

Preschool Teachers' Beliefs and Practices on Early Literacy Instruction

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Abstract

This study examined 96 preschool teachers' self-report on literacy beliefs and practices. Participants comprised government and private preschool teachers in a southern state of Peninsular Malaysia. Using a Preschool Literacy Practices Questionnaire, the study investigated the practices of literacy instruction in Malaysian preschools on the choice of literacy content focus, instructional strategies, and teachers' perceived opportunities and challenges in literacy instruction. Findings revealed that most teachers appeared to hold conventional literacy beliefs and practices, lacked variety of developmentally appropriate instructional strategies and faced challenges of time constraint and inadequate linguistic and pedagogical knowledge and skills. Limitation of research design and future research directions are also discussed.

Keywords: Early literacy; early literacy instruction; preschool education

Abstrak

Kajian ini menyelidiki amalan dan kepercayaan literasi berdasarkan laporan sendiri 96 orang guru pra sekolah. Peserta kajian terdiri daripada guru-guru pra sekolah kerajaan dan swasta dari sebuah negeri yang terletak di selatan Semenanjung Malaysia. Soal selidik amalan literasi pra sekolah telah digunakan bagi menyelidiki amalan pengajaran literasi di peringkat pra sekolah di Malaysia yang merangkumi pilihan isi kandungan fokus literasi, strategi pengajaran dan tanggapan guru terhadap peluang dan cabaran dalam pengajaran literasi. Hasil kajian menunjukkan kebanyakan guru mempunyai kepercayaan dan amalan literasi yang konvensional, memiliki kekurangan dari segi pembangunan strategi pengajaran yang sesuai dan menghadapi cabaran dari segi kekangan masa dan kekurangan ilmu dan kemahiran linguistik dan pedagogi. Batasan dari segi rekabentuk kajian dan halatuju kajian di masa hadapan juga dibincangkan.

Kata kunci: Literasi awal; pengajaran literasi awal; pendidikan pra sekolah

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Literacy begins early before formal schooling. Studies have shown that young children have developed hypotheses about how the literacy system worked when engaged in literacy in the environment (Gillen & Hall, 2003). This suggests that literacy emerges long before children begin to read and write conventionally in elementary schools. The literacy development at this early stage is important as a growing body of research has indicated that children's emergent literacy, which encompasses the skills, knowledge and attitudes that they have about literacy in early childhood, predicts their reading success throughout elementary school (Lonigan, *et al.*, 2008; Spira & Fischel, 2005).

While this notion gives rise to more emphasis on the early literacy experiences, there is another growing concern about the "academic push down" in the preschools (Gallant, 2009). The increased academic expectations have raised concerns about the literacy instruction practice in kindergartens (Joyce *et al.*, 2003). Besides, studies also show that most elementary school teachers lack disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical skills to support the children acquisition of basic skills (Bos, *et al.*, 2001; Cunningham *et al.*, 2004; Moats & Foorman, 2003). There are, however, limited studies to look into the literacy instruction practices happening in the preschool settings. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the practices of literacy instruction in Malaysian preschools with focus on the literacy content choice, instructional strategies, and teachers' perceived opportunities and challenges in literacy instruction.

2.0 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

In Malaysia, the government's realization of the importance of early literacy instruction and intervention is clearly demonstrated in national key performance indicator (NKPI) whereby every child acquires basic literacy skills after 3 years of mainstream primary education. There is continuous effort to support children's literacy learning in primary school, such as the *Kelas Intervensi Awal Membaca*

dan Menulis (KIA2M–Reading and Writing Early Intervention) initiative which commenced in 2006 and which was later replaced by LINUS (Literacy and Numery Screening) programme starting 2010.

Although the effort is commendable, it starts only when the children enter formal education in Year 1 at seven years old. The assumption of this study is that if the interest and love in literacy learning can be inculcated right from the moment the children are in touch with prints; and developmentally appropriate support rendered early to those at risk for literacy difficulties, it will not only boost their confidence in literacy learning but also pave their way towards successful and enjoyable learning.

