschool children's English vocabulary learning through play-based activities. For this very reason, the study sought to find out the strategies that preschool children adopt to learn English vocabulary through play-based learning activities, and to investigate the experience of the teacher in teaching vocabulary through play-based teaching method. It was also designed to investigate the teacher's perspective on teaching English vocabulary through play-based teaching method. The study involved 23 preschool children and their English teacher as sample population. It adopted a triangulation process to analyse the data collected from audio-visual recording, observation field notes, and semi-structured interview. The findings revealed that paying attention, listening, repetition, retrieval, writing, having fun, and teacher-peer interaction were the main approaches preschool children used to learn English vocabulary through play-based learning activities. The teacher also employed multiple teaching techniques, such as using materials, giving instruction, providing explicit information, using first language and synonymous words, and participation with children in learning activities to teach vocabulary. Moreover, the findings from the teacher's interview also revealed that the teacher appreciates the idea of play-based teaching method to teach English vocabulary. The current study is significant in filling the gap in the current literature concerning teaching English vocabulary through play-based teaching method.

خلاصة البحث

المفردات هي قلب أي لغة .ولطالما اقترح أنه من أجل نجاح تعلم لغة أجنبية أو لغة ثانية ، يجب أن يكون لدى المتعلمين معرفة قوية بمفردات اللغة الهدف. وقد أظهرت الدراسات أن الطفولة المبكرة هي أفضل وقت لبناء مهارة مفردات جيدة .وتم الكشف عن " اللعب "كنهج فعال لتعلم المفردات لدى الطفولة المبكرة .على غرار البلدان الناطقة باللغة الإنجليزية ،و يشدد التعليم في ماليزيا أيضًا على " اللعب " لتحسين التعليم المبكر للمستقبل الأكاديمي للطلاب .واستكشفت دراسة الحالة النوعية هذه تعلم مفردات اللغة الإنجليزية لأطفال ما قبل المدرسة من خلال الأنشطة القائمة على اللعب .لهذا السبب بالذات ، سعت الدراسة إلى معرفة الاستراتيجيات التي يتبناها أطفال ما قبل المدرسة لتعلم مفردات اللغة الإنجليزية من خلال أنشطة التعلم القائمة على اللعب وللتحقق من تجربة المعلم في تدريس المفردات من خلال طريقة التدريس القائمة على اللعب .كما تم تصميمه لاستقصاء وجهة نظر المعلم في تدريس مفردات اللغة الإنجليزية من خلال طريقة التدريس القائمة على اللعب.وشملت الدراسة 23 طفلاً في سن ما قبل المدرسة ومعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كعينة من المجتمع .اعتمدت عملية التثليث لتحليل البيانات التي تم جمعها من التسجيل السمعي البصري ، والملاحظات الميدانية ، والمقابلة شبه المنظمة .كشفت النتائج أن الانتباه ، والاستماع ، والتكرار ، والاسترجاع ، والكتابة ، والمتعة ، والتفاعل بين المعلم والأقران كانت الأساليب الرئيسية التي يستخدمها أطفال ما قبل المدرسة لتعلم مفردات اللغة الإنجليزية من خلال أنشطة التعلم القائمة على اللعب .واستخدم المعلم أيضًا تقنيات تعليمية متعددة ، مثل استخدام المواد ، وإعطاء التعليمات ، وتقديم معلومات واضحة ، واستخدام اللغة الأولى والكلمات المترادفة ، والمشاركة مع الأطفال في أنشطة التعلم لتعليم المفردات .علاوة على ذلك ، كشفت نتائج مقابلة المعلم أيضًا أن المعلم يقدر فكرة طريقة التدريس القائمة على اللعب لتعليم مفردات اللغة الإنجليزية .والدراسة الحالية مهمة في سد الفجوة في الأدبيات الحالية المتعلقة بتدريس مفردات اللغة الإنجليزية من خلال طريقة التدريس القائمة على اللعب.

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 thesis for the degree of Master of Education.

