

Teaching Writing in Preschool Classroom

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Abstract

Teachers play an important role in helping preschool children master literacy before stepping into year one. This is because writing skills are the most difficult to learn by preschool children besides speaking and reading skills. The best teaching practices in teaching writing will help teachers to produce an effective learning outcome and increase early literacy among preschool children. This preliminary study is conducted to explore the strategies in teaching writing and identify the problems faced by preschool teachers. A total of 65 preschool teachers from Selangor State in Malaysia participated in this study. It used qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques through questionnaires and observations. Frequency analysis and triangulated themes were used to identify the strategies used and the problems faced by preschool teachers. The results show that preschool teachers often used copying, drills, and questions as the main strategies in teaching writing. This occurs because the preschool teachers are tied to the need of teaching reading. The study indicates that preschool teachers do not have a specific approach in teaching writing. This condition can cause an imbalance in the level of literacy in preschool. Therefore, these findings recommend interactive writing approach in teaching writing to be used as an instructional strategy based on developmentally appropriate practices.

Keywords: *preschool; writing; teaching*

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INTRODUCTION

In 2003, the National Preschool Curriculum was implemented. This curriculum has been revised and implemented in all government and non-government preschools in 2010 as National Preschool Curriculum Standard (NPCS). In 2009, NPCS was revised to ensure that there is continuity between the NPCS and the National Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools. NPCS was designed based on standards and modular. The revised curriculum involved six components (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2010). One of the curriculum main foci is to master the early literacy of 4R's. 4R's are reading, writing, arithmetic, and reasoning (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2010). However, the focus of this study is on Malay language writing skills. The importance of good writing skills among the pre-schoolers has been emphasized in the standard curriculum of 4R's (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2010).

NPCS is a form of achievement indicators for preschool children (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2010). For writing skills, standard of learning writing to be mastered by the children of age 5+ years, is to write small letters correctly (BM 4.2.4), write uppercase letters correctly (BM 4.2.5), copy words correctly (BM 4.2.6), and copy the sentences correctly (BM 4.2.7). According to Kamarul Azman (2013), learning activities that occur in the preschool classroom involves communication or interaction between teacher-children or children with children. This activity is a social process that was used as a method for imparting knowledge, experiences, and ideas to children through the use of language. According to Vygotsky (1978), children need adults or people who are competent to help them to master new skills.

There is lack of prior research studies on preschool children's writing in Malaysia. Most of the studies concentrated on reading problems, cognitive, socio-emotional, and preschool children readiness. Sharifah Nor and Aliza (2011) found that preschool teachers should have knowledge of child development. If teachers are aware about children development, the learning outcomes can be achieved easily. Zamri, Nik Mohd Rahimi, and Juliawati, (2009) pointed out that the effectiveness of teaching depends on the objectives of how children learn and what was being taught. According to Rohaty (2000), preschool teachers cannot use the same teaching methods for each child. This is because each child comes from the different socio-economic background and has acquired different degrees of learning ability. Zamri (2012) argued that teachers should combine several methods of teaching strategy to achieve the learning objectives that meet the diverse needs and abilities of children.

Most of the teachers use direct instruction such as drilling and copying because they are unsure of appropriate strategies in teaching preschools writing skills. The building sentences activities are only conducted at the end of term, after all preschool children master the reading skills. This phenomenon shows that preschool teachers have no specific approach in the teaching of writing to preschool children. As Abdul Rasid (2011) argued, teachers who are not proficient in teaching language or learning methods are barely able to give high commitment in teaching. Therefore, there is a need to identify the writing strategies used by teachers and to look at the performance of the teaching writing practiced in preschools. This is because successful learning arises from effective teaching. Therefore, this study aims to look at the ongoing implementation of the teaching of writing in preschool.

The purpose of this study is to explore the strategies in teaching writing and to identify the problems faced by preschool teachers in teaching Malay language writing skills. This study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How do preschool teachers teach writing Malay language during the writing session in preschool classrooms?
- (2) What are the problems faced by these preschool teachers in teaching preschoolers writing?

BACKGROUND

Teacher quality is one of the four sub-National Key Result Area (NKRA). It expands to the quality education. The levels of teacher skills in teaching are expected to produce effective outcomes, especially in teaching writing. Abdul Rasid, Shamsudin, and Humaizah (2012) stated that learning writing required teachers who are knowledgeable in teaching of writing. This is because the writing process required children to think deeply. Based on the Interim strategic plan of the Ministry of Education 2011-2020 (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2012b), quality of teachers is one of the factors to be focused on in order to ensure effectiveness of teaching and learning. Based on the Preliminary report of the National Education Development Plan (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2012a), only 12% of 125 observations of teaching have implemented in best instructional practices, while 50% indicate that instruction imparted is not satisfactory. This is because the lesson delivered by the teacher is uninteresting and passive. The method used by the teachers is more in the form of lectures. Teachers should diversify instructional strategies and improve the existing pedagogical skills to ensure they can deliver the knowledge or skills needed by children.

