

PRESCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHERS' PRACTICES IN EARLY LITERACY INSTRUCTION: A  
MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

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# **Preschool English Teachers' Practices in Early Literacy Instruction: A Multiple Case Study**

## **ABSTRACT**

The most important years of learning begin at birth. During these early years, a human being is capable of absorbing more information at a time than they will ever be able to gain. The practices preschool teachers implement in their classrooms are vital in children's early literacy development. Preschool teachers are always expected to implement research-based literacy practices to make sure children are ready to learn when they enter school.

This qualitative case study intended to address four non-native in-service preschool English teachers' practices in early literacy instruction. These teachers were selected from two preschools in the northwest of Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. Data collection involved field notes and videotaping of classroom practices along with interviews and documents from ten full English lesson observations in each classroom. Data analysis began with identifying teachers' practices. Teaching techniques the teachers used as they set about trying to implement these practices were then examined across a range of instructional events. The data record was also examined to see how these teachers promote social interaction in their classrooms. From these analyses, a case study of each teacher's English literacy practices was developed. A final step involved conducting a cross-case analysis.

The major contributions of the study related to the vitality of the professional development and curriculum in early childhood education in providing support for teachers' efforts as well as the importance of teacher education training programs in preparing preschool teachers to be able to explore the key elements of early English

literacy and its context and consequently deliver appropriate instruction in classrooms. In other words, through proper training and support, preschool teachers can attain the proficiency in literacy instruction and thus be successful in boosting early literacy skills and motivation of young children. Besides, conducting this research has indicated that curriculum can be a useful tool and guide in helping teachers focus instruction on significant goals. However, curriculum is not helpful unless teachers understand it and know how to use and implement it in actual practices. They are required to comprehend how these practices can be implemented to enhance or build suitable and efficient literacy experiences for young children in their early years.

It is hoped that the current study offers some valuable information and understanding about ways preschool teachers provide educational opportunities to young children and how they implement social interaction in their classrooms to help children develop early English literacy. It also intended to offer insights on how to train preschool teachers so that they become competent in early English literacy instruction.

**Key Terms:** *Preschool, Early Literacy Instruction, Practices, Social Interaction, Multiple Case Study*

## **Amalan Guru Prasekolah Bahasa Inggeris dalam Pengajaran Literasi Awal:**

### **Kajian Kes Pelbagai**

#### **ABSTRAK**

Tahun-tahun utama bagi pembelajaran bermula ketika kelahiran. Pada tahun-tahun awal ini, seseorang manusia boleh menerima banyak maklumat pada satu masa, yang tak mungkin dikuasai pada tahap lain.

Amalan guru prasekolah di dalam bilik darjah adalah penting bagi perkembangan literasi awal kanak-kanak. Guru prasekolah dijangka akan mengimplementasi amalan literasi berasaskan kajian bagi memastikan kanak-kanak bersedia untuk belajar apabila memasuki sekolah.

Kajian kes kualitatif ini berkaitan amalan pengajaran literasi awal empat guru Bahasa Inggeris prasekolah bukan native. Pengumpulan data melibatkan nota lapangan dan rekod video amalan di bilik darjah bersama dengan temuduga dan dokumen daripada 10 pemerhatian pengajaran Bahasa Inggeris bagi setiap bilik darjah. Analisa bermula dengan mengenalpastian amalan guru. Teknik pengajaran yang digunakan guru ketika cuba mengimplementasikan amalan diperiksa di antara aktiviti-aktiviti pengajaran. Rekod data juga diperiksa untuk melihat bagaimana guru menggalakkan interaksi sosial di dalam bilik darjah. Dari analisa ini, satu kajian kes bagi setiap amalan literasi bahasa Inggeris setiap guru dibina. Langkah terakhir merupakan analisa kes bersilang.

Sumbangan utama kajian yang berkaitan dengan daya hidup pembangunan profesional dan kurikulum dalam pendidikan awal kanak-kanak dalam menyediakan sokongan untuk usaha guru serta kepentingan program latihan pendidikan guru

dalam menyediakan guru-guru prasekolah untuk dapat meneroka elemen penting dalam awal literasi bahasa Inggeris dan konteksnya dan seterusnya menyampaikan arahan yang sesuai dalam bilik darjah. Dalam erti kata lain, melalui latihan dan sokongan, guru prasekolah dapat mencapai kemahiran dalam pengajaran literasi dan dengan itu berjaya dalam meningkatkan kemahiran literasi awal dan motivasi kanak-kanak. Selain itu, menjalankan kajian ini telah menunjukkan bahawa kurikulum boleh menjadi alat yang berguna dan panduan dalam membantu guru-guru menumpukan arahan kepada matlamat yang ketara. Walau bagaimanapun, kurikulum tidak berguna kecuali guru memahami dan tahu bagaimana untuk menggunakan dan melaksanakannya dalam amalan sebenar. Mereka dikehendaki untuk memahami bagaimana amalan-amalan ini dapat dilaksanakan untuk meningkatkan atau membina pengalaman literasi yang sesuai dan berkesan untuk kanak-kanak pada tahun-tahun awal mereka.

Diharapkan kajian ini memberikan maklumat berguna dan pemahaman berkenaan cara guru prasekolah memberikan peluang kepada kanak-kanak dan cara mereka implementasi interaksi sosial di bilik darjah bagi membantu kanak-kanak mengembangkan literasi awal bahasa Inggeris. Ia juga bertujuan memberikan pemahaman mendalam dalam cara untuk melatih guru prasekolah supaya mahir dalam pengajaran literasi awal bahasa Inggeris.

**Kata Kunci:** Prasekolah, pengajaran literasi awal, amalan, interaksi sosial, kajian kes pelbagai

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Introduction of the Study**

The present study intends to address preschool English teachers' practices in early literacy instruction. In general, literacy is an ongoing process starting at birth which includes a child learning to read and write (Strickland et al., 2004). More specifically, early literacy is described as the developmental period of literacy acquisition in which children acquire significant precursory skills in reading and writing (Justice, 2006a) therefore, the early years of childhood education play an important role for literacy development.

Today, preschool teachers are instructing a various number of children that many of whom are coming from homes where English is not the first language. In light of this rising number of English Language Learners (ELLs) in preschools, researchers have examined techniques or methods to enhance the development of early language and literacy in ELLs. Preschool teachers have a substantial effect on the development of literacy in children as well. They actually "have the power to influence early literacy skill development and potentially impact children's later success in school" (Dennis & Horn, 2011, p.30). Similarly, teachers who teach English as a second language (ESL) are the school educators who have the most rigorous interaction and communication with ELLs at their early stage of school acculturation and are in charge of the educational programming of ELLs at the beginner stage of school modification (Roessingh, 2006).

In addition, the early literacy instruction preschool teachers implement in their classrooms are vital in their students' literacy development as Yunus, Hashim, Lah, Ahmad and Ahmad (2009) argued, the role of a preschool teacher is "an

implementer of instruction, whereby teachers have to prepare lesson plans, conduct teaching activities and make wise decisions about strategies and methods they will use to help children achieve their learning goals” (p.653). Hence, early literacy instruction involves and is comprised of literacy practices and activities or strategies preschool teachers implement in their classrooms.

By and large, practices “are culturally shaped, normalized and repeated” ways of doing things that are “largely invisible to the insider of a group” (Tan & Miller, 2007, p.25). They are processes that “connect people with one another, and they include shared cognitions represented in ideologies and social identities” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p.8). In particular, “best practices in emergent literacy instruction in early childhood settings” are comprised of “strategies that support skill development in five key emergent: literacy areas such as phonemic awareness, word recognition, concepts about print, alphabetic principle, and comprehension” (Parette, Hourcade, Dinelli & Boeckmann, 2009, p.356). And as Parette et al. (2009) state, “effective emergent literacy programs in early childhood education seek to incorporate these concepts and practices” (p.356).

With this in mind and in order to provide effective or efficient preschool classrooms, teachers need a variety of instructional methods and strategies to meet the students’ diverse needs for emotional, cognitive and social development. Correspondingly, incorporating direct instruction with quality instruction coupled with developmentally appropriate practices can provide opportunities for children to engage in a multitude of hands-on literacy activities and tasks which support the development of the above needs.



## **Background of the Study**

The term 'early literacy' is used to describe the knowledge of children in reading and writing before they start formal education at school. More specifically, it is a process that takes place gradually over time since childbirth until the child is capable of reading and writing conventionally (Fern and Jiar, 2012). Over time a great number of researches have expanded the concept of early literacy and stated that the child's literacy development can be influenced by a number of factors for example, social communications with adults, exposure to early literacy materials together with the use of engaged learning activities or tasks. Indeed preschool teachers can provide children with these opportunities "through modeling, and developing rules and schedules in the classroom that allow the children to speak and interact with one another while interacting with the physical environment and teacher developed activities" (Burr, 2013, p.25). In effect, emergent literacy has been defined and referred to as "the emergence of literacy-related behaviors as a result of both social interaction and direct instruction. Initially, proponents of the emergent literacy perspective acknowledged social interaction as the means by which children's early literacy emerges" (Sandvik, Van Daal & Ader, 2014, p.30).

However, students who begin their literacy education in two languages simultaneously may face some challenges. These children can have a language processing problem (Dufresne & Masny, 2006). When they come into preschool, they might regularly fall behind their classmates in the skills that are essential to learn to begin reading and writing, with the variation that lasts all through their school years. They are sometimes not able to join their peers in the classroom and often feel discouraged during group activities (Chipman & Roy, 2005). Shaari and Ahmad (2016) referred to a study by Majzub and Rashid in which it was confirmed

that the majority of children are still challenging to master reading and writing as they enter primary school. Similarly, Ida Fatimawati (as cited in Fahim & Dhamotharan, 2016) confirms that students who were taught English for 11 years in schools, they still had problems in language proficiency.

In reality, most students who receive instructions in two languages are not equally proficient in both, and their writing or reading skills will probably reflect this. In addition, preschools do intend to prepare children to enter school; however, Shaari and Ahmad (2016) assert that “children are not fully ready for school” (p.16). This shows “that the children’s learning and developmental milestones during preschool years are not fully achieved as targeted” (Shaari & Ahmad, 2016, p.16). It is therefore essential to consider the significance of early childhood curriculum in leading preschool teachers to implement an effective early language and literacy instruction. Not to mention, a more academic focus in preschool curricula within a developmentally appropriate framework requires teachers to focus their instruction and practices on particular early literacy skills and concepts while being responsive to children and their individual needs (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000). As a result, teachers’ attending teacher education programs consistently together with a structured curriculum and specifying what preschool English teachers can teach or implement in their practices and instruction might help them to have a potentially productive effect on the early literacy growth of children.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Education is considered to be one of the most influential components or factors for bringing about changes to achieve sustainable development in students’ learning (Educational Planning and Research Division, 2008). In particular, early education can have a significant effect in children’s later academic success as well as

social achievement as preschool is the first place children may attend after home. Preschool education in Malaysia is mostly provided by private for-profit preschools. On the other hand, some preschools are managed by the government or religious groups. And some elementary schools have adhered preschool divisions.

In 2010, the Malaysia Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced the National Preschool Curriculum (NPC) that all preschools including public and private need to comply with (Puteh & Ali, 2013). The National Preschool Curriculum in Malaysia is prepared according to the principles of *Rukun Negara* which means ‘National Principles’ and it is the Malaysian declaration of national philosophy and the National Philosophy of Education.

The National Preschool Curriculum was later reviewed in 2017 (Curriculum Development Division, 2017) which mainly aims to help children develop a number of cognitive skills in order to be able to think, face challenges and solve problems in various social contexts. It also intends to encourage children to get ready for further learning. The emphasis of pedagogy based on National Preschool Curriculum is on various teaching and learning strategies which focuses on fun learning. Besides, it focuses on child-centered learning and teaching activities that require problem solving and making decisions (Puteh & Ali, 2013). Additionally, teachers should plan classroom activities based on children’s ideas (Efrat, 2015).

Likewise, the objectives of the National Preschool Curriculum (NPC) is for children to develop several (a) social skills for instance, children need to develop the ability to communicate and socialize with confidence and develop positive relationship with adults and peers, compete and make effort to achieve their goal, as well as share feelings and collaborate with others, (b) intellectual skills, for example, children should acquire the basic skills in solving problems in everyday life and be

able to communicate in English, (c) physical skills for instance, children should attain basic physical skills and be able to perform good health practices. They also need to subsequently master basic psychomotor skills, fine motor skills and gross motor skills, (d) spiritual skills for example, children should be able to adopt values or ethics, and (e) aesthetic values for example, creativity and appreciation in their everyday lives. Children should have aesthetics and creativity to be able to appreciate natural beauty and cultural heritage surrounding them (Malaysian International ECEC Conference, 2009).

As a matter of fact, the NPC “promotes the holistic intellectual, languages, social, art and creativity, psychomotor, cognitive and spiritual development of the children” (Ministry of Education, 2003, p.5). It indeed intends to promote the attainment of “basic skills such as socialization process and personality development as well” (Ministry of Education, 2004, p.20). In other words, according to Ministry of Education (2004), a number of main literacy skills need to be taught at this level to children and these skills comprised of communication and social skills coupled with other skills such as reading, writing and counting in order to help children prepare for primary schooling. Efrat (2015) also states that preschool education is aimed to guide children to be able to take part and involve in their community successfully and be capable of thinking critically and independently. Growth in language and employing English language in daily life in alignment with its position as the second or foreign language is another skill children are required to obtain based on the curriculum program and approach.

According to the Ministry of Education (2003), “learning through play, thematic approach, integrated approach and information technology and communication” is considered to be well supported as these approaches in teaching

and learning may help young children develop the required skills (p.70). To put it another way, learning theories adopted in the National Preschool Curriculum are those of constructivism and discovery inquiry where children interact with environment, teachers, and classmates, and successively build their own understanding and making sense of things surrounding them as suggested by Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky (1978) chiefly stressed that with the help of social interaction, for example help from a mentor or expert other, children can perceive concepts and schemes that they are not capable of understanding them on their own. Tang, Hashim and Yunus (2011) also confirmed in their study that preschool curriculum in Malaysia focuses on the process of socialization and the growth of personality. "In early childhood, language and literacy development is acquired through social interactions" (Puteh & Ali, 2013, p. 83). Puteh and Ali (2013) agree that "by interacting with peers and adults, a child learns to develop language skills" (p.83). Moreover, Malaysian preschool curriculum puts emphasis on the preparation of children for primary schooling.

Regarding preschool teachers' early instruction, "we know that how teachers practice instruction is as important as the content they cover, and that ongoing professional development and support are crucial to ensuring that all teachers know how to implement excellent literacy instruction" (Snow, Griffin, Burns, and the NAE Subcommittee on Teaching Reading cited in Porche, Pallante & Snow, 2012, p.650). It is therefore critical to consider the role of preschool teachers and their practices in promoting the development of early literacy in children and this role therefore should be identified and expanded for early childhood education curriculum.

Surprisingly, Henrichsen (2010) argues that a large number of ESL teachers are not professionally prepared to teach second language learners. "Most local ESL

teachers have little experience working with ELLs, learning a second language, and working with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds” (Pray & Sherry, 2010, p.217). Similarly, Dickinson and McCabe (cited in Scull, Brown & Deans, 2009) confirm that teachers are uncertain of how to construe literacy and how to decode their existing knowledge and teaching strategies into practice. Tang et al. (2011) in a study in Malaysia indicated that majority of preschool teachers were of low or average quality. They stated that this can be inferred that low quality teachers lack both the content knowledge and the pedagogical skills. Equally important, Paciga, Hoffman and Teale (2011) worry that drill-and-skill activities and practices replace some richer language and literacy activities. They actually signal caution as at times when more drill-and-skill activities take the place of authenticity, children’s play and engagement lessen. This is a cause for worry.

In another study by Teale, Hoffman and Paciga (2010), the first concern faced was the belief that a number of instructional recommendations influenced and suggested by National Early Literacy Panel were inadequately explained “and overly narrow with respect to what preschool teachers should be focusing on instructionally in early literacy” (p.311). As a result, “basing curriculum and instruction on these recommendations can result in literacy teaching that is not” extremely efficient for three, four, and five-year-old children (Teale et al., 2010, p.311). By all means, there is no mention of how teachers should deliver efficient literacy instruction and practices in classroom. In other words, “what does not exist in the recommendations is a sense of early childhood curriculum, of how early language and literacy instruction functions in the larger context of an overall cohesive framework or thematic focus for children” (Teale et al., 2010, p.314).

By the same token, in a different study by Gutiérrez, Zepeda and Castro (2010), it was assured that what is effective pedagogy and practice for Dual Language Learners (DLLs) remains an unanswered empirical question. There are indeed a few studies that evaluate the effectiveness of instructional practices in promoting early literacy skills in children who are learning English language (Lonigan & Shanahan 2010). Ultimately, these studies refer to the vitality of preschool curriculum for children's literacy development. Therefore, more studies need to be carried out on the matter. More studies can be carried out though, it is important to strategically plan for a study that investigates what is popular and applied in preschools in Malaysia.

Along with the National Preschool Curriculum in Malaysia which is prepared according to the principles of *Rukun Negara*, National Principles, and the National Philosophy of Education that all public and private preschools are required to follow, two popular preschool curricula are used in most private preschools in Malaysia. These two programs include Montessori and International Preschool Curriculum (IPC) (Belle, 2016).

Montessori and IPC curricula both consider social interaction and play crucial in their teaching philosophy to enhance the early literacy development in young children. They both intend to help children develop social skills in order to be able to communicate with others through language particularly, English language. The classrooms in both Montessori and IPC preschools in the current study are staffed by various young certified teachers with a class size of no more than fifteen students. They indeed regard promoting and teaching social skills as essential on the development of children's early literacy knowledge and skill. And to achieve this,

teachers in these preschools need to implement various practices or activities on the key early English literacy skills.

On the contrary, it is actually recognized that the actual practices of preschool teachers contradict with the curriculum standards and objectives. Justice, Mashburn, Hamre and Pianta (as cited in Rohde, 2015) confirm that “little instruction in Emergent Literacy (EL) or any of the individual components of EL is happening in preschool classrooms” (p.2). In addition, in a study by Tang et al. (2011) conducted in Malaysia, it was observed that teachers prepared too brief lesson plans and rarely any interactive activities were recorded. In other words, the preparation and implementation of the lessons by teachers were of low quality (Tang et al. 2011). Additionally, Fern and Jiar (2012) assert that teachers lack variety of professional development fundamentals, struggle with inadequate linguistic knowledge and poor pedagogical skills. Given these points, it can be implied that there may be a contradiction between preschool curriculum standards focusing on social interaction between teacher and children (and the role of play) along with various literacy activities and the actual practices that preschool teachers implement in their classrooms.

Equally important, Jensen (2011) refers to the issue that carrying out early literacy teaching with regard to the policy domains or school effectiveness, curricula and indicators, and the children’s own perceptions seems a real challenge. Therefore, the current study aims to fill the gap in literature which is examining teachers’ practices to provide effective early English language and literacy instruction for ELLs and specifying the way preschool teachers can implement social interaction in practice. As Phoon, Abdullah and Abdullah (2013) confirm, it is necessary to investigate what is really happening on the actual contexts and what is required to be



implemented to assure that encouraging learning environment is provided in preschool classrooms.

### **The Purpose and Objectives of the Study**

The present study aimed to examine the instructional practices, activities and tasks needed to enhance/and/or promote the development of early English literacy in English as a Second Language learners. Examination of the instructional practices used by early childhood English teachers would potentially provide insights into the early English literacy instructional process.

In particular, the purpose of this study was to examine the early English literacy practices of four non-native in-service preschool teachers in the context of Malaysia through the association of strategies and approaches they applied in their classrooms. It also intended to investigate how these preschool teachers implemented social interaction in their practices. In fact, gaining an understanding of the preschool teachers' actual practices in early English literacy helps teachers open up the world of communication for students by expanding the potential for students to share thoughts and needs (Shagoury, 2009). As a result, to meet the above purposes, the specific objectives of the present study are:

1. To examine what practices are applied by preschool teachers in early English literacy instruction.
2. To investigate how preschool teachers implement social interaction in practice.

### **Research Questions**

By exploring what practices preschool teachers implemented in their classrooms and examining how they promoted the development of social skills in

children, the researcher would gain a clear picture of strategies and activities provided in preschools and identify efficient practices for the development of early English literacy and social interaction for children.

Given the acknowledgement of the preschool teachers' practices and their role in early literacy instruction specifically early English literacy, investigation in this area is not only favorable, but at this junction, is warranted. Therefore, the following questions guided the current research:

1. What practices are applied by preschool teachers in early English literacy instruction?
2. How do preschool teachers implement social interaction in practice?

### **Theoretical Framework**

An increasing number of studies have investigated the relation and the link between early literacy and the acquisition of conventional literacy. These studies have focused on detecting individual skills that develop during the early stages of the emergent literacy continuum, and have examined their predictive significance for later reading and writing. There are mainly four major literacy components and skills that repeatedly surface in the literature and have been identified as particularly significant in the study of emergent literacy. They consist of alphabet knowledge, oral language skills, phonological awareness, and print awareness (see Regalado, Goldenberg & Appel, 2001, Parette et al., 2009; Piasta, 2014 & Rohde, 2015).

Nevertheless, without examples or models to help teachers identify what the policies, standards or curriculum are calling for in practice, teachers remain unsure of how to teach early literacy and the corresponding skills through developmentally appropriate practice and activities. In fact, Rohde (2015) presented a Comprehensive

Emergent Literacy Model to make sure that children acquire all required primary “skills and awareness they will need to become successful readers and writers” (p.1). This model relates the components of early literacy to the recommendations of three national organizations in Early Childhood Education: the International Reading Association, the National Association for the Education of Young Children and Head Start (Rohde, 2015).

This model entails three emergent literacy components that include print awareness, oral language and phonological awareness. In this model, Rohde (2015) tried to describe and analyze the relationships that exist between these three early literacy components while considering the importance of community, demographics and culture. This model indeed values the importance of each literacy component as well as the interactive nature of these components with one another. To explain, the next three paragraphs elaborate the Rohde’s (2015) comprehensive framework with its components in detail.

The first component in Rohde’s (2015) literacy model; phonological awareness is interpreted as the children’s capacity to distinguish and employ the language sound structure. Phonological awareness in this model includes skills such as rhyming, alliteration, blending and segmenting the sounds. Rhyming as one of the phonological skills is the awareness of the words that consist of different beginning phonemes yet the same shared stressed vowel and the following phonemes. The other skill, alliteration, on the other hand, is the knowledge and recognition of the words that have the same initial sounds. And the final skills of phonological awareness, blending and segmenting, refer to the children’s ability to combine small elements such as sounds, phonemes or syllables into a word and breaking a word into individual phonemes respectively. According to Rohde’s comprehensive model,

there is a link or connection between phonological awareness and listening comprehension. In fact, understanding words' sounds and identifying them can help children improve their listening comprehension skills.

Oral language, the second component of Rohde's (2015) literacy model, includes understanding and using semantics which is concerning the rules of the words' combination and their meanings, vocabulary, background knowledge, and communication, for example, relaying and receiving messages.

Print awareness, the last literacy component in Rohde's (2015) model, is divided into two sub constituents. The first one is alphabet knowledge which is defined as the children's ability to name letters, identify sounds and produce them. The second sub component is the notions of print, that is to say, awareness of print is children's understanding that print has various purposes and conveys a message. It also involves the children's ability to differentiate words from letters.

Beside these three main components, there are several other skills which overlap with these components. For instance, the correspondence between phonological awareness and print awareness is the skills of invented spelling and understanding the relationship between letters and sounds. Invented spelling is the process in which children spell unfamiliar words naturally. Similarly, Burns and Richgels (as cited in Ouellette & Sénéchal, 2008) claim that invented spelling results from children's experimentation with representing words in print.

On the other hand, the other two skills, oral language and print awareness in Rohde's (2015) model overlap with skills such as understanding syntax and using grammar. Oral language is related to print awareness concerning "the similarities and differences between the spoken and written word" (Rohde, 2015, p.6).



All things considered, the current study draws on the Comprehensive Emergent Literacy Model of Rohde (2015) since this research is intended to examine preschool teachers' practices through investigating how these teachers implemented instruction in early literacy components or skills in their classrooms in order to enhance the development of early literacy in young children.

As mentioned earlier, alphabet knowledge is considered a subcomponent of print awareness in Rohde's comprehensive literacy model. "Alphabet knowledge is sometimes combined with other print awareness skills or subsumed under the constructs of print concepts or print knowledge" (Townsend & Konold, 2010, p.117). Nevertheless, alphabet knowledge is a prerequisite and is fundamental to children's later reading success. Piasta (2014) asserted that children usually start learning alphabet before they enter school. They can develop this skill through interactions with books, games, songs and environmental print. Piasta (2014) also emphasized that the basic building blocks of English language are letters and their corresponding sounds. And for children to decode increasingly sophisticated print in alphabetic languages such as English, they must rely on the alphabetic principle. Similarly, Townsend and Konold (2010) confirmed that "to read in an alphabetic language, where sounds in speech are represented by symbols, children must learn and use the alphabetic principle" (p.116). Indeed, Caravolas (2004) completed this point that knowledge of the alphabetic principle is essential to reading and writing across alphabetic orthographies.

Likewise, a number of researches have verified the vitality of alphabet knowledge for reading accomplishment and have indicated that tests of alphabet knowledge can predict very much the children's later reading accomplishment (see Duncan & Seymour, 2000; Foy & Mann, 2006; Muter & Diethelm, 2001; Treiman &

Kessler, 2003; Vellutino & Scanlon, 2001). As a result, the present study investigated preschool teachers' practices on instructing phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness and oral language to augment the development of early literacy in children.

Additionally, it is important to highlight that language and literacy are social events that do not merely entail skills, knowledge and understanding, but also encompass compound interactions and responses. Literacy is in fact developed through the interactions in classroom discourse, family interaction and the larger community and culture exchanges. In the social constructivist model the relationship between the student and the teacher is necessary in the learning process. This is relevant to the present study, as the teacher-child interactions during instruction are considered important in providing high quality classroom and conducive literacy environment in Montessori and IPC teaching philosophy. This participation in interactions consequently has an important effect on the individual's sense of self as a reader and writer. McCabe (2005) noticed that preschool students with poor social skills continue to have major social, emotional and behavioral complications in middle school. Furthermore, research suggests that social development fosters learning and has a potentially significant effect on social behavior in the classroom (Nix, Bierman, Domitrovich, & Gill, 2013).

For these reasons, a high quality preschool would try to maximize the interaction between teacher and child. In fact, the preschool curriculum should emphasize on the development of both academic and social skills in children (Stockall, Dennis & Miller, 2012). The preschool is required to encourage active engagement with children as well and provide space for children to have nurturing and emotionally supportive relationships with peers and early childhood staff.

Therefore, this research is also informed by a social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978). This view emphasizes and highlights the critical role of the more knowledgeable other particularly, preschool teachers, in expediting learning. Vygotsky's theory is in line with the understanding that individuals' mental growth happens via interactions with people and their environment (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992). It is indeed via this interaction that students are able to attain the developmental early literacy skills, concepts, and knowledge needed for future literacy achievement. As a matter of fact, the quality of interaction occurs between teacher and student can determine the level of mastery in early literacy development that a student accomplishes.

Indeed the social constructivist lens is looked through in this study as the present research examines the practices of preschool teachers in the classroom and their social interactions with young children since both curricula in this study namely Montessori and IPC consider play and interaction as necessary in the development of early literacy in young children (Lillard, 2013).

To point out, Oldfather and Dahl (1994) maintain that the "most salient aspects of classroom culture for supporting student motivation relate to socially constructed beliefs about what constitutes learning" (p. 143). Lynch (2011) believes that the social constructivist view refers to "the need for preschool teachers to have awareness of children's knowledge and experiences in order to support further cognitive development" (p.330). Justice and Pullen (2003) agree that "emergent literacy is best represented as a sociocultural process whereby emergent literacy development is highly influenced by the social and cultural contexts in which children are reared" (p.99).



In general, Lev Vygotsky's (1978) work on children's language development has greatly influenced how educators understand language and literacy learning, and his theories continue to impact early childhood education and teachers' professional development. At the core of Vygotsky's theory is the idea that child development is the result of interactions between children and their social environment. Rowe (as cited in Kissel, Hansen, Tower & Lawrence, 2011) considers classroom as a social world and states that children's interactions shape both their writing and their literate identities.

The role of the teacher, in Vygotskian terms, is to firstly develop a strong relationship between oral and written language. A second element of Vygotsky's theory is that learning requires student interaction and engagement in activities, and that without the interaction and engagement, learning does not take place. Shared reading experiences are considered to be an example of a strategy to bridge children's life experiences while scaffolding their development of emergent literacy skills (Teale, 2003; van Kleeck, 2003), yet this connection to the child's knowledge base is surprisingly absent from many early childhood classrooms (Rothstein, 2004). Considering all the points, social interaction is hence the basis of early literacy instruction.

Another key point according to Rohde (2015) that must be underlined is that the existing models of early literacy mainly focus on discrete skills without considering literacy learning environment which involves social interaction (Mashburn et al., 2008). This is by and large a crucial gap that this study intends to fill.

All of the above mentioned influences or theories and their relationships to children's early English literacy development are illustrated in the theoretical framework for the present study, presented in Figure 1.2.

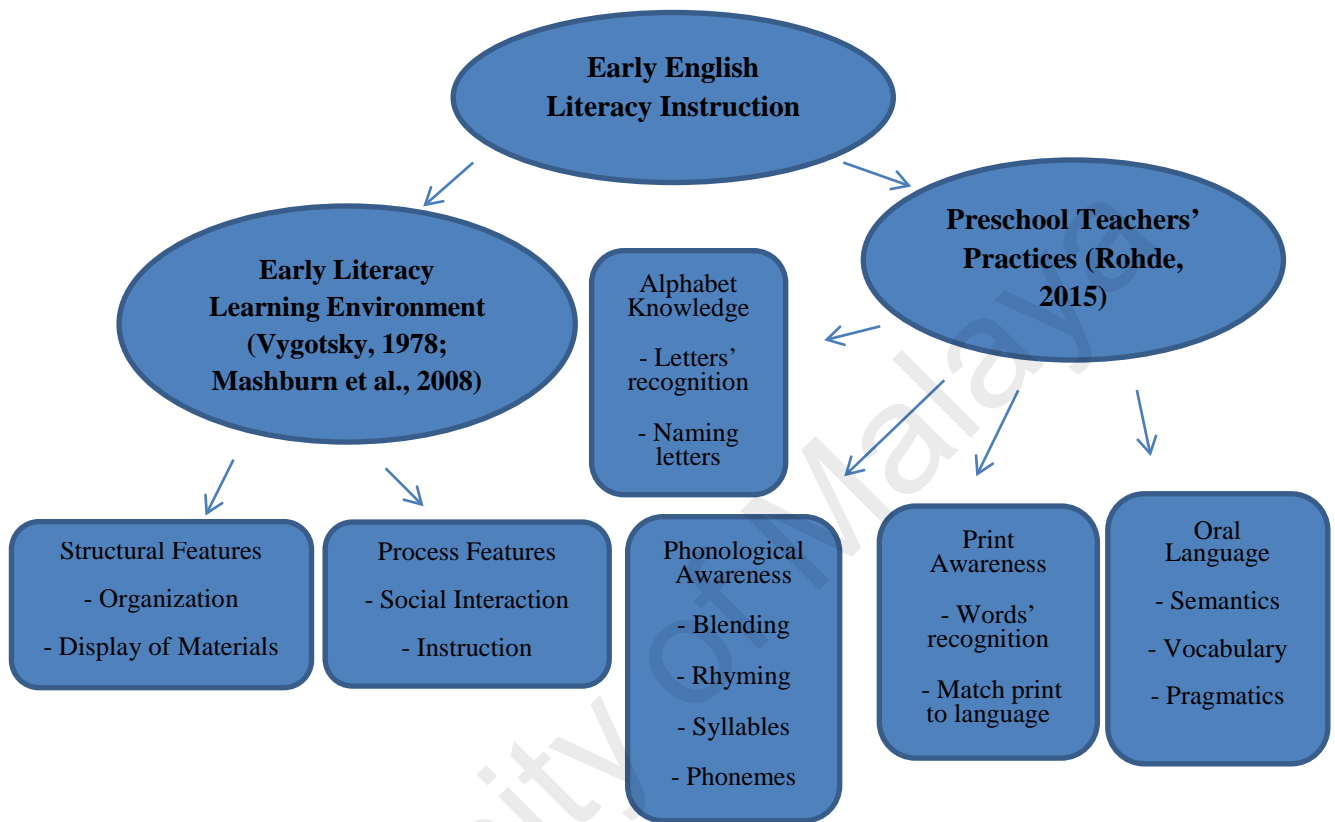


Figure 1.2. Theoretical Framework of Early English Literacy Instruction (Rohde, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978 & Mashburn et al., 2008)

As illustrated in the above model, early English literacy instruction is divided into two constituents: early literacy learning environment and preschool teachers' practices. Early literacy learning environment as the first component in this framework includes both structural features and process features (Mashburn et al., 2008). Structural features refer to the organization and display of early literacy materials throughout the classroom together with the delivery of early literacy

materials in the classroom. Process features of the literacy learning environment on the other hand, refer to the way the teacher supports children's literacy development through both interactions and instruction. They also concern the nature of teacher-student interactions and student-student interactions.

To point out, social interaction or development of social skills is the focus of the current study as both Montessori and IPC curricula standards and policy consider it prerequisite in their programmes and teaching approach. To support this, Vygotsky (1978) explains that children acquire new knowledge through communicating with others. Language which is one of the key early literacy skills is then the primary tool for the child to solve future problems and interact with people. It is also important to help children take part in decision making processes in everyday lives (Leinonen & Venninen, 2012). Vygotsky (1978) indicates that "all the higher functions originate as relationships between individuals" (p.57). In other words, social interaction involves learning through communication and working with peers. This process mainly occurs through the interplay of the child with a more capable peer or an adult. In fact, through collaboration between the adult and the child, the more experienced participant transmits knowledge of the child's culture to increase his or her understanding. Efrat (2015) also thinks that how teachers respect and believe in children's abilities to involve in their learning can help them develop communicational-social skills efficiently. However, some researchers such as Nyland and Smith (as cited in Leinonen and Venninen, 2012) state that "many children suffer from a lack of daily interactive moments, because their daily routines follow tightly scheduled timetables created by educators that offer children little opportunity to practice expressing their views" (p.467).

Preschool teachers' practices as the second component in the research framework in the current study include the way teachers support children's development in four key early literacy skills namely alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, print awareness and oral language. The following four paragraphs depict and describe each of these early literacy skills of the current study framework in detail.

The first subcomponent or skill in preschool teachers' practices, alphabet knowledge, refers to the ability to recognize, name and provide the sound of the alphabet letters (Drouin, Horner & Sondergeld, 2012). In other words, alphabet knowledge refers to the knowledge about both letter names and letter sounds. To explain, knowledge of letter names refers to the ability of children to distinguish and identify the letters of the alphabet while knowledge of letter sounds is the ability to identify and articulate the sounds that represent each letter of the alphabet. Dodd and Carr (2003) argue that knowledge of letter sounds depends on both knowledge of letter names and a degree of phoneme awareness. This can hence signify the importance of the development of phonological awareness.

Phonological awareness, the second subcomponent in the preschool teachers' practices, involves the children's awareness of sound features in spoken language (Frost, et al., 2009) including rhyming, blending and knowledge of syllables.

*Rhyming* words include different beginning phonemes with the same shared stressed vowel and subsequent phonemes for example, 'cat', 'bat', or, 'hat'. In early childhood curricula rhyming tasks can be seen in activities such as story books reading, nursery rhymes, poems, and music for children.

On the other hand, *blending*, as the other feature of sound awareness, is the ability of children to combine small elements such as syllables or phonemes into a

word. And *syllable* awareness on the other hand, is the ability to identify syllables in a word. To clarify, syllables are the units of speech consisting of a vowel nucleus that can be preceded and/or followed by a consonant or a consonant cluster for example, 'ba-by'. In fact, syllable pattern knowledge guides students to correctly decode or make sense of vowel sounds in words and word parts. Consciousness of the syllable patterns provides early readers with strategies to figure out the complex use and application of vowel sounds and letters. As a matter of fact, "children must be able to understand that letters in print stand for phonemes in speech and also map the letters to their associated sounds to learn to read and spell alphabetic texts" (Manolitsis & Tafa, 2011, p.28).

Therefore, phonemes can also be considered another constituent of phonological awareness. A phoneme is the smallest unit, or sound, that changes the meaning of the stimulus for instance, /p/ and /m/ as in 'pop' and 'mop'. Phonemic awareness is defined as the ability of the children to attend to and intentionally manipulate individual phonemes, or sounds, of spoken syllables or words.

The third subcomponent of the preschool teachers' practices in the study framework, print awareness, refers to a child's developing conscious awareness of print and its relationship to written language (Justice & Ezell, 2002). It also involves the concepts of print which ranges "from appreciating that print has different functions and that print carries a message, to knowing the differences between words and letters" (Rohde, 2015, p.6).

Lastly, oral language in this framework involves knowledge of vocabulary, semantics and pragmatics. The National Early Literacy Panel (Lonigan, Schatschneider, & Westberg, 2008) suggested that knowledge of vocabulary provides a foundation for subsequent literacy learning as oral language is dependent

upon vocabulary learning. Vocabulary instruction is when the reader is taught to interpret unknown words in text into spoken language, and the understanding that the forms in spoken language will be probably easier to comprehend (National Reading Panel, 2000). Semantics on the other hand, are the rules governing the meaning or content of words coupled with word combinations (Owens, 2008). And pragmatics as the last skill in oral language is described as the rules connected with language usage within a communicative and social setting. It includes the selection of apposite linguistic structure, use of languages structures consistent with presumed roles, and the use of ritualized structures (Owens, 2008).

### **Significance of the Study**

As a result of a relative increase in the number of early childhood education programs, and the growing number of young children joining these programs and being instructed at their significant and critical early years, a need for qualified preschool teachers has surfaced in the field. For example, Liu (2013) in a study, referred to the lack of professional development in some “English as a second language (ESL)” preschool teachers (p. 128). In fact, this might subsequently affect preschool teachers’ practices. As a result, the practices and early literacy activities teachers implement in the classroom can consequently affect children’s early literacy development. Thus, an investigation on preschool teachers’ practices would benefit the research in the area of early childhood education. It is additionally requisite to explore if the preschool teachers are aware of the effective or efficient teaching practices and to what extent they perceive these to be consistently applied in their classrooms.

This study is considered to be significant since its results would provide valuable information about preschool English teachers’ actual practices in early

English literacy instruction. Certainly, the results of the current research would potentially provide researchers with important information on preschool English teachers that will be vital in both the fields of professional development and teacher education. Furthermore, the research insights that are gained would add to the understanding of responsive pedagogy in relation to early literacy development in young English learners. This should then enable researchers to develop a better understanding of the extent to which teachers are professionally developed, and what instruction and practices are implemented and provided by teachers to promote the development of early English literacy in young ELLs.

Additionally, early childhood education officials and administrators can plan interventions or training programmes to shift the teachers' approaches or practices and develop their prior knowledge to change the emphasis from the traditional methodology, focusing on drill-and-skill activities, as Paciga et al. (2011) mention that over-emphasizes on skill-and-drill activities is an inappropriate way to teach early literacy skills into a new balanced model in which teacher-child interaction is a crucial factor in augmenting early English literacy development.

Similarly, by examining preschool teachers' practices for early English literacy in the context of Malaysia, teachers and educators can better identify the efficient early literacy practices which can enhance early English literacy development in preschool children. With this understanding, researchers can subsequently better isolate early English literacy skills and develop models for early English literacy instruction. The findings of the present research would also contribute to the existing literature concerning the implementation of early literacy and language practices in preschools in international context in general and in preschools in the context of Malaysia in particular.

It is hoped that the current study offers some useful information and understanding about ways preschool teachers provide educational opportunities to young children and how they implement social interaction along with early literacy skills in their classrooms to promote the development of early English literacy in young children. It also intends to offer insights on how to train prospective preschool teachers so that they become competent in early English literacy instruction.

### **Definition of the Key Terms**

*English Language Learners (ELLs):* Children who are learning English as a second language and live in homes where languages other than English are spoken are known as English-language learners (ELLs).

*Preschool:* Preschools are schools for teaching very young children (that is to say 5 year-olds and younger) and aims to prepare them before they enter school to have a formal education. These preschools normally focus on early childhood education development (Tang et al., 2011). In the context of the study preschools are two that use the Montessori and IPC curriculum.

*Early Literacy Instruction:* Early literacy instruction refers to practices teachers implement in their classrooms including providing children with appropriate setting, materials and social support to develop in their early years. Verhoeven (as cited in Bingham, Hall-Kenyon & Culatta, 2010) states “that the way to enhance instruction is to increase variability in activities and not to repeat presentation of structured tasks that are not child centered or engaging” (p.38).

*Practices:* Practices refer to the processes that “are culturally shaped”, which “connect people with one another, and they include shared cognitions represented in ideologies and social identities” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p.8). In the present study, practices in early literacy instruction include strategies that support skill



development in alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, print awareness and oral language (see Parette et al., 2009 & Rhode, 2015).

*English as a Second Language (ESL) Teachers:* ESL teachers typically are the adults in school who have the most rigorous communication with ELLs at their early stage of school acculturation (Roessingh, 2006). ESL teachers can be the school professionals who are in charge of the educational programming of ELLs at the beginning stage of school adaptation (Roessingh, 2006). In the current study, it would be focused on preschool teachers who teach ELLs to preschool children of age 3 to 6. Preschool teachers are then considered as an implementer of instruction who has to prepare lesson plans, provide teaching tasks or activities and make insightful decisions about the methods they use in their classrooms (Yunus, Hashim, Lah, Ahmad & Ahmad, 2009).

*Social Interaction:* The term social interaction refers to how children can interact or communicate with their peers and teachers. “Developmentally appropriate teacher-child interactions that best stimulate cognitive and social development are those that extend children’s thinking and enrich their experiences with classroom materials” (Winsler & Carlton, 2003, p.158). The focus of the current study is mainly on the interaction between teacher and children. Interactions that occur between teacher and child are described as the daily conversations and communications that can be both social and instructional (Hamre et al., 2012). As a matter of fact, young children learn through a wide range of interactions occur during the school day, and their competence or adjustment is best specified by the nature and quality of these interactions which should be indeed underscored as the main indicator of children’s readiness or capability to successfully move to school environments (Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Ritchie, Howes, & Karoly, 2008; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

*Case Study:* Case study is a variation of an ethnography method in which the researcher provides “an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., activity, event, process, or individuals) based on extensive data collection” (Creswell, cited in Creswell, 2012, p.465).

*Multiple Case Study:* According to Stake (as cited in Creswell, 2012), “case studies may include multiple cases” (p.465). These “multiple cases are described and compared to provide insight into an issue. A case study researcher might examine several schools to illustrate alternative approaches to school choice for students” (Creswell, 2012, p.465).

### **Limitations of the Study**

Certain features of the current study limit its widespread application to all preschool classrooms. Some of these limitations are the results of conducting a research project, while others result from project design. Four limitations were encountered in conducting the present research. First, the sample size of this research was somewhat small as only four preschool teachers participated in this study and this hence did not allow for the generalizability of the results. However, as this study aims to investigate depth of the case, four was ample and appropriate. Therefore, it is unrealistic to generalize these findings to all preschool teachers. The next limitation is the context of the study which is limited to only two private preschools in the northwest of the city center of Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. Though, to examine each case in depth, two is considered suitable to answer the research questions. The third limitation of the study is that the findings may not be generalizable to other preschool systems or policy since the current study is focusing on two early literacy curricula under the franchises of “Montessori and IPC”. Lastly, this study only investigated the preschool teachers who teach English language learners.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

The boundaries of the current study comprise its particular focus on preschool teachers' practices in the field of early English literacy education. There are a few features of this study which delimit the current research. It considered non-native or local teachers who had various experiences in early literacy instruction in preschools in Malaysia. They were also required to be completely engaged in teaching. By this, this study also delimits itself to in-service teachers.

### **The Researcher's Perspective**

Having several years of experience as a teacher, the topics of teachers' practices and early English literacy instruction raised the researcher's interest and motivation to conduct this study. Additionally, seeing a growing number of children joining various early childhood education programs in order to study English even though struggling to acquire early literacy skills, further encouraged the researcher to conduct a research in this area. The researcher visited several preschools, searched for and studied various books and articles to gain enough knowledge about the early childhood curriculum standards and policy in Malaysia in general and in Kuala Lumpur in particular.

The researcher realized that preparing an effective curriculum including an efficient early literacy model that explains the procedure of early literacy instruction and guides the preschool teachers step by step on implementing appropriate practices would accelerate and promote the literacy and language development in children in their early critical years of life. This would subsequently have a potentially positive effect on their later academic success and accomplishment at schools. As Dickinson and McCabe (as cited in Scull et al., 2009) emphasized teachers are uncertain and

unclear of how to implement their teaching strategies and knowledge into their practice. Therefore, creating a model of early literacy instruction for preschool teachers and other educators to explore the key elements of early English literacy and its context would be very helpful. Besides, this model can be included in early literacy curriculum to assist preschool teachers in implementing appropriate and efficient early English literacy instruction in the classroom.

Even though the researcher is completely aware that it is very difficult to make a change in the educational system, conducting the present research and disseminating its findings can add novelty to existing literature in the area of early childhood education mainly for the policy making department and curriculum specialists to review and reflect on the system related to teachers' matters. These are potential efforts to enhance preschool teachers' practices and early literacy implementation particularly early English literacy instruction that can directly or indirectly improve students' literacy performance.

## **Summary**

The researcher started this chapter with the aim of conducting a research regarding preschool teachers' practices on early English literacy instruction. The researcher then established a niche by highlighting the inconsistency between the National Early Literacy curriculum along with specific preschools' curricula namely Montessori and IPC focusing on social interaction between teacher and children together with the role of play and teachers' actual practices in the classrooms. It was also realized that there had been ambiguity on what preschool teachers should be focusing on instructionally on the delivery of early English literacy.