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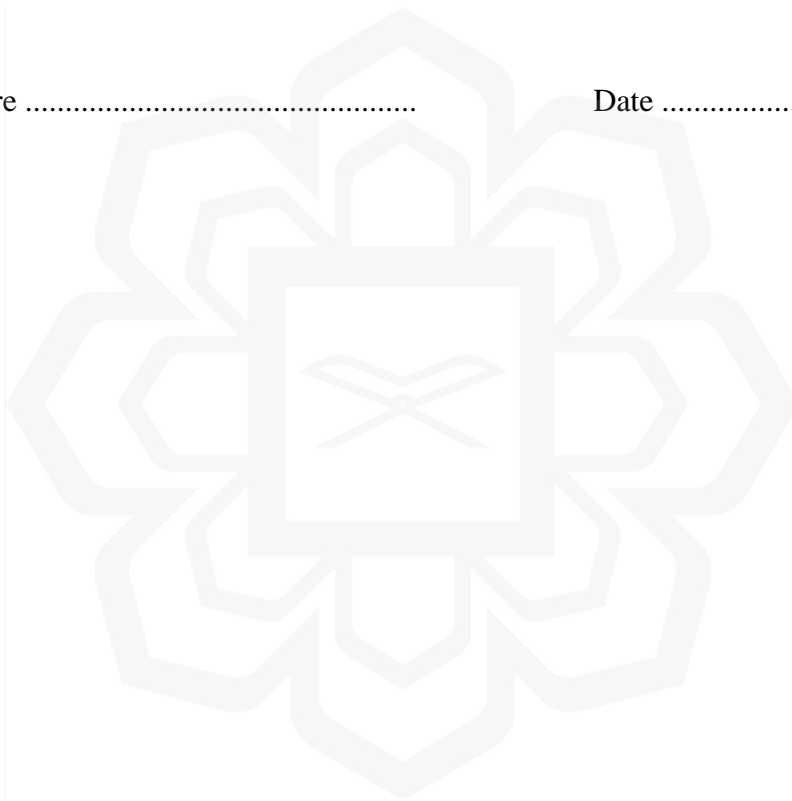
DECLARATION

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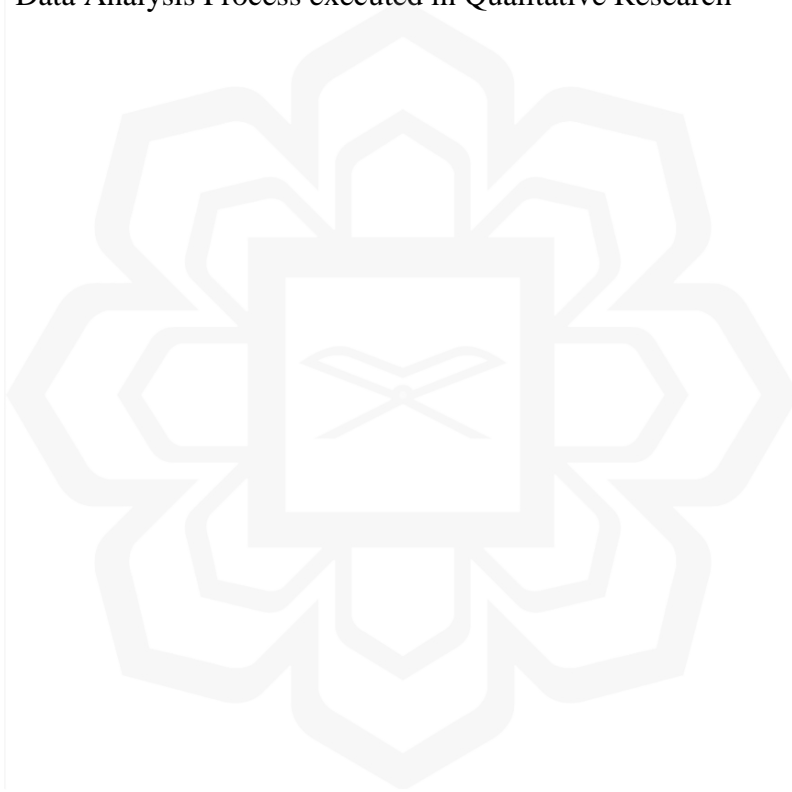


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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DU	discourse unit
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ELT	English Language Teaching
ESL	English as a Second Language
I	informant
IIUM	International Islamic University Malaysia
IPR	Interview Protocol Refinement
KOED	Kulliyah of Education
L1	first language
NA	not available
NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
NPCS	National Preschool Curriculum Standard
R	researcher
RQ	research question
TESL	Teaching English as a Second Language
T/L	Teaching/Learning
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