Teaching is a process of delivering information, combining ideas, and enhancing children creativity. Teaching is also to provide preschool children with the knowledge and skills needed to achieve the optimum potential. Effective learning comes from affective teaching. Thus, teachers should be creative in preparing or selecting appropriate teaching materials and know the right contents to deliver to children (Abdul Rasid et al., 2012; Noriati, Boon, & Sharifah Fakhriah, 2009; Sharifah Nor & Aliza, 2011). Authentic activities and teaching materials provided by teachers are able to increase preschool children's literacy skills, specifically in learning to write. Preschool children will combine the experience gained at school with their own experience to make their writing more meaningful (MacKenzie, 2011; Mahzan, 2012).

Writing is a complex process for children and they need adult guidance to support the acquisition of it (McCarrier et al., 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). According to Olness (2005), teaching writing is a structured situation where children are guided through the steps correctly. Writing required a variety of skills and coordination (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). According to Abdul Rasid (2011), high ability and achievement in writing skills and reading can improve preschool children learning proficiency in Malay language and other subjects. Teaching writing also helped preschool children to build awareness of language literacy (Clay, 1991; Mahzan, 2012).

The practices or teaching strategies should be appropriate to preschool children. Teachers need to understand their development clearly and to create an enjoyable experience for children as stated in the NPCCS (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2010). This is because the level of school readiness of preschool children before entering formal schooling depends on their experiences at the preschool. This experience is grows out from the teachers who are implement the curriculum and the comprehensiveness of the curriculum itself (Awang Salleh & Zamri, 2006).

Galbraith and Rijlaarsdam (1999) suggested that the teaching of writing should be more of engaging children in writing and less of being teacher-centred. Teachers just need to encourage children to write effective sentences with guidance. The children must learn to implement the strategies they have learnt without the help of others (Mack, 2012). The present study indicates that writing activities provide opportunities for preschool children to use their knowledge of print and words that they have learned from reading. This study examined how teachers guide preschool children to write. The children will have more confidence if teachers know how to encourage the preschool children to write continuously through a variety of activities. If teachers only focus on teaching reading, it will create imbalance in learning literacy because writing and reading are interconnected. According to Vygotsky (1978), children need adults or competent people to help them to master the new skills. Siti Iwana Sharizah, Rohaty, and Zamri (2013) claimed that teachers do not provide opportunity for preschool children to practise what they have learned through writing activities such as the use of capital letters, the distance between words and punctuation marks. Browne (1993) suggested that opportunity should be given to preschool children to write so that they can form letters, build words and sentences, and also write neatly.

RESEARCH METHODS

Sample

This exploratory study was conducted to survey current practices to have a better understanding of teaching writing. Teaching writing in the preschool classroom is part of our research. This study used a qualitative and a quantitative approach. Data were collected through observations and questionnaires. A simple random sampling was used to identify preschool teachers. 80 preschool teachers from 80 preschools in one district of Selangor were selected randomly to complete the questionnaires. A simple random technique was used because all of preschools were categorised under the sub-urban school. Even though the preschools were categorised under sub-urban district, they were chosen because the preschool teachers have same teaching qualification and came from same teaching institute and also using the same preschool curriculum.

Out of 80 schools only 65 preschool teachers have returned the questionnaires. The sample size of 65 respondents was matched the size of the study population according to the table of determination sample size proposed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). A total of 11 preschool teachers were selected among the 65 respondents to be observed. According to Sandelowski (1995), a small sample size is an adequate in qualitative approach. Eleven preschool teachers in total were involved as participants through purposive sampling. The participants were selected based on three criteria such as novice teacher, experience teacher and expert teacher (Merriam, 2002).