The researcher decided to occupy this niche by concentrating on the preschool teachers' actual practices regarding early English literacy. A look at how teachers of students who learn English as a second language apply early literacy reading and writing routines, strategies and activities in their early English literacy instruction would provide important research for early childhood education. Besides, study of how teachers' implementation of social interaction routines can influence student achievement and teachers' instructional practice would benefit the early childhood education community.

Therefore, in the current study it was hoped to gain insights into what early English literacy instruction was applied by preschool teachers in the classrooms and how they implemented social interaction in order to enhance early English literacy in young English language learners.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the present multiple-case study was to investigate and explore what practices were applied by preschool teachers in early English literacy instruction. It also aimed to examine how the preschool teachers implemented social interaction in their practice.

Preschools are the first places children attend after home. Therefore, as Kayili and Ari (2011) believe preschools are required to be designed to enhance certain literacy skills in children during their preschool years. In addition to this, Stockall, Dennis and Miller (2012) emphasize that not only teacher and child interactions should be maximized in preschools but also the curriculum needs to focus on children's development of both academic and social skills.

Besides, children have this ability to develop a number of basic skills in the first five years of their life. These skills include motor and emotional skills, thinking and language skills together with interpersonal skills that are all considered essential in their later academic achievement and life experiences (Tarakçioğlu & Tunçarslan, 2014). In effect, students need high quality instruction providing various efficient activities and methods in order to attain these skills and subsequently enter school for formal education. And preschool teachers play a significant role in providing such an instruction. Hence, Landry, Swank, Smith, Assel and Gunnewig (2006) carried out a research to investigate the practices of teachers in literacy instruction after they took part in a professional development training. The professional development training was regarding particular strategies about phonological awareness and print knowledge. Landry et al. (2006) recognized in their study that students acquired

phonological knowledge and print awareness from teachers after they were trained in literacy instruction. In a similar study, Howes et al. (2008) investigated students' outcomes after they finished kindergarten based on the quality of pre-kindergarten teaching, instruction, activities, and caregiver sensitivity. They realized that efficient instruction entails profound interaction between teachers and students, and that instruction is required to be play-based in order to boost a positive social environment for children.

All these things considered, this chapter describes existing literature relevant to the research purposes of the current study. It includes an overview of the related research in early literacy together with early childhood education. The individual components of early literacy are going to be elaborated in depth as well. It will also focus on teachers' quality, knowledge, professional development and practices regarding early literacy specifically, early English literacy instruction as well as the development of early literacy skills in young children.

To begin with, obviously the most vital years of learning initiate at birth. Within these early years, a human being is able to attain more information at a time than he will be ever capable of gaining. The environment in which the young child is raised can have a great impact on his development of cognitive skills and emotional skills because of the quick brain growth that happens in these early years.

Above all, literacy and literacy related skills arise and happen in the everyday environments of home and community. They are the results of meaningful and practical experiences in a knowledgeable society. The development of these skills is usually social and arises through the interactions children have with adults as they share, cooperate, and exchange meanings in their world. With this in mind, the most salient characteristics of literacy teaching practices is the teaching of a variety of

literacy skills and knowledge, at word, sentence and text levels, within the context of work on shared texts. In fact, preschoolers who demonstrate well-developed early literacy skills naturally have better accomplishment in all educational areas from elementary education through high school (Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2009).

However, to provide an efficient literacy instruction, the concept of literacy needs to be clarified first. Literacy has been defined by a number of researchers. Cameron (2012) for example, delineates literacy as “the ability to produce and comprehend written language” (p.283). United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (2005) on the other hand refers to the term literacy being “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts” (p.21). In this regard, Miller (2000) presented two models in early literacy instruction namely transmission model and transactional model.

According to *transmission* model that comes from behavioral psychology, children are empty containers into which knowledge should be poured. In other words, from the view of literacy across curriculum, the goal of education is to raise critical or analytical readers and writers. Based on this model, education is a teacher-centered approach in which the role of teacher is to provide children with information and knowledge in a predetermined order. On the contrary, *transactional* model comes from cognitive psychology and some people refer to it as a constructivist view of learning that views children as already having prior knowledge. According to this model, knowledge is not passively received. It is rather actively built or constructed by students as they connect their previous knowledge and experiences with new information (Santrock, 2004). Based on this model, teachers in fact help children to connect their old information with new information



in order to build meaningful knowledge. Over time, following these above mentioned two models, two perspectives on early literacy were introduced and have emerged. They include *reading readiness view* and *emergent literacy view*.

### **Reading Readiness View**

Accompanied by the cultural and social revolution of the 1960s, the Head Start programs started and the introduction of reading readiness programs became a major component of kindergarten curriculum (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). According to reading readiness view, early literacy is considered as composed of a number of discrete skills that a child has to master in order to be able to read and write in school. In fact, reading readiness view proposes that there is a specified time when the child is ready to read and write. In the reading readiness perspective, individual differences in reading development are explained as some children developing faster or slower, although differences are not thought to be from early experiences. Clearly, there are numerous opinions regarding the emergence and concept of reading readiness view. As an illustration, Hoskisson (1977) discussed three viewpoints concerning reading readiness approach:

The first viewpoint on reading readiness was *Maturation Viewpoint*. According to this view, reading readiness is connected to a specific development stage. That is to say, children have to reach that certain stage first and have the maturity to be able to read. "The concept of readiness was for a long time interpreted to mean that children become ready as a result of maturation" (Durkin, 1970, p.530). Durkin (1970) also mentioned that the readiness age was considered to be the mental age of six years and a half. In fact, readiness was the product of maturation. Durkin (1970) presented and discussed three interpretations of the concept of readiness:

“1. Readiness is not one thing. In fact, the variety of abilities, both in kind and amount, which add up to readiness suggests that a more accurately descriptive term would be "readinesses"- awkward, to be sure, but also accurate.

2. Although what makes one child ready for reading might be different from what makes another ready, both are ready because of the interplay of nature and nurture. This is recognition that children are ready because of hereditary and maturational factors, but also because of the learning opportunities in their particular environment.

3. Because readiness depends not only upon a child's abilities but also upon the kind of learning opportunities made available to him, it is possible for a child to be ready when one type of reading program is offered, but unready when other kinds are available” (p.531).

The second view of the concept of reading readiness was *Behavioristic Viewpoint*. It is an environmentalist view in which the child is dependent on the reading environment and acts like a machine which needs a stimulator in order to respond. It means that the child has to be made ready in order to learn to read. The environment then needs to be structured with a number of criteria and objectives to provide suitable conditions for the child to make predetermined responses. According to this viewpoint, the structured reading environment is considered to be an actor, and the child acts upon and reacts based on prearranged objectives.

The last view on reading readiness was *Cognitive Psycholinguistic Viewpoint*. This view considers reading as part of a total language process. The child indeed interacts with the environment and makes his own knowledge and experience. Based on this viewpoint, children do not need to master a number of skills in a non-natural system in order to be ready to read. The children are actually the actors or the active participants who interact with and adapt to the environment. In addition, children can be ready to read by an adult reading to them and with them. Based on this viewpoint, books are important and should be part of the children's life. In fact, children should be given enough opportunities to read and handle books.

On the other hand, several researchers think that reading can be developed through a number of stages. For example, the chief developer of reading readiness theory, Chall (1983), has categorized six stages of reading development which are impacted by “stages of cognitive and language development (p.11).” As Chall (1983) says, reading is regarded as a kind of problem solving in which readers become accustomed to their environment through the process of assimilation and accommodation. The key qualitative features of Chall’s (1983) stages of reading development consist of: (a) *Stage zero - Prereading*: this stage starts from birth to the age of six. This phase is indeed considered as the time from birth until the commencement of formal education. At this stage, children are not regarded to be readers yet although by the end of this phase, the child is able to name the letters of alphabet, identify some signs, print own name, and retell a story from looking at the pages of a book previously read to him, (b) *Stage one*: this stage is considered to be the early reading and decoding stage which involves children from the first grade to the beginning of second grade, (c) *Stage two*: this stage begins at the age of 6 and ends at the age of 7. At this phase, children acquire the connection between letters and sounds as well as the link between printed and spoken words. Furthermore, at this level children have the ability to read simple text comprising of high frequency words and phonetically regular words. They are also able to use the skill and insight to sound out or pronounce new words that contain one syllable.

In due time, a new approach to looking at beginning reading was initiated in the late 60s and continued into the 80s. In 1966, Marie Clay introduced the notion of emergent literacy for her dissertation, which would come to define this new approach to early reading (Clay, 1966). Consequently, emergent literacy has gradually replaced the concept of reading readiness in the field of early childhood education.

Unlike reading readiness view, emergent literacy indeed refers to a different perspective that, in a well-educated society, young children are in the process of becoming literate.

### **Emergent Literacy View**

The concept of emergent literacy was first presented by Clay (1966) who did describe the behaviors that are emerged by five-year-old children while they are reading and writing, even when they could not read or write in a standard form. The use of the term emergent proposes that there is continuousness in the process of learning to read and to write. The idea of emergent literacy posits that learning to read is a gradual attainment of skills that start from birth and continue through the time when a child begins to read. On the contrary, despite the vitality of early years, the research on reading and writing used to be mainly focused merely on the elementary school grades, with the postulation that the earlier grades like kindergarten and below were not certainly that vital in the acquisition of language and literacy and that the secondary grades were a time to utilize reading skills to learn content.

Instead of emphasizing on a disconnection between adults' and children's literacy, the idea of emergent literacy conceptualizes literacy on a developmental continuum. Justice (2006b) defines emergent literacy “the reading and writing behaviors of young children before they become readers and writers in the conventional sense” (p. 3). More specifically, emergent literacy is described as the developmental period of literacy acquisition in which children acquire significant precursory skills in reading and writing (Justice, 2006b). Emergent literacy in fact establishes reading and writing as being learned simultaneously and conjointly in the well-educated environments. Accordingly, the process of learning to read is assumed

to cultivate as children gather knowledge of the spoken and written language (Leong & Bodrova, 2006).

In addition, early literacy comprises the knowledge, skills, and approaches that a child cultivates with regard to reading and writing during the early childhood period. And it initiates at birth and before the commencement of formal reading and writing instruction. Emergent literacy is considered to be consisted of a number of key components such as phonological awareness, print awareness, alphabet knowledge and oral language. These skills actually enhance the development of early literacy in young children. They are specifically identified to be the “important precursors of early literacy” (Townsend & Konold, 2010, p.124). According to Diamond, Gerde and Powell (2008), understanding that there are links between children’s knowledge of alphabet letters and their corresponding letter sounds coupled with the recognition of appropriate instructional strategies and practices to support the development of children in these areas, emergent literacy will continue to be a research priority.

In the meantime, an important readiness factor, encouraging and promoting early literacy in preschools that can make children ready for the language-mediated instruction and learning becomes salient in a formal school initiation (Phillips, Gorton, Pinciotti, & Sachdev, 2010). A wide range of instructional methods, approaches, and practices can be used in order to teach early literacy skills to young children (Strickland et al., 2004). For instance, Roskos and Burstein (2011) in a study investigated a vocabulary instruction method to see how this technique can impact preschoolers’ vocabulary gain. Say-tell-do was a supplemental, small group vocabulary instruction technique that was carried out and accompanied with the intervention control group within center time for fifteen to eighteen minute sessions,

twice a week that took three months. To explain, in this method first a target word was said and the meaning of that word was then explained as using a gesture before reading a story. Beside these, performing a play activity that stimulated the use of the target word followed the story.

Correspondingly, based on the emergent literacy view, teachers have a specific role in supporting self-motivated and self-regulated learning. Teachers should provide children with meaning-based activities in order to help them develop early literacy especially, early English literacy. “L2 acquisition includes second (or foreign) language learning in both naturalistic (unschooled) settings as well as classroom-based learning, including both oral and written forms” (Dixon et al., 2012, p.9). Nevertheless, Dixon et al. (2012) consider L2 education as classroom-based instruction which is designed to help students in learning a L2 in “both oral and written forms” (p.9).

### **The Role of English as a Second Language Teachers**

Teachers are not passive participants in the classroom, and in order to influence or improve their practices it is essential to understand the actions they perform. Investigating the knowledge and professional development of teachers who teach English as a second language is a requisite since they usually feel frustrated due to lack of enough professional knowledge (Liu, 2013). In a study by Ali, Aziz and Majzub (2011), it was claimed that many teachers do not have sufficient skills and knowledge to provide children with high quality literacy instruction. Therefore, educators and professionals in teacher education field should develop effective professional development programs or trainings courses since these can potentially impact teachers’ teaching strategies and skills.

Teacher competence is considered one of the most broadly recognized measures that have a significant effect on student accomplishment and success in schools (Goh, Saad & Wong, 2012). Goh et al. (2012) stated that the competence of teachers who enter the profession of teaching is a key matter for educators, administrators and even parents. Liu (2013) in a study tried to examine the knowledge of a teacher educator who was teaching ESL to teacher candidates. Her study was grounded in the concept of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK). Based on this concept it is not enough for ESL teachers to have only subject matter knowledge, as they also have to know how to transfer their knowledge to their learners and make learning meaningful for these learners. Basically, the knowledge, education and practices of teachers can affect the quality of early English literacy instruction.

Accordingly, it is wrongly believed that every native English speaker has the ability to teach English because of his natural English competence. It might be because “the subject matter knowledge of ESL is not clearly defined” and it should be reminded that “teaching ESL is different from teaching other subjects” (Liu, 2013, p.129). Liu (2013) in fact, agrees “that ESL teachers suffer from weak professional development” (p.130). It was concluded in her study that PCK is developed through gaining experience “in real classroom teaching” (Liu, 2013, p.135). “The most active component in PCK” is pedagogical knowledge, but at the same time it is less teachable (Liu, 2013, p.135). Teaching strategies are in fact acquired through experience. Therefore, the question that can be addressed is how is it possible to convey teaching strategies to teacher candidates? As a result it was pointed that PCK can be developed through formal teaching, observation and monitoring together with in-service teaching.

Other than the teachers' knowledge, since ESL teachers bring their personal histories to their classrooms, their background and sociocultural identities can also impact their pedagogical decisions and teaching practice. And trying to understand the contexts within which teachers implement practice is centrally imperative in understanding how they construct their identity in practice. It is also crucial to see how ESL teachers' race, ethnicity and culture impact ESL teacher identity (Ajayi, 2011). However, it is important to know how teachers' background, identities as well as educational contexts can impact their practice in classroom.

Teacher identity has been interpreted as the social and cultural networks and connections that establish a context or basis for creating educators' beliefs, principles, thoughts and approaches (see Richards 2008; Singh and Richards 2006; Morgan 2004). Identity can also be referred to as multiplicative, socially constructed and messily process oriented. In other words, how teachers form identity is related to the processes, contexts, relationships and actions in which they are engaged in all aspects of their lives. Regarding the concept of identity, the sociocultural notion of development postulated by Vygotsky is focused on the actions of individuals in social contexts and activity. It is also focused on how the individual takes in and internalizes various social practices.

On the other hand, Ajayi (2011)'s study results recommend "a need to re-conceptualize ESL teacher preparation programs as sites of cultural negotiation\_ spaces where teachers can reflect, shape and create both the dominant and minority ethnic/ racial social and cultural relations" (de Freitas, cited in Ajayi, 2011, p.675).

Therefore, in order to explore the role of ESL teachers in developing early English literacy in young language learners, early literacy instruction and the actual practices teachers implement in their classrooms should be considered.



## **Early Literacy Instruction**

Early literacy is a continuous process of learning in which there is no identifiable point in a child's life when literacy begins (Miller, 2000). It is part of a transactional model which believes in children's prior knowledge. Besides, early literacy refers to not only the child's ability to read and write but also comprises of a number of communication strategies that include storytelling, music, movement, dance, the visual arts, media and drama, together with speaking and viewing (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), 2009). Neuman, Copple, and Bredekamp (2000) also refer to early literacy approach "as the view that literacy learning begins at birth and is encouraged through participation with adults in meaningful activities; these literacy behaviors change and eventually become conventional over time" (p.123).

Furthermore, literacy encompasses "communicating thoughts and ideas in effective ways which enable individuals to think critically, to solve problems, to develop knowledge, and essentially to be able to participate fully in society" (Tams, 2009, p.11). According to Miller (2000), "emergent literacy entails the use of the appropriate teaching point at which the teacher provides meaningful opportunities for the child to expand and refine his or her literacy skills" (p.4). Missall, McConnell and Cadigan (2006) expressed "that preschool classrooms provide an important opportunity for children to access planned and varied early literacy experiences" (p.4).

In considering emergent or early literacy instruction, reading has received an excessive amount of attention, and "knowledge of writing pedagogy" has been "embedded within reading competency requirements for teachers" (Norman & Spencer, 2005, p.25). Surprisingly, sixty percent of children in America cannot

achieve proficient reading skills (Connor et al., 2009). A number of factors can actually affect children's literacy development such as home, parenting, preschool and community resources, but the main factor can also be the instruction or practices that are implemented in the classroom. For instance, it is possible that children do not receive an appropriate amount of particular types of literacy instruction or strategies during the primary grades. A solution to this matter might be preparing an instructional strategy based on language and literacy skills that children bring to the classroom.

Therefore, personalizing or individualizing instruction based on each child's literacy skills would be effective. Connor et al. (2009) aimed to open up the effect of individualizing instruction from sources like teacher qualifications. That is to say, they tried to examine the precision with which teachers provided recommended types of instruction and the effect of this instruction on first grades' literacy skill growth.

The results in the previous study showed that at school year an average of 17 minutes of class time is spent on reading text either aloud, in pairs or individually. Word identification encoding was the next most frequently type of literacy instruction observed which was about 11 minutes on average, followed by writing instruction for 10 minutes. On average, small amounts of class time were spent on phonological awareness which was only 2 minutes and grapheme-phoneme correspondence activities for about 4 minutes. These amounts actually decreased from fall to spring (8 to 2 minutes respectively). The Individualizing Instruction system emphasizes that children have access to different learning opportunities even if they share the same classroom. To put it differently, this instruction's effect depends on children's language and literacy skills (Connor, Morrison, Fishman, Ponitz, Glasney, Underwood, Piasta, Crowe, & Schatschneider, 2009).

Regarding research on the other early literacy skills, Lonigan et al. (2010) state that while it is clearly supported by the research that shared-reading interventions can result in improved vocabulary skills, less evidence is provided for effective instructional strategies to support other meaning-related skills such as listening comprehension or background knowledge. Lonigan et al. (2010) also emphasize that there is no evidence that even the most influential of the shared-reading interventions can result in improved reading skills. Therefore, this gap in the research literature is required to be filled.

In addition, Elliott and Olliff (2008) in their study emphasized on the advancement of young children's emergent literacy and letter recognition skills. Progress or improvement of pre-reading and writing skills development is one of the various areas of attention for early childhood teachers. Furthermore, teaching children to read and write is the most significant job of the primary school program. It was concluded in Elliott and Olliff's (2008) study that generating developmentally appropriate activities across all domains such as physical and social-emotional domains together with cognitive domains is essential. Moreover, these activities have to be created with the intention to advance the development of early literacy skills in young children. In other words, in order to be proficient in reading, children should acquire several literacy skills such as phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, knowledge of letter-sound connections, and the awareness of print experience and concepts as using writing.

Therefore, in their study, Elliott and Olliff (2008) described The Early Literacy and Learning Model (ELLM) that puts emphasis "on six emergent literacy concepts" (p.553). These concepts comprised of "read aloud, independent reading, oral language, phonological awareness, letter and sound knowledge, and

development of print concepts” which each should be implemented in classrooms for a minimum of one hour a day (p.553).

However, in order to use this model (ELLM) in the classroom, teachers are required to have enough knowledge of emergent literacy. They have to be able to identify students’ various needs and provide them with effective instruction accordingly. Based on the results of Elliott and Olliff’s (2008) study, providing “developmentally appropriate activities across all domains \_physical, social-emotional and cognitive\_” is a necessity in order to facilitate the emergent literacy skills development of two and three year old children (p.555).

In general, aforementioned study investigating efficient literacy practices to boost preschool children’s learning of early literacy skills first and foremost assessed programmes that have been implemented by researchers and/or classroom teachers. However, such studies actually failed to consider the role of other school authorities in aiding children at risk for early reading complications. They indeed ignored the authenticity of the typical preschool classroom. Therefore, in the aforementioned exploratory research study by Elliott and Olliff (2008), a paraeducator was trained to deliver explicit and engaging early literacy instruction.

As indicated previously in chapter one, the current research is informed by social constructivist’s theory of Vygotsky (1978). According to this theory, development is described as a mutual process of learning in which children take an active role as participants in their own development by communicating and interacting with other people socially. To engage children to maximize their abilities in order to learn and build literacy skills, the teacher needs to design efficient literacy learning environment by providing print rich environments, making conversations with children, and devoting time throughout the day to read to and with the children.

With this in mind, there are five principles that are apparent in a constructivist classroom (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). First, teachers consider and value the viewpoint of students. Second, students are challenged by various classroom activities and tasks. The third principle in a constructivist classroom is to consider that relevance emerges from problems the teacher poses to the students. The next one is that lessons should be created from big ideas and primary concepts. Finally, the teacher assesses the learning of students daily. Each of these principles encompasses both the teacher and the student in the development of the classroom. In other words, students can learn as the teacher organizes and arranges the learning environment. This can encourage the students to be involved in experiences that help them to solve problems and make connections with their prior learning experiences.

In fact, students discern answers through experiences and interactions which can subsequently allow them to learn concepts that can be used again in future situations. Students grow in experiential learning and modify or change their actions through experienced learning (Reich, 2007). The students can learn in an environment that is generated and formed by both the teacher and the students. Indeed, the teacher-child interactions keep the learning environment fervent, active, and dynamic.

Connor et al (2009) believe that except students, teachers also bring some characteristics with them to the classrooms such as their knowledge of subject area, experiences and their facility with interpreting assessment results for each student. As mentioned previously, they refer to The Individualizing Student Instruction (ISI) system which actually incorporates multidimensional, transactional and dynamic systems framework to explain the environment of a classroom. This research

suggests that a child-managed activity would not provide an effective learning environment for a student with weaker language and behavioral regulation skills.

However, the solution would be that an efficient teacher should be able to detect children who are able to learn well in a child-managed activity and identify children who perhaps would require more supports to be engaged during dynamic learning time. These studies in general refer to early English literacy instruction as consisting of practices teachers implement in their classrooms and literacy learning environment that can have effect on children's later academic and social achievement, particularly when dealing with students with different language proficiency and behavior.

To point out, practices are mostly not assessed directly and many researches focus more on teachers' beliefs. For example, in a study by Smith and Croom (2000) the investigation was on teachers' beliefs and their corresponding link with teachers' practices. The practices were actually inferred from those beliefs and the study data were based on the teachers' self-report and not on observation. There have also been a number of studies examining specific early literacy curricula but most focus on student outcomes as determined by an established curriculum, rather than on the teachers' practices, including the strategies and activities they implemented in classroom.

**The ESL teachers' practices.** A study by Fisher (2008) referred to a number of changes in literacy instruction over the last 50 years. And according to this study, one of the crucial issues in the area of teaching is instruction for students whose native language is not English which had not been addressed in various other researches.

Therefore, the development of learning goals is just a first step in supporting English language learners. What occurs with the students in the implementation of early literacy standards is what instructional practices can support children's literacy development. A number of factors that have an impact on the literacy and language development of preschoolers include the types of verbal interactions the teacher has with the children, the richness and sorts of literacy materials available to the students, together with the quality of the literacy activities performed by teachers (Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2005). Wong Kwok Shing (2005) acclaims that teachers who work with ELLs usually employ knowledge from other disciplines in order to update their instructional practices. He hence emphasized that instructors teaching students acquiring English as a second language should have ample knowledge of the steps involved in English language acquisition. They should have an understanding of the language difficulties of the first and second language, and be able to effectively scaffold learning activities according to the learner's current level of learning. Wong Kwok Shing (2005) also found that teachers should be committed to establishing a communication exchange where conversation is reciprocal and be able to exhibit a clear understanding of the connection between the spoken and written word. This would actually help teachers to enhance the acquisition of English language by young learners.

Hence, researchers use the term 'classroom quality' to assist the identification of numerous components of classroom excellence. Structural quality looks at modifiable classroom elements such as teacher credentials, length of day, adult-child ratio, and classroom enrollment size (Kagan, 2007; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005). Similarly, Lazarus and Ortega (2007) refer to some other elements of high quality instruction such as the availability of professional development opportunities for

teachers, routine supervision, and the regular evaluation of the teacher's performance. When assessing the gains made in English literacy and language by ELLs, the quantity, quality, and types of literacy activities in which the ELL preschoolers take part are critical variables to be measured (Bernhard, Cummins, Campoy, Ada, Winsler, & Bleiker, 2006). As such, teachers must have an understanding of appropriate experiences to plan for children. Hence, evaluating the need and providing for the professional development of teachers is an important factor when inspecting instructional practices to support ELLs.

Following the above mentioned points, Lara-Alecio et al. (2009) refer to the knowledge base and experimental researches concerning classroom instructive events and the reported quality of teaching as missing parts in literature. Therefore, in order to understand teaching practices for ELLs, the time allotted to educational instructions among teachers with preschool ELLs is described in their research. It is believed in this study that English oral proficiency develops at early grade levels which occur in preschool. As a result, it is helpful to understand the amount of time teachers spend on classroom activities during English as a second language (ESL) lessons or English language development (ELD) block. It is also worthy to investigate the effectiveness of these activities on students' oral enhancement.

Lara-Alecio et al. (2009) too refer to the importance of professional development programs and quality of instructions. According to their research, it is actually effective to use well-controlled intervention to compare instructive dissimilarities among various program models assisting English language learners and identify the effect of that intervention on teacher's teaching performance. Therefore, their study focused mainly on time allocation of teachers' pedagogical approaches in Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) and Structured English



Immersion (SEI) programs. They focused on Spanish-speaking English language learners in preschool and tried to investigate the quality of instruction by comparing the experimental and control classrooms. The aspects of the intervention included: First, there needed to be extended time for English instruction. Second, structured English intervention was required to be applied in classroom. Third, it was necessary to have an ongoing biweekly professional development programmes and paraprofessionals. The next aspect of intervention was that two levels or tiered approach was a requisite to be provided. Finally, classroom observation should be performed based on the four-dimension Bilingual Pedagogical Theory.

Based on the results of the above research, one of the points which was unanswered was the connection between quality instruction and English language learners' learning performances. The extent to which teachers' pedagogies do impact students' language learning was also left unanswered. It was noted in Lara-Alecio et al.'s (2009) study that Transitional Bilingual Observation Protocol (TBOP) is a flexible and comprehensive classroom observation tool that can be utilized in various educational contexts as an assessment instrument to provide an image of teachers' instructional arrangements and their interactions with their students. This instrument can also be used as a guide for teaching for teachers working with English language learners in several program models.

Additionally, Pray and Sherry (2010) stated that "teacher preparation programs in UTAH only recently began offering" English as a second language "or bilingual education endorsement programs" as this field is relatively new in this community (p.217). They declare that most local teachers who teach English as a second language have little experience working with English language learners who are learning a second language. These teachers also have less experience "working

with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds” (Pray & Sherry, 2010, p.217). Pray and Sherry (2010) additionally stated that ESL teachers “often have little empathetic knowledge of what students are experiencing linguistically and culturally” (p.217). Pre-service teachers are usually “white, monolingual and have little experience with” English language learners (Pray & Sherry, 2010, p.218). Therefore, teacher training programs need to make fundamental and practical experiences available to these teachers.

In the above study Pray and Sherry (2010) investigated the extent to which pre-service ESL teachers in a study program abroad specifically, in Mexico enhanced their understanding of the procedures of language learning and hence the sociocultural impacts on second language learning as compared with the outlooks and views of students studying in the same course on-campus. During their time in Mexico, study abroad students lived with Mexican families, took part in cultural expeditions, visited Mexican schools through bilingual training programs, and registered in a Spanish language course instructed by native Spanish speakers.

As a matter of fact, “one of the ways teachers may be told to meet the needs of their culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms is to differentiate instruction” (Baecher, Artigliere, Patterson & Spatzer, 2012, p.14). Baecher et al. (2012) presented the concept of differentiated instruction and attempted to make a distinction between sheltered content instruction and differentiated instruction. The most popular “sheltering techniques” include “Sheltered Instructional Observation Protocol (SIOP)” and “Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA)” (Baecher et al., 2012, p.15).

To explain, sheltering methods actually aid teachers to deliver apposite scaffolding for their ELLs to achieve content area learning. In other words, it helps

them to provide and deliver instruction in English language skills. On the other hand, differentiated instruction is customized to particular smaller groups of students rather than the entire class. It includes the teacher in generating various activities for a certain lesson. In this instruction the focus is on language development activities in the content lesson. The important aspect of differentiated instruction is that activities should be based on students' learning preferences or styles rather than the levels of English language proficiency. Certainly, to utilize the differentiated approach, a number of principles need to be followed.

First, the strengths and weaknesses of English language learners in English should be identified and known. The next principle is that a common content objective should be set and the language objective should be differentiated accordingly. Third, differentiation needs to be made controllable for the teacher. Fourth, learning also needs to be made practicable for children by differentiating instruction. Next, a base activity for more proficient students and tier downward ought to be identified. Sixth, teachers need to use themselves rather than a more proficient student to act as the differentiation in the lesson. The other principle in differentiated instruction is that a flexible rather than fixed grouping ought to be used in the classroom. Eight, choice activities should be offered to allow students to bring change in instruction. It is also necessary to understand that cognitive complication is entangled with language proficiency. Finally, the last principle in differentiated approach is that the same number of minutes ought to be allotted for a differentiated task.

All things considered, in order to meet the needs of ELLs and implement effective literacy instruction, preschool teachers need to have enough knowledge about different teaching theories and practices. Wishard, Shivers, Ritchie and Howes,

(2003) hence reported three mutually exclusive practices about literacy and numeracy skills. These practices include child initiated learning, scaffolding and direct teaching of basic skills for children.

In the child initiated group, the primary belief articulated by teachers was that the teacher's role is to expose children to a wide variety of experiences and activities because children learn if opportunities for play are provided. In this view, the role of the teacher as the provider of direction or scaffolding is limited. The second set of belief systems involved in practices is the use of scaffolding as a teaching technique. The role of the teacher in this view is providing hands on activities for children, monitoring their behavior, coupled with using teachable moments to scaffold knowledge. Based on scaffolding approach as the basic element in efficient teacher-child interaction, if the teachers are supported carefully in this regard, they can facilitate the children's operation at higher levels of cognitive functioning than what they could accomplish on their own (Wray, Medwell, Fox & Poulson, 2000). Direct teaching of basic skills to children as the third mutually exclusive category, was more teacher-directed and the role of the teacher was to teach children the rudimentary skills. Teachers with this belief system have a predetermined set of academic skills that children need to learn while in their class. The role of teacher, then, is to deliver instruction so that children would be successful in school. Teachers representing this view felt that they, as teachers, had the required knowledge and that it was their duty to share this knowledge with the children.

In another study, Li (2013) suggests four paramount practices that teachers can utilize in their classrooms through incorporating technology and uniting second language theories to comply with the needs of the English language learners. According to Li (2013), teachers usually face a challenge regarding knowing second

language teaching strategies and working effectively with the English language learners.

In effect, with the increase of the population of English language learners, there is a lack of well-prepared teachers who have second language theoretical knowledge and teaching abilities to comply with the English language learners' various needs. Best practices involve the commitment of teachers to use their knowledge to lead to students' success, using reliable method or technique, and teachers' commitment to advance their knowledge and skills to promote student learning. According to Li (2013), the best four literacy practices to implement in classrooms is that first, comprehensible input needs to be increased and in order to increase comprehension for English language learners teachers can use a number of strategies such as providing pertinent contexts, linking learning to previous knowledge and experiences, and utilizing visual aids and physical artifacts. Second efficient literacy practice is the one in which social collaboration ought to be encouraged. And to do this, teachers can provide cooperative learning activities and allow English language learners to interact with their peers and accomplish their learning goals. Third literacy practice according to Li (2013) is the one during which learning should be related to the real world. Indeed, English language learners need to acquire two types of English: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). The last efficient early literacy practice is the one in which support for learning environments needs to be provided. Li (2013) suggests that "in designing learning settings, educators should consciously create friendly, positive, less tense styles of teaching within an atmosphere that lowers students' anxiety, and provides *affective* support for ELLs and all students to learn productively" (p.220). Li (2013) also mentions that "as

school diversity increases, the challenge for teachers also increases. It is thus crucial that educators continue exploring and acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the needs of ELLs and all students” (p.221).

In another study by Wray et al. (2000), it was observed that effective teachers tried to refocus children’s attention on the early literacy tasks at regular points during the lesson of the day. These teachers in this study applied at least one of the literacy activities such as writing dialogues, writing letters to fantasy characters, singing nursery rhymes, and modeling formal and informal speech. These researchers believed that these tasks helped children understand how literacy activities were achieved. They could also understand the purposes of the tasks. Additionally, Wray et al. (2000) consider the teaching of a variety of literacy skills and knowledge, at the levels of word, sentence and text, within the context of work on shared texts as the main features of early literacy teaching practices. It is therefore important to provide preschool teachers with professional development opportunities to review their practices and try to improve the tasks they apply in their classrooms (Meerah, 2009).

**Theories on child development.** In a study by Eun (2008), it was stated that professional development has not been grounded within a theoretical framework. To put it differently, the mechanisms “teachers acquire knowledge and skills to effectively reach out to all students are not generally explained with a support of a unified theory” (p.135). In fact, considering this point is helpful for devising plans “that contribute to the effectiveness of professional development programs” (Eun, 2008, p.135). Hence, Eun (2008) presented seven models of professional development which are explained below:

The first model, *training*, “typically involves a presenter or a team of presenters that shares its ideas and expertise through a variety of group-based

activities” (Guskey cited in Eun, 2008, p.140). The advantage of this model of professional development is that it is “efficient and is capable of reaching a large number of participants in a single session” (Eun, 2008, p. 140). The disadvantage on the other hand is the lack of opportunities for individualization.

*Observation or assessment*, the next model “of professional development that benefits both the observer and the observed” (Eun, 2008, p.140). According to Eun (2008), “the observer learns from closely monitoring and watching the teaching experience of a colleague” (p.140). The observed on the contrary can improve his practices by the feedback received after the observation.

The third model “is *mentoring*, which involves interactions between an experienced and highly successful educator and a less experienced colleague” (Eun, 2008, p. 140).

“*Involvement in a development*” or “*improvement process and study groups*” as the next “models of professional development”, help educators “to gain new knowledge and skills” and when they collaborate with other peers they are able to find solutions to the common problems (Eun, 2008, p.140).

Last models of professional development include “*inquiry*” or “*action research and individually guided activities*” (Eun, 2008, p.141). The first starts out with detecting a problem or question and second one starts with the identification of a need or interest.

It can be noticed that the above study tried to ground professional development in the theories of Vygotsky since both regard social interaction as the key foundation of human development.

As a matter of fact, a theory allows for justifications concerning why particular literacy practices lead to usefulness, efficiency and accomplishment while

the others do not. Another advantage of grounding practices within a theory is generalizability. This emphasizes that it is crucial to connect practice to a theory because it clarifies or helps to understand why particular outcomes are achieved by particular practices.

As an illustration, Fisher (2008) endeavored to review some theories and practices supported in the last 50 years. Fisher (2008) found that obviously when children are exposed to print or written language in either environment or at home, this exposure can impact what they learn about reading and writing. He also says that through this exposure we can consequently assume particular performances to emerge as students are learning to read.

Therefore, for teachers to be able to apply effective practices in early English literacy instruction, they should have ample knowledge of theories on child development. A number of the most influential theorists in the subject area of child development include Freud, Piaget, Erikson, Vygotsky, and Skinner (Berger, 2006).

One of the initial theories of child development was Freud's theory. Freud assumed that every phase of development consisted of potential conflicts and what determined future behavior and development was how these conflicts were resolved. Successful resolution of these conflicts, particularly in early childhood, is then important in the whole mental well-being of the adult (Berger, 2006).

Similarly, Erikson, another theorist expanded Freud's theory and his ideas. Combining psychological theory and social development knowledge, Erikson described eight developmental stages in his theory. Similar to Freud's theory, every one of these eight stages consisted of a number of developmental crises, and the immediate consequence of unsolved conflicts in early childhood was difficulties or complications in adulthood.



Based on Erikson's theory, if a child completes each developmental stage successfully, he can acquire the basic virtues and gain healthy personality. The first five stages of development are up to the age of eighteen and the other three stages are beyond that age and into adulthood (Erikson, 1959). These stages are elaborated in detail as follows:

At the stage of *infancy* a crisis of *Trust vs. Mistrust* might happen. Within this phase the infant is unsure about the world he is living in therefore he will look for his caregiver to provide him with consistency and stability of care. If that care is constant and well-founded, the child will cultivate a sense of trust. The success in this phase can create hope in infant.

During *toddlerhood*, *Autonomy vs. Shame* may occur. Within this stage the child wants to gain his independency and he realizes that he has many skills and abilities. According to Erikson's theory, it is vital that parents let their children to find out the boundaries of their capabilities within an inspiring environment in which failure is acceptable. If the parents or caregivers discourage children, they might feel shame. In contrary, the success at this phase can lead to the virtue of will.

Within *preschool years*, the crisis is one of *Initiative vs. Guilt*. Play is significant at this stage. Children would like to interact with other children and play provides this opportunity for them. The child at this stage would ask a lot of questions to attain knowledge. If the parents or other caregivers ignore his questions, the child might feel the guilt. On the other hand, the success at this stage help children attain purpose.

During *early schools years*, the crisis of *Industry vs. Inferiority* can happen. Teachers take an important role as children will be learning to read and write. Children indeed start doing things on their own. Therefore, at this phase children

need to be encouraged for their initiative to feel confident in order to achieve their goals. Otherwise, they feel inferior. Nevertheless, the success at this stage can cause competence.

As children reach the stage of *adolescence*, they might face the crisis of *Identity vs. Role Confusion*. This stage is very important as children become more independent and develop their personal identity. Fidelity is the result of success at this phase.

During *young adulthood*, the crisis is one of *Intimacy vs. Isolation*. People at this stage start to share themselves with others intimately and avoiding from intimacy and relationships can lead to isolation. On the other hand, if people are successful at this phase, they can achieve love in their life.

As people reach *middle adulthood*, they can face the crisis of *Generativity vs. Stagnation*. Within this phase people settle down their relationship and make their own family. They become involved in community activities and if they are not successful, they remain stagnant. The success at this stage on the other hand leads to care.

At the last stage, *late adulthood*, the crisis is one of *Ego Integrity vs. Despair*. People slow down in life at this stage. If people think that they have not achieved their goals, they might feel depression and hopelessness. Nonetheless, the success at this stage leads to wisdom.

An opposition to psychoanalytic theory was Watson's, Skinner's and Pavlov's theories which were all rooted in behaviorism. According to behaviorism, human behavior could be formed during the course of development by conditioning which is the process of connecting reactions to particular stimuli. The behaviorists though did not describe clearly the individual stages of development. On the other

hand, they believed that classical conditioning and operant conditioning as the two forms of conditioning could be used to revise human behavior all through the life time (Berger, 2006).

Along with these theories, Piaget developed another approach to child development which was cognitive theory. He investigated the development of thought processes. In other words, Jean Piaget created a theory of child development that conceptualized children as moving through a number of stages of development (Piaget, 1950). Sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete and formal operations were four stages of development in Piaget's theory. Not to mention, teachers working from this developmental model need to be aware of each individual child's development and respond in the appropriate ways. Moreover, the most effective tool for learning to Piaget was play. Jean Piaget believed that children explore their worlds through play. The four developmental stages of Piaget (1950) are elaborated in depth as follows:

*Sensorimotor Stage:* this stage starts from birth until the age of two. Children at this stage can develop knowledge through motor activity using senses. Ability to use symbols and language develops at the end of this stage.

*Preoperational Stage:* this phase starts from the age of two till the age of seven. At this stage children use symbols and words to understand the environment. Story book reading is considered as a helpful literacy activity at this level.

*Concrete Operational Stage:* this phase initiates at the age of seven and ends at the age of eleven. During this phase children are able to use concrete objects to understand abstract concepts.

*Formal Operational Stage:* this phase activates at the age of eleven and finishes at the age of fifteen. At this phase, children are able to understand abstract

concepts. Metacognitive reading strategies can be considered as literacy activities at this stage (Godwin, Herb, Ricketts & Wymer, 2013).

Beside all these theories on child development, Bronfenbrenner (1979) grounded another theory namely the ecological theory based on which the human development progresses throughout life as well as through interactions with others.

Ecological Theory and Child Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Tseng & Seidman, 2007) emphasizes that various levels of environment can potentially impact on literacy development in children. The first level of environment is called Microsystem and it is the immediate environment where children live in. This environment consists of close relatives, friends, caregivers and daycare. In addition, how different people who are in an incessant contact communicate with the child, can indicate and control how each individual child develops. The second level of environment in ecological theory is Mesosystem. This level explains how various parts of a child's microsystem function together for the child. For instance, if one of the parents shows vigorous interest in the child's school and extra-curricular tasks, it can enhance the total progress of the child. The third level of environment is Exosystem. This stage refers to people and places that the child himself does not communicate with so often, yet they have an extensive effect on the child. These places could be place of work of the parents, extended family, and neighborhood and so on. The final level of environment is Macrosystem. This is the widest and the most distant set of people and things which have excessive effect on the child's development. It involves freedom by the national government, cultural ethics, economy, wars etc. These factors can either have a positive impact or a negative effect on the child. In fact, compound interconnections of people and environments form physical, social, and cognitive development in children.

Furthermore, Ecological Theory and Child Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) puts emphasis on the significance of teachers' analytical reflection on their practices. It also signifies the inter-connections of; a) scholastic study concerning young children's learning and development and language development together with early literacy learning, b) beliefs, ideologies and practices, such as the teachers' role, the image of the child and intentional teaching practices c) profound dialogues and communications in the preschool learning environment d) caring collaborations with children, parents, families and communities e) comprehensive learning contexts or settings and children's ability to tryout and participate in literacy activities through play f) links with children's previous language and literacy experiences, family main concerns for encouraging literacy, children's interests and strengths, and community and family opportunities for language and literacy acquisition.

Another prominent theorist, Lev Vygotsky, was a Russian psychologist whose theory has had great effects on research on how children learn for many eras. He proposed constructivist theory. Vygotsky's social constructivist theory was indeed interested in interactions between the child and the environment. As a matter of fact, "our understandings of literacy are informed by a social constructivist perspective" (Oldfather & Dahl, 1994, p.140). As social events language and literacy involve complex interactions and responses. In Vygotsky's theory, productive social and cultural environments significantly impact children's cognitive development. Mental activity in this theory is regarded distinctively human and it is the outcome of social learning, of the internalization of social signs and of culture and social interactions. Vygotskian scholastic and psychological applications provide chances for dynamic involvement and approval of individual dissimilarities.

According to Vygotsky, children learn through their interactions with their environment and social interactions (Berger, 2006). Through interaction with more knowledgeable teachers and peers, Vygotsky believed that children's learning would spur their development. Justin et al. (2003) confirm that the social settings and environment where children are raised can greatly impact the development of early literacy. Meanwhile, teachers play a significant part in interactions and their beliefs can be reflected on their practices in the field of early literacy. Teachers had better select literacy materials based on children's interests and organize, and structure children's participation and engagement in early literacy tasks and interactions to help children construct their repertoire of knowledge and experiences. The engagement in interactions and activities can also support children to have the individual sense of self as a reader and writer. Adults thus can indeed help children in order to expedite and to expand their learning within these interactions (Vygotsky, 1978).

In contrast with Piaget's belief, Vygotsky's (1978) theory highlights this point that learning preceding development with instruction aimed at a child's emerging skills. The preschool teachers are indeed required to have sufficient knowledge and mastery of early literacy skills that are requisite for a child in order to learn to read and write. In other words, children need to be in an environment that is conducive to learning in general and to learn to read and write in particular. Children are active learners who build knowledge from their experiences with the world and these experiences are mediated by others predominantly their parents or primary caregivers

Regarding the social interaction implementation, Vygotsky (1978) affirmed that social interaction was fundamental in the children's learning process and it

depends on two people; one who is more knowledgeable about the material namely the teacher and the other who is learning the material that is the student. Subsequently when children are able to work and communicate with an adult or other more progressive children during learning, both learning and cognitive developments are enhanced.

Along with the above mentioned theories that all focus on the child development, McComish and Parsons (2013) in their study linked Transformational Learning theory emphasizing on adults to improving teachers' practices through collaboration. Transformational Learning Theory was presented by Mezirow and it is grounded in the nature of human communication. This theory explains the change in meaning structures through two domains of learning. First domain of learning is *instrumental* learning which is based on empirical-analytical discovery. It emphasizes on learning through problem solving and determination of cause and effect relationships. The second domain of learning is *communicative* learning which is when learning occurs through understanding the meaning of what others communicate. In other words, Transformational Learning Theory describes how adults revise their meaning structures and make meaning of their experiences.

Moreover, McComish et al. (2013) mentioned that transformational learning in the field of teaching and instruction happens when teachers examine or question their practices critically and develop different perspective to apprehend that practice. They actually transform their understanding of pedagogy as well as their roles as teachers (p.240). McComish et al. (2013) also asserted that this transformation does not happen in isolation though. Teachers indeed can achieve this transformation through collaborating with each other.

In another study, Nickel (2011) refers to the concept of scaffolding in early literacy childhood education. Social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978) considers scaffolding as the process by which the teacher constantly changes the level of assistance given to the learner as the learning needs change. This view supports the principle that adults can impact the development of early literacy in children by scaffolding children's understanding. It means that teachers can help children to be able to achieve more than they could independently. To put it differently, children are first taught and provided with certain information and material. They then receive scaffolding from their teacher in order to help them reach the point of rich understanding. Furthermore, Sun and Rao (2012) confirm that children can master a number of skills to solve problems through interactions with adults and scaffolding is an interactive process that facilitates this process. Teachers can actually impact children's early literacy development based on the type of scaffolding they provide children with. They can in fact simplify the activities into comprehensible parts and encourage children to do the task and solve the problem independently (Sun & Rao, 2012).