Notational Convention of Interview Transcription

...~	Long pause
###	Not clear (To the researcher)
...	Short pause

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

As part of British colonialism, English was introduced in Malaysia in the 19th century. At its infancy, English in Malaysia was used as a language of instruction and law. Gradually, it began to thrive its existence from elite society to common people. Even after her independence in 1957, Malaysia continued to use English as its official language (Chang, 2011). Later, English received the prestige of the second most prominent language in the country through the National Language Act of 1967. However, in education, it was taught and learned only as a subject. When the importance of English was deeply recognised for its prevalent nature, the Government officially made it as an instructional language for Mathematics and Science in all educational sectors in 2003.

Developing English language proficiency among Malaysian students have always been a matter of concern. To improve the overall English language proficiency, in January 2014, the former Malaysian Education Minister agreed that the teaching of English should begin at preschool education so that students can improve their language skill as they grow up (Mustafa & Ahmad, 2018). Consequently, The Malaysian Education Plan (2013-2025) was reformed for the second time and importance was given on Early Childhood Education (ECE) (Mustafa & Ahmad, 2018).

Over the decades, language researchers have been looking for ways that can help second/foreign language learners to learn the language in a successful way. The acknowledgement of vocabulary as a key element in language learning by British

linguist David Wilkins has received considerable attention by linguists and researchers. Wilkins (1972: 111) stressed on vocabulary for mastering a language and said "...without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed" (as cited in Schmitt, 2010: 3). Similarly noting the importance of vocabulary in learning a second language, Krashen (1989) stated that knowing a large amount of vocabulary is essential for a better second language learning because learners carry vocabulary with them instead of carrying any grammar books for communication. Hence, it is clear that vocabulary is the core element of a language and one factor that can contribute to the success of learning any language is primarily associated with a learner's knowledge of vocabulary.

To elaborate more on the issue of vocabulary learning, Schmitt (2010) contend that the knowledge of vocabulary is crucial for communication and thereby, it is usually testified to determine a learner's language proficiency. In addition, Lessard-Clouston (2013) posits that it is vital to have an adequate amount of vocabulary for successful second language use as the absence of a rich vocabulary collection will make it quite impossible for a person to use the structures and functions needed for comprehensible communication. In the 21st century, ground-breaking studies conducted by renowned researchers (e.g., Gu, 2003; Marion, 2008; Maximo, 2000; Nation, 2001; Nation, 2005; Read, 2004) advocate that the acquisition of vocabulary is essential for effective second language use and plays an influential role in the formation of complete spoken and written text.

A significant aspect that has been highlighted by recent research (e.g., Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Dickinson, & Tabors, 2001; Dwyer & Harbaugh, 2020) is the urgent need for vocabulary learning at early schooling days for a successful second language acquisition. Vocabulary is essential for an entire language

learning process through a continuous development of phonological, decoding, and printing knowledge (Dickinson, McCabe, Anastasopoulos, Peisner-Feinberg & Poe, 2003; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Eventually, vocabulary has an enormous effect on oral language proficiency, future reading achievement, and academic success at school (Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Roth, Speece & Cooper, 2002; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Therefore, children should be taught a second language mastery starting with vocabulary.

Studies have shown that children learn best through play, games, stories, art, puppetry, and social interaction (Nair, Yusof & Arumugam, 2014). A child's cognitive and comprehension level of mathematics and linguistics, social skills, interpersonal relationships and self-controlling power depend on the quality of the education s/he receives in early ages (Rohaty, 2013). Scientific research and educational science related to effective pedagogy at early childhood education have proven that play is more associated than direct instructions with preschool readiness and academic achievement in advanced school days. Gradually, the connection between play and literacy became one of the most focused aspects for early literacy learning and instruction in the late 20th century (Christie & Roskos, 2009). The significance and efficiency of play have been supported by different organisations and research groups. For example, the 2002 Hampshire Play Policy Forum declares play as a crucial part of children's life that is predictably associated to their physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and educational development. Through play, children discover their surroundings and learn social and behavioural skills (Stegelin, 2005). Play is also responsible to stimulate children's brain nerve cells with an enhanced awareness and memory development which are clearly visible in their interactions (Nair et al., 2014).