This calls for developmentally appropriate practice in literacy instruction in preschools. The early educators are held accountable to create sustainable interest in literacy learning as it is ultimately the teachers who are responsible for providing successful literacy learning experiences in school. The decisions teachers make about instruction influence students' performance and motivation towards literacy. While teachers are likely to agree that it is important to implement best practices, there may be a mismatch between the actual and perceived knowledge of literacy instruction (Cunningham *et al.*, 2004). In this light, it is important to examine preschool teachers' pedagogical practices as this will provide insight into the learning experiences which take place in the preschool classrooms.

All the preschools in Malaysia follow a similar National Preschool Standard Curriculum (KSPK) starting 2010. The curriculum is modular in nature and the communication strand for Malay language is taught in both core module and thematic module throughout the year with a gradual shift of focus on the latter towards the end of the preschool year. While the literacy curriculum content is standardised, the content focus and instructional approaches may vary among the preschool teachers. However, there is a dearth of research into preschool teachers' practices in Malay early literacy instruction within the curriculum. It is therefore essential to gain understanding about the teachers' practice so that intervention measures could be taken as it is found to be significantly related to student outcomes (McCutchen *et al.*, 2009).

■3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Literacy is a complex, personal and social process rather than simply a set of skills and strategies to be learned (Johnston & Costello, 2005). Therefore early childhood educators are challenged to ensure young children receive enriched literacy stimulation and thus supporting them as wholesome, developing individuals (Hall, 2003). Early literacy pedagogy is greatly related to how children acquire literacy and develop as readers and writers.

This study employs the theoretical framework based on the joint position statement by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the International Reading Association (IRA) on developmentally appropriate practices in literacy instruction and assessment. The key points in the position paper include: the most critical period for literacy development occurs in early childhood years; literacy does not emerge naturally and a child's reading potential can be affected positively by systematic intentional instruction; developmentally appropriate goals for literacy exist on a continuum which accounts for individual variation; by helping children learn to read well by the end of third grade, they will be able to read to learn; and no one teaching method is effective for all children.

The present study applied the inclusive model of reading (Bell & McCallum, 2007) which takes account of the context, cognitive correlates and affective factors. All these contribute to the learning and acquisition of literacy skills such as phonological awareness, sight words, vocabulary, phonics, fluency and comprehension which have been identified as essential elements of best practices in literacy instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Research studies demonstrate that the most effective literacy instruction requires teachers to possess multiple knowledge bases such as deep knowledge and understanding of the language system as well as the literacy skills (McCutchen *et al.*, 2002; McCutchen *et al.*, 2009). The content of early literacy instruction suggested from the research studies encompasses three main content categories: 1) phonological awareness (the ability to hear and manipulate the sound structure of language); 2) alphabetic principle (the mapping of print to speech, the phonological recoding of letter strings into corresponding sounds and blending stored sounds into words); and 3) accuracy and fluency with connected text. These validated foundational skills in beginning reading are prerequisite and fundamental to later reading success.

While attending to the codes of written language is important in early literacy instruction, providing ample opportunities for children to meaning making literacy activities in authentic situations should be given equal emphasis. Besides, the dispositions in literacy learning also needs to be cultivated such as curiosity about prints, exploration of print forms, playfulness with words and enjoyment of literacy-related activities.

In addition, skillful teachers are able to make adjustments within the curriculum framework to respond to the needs of students who come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The teachers should possess knowledge to identify children with disadvantaged linguistic and experiential exposure and provide intervention to support their learning through more intensive instruction and individual focus.

In brief, effective early literacy teachers should acquire linguistic knowledge, knowledge of literacy development in young children, effective pedagogical practices in both instruction and intervention. With this theoretical basis as a guide, this current study will provide insights into preschool teachers' implicit beliefs through self-reported practices of early instruction in preschool settings.