Moreover, scaffolding can be used as a strategy to teach children a number of early literacy skills. For example, McGee and Ukrainetz (2009) consider scaffolding as a method to teach young children phonemic awareness in preschools. The method of scaffolding includes instructions in which teachers provide children with guidance to how to answer the question correctly. Likewise, McGee et al. (2009) developed three levels of scaffolding. The first level of scaffolding is *Intense scaffolding* in which teacher puts emphasis on the beginning phoneme in isolation and says the word with the phoneme overstated. Teacher reminds children to look at his/her



mouth as he/she says the sound. He/she models the right answer and then has the child repeat the phoneme.

The second level of scaffolding is *Moderate scaffolding* in which teacher stresses on the first sound in isolation and within the word by bouncing the sound. Teacher can point to or remind the children to look at his/her mouth without providing them with the correct answer.

The last level of scaffolding according to McGee et al. (2009) is *Minimum scaffolding* in which teacher only emphasizes on the first sound as he/she says a word.

Additionally, Phillips, Clancy-Menchetti and Lonigan (2008) support scaffolding and assert that phonological instruction should involve scaffolded instruction together with corrective feedback. They explain that in a scaffolded instruction teacher defines the concepts and models them, explains the task and consequently provides guided feedback. And the level of support each child needs in order to answer the question and perform the task independently determines the level of scaffolding the teacher provides. Corrective feedback accordingly is a certain positive comment about the task which is a response from the teacher. And this feedback occurs during the instructional intervention.

With all these in mind, it is essential to remember that learning to read and write is dependent on the children's mastery of a number of basic skills. Children must have key foundational skills if they are to study in kindergarten ready to learn to read. Therefore, Paciga et al. (2011) provide some recommendations for preschool literacy teaching based on National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) report. According to this report, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and oral language are crucial features of early literacy instruction. Similarly, Rhode (2015) in another study

considers emergent literacy as consists of “the knowledge and abilities related to the alphabet, phonological awareness, symbolic representation, and communication” (Rohde, 2015, p.1). And practices which are including these elements are effective since they have positive effects on children’s literacy development.

Though, it needs to be reminded that measuring the relationships between these elements is hard. As an illustration, measuring skills like oral language is complex as development occurs on so many levels like grammar, vocabulary, articulation and practical use.

Another important factor in providing efficient early literacy practices is to decide how to boost the achievement of the key literacy skills in young children. A great deal of research has focused on specific strategies which support children in their attainment of these skills. And without high quality models of instructional practice the inexplicit language in NELP-related documents could be utilized in inappropriately. Paciga et al (2011) actually signal caution when authenticity is substituted by more drill-and-skill tasks consequently children’s play and engagement lessen. It is worrying that there are misinterpretations about NELP report and it is possible “that instruction could become narrowly focused on basic skills through inappropriate teaching practices” (Paciga et al., 2011, p.55).

**Early literacy skills.** In order to provide young children with efficient instruction and help them master early literacy skills, researchers have conducted a number of studies and suggested various early literacy models; however each included various skills in their models. For instance, early literacy in Mason and Stewart’s (1990) model encompasses four key constituents. The first constituent includes *concepts and functions of literacy* such as children’s knowledge about the act of reading, their knowledge about the function of reading, and their self-

perceptions about learning to read, and reading environmental print. The second component in Mason et al.'s (1990) model comprises of *writing and composing* which contains children's writing of words and sentences, along with composing stories. The third component in this literacy model involves *knowledge about letters and words* such as letter name and letter sound knowledge, word recognition skills, and phonological awareness. The last constituent consists of *listening comprehension and word understanding* including children's word knowledge, narrative knowledge, coupled with using cues for reading stories.

On the other hand, in Whitehurst and Lonigan's (1998) model, early literacy entails two interdependent domains of skills and knowledge. The first domain comprises of *the outside-in constituent* which signifies "children's understanding of the context in which the writing they are trying to read (or write) occurs" (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, p.854). This domain consists of vocabulary, understanding and producing narratives, knowledge about print, and pretending to read. The second domain involves *the inside-out constituent*. This domain signifies "children's knowledge of the rules for translating the particular writing they are trying to read into sounds (or sounds into print for writing)" (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, p.854). This domain of early literacy consists of letter name and letter sound knowledge, phonological awareness, pseudo word decoding, syntactic awareness, and invented writing.

On the contrary, Senechal, Lefevre, Thomas and Daley (1998) in another study divided early literacy into two different main constituents. *Oral language component* as the first constituent in Senechal et al.'s (1998) model consists of vocabulary, listening comprehension and phonological awareness, and the second component, *the written language constituent* includes concepts about print,

alphabetic knowledge, invented spelling, and decoding. Senechal et al. (1998) suggested that these two constituents of emergent literacy are allied with different literacy experiences at home. Oral language skills are influenced by the frequency of storybook reading, though written language skills are associated with parent's teaching of reading and writing skills.

Correspondingly, Storch and Whitehurst (2002) considered early literacy as consists of oral language and code-related skills. These two constituents included similar variables to those described by Senechal et al. (1998), except that they assumed that phonological awareness belongs to the code-related skills.

The recent early literacy model is presented by Rohde (2015) which consists of print awareness, phonological awareness and oral language. There are also other skills that overlap with these constituents such as inventive spelling, grammar, syntax, lexical restructuring, and a mental organization of words. In addition, Rohde (2015) includes writing as another component which consists of all of the pieces of the model. This component is located in the center of Rohde's (2015) comprehensive literacy framework. This is because that is the place where children establish literacy concepts' knowledge. According to this framework, children are the initiators of literacy and writing is considered as a place "where all the pieces come together" (p.4). Indeed, children use writing to produce a new message. Children can gain more thorough understanding of the early literacy constituents connected with reading when they have this ability to make their own messages. In other words, when children achieve early writing, they can extend their knowledge of other components of early literacy.

Even though these models vary in the number of constituents included in their grouping systems, and the classification of each variable, all these models approve

that early literacy comprises of a comprehensive range of skills and knowledge that may be connected with reading and writing development of children.

Based on Paciga et al.'s (2011) study, early literacy instruction should focus on and follow a certain system as well. They elaborate this system as follows:

*Green lights:* Alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness and oral language should be taught while considering authentic strategies to teach early literacy and language skills.

*Caution lights:* For long-term literacy development, children need instruction in content and developmental areas and code-based aspects of literacy. All three skills are important in literacy development. They need to practise real-life literacies. Over-emphasize on skill-and-drill activities is an inappropriate way to teach early literacy skills.

*Red lights:* It is worrying “that instruction could become narrowly focused on basic skills through inappropriate teaching practices” (Paciga et al., 2011, p.55).

As a result, one of the areas of focus for preschool teachers is the advancement of skill development in writing and pre-reading (Elliott & Olliff, 2008). Research on the knowledge of early childhood educators and instructors in promoting language and early literacy development proposed the necessity of a solid understanding of early literacy skills foundational for children in order to be good readers, writers, and communicators. It is also important that teachers and educators have the knowledge of various developmentally appropriate activities and strategies to provide children with opportunities for learning. Surprisingly, in a study by Crim, Hawkins, Thornton, Rosof, Coplay and Thomas (2008), it was revealed that preschool teachers had struggle detecting certain features of phonological awareness that could directly impact on what was instructed to preschool children. Ball and

Gettinger (2009) noticed that literacy-building activities and tasks were reinforced when teachers were equipped with ample print and written materials and were assured of their level of preparation and training.

As an illustration, preschool teachers had considerably increased children's expressive and receptive vocabulary when they were provided with particular training in book reading and oral language strategies (Wasik, Bond & Hindman, 2006). The development of early literacy skills is vital within the early years at preschool as children can acquire the requisite pre-reading skills in order to be successful later at school.

Findings from the increasing number of experiential evidence show that phonological processing skills, print awareness and alphabet knowledge, and oral language are highly foretelling how well children learn simply to read as soon as they are exposed to formal reading instruction from kindergarten to grade three (Lonigan, 2006). Children who leave preschool with well-built or developed phonological processing skills, significant print and alphabet knowledge, and substantial oral language skills have the ability to break the alphabetic code apart and to become proficient readers when are given effective reading instruction. In contrast, children who have struggle learning the alphabetic principle and decoding fail to benefit from the opportunity to develop fluency skills in order to become a proficient reader. They are also inclined to have lessened enthusiasm to read, and lose the chances to attain vocabulary and other essential content knowledge (Lonigan, 2006).

There is an abundant body of research and study in the area of early literacy instructional practices in traditional print-based texts. In spite of the historical "Reading Wars" amongst advocates of whole language instruction and advocates of

skills-based instruction, a lot of literacy educationalists and researchers argue for a balanced approach to literacy instruction. This balanced approach is a combination of systematic, explicit skills instruction and holistic, authentic reading and writing experiences. Reading research suggests various methods to organize or conceptualize the components of early literacy.

As a matter of fact, to better implement early English literacy instruction and provide efficient literacy practices, it is necessary for teachers to be aware of the concept of early literacy skills. Indeed, Sonnenschein & Munsterman (2002) consider early literacy skills as the basic skills which are supposed to be applicable and related to the acquisition of a child's reading ability. And Drouin (2009) expresses that child who struggle with early literacy skills throughout the first years of school will most likely struggle with literacy during the following academic years and beyond.

To sum up, the components of early literacy instruction for the aims of the current research are theorized as components of a whole process, interconnected and intertwined. These components consist of phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness and oral language. A discussion of practices of early literacy instruction must also include practices for working with English language learners (ELLs) in literacy instruction. Additionally, early literacy instructional practices are required to attend to the issues of engagement and social interaction in early literacy learning. These dimensions of literacy instruction can be organized in a variety of ways.

There is an abundant body of scholarly research for each of the above mentioned components of early literacy instruction. Each will be precisely delineated and elaborated for the purpose of establishing effective practices in early English literacy instruction. These key early literacy skills including alphabet knowledge,

phonological awareness, print awareness and oral language are requisite in preschool teachers' practices and activities which are elaborated in detail as follows:

***Alphabet knowledge.*** Knowledge of alphabet is considered to be a key component of early literacy instruction. Townsend and Konold (2010) mention “that later spelling skills depend on initial alphabet knowledge” (p.124). Children have to recognize that there are systematic connections between written letters and spoken sounds and this understanding is named alphabetic principle. In addition, when children gain the knowledge that particular sounds are linked with each letter the process of decoding print will begin (Townsend & Konold, 2010). The concept of alphabet knowledge has been interpreted in a number of ways throughout the existing research. According to Drouin, Horner and Sondergeld (2012), “alphabet knowledge is considered a unitary construct that includes the ability to recognize, name, and provide the sound for the uppercase and lowercase letters of the alphabet” (p.544). Similarly, National Early Literacy Panel (2008) defines alphabet knowledge as the knowledge of letter names and their corresponding sounds. Turnbull, Bowles, Skibbe, Justice and Wiggins (2010) noticed that preschoolers in their study were 16 times more likely to know a lowercase letter if they knew the corresponding uppercase letter. They also detected that uppercase and lowercase similarity, letters in a student's name, and letter frequency in printed English did predict children's lowercase letter knowledge.

However, it is believed that alphabet knowledge can be under the constructs of print knowledge or concepts. In other words, when children acquire the word skills, they are able to match printed words into words in speech. Yet, children must master letter knowledge first in order to identify sounds and then acquire word skills



as Piasta (2014) asserted that children usually start learning alphabet before they enter school.

Supporting alphabet knowledge as one of the key components of early literacy instruction, Goodman (2011) monitored a group of kindergarten children up to the second grade to examine the effects of learning the alphabetic principle. She found out that students who became skilled at the alphabetical principle in kindergarten have been bettered reading fluency in the second grade. Various researches refer to a number of evidence that mastery of the alphabetical principle affected students' reading in upper grade levels (see Fien, Park, Scott, Jean, Stoolmiller & Edward, 2010; Simmons, Coyne, Kwok, McDonagh, Harn & Kame'nnui, 2008). On the contrary, Fien et al. (2010) reported that a large number of kindergarten students were completing kindergarten without mastering the alphabetic principle. Likewise, Ford and Opitz (2008) stated that most students had difficulty in reading since teachers were not talking to students who failed to learn alphabetical principle. Indeed, Ford and Opitz (2008) also mentioned that teachers were the main element that affected students who were reading below the proper grade level.

Even though there are a variety of approaches to alphabet teaching and instruction, there is a disagreement about the effective teaching in this area. The research by NELP did not make a distinction "between various alphabet outcomes such as letter name knowledge, letter sound knowledge, or letter writing, instead collapsing all alphabet outcomes into a single construct and prohibiting disambiguation of differential effects across alphabetic domains" (Piasta & Wagner, 2010, p.9). The NELP actually "did not thoroughly investigate the impact of specific instructional components on alphabet knowledge outcomes" (Piasta & Wagner, 2010, p.9).

With this in mind, instruction techniques might differ significantly from teacher to teacher. There is a wide variety of options to teach the knowledge of a concept like the alphabetic principle (Randolph, 2012). And the distinction in instruction can affect students' outcomes concerning alphabetic principle, mainly with regard to phonetic awareness, fluency, and vocabulary. Games and play activities as well as picture mnemonics (for instance, drawing a pair of wings on a 'W' to incorporate the grapheme with a word beginning with the initial sound) are considered to be helpful in the development of children's understanding of the alphabetic knowledge (Pressley, 2006). Pressley (2006) also discussed that children have to be afforded lots of practice reading and writing words, both in isolation and in texts. Reading research has agreed on the various types of activities that develop the alphabetic principle in beginning readers.

In a study, Jones and Reutzel (2012) referred to a number of advantages that can have an effect on letter names and sounds learning and alphabet knowledge teaching. The first factor or advantage is the *own-name advantage* which refers to the understanding or accepting that children first acquire the letter names and sounds in their given or first name. The second factor, "the alphabetic-order advantage is that young students learn AK more quickly for the letters occurring at the beginning or end of the alphabet rather than those letters occurring in the middle of the alphabet" (McBride-Chang, cited in Jones et al., 2012, p.450). The third advantage is *letter frequency advantage* which refers to the frequency of exposure to the letters of alphabet that happens in an individual and general level. The next advantage is *letter-name pronunciation advantage* which means that children learn a sound of letter more easily when the name of that letter comprises the typical sound which is connected with letters as /b/ or /f/, and the last advantage is *consonant phoneme*

*acquisition order advantage*. It means that “consonant letters that correspond to consonant phonemes acquired earlier in oral language development are typically learned earlier than consonant letters and phonemes with which students have less phonological and perceptual experience” (p.453). In fact, Jones et al. (2012) used these advantages in order to improve alphabet knowledge instruction.

In another study Jones, Clark and Reutzel (2013) provided a technique of instruction that teachers can implement in their practices to teach the key skills of alphabet knowledge. This method is called Enhanced Alphabet Knowledge instruction (EAK). Jones et al. (2013) believed that lessons on alphabet knowledge are required to be brief and explicit. The format of EAK emphasizes on detecting the name of the alphabet letter and its sound, identifying the letter in writing and producing the letter form. These three steps would assist children to learn alphabet knowledge and use that knowledge in both reading and writing. Jones et al. (2013) discussed that this method or technique has three benefits. First, they stated that Enhanced Alphabet Knowledge instruction consists of three essential components of alphabet knowledge and is easy for teachers to use. Second benefit of EAK instruction is that unlike the traditional letter-of-the-week pacing teachers in this kind of instruction can vary the pacing in instruction. They can for instance, devote more time to letters that children have problem with and less time to the letters children know well. Finally, EAK comprises of research-based cycles that teachers can choose from according their students’ needs.

Hence, it is important to consider that students in all levels should attain alphabetical principle, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary knowledge, and comprehension in order to read efficiently (McCulley, Katz & Vaughn, 2013). Teachers should in fact teach phonemic awareness and alphabetic principle directly

and explicitly. As regards with vocabulary teaching, vocabulary instruction highlights word recognition. Repeated or timed readings on the other hand might solve problems connected with fluency. As children advance or proceed to higher levels, vocabulary demands are linked with how students acquire content. Therefore, generative and non-generative approaches can be united with vocabulary instruction in order to attend to effective content acquirement (McCulley et al., 2013).

Considering the importance of alphabet knowledge instruction, Piasta et al. (2010) focused on “all studies providing alphabet training and assessing alphabet outcomes through November 2006” (p.10). It “disambiguated effects for five discrete alphabet outcomes” that is to say “letter name knowledge, letter sound knowledge, letter name fluency, letter sound fluency, and letter writing” (Piasta et al., 2010, p. 10). It was expected that alphabet instruction have positive significant effects on phonological awareness, reading and spelling outcomes.

Through synthesis of 60 studies from early reading literature, Piasta et al. (2010) demonstrated the substantial effect of instruction on children’s alphabet learning. Letter name fluency was the only outcome that did not show any effect of instruction. Though, it was not unexpected since fluency is one of the most difficult aspects of literacy to improve. It is actually proven that particular aspects of alphabet knowledge can be improved by instruction.

As can be noticed, findings were by and large unconvincing with regard to the contributory associations between alphabet learning and development of other early literacy skills. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on and identify how to effectively impart alphabet knowledge. A study focusing on different ways of enhancing the acquisition of letters and how sounds are differentiated is required in order to see the efficacy and efficiency of alphabet letters instruction. It is also

important to elucidate the role of alphabet knowledge in enhancing children's early literacy development.

***Phonological awareness.*** “Over the past 25 years, a number of studies have demonstrated the significance of phonological awareness in helping young children to develop preliteracy and literacy skills” (Stewart, 2004, p.31). Stewart (2004) believes “that phonological awareness is not simply correlated to literacy skills but plays a strong causal role in the development of them” (p.36). “Phonological awareness is an understanding of the different ways in which spoken language can be broken down and manipulated” (Washburn & Mulcahy, 2014, p.331). On the other hand, National Early Literacy Panel (2008) refers to phonological awareness as the children's capability to distinguish, manipulate, or analyze hearing language. It indeed involves an awareness of sounds within words and the knowledge of sound and letter correspondence.

Phonological awareness can also be known as sound awareness which incorporates understanding, decoding, and blending of sounds. To put it differently, phonological awareness helps children recognize and manipulate the syllables, graphemes, and phonemes in order to develop words. The primary step for the development of phonological awareness is in fact to understand that each letter of alphabet makes a sound and the combination of these sounds makes a word (Lonigan, 2006). In effect, to enhance this skill in children, teachers need to teach phonology explicitly as explicit phonological awareness instruction aids children develop the ability to take apart words into sounds, identify the sounds, and put them together again.

Accordingly, a number of theories on phonological knowledge and its instruction have emerged. Regarding theories on teaching and learning phonological

awareness and skills, López (2012) discussed one of the recent theories concerning phonological awareness that is called developmental progression. In this theory phonological awareness involves a number of tasks in which tasks span from easy to more complex abilities. The difficulty of the tasks though depends on the kind of sound manipulation, the unit size as well as the unit location in the word. López (2012) stated that “assessment is of concern in the study of PA” (p.374). As phonological awareness is a critical factor in the development of early literacy and most assessments focus on elementary school children, López (2012) emphasized that it is essential to develop a tool which measures this development earlier than kindergarten.

Moreover, phonological awareness is considered to be as important and effective in learning how to read. “Phonology plays a crucial role in reading acquisition and development” (Frost et al., 2009, p.79). Frost et al. (2009) also mention that “the prominent view of the role of PA is that it provides an entry for print processing to make contact with areas already engaged by well-instantiated spoken language processes” (p.80). It involves the awareness of sound features in spoken language. It also involves rhyme recognition, syllables, onset and rime. To explain, onset is the consonant phoneme(s) before the vowel in a spoken syllable and rime is the vowel and any remaining consonant(s) of the syllable. And onset-rime is the ability of the children to break apart a single syllable into an onset and a rime. Beside this, children need to be able to realize that written letters or letters in print do symbolize phonemes in spoken language and they should subsequently associate the letters to their corresponding sounds in order to learn to read and spell alphabetic writings or passages (Manolitsis & Tafa, 2011).

Moreover, according to Martins, Silva and Pereira (2010), at a first level when children write, they do not try to match the oral to the written language but later on they start to represent their writing by phonetic signs. Martins et al. (2010) believe “that children often start by representing some of the sounds in the words before finally representing all of the sounds in the words (alphabetic writing)” (p.694).

A study indeed showed that young and beginning writers who are learning English as a foreign language, “even those that are at a very young age and in a very early stage of writing, demonstrate preliminary phonological awareness and competence” (He & Wang, 2009, p.54). It was concluded in the study that “relying on their phonological awareness and these principles, young EFL writers can represent phonemes they segment and/or pronounce with corresponding graphemes” (He & Wang, 2009, p.54). He and Wang (2009) explain that “spelling in an alphabetic language like English is a phonologically guided process” as well (p. 54). To clarify, spelling skill development can have an important effect on reading since it boosts phonologic awareness and comprehension skills. Moreover, enhanced spelling skills lead to better understanding of the alphabetic principle, and easier acquisition of sight words (Graham & Santangelo, 2014).

Along with phonological awareness, recently the concept of phonemic awareness has received considerable attention in the area of early childhood education. Phonemic awareness is indeed a part of phonological awareness. As a matter of fact, the difference between phonological awareness and phonemic awareness is more important in theory than in practice. In a study for example, Yurick, Cartledge, Kourea and Keyes (2012) tried to investigate how much progresses in phonemic awareness skills could be attributed to the partaking in an

intensive early reading intervention. It was intended in the study to see whether the level of treatment integrity and treatment duration had any effects on students' phonemic awareness gain scores. Besides, Brady, et al. (2009) suggest that teachers are required to have the knowledge to be able to help children to understand that developing phonemic awareness facilitates to understand the written language. According to Brady et al. (2009), teachers had better to recognize:

“(a) what the speech sounds of English are; (b) how phonological awareness develops and the characteristics of advanced levels of phoneme awareness; (c) what kinds of activities foster development; (d) what speech sounds (and in which combinations) are easier for children to segment and identify, as well as which are harder and why; (e) what constitutes an adequate level of phoneme awareness for literacy purposes; and (f) how weaknesses in phoneme awareness are evident in reading and spelling errors” (p.427).

Along with phonemes, phonics can also be regarded as another component of phonological awareness which refers to the relationships between sound and letter of alphabet. It involves a set of rules in order to establish consistency in how speech sounds represented in print letters or words. A number of researches indicate that learning and using the correspondences between sound and letter are crucial in the process of learning to read (see Ehri, 2004; Muter, Hulme, Snowling & Stevenson, 2004). To point out, the instruction on phonics should be explicit as well. Phonics instruction indeed involves teaching children the links or connections between the graphemes and letters of words in print and the single sounds and phonemes of oral language. The knowledge of phonics helps children to read and spell words accurately and rapidly. As a matter of fact, invented spelling is an exploration of written symbols in language and can be characterized as phonics instruction.

Supporting the development of phonological awareness, in order to help children develop this skill, teachers can implement various tasks in their instruction.



Accordingly, a research by Schatsneider, Francis, Foorman, Fletcher, and Mehta (1999) refers to a number of tasks in phonemic awareness instruction. The first activity is *phoneme isolation* in which children are asked to identify certain sounds at the initial, medial and final part of words. Second task entails *phoneme blending* in which children need to blend two or more sounds in order to make a word. In *phoneme omission* as the third activity on phonology teaching, children are required to recognize a word when a sound is deleted. The fourth task is *phoneme segmentation* in which children should break apart the sounds in a word and detect the number of the sounds. Phoneme segmentation skills are indeed considered to be the greatest predictor of a child's reading and spelling skill development (Blachman, 2000). The next activity in phoneme instruction, *phoneme substitution* is the one in which children should alter a certain sound within a word to make a new word and in *rhyme* children are required to provide a word which rhymes with the target word. Finally, in *phoneme reversal* as the last task in phonology teaching, children should change the positions of the sounds within words.

In another study, Townsend and Konold (2010) described some strategies on how to implement a task focusing on sounds. According to Townsend and Konold (2010), performing the tasks in phonology includes a number of steps. First, the teacher needs to introduce a picture. Next, the teacher says the word the picture represents while she/he is emphasizing on the beginning sound of the word. Finally, the teacher asks the children to separate and repeat just the initial sound of the word. After children made an effort to answer, the teacher should inform children what the correct answer is while explaining it. Later, children sort the picture in a column with other pictures that have the same beginning sound.

Furthermore, teachers require a number of key instructional guidelines concerning teaching phonological awareness skills in order to teach young children. For example, several guidelines are presented in a study by Troia (2004). These guidelines or procedures include: First, tasks on phonological awareness are required to be focused on the sounds of the language not on the meaning. Second, direct techniques should be used to teach phonological awareness skills such as extensive modeling, immediate feedback together with positive reinforcement. Next principle in teaching phonology is that phonological awareness skills need to be initiated with simple skills like rhyming. In addition, activities on phonological awareness should begin with less cognitively demanding tasks such as matching and eliminating.

The other guideline in phonology teaching according to Troia (2004) is that instruction on phonological awareness should start with larger linguistics units as words and syllables before smaller units. Additionally, children should learn continuant consonant sounds before non-continuant sounds. And the first target words should be concrete and familiar to the children. Moreover, segmental features of target words need to be scaffolded as exaggerating the pronunciation of continuant phonemes and repeating non-continuant phonemes. And in order to facilitate segmenting, sequencing and blending, illustrations with prompts can be used. The next guideline is that phonological awareness, letter recognition and naming and letter-sound association should be synthesized in optimal instruction and finally a child's development of one skill may not automatically transfer to other skills therefore, children should be taught to generalize skills.

It is discussed that supplemental instructional programs can also provide children with engaging, appropriate literacy skills activities (Korth, Sharp and Culatta, 2010). Though, for supplemental instruction to be effective enough, the

treatment is required to be of ample length in minutes, be regularly employed and continue for an adequate number of weeks throughout the school year. More researches are required to explore the nature of treatment integrity and outcomes. Further examinations should also gather more detailed and thorough information about the interventionists' outlooks toward the intervention and the students.

***Print awareness.*** Since early ages children are encountered with various experiences that might provide them with knowledge about print. For example, they are read story books by adults and are taught alphabet letters and their own names. They also encounter different signs such as road signs, product signs and so on. Orthographic concepts are indeed central to this literacy component which includes conventions of print such as the understanding that English is read from top to bottom and left to right. In particular, print awareness includes an understanding of the function of the written language along with the relationship between the spoken and written words (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2014).

Having emerging knowledge about print helps children to learn “the ability to name letters and the knowledge that letters are associated with sounds” (Landry, Swank, Smith, Assel & Gunnewig, 2006, p.306). The results in Gong and Levy research (2009) “suggest that in order for young children to learn writing conventions, they need to explore the print more thoroughly than simply looking at it by pointing to and tracing the print” (p.903). Gong et al. (2009) also mention that “print referencing behaviors that emphasize what constitutes readable print are important in learning print conventions” (p.903).

Additionally, exposure to various prints in diverse languages and their conventional spelling systems aids the child to link writing to his native language and culture. Besides, it increases the recognition of the representative and subjective

foundation of written language. When children are exposed to print, they can become aware of a number of its main surface structures. For instance, when young children are faced with words that are particularly important to them such as their own names they are even able to learn language-specific properties (Pinto, Bigozzi, Gamannossi & Vezzani, 2012). “Improving children’s motivation for print may be particularly important as this seems likely to result in further gains as children orient to and enjoy reading letters and words in surrounding print” (Neumann, Hood & Ford, 2013, p.789).

Similarly, Neumann et al. (2013) agreed that “by focusing children’s attention on letters and words in environmental print, it may be possible to motivate them to initiate further independent exploration of letters in their broader surroundings, thereby increasing their learning opportunities” (p.789).

With this in mind, certain activities can help to enhance the print awareness development in children. As an illustration, book reading lies at the heart of children’s early literacy development. Book reading experiences help children to build background knowledge about the world and about the print concepts. In addition, books can help children to understand how the printed word transfers meaning, and they can subsequently assist children to distinguish letters and gain knowledge of sounds (Justice, Skibbe, & Ezell, 2006). Shared book reading is well supported by research in the field of early literacy. It is interpreted as an activity in which a parent, a caregiving adult or a teacher reads aloud to a child (see Levy, Gong, Hessels, Evans, & Jared, 2006).

In order to implement efficient instruction in reading comprehension skill, a number of strategies can be used. The first strategy is called *Reciprocal teaching*. This strategy allows teachers and students to model the comprehension process for

each other. In this process after reading the text the students are asked to question, summarize, clarify and predict the story. The next method is *Schema Theory* in which an abstract knowledge namely, schema, summarizes what you know about a variety of cases that differ. According to this theory, all knowledge is ordered and structured in units and in these units of knowledge which are called schemata information is kept. To clarify, schemata denote the information about concepts such as the objects and the connections they have with other objects, situations, events, and arrangements of events, actions, coupled with arrangements of actions. The last technique in teaching reading comprehension skill is named *Reader response theory*. This technique supports teachers to enhance the talk on literature rather than teaching the correct answer or arguing about what the writer meant or aimed in the story.

In addition, print referencing along with reading aloud practices can maximize the development of early literacy skills (Baker, 2013). Baker (2013) also suggests that adults can help children develop alphabet knowledge by highlighting specific text such as a capital or lowercase letter and the letter with “b” sound. Research has shown that adults did not often make an explicit talk about print during shared book reading. As a result, Massetti (2009) believes that “to consider the potential contribution of writing activities and tasks in a comprehensive emergent literacy intervention approach” is imperative and essential (p.556). Some “emergent writing activities can include teaching children to write the letters of the alphabet and other tasks related to letter knowledge, print awareness, and phonological awareness skills” (Massetti, 2009, p.556).

Invented spelling can be considered as an early literacy activity to promote print awareness in children as well. It actually helps children to explore the written symbols in language. Beginning writers usually spell the unfamiliar words based on

guess and their judgment which can be called invented spelling. Moreover, Burns and Richgels (as cited in Ouellette & Sénéchal, 2008) claimed that invented spelling occurs naturally and does result from children's experimentation with representing words in print. Later children try to match sounds to letters and start conventional spelling. They recognize patterns in the grouping of the letters and identify the link between spelling and meaning. As a matter of fact, invented spelling involves the knowledge of phonologic, orthographic and morphologic word forms. Invented spelling "is a developmental progression in which spelling attempts increase in phonological and orthographic accuracy over time" (Ouellette & Sénéchal, 2008, p.899).

Two major theories emerged related to the development of spelling. *Phase* theorists (see Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton & Johnston, 2012; Sipe, 2003) recognized and presented several stages in spelling development. According to these theorists, these stages begin with phonologic skills. After gaining phonologic skills, students progress to orthographic skills and on to morphology which is the final stage of spelling development. In other words, it is identified by phase theorists that there is an overlap of development, but they believe that the progression of mastering spelling skills develops from phonologic skills to morphologic skills.

*Repertoire* theorists on the other hand, believe that all three kinds of spelling skills develop at the same time (see Bahr, Silliman, Danzak & Wilkinson, 2014; Garcia, Abbott & Berninger, 2010). According to this theory, there is an overlap between phonologic, orthographic and morphologic skill development.

Furthermore, seeing words in print is helpful to learn where the different patterns of spelling are applied. Children are able to learn spelling patterns through seeing the words in print. It enables them to progress from phonological to

conventional spelling. Therefore, reading aloud can help children make a link between print or written word and its spelling as well. As Ness (2010) explained, a child's spelling tells us a lot about how the child reads words. Additionally, Ness (2010) confirmed that it is significant to make a connection between the instructional level of a student's reading and spelling materials since the student's "literacy growth can be stunted by a mismatch in the words they are expected to spell and the words they can independently read" (p.114).

**Oral language.** Oral language development in the early years can have a significant effect on the development of what Vygotsky (1983) calls higher mental processes, such as imagination and abstract thinking. For instance, quality preschool settings or environment can help children move from regulation by others to self-regulation (Yang, 2000). To achieve self-regulatory is essential in the development of academic skills that encompasses other higher mental processes. In fact, "a clear understanding of the importance of self-regulation in children's learning significantly helps teachers of young children to interact more productively in playful contexts" (Whitebread, Coltman, Jameson, & Lander, 2009, p.50).

Additionally, language is considered as the basis for learning to read and write (Dockrell, Lindsay & Palikara, 2011) and is the means through which children can understand their surroundings. Oral language encompasses both speaking and listening to interact with people. Pence and Justice (2008) define oral language as the "language that is spoken. Comprises three domains: content, form, and use" (p. 365). Content or semantics is connected with words and their combinations. Children's language content ability refers to their vocabulary skills and how well the words are understood, employed and delineated by children. Form on the other hand, includes three subparts of morphology, syntax and phonology. Form is indeed more related to

grammar rules which include ordering words, using verbs, articles, pronouns and so on. The last domain of language, use or pragmatics, is about understanding the language and how to use language in a communicative or social setting. It comprises the ability to employ proper language in a communicative and social setting, and understand the social rules. Turn taking, body language, initiating and maintaining topics together with small talk can be considered as a number of social language rules.

Above all, oral language development is considered to be a key precursor to children's later achievement in reading as Lawrence and Snow (2010) identified two categories regarding the connection between oral language and reading achievement. They are called a literacy skills perspective and a Vygotskian perspective.

In the *literacy skills* view, oral language is considered as a skill that needs to be required. According to this perspective, enhancing skills in oral language in early childhood education will result in better literacy performance. It can also contribute to later comprehension skills. In fact, oral language skill is considered as vital in instructional interactions.

In the *Vygotskian* perspective, oral language is viewed as the means by which children can acquire comprehension skills. According to this view, oral discourse is a context for practicing, appropriating and acquiring reading comprehension skills. Similarly, taking part and involvement in oral discourse helps to learn to experience and internalize responses to a text which can consequently result in more skills of comprehension. This participation in fact encourages practicing the perspective-taking skills as well as reasoning skills which are both equally important to comprehension and writing. Additionally, practicing to produce oral discourse and learning through modeling can be considered as a sign of full literacy development.



Likewise, Vygotsky (1962) identified four stages of speech development. The first stage is *primitive stage* which is related to pre-intellectual speech. *Naïve psychology* is the second stage of speech development in which “the child experiences the physical properties of his own body and of the objects around him, and the application of this experience to the use of tools” (Vygotsky, 1962, p.46). *External signs* is the third stage in speech development that is manifested through utilizing “external signs, external operations that are used as aids in the solution of internal problems” (Vygotsky, 1962, p.47). This stage is categorized as egocentric speech, and the *ingrowth stage* is the last stage in which “the child resorts to using outer and inner operations to use logical memory to operate with inherent relationships and inner signs” (Vygotsky, 1962, p.47). The child can think inside of his head at this phase. This is in fact soundless speech. The speech development procedure informs a child’s more advanced ability to use both inner and outer spoken language to create the written language. Without spoken language and the ability of a child to think inside of his or her own head, early writing is not likely.

With all of these in mind, teachers are required to utilize different strategies and activities to enhance oral language development in children. For example, Greenfader, Brouillette & Farkas (2014) suggest that “to facilitate the transition of ELs to English- speaking classrooms, teachers need explicit research-based instructional strategies for the oral language practice necessary to help these students thrive” (p.185). Instructional activities which can support oral language development comprise of read aloud practices such as reading with expression to students, asking students open-ended questions while reading and discussing new vocabulary. Besides, encouraging children to repeat basic phrases from books, and practice

rhymes or poems also supports oral language development (Morrow, Tracey & Del Nero, 2011; NELP, 2008).

Furthermore, supporting the significance of oral language development in children, Greenfader and Brouillette (2013) presented and described the Teaching Artist Project (TAP) in which children were provided with the opportunity to practise listening and speaking skills in a fun comfortable environment. The aim of this project was to provide “teachers with professional development that enables them to stimulate engaging verbal interactions in the classroom and to bring standards-based arts instruction into schools where it has been all but eliminated in the primary grades” (Greenfader & Brouillette, 2013, p.173). Greenfader and Brouillette (2013) agree that teachers can use interactive art lessons to engage children in activities in which children are able to boost their vocabulary knowledge and practice oral language. Hence, arts lessons also provide children with the chance to practice pronunciation, intonation, and gesture that in effect helps them learn to “speak audibly and express thoughts, feelings, and ideas clearly” (NGA Center & CCSSO cited in Greenfader & Brouillette, 2013, p.192). Based on this study children need to feel comfortable in order to speak and the communicative arts activities provide a caring cooperative environment.

Shared book reading is another practice that is helpful in oral language development as well. A fundamental aspect of any shared book reading such as dialogic reading, book sharing, shared stories and reading aloud is the quality of interaction in which the role of listeners that is to say children should be considered as active participants in the interaction. Not to mention, a critical factor in shared book reading events is the discourse, or the verbal interactions that take place between teachers and students. Baker (2013) believes that children are not able to

master early literacy skills only by having adults read to them. What really can have effect on the acquisition of literacy skills are the interactions that happen during reading (Justice, et al., Lovelace & Stewart, Phillips, et al. cited in Baker, 2013).

Instruction or activities on shared book reading can be implemented in a number of ways. For example, in a study, Dickinson and Dickinson and Smith (as cited in Schick, 2015) presented three styles of instruction teachers can implement during shared book reading. The first style is *didactic interactional style* in which teachers encourage limited talk before and after shared book reading. Children are fully involved in the activity in this style however, the talk is concentrated on the basic recall questions teachers ask about the text. *Co-constructive style* is the second style in shared book reading teaching in which the focus is on the story but similar to the first style, teachers do not include much talk before and after book reading. The difference between these two styles is that in co-constructive style teachers stop frequently during shared book reading to talk about the story and help children to make connections with their personal experiences. The last style of instruction on shared book reading, *performance-oriented style* is the one in which teachers have a little talk but extensive conversation both before and after book reading with children about the story. They also talk about the story in detail and help children to link the story with their personal experiences.

Additionally, Pollard-Durodola, et al. (2011) think that shared book reading can accelerate content vocabulary as well and as mentioned previously vocabulary is considered as one of the main components of oral language skill. Pollard-Durodola et al. (2011) refer to three principles that can be implemented during reading aloud process to encourage the development of content vocabulary in children. The first principle is that teachers can help children build content vocabulary by using

concepts that are in line with curricular objectives. The second principle teachers should utilize during reading aloud process is that they can integrate either informational or narrative passages in order to increase children's several exposures to words and concepts. The last principle is that teachers can provide children with ample opportunities to talk about connections between words and concepts to help them build content vocabulary.

In addition, a study conducted by Sénéchal, Pagan, Lever, and Ouellette (2008) verified other research findings and indicated that there was a positive connection between the frequency and variety of shared reading as an instructional approach to construct children's expressive vocabulary. They extended the existing findings and revealed that shared book reading also has a potentially positive and strong relation with children's morphological comprehension. In addition, it has an indirect positive connection with children's syntax comprehension skills. Neuman (2006) supported this and declared that when children are not provided with ample opportunities to be read to, they will have limited experience with novel, diverse, and further refined vocabulary outside of their daily environments. Moreover, "they are less likely to learn about their world and to hear decontextualized language, the beginnings of abstracting information from print" (p.31).

Likewise, some researchers like Neuman and Dwyer (2009) studied the inadequate works on vocabulary teaching in preschool and determined that "pedagogical principles for teaching vocabulary to young children are sorely needed. There appears little consensus on developmentally effective strategies for teaching vocabulary" (p.391).

In spite of considerable research that support and advocate the significance of intentionally establishing children's vocabulary as a crucial component of their oral

language development and with extensive variability in teachers' practices, there seems to be a requisite for augmented attention on professional development for teachers and school authorities in order to promote effective and consistent literacy practices in the classrooms. Educators, teachers and policy makers also need to raise the level of focus on oral language as much as there is on phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge.

In fact, vocabulary instruction is one of the key components of reading comprehension that includes both word knowledge and the use of strategies or approaches to understand new words encountered during reading. Besides, vocabulary can be learned through stories as well as oral speaking and discussion. In order to improve the development of vocabulary in children, teachers can expose children to new words frequently in a variety of contexts as well.

As a matter of fact, the use of comprehension strategies are strongly recommended by a number of researchers like Shanahan, Callison, Carrier, Duke, Pearson, Schatschneider & Torgesen (2010) and Lawrence & Snow (2010). These strategies put a great emphasis on using oral language. Their focus is on young children. These comprehension strategies consist of: (a) structuring post-reading discussion questions during which children can be encouraged to think deeply, (b) asking follow-up questions which ease or aid discussion, and (c) having children lead discussion groups. Additionally, Lawrence and Snow (2011) ascertain particular reading strategies such as Reciprocal Teaching, Collaborative Reasoning, Questioning the Author and Accountable Talk. All these strategies are indeed designed to raise children's engagement in discussing texts. Teacher modeling, explicit elucidation of the strategies, marking when the teacher answers students questions or respond to them by emphasizing on a certain aspect of the passage, and

clarifying students' understandings are considered to be as some features of effective instruction. Children should also think about their use of reading comprehension strategies so that they can better realize when it is suitable or applicable to employ them. This can be actually called metacognitive knowledge.

Given these points, along with teaching early literacy skills, learning environment and preschool classrooms can have potentially positive effects on children's literacy development. For instance, the way the learning environment is structured is crucial. "Socio-economic structures that surround their life exert powerful influences on their learning and development; children are active agents who are capable of influencing their interactions with parents, peers and schools" (Hartas, 2012, p.861). Therefore, it is required to provide the environment in which the children can learn through active exploration, engagement and interaction with materials and others. The environment also needs to allow or provide the opportunity for children to work either individually or in small groups.

**Early literacy learning environment and social interaction.** Rather than drill literacy concepts to children at circle time, preschool teachers are expected to set up a learning environment rich with various print materials and to help children make connections with various literacy concepts embedded in talk, print, and social interaction. Accordingly, in a study by Cunningham (2010), the environments in a preschool region were studied thoroughly to detect if children were learning the essential language skills of reading and writing. Through evaluating the quality of language and early literacy environment in preschool numerous types of developmentally appropriate activities were perceived. In this study it was indicated that activities such as problem solving, using language to interact with others, and constructing connections influenced the quality experiences in children. Overall, the

physical features coupled with the social features of process quality had better to be accompanied with positive developmental outcomes for children in order to provide children with the highest quality preschool experiences. It is actually important for a curriculum to make sure that children receive interaction with at least one adult (Mohidin, Ismail & Ramli, 2015). Similarly, Majzub, Hashim and Johannes (2011) consider preschool as a place that helps children develop socialization awareness.

Certainly, in high quality environment teachers chiefly interact with children regularly in an encouraging and helpful manner. In this environment the classroom is highly structured in order to encourage interactions and play that are suitable to children's various ages. In addition, students' interests and abilities control the activities in this classroom and each child's personal needs are regarded on an individual basis. Despite the fact these features seem to be the common practice in preschool classrooms, research has shown that forty to fifty percent of classrooms viewed do not comply with these or even average quality anticipations (Kostelnik & Grady, 2009).

In general, the interaction between teacher and student has been a main focus of interest in early childhood education. The salient features of effective teaching are considered to be proper pace, communicating with children, observing children at work and giving feedback. These features seem to play a significant role in guaranteeing high levels of task engagement (Wray, Medwell, Fox & Poulson, 2000). Indeed, one of the most developmental tasks of early childhood is social development as through social interaction children can develop their self-concepts and self-esteem within the preschool years (Berk and Santrock cited in Phoon et al., 2013). To clarify, "teacher-child interactions are the daily back-and forth exchanges

that teachers and children have with one another throughout each day, including those that are social and instructional in nature” (Hamre et al., 2012, p.89).

During interactions in preschool settings, teachers have been shown to promote the literacy knowledge that oral and written forms of language are connected and they seek to develop children’s literate knowledge by taking on certain roles. For example, the role of a storyteller during shared book reading is to guide understanding of character development or what the character is doing in the story (Saracho, 2004).

Therefore, social development is another key literacy component that is fundamental in children’s later academic success. And to promote social interaction in class, children need to acquire certain social skills. Lynch and Simpson (2010) define social skills as “behaviors that promote positive interaction with others and the environment” (p.3). They also assert that “social skills include showing empathy, participation in group activities, generosity, helpfulness, communicating with others, negotiating, and problem solving” (p.3). To boost the development of social skills in children, preschool teachers can implement a number of strategies in their classroom. Lynch and Simpson (2010) for instance, present three methods to enhance social skills in children. They are described in detail as follows:

***Providing play opportunities.*** Play is considered to be a means by which children can develop social skills. Vygotsky (1978) considers play as the primary source of literacy development in children throughout the preschool years. In fact, when adults or teachers interact with children as they play early literacy development in children can take place. In preschool settings, there is normally a trend to allow children involve in free play with computers or various toys. In a study by Ali, Aziz and Majzub (2011) in Malaysia, it was declared that children can develop cognitive



and social skills, mature emotionally and obtain self-confidence to try new activities through play. In other words, play drives the development of various skills such as social skills, cognitive skills, appropriate behavior, problem-solving skills, language skills social norms coupled with abstract cognitive abilities (Carman & Chapparo, 2012).

Additionally, taking part in play is a major opportunity for children to develop spoken language among numerous other literacy skills and offers important occasions for social interaction. Children for example, first use concrete objects to develop vocabulary knowledge, and they then proceed to abstract thinking (Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Gredler, 2012).

In contrast, there seems to be “a lack of focused interaction and little peer support” in preschool classrooms (Grieshaber, 2010, p.69). And it can be due to the fact that when children are given more free play time, there will be less interaction between teacher and child. As a result, children do not have this opportunity to acquire required literacy skills in play and interaction as Grieshaber (2010) referred to a study in which “children were trying to work together but had not been taught skills of how to do this effectively and so learning outcomes were compromised” (p.70).