Moreover, the National Association for the Education of Young Children of United States recognises play as a suitable teaching and learning approach for early child development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Considering the facts of child development, a significant attention has been paid to play-based teaching and learning practices during early education.

Due to the worldwide recognition of play, Malaysia has also taken the step to integrate play into Malaysian early childhood education. In 2010, The Malaysian National Preschool Curriculum Standard (NPCS) highlights the use of appropriate teaching and learning strategies, and methods considering the fact of learners' age, development, ability, talent, and interests for learning English language ((Mustafa & Ahmad, 2018).

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

For its persistent and extensive consequences, play has been recognised as an effective instructional strategy or approach in early learning and literacy. Previous studies have shown that play-based teaching and learning method has an enormous impact on children's vocabulary and language development (Ali & Mahamod, 2015; Ali, Aziz & Majzub, 2011; Puteh & Ali, 2013).

Nevertheless, the existing conditions of play-based teaching method in Malaysia are still found to be poor. The study conducted by Puteh & Ali, 2013) found that teachers do not know the proper use of play materials. As a result, the activities easily make the learning process tedious for the children. Most importantly, the activities are not correctly set for learning outcomes (Puteh & Ali, 2013). The reasons behind these problems are, as reported by the teachers, an overloaded syllabus compared to teaching hours, inappropriate space, lack of support from parents and

administration, inadequate amount of play materials, equipment, and resources. Due to the flexible nature of play-based learning, it is difficult for curriculum designers and educators to propose any specific play-based approach for early childhood academic skill (Abu Bakar, Daud, Nordin, & Abdullah, 2015; Puteh & Ali, 2013). Teachers also admit that they are more comfortable with teacher-directed method than the play-based teaching approach because of their poor skill in controlling the children and of the method.

Although the Malaysian NPCS (2010) approach emphasises the idea of appropriate teaching and learning strategies, it does not offer any English training for preschool English teachers under the 2015-2025 blueprint. Hence, the quality of teaching English to young children is in a vulnerable state because there is no straightforward indication about when and how second language should be taught and learned. Moreover, early childhood English teachers are neither “majoring in English” nor “professionally trained” to teach English to young children (Mustafa & Ahmad, 2018: 15). Consequently, many teachers are not confident and proficient enough to communicate in English with the young children. As teachers are not proficient in English, they cannot conduct the learning activities in English. Sometimes, they need to employ code-switching to make sure that each student understands the messages that they want to convey to the class.

In consideration of the current condition of English teaching and learning in the Malaysian context, this study aims to explore preschool children’s English vocabulary learning through play-based learning activities. To determine the ways of learning English vocabulary, this study intends to investigate the strategies employed by preschool children in the learning process. Eventually, it will examine the teacher’s

experience in teaching English vocabulary through the play-based teaching method and investigate the teacher's perspective of the respective method.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to examine the approaches preschool children use to learn English vocabulary through play-based learning activities. It also explores the teacher's experience and perspective on teaching English vocabulary through the play-based teaching method. Therefore, the purposes of the study are:

- i. To explore the strategies which preschool children employ to learn English vocabulary when they are engaged in play-based learning activities.
- ii. To explore how the preschool teacher experiences English vocabulary teaching through the play-based teaching method.
- iii. To explore the teacher's perspective on English vocabulary teaching through play-based teaching method.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addresses three research questions which are:

- i. What are the strategies preschool children use to learn English vocabulary when they are engaged in play-based learning activities?
- ii. How does the preschool teacher experience teaching English vocabulary through the play-based teaching method?
- iii. What is the preschool teacher's perspective on English vocabulary teaching through play-based teaching method?

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

To date, there are few studies that have concentrated on play-based teaching and learning approach as one of the learning strategies for English vocabulary among preschool children. This current study eliminates the gap of underlying knowledge by highlighting the teaching and learning approaches in early pedagogy. Since the study is exploratory in nature, it provides a better understanding of the phenomenon. Through the experimental design, the findings of the study will provide evidence and information on implementation of play as a pedagogy in teaching English vocabulary to pre-schoolers.