■4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS ON EFFECTIVE EARLY LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Previous research studies about effective early literacy teaching employ interview survey, ethnographic study such as in-depth teacher interviews, close classroom observations and cross-case analyses of classrooms where achievement was high (Pressley *et al.*, 2001; Wharton-McDonald *et al.*, 1998). In these studies, exemplary teachers offer a variety of literacy experiences to their pupils from partner reading, shared reading, independent reading and book choosing to explicit instruction using familiar and new texts and from daily writing

in journals. Typical guided reading lessons incorporate lessons on phonics and phonemic awareness, the use of familiar and new text, the introduction and use of new vocabulary. Pupils are shown how to use reading cues and explicit methods are used for the development of comprehension. The most effective teachers consciously integrate the teaching of skills with authentic literacy experiences (Hall, 2003).

Highly effective kindergarten teachers believe that frequent repetition enhances background knowledge and have the talents to create inviting, print-rich classrooms (Block *et al.*, 2002). They spend more time in small-group teaching which includes teacher-directed text activity, and explicit teaching in phonics, comprehension and vocabulary (Taylor *et al.*, 2000). Nevertheless, Hall (2003) commented that outstanding literacy teachers do not adhere to one particular method of teaching. Instead, they build upon the variety of strategies the children acquired outside of school and are adept at seizing the ‘teachable moment’ (Block, 2002).

Compared to earlier studies which focused on the study of teacher behaviours in the classroom in relation to pupil achievement, the recent studies take into consideration teachers’ prior beliefs and knowledge and their reasoning behind their practices through semi-structured interviews (Poulson, 2001; Wharton-McDonald *et al.*, 1998). These studies showed that effective teachers of literacy demonstrate higher consistency between their theoretical beliefs and choice of teaching activities. They place more emphasis on functions of literacy tasks, meaning-making and authentic contextualized texts (Poulson, 2001).

Another recent study by Cunningham *et al.* (2009) investigates the structure of teachers’ implicit beliefs about reading instruction through teacher self-reported amount of instructional time on language arts activities. The findings showed no significant association between the beliefs and teachers’ type of expertise, experience or disciplinary knowledge.

■5.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

This study addresses the primary research question: What are preschool teachers’ instructional and intervention practices in literacy? Besides investigating the literacy content focus, and instructional approaches, we also examined the teachers’ perceived opportunities and challenges in literacy instruction in preschools.

■6.0 METHODOLOGY

This is a preliminary study of an early literacy intervention project to enhance the early literacy skills and motivation of preschoolers at risk for reading difficulties. As this study intends to gain a broader understanding of the common literacy practice in the preschool classrooms, a survey research methodology is employed to address the research questions about the literacy instruction and intervention practice in preschools. The data collected could provide insight into the design and implementation of the intervention programme.

A total of 96 government and private preschool teachers who attended two preschool professional development courses in a school district located in a southern state of Peninsular Malaysia were invited to participate in the study. The underlying pedagogical beliefs are assessed through the choice of focus in literacy content, resources, instructional and intervention strategies in the Preschool Literacy Practices Questionnaire. This would provide a more accurate assessment of their implicit beliefs than rating the extent of agreement with statements on instructional orientations which might be unfamiliar to the teachers.

The questionnaire which takes approximately 30 minutes to administer, captures teacher’s self-reported literacy instruction practices and contains both open and closed questions. It is designed based on the criteria listed in the Bell & McCallum’s inclusive model of early literacy assessment (2007), Scarborough’s skilled reading model (2009) and Malaysian National Preschool Standard Curriculum (KPM, 2010).

The questionnaire is divided into 4 sections. Section A requires the basic information about the respondent. Section B requires the respondents to select the extent of the particular content focus, literacy resources used, instructional strategies and assessment practice implemented in the classroom based on a four-point scale. Section C asks about the common literacy difficulties of the pupils; the assumed causes, and intervention practice. Section D addresses contributing factors of literacy instruction success and problems in the classroom using two open-ended response items, as well as the areas of professional development needed. This paper will report the descriptive data on literacy content focus, choice of literacy instruction strategies, intervention practice and the perceived contributing factors of success (opportunities) and problems (challenges) in literacy instruction.

The content of the instrument has been validated by experts, and based on the expert comments, some questions had been revised and rephrased for precise wording before it was piloted with 10 preschool teachers to check for validity and practicality. Brief interviews with the teachers captured data on the practicality of the instrument (duration, accuracy and emotional response).