Therefore, teachers can follow a number of patterns in order to interact efficiently with children. According to Alexander (as cited in Grieshaber, 2010), “there are three predominant patterns of teacher-child talk in classrooms around the globe” namely “rote, recitation and instruction/ exposition” (p.70). The first pattern, *rote*, refers to drilling facts, ideas and routines through repetition. On the other hand, *recitation*, the second pattern of efficient interaction is about using short question and answer sequences in order to recall what is expected to be already known. Next is

*instruction* that means to tell children what to do and how to do a certain activity and finally *exposition* is all about conveying information and explaining things to children. To point out, “in each of these patterns, children are positioned to listen to the teacher and are expected to respond to prompts that require them to contribute” (Grieshaber, 2010, p.70).

Regarding the implementation of play as a kind of activity to promote interaction, Lynch and Simpson (2010) presented four stages of play which are indicated by various kinds of social interaction. Each play involves a different type of interaction. These stages include onlooker, solitary, parallel and cooperative play.

The children who engage in *onlooker* play gain an interest in other children's play. Yet, they do not join to play with them and simply watch or observe other children playing. Though, they might talk or ask some questions as the other forms of social interactions to learn the play that is going on. On the other hand, during *solitary* play the children are completely occupied in playing on their own and do not notice other children. They are not indeed interested in or aware of what other children around them are doing. This type of play can be vital though as it helps children to entertain themselves. And *parallel* play is another type of play in which the children imitate other children's play but do not dynamically engage with them. Children play side by side and typically play with the similar toys. On the contrary, during the last type of play, *cooperative* play, children gain interest in both the activity and the people they are playing with. On this stage teamwork or group work can be seen. It is important to mention that this form of play brings together all the skills learned in previous stages into action and helps children to develop group interaction.

In line with group working or interaction, in a study by Lou, Abrami and d'Apollonia (as cited in Grieshaber 2010) it was indicated that “students working in groups had a significantly higher frequency of positive interaction and using appropriate learning strategies” (p.72). Additionally, they “had a more positive attitude toward group work and other students in the class” (Lou et al. cited in Grieshaber, 2010, p.72).

Given all these points, Joshi (2009) believes that there is “a positive relationship between teacher training and interactions with children, especially training in topics such as developmentally appropriate practices, child development and guidance” (p.294). It is also mentioned in Joshi's (2009) study that teachers who were “dissatisfied with their training might experience” uncertainties and apprehensions “about their own role as teachers” and this might subsequently impact “their interactions with children” (Joshi, 2009, p.294).

Nevertheless, teachers somehow can create and cultivate their own strategies of teaching or instruction when they recognize the contradiction between training and real classrooms. Therefore, there is this likelihood that to what extent teachers are satisfied with training may not impact their interactions with children (Joshi, 2009). In general, the findings in Joshi's (2009) study implied that a number of factors influence “teacher-child interactions, such as personality characteristics of the teacher and/or children” (p.296).

#### ***Setting up environment or classrooms to boost social development.***

Obviously, the current standards-based literacy reform in preschools is asking for teachers to teach early literacy skills in developmentally appropriate ways. Additionally, teachers are required to establish a high quality environment in which children are provided with various opportunities to engage with both written and

spoken language. Frey and Fisher (2010) agree that children need to be given sufficient chances to discover the sounds in words, understand the concept of written words, and start to employ meanings to words at an early age right long before they join kindergarten. As a matter of fact, children's early literacy skills have been approved to be considerably influenced by high-quality literacy environments that involve a numerous number of children's books in reachable libraries and well-ordered reading and writing areas (see Justice, 2006b; Roskos & Neumann, 2001; Vukelich, Christie, & Enz, 2012).

A further feature of efficient early literacy-rich classroom environments is that they provide children with extensive contact with print through the display of practical and useful print materials, for example signs, posters, and teachers' and children's writing samples that provide children with examples of how spoken words can be characterized in print (Justice, 2006b).

Commonly, features of the classroom and early literacy environment can be classified in terms of whether they reflect structural or process features (Mashburn et al., 2008). Structural features of the early literacy environment consist of, for example, the organization and display of literacy materials throughout the classroom and the delivery of the early literacy materials during the course of the classroom. In fact, classrooms that are "developmentally appropriate" and "literacy-focused" inspire "children to look at books alone and with adults" and to "engage with sounds and letters of the alphabet" (Whitehurst & Lonigan cited in Missall, McConnell, & Cadigan, 2006, p.3). These classrooms also help children to converse with adults and other children, to practise writing "and learn about print and book features" (Clay cited in Missall et al., 2006, p.3).

Process features of the early literacy environment on the other hand refer to the way the teacher supports children's literacy development through interactions and instruction, and concerns the nature of teacher-student interactions and student-student interactions (Mashburn et al., 2008).

As a matter of fact, classrooms are required to be organized in a way that promotes early literacy development in children. A set of design principles for early childhood classrooms was established by Neuman and Roskos (2005). They included first there should be a sufficient space in literacy learning environment (at least 25 square feet per child) to implement quality interactions and activities. Second, classrooms need to be open-spaced for freedom of movement. The last principle is that smaller, well-defined areas or centers should be provided for children to encourage more language and conversations with peers and adults. As Lynch and Simpson (2010) agree "learning areas can be large enough to give children the space they need to play together, but small enough to provide an intimate setting for social interaction" (p.4).

Except classrooms' organization and layout, the kind of early literacy artifacts used in classrooms can also accelerate children's literacy development. According to Neuman and Roskos (2005), early literacy artifacts in the literacy environment should be first *appropriate*. In other words, they should be able to be employed naturally and securely by young children. They also need to be *authentic*, that is a real item in the child's general environment. As an illustration, authentic literacy-rich play environs such as grocery stores induce more attention, language, and use than banks, as children are possibly more acquainted with grocery stores than banks (Neuman & Roskos, 2005). In these environs, children would like to involve or take part in more compound interactions (Neuman & Roskos, 2005).

Furthermore, early literacy-rich play environs demonstrate Vygotsky' theory of intellectual development through social experiences. Lastly, literacy artifacts have to be beneficial to children as they replicate literacy behavior in them.

Another factor in providing efficient literacy instruction is applying consistent language and literacy activities in early literacy classrooms in preschools. "Consistent and predictable classroom environments, schedules, and routines can increase children's independence, ability to anticipate change, and likelihood of using appropriate behavior" (Hancock & Carter, 2016, p.67). Teachers in fact must be explicit with children to help them build an understanding of language and literacy. Children's attention must be drawn to language and its use. Children are not usually provided with consistent language experiences therefore, preschools are required to ensure that emergent literacy skills are cultivated in children.

On the other hand, the results in a study by Justice et al. (2007) showed that well-arranged lessons and the associated processes did not guarantee the quality of instruction in early literacy. As a matter of fact, curriculum-specified explicit instruction is required to be well-adjusted with vibrant, engaging, teacher-child interactions. Besides, Tang, Hashim and Yunus (2011) agree that teachers should select instructional goals which have balance, clarity and value and are suitable for diverse students.

To conclude, those of interests to this study are the general early literacy instruction provided for children through emergent literacy skills and the way teachers interacted with their students throughout the classroom.

***Teaching social skills directly.*** The third method to encourage children to acquire social skills and develop social interaction is to teach them social skills directly. One of the most essential roles of preschool teacher is in fact to teach

children the social skills needed to establish positive relationships with adults and their peers. Indeed, children should acquire certain social skills in order to be able to interact with the teacher. The key point is that social skills should be taught explicitly. Lynch and Simpson (2010) describe six steps in direct or explicit instruction of social skills. The first step is that the teacher models the proper social behavior. On the second step the child consequently reveals that behavior with the teacher. The teacher on the third step models an appropriate and inappropriate example of the target social behavior. In the fourth step in explicit instruction of social skills the teacher asks the child to detect the right or appropriate social behavior. On the next step the child role plays the positive skill with another child. And on the last step the teacher reminds the child of the skill where it is possible to be used in order to support generalization of that certain social skill.

It is clear from the literature that teachers who teach English as a foreign or second language coupled with the practices they implement in their classrooms have a potentially substantial effect on enhancing the development of early English literacy in young children. As a result, it is important to consider to what extent preschool teachers are developed professionally.

### **Teachers' Quality and Professional Development**

The quality of early literacy instruction relies greatly on the teacher's experience, knowledge and practices. Teachers' characteristics can also influence their literacy practices. Guo, Connor, Yang, Roehrig and Morrison (2012) in a study examined the connections between teacher attributes and children's achievement of literacy skills. Teacher characteristics in this study included teacher self-efficacy, teacher education and teaching experience. Bandura (as cited in Guo et al., 2012) mentioned that "the concept of self-efficacy is grounded within social cognitive

theory” (p.5). According to Fuller, Wood, Rapoport, & Dornbusch (as cited in Guo et al., 2012), “self-efficacy is conceptualized as ‘teachers’ belief that they can bring about desirable changes in student achievement” (p.5). Based on the results in Fuller et al.’s (2012) study, teacher self-efficacy can predict teachers’ classroom practices which consequently estimates student literacy performance. However, studying particular elements of the teaching setting in the domain of teacher quality which may possibly make a distinction in the construction and boost of teachers’ self-efficacy and their classroom practices is necessary. In addition, support that might aid to construct sturdy efficiency beliefs among teachers and promote the quality of their classroom practices merits more consideration and investigation.

Moreover, Gere and Berebitsky (2009) tried to investigate some discussions of teacher quality for the field of English by examining their preparation, practices, tracking and retention. Their study was focused chiefly on secondary school English teachers. Not to mention that, most investigations were based on input model like individual teachers’ qualities or preparation.

Therefore, Gere and Berebitsky (2009) were trying to focus on output model which included teachers’ practices, student achievement, teachers’ tracking and retention. It was stated in the study that none of these models considered the contexts where teachers were working. Moreover, Gere and Berebitsky (2009) emphasized that “the collaboration essential to developing strong programs for the literacy instruction essential to English studies would be reduced by a more transient instructional force” (p.256). They added that it was worth to study “how preparation, professional development, and school context interact to produce and sustain such teachers” (p.257). In addition, “the role of professional associations like National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has received virtually no attention in



research on teacher quality, and this, too, is an area that merits further examination” (p.258).

With all these in mind, generally beginning or novice English teachers face a number of challenges during instruction such as managing difficult students, preparing and presenting lessons. These challenges are believed to be influenced by the increasing complexity of the English classrooms (Shoffner, Brown, Platt, Long & Salyer, 2010). To overcome these challenges, Shoffner et al. (2010) express that when teachers move to a new community or transfer to unacquainted areas of the country, they must learn the context of their new classrooms. Reflection is proposed as one practice that can help teachers in this situation. As a result, Shoffner et al.’s (2010) study was focused on reflections of four secondary English teachers. Consequently, training preservice teachers how to reflect and make sense of their experiences helped them to question their teaching as they entered the classroom and deal with the difficulties they encounter in teaching in the initial years. Moreover, “this reflective stance toward learning and teaching encourages teacher candidates to look beyond their own perspective and to be more open to alternative approaches that they might have rejected or not had the confidence to try” (Norman & Spencer, 2005, p.38).

It can be noticed through research that teachers’ quality is very important especially in early childhood education. Effective teachers of early literacy must have enough knowledge on child development and acquire necessary skills to form apposite learning experiences which are interesting to children. On the contrary, Neuman and Cunningham (2009) revealed that “policy makers and researchers have limited knowledge about effective professional development programs and their potential impact on instructional practices” (p.534). Therefore, Neuman and

Cunningham (2009) tried to explore the impacts of professional development and training on early childhood early literacy knowledge of caregivers and on quality language and literacy practices in center-based and home-based education settings. This study indicated moderate progress in teacher knowledge and very limited utilization in language and literacy practices. However, it showed that coaching accompanied with course-based professional development enhanced the quality of practices and activities in language and literacy.

Meanwhile, Greenwood, Carta, Atwater, Goldstein, Kaminski and McConnell (2013) refer to a previously conducted research in which professional development had significant effect on the practices of teachers and on the letter and print knowledge outputs of children but it did not have considerable effect on children's phonological awareness and oral language. This question was raised in the study that how to make each of preschool instruction programs more efficient for all children. Greenwood et al.'s (2013) study proposed the response to intervention (RTI) which is an approach to early recognition and distinguishing instruction for children who does not have adequate early literacy experiences. It follows contemporary learning theory that believes educational experiences should be modified according to the knowledge of a student's assessable success or failure in learning what is being instructed. Response to Intervention approach includes a number of components which are listed as follows:

- a. universal screening is implemented to detect students who are not progressing at the same rate with their peers,
- b. ongoing assessment of the development of children over time and one which is applied more regularly for whom additional intervention is offered, and
- c. various kinds of support related to

- d. a decision-making model therefore when children who are detected with weak and very weak skills will be given further intensive instructional support in a well-timed mode.

It was concluded in the above study that even though there were emotional support and appropriate classroom organization, educational support was quite low. Therefore, the struggle to enhance the instructional experience and boost the outcomes of all children still needs to be addressed.

Likewise, Cunningham, Zibulsky and Callahan (2009) highlighted that providing “adequate professional development opportunities for building teacher knowledge in the domain of literacy are critical to the academic success of children” (p.488). Nevertheless, implementing this in training programs is really perplexing since “knowledge base” which supports that “the development of emergent literacy skills and the teaching of reading and writing is extensive, complex, and often underestimated” (Cunningham et al., 2009, p.488).

In fact, the relationship between the knowledge base of teachers and their impact on children’s performance has been unattended. This area then should be narrowed down for easy investigation. Cunningham et al. (2009) consequently tried to examine an important aspect of content knowledge namely skill of word recognition as this skill is needed for preschool teachers to support early literacy effectively.

Moreover, along with the content that teachers cover in their classrooms identifying how they practice instruction is quite important (Porche et al. 2012). In other words, professional development can have a significant effect on how teachers can implement effective and excellent literacy instruction in the classroom. Porche et al. (2012) believe that teachers are not likely to make requisite standard alterations in

practice due to lack of skills, interest and time to incorporate evidence-based knowledge into their teaching. As a result, they suggest “The Collaborative Language and Literacy Instruction Project (CLLIP)” as a model of professional development which helps teachers to implement research-based practices of literacy instruction (Porche et al., 2012, p.650).

There have been scrupulous studies concerning the knowledge base needed for instruction in study fields such as science and mathematics over the years and shockingly, there has not been the same level of investigation in the subject area of early literacy instruction (Cunningham et al., 2009). Cunningham et al. (2009) believe that “teacher professional development that cultivates detailed knowledge of the English speech sound system and its production can help teachers provide effective instruction in important elements of beginning reading, specifically word recognition” (p.491).

As a result, it is important to “include measures of actual knowledge, perceived knowledge, knowledge calibration, and teacher beliefs in order to more comprehensively assess factors that influence teacher receptiveness to participate in professional development” (Cunningham et al., 2009, p.499). In effect, Cunningham et al (2009) used “Teacher Knowledge Assessment Survey (TKAS)” to measure “teachers’ actual knowledge of spoken and written language structures” (p.498). They also proposed the model of Response to Intervention. It was concluded in their study that instruments for characterizing knowledge of teachers should be developed. Providing professional development programs in which teachers are primed to be receptive to knowledge specifically knowledge calibration is an essential step. According to Cunningham et al. (2009), it is also crucial to operationalize teachers’ knowledge and develop valid measures to assess actual and perceived knowledge.

Likewise, to provide young children with efficient literacy instruction, teachers' knowledge of emergent literacy is considered as a critical factor. According to Elliott and Olliff (2008), teachers had better to be aware of the process of early literacy for example, they should be familiar with the knowledge and skills prerequisite for children as they are learning about literacy. Moreover, Elliott and Olliff (2008) mention that teachers should be aware of the emergent literacy levels of each child and be capable of applying this information in shaping literacy related questions for each individual child. Their study revealed that teachers should provide developmentally appropriate tasks across physical, social-emotional and cognitive domains in order to advance the development of early literacy skills in children. However, there are a number of domains that are very critical in early childhood development which are not included in the above study. These domains are spiritual and moral, language, gross motor, fine motor and self-help adaptive.

In another study, Calderón, Slavin and Sanchez (2011) asserted "that the quality of instruction is what matters most in educating English learners" (p.103). They said that despite the fact that districts need to provide services to English learners, they do not offer any guidelines or principles to comply with in detecting, evaluating, placing or teaching them. Therefore, Calderón et al. (2011) tried to detect the features of effective instruction since there are some students who enter preschool without sufficient English proficiency. It is believed in the study that preschool programs are not sufficiently considering the needs of English learners. Therefore, Calderón et al. (2011) presented a number of elements of effective instruction for ELLs that included (a) school structures and leadership, (b) language and literacy development, (c) integrating language, literacy and content for adolescent readers, (d) cooperative learning, (e) professional development, (f) parent

and family support, (g) tutoring and other interventions for struggling readers and (h) monitoring implementation and outcomes.

In addition, the review of wide-ranging studies demonstrate that successful schools work concurrently on school structures, professional development, student formative assessments, teacher support, and effective instruction for English language learners (Calderón et al., 2011).

Furthermore, Guccione (2011) refers to inquiry-based instruction which provides a more balanced approach to literacy teaching. It is stated in her study that this approach emphasizes on student's engagement and meaningful interactions with print. She suggests transactional strategy instruction combined with reciprocal teaching which helps students acquire necessary skills. It also appropriates literacy practices to support the construction of meaning in children. She additionally found that English language learners in particular can improve by being seen and seeing themselves as highly important members of the learning community and teachers should be consequently cheered or supported to use integrated and meaningful literacy practices to construct meaning. In fact, incorporated literacy practices in an inquiry environment deliver an authentic setting in which English learners are capable of and do excel (Guccione, 2011).

Supporting efficient literacy instruction, Culatta and Hall (2006) recommended Systematic and Engaging Early Literacy (SEEL) as an early literacy framework that integrates systematic, explicit instruction with engaging activities. It also provides regular opportunities for children to practice literacy skills. In this approach, children are given extreme and noticeable exposure to literacy targets in encouraging and wide-ranging activities (Culatta, Aslett, Fife, & Setzer, 2004; Culatta, Reese, & Setzer, 2006). Systematic and Engaging Early Literacy instruction

scientifically follows a developmental curriculum in which skills are instructed in order with scaffolding from one skill level to the next (see Juel, 1996; Ukrainetz, Cooney, Dyer, Kysar, & Harris, 2000). Besides, this curriculum consists of a number of particular aims in the areas of phonological awareness (including rhyming, alliteration, blending or segmenting, and word analysis), phonics, letter knowledge, and letter–sound associations.

Yet, further study is required to scrutinize the effect of Systematic and Engaging Early Literacy activities on literacy development of children. Not to mention, these researches should not only focus on the nature of the curriculum being utilized but also discover the role that children's characteristics and development play in the learning process. As an illustration, research should investigate how children's attention and memory processes coupled with how affective engagement boost or hinder the coding and repossession of knowledge in literacy. Further research is also required to explore the contribution that paraeducators make in literacy development of children by playing meaningful instructional classroom roles. In particular, the research should detail the training required to assist paraeducators function at these roles and investigate the differential effect of instruction provided by paraeducators in small-group and one-on-one contexts.

Furthermore, Korth, Sharp and Culatta (2010) refer to supplemental instructional programs and believe these programs can provide children with engaging, proper activities in literacy skills. These programs cause classroom teachers and early literacy authorities collaborate and also help them to develop professionally since they are exposed to research-based instructional strategies. The teachers in Korth's et al. (2010) study were interviewed and participated in

Systematic and Engaging Early Literacy (SEEL) approach. The aim was to investigate the effect of SEEL method on teachers' knowledge and practices regarding early literacy instruction.

The “comparisons that teachers made between the SEEL” curriculum and “their earlier practices showed that they” recognized “the importance of multiple exposures to phonological awareness targets, as well as the influence of these curricula on their students’ skills and performance” (Korth et al., 2010, p.118). In particular, Korth et al. (2010) believed in the significance of required literacy skills. They stated that the SEEL method considerably boosts literacy development in ELLs. Yet, one of the issues they mentioned was that the ready-made materials were not available.

Supporting this point, Frost, Siegelman, Narkiss and Afek (2013) refer to a number of researches demonstrating that first-language linguistic capacities like phonological awareness or syntactic abilities can allow the prediction of success in second language acquisition. During this research, they focused on whether individual differences in statistical learning can anticipate individual differences in second language literacy acquisition. They tried to examine the process of assimilating the writing system of Hebrew by native English speakers. They used a visual-statistical-learning (VSL) task and monitored their participants’ implicit learning of the transitional probabilities of visual shapes. Their findings showed that there is a connection between statistical learning of visual shapes and learning to read in a second language.

On the other hand, Bingham, Hall-Kenyon and Culatta (2010) look at the efficiency of one such model of supplemental literacy instruction provided by paraeducators to preschool-aged children who were detected as being at risk for early



reading failure. Unfortunately some classroom teachers had inadequate time to make certain that children who were most at risk for early reading complications are given a ample amount of explicit and constant exposure to literacy targets to considerably enhance children's literacy skills. During their study they considered the role of paraeducators who were employed as assistant teachers. They had this responsibility to support teachers in providing instruction. However, it was noticed that a few of them had lack of training to work with students who had literacy difficulties.

As a result, Stanton-Chapman and Hadden (2011) during their study provided a number of guiding principles for interventions to enhance peer interactions in preschool environments. They referred to several strategies that are elaborated in detail below;

*Naturalistic Intervention Strategies:* These strategies have some characteristics. The first feature is that teaching opportunities should happen in the course of constant classroom activities. Next, the individual teaching interactions should be succinct and implemented over time. Third, instructional interactions should be responsive to children's behavior. The fourth characteristic is that instructional goals should be specific and finally instruction should result in access to naturally occurring feedback and consequences.

*Milieu Teaching Strategies:* These strategies rely on teacher talk. They involve modeling, mand-modeling, time delay, and incidental teaching.

*Incidental Teaching Strategies:* In this procedure a child can initiate social interaction. One child specifies the topic and teacher tries to continue the social interaction through prompting.

Teacher talk is indeed one of the key forms that helps teachers or educators to promote peer interactions among children. It can be indeed in various formats such as *recasting, repeating, expanding, questioning* and *prompting*.

However, in order to talk, children need to have ample knowledge of vocabulary as a number of children do not have opportunity to learn all words they need to know hence it is helpful to teach some of them in early childhood classrooms (Silverman & Crandell, 2010). It was explored in Silverman and Crandell (2010) 's study that there is a relationship between teachers' vocabulary instruction practices and children's vocabulary learning during read-aloud and non-read-aloud times as well as on curriculum-based and norm-referenced measures. Besides, Silverman and Crandell (2010) investigated the role of children's initial vocabulary level in these relationships. Five practices have been used by teachers who did teach children vocabulary. These practices included acting out and demonstrating words, examining words focusing on semantics, employing words in new contexts, defining words explicitly in compound context and word study.

On the contrary, Silverman and Crandell (2010) suggest that more investigation is required on the added advantage of extending vocabulary instruction beyond read-aloud time. Particular "to the vocabulary intervention, many studies did not include details on the difficulty level of words, the number of words taught, the rationale for the selection of words, or the relationship of the intervention to the existing curriculum" (Marulis & Neuman, 2010, p.326). Therefore, it would be useful to study "what words should be taught, how many should be taught and what pedagogical strategies are most useful for creating conceptually sound and meaningful instruction" (Marulis & Neuman, 2010, p.328).

Moreover, in their research Sonnenschein, Stapleton and Benson (2010) tried to investigate the relation between normative classroom instructional practices and children's reading competencies from preschool through fifth grade. They compared two instructional approaches; one focusing on phonics and the other one on meaning. The findings from this study indicated a need to consider the actual skills demonstrated by different children in preschool coupled with elementary school and how well instruction is targeted to those skill levels. According to Sonnenschein et al.'s (2010) study, teachers can focus both on phonics and meaning but the instruction may not be appropriate for some or maybe many children in their classrooms.

In the meantime, another issue emerges and it is the necessity of examining what early literacy instruction is most effective for various types of students and in various contexts. As an illustration, similar to the work of Carol Connor, Frank Morrison, and their colleagues, interactions between students' literacy knowledge and teachers' instruction could be examined at the early elementary levels (Connor, Son, Hindman, & Morrison, 2005; Connor, Morrison, & Slominski, 2006; Connor, Morrison, & Katch, 2004).

As can be seen through the research, preschool ESL teachers have a potentially crucial effect on promoting the development of early English literacy in young children. As a result, they should be prepared professionally in training programs or courses to implement efficient early literacy instruction in their classrooms.

### **The ESL Teachers' Professional Development**

To what extent preschool teachers are developed professionally can have a great effect on their early literacy instruction and practices. There is indeed a need

for teacher education programs that “train” prospective teachers of different backgrounds to work with ESL students’ communities as “equals and as change agents” (Anyon 2005, p.181) to arrange and enhance productive education and more efficient instructions for young children. Kosnik and Beck (as cited in Peterson et al., 2016) also supported this and added that “professional learning experiences honour and build upon teachers’ professional practical knowledge and experience” (p.13).

In general, in the United States and many countries there is a large number of ESL teachers who are not professionally prepared to teach second language learners. Their only qualification is that they are native English speakers (Henrichsen, 2010). Similarly, Moussu (2010) refers to a number of study which claim 59.8 percent “of the program administrators used the *native speaker* criterion as their major decisive factor in hiring ESL teachers” (p.747). On the contrary, it is believed in the study that non-native ESL teachers can be good learner model for students. They are able to teach language strategies effectively, and can provide more helpful information about language. In fact, they have this capacity to understand their students’ needs and struggles in learning therefore they can predict language difficulties. Moussu (2010) during her study tried to examine ESL students’ attitudes to invalidate the assumptions underlying discrimination against non-native ESL teachers. The conclusion in the study indicated that good or qualified teachers should be characterized based on their mastery of linguistic and pedagogical skills rather than on the kind of language they speak.

In addition, Yoon (2012) added that “pre-service ESL teachers who definitely lack of enough formal classroom teaching experience” can feel a high level of anxiety (p.1099). Hence, one of the qualifications of effective language teachers is

indeed being able to decrease anxiety. Yoon (2012) therefore in her study focused on non-native pre-service ESL teacher's foreign language anxiety and its factors.

According to Yoon (2012), foreign language anxiety contains two main components. The first category is cognitive anxiety which refers to negative expectation and concern about performance and perception of others. "The other one is somatic anxiety that refers to learners' perceptions of the physiological effects of the anxiety experience" (Yoon, 2012, p.1100). General anxiety and communication anxiety are also two other components of language anxiety which refer to trait, state and test anxiety; and anxiety about speaking and communication situations respectively. Yoon (2012) utilized questionnaire in her study to collect data on this matter. The results "suggested that skillful ESL faculty members through exclusive English training classes can sustain" Non-Native Preservice ELS Teachers "(NNPSETs) based on their previous Know-Hows, guiding them to become effective ESL teachers who would overcome language anxiety" (Yoon, 2012, p.1105).

Different training programs can also be held to prepare ESL teachers professionally. "Over the years, a variety of local , primarily face to face and paper-based programs for providing basic ESL/EFL teacher training have been developed" (Henrichsen, 2010, p. 15). Henrichsen (2010)'s investigation described a basic ESL teacher-training which was under development. It was called Basic Training and Resources for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages: The Least You Should Know and Where to Go to Learn More (BTRTESOL). The approach of this program to preparing English as a second or a foreign language teacher is minimalist, connectivist and problem-based approach. The delivery system of this program included traditional and/or web-based text materials coupled with digital video and

interactive online activities. This program consisted of 50 planned units which were organized into 10 major areas.

In brief, it can be noticed that there are missing parts on literature such as the knowledge base and experiential investigations on classroom educational events and the documented quality of teaching as formed by instructional intervention (Lara-Alecio, Tong, Irby and Mathes, 2009).

### **Summary**

Through the literature and from examining the present research in early literacy, the importance of early English literacy is well acknowledged. It is also considered and recognized that teachers' quality and professional development play critical roles on early childhood education and preschool teachers' literacy practices.

Overall, even though recommended practices of early literacy are well-established, it is not known specifically what kind of practices or activities English as a second or foreign language preschool teachers implement or can perform in their classroom to enhance the development of early English literacy in young English language learners. It is not also identified how these preschool teachers implement social interaction into practice in order to facilitate literacy instruction.

Therefore, the purpose of the present research was to discuss a research on the practices of preschool teachers on early English literacy in the context of Malaysia. It did aim to concentrate on the curricula used in the area of early childhood education to determine whether the role of preschool teachers account for differences in young English language learners' literacy development. Indeed the investigation was going to examine teachers' actual practices and activities of early English literacy and the ways in which teachers did provide social interaction to promote the development of early English literacy in young children.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

In the previous chapters the research space has been created, framed theoretically and the related major issues were reviewed. It was also justified the need for conducting the current study. This chapter is going to present the study design and methodology to be employed to answer the research questions. Furthermore, data collection instruments and data analysis process will be discussed and elaborated in detail.

The aim of this research was to investigate the teaching approaches, activities and practices of four non-native in-service preschool English teachers to support early English literacy in their classrooms. Understanding these approaches and practices would help the researcher to better recognize the learning opportunities available to young children in preschools. In particular, this research was interested in exploring early literacy learning opportunities available for young children who were going to learn English and in examining how preschool teachers implemented social interaction into their practices in the classrooms in Malaysia setting.

In the upcoming sections, the researcher described in detail the research design as well as how she selected the research sites, that is to say, two preschools and also participants for the study. The researcher also discussed about the sources of data she used and the procedure she went through to collect the required data. The data was indeed used to explore how curriculum and preschool teachers' perceptions on early English literacy did influence their instructional practices. The sources of data included semi-structured interviews, observations of preschool teachers delivering early English literacy instruction in a preschool, and documented

materials' review. Finally, the researcher discussed the strategies for data analysis and ethical concerns regarding this study.

### **Research Design**

The investigation of how four preschool teachers from the same district did apply practices in early literacy instruction and how they did implement social interaction in their practices was a qualitative study.

To explain, qualitative research is a method of investigation in various academic fields. The qualitative research design is normally applied to gain a profound and complete understanding of human behavior and the reasons that result in such behavior. Furthermore, Hiatt (as cited in Harwell, 2011) emphasizes that qualitative research focuses on discovering the participants' perspectives, thoughts and experiences. In other words, qualitative research is mainly about finding the issues, understanding phenomena, and answering questions.

There are several features for qualitative research design that should be considered. Some of these features are presented in a study by Bogdan and Biklen (2007). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), the first feature of the qualitative study is that the primary instrument to collect data in this type of research and analyze them is the researcher. Second, unlike quantitative study in which the data involves numbers, the collected data in qualitative research is rich descriptions of people, places, language, and behaviors. The next feature of qualitative research is that the focus is more on the research process rather than on the research findings. Fourth, the researchers in qualitative study are more likely to analyze data inductively and develop theory. Lastly, the qualitative researchers are more concerned to find out the participants' outlooks on how they make sense of their lives.



Indeed, there are several kinds of qualitative research designs such as ethnography, narrative research, grounded theory, phenomenological research and case study. Though, case study is considered as a type of ethnography as well (Creswell, 2012).

*Ethnographic* designs are used to describe, analyze and interpret a culture's characteristics. In order to study and understand a group of people's lives, the researcher uses ethnographic design. The method of collection in this design is observation over an extended period of time. On the other hand, when the researcher is interested in telling people's stories and reporting their stories, *narrative research* is utilized. "Narrative research is a literary form of qualitative research with strong ties to literature, and it provides a qualitative approach in which you can write in a persuasive, literary form" (Creswell, 2012, p.502). In *grounded theory*, another type of qualitative design, researchers are able to develop a theory to explain a certain phenomenon. "Grounded theory *generates* a theory when existing theories do not address your problem or the participants that you plan to study" (Creswell, 2012, p.423). And in *phenomenology* the researcher identifies a specific phenomenon and tries to describe the common characteristics of that phenomenon in depth. The method of data collection in this type of research is through in-depth interviews.

The present research is a *case study* and as mentioned earlier it can be considered as a type of ethnography as well. A case study is an experimental research which "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2003, p.13). Case study method was implemented in the current research as Yin (2009) elucidated that the case study investigation provides a distinctive examination of a phenomenon because the researcher collects data from

various sources of evidence in order to present a thorough description of the phenomenon under investigation. As a matter of fact, the use of the case study method of research becomes vital when the researcher feels that gaining an understanding of the conceptual conditions is significant to the phenomenon. In addition, case study method constructs knowledge and understanding and offers a standard for efficient instructional practices (Timmons & Cairns, 2012). In case study collection of data occurs through in-depth observation of the teacher's instructional practices. Observation of different variables, such as lack of social interaction or an unstructured learning environment, explores the effects of how students progress by the instructional practices of the teachers involved in the study.

With this in mind, the present research adopted a multiple-case study “in which multiple cases are described and compared to provide insight into an issue” (Creswell, 2012, p.465). The researcher chose a case study design since the case study design applies multiple sources of evidence and this allowed the researcher to illustrate a richer picture of the phenomenon under examination for the current research. In order to have a better understanding of the four selected items in particular, four non-native in-service preschool teachers, several sources of information were gathered. They included semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and reviewing documented materials such as syllabuses, portfolios, teachers' lesson plans or worksheets. These multiple sources of evidence allowed the researcher to describe the complex phenomenon of preschool teachers' practices and activities in early English literacy instruction.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

The researcher came to this study with several years of experiences that have changed her insights and beliefs on teaching and learning. She started this research

with strong beliefs about the importance of preschool teachers' practices in early literacy instruction. Nonetheless, the researcher had added to these beliefs, the perspective of being a learner throughout conducting the current study. This perspective was important as it led her to reflect on all aspects of research procedures, findings and results.

During the present research, one of the researcher's roles was to collect data during the interviews with principals and preschool teachers. It was essential for the researcher to be conscious of both verbal and non-verbal communication with the participants. This consciousness could impact the participants' answers to the interview questions and also influence the findings. The researcher also needed to collect data during the observations of teachers' early literacy instruction and their practices in their classroom. However, the researcher engaged in a non-participatory observation because by being a non-participant observer the researcher would not affect teachers' instruction. Furthermore, the researcher attempted to stay detached but focused during her observations of how preschool teachers implemented practices in their early literacy instruction. Following both descriptive and focused observation checklists (Appendices G & H), the researcher also took detailed notes of each early literacy activity, strategy or task which was carried out by the teachers. In particular these notes included the observations of what the researcher saw and heard as well as the impressions of what was going on in the classrooms. Another source of data collection was reviewing some documented materials such as syllabuses, lesson plans, worksheets and portfolios. Not to mention, teachers in both Montessori and IPC preschools were cooperative in providing the researcher with the existing early literacy materials in their centers to collect required data in the study.

Another role that the researcher assumed was to objectively analyze and interpret the collected data. Merriam (2009) and Yin (2009) both agree that the researcher in qualitative study is regularly the only person who is in charge of all the data collection and analysis. As a result, the researcher bias is likely to emerge and in order to address this bias, the researcher described particular approaches that the researcher used to enhance the credibility and reliability of this research. These descriptions are presented in the segment about matters of trustworthiness explained later in this chapter.

### **Context of the Study**

Preschool education in Malaysia intends to cultivate students' potential in all aspects of development. It aims to help children to master basic skills such as socialization progression and personality growth and to cultivate an optimistic outlook in getting ready to enter elementary school. And in order to achieve this, the use of National Preschool Curriculum in all preschools has to be ensured. In Malaysia, the National Preschool Curriculum is developed according to four major principles including total and integrated self-development, fun learning experience, meaningful learning experience and lifelong learning.

Moreover, as mentioned in chapter one, in 2017, Ministry of Education (MOE) in Malaysia reviewed and prepared the National Preschool Curriculum that all preschools including public and private are required to comply with. The NPC is structured according to the principles of Rukun Negara (Malay for "National Principles") and the National Philosophy of Education. It additionally intends to boost the achievement of social skills, intellectual skills, physical skills, spiritual skills and aesthetic values such as creativity and appreciation in children (Malaysian International ECEC Conference, 2009). NPC provides children with the

opportunities to attain the skills to be able to communicate effectually, to appreciate and show sensitivity towards the various cultures of the Malaysian society, to love and appreciate the environment, to develop positive self-concept and self-confidence and to think critically and use their problem solving skills in learning and their daily life.

In this curriculum, cognitive development and mastery of cognitive skills are the main focus because the cognitive ability of a child affects potentially all other learning abilities. Mastery of these skills can also assist children to think and solve problems. In addition, the National Preschool Curriculum lays stress on communication and developing social skills that make children ready for elementary or conventional education. And any extra programmes recommended have to be indeed confirmed by the Ministry of Education.

Besides, other learning theories that are adopted in the National Preschool Curriculum are those of constructivism and discovery inquiry (for example, developing critical thinking skills through query and the usage of all the senses) where children interact with environment, classmates and teachers and consequently create their own understanding and making sense of things surrounding them as suggested by Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that with the help of social interaction, such as aid of a mentor, students can understand concepts and schemes that they cannot comprehend on their own. Supporting this point, according to the Ministry of Education (2003), “learning through play, thematic approach, integrated approach and information technology and communication” are considered to be the approaches in teaching and learning (p.70).

Although, along with the NPC that all preschools, public and private are needed to comply with, two famous preschool curricula and teaching programs are

implemented in most private preschools in Malaysia, particularly IPC and Montessori, which their policy and standards are described in detail as follows.

**IPC:** The term IPC stands for International Preschool Curriculum that is set by a group of educationists with vast experience in research and development in the field of preschool education. IPC programmes try to provide a stimulating learning environment for the children of different nationalities and races. They also attempt to ensure that children learn in a joyful and meaningful manner. The IPC program was basically established to balance international early childhood education principles or criteria and provide a channel by which families, teachers, and community stakeholders around the world can gain advantage from world class educational training, materials and supervisory inaccuracy. It is indeed the mission of IPC to elevate the standards in preschool education and introduce children, parents and teachers to worldwide standpoints with the aim of creating cultural accord through progressive education.

Besides, this curriculum is based on verified, supported, and peer reviewed concepts that consist of play, inquiry and objective based learning styles. There are five fundamental themes and objectives of the IPC which are intended to foster critical thinking, nurture self-awareness, boost an understanding of the other cultures and inspire internationalism and multilingualism among children.

In general, IPC consists of thematic units and all units include six content learning areas. They comprise of language arts, socio-emotional skills, numeracy, sciences, together with fine and gross motor skills. This program in particular provides children with various activities and lessons such as Language, Numbers or Mathematics, School Theme, Fine Art and Music Education and Physical Education

or Sports Play. It also provides children with a number of extra curriculum classes. The first one is called The Victoria Readers Reading Programmes. It is a systematic approach in phonics instruction in which children learn the alphabet letters and their corresponding sounds. The second extra curriculum activity is named Fun Phonics in which children learn letter-sounds through music and songs, story- telling as well as hands- on objects. Other extra curriculum activities include Mandarin class, Speech and Drama, Creative Fitness, Martial Art and Creative Dance.

Regarding language instruction in IPC program, as the focus of the study was investigating teachers' practices on early English literacy instruction, the aim was generally to enhance children's language skills for example speaking, reading, listening, and writing. It was particularly meant to help children learn the sound of each alphabet letter and step by step introduce them to the phonetic system in which children develop their blending skill. This in fact would assist children to read words.

**Montessori:** The Montessori program is a child-centered curriculum which is aimed to assist the child to develop into a complete adult person, be comfortable with himself, with his society and with humanity as a whole. Mooney (as cited in Tarakçioğlu & Tunçarslan, 2014) asserted that in Montessori approach and perspective, "the first six years of life are the most important years of a child's growth when unconscious learning gradually emerges to the conscious level" (p.68). Furthermore, Montessori education considers the role of the adult as to help children to unfold their inborn developmental powers. It tries to provide the child with an environment that is idyllically suitable to his stage of development. As a matter of fact, it provides children with practical life activities. Based on Montessori approach, children learn from environment. What children learn significantly can be influenced by their teachers, environment and experiences (Morrison, 2014). Morrison (2014)

regards teachers' role as critical in what children learn. Similarly, Morrison (2014) believes that teachers arrange classrooms in a way that children are able to train themselves.

In general, Montessori formed and generated an approach in early childhood education which is embedded in particular numbers of instructional and hands-on materials (Whitescarver & Cossentino, 2008). In other words, children in Montessori program are encouraged to complete tasks on their own using hands rather than relying on instruction and repetition. In particular, Montessori program includes sensorial materials, mathematics, language and culture. It provides preschool services for children in the age range of 18 months to 6 years old. The programmes Montessori applies in its curriculum include Art and Craft, Music, Phonics, sensorial and practical life experiences, language, Math coupled with thematic activities. In the current research site curriculum, it was meant to provide children with various activities to help them develop a high level of attention and focus, a sense of arrangement, happiness in a job performed successfully, an increasing sense of independence by learning to care for himself and the environment, respect for the classmates and teachers as well as acquiring fine motor skills.

This study was exploring preschool teachers' practices on early English literacy instruction and the purpose of the research site curriculum in teaching language was to help the child to gain an awareness of the power of language and an gratitude of the beauty language can express. According to this curriculum and teaching approach, the ability to learn language is intrinsic. The Montessori materials in their preschool were intended to organize and shape the experiences that are requisite for language learning, both in reading and writing. Additionally, it was cited in their program that the literacy materials to teach language included objects and



pictures to be named, matched, labeled, and categorized to enhance vocabulary development.

Considering all these, two private preschools under the franchises of IPC and Montessori curricula were hence considered as the research sites in the present study. The selection of these two preschools for this project was based on four factors. First, they are highly popular and recognized in Malaysia (Belle, 2016). They both try to follow the highest professional standards in providing the development and educational needs of children in their early years. Second, both preschools' curriculum and teaching philosophy considers social interaction and play crucial in promoting the development of early literacy in young children (which is the focus of this study). Third, the teaching approach of curriculum in both preschools was child-centered which was following the National Preschool Curriculum. This was the main factor as NPC "focuses on standard content and standard learning" and the use of appropriate practices "that focuses on child-centered learning approaches has been strongly advocated to all preschool teachers and early childhood educators" (Puteh & Ali, 2013, p. 82). Fourth, the demography of the preschools provides the researcher with an important venue for examining the practices preschool teachers provide in early English literacy instruction and for investigating the way they implement social interaction into their practices. Besides, the principals in both preschools tried to create a high quality classroom environment based on their specific curriculum and provide children with appropriate teaching or instructional early literacy materials.

### **Participants of the Study**

The principal as a leader in the preschool has a key role in shaping the quality of education in a preschool. In this regard, the efficient and productive principal

always strives to communicate and cooperate with teachers in order to increase the school performance. The principal's practice can in fact influence both teachers' job satisfaction and practices. As a result, in the present study the principals in Montessori and IPC preschools were interviewed to explore the type of curriculum and teaching approach they were using in their centers. Also, their view-points concerning the literacy instructional materials provided to English language learners' and teachers' role on facilitating the development of early English literacy in young children were examined.

Similarly, four non-native in-service preschool teachers as the cases of the present study were chosen to take part in this study from the list of teachers in two preschools in Malaysia. In the present research it was not aimed to make generalizations or test some hypotheses therefore the sample was four individuals and it was a purposeful sampling. "In purposeful sampling, researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2012, p.206). This type of sampling can lead to detailed understanding of the people and site, provides people with information on a certain phenomenon and gives voice to people whom are not heard (Creswell, 2012).

The selection of the participants particularly, four preschool teachers in the current study followed a process. First, the researcher met with the preschool principals and explained the study, then asked for their permission to conduct the study at their preschool and consequently ask for recommendations of participants. Next, the participants needed to have various teaching experiences at preschools as well as proficiency in English. The principals subsequently suggested a few teachers. Later, the researcher met with the teachers recommended by the principals and

provided them with the information sheet (Appendix B) in order to be fully aware of the study and its aims.

Accordingly, for the purposes of this study, the researcher investigated four non-native in-service preschool teachers who had various experiences in the area of early literacy since their practices and teaching strategies would help to create a literacy framework for teaching early English literacy. Therefore, teachers were asked to indicate how many years they have been teaching. Specifically, they were asked how many years they have been teaching English to young children. The reason to choose teachers with various experiences was to have this opportunity to observe both experienced and non-experienced teachers. This research was interested in exploring and understanding the practices teachers implement to promote early English literacy in young children. As a result, it was thought that teachers with various experiences in the area of early literacy could be suitable.

Moreover, local or non-native preschool teachers were selected to take part in this research because the current research was conducted in the context of Malaysia and the purpose was to identify and explore how local preschool teachers did provide early English literacy instruction and practices in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Furthermore, this research was focused only on in-service preschool teachers as the aim was to investigate teachers who were fully engaged in teaching practices.

In addition, the aim of selecting teachers with English language proficiency was to make communication easier between them and the researcher. Lastly, to make the final selection of four teachers (Maria and Sally in Montessori preschool; Carla and Maya in IPC preschool) each participant was contacted again by the

researcher to ask for their participation. They ultimately agreed to take part in the study and signed the informed consent form (Appendix C).

As it was mentioned previously, for the privacy of participants, each potential participant was contacted only after the researcher had an initial exchange with the preschool principal regarding allowing the teachers' participation.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

In order to answer the research questions, the researcher had to first consider how to collect and then analyze the necessary data. As it was presented in the first chapter (the introduction), the first research question was;

What practices are applied by preschool teachers in early English literacy instruction?

Later through research the second question was emerged;

How do preschool teachers implement social interaction in practice?

To fully represent and describe each preschool teacher's practice and activity, the researcher had to collect data that reflects that thoroughly. The data had to include the strategies, methods, activities or tasks preschool teachers implemented in their classrooms to help children develop the key early literacy skills. In particular, the data needed to be focused on the instruction of each early English literacy skills to examine how teachers delivered the instruction. Additionally, the data was required to represent how teachers enhanced the development of social skills in children and how they implemented social interaction in their practice.

Therefore, throughout this research the data collection procedures reflect the socio-constructivist lens in which classroom interactions were viewed. Several types of qualitative instruments were used to collect data on how teachers implemented the instructional materials in their classrooms and how the interactions took place. As a result, the present research utilized semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and document review such as portfolios, syllabuses, lesson plans and worksheets as the sources of data.