Instruments and Data Analyze

Questionnaire

Themes from the literature review such as teaching writing (Clay, 1991; Mahzan, 2012; Abdul Rasid, Shamsudin, & Humaizah, 2012), writing activities (Galbraith & Rijlaarsdam, 1999) and teaching strategies (Awang Salleh & Zamri, 2006; Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2010) were transformed into questions. These questionnaires are measuring teacher's knowledge, practices, strategies and problems. The Teachers Teaching and Writing Questionnaire consisted of four parts. Part A: Background of respondents; Part B: Teachers' knowledge about writing; Part C: The practice of teaching and learning in the classroom; and Part D: Strategies and problems in the teaching of writing. The questionnaire used a Likert scale, namely 1: strongly disagreed, scale 2: disagree, scale 3: quite agree, scale 4: agree and scale 5: strongly agree. Frequencies and percentages were used to identify the problems and strategies used by preschool teachers. This study used the Cronbach Alpha to test the reliability of the questionnaire items. The Cronbach Alpha for the questionnaire items was 0.64. According to Gliem and Gleim (2003), Pallant (2001), Slaughter, V. (2010), and Zainudin Abu Bakar and Hidayatul Nor Aini Ismail (2011), Alpha value above 0.60 is acceptable and can be used as an index of the reliability of the instrument.

Observations

The purpose of the observation is to identify the problems faced by preschool teachers when teaching Malay language writing skills. The observations of teaching were carried out once for each participant. The study used an observation's checklist during the observation process. The checklist includes items such as (1) teaching practices (Clay, 1991; Mahzan, 2012; Abdul Rasid, Shamsudin, & Humaizah, 2012), (2) strategies and problems in teaching writing (Awang Salleh & Zamri, 2006; Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2010; Mack 2012) and (3) writing activities (Galbraith & Rijlaarsdam, 1999; Siti Iwana Sharizah, Rohaty & Zamri, (2012).

The observations were video-recorded and focused on the set induction, development and closing sessions. Field notes were taken as part of data collection during observation. Atlas.ti as CAQDAS tool was used to analyze data. The data from the field notes, observations report and checklist were

analyzed thematically followed the Strauss and Corbin's (1990) steps of coding; open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The results from the coding process were collected as themes. Then, the themes were checked by the participants. The data from the survey and observations were triangulated. Member's checking and triangulation were used as the validity and reliability for the study as suggested by Merriam (1998).

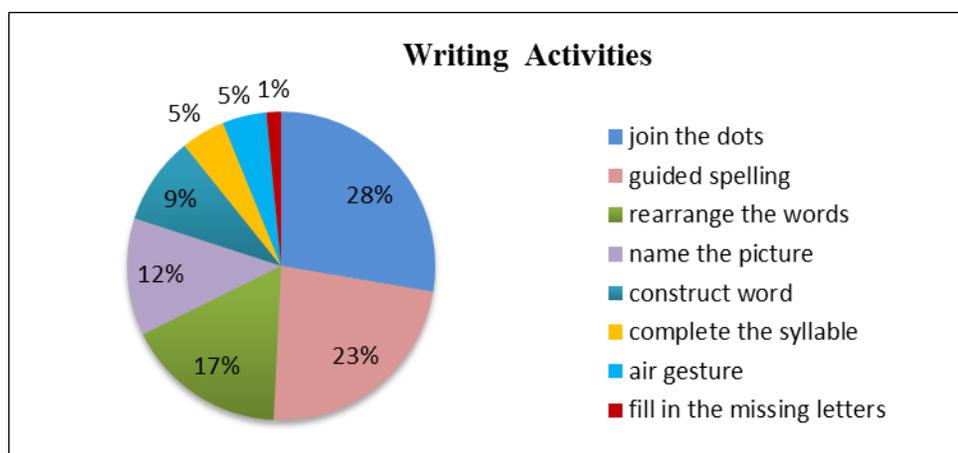
There were observations conducted in this study. The observations were done at 11 preschool classrooms in the State of Selangor. Permission was obtained earlier from the Ministry of Education, the State Department of Education, the District Office of Education, school administrators and preschool teachers who were involved in the study. Discussions were also conducted with the preschool teachers to deepen our understanding of the teaching and learning process in Bahasa Malaysia.

Findings

Teaching Techniques Used by Preschool Teachers

To answer the first research question on how do preschool teachers teach writing, based on the observations carried out, this study found that most of the teachers used the thematic approach, the children-centred approach, and the play approach when teaching language in Bahasa Malaysia. However, in the writing activity session, the study found that *drills* are still the most frequent technique used by the preschool teachers. Based on the survey conducted, 14 preschool teachers or 21.5% of the participants used the *drills technique* in teaching writing. Most of the preschool teachers claimed that they used *drills technique* was to emphasize the writing exercises. The *reading technique* is the second most frequently used in teaching writing; it was used by 13 participants or 20% of the preschool teachers. The third most frequently used technique in teaching writing is the *questioning technique*; it was used by 10 preschool teachers or 15.4% of the participants. A total of 7 people or 10.8% of the preschool teachers used *storytelling* while 7 people or 10.8% of the preschool teachers used the *singing technique* in teaching writing. According to the observations, the *questioning*, *storytelling*, and *singing techniques* were frequently used by them because they found that these techniques are simple and easy to prepare and attracted to children. Only 4 participants or 6.1% of the preschool teachers used *demonstration techniques* in teaching writing.