The questionnaires were administered face-to-face during two sessions of professional development course in a southern state of Peninsular Malaysia. The participants who attended the course were invited to participate in the study. The choice of face-to-face surveys was to benefit from the flexibility and opportunity for the interviewer to clarify terms which are essential but may not be in the repertoire of the respondents.

■7.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Table 1 displays the brief account of the profile of the respondents in the study. Out of the 96 preschool teachers, 59.4% came from government preschools and 40.6% from private preschools. Most of the teachers (71.9%) were between 31 to 50 years old and more than half of them (56.2%) had between 6 to 15 years of teaching experience.

Table 1 Profile of the respondents (n=96)

Characteristics		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Types of preschool	Government preschool	57	59.4
	Private preschool	39	40.6
Age group	<31	15	15.6
	31-40	36	37.5
	41-50	33	34.4
	>50	12	12.5
Teaching Experience	0-5 years	18	18.8
	6-10 years	25	26.0
	11-15 years	29	30.2
	16-20 years	24	25.0

Table 2 shows the frequency and percentages of respondents reported extent of content focus for literacy instruction. The results showed that the main content focus for almost all of the preschool teachers in the sample was the alphabetic code: letter naming (100%), letter sound (100%) and capital and small letters (100%), followed by alphabetic principle: syllable decoding (100%), word decoding (64.6%), phrase decoding (55.2%); writing skill: Copying letter (100%), prewriting practice (95.8%) and copying word (85.45%). Content areas never covered by the majority of the respondents were phonological awareness skills [segmenting of sounds (99.0%), blending of sounds (93.8%), final sounds identification (53.1%)] and spelling of letter sound (87.5%).

Other content areas which more than half of the respondents reported little or no focus include: independent story book reading (79.2%), reading fluency training (62.5%), reading comprehension (62.5%) and intentional writing (51.1%). It is also notable that only 27.1% of the teachers selected literacy motivation as their main content focus.

Table 2 The number and percentage of teachers reported literacy content focus (n=96)

Literacy Content	Never		Little Focus		Some Focus		Main Focus	
	n	%	n	%	N	%	n	%
Segmenting of sounds	95	99.0	1	1.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Blending of sounds	90	93.8	6	6.2	0	0.0	0	0.0
Final sounds identification	51	53.1	39	40.6	4	4.17	2	2.1
Initial sounds identification	45	46.9	36	37.5	11	11.5	4	4.2
Book Concept (directionality, book title)	4	4.2	32	33.3	48	50.0	12	12.5
Guided story book reading	4	4.2	31	32.3	39	40.6	22	22.9
Print-rich environment	14	14.6	24	25.0	33	34.4	25	26.0
Letter name recognition	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	96	100.0
Letter sound recognition	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	96	100.0
Capital and lowercase letter recognition	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	96	100.0
Syllable decoding	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	96	100.0
Word decoding	0	0.0	0	0.0	34	35.4	62	64.6
Phrase decoding	0	0.0	13	13.5	30	31.3	53	55.2
Sentence decoding	19	19.8	11	11.5	42	43.8	24	25.0
Encoding (spelling/writing)	16	16.7	26	27.1	36	37.5	18	18.8
Reading fluency training	24	25.0	36	37.5	21	21.9	15	15.6
Reading comprehension	29	30.2	31	32.3	23	24.0	13	13.5
Independent Story Book Reading	22	22.9	54	56.3	16	16.7	4	4.2
Prewriting practice	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	4.2	92	95.8
Writing (Copy) letter	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	96	100.0
Writing (Copy) word	0	0.0	0	0.0	14	14.6	82	85.4
Spelling of letter based on letter name	18	18.8	27	28.1	28	29.2	23	24.0
Spelling of words	7	7.3	36	37.5	33	34.4	20	20.8
Spelling of letter based on letter sound	84	87.5	7	7.3	3	3.13	2	2.1
*Intentional Writing (memo, shopping list)	12	12.5	38	39.6	30	31.3	16	16.7
Developing interest in reading & writing	0	0.0	36	37.5	34	35.4	26	27.1

Table 3 shows the frequency and percentages of teachers reported extent to teaching strategies focus for literacy instruction. The results showed that main strategy focus of most teachers included repetition and drills (96.9%), reading aloud (95.8%), reading after teacher (92.7%) and matching words with pictures (67.7%). A large number of the teachers reported using stories (75.0%), songs or music (71.9%), coloured reading materials (63.6%), print-rich environment (60.4%) and multisensory approach (56.3%) in their literacy instruction.