It has to be mentioned that a pilot study was performed in 2014 by the researcher to increase the trustworthiness of the current research and to detect any gaps or additional questions that may have been required to be addressed. Lessons learned from this pilot study are elaborated in relation to the data collection procedures below.

**Semi-structured interviews.** In order to answer the study questions, the researcher decided to interview the participants to understand the perspectives of principals and teachers respectively who were responsible for the literacy initiatives. Interviews “permit participants to describe detailed personal information” (Creswell, 2012, p.218). Besides, “the interviewer also has better control over the types of information received” (Creswell, 2012, p.218). Therefore, conducting interview in this study helped the researcher to obtain comprehensive information about the teachers’ personal beliefs and theories of language learning and teaching; information that might not have been possible to gain merely by means of observations. In the current study interviews also intended to strengthen the researcher’s understanding of what might be observed in the classrooms.

Additionally, to gather data from participants, the researcher chose to use semi-structured interviews because they provide for the flexibility needed in this capstone. The researcher needed flexibility in order to probe and gain more clarity from the participants. As an illustration, the researcher recognized during interviews that principals and teachers were unaccustomed to these types of interviews and often provided short, less-detailed answers as a result, the researcher asked many questions in multiple ways to fully investigate principals' and teachers' ideas.

To begin, first of all, the researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with the principals of each preschool. The principals of preschools were interviewed following the interview protocol (Appendix D). Some interview questions were adopted from a study by LeBlanc (2013). The purpose of this interview was to identify their views regarding early English literacy and get information about the curriculum standards and teaching approach which were used in their preschools.

Next, each teacher was interviewed following an interview protocol as a guide (see Appendix E). Some interview questions originated from a research concerning preschool literacy beliefs in Australia (Ure and Raban, 2001) and a study of Lynch (2009). This interview protocol included a number of open-ended questions and some were modified based on the aims of the study. Some of the research questions were also rephrased depending on the participants' responses, attitudes or mood. The interviews were conducted before the classroom observations to elicit information and gain knowledge about each preschool and the participants with this intention to collect appropriate data. The interview questions were created in a way that investigated the participants' perspectives, strategies and practices in the field of early literacy instruction. In general, during the interviews the researcher took notes

of the most significant features stated by the principals and ESL teachers, the variations among them and unplanned questions.

These face-to-face or one-on-one interviews with the participants contributed to the collection of data for this qualitative case study. The researcher interviewed and asked questions from each participant one by one and recorded their answers (Creswell, 2012). Even though, this approach was time consuming but resulted in a rich data on both principals and teachers' perspectives on early English literacy instruction. The information from interviewees was audio-recorded. Before that, permission from the participant to tape the conversation was also obtained. Yet, five of the participants (including principals) did not feel comfortable to be recorded therefore the researcher took notes of the conversations. Even though the researcher used audio recording for the rest of participants, she took notes as well to add up in the audio recording data.

In each interview early in the session, the participants were informed of the purpose of this research briefly, and given assurance that what would be said in the interview would be treated confidentially. During the conversations, the researcher made sure that teachers felt comfortable discussing their teaching and instructional practices. The researcher started each interview with a small talk to develop a good rapport between the teachers and the researcher. She indeed tried to speak slowly and simply, repeat questions in case of ambiguity and encourage teachers to ask for clarification. On the other hand, a significant limitation to the interviews was the researcher's hesitancy to follow-up with some answers. In particular, the researcher was aware that some teachers felt duty-bound to provide an answer to every question, even if they did not necessarily have an answer or an opinion. These answers actually did not address the question asked. In these cases, the researcher

refused to ask for clarification as it would embarrass teachers and increase their anxiety levels. Likewise, the researcher was limited in the depth of information she could attain since teachers were normally not used to talking about educational or instructional issues or assessing their teaching and curriculum standards.

Besides, the researcher was careful not to pass judgment on teachers' thoughts. She declared numerous times during interviews that their responses would be kept anonymous. Additionally, she presented herself as a colleague and noted that she also used to teach the young children classes and was fervent to hear their views on this matter. Most conversations between the researcher and the teacher were high-spirited and warm. Teachers clearly felt free to express their opinions. They did not actually seem concerned about sharing their thoughts on the curriculum, even if they were critical. Many commented that they enjoyed participating in the interviews.

**Classroom observations.** Overall, the method of observation involves the direct scrutiny of phenomena in the natural setting. It measures behavior directly rather than the reports of behavior or intentions. Consequently, during this research what exactly teachers did, their actual practices, strategies or tasks and how they did implement social interaction in their classrooms were observed directly.

In the course of this research, the researcher engaged in a non-participatory observation. She observed the participants' activities and strategies but not take part in them. This research was focusing on actual teachers' practices in early English literacy instruction, therefore it was better to not take part in participants' activities and not intrude their lesson instruction. As a matter fact, being a non-participant observer the researcher would not affect teachers' literacy instruction and activities. Non-participatory observation can be conducted both overtly and covertly. The



researcher decided to engage in an overt non-participatory observation to not break ethical norms. Overt observation helps researchers maintain their objectivity as well specifically because of the impartiality and detachment involved due to subjects knowing they are being studied (Brewer, 2003).

Classroom observations took place in the morning by the lead researcher (the author) typically beginning just prior to circle time or whole class and lasting for approximately an hour and a half. The observations were video-recorded while the observer (the researcher) taking field-notes using observation checklists. These checklists included both descriptive and focused observation (see Appendices G & H). During observation the researcher sat in the back of the classroom and took extensive notes on classroom environment and teachers' practices, strategies and tasks as well as interactions. The purpose of taking field-notes along with observation checklists was to interpret the teachers' practices in more details and provide evidence for each certain activity or practice.

The descriptive observational visits (Appendix G) were occurred during regularly scheduled English literacy instruction which lasted no longer than ten sessions. The purpose of the instrument was to collect data that reflects classroom instruction within early literacy environment. The descriptive observation checklist included two parts.

The first part was on *learning environment* in which the focus was first on the relationship to students. For instance, (1) if the teacher tended to teach mainly to one area of the classroom, she was cognizant of this. (2) The teacher made a conscious effort at all times to pay attention to all students equally or the teacher divided the students into small groups in an organized and principled manner. The second focus

was on the Classroom. As an illustration, (1) the researcher tried to examine if the teacher arranged the seating in the class to be suitable for the class activity of the day or (2) when the teacher needed certain materials or equipment, she had them prepared before the class starts. The third focus was on the teachers' presentation such as (1) if the teacher did speak loudly enough to be heard in all parts of the classroom and she enunciated clearly, (2) the teacher varied the exercises in class, alternating rapid and slow paced activities to keep up maximum interest level in the class, (3) the teacher was ready to give children different kinds of explanations, models and descriptions, as she knew that one explanation might not be enough for all children, or (4) the teacher planned for thinking time for her students so that they could organize their thoughts and plan what they were going to say or do.

The second part of the checklist was on the investigation of *the individuals* in particular, teachers and students in the classroom. The first focus was on the physical health. For instance, (1) if the teacher did know which students had visual or auditory disabilities therefore had them sat down as close to her usual teaching position as possible and (2) the teacher was aware that a student's attention capacity varied from day to day depending on mental and physical health and outside distractions. (3) The teacher also paced the tasks in class to put up with the strengths of children, (4) the teacher did begin class with a simple activity to wake the students up and get them working together or (5) the teacher tried to challenge students who were at their best. The second focus was on the aptitude and perception. As an example, (1) whether the teacher was aware that students did learn differently, (2) the teacher provided models, examples, and experiences to maximize learning in each of these areas or (3) the teacher did know the basic concepts in the memory process. In other words, when it was appropriate and relevant, she did apply a number of methods such as backward

build-up and association to help children acquire literacy skills quickly. The third focus was on the reinforcement such as (1) if the teacher did tell students when they had done well, but she did not let praise become mechanical. And (2) the teacher did finish the class period in a way which would revise the new concepts taught during the class time. Therefore, her students could immediately assess their understanding of those concepts. The last focus was on the development. For instance, (1) if the teacher did attend in seminars and workshops or did read related professional articles and books in order to update herself on the new methods in the ESL profession. She did indeed understand that there was no one correct way to teach any lesson. (2) She also did try new ideas where and when they did seem appropriate or (3) she did observe other ESL teachers so that she could get other ideas and compare them to her own teaching style. She indeed did want to have several ideas for teaching any one concept.

Mainly, the rational to use descriptive observation checklist was to reflect evidence of demonstrated basic teaching practices that are essential for efficient classroom instruction. The researcher would ask preschools' principal to obtain permission to observe each preschool teacher in their class. Subsequently, the researcher was offered to contact the classroom teachers and describe the study to them. During the observation, the observer took field notes and observations were video-recorded.

The next type of observation was focused observations (Appendix H). Focused observations limit the scope of area in the investigation and occur after the descriptive observations have occurred (McGoun, 2007). Focused observations for this study included an examination of the practices and activities preschool teachers provided in early English literacy instruction and an investigation of the way they

implemented social interaction in their practices, students' behavior toward the activities and each other, as well as students' growth. The focused observation checklist included five parts following the theoretical framework of the study;

The first part of the checklist was on the examination of *the activity*. The first focus was on social interaction which is the main focus of the current research. It aimed to explore how teachers implemented social interaction in their practice. For instance, whether (1) the teacher did minimize her role in performing the tasks, (2) the teacher organized the tasks therefore they were apposite for real interaction among children, (3) the activities maximized student participation or the activities did encourage impulsiveness or experimentation in children, (4) the activities generally transferred attention away from self and outward toward a task, (5) the tasks were structured to assure a high success rate where making mistakes were accepted in order to make the activity challenging, (6) the teacher was not very concerned with error correction, or (7) she did concentrate on what the students were saying that is to say, content.

The second focus was on the teacher's language. As an illustration, whether (1) the activity was focused, (2) the lesson or the skill taught would be effortlessly used by children outside the class, (3) the activity was planned based on the proficiency level of the class or moderately beyond, (4) what was included in the activity was not too refined for children, or (5) the teacher did make the content of the activity pertinent and significant to the students' world.

The second part of the checklist was on *interactions during literacy activities* specifically, oral language such as examining (1) if the teacher promoted the students to attend during literacy activities using eye gaze, gestures, voice or personal

communication device. Or (2) if the teacher did help the students to attend to (such as by reaching, pointing or looking) pictures, symbols and text, (3) if she did guide the students to demonstrate understanding or personal connection during favorite part of the story by remarking on and/or connecting to personal experiences, responding to questions about story or asking questions about the story. And finally (4) If the teacher did encourage the students to retell a part of the story with an activity such as arranging picture cards, acting out, retelling in own words, or in a sequence.

The third part on the checklist was on how teachers did try to enhance *print awareness* in children. The research tried to explore (1) if the teacher encouraged the students to demonstrate awareness of print by attending, eye gaze, pointing, vocalizations or talking. (2) If the teacher did help students to connect print to speech or language, (3) she guided them to understand the basic concept of printed word by linking picture or object with printed word, or (4) if she did encourage them to distinguish words in print in isolation as well as in context.

The forth part of the checklist was on teachers' practices on enhancing *alphabet knowledge* such as (1) whether the teacher encouraged students to explore alphabet materials, know that printed and tactual letters were different from pictures and other representations, recognize first letter in own name and identify specific letters in their own name, other important names and high frequency words. This part also aimed to see (2) if the teacher helped students to recognize other letters in other words or identify name of many letters or show the number of letters in each word.

And the last part of the focused observation checklist was the investigation of the teachers' practices on promoting *phonological awareness* in children such as if the teacher did assure that students participated in word play for example, finger

plays, followed rhythmic patterns in poems, music and stories, recognized the basic sounds of some letters or indicated the number as well as specific letters, repeated rhythmic patterns in poems, music and stories, demonstrated awareness that different words did begin with the same sound and identified initial letter sounds of at least 20 letters.

Descriptive as well as focused observation checklists were adopted from the study and work of various researchers (see Christison & Bassano (1983), Pierce, Summer & O'DeKirk (2005) King-DeBaun, & Musselwhite (1997) and Johnsen & Newman (2011)) which were designed as observation checklists for preschool classrooms. The purpose of these observations was to better understand the four teachers' classroom environments, routines and practices. Both checklists were later modified by the researcher to match with the current research perspectives and objectives. The researcher met each teacher at the end of the final visit to debrief about comments made in observations which the researcher had noted during visits. This debriefing session would also provide an opportunity for the preschool teacher to ask questions or make further comments.

**Document review.** Another important source of information was the analysis of the existing instructional documented materials. A variety of documents were analyzed during the course of study such as portfolios, syllabus, lesson plans, worksheets and other written artifacts in order to complement the information from the class observations and interviews. This indeed would help the researcher to better understand the program and curriculum standards or policy and establish a connection among all different types of data. In fact, the aim of the documented materials' analysis was also to attain a better understanding of the goals and expectations of both Montessori and IPC programs. In effect, the researcher could

explicitly and clearly investigate and present the practices were provided for different early literacy activities.

In the course of documents' analysis, the written lesson plans were compared with the observed lessons to match the content. As a matter of fact, they were used to explore to what extent the lesson plans' content matched teachers' actual literacy activities or practices.

Moreover, portfolio as another type of documented materials often reflects the unique classroom community of the teacher, children, and parents as well as the development of which is a major goal of the program curriculum. In particular, preschool teachers at the research sites were required to keep portfolios of children's work, including drawings, art work, writing samples and pictures to document children's progress towards meeting state assessment standards. Portfolios were used as an evidence of providing efficient early language and literacy practices in the classroom as well. They were also used to glean additional insight into classroom processes and the meaning behind them. In addition, they were used by the researcher to check the accuracy of teachers' articulated practices and determine how these articulated practices were related to the actual classroom experiences and activities. To point out, the information contained in children's portfolios was used to gain awareness of each individual child's interests, strengths, and areas of required improvement and should have been an important part of the planning process.

The program curricula, Montessori and IPC were also part of the document analysis, with attention paid to curricular guidelines and expectations for early language and literacy instruction and experiences. Curricular guidelines were used to juxtapose teacher's beliefs and practices with the stated goals and practices of the curriculum. Document analysis was conducted on the curriculum used by the

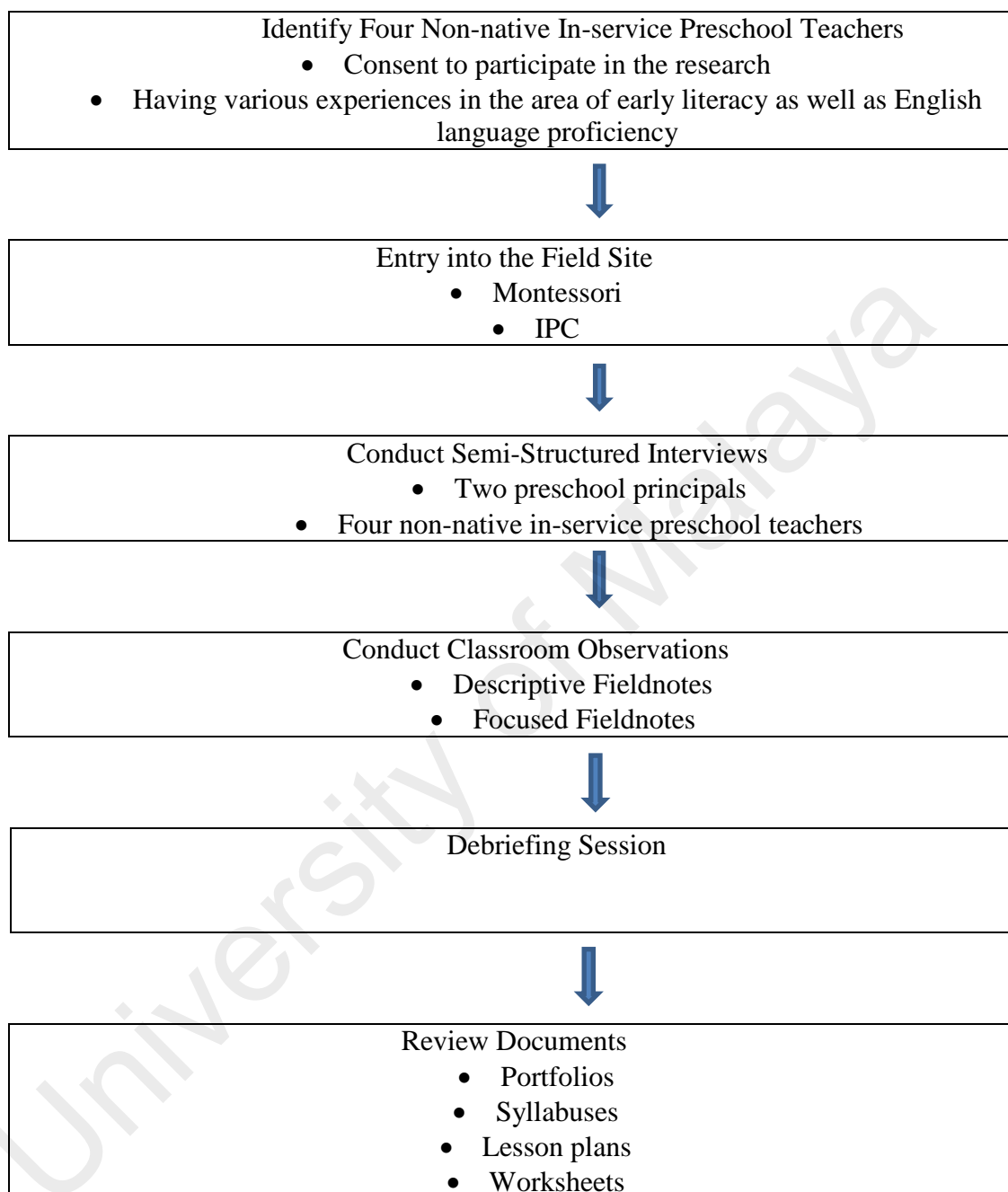
program to obtain information about the language and early literacy goals of the curriculum and how they were to be implemented in practice. Information on curricular guidance regarding the learning environment, activity settings, and strategies for English language learners was also reviewed.

Besides, syllabus and lesson plans as other types of documented materials were reviewed in the course of this research. Globokar (2010) states that “syllabus is a document that typically contains an outline of the course, a list or detailed description of relevant assignments and readings, instructor contact information, and relevant course policies” (p.8). Syllabuses or lesson plans at the research sites of this research specifically, Montessori and IPC were actually what directed teachers and provided specific instructional targets. They in fact did show and illustrate what early literacy skills children needed to develop throughout the year. On the other hand, documented samples and worksheets were reviewed as well. Not to mention, they were processed using the drawing features of Microsoft Word 10. The flow chart of data collection procedures is illustrated as follows:



Table 3.1

*Flow Chart of Data Collection Procedures*



**Data Analysis**

The core research questions of the current study were related to exploring and understanding the preschool teachers' practices in the field of early English literacy instruction. In order to present teachers' activities and practices and answer the

research questions, required data was collected through multiple resources that hence need to be analyzed as well. In general, data analysis is the process of making sense of the collected data. Particularly, Hatch (2002) stated that data analysis in qualitative research comprises of arranging and structuring data for analysis then lessen the data into themes through a process of coding and summarizing the codes. Lastly, data are illustrated in figures, tables, or discussion. In the course of this research, the qualitative data for interviews, observations and documented materials were examined using Creswell's (2012) data analysis procedure. According to Creswell (2012), qualitative researchers collect the required data first and prepare it for the data analysis afterwards as it is shown in figure 3.1.

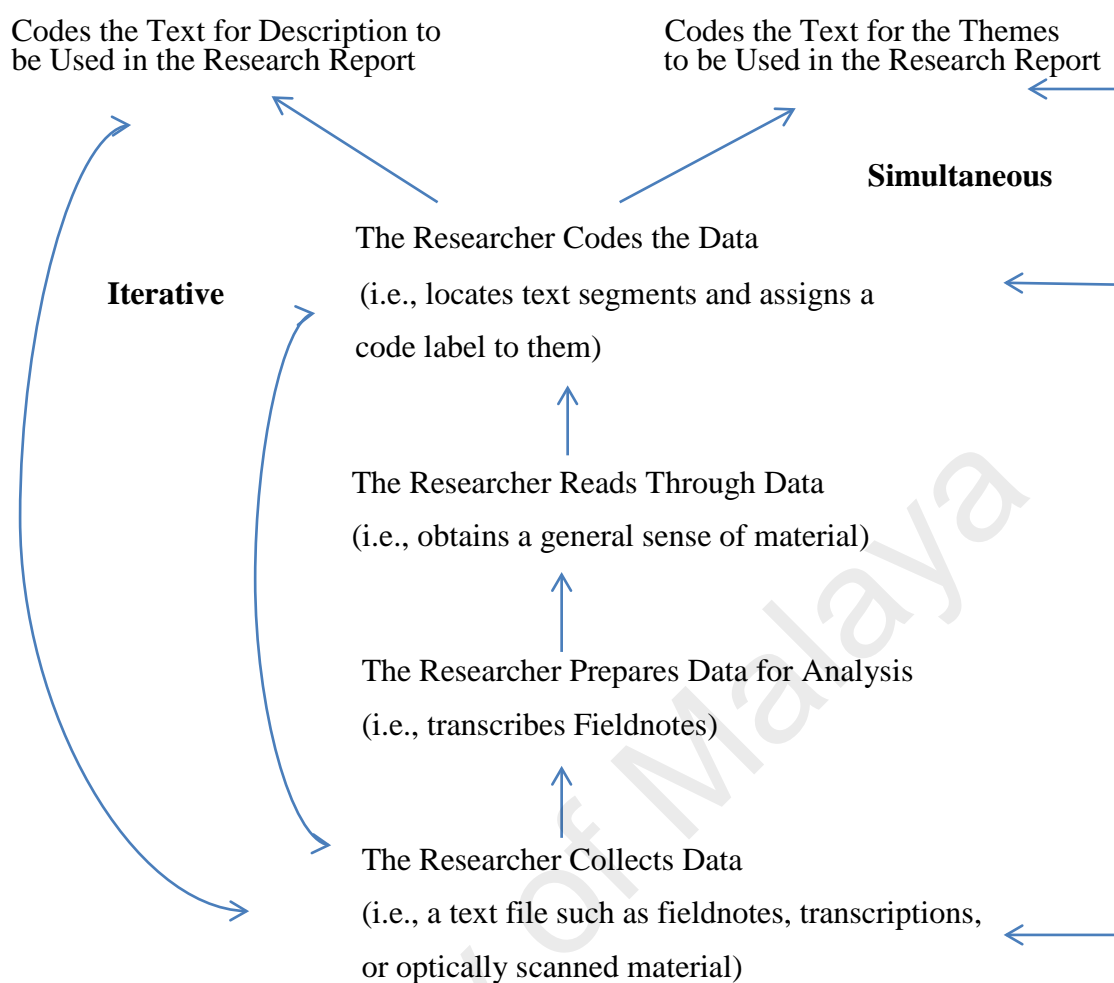


Figure 3.1. The Qualitative Process of Data Analysis (Creswell, 2012, p.237)

As Creswell (2012) states, “researchers have a choice about whether to hand analyze data or to use a computer” (p.239). During “hand analysis of qualitative data, researchers read the data, mark it by hand, and divide it into parts” (Creswell, 2012, p.239). Creswell (2012) believes that a hand analysis may be preferred when (a) the researcher is analyzing a small database specifically fewer than 500 pages of Fieldnotes or transcripts, (b) the researcher can track of files easily and locate text passages, (c) the researcher is “not comfortable using computers”, (d) the researcher needs “to be close to the data” or (e) the researcher does “have time to commit to hand analysis” (p.240). As a result, the researcher in this study decided to do hand analysis since she had a small data including interviews’ transcriptions (Appendix F)

and observation Fieldnotes (Appendix I). She was also close to the data and had a hands-on feel for it.

In order to code the data, the researcher followed the coding process of Creswell as well (2012) which is shown in figure 3.2 as follows:

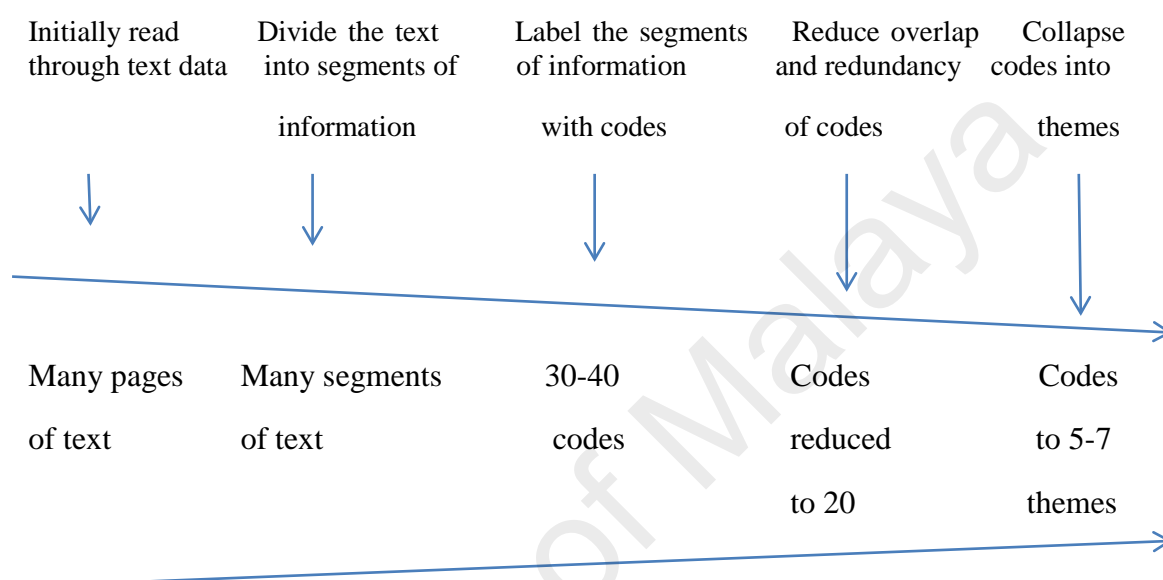


Figure 3.2. Coding Process (Creswell, 2012, p. 244)

In addition, for this multiple case study, data analysis was conducted at two stages specifically within- case analysis and cross-case analysis. The researcher looked for common themes that were shared across cases as well as similarities and dissimilarities exclusive to every single case.

The researcher started to process the raw data after collecting the data needed. Data analysis began and occurred simultaneously with data collection. After returning from the field, the researcher immediately began organizing and preparing data for analysis. She then transcribed the interview data collected that day. In fact, after the interview session with the participants, the transcription of the interview was done. The interview sessions took around one hour to one hour and a half and

the transcription obviously took much longer. After completing the transcribing process, the researcher read through all the data while listening to the audio tape to make sure what was transcribed was the same as what was recorded. The transcripts were read and coded before starting the observations of the classrooms. Later, the researcher started to observe the classrooms and teachers' activities or tasks. Teachers' practices as well as the classrooms' setting and literacy environment were observed and analyzed based on descriptive and focused observation checklists (see Appendices G & H).

Next, the researcher created fieldnotes (Appendix I) from the observation field jottings and video tape data which began during data collection and continued through the year of 2015. Together, a more accurate and detailed record of the field observation was produced. For example, while creating field notes from a day's observation, the field jottings provided the context. Indeed, the active process of transcribing the interview data and beginning the creation of field notes as close to the observation as possible engaged the researcher throughout the data collection period.

Furthermore, to get a general sense of the teachers' daily practice and activities, the observational data record was chunked by instructional events for instance, circle time, morning routine, and so on. It was also read several times as a way to recount the events of a typical day. Using research on key early literacy practices including oral language, print awareness, alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness and social interaction, this organized data set was coded.

Examining the data in relation to literacy events for each teacher resulted in two data records which illustrated each teacher's emphasis on various early literacy

events. As an example, for both Maria and Sally phonological awareness was the most prominent literacy skill and within this category, two key practices emerged: syllables and letters and sounds. These literacy events were further coded according to teaching strategies such as questioning, feedback, modeling and demonstrating. The interview data was then read several times. Next, looking closely at the participants' words, statements in which values about these different literacy events were espoused were highlighted, copied, and pasted in the findings file with the corresponding literacy practice. The data was also examined connecting to the Montessori and International Preschool curricula program and standards aiming at facilitating the development of young children's early literacy learning. In addition, looking for particular events in the observation and interview data where the teachers talked about the curriculum and its approaches, pieces of the data were coded as curriculum.

**Within-case analysis.** Each case is regarded as a single case in a multiple-case study and each case's findings can be regarded as information contributing to the whole research. Within case analysis is used at first to create a description of each case and then to implement cross-case analysis namely between cases in order to detect what each case has in common (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). Mills et al. (2010) indeed consider within-case analysis as the crucial constituent of the process of analysis in case study.

In the present research and in the course of within-case analysis, the researcher transcribed the collected data from the interviews and observations through interpretive analysis in order to provide a thorough understanding and description of each preschool teachers' practices in the area of early childhood education. The process of transcribing data included following some steps. The first

step was to read the data to gain a sense of the whole. Next, the researcher did review impressions previously recorded in research and in protocols. The next step in data transcribing was to read the data, identify impressions, and record those impressions in memos. The researcher correspondingly created memos with her initial ideas. While re-reading the data, she identified the recurring themes. She read the data several times. This careful reading helped the researcher create links between the memos, the teachers' ideas, her observations, lesson plans and her field notes. The third step was studying memos for salient information. The researcher tried to reduce the amount of collected information by concentrating on the repetitive memos. She continued to create links between the memos. This was the record the researcher used to describe the data analysis when she was writing the final report. Another step to transcribe data was re-reading data, coding places where interpretations were supported or challenged. Writing a draft summary was the last step in transcribing data. Not to mention, the voices of the teachers were a key element to write the first draft. Then the researcher reviewed the interpretations with the participants. The chief purpose of this step was to agree with the participants on the way the researcher described and analyzed their classroom experiences, later the researcher did write a revised summary and identify excerpts that support interpretations. In this final step, the researcher refined and clarified interpretations and supported them with the excerpts from the data. The flow chart of within-case analysis in the present research is illustrated as follows:

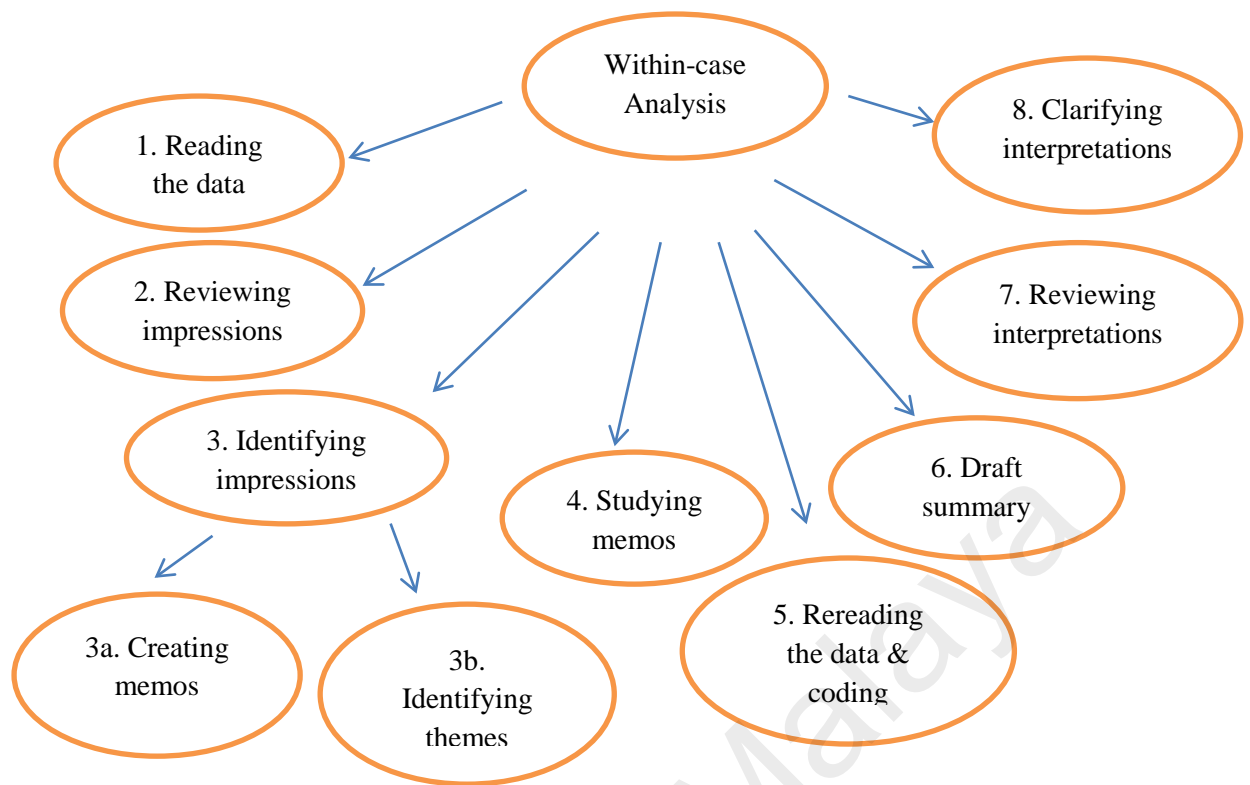


Figure 3.3. Within-Case Analysis

**Cross-case analysis.** After analyzing each case separately, a cross-case analysis was performed by the researcher. The themes and subthemes emerged across the four cases were compared and contrasted correspondingly.

The last step in analyzing data involved looking across the four cases to make a connection among them and find similarities and differences between the four preschool teachers' stories relating to the current study two research questions. Through this process the researcher looked for details to identify preschool teachers' early literacy practices, this time searching for patterns of practice, again looking for ways that Maria, Sally, Carla and Maya were similar and different in the kinds of interactions they provided children with in their classrooms across instructional events. The flow chart of cross-case analysis is demonstrated in Figure 3.4.



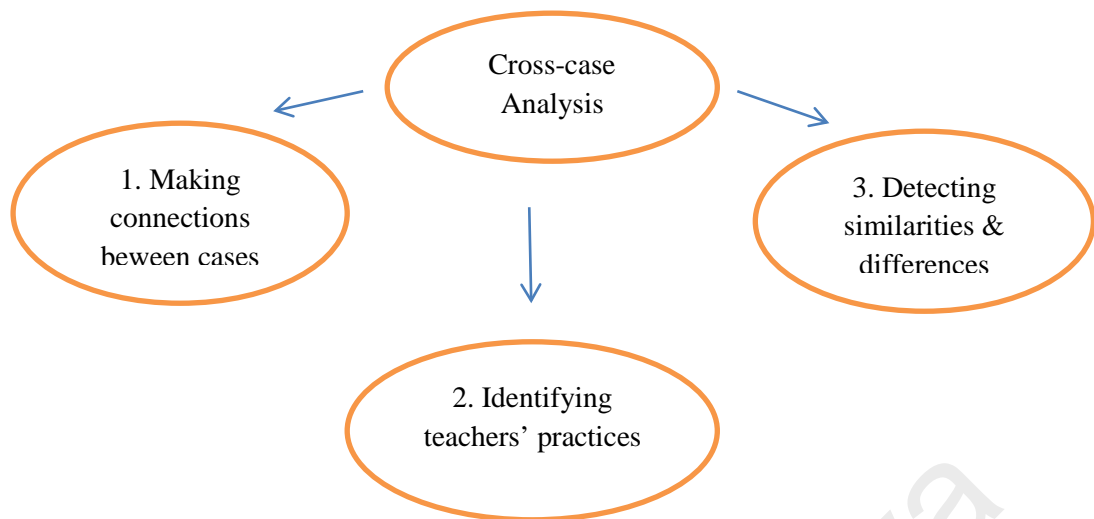


Figure 3.4. Cross-Case Analysis

Another key point is that the researcher also tried to analyze the data thematically and relationally as it was imperative that the material under scrutiny was analyzed in a methodical manner if qualitative research was to yield meaningful and useful results. “Thematic analyses seek to unearth the themes salient in a text at different levels, and thematic networks aim to facilitate the structuring and depiction of these themes” Attride- Stirling (2001, p.387). To put it another way, the procedure of thematic networks “provides a technique for breaking up text, and finding within it explicit rationalizations and their implicit signification” (p.388). Content or relational analysis on the other hand, helped to lessen the amount of material. The researcher was required to focus on particular facets of meaning, explicitly those aspects that relate to the overall research question (Schreier, 2013) in order to gain ample information on preschool English teachers’ practices.

### **Trustworthiness of the Study**

Trustworthiness depends on following the consistency of a qualitative research. In order for the findings of a research to be valid and trustworthy, researchers have to be confident in how the research was performed. Trustworthiness

is when the researcher has collected the required data, analyzed it, and interpreted it rigorously and ethically. Similarly, “validating findings means that the researcher determines the accuracy or credibility of the findings through strategies such as member checking or triangulation” (Creswell, 2012, p.259).

As a result, in order to improve the likelihood that the findings and interpretations produced through the data analysis are credible and consistent to what the participants of the study had said and done and to demonstrate the credibility of the research project from the beginning stages of data collection through data analysis to the final written report, two verification procedures were employed in the present research.

*Member checking:* Member checking is a process which is applied to check research findings with participants to determine if the findings are accurate. On the other hand, the findings are taken back to the subjects of the study and they are asked about the accuracy of the report. For instance, they are asked “if the themes are accurate to include and if the interpretations are fair and representative” (Creswell, 2012, p.259). Therefore, the researcher met with each of the participants in the present study and asked them to look at and review her analysis of their in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis to confirm if the analysis was a true representation of what they said and implemented. As a matter of fact, several aspects of the study with the participants were reviewed.

For example, the research participants both preschool principals and teachers did review the interview transcripts made by the researcher. Furthermore, the researcher met each teacher at the end of the final visit to debrief about comments made or noted by the researcher during classroom observations. While the participants made no or a few additions, deletions, or comments, this member

checking helped to ensure the reader of the study that the essential facts and evidence were correct. This first step in the research investigation was intended to enhance the accuracy of the qualitative case study research.

*Triangulation:* Triangulation was the second strategy that was applied to improve the credibility and accuracy of the study. The principle of triangulation has been referred to as a substantial means of validating the facets of a qualitative research. It indeed helps to compensate for the limitations of the individual data collection techniques and lessens the impacts of possible researcher bias in interpreting and analyzing qualitative data. In fact, triangulation is the practice of applying several data sources or approaches to analyzing data in order to enrich the research study reliability (Hastings, 2010).

As a result, a variety of data collection sources such as interviews, participant observations, artifact collection, as well as videotapes or audio records has been employed to secure an understanding of preschool teachers' practices and activities in the classroom. These multiple sources aided the researcher to either see the same things through different sources or question things which were different through these various sources. As an illustration, looking at Maria's classroom observations, the patterns of practice revealed reliable early literacy practices; the researcher was then able to look at artifacts that revealed this as well. Regardless of the outcome, variety in data collection added to the depth and breadth of the research.

Collecting three types of data allowed for triangulation and member checking to provide variety in data types and to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. Moreover, pseudonyms were used in place of the teachers' real names in data analysis as well as in reporting of research findings in order to protect teachers' identities.

In addition, a pilot study conducted by the researcher in 2014 informed the use of these methods. The purpose of conducting pilot study was to increase the trustworthiness of the present research and to identify any gaps or additional questions that may have been needed to be addressed. Similarly, the intention of conducting the pilot study was to find out and delineate teachers' practices together with the teacher-student interaction in a preschool classroom. During these observations, the researcher took on the role of a participant observer interacting with the students to gain an understanding of the teacher-child interaction within that classroom. The researcher collected data twice or three times a week over a four-week period, conducted follow-up stimulus recall interviews, classroom observations and gathered various artifacts or documents in an effort to describe one preschool teacher's actual practices as she experienced mandated curriculum reform in its third year of implementation in a Kuala Lumpur district in Malaysia.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In conducting qualitative research, there are a number of ethical issues which need to be considered. In fact, ethical issues surface and emerge in all parts of conducting research. Therefore, regardless of the kind of research the researchers conduct, they are required to follow the principles for the ethical practice of research. Besides, Creswell (2012) states that ethical issues "are especially important during data collection and in writing and disseminating reports" (p.27). It is believed that "data need to be collected ethically, with sensitivity to individuals, populations being studied, and research sites" (Creswell, 2012, p.233).

One of the challenges the researcher faced in the course of study was gaining access to the research sites specifically two preschools under the franchises of Montessori and IPC. Therefore, the researcher requested for an ethics approval letter

(Appendix A) from the university in order to submit to the principals of those two preschools. This letter helped the researcher to get permission from the principals to conduct the study in their preschools.

In addition, considering the privacy of participants of the study are very critical in conducting any research. Therefore, the researcher provided each subject in the current research with Information Sheet (Appendix B) in order to be fully aware of the aim of the study as Creswell (2012) agrees that “sharing information with participants (including your role as a researcher), being respectful of the research site, reciprocity, using ethical interview practices, maintaining confidentiality and collaborating with participants” need to be considered as a number of ethical practices (p.230).

Moreover, the participants of the study needed to be completely aware of the procedures and risks involved in the study and they were required to give their consent to participate in this research. Therefore, they were provided with Informed Consent Form as well (Appendix C). Confidentiality was needed to be considered in the course of research which would help protect the privacy of research subjects. Ethical principles also required that the researcher not place participants in a condition where they might be at risk of harm as a result of their participation.

To sum up, the following table (Table 3.2) presents the research questions, data collection instruments as well as data analysis strategies.

Table 3.2

*Core Outlines of Research Questions, Instrumentation, and Analysis*

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Data Collection</b>	<b>Data Analysis</b>
1. What practices are applied by preschool teachers in early English literacy instruction?	- Semi-Structured Interviews - Classroom Observations - Document Review ( portfolios, lesson plans, syllabuses & worksheets)	Thematic Analysis of the Data
2. How do preschool teachers implement social interaction in practice?	- Semi-Structured Interviews - Classroom Observations	Relational Analysis

**Summary**

This chapter discussed the various steps involved in this research to proceed into developing and writing qualitative procedures. The chapter begins with an introduction on the study and its purpose, followed by the type of design used in the present study. This chapter also described the participants involved in this research. Moreover, the researcher's role was addressed. Then the procedures such as sampling, how to gain access to data and the processes the researcher followed to get permission to enter into the research field sites in order to conduct the study and collect data, as well as informed consent were discussed. The chapter referred to the instruments for gathering data as well to answer the research questions. In this study the forms of data collection were principals' and preschool teachers' interviews, classroom observations and review of documented materials such as syllabus, lesson plans, portfolios and worksheets. This chapter also specified and elaborated in detail

the procedures by which these data were analyzed. Finally, an important section was to mention the strategies particularly, member checking and triangulation, that were used to confirm the accurateness and reliability of the research findings. This chapter then ended with ethical considerations as well as a summary in this study.

University of Malaya

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **Introduction**

As stated in chapter three, this investigation utilized a qualitative multiple case study approach to provide a complete picture of practices and activities preschool teachers applied in early English literacy instruction as well as the way they implemented social interaction in their practice.

The researcher tried to collect data by implementing various instruments such as principals' and teachers' interview, classroom observations, and documented materials. The first concern was to choose the interview times that the participants were comfortable with. Additionally, another main consideration for the researcher was to collect quality audio recordings. The interviews were performed at places and times that were convenient for the participants. All participants were interviewed face to face at the research sites particularly, two preschools, during the day. Subsequently, classroom observations were performed after the researcher made apposite arrangements with the preschool principals as well as teachers. Lastly, documented materials, such as lesson plans, syllabuses, worksheets, and portfolios together with some videotaped lessons for each preschool teacher who allowed the researcher to record were collected from the participants.

This chapter hence discusses the data analysis and the findings of the current study. The researcher started the chapter with presenting the aims of the study followed by research questions. To present the data analysis, the researcher describes each case first by discussing the setting and describing the participants followed by the emerged themes and subthemes of that case. Successively, the cross-case



analyses together with their emerged themes, and subthemes are discussed. At the end, the summary of the main research findings concludes this chapter.

### **Review of the Research Aims and Questions**

The current study was aimed to examine and explore the preschool English teachers' activities and strategies particularly, practices in early English literacy instruction. As a matter of fact, the purpose was a) to examine the practices applied by preschool teachers in early English literacy instruction and b) to investigate the way preschool teachers implemented social interaction in practice. To examine these instructional aspects fully, the following questions had to guide the research:

1. What practices are applied by preschool teachers in early English literacy instruction?
2. How do preschool teachers implement social interaction in practice?

To point out, the research questions were in line with the theoretical framework of the current research which is informed by Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivist and Rhode's (2015) comprehensive early literacy model. Vygotsky was a contributor to the theory of learning namely constructivism which is considered as the basis for efficient practices in preschool programs in the Malaysia's national preschool curriculum. In addition, Rhode (2015) presented a comprehensive model of early literacy to improve the implementation of appropriate practices in early literacy instruction. To put it another way, the key principles of appropriate practices include high quality teacher-child interaction as well as play which are the main focus of both Montessori and IPC teaching approach and philosophy.

Accordingly, the purpose of this chapter is to present all the collected data and provide a detailed analysis and discussion of the collected data to address each teacher's practices and activities in early English literacy instruction. However, the researcher assumed it was also necessary to describe each teacher's attitudes or characteristics since their beliefs and characteristics would be highly associated with their early literacy practices and activities.

### **Analyzing the Research Data**

The researcher used the data as a guide together with the research questions to construct each teacher's portrait of early English literacy instruction and practices. Part of this process involved going back to the data to find literacy events that illustrated or demonstrated the particular early literacy practices and the way social interaction was implemented by teachers in their practices. At times, several events could be used but the researcher chose those episodes that clearly illustrated the teacher's typical approach and also those events that showed a range of activities, materials, and contexts when possible in order to give the reader a richer and broader picture of preschool early English literacy teaching.