Figure 1. Writing Activities Used by Preschool Teachers Writing Activities Used by Preschool Teachers

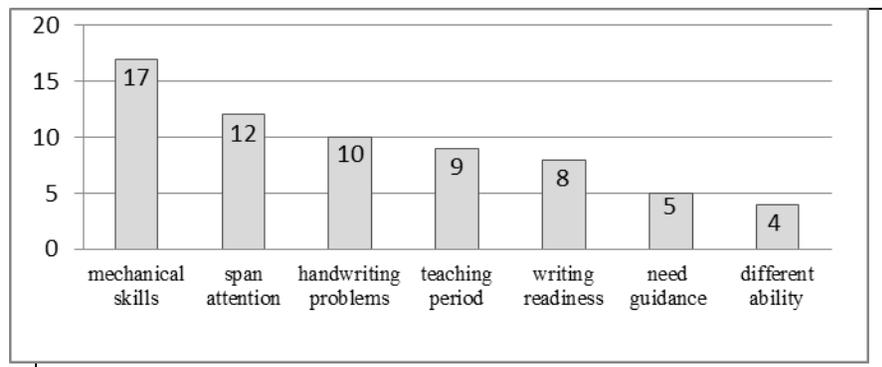


Based on the writing activities that have been listed by the 65 preschool teachers (Figure 1), a total of 18 participants or 28% of the preschool teachers said that *join the dots* was the most frequent activity of teaching writing. *Guided spelling* was the second most frequent activities; its usage was

reported by 15 preschool teachers or 23% of the participants. The results were followed by *rearrange words*, which was used by 11 preschool teachers or 17% of the participants. The fourth most frequently used activity was *named the pictures*; it was used by 8 preschool teachers or 12.3% of the participants. A total of 6 preschool teachers or 9% of the participants used *construct word based on picture* as a writing activity. *Complete the missing syllables* and *air gesture* were the sixth most frequently used activities by 3 preschool teachers. Only one teacher used the *missing letters* activity.

Findings from the observations indicated that the most frequent activity carried out in the writing session is *copying words* with diversified activities such as arranging words first then copying the words or sentences according to the pictures. The teacher showed a picture and asked questions about the picture. Then, the teacher showed the words and asked the preschool children to read and arrange the words. Based on the survey conducted, this study found that *copying words* was the most frequent activities performed by 20 preschool teachers or 30.8% of participants. *Copying words* without any stimulation or using learning materials was the second most frequent activity used by 19 participants or 29.2% of the preschool teachers. It was followed by constructing sentences activities based on the picture; it was used by a total of 14 participants or 21.5% of the preschool teachers. The results indicated that these activities were carried out in the second term and after the preschool children were able to read. A total of 6 participants or 9.2% of the preschool teachers used *combining syllables* as a writing activity. This was probably because the preschool teachers thought that preschool children were unable to construct sentences, and that they could only choose *completing* or *combining syllables* in teaching and learning writing activities. Only 4 preschool teachers used *reading while writing* as a strategy, and 2 preschool teachers used *children's experiences* as an activity in learning writing.

Figure 2. Problems in Teaching Writing Faced by Teachers Problems in Teaching Writing



The second research question concerns the problems faced by preschool teachers in teaching preschoolers writing. Based on the survey conducted (Figure 2), a total of 17 participants or 26.1% of the preschool teachers encountered problems in the teaching of writing when the preschool children had just mastered the mechanical skills. Mechanical skills involve gross motor skills and fine motor skills to help children to produce neat handwriting (Longman, Zerbato-Poudou, & Velay 2005; Vinter & Chartrel, 2010). This approach makes teaching difficult and slow because of the preschool children's weaknesses, such as in mechanical grip and reformation of the letters. The second frequent problem faced by the preschool teachers was learning span. A total of 12 participants or 18.4% of the preschool teachers stated that preschool children did not concentrate on the writing session. This was because writing involved several cognitive components before operating in the expression of a mental representation (Berk, 2006; Olive et al., 2009).