On the other hand, more than half of the teachers reported never use strategies like movement (60.4%), association (59.4%) and imagination or visualization (57.3%) in their literacy instruction. Majority of the teachers also reported little or no focus on strategies such as using authentic reading materials (77.1%), reading own selected story books (70.9%), and parental involvement (74.0%).

7.1 Perceived Factors Contributing to the Success in Literacy Instruction

The open-ended respond item about the perceived factors contributing to the success or effectiveness in literacy instruction were analysed by examining patterns and trends in the responses so that they reach certain conclusions. The most prevalent theme raised was parental support and involvement. Comments like “parents who guide the child at home” (*ibu bapa turut membimbing anak di rumah*) and “parents who cares (*ibu bapa yang mengambil berat*) were some examples that illustrated the point. Teacher’s accumulated teaching experience was another common factor raised by teachers as contributing factor for successful literacy instruction. Typical comments like “from the experience throughout the years of teaching” (*pengalaman mengajar*). A number of respondents reported “adequate fund for materials and resources” (*peruntukan untuk bahan dan sumber*) as the success factor. Other themes include opportunities of professional training and courses, support from administration, peer (colleague) support and special reading programmes.

Table 3 The number and percentage of teachers reported literacy focus strategies (n=96)

Literacy Teaching Strategies	Never		Little Focus		Some Focus		Main Focus	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Repetition and drills	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	3.13	93	96.9
Reading aloud	0	0.0	2	2.1	2	2.08	92	95.8
Reading after teacher	0	0.0	3	3.1	4	4.17	89	92.7
Matching words with pictures	0	0.0	12	12.5	19	19.8	65	67.7
Using stories	0	0.0	24	25.0	46	47.9	26	27.1
Using songs/music	2	2.1	25	26.0	43	44.8	26	27.1
Using colours in reading materials	8	8.3	27	28.1	42	43.8	19	19.8
Preparing print-rich environment	14	14.6	24	25.0	33	34.4	25	26.0
Using multisensory (at least three)	19	19.8	23	24.0	30	31.3	24	25.0
Using games	9	9.4	38	39.6	27	28.1	22	22.9
Using humour	4	4.2	33	34.4	30	31.3	29	30.2
Showing relevance in literacy learning	12	12.5	31	32.3	29	30.2	24	25.0
Using movement (action, etc)	58	60.4	18	18.8	12	12.5	8	8.3
Using association	57	59.4	25	26.0	12	12.5	2	2.1
Using imagination or visualisation	55	57.3	28	29.2	9	9.38	4	4.2
Reading own selected story books	45	46.9	23	24.0	15	15.6	13	13.5
Using authentic text materials	47	49.0	27	28.1	14	14.6	8	8.3
Safe and non-threatening environment	8	8.3	21	21.9	42	43.8	25	26.0
Involving parents in literacy instruction	47	49.0	24	25.0	25	26	0	0.0

7.2 Perceived Factors Contributing to Challenges and Problems in Literacy Instruction

There is more variety of responses for this open-ended item than the previous one. From the responses, more than half of the respondents mentioned time constraint as contributing factor. Comments such as “busy routine” (*kesibukan rutin*) and “time constraint” (*kekangan masa*) are examples of the typical comments. Other equally ubiquitous themes are insufficient disciplinary knowledge or skill such as “needs to be more knowledgeable about effective methods” (*perlu lebih pengetahuan tentang kaedah berkesan*), “lack skills to support pupils with reading difficulty” (*kurang kemahiran membantu murid bermasalah membaca*), large class size, and pupils with learning or behavioural problem. Other common themes raised are unmotivated pupils, insufficient resources or materials, and lack of support from parents. Some respondents also reported stress due to expectation from primary school teachers’ or parents’ and literacy screening in Year 1. A few respondents reported lack of support from administrators.