Analyzing the data that was collected over the course of the present research was guided by the questions. The collected data was analyzed thematically as Lapadat (2012) considers thematic analysis as a systematic approach to analyze qualitative data. According to Lapadat (2012), thematic approach involves first detecting themes or patterns, then, coding and categorizing data according to themes, and in the end, interpreting the subsequent thematic structures in quest of commonalties, relationships, primary patterns, theoretical constructs, or descriptive principles. Moreover, the collected data was analyzed relationally as the researcher was required to focus on particular aspects of meaning, obviously those facets that

connected with the overall research question (Schreier, 2013). Relational data analysis would also help the researcher to lessen the amount of materials needed to answer the research questions.

This section hence, presents the findings from the data collected through face-to-face interviews, observations and the review of the documents. Data analysis was carried out at two stages. The analysis for each case namely, within-case analysis was performed to identify themes and subthemes in teachers' practices in each preschool while cross-case analysis was subsequently employed in order to find overall themes and subthemes shared by both case studies. Besides, when referring to the various data sources in the text of each case study, some abbreviations used such as ID or VD which are presented in parentheses at the conclusion of the piece of data. For example, (ID, 8-25-2015) indicates the interview data transcription on August 25 in 2015 and (VD3, 9-14-2015) indicates the videotaped data transcription on September 14 in 2015.

In the present research, the data from each teacher was coded separately following Creswell's (2012) coding process. In fact, field notes were read in their entirety and coded afterwards. Consequently, three main themes (Figure 4.1) were emerged after analyzing the collected data. Classroom observations, participants interviews and instructional documents including lesson plans, syllabuses, worksheets and portfolios collected found a) early literacy learning environment, b) early literacy instructional practices and c) social interaction as a part of learning environment to be the most significant themes in both preschools. These three themes are defined first and then elaborated in detail for each case in the following sections.

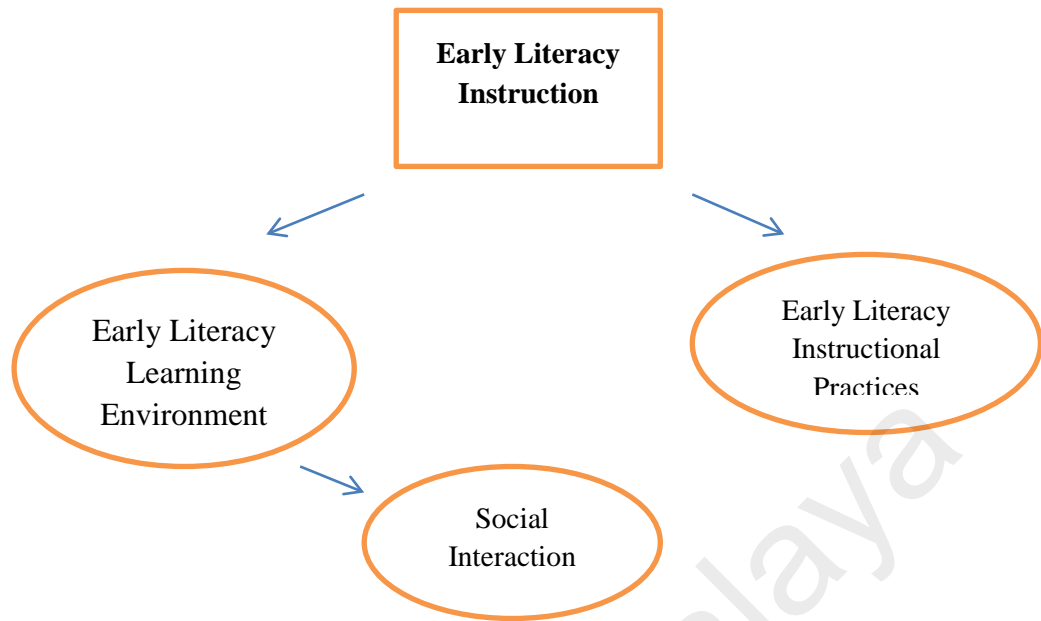


Figure 4.1. Three Themes

***Early Literacy Learning Environment:*** Early literacy learning environment consists of the physical space and social interaction (Mashburn et al., 2008). Indeed, setting up a learning environment rich with numerous print materials to help children make connections with various early literacy concepts inserted in talk, print, and social interaction by preschool teachers is prerequisite in enhancing early literacy in young children. In other words, the physical elements together with the social elements of the process quality should be considered in organizing the environment in order to provide children with the opportunity to gain the highest quality preschool experiences. In addition, Berk et al. (2013) consider social development as one of the most developmental tasks of early childhood education. They believe children can develop their self-concepts and self-esteem within the preschool years through social interaction. Hence, children are required to learn a number of social skills in order to be able to communicate and interact with others and with their environment.

Besides, play is considered as the primary source in the child's development (Vygotsky, 1978) and can help children develop social skills. In fact, early literacy development can occur in children, when teachers try to interact with them through play. Carman et al. (2012) confirm that play drives the development of numerous skills such as social skills, cognitive skills, appropriate behavior, problem-solving skills, language skills, social norms as well as abstract cognitive abilities.

***Early Literacy Instructional Practices:*** Early literacy instructional practices include activities, tasks and strategies that teachers implement in their classroom to provide children with opportunities for learning. Development of certain literacy skills is crucial during early years at preschool as well and should be part of these literacy practices. Rhode (2015) asserts that practices which include elements such as alphabet and phonological awareness, symbolic representation and communication are effective as they have potentially positive effects on children's literacy development. Therefore, the researcher in the current research tried to investigate teachers' practices on phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness and oral language which are described in brief as follows.

The first early literacy subcomponent of teachers' practices in the current study's theoretical framework is *phonological awareness* or sound awareness that aids children to recognize and manipulate the syllables, graphemes, and phonemes to develop words. Teaching children phonology explicitly provides children with this opportunity to develop the ability to take apart words into sounds, identify the sounds, and put them together again.

Preschool teachers play a significant role to enhance phonological awareness in children. They can apply numerous activities and tasks in their instruction to

promote the development of this skill in young children. For example, phoneme segmentation, phoneme omission, phoneme substitution, phoneme reversal and phoneme blending are considered as a number of tasks in phonological awareness instruction (Schatsneider et al., 1999).

*Alphabet knowledge* as the second subcomponent of teachers' practices on the other hand, is the ability to detect and name the letters of the alphabet (Drouin et al., 2012). To put it differently, in order to decipher progressively refined print, children have to count on the alphabetic principle. They need to count on the notion that printed words are consisted of individual letters and that these letters match to speech sounds which are called phonemes. Children are required to use the knowledge of letters to detect the sounds in a printed word. They also need this knowledge to employ their phonological abilities in blending these sounds together and distinguish the words' spoken form. As a result, alphabet knowledge is regarded as one of the essential components of early English literacy instruction in the present study's conceptual framework.

*Printed awareness*, the third early literacy subcomponent, is the children's ability to match the print with the spoken word or language and recognize the words. Book reading is assumed to be an appropriate activity that aids children develop print awareness. Justice et al. (2006) believe that books help children to know how the printed word conveys meaning, and they can help children to identify letters and be aware of their corresponding sounds as well.

The last early English literacy subcomponent of preschool teachers' practices, *oral Language*, is the means by which children can understand their environments (Dockrell et al., 2011). In fact, in order to be able to communicate with others,

children need to develop speaking skills. When children develop oral language skills, they have the knowledge of vocabulary and the ability to understand the words and their usage. Subsequently, they can understand the order of words and their grammatical rules. They are also capable of using language in various communicative or social contexts. Reading with expression to students, asking students open-ended questions while reading, and discussing new vocabulary are considered as a number of instructional activities that can support oral language development in children.

In the following section the researcher presents each case first by describing the settings, describing the participants, and their practices based on the above themes and subthemes (Figure 4.1). Subsequently, the cross cases analyses together with their emerged themes, and subthemes are discussed.

**Within-case analysis.** It was mentioned previously in chapter three that each case in the current study needed to be described in order to explore and identify the specific patterns of every single case before detecting the attributes and patterns across both case studies. “Within-case analysis in case study research is the in-depth exploration of a single case as a stand-alone entity” (Mills et al., 2010, p.2). According to Mills et al. (2010), within case analysis involves familiarity with a certain case to recognize “how the processes or patterns that are revealed in that case support, refute, or expand” (p.2). It also helps the readers to recognize “a theory that the researcher has selected or the propositions that the researcher has derived from a review of the literature and/or experience with the phenomenon under study” (Mills et al., 2010, p.2). In fact, through using within-case analysis the researcher can be fully involved in the data that consequently cultivates the emergence of elements, aspects and features of each single case.

**Case study 1.** The patterns and attributes of case study 1 are elaborated in depth as follows in three sections that is to say, research site, participants and themes and subthemes.

**Research Site 1:** The setting for the first case included a preschool under the franchise of Montessori that was located in the northwest of the city center of Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. This preschool was situated in a building which consisted of a serviced apartment and a corporate office tower. This preschool was chosen for this study because of its program's popularity and its exceptional work to promote the development of children's learning and early literacy. Besides, the goal of this preschool's approach was to provide children with a program that fosters young children's physical, emotional, intellectual and well-being. As a matter of fact, its teaching approach was the development of the whole child including both social and cognitive development.

According to Montessori philosophy, children learn from their environment. Children are born to learn, and they are outstanding learning systems. Children indeed learn because they are thinking beings. However, what they learn depends significantly on their teachers, experiences as well as literacy learning environment. As Morrison (2014) confirms that teachers have a significant effect on what children attain. Additionally, the literacy materials that are utilized in Montessori program and classrooms are designed to help children immerse as many experiences as possible which consequently heighten their experience in learning. The prepared environment established by Montessori program consists of literacy materials that are aimed to employ both the hands and the minds of children.



The principal of this preschool holds a bachelor degree in Economics and has been a teacher for eleven years. She has also been a preschool principal for thirteen years. To employ teachers, she qualifies teachers based on their teaching experiences particularly, at least one to two years. She stated in the interview with the researcher that what really matters is that preschool teachers should be patient and love children.

The qualification is mostly depends on language...be able to speak English....working experience as well...they should spend time playing with children...love them and be patient. (ID, 1-5-2015)

With regards to methodology and instructional strategies, all teachers in Montessori preschool needed to apply the same Montessori Method and Jolly Phonics in their classrooms. Concerning early English literacy instruction, the principal in this preschool stated during interview that:

Children should be able to identify letters and their corresponding sounds...to blend three letter words and teachers should combine teaching with pictures and objects to facilitate children's understanding the words with their meanings. (ID, 1-5-2015)

Besides, she signifies the role of social interaction as important in early childhood education. She states that it is quite good for children to share experiences and encourage children to speak up through telling their stories.

***Participants of the First Case Study:*** Overall, two teachers in Montessori preschool took part in the present case study. To maintain confidentiality, participants were requested to choose pseudonyms to protect their identities. To point out, the key component of the teaching and learning environment in the field of early

literacy instruction is the teacher who is working in the classroom. Teachers can differ on education, experience and their literacy interests, beliefs, habits as well as practices. Every single of these factors can have a substantial effect on the quality of instruction that children receive in order to be able to read and write. Focusing on these factors two teachers in Montessori, Maria and Sally are described in the following section. Table 4.1 presents the demographics of the participants in this case study.

Table 4.1

*Participants' Demographics of the First Case Study*

<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Educational Level</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>Classroom Purpose</b>
Ms. Maria	BA in SC/ M & Ph Courses	3	Book knowledge/ sounds recognition
Ms. Sally	Certificate in M & FA/ KAKK	6	Recognizing letters and their sounds

To provide a better understanding of the participants, this section introduces each participant and pertinent demographic data. As it was mentioned earlier, the researcher used pseudonyms to describe each teacher's background, attitudes towards early literacy instruction, characteristics and teaching experiences. Avoiding teachers' real names was crucial to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. The arrangement of the participants in this segment is chronological and based on the date of the interview.

**“Maria”** after obtaining a bachelor degree in Science, passed short Montessori Set courses. She also passed a few courses on Phonics. She has been teaching at the present preschool for three years. She used to be a bible teacher but

started working with children as a preschool teacher because of passion. However, she is mainly interested in this job because of its time flexibility.

She believes that there has not been any significant professional development related to preschool or childhood education over the last three years except adding a number of worksheets. In her interview with the researcher, Maria asserted that parents would like their children to learn to write since they need to join international school afterwards therefore, it is necessary for children to be able to pass an assessment test to be able to enter school. She stated that the preschool curriculum standards or approach was more academic and the students needed to keep doing several worksheets which was not actually interesting and children would subsequently get bored. In her opinion, recently things were getting more intensive. As an illustration, there is lesser play time, and instructional activities are focusing more on merely academic success. To her, these were all because of parents putting pressure both on teachers and mainly on children.

Regarding the implementation of all she learned in theory in the area of early literacy and childhood education, she mentioned that she learned quite a lot during Montessori courses but practically it has been difficult for her to put all her knowledge into practice. She explains that it is because learning environment and children are different from what happens during courses, thus teachers would not be able to teach based on what they have learned at universities or training courses.

Furthermore, Maria said that parents would expect their children to be able to read and write therefore, during her class she usually focused more on reading as she thinks reading helps children to develop writing as well. Overall, she intended to

promote book knowledge in children in her class and also focused mainly on children's being able to recognize alphabet letter sounds.

Furthermore, she suggests that for more effective English literacy instruction, we as educators or teachers need to incorporate more hands-on materials rather than worksheets into curriculum standards or policy. Concerning learning English, she thinks that children need to be encouraged to read and write in English when they are at least three years old.

*"Sally"*, the second teacher, on the other hand, passed courses of Montessori in Segi College and obtained her Diploma. She has also received a certificate in Kursus Asas Kanak Kanak (KAKK) which was obtained in order to open a center. In addition, she has obtained a certificate in First Aid which she believes is quite important for teaching young children. She has been working for five years as a teacher but working at the current preschool around a year. She started working as a preschool teacher since she thought this job was good and suitable for her. Regarding the reason why she decided to get into teaching, she stated as follows:

I think that is a very great hmmm it's a very good job for me to try.... before I studied early childhood I studied Montessori and got a diploma.... I think it's quite different... before I studied I felt that it's a normal teaching ...like just feed them or .....after I studied in the course, everything was different from what I expected. I feel that it's really different children are very young and ....or any movement or most of the development they start since they are young so the lack of physical development...lack of....then will be very hard to I mean cope with this ...or move forward when they grow up ....(ID,1-6-2015)

Additionally, in her opinion physical development is an essential part of preschool teaching and early childhood education. And she believes that a lot has changed related to preschool curriculum and setting including physical environment. For example, teachers mainly try to implement activities of everyday living or

authentic tasks. She adds that it could subsequently reinforce the child's fine-motor skills such as spooning and pegging which help children to strengthen their pincer grip, to hold a pencil and develop their motor skills as well.

Maybe pouring or maybe scooping so that they can develop their fine motor skills so when they're scooping, they hold the spoon....which is like they are going to hold a pencil in the future so it's very good for helping them in like writing in teaching and also pouring...eye-hand coordination ...so they need to look at I mean...the level they need to...from job to job...so then eye- hand coordination is very important for them and in the future they are going to write a letter on the I mean on the box or on the line ohh yeah its very good for them...other coordination hmmm more it's like physical development...so they need to ...actually children would like to run around so wherever you go to any preschool children like to run and then they like to jump around or so they don't have like garden so we let them go run outside here only...(ID, 1-6-2015)

With regard to early literacy instruction, Sally thinks that early English literacy is important because at young age the students could easily catch up to learn. Moreover, she emphasizes teachers need to implement various instructional tasks for children in different levels. For example, at young ages or basic levels it is better to use Jolly Phonics systematic approach and apply a number of activities such as singing songs, telling stories and using more pictures but at higher levels it is necessary to implement less pictures and focus more on sound object boxes and large movable alphabet letters.

Besides, she asserts that learning language is vital in children's literacy development and teacher plays an important role in encouraging children to learn a language. According to her, to achieve this, teachers should be involved in their students' world. In other words, they should join them during literacy activities and share stories and experiences with one another.

Similar to Maria, Sally thinks that all she learned theoretically during instructional courses at college is hard to implement in practice because the working environment and conditions are different from what she has experienced in classes and it normally takes time for teachers to adapt to the new environment. Unlike Maria, Sally believes that children need to start English at early ages even one year old. Regarding her teaching approach, she mentions that she used to force children to write but later she recognized that this indeed blocks children from learning. As a result, Sally chiefly aims to encourage children in her class to recognize alphabet letters and identify their corresponding sounds.

In general, it can be summarized from the discussion above that two teachers in the Montessori preschool did not attain any university degree in early childhood education. They merely passed a few Montessori courses in order to teach young children and help children develop early English literacy skills.

***Themes and Subthemes of the First Case Study:*** In line with the analysis of all collected data sources such as participants' interviews, classroom observations, and the documented materials of the first case in Montessori preschool such as lesson plan, syllabuses, portfolios and worksheets, the researcher identified three major themes regarding the practices of preschool teachers in early English literacy instruction: (a) early literacy learning environment; (b) early literacy instructional practices; and (d) social interaction. The detected major themes and related subthemes that emerged from the first case are listed below in Table 4.2 and are delineated in detail in the following sections.

Table 4.2

*Themes and Subthemes of the First Case Study in Montessori Preschool*

<b>Themes and Subthemes</b>		
<b>Early Literacy Learning Environment</b>	<b>Early Literacy Instructional Practices</b>	<b>Social Interaction</b>
Physical environment	Alphabet Knowledge: Flash cards & worksheets	Group teaching
House environment	Phonological Awareness: Sound object boxes, flash cards & worksheets	Working with puzzles
The location of classrooms	Print Awareness: Letter tracing, sand paper letters, worksheets & Big Books	Playing games
The size of classrooms	Oral Language: Big Books	Big Books

**Early Literacy Learning Environment in Montessori Preschool:** This section describes the early literacy learning environment at Montessori preschool such as the use of environmental print, the display of children's early literacy work or materials and the availability of books and other literacy artifacts in the environment. It also elaborates the implementation of social interaction by teachers in the classrooms.

The present research addressed the classroom literacy environment in Early Childhood Education classrooms in terms of both structural and process features. Structural features represent the physical elements of the classroom and literacy environment, whereas the process features represent teacher-student interactions coupled with how the teacher provides instruction to young children. Therefore, early literacy learning environment in the current research conceptual framework comprises of *structural features* namely physical space including setting and

materials and *process features* including teachers' literacy instruction and teacher-child interaction (Mashburn et al., 2008).

Following the current research theoretical framework, the researcher begins by outlining how the physical environment (Mashburn et al., 2008) was designed to support young children's literacy learning and language development. The researcher then describes how teachers in Montessori preschool implemented and promoted the development of social interaction and social skills (Vygotsky, 1978) into early literacy instruction and practices within this environment. Lastly, the researcher depicts preschool teachers' practices (Rhode, 2015) on instruction of phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness and oral language.

***Physical Environment in Montessori Preschool:*** According to the analysis of the preschool teachers' interviews, classroom observations, and documented materials such as lesson plans, portfolios, syllabus and worksheets both teachers in Montessori preschool, Maria and Sally, regarded the provided literacy environment effective in early English literacy instruction. As an illustration, Sally mentioned that the preschool provided a suitable efficient literacy environment for effective teaching which let children be as comfortable as in their house. In her conversation with the researcher, Sally spoke about the importance of literacy environment:

We can see that Montessori environment is a lot like house environment,...we have pouring, we have scooping we have like tracing ....we have so many parts... lots of materials that related to our home so the children feel ...here and then they feel oh ok it looks like my home I can learn ...everything is similar to home yeah. (ID: 1-6-2015)

To describe the preschool, as you entered the Montessori preschool, you could see the principal's office which was connected to the rest of preschool where classrooms were situated by a door. Everyone needed an access key to enter the area.



When you got into the preschool, there were two interconnected classrooms on the left. In the middle there were two other classrooms which were divided by a partition. At the front of these two classrooms, there was children's bathroom and a kitchen. On the other side, opposite children's bathroom, there was the teachers' bathroom. Passing this area there was a big hall contained a number of tables (as a canteen) where children could have breakfast and lunch. On the other side, there were other two interconnected classes. There was also another big class in which toddlers were nurtured. This class was separated from other two classes by a door.

The classroom in which Maria worked (the one in the middle) was big in comparison to the other classrooms. In the center of the class there were two small tables attached together and the chairs were placed around. There were a few shelves on two sides of the class in which were some hands-out materials, textbooks, children's water bottles and sound object boxes. There was also one small board that was posited on top of the class.

On most days circle time began at 10.00 am in the class and marked the beginning of the whole group literacy work with the singing of a song named "Good Morning". Next, Maria did the attendance and each child needed to raise hand and say "yes, teacher". Maria then guided the planning of work time by reviewing alphabet letter sounds using sound object boxes. She also used to read Big Books focusing on sounds for children daily.

On the other hand, the classroom in which Sally worked was (the one opposite dining room) tiny in comparison to the other large preschool classrooms. Even though, according to Copple and Bredekamp (2009), physical space is central to providing high quality, developmentally appropriate curriculum. Neuman et al.

(2003) also referred to a number of design principles for early childhood classrooms such as sufficient space for quality interactions and activity and open-spaced classrooms for freedom of movement.

Despite her tight classroom space, Sally set up the physical environment in order to accomplish her main objectives of enhancing the development of young children's independence and their early literacy competencies. Like Maria, Sally used the same teaching approach using the same materials such as sound object boxes and the Big books except that she sometimes put the big flashcards of alphabet letters on the mat on the floor asking children to sit on the ground. Then children were required to find the sounds of each letter and place it beneath its letter flash card. Another normal practice Sally implemented in her classroom was that she asked children to get a few frames in different shapes and trace them on the paper.

To point out, all the literacy materials for teaching including Big books, sound object boxes and flashcards were available in the large room in front of the office that was used by Maria. This room had a small shelf at the front consisting of literacy instructional materials which was used by other teachers throughout the day to prepare their materials for teaching in their classrooms. Due to this, all the teachers in various classes needed to go there to get their required materials each day. This would consequently result in teachers moving throughout the classrooms to find their appropriate instructional materials.

The location of the bathroom was another variable that affected the preschool operations and classroom practices and activities. It was mentioned earlier that children's bathroom located opposite some classrooms. Therefore, when children of all classes needed to use the bathroom they could disturb the classrooms' instruction.

To conclude, the physical environment of the Montessori preschool limited the teachers' ability to fully implement the curriculum standards and approach. However, it is imperative to mention that despite the limitations of the physical space, the teachers seemed to make it work and staff appeared to work well together. The physical layout of the Montessori preschool can be found in Figure 4.2.

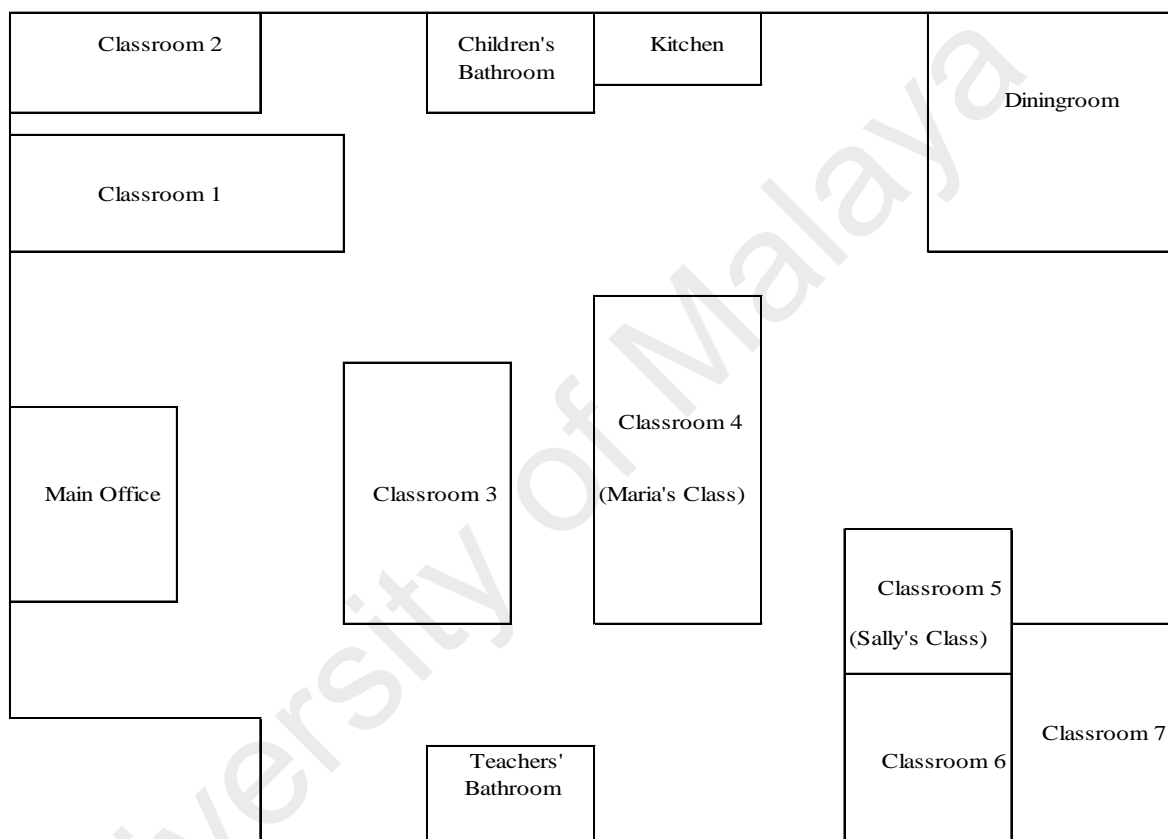


Figure 4.2. Montessori Preschool Physical Layout

***Teachers' Instruction to Enhance Social Interaction in Montessori***

**Preschool:** Teachers in Montessori preschool tried to use a number of activities to promote the development of social skills in children. Grouping children was one of those activities which teachers utilized to enhance children's social skills. However, they did not have any specific strategy such as mixed ability grouping or flexible grouping supported by research. Maria for instance, usually grouped children as a

whole class during shared book reading which can be considered as fixed grouping. Yet, she could implement flexible grouping as another technique to differentiate instruction in order to meet the needs of her diverse cultural and linguistic students (Baecher et al., 2012). According to Baecher et al. (2012), flexible grouping includes small groups or with a partner which is one of the principles of differentiation approach. It is recommended by this approach that teacher should use flexible rather than fixed grouping.

Moreover, questioning was another technique used by teachers to promote learning social skills in children. For example, at the time of shared book reading Maria after grouping children as a whole class, asked children a few questions on the story to involve them in reading. Here is the description of implementing this practice by Maria:

On the 12<sup>th</sup> January in 2015 Maria asked children to sit on the table quietly and put their hands on their laps to prepare for shared book reading. She brings a Big Book and before starts reading, she states that she is going to read a book about three bears. She starts with asking a few warm-up questions like ‘what did you do yesterday?’ or ‘how was your day?’. Sam \_one of children\_ says he went shopping, Laya \_a four year old girl\_ says she went to the playground and the rest of students keep quiet. Everybody claps then and Maria declares the name of the story: Goldilocks and Three Bears. She tells the story pointing to the pictures and sometimes asks a few questions on the story to engage children in the activity. Yet, children did not get much opportunity to make their own personal connections to understand the story. Even though, she could utilize various strategies to engage children more. As an illustration, Dickinson et al. (as cited in Schick, 2015) referred to co-constructive style as one of the styles of instruction which teachers can

implement during shared book reading. In this style, teachers stop frequently during book reading to talk about the story and help children to make connections with their personal experiences.

Sally, the second teacher in Montessori preschool, implemented the same procedure to read Big books to children. However, she was less likely to engage children in conversations about stories. According to performance-oriented style of shared book reading teachers need to have extensive conversation both before and after book reading with children about the story. They should talk about the story in detail and help children to link the story with their personal experiences (Dickinson et al., cited in Schick, 2015). Throughout the time the researcher spent in Sally's classroom, on a few occasions the researcher did observe Sally read stories to children and engage children in interaction or conversation either with teacher or with peers.

Giving children the opportunity to choose various puzzles was another strategy that Maria employed in order to help children develop social skills. During free play time children could choose a certain puzzle and play. As a matter of fact, playing games was also a part of teachers' practices in Montessori preschool. Strickland and Schickedanz (2009) support play and consider it as essential for growth in all developmental domains including cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional as well as physical domains. The application of play varied from teacher to teacher in Montessori preschool. Maria for example, allowed children to play different cognitive games as a break between lessons. She mostly let children play alone or together yet she did not join them so often. In fact, she defined and described social interaction as follows:

Playing games (letter games).....hmmm working with puzzles and rewarding the children can be kind of teacher-child interaction...(ID: 1-8-2015)

Sally, on the other hand asked children to choose their favorite material to play with while she was teaching an individual student. It is important to mention that both teachers utilized only free play among other types of play. They did not actually implement other types of play like intentional play or pretend play. However, Copple and Bredekamp (2009) believe that engaging children in various types of play aids them to enhance their learning and development in all domains.

All things considered, it is not only the environment, physical space or literacy materials that determine whether children acquire to read and write. What matters the most is what the teacher does in this environment and how she delivers instruction in her class. Without a doubt, small class sizes, lack of teaching and literacy learning materials, and a teacher's lack of knowledge and skill can limit or affect what teachers and students do in the classroom.

**Early Literacy Instructional Practices in Montessori Preschool:** The upcoming section discusses and describes the early literacy practices of the two above teachers in Montessori preschool on the implementation of four key early literacy skills in their classrooms. Their practices are described following the theoretical and conceptual framework of the current study. This segment delineates how teachers promoted the development of early literacy skills such as phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness and oral language in the classroom.

***Teachers' Practices to Enhance Phonological Awareness in Montessori Preschool:*** Phonological awareness as one of the key early literacy skills is the ability of children to recognize the sounds of words in spoken language.

Phonological awareness comprises of numerous skills that range in difficulty from the simple activities or tasks including word units such as syllables to the more challenging tasks of employing phonemes.

Maria mainly tried to include phonological awareness as an early literacy component in her instruction. Phonological awareness was indeed her daily literacy practice. Observed patterns of phonological awareness instruction in her classroom included basic sound identification or recognition. Maria tried to teach alphabet letter sounds to children explicitly. She developed children's understanding of different letters and their corresponding sounds using sound object boxes. Here is the description of teaching sounds by Maria in her classroom:

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of January in 2015, Maria brings two small sound boxes with her to the class then asks all children to sit on the table. After choosing the sound box for the letter 'p', she gets an object, to be specific, 'pen' out of the box and says the word aloud like 'p' as a 'pen'. She passes the object pen to children to feel its texture and pronounce the word. She goes on with another object 'pear' using the same procedure. To make this task a bit fun, for the next object 'penguin', she hides it in her hand without saying what it is. Children seem excited and curious. Then Maria asks them what they think it is and children start guessing. Finally, she shows the object 'penguin' and children touch it one by one trying to pronounce the word. She puts all the objects back to the box afterwards and starts another sound object box. This time it was the letter 'g'. She adopts another strategy \_description\_ this time to engage children. She says she has an insect in her hand, it is green and it starts with 'g'. After different guesses, a four year old girl Sarah answers and Maria asks everyone to clap for her.

Now some excerpts are presented from the researcher's observation of large group activity on another day in which children were encouraged to identify both the alphabet letters and their corresponding sounds.

Maria brings a sound box starts with the alphabet letter "M". She warns children that if they behave, they are allowed to see inside the box. This actually made children to be quiet and attentive.

1. Maria: (holding the letter M) what letter is this?
2. Children: M
3. Maria: (hiding an object). It is a sweet yellow fruit. What do you think it is?
4. Children: Mango
5. Maria: Who likes to eat mango?
6. Children: Me...me....me

Maria asks children to pass the object 'mango' to one another to touch and pronounce the word. After that Maria continues and explains that the next word looks like an umbrella.

7. Radha: Mushroom....mushroom can stand?
8. Maria: Sushi, how to say mug in Japanese?
9. Sushi: No answer.
10. Maria: Passing the object 'mushroom' to children. Are you ready to see the next one?
11. Children: Yes
12. Maria: It is round.
13. Children: Ball
14. Maria: Marble. (VD, 1-8-2015)

This procedure continues with one or two other letters and sounds as well. As it indicates, Maria used the same process every session to enhance the development of phonological awareness in children.



On the other hand, to help children develop awareness of sounds, Sally mostly used big alphabet letter flash cards as a technique which was not viewed by the researcher in Maria's class. Sally used to put a small mat on the floor with big flash cards on it and asked an individual child to sit on the ground. She implemented this task with an individual student while the rest of children could play with their material. The child in this task was required to say the sound of each letter and place it under its certain alphabet letter card.

Both Sally and Maria tried to follow Jolly phonics systematic approach to promote the development of phonological awareness in children. Jolly phonics is in fact a child-centered approach which is a part of Montessori program. Here is Sally's attitude on using Jolly Phonics:

Also in the curriculum as well its part of our lesson so we have language ahhh classes...so in our language classes we bring the jolly phonics and also Montessori....for Montessori it's like those sand paper lesson so the children can trace on it they can feel the letters so from that it help them to identify the sound..they recognize the sound ...can you find me this letter so they can find and then jolly phonics it's a movement as well so Montessori is like they can see the letter. (ID, 1-6-2015)

To point out, there is various numbers of skills that are needed to be taught in Jolly phonics approach. First, children should learn the alphabet letter sounds. Next, they need to learn to use different sensory methods to form the letters in print. Lastly, they should learn how to blend the sounds in order to make new words. They also ought to learn to identify sounds in words. Overall, to enhance phonological awareness and phonology skills in children, both Maria and Sally mostly implemented instruction in a large group particularly, as a whole class or individually though National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000) emphasized phonological awareness instruction is most effective in small groups. As

a matter of fact, Maria and Sally mainly focused on certain limited tasks to simply help children recognize the letters of alphabet, identify their sounds and be able to pronounce them.

***Teachers' Practices to Enhance Alphabet Knowledge in Montessori***

**Preschool:** Alphabet knowledge is defined as the children's ability to identify the forms, names and sounds of the written alphabet letters (Townsend et al., 2010). Various numbers of strategies can be used by teachers to enhance this skill in children. As an illustration, reading out loud was considered as a technique to enhance alphabet knowledge in children and was central to learning in Montessori preschool. Maria very often carved out time within her daily schedule to read story to children. It was actually a routine activity in her class and Maria used to read to children in large group every day before lunch. The story books were some story books named Big books that were focusing on alphabet letters and their sounds. She typically implemented each reading loud activity in the same way. Maria tried to get through the story by asking a few questions on the story. However, she sometimes named the characters of the story the children's names to involve them in the story.

Sally, on the other hand, used big flash cards of letters and various worksheets to teach alphabet letters to the children. As an example, the researcher presents an excerpt of her observation of Sally's classroom while teaching alphabet letters.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of February in 2015 Sally places a mat on the floor and asks one of the children (a boy named 'Ed') to sit on the floor. Then the activity starts:

1. Sally: Finds the card with 's' sound and places it on the mat.
2. Ed: Here.
3. Sally: What is this?

4. Ed: 'sssss'
5. Sally: Yes, like snake 'sssss' asking what is after 's'?
6. Ed: 't'
7. Sally: Very good! Asking Ed to place 't' on the mat beneath the letter 't'.

Ed picks the wrong letter therefore, Sally helps him to place the letter 't' on the mat. Another child, a girl named 'Nile' comes to join but Sally asks her to wait for her turn. And continues the task with Ed;

8. Sally: Now the letter 'a'.
9. Ed: 'a' placing it on the mat under its flash card.
10. Sally: Good job! Asking Ed to place the flash cards of alphabet letters back onto the box and calls another student. (VD, 2-16-2015)

As it was illustrated above, with regard to utilizing alphabet letter flash cards, Sally used the same process every day. She did put a mat on the floor and ask children one by one to sit on the floor. She then did lay a box letters next to the mat and place flash cards on the mat. She used to start the activity by asking the child to find certain alphabet letters and want them to place each letter under its flash card showing the same letter while saying the sound. It can be noticed that Sally performed this task to enhance both phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge in children though as Baecher et al. (2012) say teachers should differentiate instruction in order to meet children's various needs. Moreover, doing early literacy tasks individually can discourage children in learning as Chipman et al. (2005) referred to an issue that young children are sometimes not able to join their classmates and often feel demotivated during group activities.

It was mentioned earlier that Sally also used worksheets to help children develop alphabet knowledge. Sally performed this activity by asking children to say the sound of letter then they were required to circle the picture started with that

certain letter. Yet, this activity was observed only once as Sally used the worksheet shown on the right side (Figure 4.3) in which children needed to trace the letter then color its picture. A few samples of worksheets to enhance alphabet knowledge in children in Montessori preschool is demonstrated in Figure 4.3.



Figure 4.3. Samples of Worksheets for Alphabet Knowledge

In addition, to enhance the development of alphabet knowledge in children it is emphasized in a part of syllabus in Montessori preschool (Figure 4.4) that teachers were required to revise certain alphabet letters every day and both Maria and Sally tried to implement this activity in their classroom.

Week 4 27/07 – 31/07	Revision of alphabets (a – e)	Revision of numbers (1 – 10)	<u>Netherlands</u> Talk about flag, national flower	
	Sorting colours	Shapeland Book- Tear & Paste	Netherlands landmarks	Netherlands costume

Figure 4.4. Teaching Syllabus in Montessori Preschool

### ***Teachers' Practices to Enhance Print Awareness in Montessori Preschool:***

In order to learn to read and write, young children must understand that print conveys meaning and it has various numbers of functions. Like many other preschool teachers, Maria believed it was vital for children to be encountered with print. However, Maria in all literacy activities rarely made explicit connection for the children between the symbols and the printed words. Most of the time she preferred to use the more formal teacher directed time of large group to introduce new words to children.

Reading books was another strategy Maria implemented to help children develop print awareness. Maria in her interview affirmed that comprehension skills are the essential skills which make it easier for children to go to the next level. Reading Big books was a normal practice Maria implemented in her classroom to help children to build book knowledge. She used questioning during story book reading as a strategy to strengthen comprehension skills in children. Though, these questions were limited and basic as students just needed to recall the information on the story. And, the researcher did infrequently observe Maria to use a description for example as a technique to attract children's attention to the specific features of letters or words with their prints. Even though, Phillips et al. (2008) believe that description or feedback can have potentially great effect on children's writing skills as well.

As a matter of fact, the main focus of Maria during shared book reading was merely on reading the story, not on the concepts of prints encouraging children to extend their vocabulary knowledge. Though Lonigan et al. (2008) mentioned that developing vocabulary knowledge provides children with a basis for subsequent literacy learning as oral language is dependent upon vocabulary learning. The

following scene illustrates how using the Big book, Maria drew children's attention to read a story and to the print.

Maria put the Big Book, number 6, on a small board then starts reading story to the children.

1. Maria: (pointing to the book) what number is this book?
2. Children: 6

Maria first describes the pictures shown in the book and introduces people in the story using the students' names on the first page to draw children's attention to the story. Then she talks about the combination of two letters and their sounds for instance, 'sh'/'ow' that represent one sound. She subsequently sings a short poem related to the story and the sounds.

3. Maria: Can we sing the song again?
4. Children: Yes. (VD, 2-5-2015)

Then Maria asks children to put their hands on their laps to sing a song all together. One of the children claps but Maria asks her to be quiet because the baby in the story is sleeping. At the end, Maria revises the sounds and their actions in the book and finishes the story.

Sally used the same procedure to draw children's attention to print during early literacy activities. Mostly, Sally used a few worksheets to promote the development of this literacy skill in children. She normally asked children to trace the lines, color or circle the picture of a certain word in order to get familiar with print and writing. Figure 4.5 shows a few samples of worksheets applied in

Montessori preschool by teachers to promote print awareness development in children.

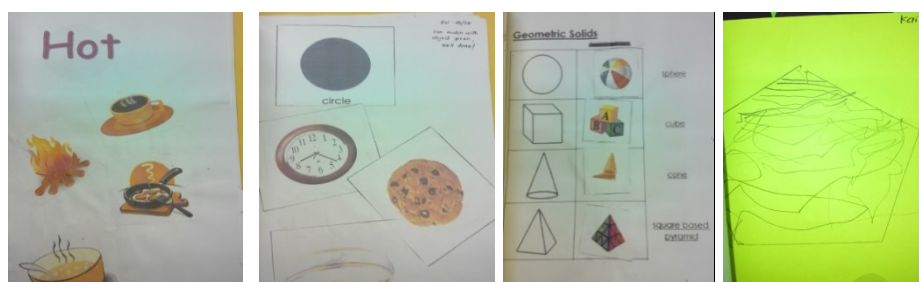


Figure 4.5. Samples of Worksheets to Promote Print Awareness in Montessori Preschool

All things considered, it should be noted that based on the lesson plan in Montessori program shown in Table 4.3 below two early literacy skills particularly, reading and writing needed to be promoted by teachers in children every day from 8:45 to 9:30. These two skills were described as comprised of two literacy activities such as reading and extending thinking and writing and representing. Though, as can be seen it is not specified in detail how teachers can implement these activities in their classroom. For example, it is unclear how teachers can promote the development of print or writing in children. It is also not explained what the term ‘representing’ means and how to apply it in literacy instruction.

Table 4.3

*Lesson Plan in Montessori Preschool*

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:45am-	Reading &	Writing &	Reading &	Writing &	Reading
9:30am	Extending	Representing	Extending	Representing	&
<b>English</b>	Thinking		Thinking		Extending
<b>(Write &amp;</b>					Thinking
<b>Read)</b>					

Along with all these activities Maria and Sally sometimes asked children to trace a few shapes on paper and did keep them as insets (shown in Figure 4.5) to help children develop writing skill. To track children's progress, teachers had portfolios for every single student and work samples of every month. At the end of the year, they put the children's works all together in order to assess the development and progress of children. Figure 4.6 shows a part of portfolio in Montessori preschool.

Language Development															
9	Reading & Handwriting	Two to threes				Three to fours				Four to fives				Aims/objectives	Remarks
		1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter				2 <sup>ND</sup> Quarter				3 <sup>rd</sup> Quarter					
		I	W	P	D	I	W	P	D	I	W	P	D		
		G	G	S		G	G	S		G	G	S			
9.1	Insets of design (preparing for writing)													To make children conscious of letter sounds	
9.2	Familiar with alphabet sounds														
9.3	Blending 3-4 letters words with s a t p I n														
9.4	Tracing with sand paper letters														

Figure 4.6. Portfolio in Montessori Preschool



As it is shown in the above portfolio, in order to promote the development of English language in children teachers needed to focus on two literacy skills particularly, reading and handwriting. Reading and writing are in fact considered as two interrelated early literacy skills in Montessori portfolio. In Montessori program reading and writing are hence divided into four literacy activities. The first activity includes children's making the insets of design in order to be prepared for writing. The second literacy activity is focusing on children's getting familiar with and recognizing alphabet letter sounds. The third one is to help children blend three to four letter words with /s/, /a/, /t/, /p/, /l/, /n/ and the last literacy activity based on the Montessori portfolio is children's tracing with sand paper letters.

Indeed, the objectives and aims of these tasks were to make children conscious of alphabet letter sounds. This can confirm the point that the portfolio in Montessori preschool mainly focused on the recognition of letters and their corresponding sounds which refer to two main components of early literacy skills; alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness. However, the four above mentioned activities were supposed to develop writing and print awareness in children as well and this objective has not been stated in the portfolio as the aim of the Montessori program.

It is therefore, important to realize that writing is a significant skill that should be taught along with reading skill. Writing is a complex cognitive process that consists of various types of knowledge. Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) refer to four major categories of knowledge based on a taxonomy of learning outcomes. The first type of knowledge is *factual knowledge* which is the knowledge of the basic elements. Children are required to know the letters of the alphabet in English. They

actually need to be familiar with terminology and details of English language in order to understand it and solve problems in it.

The second kind of knowledge is *conceptual knowledge*. This knowledge refers to the knowledge of the interconnections among the basic elements in a larger structure which aids them to function together. It is the knowledge of classifications and structures relevant with an area. *Procedural knowledge* on the other hand, as the third type of knowledge is the knowledge of how to do something. Children should be aware of the methods of inquiry, and criteria for using skills, techniques, and methods. Regarding writing, it is requisite for children to know how to form the alphabet letters to make a new word.

Lastly, *metacognitive knowledge* is the knowledge of cognition in general as well as awareness and knowledge of one's own cognition. Children need to learn when and why they can use writing as a form of communication. As a matter of fact, the role of preschool teachers is to make a connection between these four types of knowledge and make them explicit to their children as this helps children to develop understanding of the writing process.

In conclusion, over the eleven months the researcher spent in two classrooms in Montessori preschool, she observed that both Maria and Sally provided children with a few or limited early literacy materials such as insets and tracing worksheets for the purpose of print development. Yet, the researcher did not see neither Maria nor Sally use any explicit strategies at large or small group time to support children's understanding of the act of writing. Even during reading books, it was rarely observed by the researcher that Sally and Maria implement description as a strategy to draw children's attention to the specific features of the individual alphabet letters.

### ***Teachers' Practices to Enhance Oral Language in Montessori Preschool:***

Oral language as another necessary early literacy skill enables children to interact with others. This interaction involves a “process participants use to exchange information and ideas, needs and desires” (Owens, 2012, p.10). Teachers can indeed encourage students to communicate with their peers and adults using language. Not to mention, children are capable of learning to speak and understand language within the first three years. Subsequently, they learn to make connections with the symbolic aspects of language. Experiences with books and print during this time provide children with important background knowledge and assist them learn the aims of reading and writing. Furthermore, it develops learning of the alphabet, concepts about print, and the acquisition of phonemic awareness (Regalado et al., 2001).

One strategy Maria applied in her classroom to enhance oral language development and engage children in conversation was by asking a few questions on what children did on the previous day or on their weekend. And these interactions were limited to only one or two turns, not enough to guide children to have conversation with teacher and one another to exchange information. Yet, the research confirms that instructional support of a classroom concerns the extent to which a teacher efficiently uses questioning and feedback to facilitate learning (see La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002).