Developing and writing letters in uppercase or lowercase were the third problem faced by the teachers. Fifteen point four percent of the participants or a total of 10 preschool teachers claimed that the teaching of writing could not be carried out because there were still some preschool children who

wrote letters upside down. Preschool children were found very slow in and still needed guidance continuously from the teacher; this was the fourth problem faced by 9 participants or 13.8% of the preschool teachers. Based on the observations, the problem not only came from the awkward mechanical skills but also from the preschool children's inability to read independently. These preschool children often need teacher authentication, especially during word constructions activities. Besides, 5 participants or 7.7% of the preschool teachers claimed that having a short period of teaching writing was one of the problems, while 4 preschool teachers claimed that having different abilities and immaturity were the sixth and seventh problems faced by the participants. Preschool children being without confidence to write was the last problem listed by four participants. These results indicated that problems number six to eight were interrelated to and influenced by the preschool children maturity.

Findings from the observations additionally revealed that preschool children who had just mastered reading were more confident of building open syllables and writing the word without thinking of spelling errors than the preschool children who had been already able to read. This was because they were overly afraid of making spelling mistakes and always needed or required teacher authentication.

DISCUSSIONS

This study aimed to explore teaching writing practice and to identify the problems faced by the teachers when teaching Malay language writing skills. The study propounds that though the National Preschool Curriculum Standards (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2010) stress the quality of writing skills, preschool teachers should guide the preschool children to construct sentences by giving them chances to express their ideas through writing, as suggested by Watanabe and Hall-Kenyon (2011). According to Berk (2006), preschool children have different abilities. Differences in ability are influenced by maturity, especially in language development. Literacy awareness is related to the factors and individual differences in language development itself. Findings from the observations unveil that preschool children who have just mastered reading will be more confident of building open syllables and writing the word without considering spelling errors than the preschool children who have been able to read.

Watanabe and Hall-Kenyon (2011) stated that the increase of number of words produced by the children is influenced by three factors: a) the total number of words generated, b) the elements used by the teacher such as reading text of the story, and c) the knowledge of the use of three types of text. Development of writing plays an important role in the increasing number of words produced by preschool children. Although there are different levels of ability in writing, when the level of writing ability increases, the preschool children will be normally able to produce a longer text. The results showed that the preschool teachers often used copying, drills and questions as the main strategies in teaching writing. This occurs because the preschool teachers are tied to the need of teaching reading. The study also indicates that preschool teachers who do not take a specific approach in teaching writing can cause an imbalance in the level of literacy among preschoolers.

According to Vygostky (1978), teachers should encourage preschool children to interact with their environment, especially with teachers and peers, because the interaction will yield them experience in learning. Abdul Rasid (2011) suggested that teaching in Bahasa Malaysia should be presented in an interesting approach by diversifying the teaching aids and teaching methods. It can attract and expand the writing and reading skills of preschool children. Teaching aids should be used optimally. Che Zanariah and Fadzillah (2011) suggested that the teaching of writing should be done systematically and effectively. Children's writing skills will improve when they are given opportunity and guidance to write. The improvement is influenced by the total number of words produced, story heard from the teacher, text read by the teacher, and children's own knowledge of texts.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, there is no doubt that teaching writing is important as teaching reading. Most of the preschool teachers used drills technique to teach writing. It showed that preschool teacher should diversify teaching techniques and writing activities to improve their strategies in teaching writing as contained in the standard of teaching and learning. *Copying words* was the most frequent activity carried out in the writing session but did not provide preschool children opportunity to share their idea or writing. This is contrary to the recommendations proposed by Vygostky (1978) that preschool teacher should scaffold the children in learning writing. The study found that the preschool teachers had problems in teaching writing. From the observations, the problems might be related to technique and activities used in teaching and learning writing that caused short learning span. Future research should investigate how teacher problem can be avoided in a large scale study.

Copple & Bredekamp (2009) stated that preschool children should be given an opportunity to write every day so that they can accumulate experience in writing. Indirectly, writing activities develop their language skills and expand their language experience. These findings recommend that an interactive writing approach in teaching writing as an instructional strategy. Interactive writing approach is based on the appropriate practice for preschool children development. Preschool teachers can use an interactive writing approach as a teaching strategy to encourage children to interact with each other, to involve themselves actively in learning writing activities, and to express their ideas through writing (McCarrier, 2000).

CONCLUSION

The results showed that the preschool teachers often organized activities such as copying and used a questioning technique as the main strategies in the teaching of writing. This showed that they did not have a special approach to or strategy in teaching writing. They were tied to the need of teaching reading. This situation could create an imbalance in preschool children language development. As creative and innovative practitioners, preschool teachers should be able to accept, adopt, adapt, and employ a variety of methods, techniques and activities in the teaching of writing. To achieve the goal of building quality education, preschool teachers need to use the right approach according to the level of talent and the ability of preschool children.

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