The study further offers significant information and knowledge for ECE teachers pertaining to the procedures that preschool children exhibit in learning English vocabulary. The identified learning approaches of the preschool children will enable the teachers to recognise children's learning behaviour to accommodate the learning content in a more comprehensible and enjoyable way. Furthermore, it will create space for children to learn actively and creatively in an engaged manner. Adopting play-based teaching approach not only facilitates pre-schoolers' English vocabulary learning but also improves their entire language learning process.

The findings of the study additionally offer a precise view of play-based teaching guideline in early pedagogy. These also provide insights to basic teaching approaches such as instructional strategies, lesson planning, teaching preparation, and creating a flexible learning environment. Moreover, the teaching strategies identified in the current study accommodate monitored, active, creative, and enjoyable learning conditions. These will facilitate ECE teachers to identify the ways of designing and achieving learning goals more effectively. They may also be helpful for teachers to carry out innovative ideas in teaching English vocabulary and the language.

Furthermore, the findings will provide a guideline for future studies to improve the overall teaching condition relating to TESL/ ESL/ ELT context by identifying the strengths and weaknesses in teaching English vocabulary to young learners through play-based teaching method. Most importantly, it may contribute to preschool education policy to determine play-based teaching activities to create engaging learning environments that will accelerate children's cognitive development in learning a second language effectively.

1.6 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on only one institution due to transport inaccessibility. Moreover, this study was only able to record three observations during the fieldwork as consent and permission for further observation, due to internal issues, were not given by the said institution.

1.7 OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following subsections provide the definition of operational terms employed in the study:

1.7.1 Vocabulary

Vocabulary is the list of words or the total words found in a language (Hornby 1995; Hatch & Brown,1995). For the current study, vocabularies are taken from English language, which is a second language for the students. Considering the age of the participants, the vocabularies used in this study are nouns and verbs (see Piccin & Waxman, 2007).

1.7.2 Play-Based Learning Activities

The term ‘play-based learning activities’ usually refers to the activities which are set as play for a learning purpose. Although it is difficult for scholars to define the term play-based learning, they have nevertheless made it different from the wider concept of play (Pyle, 2018). Researchers have also split play-based learning into two different concepts, namely free play which is child-directed play without having any guidance and learning goal, and guided play which supports the presence of an adult assistance with a specific learning goal. Studies show that the teacher-directed guided play succeeds over free play and child-directed guided play for better academic results (Hassinger-Das, Ridge, Parker, Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek & Dickinson, 2016). In a teacher-directed guided play, the teacher is responsible for making the teaching/learning activities to achieve a learning goal. The teacher is also required to provide fun, flexibility, and guidance. In this study, teacher-directed guided play is integrated with regular learning activities to ensure an enjoyable teacher-guided learning environment to explore children’s English vocabulary learning.

1.7.3 Preschool Children

In Malaysia, preschool children refer to four to six-year-old children who are basically provided with early education (Mustafa, Nor, & Azman, 2013). In accordance with NPCS (2010), preschool education is provided as a preparation for children prior to their entry into primary school (Mustafa & Ahmad, 2018), and for sustainable education. In this study, the preschool children refer to a group of six-year-old children.

1.7.4 Learning Strategy

Richards, Platt and Platt (1992) define learning strategy as the deliberate actions and thoughts used by the learner for a better comprehension, remembering, and learning new information. In the language learning process, strategies are effective tools for enabling the students to achieve their proficiency at a target level. In this study, vocabulary learning strategies basically refer to the techniques and approaches preschool children utilise for English vocabulary learning through play-based teaching activities.

1.7.5 Teacher's Perspective

Perception is the way we think about something and the idea of what it is like; the way we notice things with our sensory organs and the natural ability of understanding things quickly (Qiong, 2017). Although play has been identified as an essential tool of early language and literacy development along with cognitive and social interaction, many teachers in Malaysia still prefer the use of direct instruction methods in teaching due to some underlying causes (Rohaty, 2013). Therefore, it is important to know what teachers think about the play-based (guided play) teaching and learning activities, adopted in this current study.

1.7.6 Teacher's Experience

According to Cambridge Dictionary (n.d), the word 'experience' (verb) means to do something ("experience"). In this study, teacher's experience refers to the actions and approaches that the teacher encounters in the teaching events during data collection.