Sally on the other hand, was more focused on doing the required task than having conversations with children. The researcher did not observe Sally to talk with children when opportunities were available to her. For instance, during play time Sally had the chance to encourage individual children to talk about their experiences with different materials as she was working with a smaller number of children. She was mostly concerned about how students behave and tried to help them how to play

with materials. As an illustration, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January in 2015 after completing the activity with alphabet letter flash card, Sally asks one of the children named Rose to put the sounds back in the box and get her material to play with. She asks her to get a mat and play on her mat. Rose spills water and does not know what to do therefore Sally asks her to bring a towel and guides her to clean up.

Though, Resnik and Snow (2009) emphasize that “talk is the main way children get to know the world, understand complex events, and encounter different perspectives” (p.3). Maria’s and Sally’s questions and talks during shared book reading or play time did not promote children to go beyond their basic knowledge and they normally prompted only one word responses from the students. In fact, their approach to enhance oral language did not seem to offer meaningful opportunities to children to develop their language skills.

To point out, it is shown in the lesson plan in Montessori preschool (Figure 4.7) that arrival and greetings together with circle time needed to be performed merely on three days of the week that is to say, Monday, Tuesday and Thursday. And English language could be used as the medium of communication during arrival and greetings only on Monday. Regarding circle time, teachers were required to apply various numbers of literacy activities during this period. As an illustration, on Monday teachers were required to apply exploratory and imaginative play to engage children in early literacy tasks. On Tuesday on the other hand, teachers needed to implement literacy activities that encourage children to share ideas and experiences as well as interests with their classmates during play through using language. This would indeed help children to enhance their vocabulary knowledge as well as oral language development. On Thursday as other example, teachers needed to provide children with activities that help them to experiment with language to demonstrate

enhanced vocabulary usage. However, these were all rarely observed in both Maria's and Sally's classrooms.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:00am-8:15am	Arrival & Greetings (in English)	Arrival & Greetings (in Mandarin)	Physical / (Outdoor) Activities	Arrival & Greetings (in Home Language)	Physical / (Outdoor) Activities
8:15am-8:30am English (Oral)	Circle Time (Exploratory & Imaginative Play)	Circle Time (Activities to share ideas, experiences & interests with classmates)		Circle (Experiment with language and demonstrate enhanced vocabulary usage)	

Figure 4.7. Lesson Plan in Montessori Preschool

In sum, as much as Maria and Sally tried to infuse early literacy skills throughout the classroom environment, their main approach to teaching early English literacy was through the more formal practice of whole group instruction using a small repertoire of strategies such as closed questions and praise to facilitate children's learning. On a very few occasions the researcher did observe Maria and Sally pick up on children's language and literacy skills in play with materials during work time or during informal interactions for instance, when children arrived at class or in small group time.

To review the practices of two teachers in Montessori preschool, a typical day in Maria's English class included Arrival in class, Breakfast, Greeting- Circle time (whole class), Morning song and message, Review, Sound object boxes, Big Books, and Free play. Sally's English class on the other hand, involved Arrival in class, Breakfast, Greeting, Sound object boxes, Flash cards, Big Books, and Free play. It

can be indicated that even though both teachers were working in the same preschool particularly, Montessori preschool, were teaching the same age- range children and following the same program, their teaching tasks and activities were slightly different.

**Case study 2.** The patterns and attributes of case study 2 are delineated in detail in the following three segments particularly, research site, participants and themes and subthemes.

**Research Site 2:** The second case was a preschool in the northwest of Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia which implemented an International Preschool Curriculum (IPC) as its early literacy instructional program. Their teaching approach was focused on play, hands-on materials coupled with thematic approach. The IPC curriculum is indeed based on proven and peer reviewed concepts which involve play, inquiry and objective based learning styles. This curriculum encompassed six learning areas such as numeracy, socio-emotional skills, sciences, creative and visual arts, language arts as well as fine motor skills. IPC program generally aims to foster critical thinking, nurture self-awareness, support an understanding of other cultures and encourage internationalism and multilingualism in children.

The principal of this preschool holds a bachelor degree in Accountancy and worked as a teacher for 2 years. She started working in IPC preschool as a principal for a few months. Regarding early English literacy instruction she pointed out in her conversation with the researcher that:

It is important for students to at least identify the sounds...they recognize the sounds of the literacy....at least they understand the conversation..all these basic skills..(ID, 8-23-2015)

In addition, the principal in IPC preschool was in charge of hiring teachers as well. In her interview considering teachers' qualification for employment, she asserted that:

That depends...some are fresh grads...they have some experience....but they do not have any certificate of...early childhood but they do have experience hmmm of handling children so hmmm we have to see what ehheh what is the criteria that we need for.... so let's say we need a toddler teacher. That'll be good if you get experience of a teacher they know how to handle toddlers. If like say it's a fresh graduate, we let them handle a big group of the students because during their study, they have that concept of teaching the bigger group. (ID, 8-23-2015)

Furthermore, she mentioned that all teachers in IPC preschool needed to and did have this freedom to prepare their own lesson plans and they should not necessarily follow the same specific teaching method or approach. She emphasized that it all depends on the children's capability or levels. She also said that what is a main factor in hiring teachers is that each teacher should be able to make a friendly interaction and relationship with students.

now there is a social interaction lacking among children yeah?...using internet, technology and gadgets..most children have access to Ipad, Iphone yeah?...depends on the parents. So, IPC is one of the programs that considers needs of the children. They have...they will do the worksheets together with their friends in a group..interact. When the children have the basic foundation to socialize with their friends, ...they do not have the fear in public setting. This is my opinion...do not do the social skills at very young age and they grow older... a lot of them will face problem...children who lack social skills...(ID, 8-23-2015)

In her opinion teachers can be professionally developed through being provided with teacher-training assessment. Yet, teachers do not need necessarily to follow the same teaching method or approach.

depends on the children capability. If the children cannot do the worksheet, they cannot force them to do. So, it's all based on..on children's level. Yeah (ID, 8-23-2015)

***Participants of the Second Case Study:*** Two teachers in IPC preschool namely, Maya and Carla took part in this case. To maintain confidentiality, participants were requested to choose pseudonyms to protect their identities. One of the essential components of the teaching and learning environment is the teacher who is working in the classroom. Teachers can vary on education, experience and their literacy interests, habits and beliefs. Every single of these factors can indeed have a significant effect on the quality of instruction that children receive in order to be capable of reading and writing. In the subsequent section the researcher tried to describe two teachers in IPC preschool, Carla and Maya while focusing on these factors. Table 4.4 presents the demographics of the participants in this case.

Table 4.4

*Participants' Demographics of the Second Case Study*

<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Educational Level</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>Classroom Purpose</b>
Ms. Carla	BA in ARCH & MA in ECE	2	Alphabet knowledge
Ms. Maya	Diploma in M	8 months	Communication

This section introduces each participant and the pertinent demographic data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and beliefs. As it was stated earlier, the researcher used pseudonyms to describe each teacher's background, perspectives, characteristics and tasks. These factors can



indeed indicate the efficiency and success of the teaching process in the classroom. For example, if teachers were caring and had positive attitude towards teaching children or if children were more motivated and encouraged to be more attentive to the lessons in the classroom as this in fact would motivate the teacher-child relationship to become closer.

Besides, it was vital to avoid teachers' real names in order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. The arrangement of the participants in this segment is chronological and based on the date of the interview.

*"Carla"*, the first teacher in IPC preschool, holds a bachelor degree in architecture but is currently studying Master in Early Childhood Education. She is interested in working with children and decided to get into teaching and early childhood education because of her interest to work with children. She has been a preschool teacher for two years. Regarding early literacy curriculum, she believes that there has not been any significant professional development related to preschool curriculum teaching approach or policy.

Since Carla studied architecture, most of the time she needs to do self- study or ask her friends and colleagues for tips to implement efficient literacy instruction in her classroom. The early literacy components that she mainly focuses in the classroom are the instruction on alphabet letters and teaching simple pronouns. However, above all she hopes that her students behave well and are able to communicate with their peers and adults. To describe a typical day in her classroom, Carla responds as follows;

Depends on the subject if they are learning personal pronoun I will start with that first and then sometimes I'll prepare two to three worksheets they cant finish..arrange worksheet from most important....at least grasp the

concept...time constraint.because in my class there are five children..one hour and a half...normally I'll do one by one. They will do altogether but I'll go one by one to get my attention each time to finish two or three worksheets....I will have to explain to them but if they dont understand it's ok we can do it again to make sure they understand .....dont have to rush anyone. (ID, 8-24-2015)

Correspondingly, Carla stated that early English literacy instruction is thematic-based and focusing more on developing language and identifying or recognizing alphabet letters. In her opinion, the most important part of literacy instruction is that you as a teacher have to start with English language. As a matter of fact, when everyone around speaks English, the students encounter this language at a very young age therefore, they can learn faster. On the implementation of early literacy tasks and activities, Carla said that the priorities of activities or tasks can be different based on the children' mood. However, she mentioned that she did not have her own specific teaching approach and method and usually learned it from her working experience and other teachers. She described her teaching methodology as follows:

I will let them to listen to like phonics song (on Youtube) and watch the video first yeah before I start the classes....{laugh} I don't have my own specific teaching approach but I learn it from my working experience other student teachers...normally they will do it but how do you call it approach eh they will do it like two weeks interaction learning yeah other than that they do it one way... let them anything you wanna ask them....individually. (ID, 8-24-2015)

**“Maya”**, the second teacher, has studied in Modern Montessori International in Subang that is a suburban city in the Klang Valley in Selangor in Malaysia. She has obtained a Montessori Teaching Diploma from London as well. She has been merely working for eight months as a preschool teacher. As a matter of fact, her teaching experience is limited simply to this current preschool particularly, IPC

preschool. In fact, comparing to other participants of the study, Maya had less experience in teaching. She indeed started working as a preschool teacher since there was always a big age gap among her siblings and her. She also believes that it is important for children to have someone to talk and share their stories and experiences with.

I'm the youngest in my family ehh my brother and sister the age gap is very big ... so for me is like to just make sure that the kids always have a company they are never alone... coming school over there or home...I have nephews as well this age three to four ..that's how..I decided to come into teaching straight from high school, got my diploma and came here straight. (ID, 8-25-2015)

Regarding the International Preschool Curriculum, she stated that it was more towards early childhood education and it was not Montessori-based. In her opinion, in IPC program students are free to do what they are willing to in preschool but they are not as free as actual Montessori program. To her, early literacy instruction especially early English literacy instruction should be implemented through repetition. Like Montessori program, more games, alphabet letters flash cards and sand-paper letters (to feel the letters' texture) are also used in IPC preschool in order for children to develop early literacy knowledge. In general, to Maya it is vital for children to recognize the words and be able to communicate and speak in full sentences.

Furthermore, she emphasized that she would not like to force children to learn and does not want them to do mainly worksheets. She asserted that it was more teacher who should change or differentiate the method of teaching based on students' needs or levels. In other words, teachers need to differentiate instruction based on students' levels or moods. Moreover, she thinks that individual teaching and one-on-

one instruction could lead to an effective teaching. She adds that the most important part of early literacy instruction is to start with English since English is an international language and if you do not know it, you would not be able to grow in literacy.

We learned Montessori. It's more like they make you think that each every child is the same like they are going through the same emotion the same. and expanding learning..when you come here it's not. It's very different. One child might want to do well the next might not. One child likes English the next hates English but loves Math. So, it's definitely different because you know you kind of learn that...what you teach and how you teach they might not accept it. You know ...have that today I'm gonna teach simple sentence and expect all the kids to do it. .some might be that sensitive to touch and then ...they don't like it. You can't force the child to do the work..when they start actual kindergarten... primary school they are forced to do work. It's not ok they don't want to do it it's ok....early childhood.it's better....of course you have to teach them but it's the child decides to do the work everyday so if they don't want to do it we don't force them to....(ID, 8-25-2015)

Besides, Maya in the conversation with the researcher mentioned that IPC worksheets are difficult and advanced and children are not able to complete it as a result teachers are required to prepare their own worksheets. Yet, Maya reported that teachers in IPC preschool apply some Montessori materials such as sand-paper letters and alphabet letter flashcards. They also provide children with opportunities to play games and sometimes play Youtube videos to deliver English literacy instruction in the classroom.

Generally, it can be summarized from the discussion above that two teachers in the IPC preschool, Maya and Carla, did attain or were pursuing studying in early childhood education. However, they were not able to implement research-based literacy practices in order to help children develop early English literacy.

***Themes and Subthemes of the Second Case Study:*** According to the analysis of the whole data set such as the participants' interviews, classroom observations,

and reviewing the documented materials preschool teachers utilized in the second case study “IPC preschool” such as syllabus, lesson plan, and worksheets, the researcher identified three major themes regarding practices of the preschool teachers in early English literacy instruction. The themes were: (a) early literacy learning environment; (b) early literacy instructional practices; and (c) social interaction which are delineated in depth in the following segments. Table 4.5 demonstrates the emerged three themes and their subsequent subthemes of the second case namely IPC preschool.

Table 4.5

*Themes and Subthemes of the Second Case Study in IPC Preschool*

<b>Themes and Subthemes</b>		
<b>Early Literacy Learning Environment</b>	<b>Early Literacy Instructional Practices</b>	<b>Social Interaction</b>
Physical environment	Alphabet Knowledge: Worksheets	One on one teaching
Colorful painted walls	Phonological Awareness: Flash cards/ Tracing & coloring	Color pencil sharing
The size of classrooms	Print Awareness: Sand paper letters & worksheets	Playing games
	Oral Language: Story books	Communication

**Early Literacy Learning Environment in IPC Preschool:** The upcoming segment describes the early literacy learning environment at IPC preschool in terms of the use of environmental setting, and print, the display of children’s early literacy

work or materials coupled with the availability of books and other literacy artifacts in the environment. This section also gives details on teachers' delivering literacy instruction and practices together with their implementation of social interaction in the classrooms.

Following the current research theoretical framework, the researcher begins by outlining how the physical environment (Mashburn et al., 2008) was organized to support young children in the development of early literacy and language learning in IPC preschool. She then describes how teachers in IPC preschool implemented social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978) into their literacy instruction and practices within this environment. Lastly, the researcher depicts how teachers implemented practices and activities (Rhode, 2015) to enhance children's phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness and oral language.

***Physical Environment in IPC Preschool:*** According to the analyses of the interviews, classroom observations, and the documented materials such as syllabus, lesson plans and worksheets, both teachers in IPC preschool, Carla and Maya, confirmed that the principal provided effective environment for early literacy instruction.

As a matter of fact, providing supporting learning environments is one of the best practices educators or teachers can implement in the classrooms (Li, 2013). Li (2013) additionally stated that creating positive and less tense teaching styles in designing learning settings is a key in lowering children's anxiety and provides affective support for all students to learn efficiently.

To describe the literacy environment in IPC preschool, as you would enter this preschool, you could see a big reception counter at the front. Normally, the principal or a few teachers would sit there and respond to the parents or other

referees. There was a big hall (called play area where circle time was held in) situated at the back of this counter and there were a number of rooms at the sides. On the left, there was a Lego room, a Music room, a canteen and an Art room. To the end, there was a kitchen and a nursery beside it. On the right side, there was a big Dance room. Then there was a corridor behind the dance room where there were classrooms. And children's bathroom was located at the end of this corridor. Each classroom in IPC preschool was labeled by a country name.

In addition, all the classrooms in this preschool were newly constructed with colorful printed walls. Besides, the classrooms in IPC preschool were all in similar sizes and were located next to each other divided by a partition. Furthermore, the classrooms were painted and colorful provided with a number of shelves, tables, desks and chairs. There was also one small board on top of each class.

On most days circle time began at 9.00 am and marked the beginning of the whole group literacy work with the singing of a song named "Morning". During circle time the children of all classrooms used to be gathered together sitting on the floor in the big hall with their teacher next to them and sing the song. After morning song, they also sang various numbers of other songs all together. Next, children were required to make a line and guided to their classrooms by teachers. As children got into class, teachers gave them some time to play with a few toys. Then teacher asked children to do a few alphabet worksheets including saying the sound of a certain letter and tracing it.

Both teachers in IPC preschool used the similar teaching approach using the identical early literacy materials such as alphabet letter worksheets and story books. However, Carla provided children with some time as well to draw and paint pictures.

Children were also given some time to play with puzzles as a literacy activity in Carla's class. To point out, all the materials for teaching were available in each classroom in IPC preschool therefore teachers did not need to go to a certain area or room to fetch them.

Moreover, both Carla and Maya mentioned in their interviews that the IPC preschool provided a suitable environment for effective teaching which let children be as comfortable as in their house. They believed this would motivate children to learn literacy skills in English and do the tasks more easily. However, during observation it was noticed that when children attended the classroom after the whole group (preschool) circle time, they were given first free time to do free play. Meanwhile, some of children were called by teacher to do a number of alphabet letter worksheets working on letters' identification and subsequently color the picture of a certain letter. They could also sometimes draw pictures on paper. To clarify, the physical layout of IPC preschool is shown in Figure 4.8.



Figure 4.8. IPC Preschool Physical Layout



***Teachers' Instruction to Enhance Social Interaction in IPC Preschool:*** The

main factor that can influence children's later educational and social achievement is the interactions children have with teachers, peers, and tasks in early childhood education (Booren et al., 2012). And in order to promote the development of social skills in children, teachers can provide children with play opportunities and try new activities through play (Ali et al., 2011). Vygotsky (1978) also affirms that play can highly influence a child's literacy development throughout studying at preschool.

Play was basically a part of teachers' literacy practices in IPC preschool. In Maya's class, as an illustration, it was obvious that she utilized play as an early literacy activity. There was actually a specific area in her classroom that provided a space for children to engage in free play. She provided children with various toys like blocks and Legos to play with. In Carla's class there was also a specific area for children to engage in free play. However, it was noticed that neither Carla nor Maya did implement any other types of games such as intentional play or pretend play to promote the development of social skills in children. Carla in her interview regarded social interaction as follows:

actually social interaction is like colour pencil sharing ....the simple thing like children being able to fetch their water bottle..they will help automatically.  
(ID: 8-24-2015)

Maya also believes that:

If they are playing...together with their peers so that's social interaction that they see...they want to be the same...that's how...they laugh and they enjoy themselves. (ID, 8-25-2015)

To both teachers in IPC preschool particularly, Carla and Maya, it was important that their students be able to communicate with others though this talk was limited in practice. Another strategy which was utilized by the teachers in IPC

preschool was teaching students individually or one on one specifically when they were going to teach alphabet letters to children. They in fact did not encourage children to work or play together or in groups except a few occasions like children's color pencil sharing during drawing or painting period.

In addition, shared book reading is another strategy that teachers can implement in order to enhance social interaction in children as Justice, et al., Lovelace & Stewart, Phillips, et al. (as cited in Baker, 2013) affirmed that what really can have a significant effect on the acquisition of early literacy skills are the interactions that happen during shared book reading. Indeed in IPC preschool, children were given this opportunity to choose their favorite books during story time. They could read books alone or sometimes teacher joined one of them. During the time the researcher spent in Carla's and Maya's classrooms, she did rarely observe they read books in large group. Children usually picked a story book to read on their own and sometimes teacher accompanied with them. During one on one reading story, Carla tried to listen to the child and communicate with him over the story. For example, when the child faced a question regarding story or the words' meanings, Carla tried to answer it as much as she could. And through this interaction around text the child was in fact able to share his experiences.

After all, it is not only the environment that determines whether children learn to read and write. What matters along with environment is the practice the teacher implements in this environment and how she delivers instruction in her class. Indeed, small sizes of the classrooms, insufficient literacy teaching and learning materials, and a teacher's lack of knowledge and skill can limit or affect teachers' instruction, practices and the children's performance in the classroom. Verhoeven (as cited in Bingham et al., 2010) also emphasized that the variability in tasks and

activities without repeating the implementation of structured tasks that are not engaging or child centered can enhance instruction.

**Early Literacy Instructional Practices in IPC Preschool:** The forthcoming segments discuss and provide the details on preschool teachers' literacy practices in IPC preschool on the implementation of four key early literacy skills according to the theoretical framework of the present research. These skills consisted of phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness and oral language which are elaborated in depth in the following sections.

***Teachers' Practices to Enhance Phonological Awareness in IPC Preschool:*** Phonological awareness is the capability to detect, manipulate and name the sounds or phonemes in spoken words. "The development of phonological awareness (PA) skills in young children has been at the center of the research literature relating to early literacy for decades" (López, 2012, p.371).

Throughout the time the researcher spent in the classroom in IPC preschool she did not observe Maya and Carla to draw children's attention to the syllables in their names nor word rhymes. Though, phonological awareness also involves the recognition of rhyme, syllables, onset and rime (see López, 2012). Additionally, Manolitsis et al. (2011) mentioned that it is necessary for children to be able to understand that letters in print represent phonemes in spoken words. They indeed need to be able to connect the letters to their connected sounds in order to learn to read and spell the alphabetic writings.

Nevertheless, Carla and Maya in IPC preschool rarely took alphabet knowledge a step further to introduce the children to the sounds associated with each alphabet letter. On most occasions the researcher observed that they were much more

focused on letter identification and recognition. They did not actually get children to play with the different sounds of language using poems, music or songs.

In fact, neither Maya nor Carla in IPC preschool did implement any certain tasks to enhance phonological awareness development in children. Even though, providing various tasks and activities is a key to promote phonological development in children (Schatsneider et al., 1999).

Moreover, activities on phonological awareness need to be focused on the sounds of the language and direct techniques should be used to teach skills such as extensive modeling, immediate feedback and positive reinforcement (Troia, 2004). Troia (2004) referred to rhyming, matching and eliminating as some examples of tasks on phonological awareness that teachers can implement in their classrooms. Preschool teachers can indeed utilize illustrations with prompts to facilitate segmenting, sequencing and blending.

Besides, how teachers deliver instruction in phonological awareness is a key in children's literacy development. In other words, explicit instruction on phonological awareness is needed to enhance this skill in children and according to Goswami (2001), research has documented that phonological awareness does not develop automatically with age. Though, it is documented that in IPC preschool teachers did not teach phonology explicitly and it might be considered as implicit teaching. To put it differently, there were no indications of explicit or systematic phonology, phonemes, or phonics instruction. The use of phonology awareness was incidental as well. Occasionally, teachers in IPC preschool stopped reading to focus on rhyme or implement specific task to work on rhyming. On one occasion, for example, Carla had children sit on their chairs and looked at the whiteboard to teach

them rhyming words. She wrote a number of words such as “mat”, “hat” and “rug”, “bag” and “tag” on the board. Then she asked children to find the words that rhyme.

However, Phillips et al. (2008) recounted that teachers cannot depend on incidental or implicit phonological awareness teaching strategies. To put it another way, teachers are required to preplan what to teach, prepare the literacy materials and implement numerous numbers of literacy tasks in order to promote the development of phonological awareness in children.

***Teachers’ Practices to Enhance Alphabet Knowledge in IPC Preschool:***

Alphabet knowledge has been found to be one of the best indicators of later reading accomplishment (Lonigan, 2006). As a result, alphabet knowledge, as an emergent literacy skill, has been a focus for intervention development, instruction, and policy development (Lonigan et al., 2008). Alphabet knowledge is indeed the children’s ability to understand, identify and say the letters in alphabet. In general, the main focus of early English literacy instruction in both Carla’s and Maya’s classroom was recognizing and identifying the letters of the alphabet. In this regard Maya asserted in her interview that;

For me is the Alphabet because my kids are three to five years old and I want them to be able to recognize the alphabet so that when they move up to senior class that's when they start reading phonics you know...efforts. So they have to know the alphabet especially recognize the alphabet like ok this is “A”...alphabet song is helpful. If we show them the letter they don't know...So that's my thinking. (ID, 8-25-2015)

Maya and Carla both used a number of worksheets focusing on alphabet letters daily to promote alphabet knowledge development in children. They normally prepared their own worksheets as IPC worksheets were quite tough or advanced for children to complete. Maya confirmed this in her interview as follows;

We have worksheets that our teachers... we make ourselves according what we see in the kids. we have provided with IPC worksheets so we are provided with

worksheets but it's not suitable like it's too difficult. It's too advanced. (ID, 8-25-2015)

As a result, they used to implement Montessori worksheets and sand paper letters instead. The delivery of literacy instruction and the normal literacy practice in both Maya's and Carla's classroom was that they preferred to work with children individually and one by one while the rest of children could play with their favorite toys.

Besides, Maya believed that children can develop alphabet knowledge through repetition. Maya affirmed this in her interview with the researcher:

Yeah yeah of course... we have Montessori...sand-paper letters. They feel the texture of writing. You have game, lots of flash cards and when it comes to English its more memory rather than understanding like A B C. The kids cannot understand A B C for them to memorize it. So it's more putting them...at this age ...they will absorb everything,...there is a lot of repeating ...so this is A this is A this is A. So, that would be like this...(ID, 8-25-2015)

To depict, here is an illustration of the normal practice of alphabet instruction and how Maya used to deliver instruction in alphabet knowledge in her class:

1. Maya: Okay, what letter is it Luna?
2. Luna: No response.
3. Maya: It is "A". So, what is it?
4. Luna: A
5. Maya: Say again.
6. Luna: A (VD, 9-14-2015)

Overall, it was observed within ten sessions that teachers in IPC preschool specifically, Carla and Maya, mainly tried to enhance the development of alphabet knowledge in children through the application of worksheets and through repetition.

***Teachers' Practices to Enhance Print Awareness in IPC Preschool:*** Print awareness as another key early literacy skill is the child's ability to understand the connection between oral and written language. In other words, once children cultivate print awareness, they have the capability to distinguish between letters and

words, they are able to hold a book in a right way and write scribbles on paper. Gettinger et al. (2014) asserted that print awareness comprises both an understanding of the function of the written language and the relationship between the spoken and written words.

Aside from using worksheets on alphabet letters, Carla and Maya did not use any one particular curriculum time to explicitly teach writing. They did not engage children in print through different types of writing tasks and activities. Though, teaching strategies such as description and feedback (Phillips et al., 2008) during children's play that can be considered as more elaborative and focused strategies need to be applied by teachers to develop and refine children's knowledge and skills of writing. In one occasion, for instance, within ten- session observations, Carla wrote a few rhyming words on the board to demonstrate the connection between sounds and words.

Carla and Maya in IPC preschool stated in their interview with the researcher that they would promote the development of writing and print in children through the combination of three letter words (shown in Figure 4.9) as well though it was barely observed in their classrooms. One of the reasons yet would be the difficulty of the worksheets as Maya during her interview mentioned:

We have worksheets that our teachers... we make ourselves according what we see in the kids. we have provided with IPC worksheets so we are provided with worksheets but it's not suitable like it's too difficult. It's too advanced. So...teaching them they don't understand. So we make our worksheets depending on the kids' benefits and we have sand-paper letters. Ehhh video...videos...Youtube videos. we play with them some games, flashcards..(ID, 8-25-2015)

### Three Letter Words (-ad, -ag, -am, -an, -ap, -at)

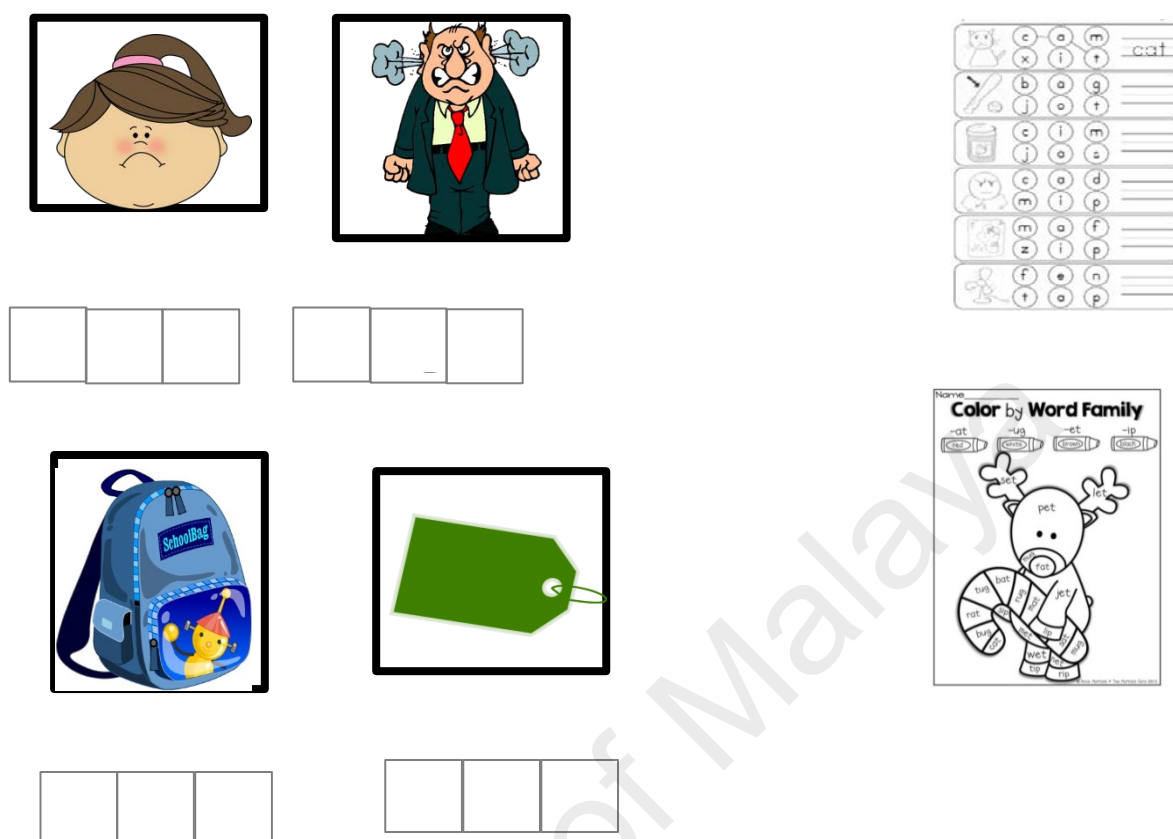


Figure 4.9. Samples of Worksheets to Enhance Print Awareness in IPC Preschool

To conclude, aside from a number of alphabet letter worksheets, Carla and Maya did rarely use other particular early literacy tasks and activities consistently to explicitly teach writing and encourage print awareness in children. In small group, for example, the researcher only observed one instance where writing or print was the focus of the learning experience. On this occasion they encouraged children's letter writing through modeling as they drew children's attention to the certain letters.

***Teachers' Practices to Enhance Oral Language in IPC Preschool:*** Oral language development is the capability of children to use words in order to express their knowledge and feelings. Resnik and Snow (as cited in Peterson, McIntyre & Forsyth, 2016) affirmed that one of the main ways children can know the world, comprehend the difficult events in it and face various attitudes is through the talk. In



fact, the child's first and most significant and regularly used structured medium of communication is oral language. Each child is indeed able to describe and control his experience by means of language. Besides, through using oral language children can locate and define themselves in the world (Cregan cited in Archer, Cregan, McGough, Shiel, 2012)

As a result, teachers can promote the development of oral language in children through talk. Carla and Maya in IPC preschool considered communication vital in early English literacy instruction as Maya for example said in her interview with the researcher that:

Hope my students to able to communicate and to talk full sentences, English is very worldwide. You don't know English you're stuck. ....So it's difficult. We are not able to understand him. He is not able to understand us. Because he doesn't understand yet at school he's very sad...child might say the school makes me sad. Because of that language we are not able to make him happy, cheer him up. So, English is very very important especially for the child at their age. They need to be comfortable... when their parents are not around. (ID: 8-25-2015)

On the contrary, as the data presented so far demonstrates, conversations were limited in IPC preschool. Carla and Maya spoke with children merely around alphabet letter worksheets and one on one story book reading. To point out, talking during these activities could promote children's knowledge of print as well as contribute their oral language development. As an illustration, Morrow et al. (2011) emphasized that encouraging children to repeat basic phrases from books, and practice rhymes or poems can support oral language development. Yet, the researcher discovered little data in which Carla and Maya simply talked with children to engage them in a conversation.

Furthermore, the most talk between teacher and child during early literacy activities in IPC preschool was on completing a number of alphabet letter worksheets

though children are required to learn words in order to be able to communicate. It was confirmed by some researchers such as Neuman and Dwyer (2009) that there seems to be little agreement “on developmentally effective strategies for teaching vocabulary” and principles for teaching vocabulary to young children are greatly needed (p.391).

In summary, the observations of Carla’s and Maya’s practices in classroom revealed that they did put an effort to support young children's literacy learning and language development. Recognizing that words were essential tools for communication, they spent some time each day talking with the children yet mostly on daily routines, on completing letter worksheets or talking during story book reading. And this talk mainly occurred individually particularly, between one child and the teacher, and rarely happened in large group in order to encourage children to share personal life and interact with peers as well as the teacher.

In addition, teachers in IPC preschool merely asked questions through the conversation during story time while providing the child with instruction as well. Even though, as active participants, the students need to learn to listen, to share ideas, and to hear new words. In fact, while teachers in IPC preschool built a curriculum that individualized literacy instruction, they missed opportunities to help children see the letter-sound relationship. Rohde (2015) also refers to another issue that might limit the development of oral language in preschool. She believes that this limitation “may be due to curriculum or instructional decisions made by educators, such as requiring children to raise their hands before speaking or teachers primarily asking yes/no questions of their students” (p.5).

Rather than engaging children in various kinds of experiences to assist them to use talk to express meanings in more depth and expand their vocabulary

knowledge, Carla's and Maya's methodology to instruct oral language did not seem to offer children meaningful opportunities to boost their oral language skills.

To sum up, as much as Carla and Maya tried to infuse early literacy instruction throughout the classroom environment, their main approach to teaching early English literacy was through a small repertoire of strategies such as routine or daily dialogues and questions to facilitate children's learning. On a very few occasions the researcher did observe Carla and Maya pick up on children's language and literacy skills in various activities or play with materials during work time or during informal interactions as children arrived in class or in small group time. Moreover, limited literacy materials or artifacts except a few worksheets and toys were viewed in IPC classrooms.

To summarize the practices of teachers in IPC preschool, a typical day in Carla's English class involved Circle time in large group (all classes), Morning songs, Arrival in class, Worksheets, Story time, and Free play. Maya's English class on the other hand, included Circle time in large group, Morning songs, Arrival in class, Worksheets, and Free play. It can be noticed that even though both teachers worked in the same preschool particularly, IPC preschool, taught the same age- range children and had the same program, their teaching tasks and activities were slightly different.

**Cross-case analysis.** Based on analyzing the all-inclusive data and comparison of themes across the two case studies, the same three themes were detected in order to figure out and comprehend how the preschool teachers applied and delivered early English literacy instruction in their classroom. These three main themes included; (a) early literacy learning environment; (b) early literacy instructional practices; and (c) social interaction. Nevertheless, the subthemes were

different among the two case studies. The themes and subthemes across the two case studies that were detected by the researcher are presented below (see Table 4.6). To describe the table, “A” symbolizes the first case study -two teachers’ literacy instruction in Montessori preschool- and “B” represents the second case study -two teachers’ literacy instruction in IPC preschool- which were identified as different subthemes across two cases. The rest of subthemes were similar between two cases.

Table 4.6

*Themes and Subthemes of Two Case Studies in Montessori and IPC Preschools*

<b>Themes and Subthemes</b>		
<b>Early Literacy Learning Environment</b>	<b>Early Literacy Instructional Practices</b>	<b>Social Interaction</b>
Physical environment	Alphabet Knowledge & Phonological Awareness: Flash cards & worksheets/ Sound object boxes (A)	One on one teaching (B)
House environment (A)	Print Awareness: Tracing, coloring & Sand paper letters, worksheets/ Big Books (A)	Working with puzzles & Big Books (A)
Colorful painted walls (B)	Oral Language: Story books (B)	Color pencil sharing (B)
The location of classrooms A)		Playing games
The size of classrooms		Group teaching (A)
		Communication (B)

**Early Literacy Learning Environment in Montessori and IPC**

**Preschools:** The following part is a cross-case analysis between two case studies of the current study. And it describes and delineates the early literacy learning environment at both Montessori and IPC preschool. It does elaborate the environmental setting and layout, the display and use of early literacy materials in

the environment as well as the availability of other literacy artifacts in the environment. Then it gives details on all four teachers' practices and activities on their implementation of the key early literacy skills such as phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness and oral language together with social interaction in the classrooms.

***Physical Environment in Montessori and IPC Preschools:*** The environment is often recognized as the third teacher in a preschool classroom and in the current study the description of the early literacy environment at Montessori and IPC preschool added another layer of insight into the language and literacy practices of the teachers. Overall, preschool environments should indeed provide teachers with the required space, efficient materials, and sufficient opportunities to boost the development of children's early literacy skill. In fact, for children to be successful in the future settings, the preschool classroom needs to have suitable materials and technology containing items that adhere to the child's visual, tactile, and auditory needs (Stockhall et al., 2012). This can consequently benefit children with low socioeconomic status. Physical environment can actually affect children's social behavior and interaction. In a study by Abbas, Othman and Abdul Rahman (2012), it was confirmed that children's behaviors were influenced by the physical environment of the classrooms, for example, in more spatially-defined spaces more positive behaviors were emerged by children. Abbas et al. (2012) state that there is "much yet to be done on the physical environment of the Malaysian classrooms to be of quality" (p.65).

In addition, it is essential to include a wide variety of literacy materials across different modalities as well as organizing these materials in the ways that invite children to engage with them and to achieve this, materials should be freely available

to the children. Likewise, children should be provided with ample opportunities to purposefully interact with the literacy materials.

Though, what occurs in a preschool environment and setting is more vital than having quality physical elements. Preschool programs need to identify and be aware of the current level of functioning in children by having understanding attentive adults and caregivers to lead their continued development and learning. Not to mention, teachers may perhaps have ample knowledge of early childhood education but not be able to perform appropriate practices that are helpful to and effective in children's early literacy development.

Following the descriptive observation checklist (Appendix G), the participants in both research sites made efforts to construct supportive communities, develop good relationships, provide efficient classroom discipline, and use physical environments efficiently. They helped students to form working principles and generalizations as well. Besides, teachers did not put a student under pressure who is unable to perform at the standard level. And they sometimes had children who had bad day seated as close to their usual teaching position as possible. However, the teachers in the study did not vary the exercises and activities in class in order to meet children's various needs. They did not actually alternate quick and slow paced tasks to maintain maximum interest level in the class. In addition, the use of literacy materials was not highly variable and was indeed limited. Most classrooms did not have many children participating in literacy activities. Yet, according to the study observation checklist teachers did try to arrange the seating in the class to be suitable to the task of the day performed in the class.

Overall, the use of environment in Montessori preschool was organized each day via a schedule of events (Table 4.7) aligned with the activities of Montessori curriculum.

University of Malaya

Table 4.7

*Schedule of Events in Montessori Preschool***Age: 3-6 years old**

	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>
8:00am-8:15am	Arrival & Greetings (in English)	Arrival & Greetings (in Mandarin)	Physical / (Outdoor) Activities	Arrival & Greetings (in Home Language)	Physical / (Outdoor) Activities
8:15am-8:30am <b>English (Oral)</b>	Circle Time (Exploratory & Imaginative Play)	Circle Time (Activities to share ideas, experiences & interests with classmates)		Circle (Experiment with language and demonstrate enhanced vocabulary usage)	
8:30am-8:45am	Music & Movement (Janet Channon)	Music & Instrument	Drama/Role Play	Music & Movement (Janet Channon)	Performance Day of any skills
8:45am-9:30am <b>English (Write &amp; Read)</b>	Reading & Extending Thinking	Writing & Representing	Reading & Extending Thinking	Writing & Representing	Reading & Extending Thinking
9:30am-10:00am	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast
10:00am-11:00am	Montessori Activities (Focus on Practical Life/ Culture)	Montessori Activities (Focus on Sensorial Social Studies)	Montessori Activities (Focus on Practical Life/ Culture)	Montessori Activities (Focus on Sensorial Social Studies)	Arts & Crafts / Kitchen Activities
11:00am-11:20am	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics
11:20am-11:45am	Worksheets Reinforcements	Worksheets Reinforcements	Worksheets Reinforcements	Worksheets Reinforcements	Worksheets Reinforcements
11:45am-12:00pm	Malay Language	Mandarin	Malay Language	Mandarin	Malay Language
12:00pm-12:30pm	Dismissal for Session 1 students / Lunch for other sessions students				
12:30pm-1:30pm	Speech & Drama Class (Optional)	Kidz Gym (Optional)	Robotics Class (Optional)	Mandarin Lighthouse Program (Optional)	Art & Craft Class (Optional)
1:00pm-2:00pm	Free Choice / Bathing Time				
2:00pm-4:00pm	Children Nap Time				
4:00pm-	Afternoon Snack				



4:45pm	
5:00pm	Dismissal for Session 2 students
5:00pm-6:00pm	Free Play
6:00pm-6:30pm	Dismissal for all students

As it is shown in Table 4.7, there was a weekly instructional schedule in Montessori preschool. To describe early English language instruction in this schedule, it is divided into two components particularly, *Oral* and *Read and Write* which were supposed to start at 8:15 and 8:45 respectively. In other words, the total amount of time to be spent on teaching English language according to the schedule in Montessori program was about an hour every day. On the contrary, it was observed by the researcher within ten sessions that these skills were both started at 10 a.m. in practice and took approximately 45 minutes to an hour which would subsequently disorder the instruction's timetable arrangement.

Based on Montessori teaching schedule (Table 4.7), the activities which were supposed to be performed by teachers to enhance oral language skills included imaginative or exploratory play, sharing ideas, experiences and interests with classmates and experiment with language as well as demonstrating enhanced vocabulary usage. However, it is mentioned before that children were merely given time to engage in free play in both Maria's and Sally's classrooms. And children were permitted to choose their favorite material to play with. Imaginative or exploratory play was not observed throughout ten session observations by the researcher.

On the other hand, based on the schedule the activities which were supposed to be implemented by teachers to enhance writing and reading skills in children

involved extended thinking and representing respectively. Maria and Sally in fact did try to engage children in story book reading through asking a number of questions but the answers were limited to a few yes or no replies or a few short answers that wouldn't encourage extended thinking in children. In addition, certain activities to encourage the development of print awareness were rarely seen in either Maria's or Sally's class except having children tracing a number of shapes or making insets.

The use of environment in IPC preschool on the other hand, was organized each day via a schedule of events (see Table 4.8) aligned with the activities of International Preschool Curriculum and teaching approach.

Table 4.8

*Schedule of Events in IPC Preschool*

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
	Language/Practical Life	Maths/Numbers	Class Theme: Countries around the World		Activity
<b>Week 1</b>	<b>Welcome Back!</b> <b>Free play, sing songs, art/crafts</b>	Revision of numbers (1-5)	Introduction of World Map & Passport Making		<b>Music/ Show &amp; Tell</b>
<b>06/07-10/07</b>					
		Shapeland Book-Tear & Paste	World map pasting	Transferring objects using spoon	
			<b><u>Malaysia</u></b>		
<b>Week 2</b>	Recognition of Alphabets (a-e)	Revision of numbers (6-10)	Talk about flag, food, costume, landmarks	Talk about Hari Raya celebration	<b>Public Holiday</b>
<b>13/07-17/07</b>				- Food Tasting	<b>Hari Raya Aidilfitri</b>
	Dry pouring/wet pouring	Shapeland Book-Tear & Paste	Malaysian food	- Art & Craft	
<b>Week 3</b>			<b><u>Australia</u></b>		<b>Art &amp; Craft</b>
	<b>Raya Break</b>		Talk about flag, country, music		

20/07–			Australia landmarks	Australia animals
24/07				
Week 4	Revision of alphabets (a – e)	Revision of numbers (1 – 10)	<u>Netherlands</u>	
			Talk about flag, national flower	Cooking/
27/07–				
31/07				Baking
	Sorting colours	Shapeland Book-Tear & Paste	Netherlands landmarks	Netherlands costume
Week 5	Friendship Day! 2nd of August	Recognition of numbers (11 – 13)	<u>Pakistan</u>	
			Talk about flag, People, Culture	
03/08–				
07/08				Science
	Transferring sand using hand	Shapeland Book-Tear & Paste	Pakistan landmarks	Pakistani food

Similar to Montessori preschool, there was a weekly instructional schedule in IPC preschool. As it is illustrated above in the schedule, unlike Montessori program the time of instruction of various skills in IPC preschool is not specified. Based on the IPC schedule, the activities to instruct English language included revision of alphabet letters, sorting colors, reading a specific book named Shapeland Book and introducing different countries and talking about their flag, food, costumes and landmarks. However, most of these tasks were not viewed by the researcher in neither Carla's nor Maya's classrooms within ten-session observations except having

children completing several worksheets focusing on alphabet letters. It was stated previously in detail that children were merely given this opportunity to choose a short story book to read individually or on their own. Yet, it was not observed that teachers read certain books in large groups. As a matter of fact, the literacy activities performed by teachers in IPC preschool was quite limited though, Tarakçioğlu & Tunçarslan (2014) emphasize “using different teaching instruments and activities in English language teaching to very young learners is very important in foreign language learning and teaching process” (p.69).

Regarding the physical space, all of the classes in Montessori and IPC preschools had child-friendly furniture. The desks, chairs, and shelves were all at the children’s level. All participants had child-sized chairs and tables as well as small shelves contained with books and literacy materials to play with. Also, in these two preschools’ classrooms everything was at children’s level. Children were able to have access to them easily and they could pull any materials they wanted to get off the shelves. A study by Abbas and Othman (2010) indicated that a better well-defined physical or environmental space did result in more appropriate social behaviors in children.

By the same token, class size can surpass the difficulties teachers might have in their classrooms that can affect teaching and learning. The physical size of the classroom was one obstacle or hurdle that reflected upon teachers’ practices in both preschools. As a matter of fact, most classrooms were quite small therefore teachers were not able to alter the organization of classroom.