■8.0 DISCUSSION

In this study, teachers' implicit beliefs are reflected in self-reported choice of content focus, resources used and strategies employed in instructional practice. The findings on the literacy practice of this sample of teachers reflect the most common practice in Malaysia (Naimah *et al.*, 2011) although this is not deemed to be the best approach. It demonstrates an emphasis towards explicit early literacy instruction geared at alphabetic code (letter naming, letter sound and capital and small letters), alphabetic principle (syllable decoding) and writing skill (copying letter). This trend is not surprising as the alphabet method, which focuses on letter name knowledge and syllable blending, is a conventional way of learning Malay language.

However, this approach requires the memorization of naming the alphabets and combination of alphabets which is meaningless to the children. It calls for the strong memory for seeing and listening, the ability of receiving abstract ideas, high mental and emotional maturity and intelligence (Isahak, 1990). Using this approach, children not only need to know the names and sounds of every letter, but also need to master the skill to segment the word into syllables and recall all the spelt syllables to form a word. This inevitably slows down the reading process and children who are less cognitively matured find it hard to memorise the abstract symbols. When the reading process is impeded, the enjoyment of reading is deprived.

On the other hand, majority of the teachers did not emphasize on the phonological awareness and phonemic awareness skills which form an integral part in early literacy skills of an alphabetic language like Malay (segmenting of sounds, 99.0%; blending of sounds, 93.8%; final sounds identification, 53.1%). The findings reflected a lack of linguistic knowledge of this sample of teachers when they did not take advantage of the orthographic transparency of the language. Written Malay follows the alphabetic writing system and thus it uses alphabetic codes to represent the spoken Malay and its constituent sounds. It is thus important for children to be taught explicitly to hear the sounds, to segment the sounds and to understand that the sounds have letter representations, irrespective of its position in a word.

This knowledge and understanding of the structure of Malay orthography is essential as this will provide insight to corresponding effective instruction which may help the young learners to master the decoding skill with ease. The finding also showed an emphasis on learning of syllables as basic sound units in decoding. This is understandable as it is probably due to the salient nature of syllables in Malay which are more easily accessible phonetically as compared to the more abstract phonemes (Lee, 2008). Most of the original Malay words are either bi- or multisyllabic but compared to English, Malay language has a less complicated syllable structure (Isahak, 1990). Unlike English with a lot of blends, consonant clusters and complicated vowel graphemes, the original Malay words are typically made up of four patterns of syllable structures: V, VC, VC and CVC (Hamdan, 1988). In other words, Malay is a consistent alphabetic orthography with complex syllable structures (Lee & Wheldall, 2011). The orthography is consistent and grapheme-phoneme correspondences are systematic and almost accurate.

In addition, majority of the respondents also chose to focus on the mechanical or physical aspect of writing (copying) rather than the function of writing (invented spelling and intentional writing). Spelling is an encoding skill of using grapheme to represent the phoneme. Ehri (2000) claims that children's spelling of words influences their sound segmentation ability. This view shows the inter-dependent relationship between phonemic knowledge and spelling. Therefore, Vacca *et al.*, (2009) suggested that phonics instruction needs to include spelling-based strategies.

Most of the teachers (62.5%) also show little or no focus on reading fluency (automaticity), the ability to read a word without the need to consciously decode or with noticeable cognitive or mental effort (Scarborough, 2009). However, sight word reading training is important as it frees resources to process meaning which contributes to reading fluency and comprehension (Fox, 2008). The finding shows the lack of knowledge in automatic word recognition skill which is essential for effective reading comprehension.

Moreover, most teachers only chose to place some (35.4%) or little focus (37.5%) in developing interest in reading and writing. Motivated children show engagement in literacy activities whereas the disengaged and resistant literacy learners have lower self concept and efficacy beliefs in literacy (Byrnes & Wasik, 2009; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). As a result, they lose the disposition or interest in literacy learning. Thus, inculcating the interest and motivation in literacy learning should be given equal, if not more, emphasis.

In addition to content focus which reflects teachers' implicit beliefs in literacy instruction, pedagogical strategies also reflects teachers' competence and disciplinary knowledge. Effective literacy instruction involves effective use of high-interest sources and authentic reading and writing materials to maintain student attention and connect the relevance of learning so that literacy learning is meaningful and enjoyable.

Findings from this study show that most of the respondents employ the conventional method of spelling (verbally), pupils reading after teachers (92.7%), reading aloud (95.8%) and memorizing the syllable sounds through a lot of drilling practice (96.9%). This may burden the children with hundreds of spelling patterns (Othman, 2004) and make the decoding process a daunting task especially for children with phonological memory deficiency.

Literacy can be taught in interesting and innovative ways, using a variety of ways and means according to pupils' needs and learning styles. However, the findings showed great dependence of the respondents on drilling practice with some focus of using stories, songs or music, colours in reading materials and multisensory activities. A large number of teachers reported some or little focus in using games, humour and showing relevance in literacy learning. Nevertheless, more than half of the teachers had never used movement, association, imagination strategies in literacy instruction which are found to be the natural brain way of learning (Caine *et al.*, 2009). Teachers should teach to individual differences, diversifying teaching strategies and maximizing the brain's natural learning process (Jensen, 2008; Sprenger, 2010; Willis, 2009).

In brief, the self-reported instructional practice reflects that majority of respondents held a more conventional way of literacy instruction approach. Moreover, there was a tendency of too much emphasis on the form rather than the function of literacy, demonstrated by the lack of focus in independent reading and intentional writing. Similar to other research studies on teachers' knowledge and practices in early literacy instruction (Bos *et al.*, 2001; Cunningham *et al.*, 2004), the respondents lacked knowledge of the linguistic structures and pedagogical practices.

The open-ended questions concerning the perceived factors contributing to the success and challenge in literacy instruction were in congruence with results on the instructional practice, demonstrating the lack of disciplinary knowledge and skills in instruction and teaching pupils with learning or literacy difficulty. This calls for in-service professional development programme about the latest research in early literacy instruction so that they acquire the necessary prerequisite knowledge (Cunningham *et al.*, 2009). This is a feasible move as

research shows that teachers' beliefs were able to change when they became more knowledgeable about recent research in the field (Brady *et al.*, 2009).

■9.0 STUDY LIMITATION AND FUTURE DIRECTION

Although the descriptive findings in this study provide insights into the practice of preschool teachers in literacy instruction, it is important to acknowledge the limitations in the study. The sample in this preliminary study is based on convenient sampling and therefore the study does not aim to generalize but provide an insight into the general practice of preschool teachers. Future research should involve a more stratified random sample in terms of location, preschool type, teachers' qualification and experience, teachers' pre-service and in-service training so that generalization can be made for a broader population about the literacy practice in preschools.

In addition, future studies can compare effective teachers with control group on the differences in literacy instructional practice based on measures on pupils' literacy outcomes. Studies can also be directed towards gaining understanding about the relationship between teachers' linguistic and pedagogical knowledge with their instructional practice.

■10.0 CONCLUSION

All children are entitled to the best literacy instructional practices for literacy learning. Understanding the literacy instructional practices of the preschool teachers is important so that intervention could be designed and planned to support the teaching and learning process. Early intervention in kindergarten is exponentially more successful than later remediation. Effective instruction that utilizes best practices in literacy instruction and intervention at early age is essential to ensure enriched literacy experiences of all children. Therefore, teachers must be cognizant of the beliefs that they hold concerning literacy instruction so that they can monitor and self regulate their instructional practices.

In conclusion, a competent early literacy educator should be equipped with an extensive disciplinary knowledge, a repertoire of effective teaching strategies and decision making and problem solving skills to cater to children's needs. Through proper training and support, preschool teachers can acquire the expertise in literacy instruction and thus be successful in promoting literacy skills and motivation of young children.

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