Besides, both Montessori and IPC preschools were print-poor environments. They included simply a few English letters, a number of materials in the form of

hand-drawn papers and a limited number of pictures drawn by children. Though, unlike Montessori preschool the literacy instructional materials –even limited- were provided in each of the classrooms in IPC preschool therefore, teachers did not need to walk around or to a certain area to fetch them. It was stated previously that most literacy materials in Montessori preschool were available in Maria’s classroom and all teachers needed to collect their required materials daily from there. There was also a small library in the corner of canteen in Montessori preschool which was used by children when they finished their breakfast. This is so that they could just look at the pictures. This leads to another concern that is a lack of sufficient reading materials for immersion in a variety of print. Similarly, Abbas and Othman (2010) reported in their study “that the majority of existing preschool classrooms in Malaysia in both urban and non-urban locations could be of average quality” (p.940). Surprisingly, nearly most of the teachers in the interview reported that there was an effective early English literacy environment at their preschools.

***Teachers’ Instruction to Enhance Social Interaction in Montessori and IPC Preschools:*** “Interactions are the daily back-and-forth exchanges that teachers and children have with one another throughout each day, including those that are social and instructional in nature” (Hamre et al., 2012, p.89). According to Hamre et al. (2012), teacher-child interactions are essential to promoting young children’s development. The types of materials children have access to and how everyday routines are managed can influence the interaction between teacher and children (Mofrad, 2012).

The participants of the current research had a general sense of what early English literacy teachers are responsible for. They expressed awareness that learning to communicate through oral language was a key for children to be successful in

their academic and real life or social settings. Indeed, a fundamental tenet of Vygotsky's (1978) theory is that higher cognitive processes such as narrative ability emerge in social interaction through meaningful communication. However, teachers' having the general sense of awareness of what they would do in their classroom as a preschool teacher in the current study was not sufficient to help children master the required social skills.

To describe teachers' practices on implementation of social interaction in the current study, the researcher observed classrooms based on focused observation checklist (Appendix H). During early literacy instruction the activities performed by teachers in IPC and Montessori classrooms generally transferred children's focus away from self and outward toward an activity. Teachers were not much concerned with error correction and tried to focus on content. And Carla among other teachers would try to minimize her role to conduct the activities. Yet, the activities were not planned to assure a high success rate, or to make the tasks challenging for children. Basically they were not organized as to be suitable for real interaction among the students with their teacher despite the fact that children can interact with their teachers mostly during whole-group, teacher-structured time (Pianta, Howes, Burchinal, Bryant, Clifford & Barbarin cited in Booren, Downer & Vitiello, 2012). In fact, the activities performed in Montessori and IPC preschool did not maximize children's involvement or encourage impulsiveness or experimentation in them.

Moreover, teachers in Montessori preschool basically guided students to demonstrate understanding and somehow personal connection during favorite part of a story (during story time) by remarking on and/or relating to personal experiences, responding to questions about story and asking questions about story. However, they did not promote the students to retell a part of the story by performing a task, for

example arranging picture cards, acting out, and retelling in own words or in an order. Besides, the questions asked during shared book reading were limited in scope as mostly focused on the story and required limited answers by the children. Even though, teachers need to support children's engagement and participation in repeated interactive book reading as they model thought-provoking language, communication, and fluency. Gentry (2010) also confirms that adults can boost language development in children through asking challenging questions and nurturing more dialogues and communications, as they encourage critical thinking and problem solving in children.

Furthermore, interview data indicated that teachers at both research sites particularly, Montessori and IPC preschools supported teacher-child interaction. Yet, observation data and documented materials showed that teachers inconsistently demonstrated interaction with students.

To sum up, the four preschool teachers in Montessori and IPC preschools applied limited materials during early English literacy instruction, and Marzano, Marzano & Pickering (as cited in Capel, 2012) agree that "when teachers lack the resources to effectively manage the social and emotional challenges within the particular context of their school and classroom, children show lower levels of on-task behavior and performance" (p.676). Table 4.9 illustrates a part of focused observation checklist (Appendix H) which demonstrates Montessori and IPC preschool teachers' practices on implementing social interaction in their classrooms.



Table 4.9

*Four Teachers' Instruction to Enhance Social Interaction*

	Maria	Sally	Carla	Maya
<b>Social Interaction</b>				
Teacher minimizes her role in <i>conducting</i> the activities.			×	
She organizes the activities so they are suitable for <i>real</i> interaction among the students.				
The activities maximize student involvement.				
The activities promote spontaneity or experimentation on the part of the learner.				
The activities generally transfer attention away from "self" and outward toward a task".	×	×	×	×
The activities are organized to insure a high success rate, leaving enough room for error to make the activity challenging.				
She is not overly concerned with error correction. She concentrates on what the students are saying (content).	×	×	×	×

**Early Literacy Instructional Practices in Montessori and IPC Preschools:**

Preschool teachers in Montessori and IPC preschools as the participants of the current study had a general sense of what early literacy teachers are responsible for. Most of them also expressed that learning to communicate and interact is a key for children to be successful in their both academic and real-life endeavors. Though, their responses during interview and their practices in the classrooms conveyed a vague awareness that early literacy teachers perform a significant task for children to learn ideally.

Additionally, having a general sense of awareness and knowledge of what they would do as early literacy teachers in their classrooms were insufficient as they seemed unprepared to enhance children's certain skills such as social interaction, print awareness and oral language.

To provide the more in-depth look at these four preschool teachers' instruction and practices, the researcher examined the interview data, classroom

observation data and documented materials related to the key early literacy practices supported by the research. Using these early literacy practices the researcher presents both descriptive and focused portrait of the early literacy curriculum and activities these teachers enacted in the following areas: a) facilitating phonological awareness, b) promoting alphabet knowledge, c) encouraging print awareness, and d) enhancing oral language.

***Teachers' Practices to Facilitate Phonological Awareness in Montessori and IPC Preschools:*** Aiding children learn that spoken language is made up of different sounds provides the foundation on which to construct the more complex connection between spoken and written words (Ehri & Roberts, 2006). Several research found phonemic awareness instruction, followed by sound-letter correspondence instruction, created positive outcomes on reading achievement in students learning English as a second language (see Swenson et al 2005; Vaughn & Mathes, 2006; Mathes, Pollard- Durodola, Cardenas- Hagan, Linan- Thompson & Vaughn, 2007).

Preschool teachers in both Montessori and IPC preschools provided early literacy instruction somehow by emphasizing on phonological awareness skills such as sound recognition. For example, Maria in Montessori preschool tried to facilitate the development of children's understanding of the different sounds of spoken language in two distinct ways. These included emphasizing on the syllabus of students' names and identifying alphabet letters and naming their sounds.

Additionally, one of the most frequent ways Maria did teach students about the different sounds of spoken language was through sound object boxes of alphabet letters. Through this daily routine Maria indeed raised children's awareness of sounds and their actions.

Similarly, Sally used this procedure to teach phonics through utilizing alphabet letters sound object boxes. Though, the most common literacy practice in Sally's class was using big flash cards of alphabet letters. To delineate this normal practice that Sally implemented in her classroom, she used to ask her students one by one to sit on the floor with a small mat in front of them. Then children were required to put sounds under its certain letters on flash cards. There was a box of letters located beside the mat by teacher which children could choose from. Sally's teaching approach was more teacher-centered. To her teachers are regarded as a role model, and she emphasized that teachers are the best way to guide children through early literacy activities.

On the other hand, Carla and Maya in IPC preschool mainly focused on students' recognition of alphabet letters and their sounds using a number of worksheets. They also assured that children recognize the basic sounds of certain letters and demonstrate awareness that different words begin with the same sounds. However, they did not implement any specific poems, music or word play at least within ten session observations to help children develop learning. In one occasion, as an illustration, it was observed by the researcher that Carla wrote a few words starting with the same sounds on the board and asked children to merely pronounce and repeat the words. Though, she could engage children in the activity and promote phonology awareness in children by helping them repeat the rhyming patterns in music or poems.

A few samples of worksheets that the four teachers in Montessori and IPC preschools implemented to teach phonology are illustrated in Figure 4.10:

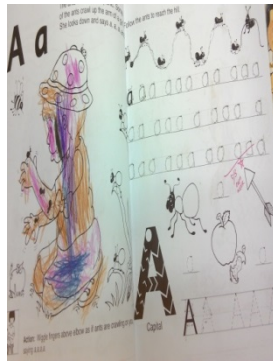


Figure 4.10. Samples of Worksheets for Phonological Awareness

In conclusion, in contrast to the structured practices of syllables and rhymes observed over nearly eleven months rarely did the researcher see teachers draw children's attention to sounds during work time when children were involved in play at Montessori and IPC preschools. Based on observation checklist, teachers did not assure that students follow and repeat rhythmic patterns in poems, music and stories. Furthermore, teachers rarely did draw children's attention to word rhymes. Even when reading books included rhyming words, they were not explicit with the children about the similarities of the ending sounds of words. Klancar (as cited in Tarakçioğlu & Tunçarslan, 2014) suggested that “mixed activities, chants, poems, songs and rhymes can help students to develop their speaking abilities while also making their pronunciation better; at the same time, their awareness of the language can improve easily” (p.69).

Besides, teachers in the current study did not assure that children participate in word play such as finger plays to promote the development of phonological awareness in children. Though, most teachers tried to help children recognize basic sounds of specific alphabet letters.

Table 4.10 demonstrates four teachers' practices on phonological awareness in Montessori and IPC preschool based on focused observation checklist (Appendix H).

Table 4.10

*Four Teachers' Practices on Phonological Awareness*

	Maria	Sally	Carla	Maya
<b>Phonological Awareness</b>				
Teacher assures that students:				
1. participate in word play such as finger plays				
2. follow rhythmic patterns in poems, music and stories				
3. recognize basic sounds of some letters (indicate number or specific letters)	×	×	×	×
4. repeat rhythmic patterns in poems, music and stories				
5. demonstrate awareness that different words begin with the same sound	×		×	
6. identify initial letter sounds of at least 20 letters				

***Teachers' Practices to Promote Alphabet Knowledge in Montessori and IPC Preschools:*** It is crucial for teachers to help children to develop alphabet knowledge in their early years since “alphabet knowledge (AK) is consistently recognized as the strongest, most durable predictor of later achievement in literacy including decoding, comprehension, and spelling” National Early Literacy Panel (as cited in Jones, Clark & Reutzel, 2013, p.81).

One of the main focuses of instructional practices that four preschool teachers implemented at Montessori and IPC preschools to improve the early literacy skills in children was encouraging students to identify and name the letters of the alphabet.

However, at both research sites teachers just used a few worksheets for children to trace and color the alphabet letters and their represented picture as mentioned previously. Based on the study observation checklist, teachers attempted

to encourage students to recognize the first letter in their own names and a few other names or identify letters in other words as well but they did not teach them explicitly to know that printed letters are different from pictures and other representations.

In fact, one of the ways in which teachers overtly demonstrated for students' knowledge of the alphabet letters was through structured worksheets designed to help children recognize letters. For example, Carla and Maya in IPC preschool usually gave children a few worksheets to trace a specific letter such as "A", name it then color its represented picture.

Most of the time teachers in Montessori preschool preferred to use the more formal teacher-directed time of large group to introduce alphabet letters and words as stated in the previous part. On the other hand, teachers' pedagogy specifically, in IPC preschool emphasized learning the alphabet letters through repetition.

To four preschool teachers especially in IPC preschool, alphabet knowledge was the main component of early English literacy instruction. Table 4.11 demonstrates four preschool teachers' practices (Carla, Maria, Sally & Maya) on promoting alphabet knowledge in Montessori and IPC preschools based on focused observation checklist (Appendix H).

Table 4.11

*Four Teachers' Practices on Alphabet Knowledge*

	Maria	Sally	Carla	Maya
<b>Alphabet Knowledge</b>				
Teacher encourages students to:	×	×	×	×
1. explore alphabet materials				
2. know that printed/tactual letters are different from pictures and other representations				
3. recognize first letter in own name	×	×		
4. identify specific letters in own name, other important names or high frequency words				
Teacher helps students to:	×	×	×	×
1. recognize other letters in other words				
2. identify name of many letters (indicate number of letters)	×	×	×	×

*Teachers' Practices to Encourage Print Awareness in Montessori and IPC*

**Preschools:** One of the most important early English literacy skills for children is to understand that print and written language conveys meaning. They need to develop print awareness as this skill and knowledge can have significant effect on reading achievement. Indeed, young children at early ages need teachers to provide them with opportunities to help them learn how print works (Epstein, 2007). Imitating, tracing or copying alphabet letters was seen in the four teachers' classrooms in Montessori and IPC preschools however, conventional print or functional spelling was not very common practice.

Through regular reading of stories to the children, the reading of the daily morning message, tracing sounds on the worksheets and using big flash cards, Maria and Sally in Montessori preschool ensured that children encountered print. However, in all these early literacy events, both Maria and Sally rarely made explicit connections for the children between the symbols and the printed words.

As a matter of fact, the researcher within ten session observation did not see the four teachers use any explicit strategies at large or small group time to support children's understanding of the act of writing. Their main goal was for children to just be basically able to trace or copy alphabet letters in a few worksheets. Moreover, the researcher rarely observed teachers encouraging children to experiment with writing using invented spelling since "as children begin to gain proficiency with letter sound correspondences, they purposefully choose letters to represent sounds and create words using both invented spelling and some conventional spelling"(Watanabe & Hall-Kenyon, 2011, p.273). Not to mention, teaching children to write the letters of the alphabet and other activities connected with letter knowledge, print awareness, and phonological awareness skills can be considered as emergent writing activities (Masseti, 2009).

Overall, through regular reading of stories, big flash cards and sound object boxes of alphabet letters, teachers in the study ensured that the children encountered print. However, they rarely made explicit connections for the children between the symbols and the printed words. As a matter of fact, teachers tried to encourage the students to demonstrate the awareness of print by pointing and vocalizations but did not help them to connect the print to speech or spoken language as teachers are essential in helping young children make the abstract connection between spoken words and printed language (Epstein, 2007). Moreover, teachers in the study did not try to guide children to understand basic concept of printed word for example, by linking picture or object with printed word or encourage them to distinguish words in print in isolation or in context.

To enhance children's knowledge of print, teachers in IPC and Montessori preschool could integrate invented and conventional spelling into their practices to



help children encounter print that can lead to reading development as well. And Frith (as cited in Ouellette & Sénéchal, 2008) agreed “that early spelling attempts provide children with insight into the role of the alphabet in representing sounds in words, and this knowledge is later transferred to word reading” (p.901). The findings of the study by Ouellette & Sénéchal (2008) indicated that invented spelling can have a crucial effect on the acquisition of early literacy skills. The following table, (Table 4.12), illustrates teachers’ practices on print awareness in Montessori and IPC preschools based on focused observation checklist (Appendix H).

Table 4.12

*Four Teachers’ Practices on Print Awareness*

	Maria	Sally	Carla	Maya
<b>Print Awareness</b>				
Teacher encourages the students to demonstrate awareness of print by attending, eye gaze, pointing, vocalizations or talking.	×	×	×	×
She helps students to connect print to speech/language.				
She guides them to understand basic concept of printed word (e.g., by connecting picture or object with printed word).				
She encourages them to recognize words in print in isolation or in context.				

***Teachers’ Practices to Enhance Oral Language in Montessori and IPC***

**Preschools:** The foundation of early literacy is made through classroom talk (Louie & Sierschynski, 2015). Through talk children are able to express their thoughts and share their experiences with teacher and peers. Interview data in the present study indicated that preschool teachers in both Montessori and IPC preschools were willing to provide opportunities for students such as asking open ended questions to encourage children to talk about or share experiences. They believed this would support the development of oral language and communication skills in children. On the contrary, the classroom observation data indicated that preschool teachers in IPC

and Montessori preschool rarely used open ended questions to help students develop oral language skills. For instance, some preschool teachers like Maria and Carla asked open ended questions during shared book reading, but the questions were mainly related to that certain story or text. They did not in fact ask probing questions to elicit more detailed answers from children.

Furthermore, for Maria, reading a story to the whole class was a regular occurrence, a literacy event the researcher observed on eight days of the ten observed sessions. According to Saracho and Spodek (as cited in Zhang, 2015), storybook reading has a positive effect on emergent literacy. In fact, conversations that occur during book reading activity can facilitate the development of oral language in children. However, not only the talk between children and Maria and peers was limited during book reading but also Maria did not encourage reading story books at small groups as she used Big books for story time as a whole class in a large group. As a matter of fact, Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, and Meisinger (as cited in Dougherty Stahl, 2012) imply that children should be exposed to a number of various texts and high volumes of words in meaningful contexts in order to cultivate fluent, spontaneous reading. And Dougherty Stahl (2012) believes that “Big books are unable to serve this function” (p.48).

On the other hand, the story books for reading time were chosen by children in IPC preschool. Teacher provided children with this opportunity to choose their favorite story book in turn and read individually. Carla for instance, sometimes offered the students some time to choose a story book. Then they looked at the book's pictures and tried to communicate with the teacher.

In contrast, teachers in Montessori preschool utilized Big books which were specifically focused on letters and sounds and not themes. To follow the focused observation checklist (Appendix H), throughout the observations of stories read aloud, teachers did not change their voice to match characters, or use body language to help children understand the characters. As these strategies can make story time fun so that children eagerly integrate with the group every day (Zambo & Hansen, 2007). Teachers in the study just used high and low pitch tone and children's names on the story characters to capture children's interest.

In fact, the researcher did not observe children retell the stories or discuss their favorite characters during story time. Moreover, story time was not a daily routine activity in most classes except Maria's class. In other words, story time was eliminated from the schedule when the daily routine needed to be altered. Teachers were less likely to engage children in conversations about stories that might enrich their vocabulary despite the fact that talk between preschool teachers and their students about storybooks associates with children's vocabulary and story-comprehension skills (Dickinson, 2001; Dickinson and Porche, 2011; Gerde and Powell, 2009; Wasik and Bond, 2001; Wasik, Bond & Hindman. 2006).

Besides, it is noticed that two teachers -Maya and Carla- in IPC preschool preferred to work with children one-on-one or individually. In contrast, the other two teachers -Sally and Maria- in Montessori preschool have limited time to do that therefore, they mostly worked and delivered literacy instruction in large groups. As much as Maria and Sally in Montessori preschool tried to infuse early literacy throughout the classroom environment, their main approach to teaching literacy as it was mentioned above was through the more formal practice of whole group instruction using a small repertoire of strategies such as closed questions, sound

object boxes and praise to facilitate children's learning. However, Fisher, Frey and Rothenberg (as cited in Louie et al., 2015) state that “in order to achieve academic literacy, ELs must spend substantial time in academic talk in content areas and time in meaningful conversation, not just responding to a teacher’s questions” (p.104).

On a very few occasions did the researcher observe the teachers of the present study pick up on children's language and literacy skills in play with materials during work time or during informal interactions as children arrived at preschool or class or in small group time. Though Vygotsky (1978) mentioned that children’s stages of speech cultivated throughout the early childhood years as primitive, oral, and inner speech, these diverse stages of speech were not represented in the social interactions during play in neither IPC nor Montessori preschool. Not to mention, emergent writing is not possible without oral language and without the child’s being able to think inside of his or her own head.

While national standards in general and the Montessori and IPC curricula and program in particular, emphasize a deeper, richer approach to teaching in which teachers make early literacy meaningful using a variety of strategies to involve children in purposeful activities, their emphasis on the acquisition of isolated skills and knowledge restricted the kinds of early literacy opportunities which were provided to the children. Moreover, teachers mainly focused on teaching early literacy clearly in structured large group events which can be inferred that they often missed moments to build on children's early literacy learning using interactions with them.

It is evident that early language and literacy practices cannot be viewed in isolation, but must be considered within the contexts of teacher beliefs about social

emotional development, the nature of teaching and learning, coupled with their own experiences in various cultural communities.

Besides, the Montessori and IPC curriculum and teaching philosophy both place strong emphasis on the development of social skills and oral language and some teachers in the current study tried to communicate and speak with children around early literacy activities. While parts of the schedule may have constrained their practice, they used particular time periods somehow (during story time) to get children to talk. However, this talk was very limited and it merely on daily routines or asking and answering a few questions. This might be due to teachers' being unclear on how to deliver certain literacy tasks as National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2007) refer to a number of evidence that some teachers may have struggled to implement oral language in their classroom as the underlying framework was not clear to them.

In conclusion, teachers in the study tried to promote students to attend during literacy activities using eye gaze structures or communication. They also helped children to attend to by pointing or looking at the pictures or texts. However, they did not encourage children to connect the story to their life or retelling it through various activities in order to promote oral language development in them. These four preschool teachers' actual practices on oral language in IPC and Montessori preschools were observed by the researcher based on focused observation checklist (Appendix H) which are demonstrated as follows in Table 4.13:

Table 4.13

*Four Teachers' Practices on Oral Language*

	Maria	Sally	Carla	Maya
<b>Oral Language</b>				
Teacher promotes the students to attend during literacy activities using eye gaze gestures, voice, and personal communication device.	×	×	×	×
She helps the students to attend to (by reaching, pointing or looking) pictures, symbols and text.	×	×	×	×
She guides students to demonstrate understanding or personal connection during favorite part of story by commenting on and/or relating to personal experiences, responding to questions about story and asking questions about story.	×	×	×	×
She promotes the students to retell a part of the story with an activity (e.g., arrange picture cards, act out, retell in own words) or in a sequence.				

Most researchers would agree that including a wide variety of early literacy materials across different modalities is essential children's literacy development. It is also vital that teachers arrange these early literacy materials in ways that encourage children to engage with them and are readily accessible to the children. Teachers indeed need to prepare literacy materials based on children's needs (Stockhall et al., 2012). Likewise, teachers should provide children with ample opportunities to purposefully interact with the early literacy materials. And this can be supported through teacher questioning and effective facilitation.

In the present research the outcomes for the use of literacy materials to enhance phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness, oral language and encourage or promote social interaction in children were not highly variable. It seemed there was dearth of or limited literacy materials in both Montessori and IPC preschools which would be a barrier for early literacy instruction. As a matter of fact, lack of resources and materials can lead to lower levels of on-task behavior and performance in children (Marzano et al., 2012). The

teaching and instructional materials or activities utilized and viewed by the researcher in both Montessori and IPC preschools within ten session observations included merely sound object boxes, alphabet letter worksheets or flash cards, and a few insets. And most classrooms did not have many children participating in early literacy tasks. As an illustration, the majority of classrooms had no children spending time in the classroom library or writing center, listening to stories in the audio center, or playing various kinds of games (except free play) or activities that include printed words or attending to sounds.

In addition, another main features of the teaching environment that might act as an obstacle to learning to read and write was the availability and use of time in class, whether in a single day or how that added up over the course of a year. In both preschools in the present study, much of the time was spent in non-learning tasks and activities even when teachers were in the classrooms. For instance, in Sally's, Carla's and Maya's class children were mostly engaged in free play (with their materials). This can be due to the fact that "managing play-based activities is one of the most challenging tasks that teachers in Malaysia have to face" (Puteh & Ali, 2013, p. 85). Puteh and Ali (2013) state that teachers normally "do not possess skills in planning and organizing activities and in using materials and resources effectively during play activities" (p.85). Besides, in some classes (for example, in Sally's class), children often arrived late in the class therefore, teachers needed to work with that child alone while other children were playing with their materials. Another main factor that affected early literacy instruction was that some children kept going to bathroom during the delivery of instruction which would consequently make teachers uncomfortable to manage the class and time. For instance, Sally in Montessori

preschool mostly had difficulty with classroom management as children were moving around and were going out to wash hands or use the bathroom.

Furthermore, providing an effective lesson structure or syllabus is vital in children's early literacy development. In lesson plans in both Montessori and IPC preschools reading story was a normal early literacy practice. During observations by the researcher teachers often used to ask questions on the story to draw children's attention, though on occasions the researcher observed teachers did encourage children retelling the story using activities such as arranging word cards or acting out.

On the contrary, in IPC lesson plan the main component of literacy teaching was alphabet letter recognition, revision or sorting numbers. Though, communication through oral language is a key principle of IPC program. And to promote the development of oral language, knowledge of vocabulary is a basic component yet was not emphasized on their lesson plan. Neuman and Dwyer (2009) determined that "pedagogical principles for teaching vocabulary to young children are sorely needed. There appears little consensus on developmentally effective strategies for teaching vocabulary" (p.391).

Moreover, it was observed that teachers in the present study moved on to the next lesson or asked children play with their favorite materials without making any conclusion on the story. Or they ended the lesson of the day without resuming the whole class instruction such as reviewing the target words, letters or sounds of the day. Nevertheless, young children who fall behind in developing vocabulary knowledge are at a high risk for undergoing major complications in reading and



learning and in the long run are detected as having a language or reading disability (Coyne, McCoach & Kapp, 2007).

It was also observed by the researcher that the content of the stories and the vocabulary words were rarely discussed or linked to the activities the teachers applied in the classroom. Any other story or vocabulary words could have instead been put in into the basic lesson structure and would have fit just as well into the read and repeat routine. However, beside lesson plan the practices of the teachers would reflect the teachers' own decisions. It was noticeable during observations that teachers picked up some elements of lesson plan to follow based on the classroom condition. This point by Tang et al. (2011) can be confirmed that even though the basis of early childhood education is the National Preschool Curriculum and all preschools are required to follow, teachers in each preschool are trained by their own certain early childhood curriculum or programs. Therefore, they might define quality teaching differently and implement literacy activities using various instructional approaches.

## **Summary**

This chapter has focused on early literacy practices of four in-service non-native preschool teachers in IPC and Montessori program who were required to use early literacy standards and policy to guide their instruction. Four participants from two different sites and preschools with various (8 months to 6 years) experiences took part in this research. The purpose of this research was to investigate and understand what early English literacy practices were provided by preschool teachers in the classroom and how theses preschool teachers implemented social interaction into their teaching practices.

The interview data transcripts, videotaped observations and field notes as well as documented materials such as lesson plans, syllabus, worksheets and portfolios were analyzed to provide a comprehensive detailed description of the teachers' practices and activities. The research was performed at two levels particularly, within-case analysis and across case analysis. Within-case analysis indicated that while subthemes were different by case, the main themes regarding early English literacy instruction and preschool teachers' practices that were identified from the two cases were equal. These major themes included: (a) early literacy learning environment; (b) early literacy instructional practices; and (c) social interaction.

Through this study it was realized that even when four preschool teachers were in the same school district and supported by the different principals, each used diverse curriculum program and interpreted and enacted early literacy policy differently. As an illustration, while Maria and Sally in Montessori preschool focused much of their attention on the implementation of phonology instruction and children's being able of identifying the alphabet letter sounds, Carla and Maya in IPC preschool guided children's learning focusing more on recognizing alphabet letters, but none of these teachers fully embraced what the research base describes as the best and the most efficient early literacy practices. After all, Tang et al. (2011) believed that quality teaching involves providing coherent instruction using proper learning activities, instructional resources and materials together with teachers' being able to communicate accurately in both oral and written procedures. Likewise, in another study by Mofrad (2012), interaction, communication and professionalism were considered as the indices of quality early childhood education. Accordingly,

what follows in the next chapter is a more in-depth discussion and some recommendations for practice and future research.

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## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### Introduction

The growing number of children speaking another language other than English at home, entering the preschool programs in both Montessori and IPC, the vitality of early years at preschool together with the decreased level of children's proficiency in early English literacy development sparked the researcher's interest in studying the instructional practices implemented in preschools by teachers in the context of Malaysia to support the early literacy and language acquisition of English language learners.

Subsequently, in light of constantly changing instructional standards and principles, the increasing struggle of teachers' following these standards, and pressures on today's educationalists and teachers due to these standards (Rashid et al., 2017) together with children's inability to develop early literacy skills as well as their lack of social skills, the researcher of the study started to believe that there would be considerable significance in examining and investigating what really happens in classrooms and what literacy practices and activities preschool teachers implement in the area of early English literacy instruction.

Besides, children who start early literacy education in two languages might have some challenges (see Dufresne & Masny, 2006; Shaari & Ahmad, 2016). These difficulties and challenges can be prevented or attenuated if children are provided with enough opportunities to develop early literacy skills that are positively connected with future reading and writing accomplishment such as alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, print awareness and oral language.

Additionally, it was supported through the literature (such as Majzub et al., 2011; Puteh & Ali, 2013; Mohidin et al., 2015) that social interaction as a part of early literacy environment is influential and effective in children's growth of these skills

Taking all these points into account, the present study intended to explore preschool teachers' practices in terms of the four key early literacy skills particularly, alphabet knowledge, print awareness, phonological awareness and oral language as well as the way teachers implemented social interaction to enhance the development of early English literacy in children.

In this chapter, before looking across the stories of the four teachers in the present study to describe their practices in their English literacy instruction, the researcher does summarize the research project briefly including its purpose and methods. A comparison and analysis of findings from the four teachers is then provided in relation to the research questions and existing literature. In the final part this chapter ends with a discussion of what these findings suggest for improving early English literacy practice and provide efficient instruction together with future research.

### **Summary of the Research Project**

The current study aimed to recognize and describe what literacy practices and activities were applied by four preschool teachers in early English literacy instruction in Montessori and IPC preschools. Along with the investigation of preschool teachers' practices, this study aimed to explore how these preschool teachers implemented social interaction in their practices as indeed cognitive and linguistic development in children occurs via social interaction. It was elucidated before that consequently the theoretical framework for the present research is in line with

Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist's theory and view of development. According to this theory, interactions that occur between children and their social environment can lead to child development. Moreover, learning requires student interaction and engagement in activities, and without this engagement, learning does not take place.

As a result, this multiple case study explored the literacy practices of four non-native in-service preschool teachers in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia as they responded to a set of interview questions (Appendices E) and being observed following certain checklists (Appendices G & H) while teaching English in their classrooms. These four teachers were selected from two preschools in which certain curricula and program particularly, Montessori and IPC were conducted. Therefore, to conduct this study, two private preschools located in the northwest of the city center of Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia running by Montessori and IPC programs were considered as the research settings for the current study investigation. The aim of these programs was to implement high quality preschool programs to help children to enter school specifically international school ready to learn. They indeed tried to implement appropriate language and literacy instruction extensively within their classrooms in order to develop a high quality childhood program.

The preschool classrooms in both research sites were staffed by a number of young certified teachers with the class size of no more than fifteen students. Teachers were expected to carry out Montessori set together with Jolly Phonics approach and IPC curricula which each had their own specific policies and teaching approaches.

These two private preschools under the franchises of IPC and Montessori were considered as the research sites of the present study and the selection of these

two preschools for this project was based on four factors. First, they are highly popular and recognized in Malaysia (Belle, 2016). They actually try to provide the development and educational needs of children following the highest professional standards. Second, both preschools' curriculum and teaching approach considers social interaction and play crucial in developing early literacy in young children. Third, the teaching approach of curriculum in both preschools was child-centered which was following the National Preschool Curriculum. This was the main factor as NPC "focuses on standard content and standard learning" and the use of appropriate practices "that focuses on child-centered learning approaches has been strongly advocated to all preschool teachers and early childhood educators" (Puteh & Ali, 2013, p. 82). Fourth, the demography of the preschools provided the researcher with an important venue for examining the role of the practices of early English literacy preschool teachers together with early literacy curriculum on enhancing the development of early literacy in English language learners. In addition, the principals in both preschools did try to create a classroom environment based on their specific curriculum and provide young children with efficient literacy teaching materials.

The preschool teachers in the current research were expected to enact Montessori and IPC curricula and standards aimed at ensuring young children's early literacy learning. Though, it is necessary to consider that "literacy teaching has become more complex" (Courtland et al., 2010, p.20). Courtland et al. (2010) refer to the issue that "teacher educators face a challenge in preparing teacher candidates to become effective literacy teachers" (p.20). Feiman-Nemser (as cited in Courtland et al., 2010) "contends that many beginning teachers have little or no support in their early years of teaching" (p.22). In fact, there are several main themes that should be considered in teaching such as the links "between theory and practice, course content

and pedagogy”, perceptions of the “consistency between the course and field experience and preparedness for early literacy teaching” (Courtland et al., 2010, p.23).

Above and beyond, the likely decrease in the amount of time and number of opportunities for play tasks and increase in rote memorization leads to a serious risk to the social constructivist theory shared universally by early childhood educationalists as effective practices in early childhood education. Vygotsky’s social-constructivist theory was regarded as the theoretical framework for the current research as it puts emphasis on the importance of social interaction in children’s early literacy development.

Accordingly, the theoretical propositions for the current study were (a) the vitality of providing effective practices through a comprehensive early literacy model that enrich early English literacy development in children and to fulfill this the researcher followed the guiding principles of Rohde’s (2015) Early Literacy Comprehensive Model and (b) social constructivist theory of Vygotsky (1978) that promotes the importance and requirement of social interaction in early childhood education. Indeed through collaboration between the adult particularly, teacher, and child, the more experienced participant namely teacher transmits knowledge of the child’s culture to increase his or her understanding. Moreover, Vygotsky (1987) clarifies that learning challenging concepts are facilitated through adult interaction involving “demonstration, leading question and by introducing elements of the task’s solution” (p. 209). Vygotsky (1978) assumes that as the child completes these tasks successfully, new knowledge becomes internalized within the child’s cognition and becomes the part of the child’s independent learning level. And this interaction between the adult and the child can happen via the use of oral language.



In addition, the role of preschool teacher together with literacy environment is to expedite learning and acquisition in children so that the development of certain cognitive and social skills can take place. There was evidence of the use of early literacy materials and interactions throughout the preschools' observations in the present research. Books were selected and read to establish children's participations and interactions. Yet, the amount of interactions between teacher and child and children's participation and engagement during literacy tasks in different preschools were various.

The method of using interviews to collect data provided the subjects of the study with an opportunity to share their attitudes, experiences and beliefs. It was also an effective strategy for the researcher to elicit better information and gaining deeper insights into teachers' constructions of early literacy and the process of early English instruction. Subsequently, the observation of classrooms following descriptive and focused observation checklists (Appendices G & H) was another method the researcher conducted to better investigate and explore the four teachers' classroom environments, routines and practices. In fact, through observations the researcher could examine the practices teachers provided children with to enhance the growth of the four key early English literacy skills. The last method of data collection was the analysis of a variety of documents such as portfolios, syllabus, lesson plans, worksheets and other written artifacts in order to complement the information from class observations and interviews. This method indeed assisted the researcher to better understand the program under investigation and establish a connection among all different kinds of data.

Research has suggested a number of factors that may ensure high quality preschool programs such as the ones studied in the present research. These factors

included language and literacy instruction and teacher-child interaction. In fact, “one particular area for concern is teachers’ use of effective interactions during the delivery of literacy and language instruction” (Hamre et al., 2012, p.90). Through research some questions raised such as what practices were applied by preschool teachers in early English literacy instruction and how preschool teachers did implement social interaction in their practice. This chapter hence discusses the conclusions and implications of these issues for preschool education in the context of Malaysia and also provides recommendations for future research.

To answer the research questions, the researcher using field notes of classroom behavior or tasks and videotaping of classroom practices along with interviews and review of documents and artifacts started the data collection in January and ended in November in 2015. Spending 10 full sessions in each classroom yielded approximately 58 hours of audiotaped data, 7 hours of interview data, and a few artifacts.

The compiled data record of transcriptions and fieldnotes was subsequently examined in relation to the research questions. Data analysis began with analyzing each teacher’s practices and activities in terms of what research claims to be the most efficient kinds of literacy practices. The researcher then looked at the teaching techniques the teachers used as they set about trying to implement these practices across a range of instructional events such as large and small group. In the final step the researcher examined how each of these teachers implemented social interaction as it was a required policy and teaching approach in both Montessori and IPC curricula initiative that they were supposed to be implementing in their classrooms. From this analysis, a case study of each teacher's literacy practices was developed.

After analyzing each teacher's practices namely within-case analysis, the researcher implemented a cross-case analysis to identify preschool teachers' early literacy practices, this time searching for patterns of practice, again looking for ways that Maria, Sally, Carla and Maya were similar and different in the kinds of interactions they provided children with in their classrooms across instructional events.

What follows then is a discussion that picks up on each teacher's story in relation to the two research questions mentioned previously. Based on the data analysis process and the findings outlined in chapter four, conclusions from the study address the three major themes critical to the research questions, that is to say (a) early literacy learning environment, (b) early literacy instructional practices and (c) social interaction. These three themes were actually investigated to elicit in depth understanding concerning the preschool teachers' practices in the area of early English literacy instruction.

To point out, the second theme that is to say, early literacy instructional practices, was interpreted and analyzed by the researcher to answer the first question of the research and the first and third themes specifically, early literacy learning environment and social interaction, were analyzed to provide an answer to the second question. To begin, the researcher details the distinctions and similarities of four preschool teachers' practices on early English literacy instruction and implementation of early literacy skills before considering how these practices reflected state policies.

### **Looking Across the Cases**

Through this research, the researcher intended to answer the study questions and draw attentions to how preschool teachers implemented literacy practices in the field of early childhood education. She also intended to emphasize on the vitality of

early literacy curriculum on teachers' practices and consequently on children's literacy and language development.

To begin, the first question is the one that the researcher started this study with and the second one emerged subsequently as she investigated the Montessori and IPC curricula and teaching approach and philosophy. The following segments discuss and provide the answers to the research questions of the present study according to the analysis of the collected data.

***Research Question 1: What practices are applied by preschool teachers in early English literacy instruction?***

The major purpose of this question was to determine the actual practices preschool teachers implemented in IPC and Montessori preschools to help children develop early English language and literacy. As discussed in chapter one on the theoretical framework of the study, early English literacy instruction was divided into two subparts and constituents. The first subcomponent was early literacy learning environment which involved the physical environment together with instruction and social interaction. The second subcomponent of the research theoretical framework was preschool early literacy instructional practices that was comprised of four early English literacy skills specifically, *phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness, and oral language*. These two categories were considered as the major themes which were identified across the two case studies. However, social interaction was considered as another major theme because it was the main teaching approach and philosophy of both Montessori and IPC curricula.

In general, as making children ready to attend schools and preparing them for later success in literacy, developing children's cognitive and social skills is fundamental (Ministry of Education, 2003). Children do indeed need a strong basis and establishment of the alphabetic principle as a necessary skill to understand reading and writing. And they also need to learn this skill to recognize how print works in order to be a successful reader and writer. Children should be engrossed in language development and given this opportunity to practise what they acquire. Moreover, making connections between oral and print at an early age is influential to their development in early literacy.

In particular, of the four key subcomponents of teachers' instructional practices specifically, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness and oral language, teachers in Montessori and IPC preschool perceived themselves that to implement most frequently practices associated with phonological awareness to develop children's recognition and awareness of alphabet letters and their sounds. In other words, in comparison to the other early literacy domains, teachers focused more on teaching and deliver instruction on alphabet letters in IPC preschool and on phonology in Montessori preschool.

In fact, the four preschool teachers in Montessori and IPC program had no clear theoretical foundation or groundwork for practice within their ideas, and they had no clear research-based theory concerning with working with and teaching young children. They had indeed misunderstandings about the actual aspects of appropriate practice in early childhood education (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). Teachers' not having a theory and misinterpretations were indeed revealed in their practices and were evident in their work with children.

It is worth mentioning at the outset that teachers in this study had trouble describing their instructional beliefs and activities. They could not identify or name certain teaching methods on how to deliver instruction in each early literacy skill. This can be as a result of teachers' lack of instructional skills (Tang et al., 2011). As an illustration, when they were asked by the researcher during interview about what teaching method or approach they do implement in classroom to enhance the development of early English literacy in young children, they could not specify any specific instructional method or strategy. As a matter of fact, repetition namely, "look and say" was the chief teaching tool to the teachers of this study, whether the teaching unit was a letter, syllable, or word. All teachers believed that revision and practice help children to learn to read and write. This might indicate that teachers did not think very critically while answering the interview questions. To put it differently, this may be due to the lack of recognition that a variety of teaching methods is necessary depending on the content being taught and on the learner's needs or characteristics.

Though some teachers mentioned in their conversations with the researcher that it was somehow hard to implement what they learned in training programs and universities in practice in classrooms since real environment and teaching situations are different from all the lessons and theories they had learned in those programs and courses. Identically, Sabar (2004) and Scherff and Hahs-Vaughn (2008), recognized that one of the common problems most new teachers face is to bring together the education they have acquired in the teacher training programs with the reality of teaching in classroom. This can make it more problematic for new teachers to put what they have learned into the teaching process in the classroom. Whereas, during the training programs, new teachers experience the freedom to

make decisions, an environment in which they are able to discuss and cooperate with each other. They are also in the working conditions that nurture personal relationships.

While four preschool teachers in the present study tried to encourage children's literacy learning in the classroom, it was not necessarily in alignment with what the standards or the assessment policy was requiring of them. There were some descriptors that were perceived to be noticeably less frequently implemented than others, such as using learning activities to build print awareness or enhance writing knowledge and oral language. On the contrary, in a study by Lovelace and Stewart (2007) it was concluded "that children's performance improved dramatically only after implementation of the print referencing strategy, indicating that explicit reference to print was necessary in order for children to acquire print concepts"(p.25). The explanation may be that teacher preparation programs and professional development activities may not be focusing extensively on writing connections to literacy. Or maybe teachers were not sure enough of how to implement appropriate writing practices in their classroom. This implication was evident in four teachers' classroom observations in the current study.

Moreover, both Maria and Sally in Montessori preschool were not so much concerned about developing speaking and listening skills. The students basically communicated on a basic level in what they did every day that is to say, daily routines.

Concerning promoting reading skill and phonological awareness, shared book reading as was previously mentioned was a normal literacy practice in Maria's class. She did try very often to enhance phonology awareness in children through whole class reading together with using sound object boxes. She believed that children

should acquire a number of basic phonological awareness such as to be able to identify the number of syllables in their first name and to identify the sound of letters in words. She was mainly focusing on helping children to recognize sounds and always asked children to perform the action representing each specific sound. Comparatively, a number of other activities observed by the researcher in four teachers' classrooms to promote the development of phonological awareness involved worksheets teaching alphabet letters and their corresponding sounds. It was additionally viewed that children in a large group setting did take part in a drill practice with alphabet letter flash cards and their corresponding sounds.

On the other hand, the other two teachers Carla and Maya in IPC preschool believed that it was necessary for students to recognize the letters of alphabet therefore they were mainly focusing on enhancing children's alphabet knowledge. They stated in their conversations with the researcher that this could happen through repetition. Indeed the most common teaching strategy implemented in their classrooms was repetition or look-and-say strategy. Most commonly teachers repeated a few certain sounds daily and used the similar letters worksheets or flash cards followed by the same repetition routine. Though, over ten session observations once Carla did try to help children to identify and create rhyming words as she wrote a few three letter words on the whiteboard and asked children to look, find and read the words.

In terms of promoting writing development, Maria during her interview with the researcher seemed to be focused on achieving the goal for children to be capable of writing. She asserted that the parents expected their children to have the ability to write to take the assessment test to join international school, and she would like to fulfill the parents' expectations. She also stated that based on the curriculum children



needed to complete simply more letters worksheets. And as stated earlier, limited literacy activity focusing on writing was observed in her class. On the contrary, Carla's focus in her classroom in IPC preschool was on the skill development of production or sounds pronunciation not on writing for any other purposes.

Sally, on the other hand, during her interview with the researcher showed an enthusiasm and was passionate for enhancing reading and writing development in children. Her aim for children was also to be independent and develop motor-skills. For children to develop writing skill, she asked them to trace the letters on the worksheets which she believed it could be effective in writing improvement. Besides, Sally in her interview affirmed that practically she could not implement the instructional methods she would like to do since some of her students were used to come late to the class, therefore this made class unorganized and sometimes the students were out of control.

Comparatively, Maya in IPC preschool tried to help children to learn writing process through completing a number of worksheets. They included a few alphabet letters which students needed to say the sound then trace the letter and color the picture relating to that letter. Though what it seemed she did not incorporate in her teaching style was the combination of letters and children's awareness of distinguishing print from the sound. Rohde (2015) cites that emergent writing is supported by language, print awareness, and phonological awareness. As a matter of fact, children move from writing through illustration and drawing to the addition of letters as they learn alphabet skills. These letters will subsequently characterize words as children attain phonological awareness and knowledge of letter-sound connections.

It can be noticed that very little integration of writing was observed throughout the classrooms in either IPC or Montessori preschool. The researcher also observed very slight enthusiasm in teachers to involve children in writing for meaningful purposes. She viewed students practising rote skills, such as tracing, writing letters and coloring.

Another point is that both Maria and Sally in Montessori preschool tended to instruct children in early literacy skills using large group time as the means to boost the growth of early literacy skills. Likewise, Baroody and Diamond (2016) emphasize that “preschoolers aged 3 to 5 years are usually required to participate in a group time activity (i.e. an activity that is initiated and led by the teacher and that involves at least half of the children in the class, such as calendar time or whole-class book reading)” (p.149). On occasions, they used small group but they never used instructional events where students had more input into the learning process such as work time. In other words, they directed much of the learning around the strands of knowledge and skills they believed were essential in learning with the whole class. Though, these large group events were not focused on writing so much as they were on phonological awareness or alphabet letters and their corresponding sounds. Thus, their English literacy instruction remained centered on teaching phonology and identifying alphabet letters and sounds.

On the other hand, Carla and Maya in IPC preschool tended to instruct children in early English literacy skills using one-on-one instruction. Their literacy instruction was centered on teaching alphabet and recognizing letters and their sounds. A demonstration of lack of genuine learning was when children read individually in IPC preschool. As an illustration, in Carla’s class the researcher noticed a child who was reading a story very well as the teacher was sitting with him.

He was curious and kept asking the teacher different questions. This happened while the rest of children were just looking at the pictures and were sort of lagging slightly behind. In fact, it was impossible to know who was actually reading and who was not when children were repeating in unison (Abadzi, 2003).

In general, in light of all teachers' literacy practices and what research suggests about supporting early English literacy, it would seem that children were better off in Maria's classroom through her more authentic approach. Based on the researcher's observations throughout the year in both preschools, Maria in comparison with other teachers was more helping children become readers and writers by connecting children's interests to literacy content in meaningful ways. For example, during shared Big book reading, she asked students a number of questions \_even though limited\_ about the story and helped them to relate the story to their lives using their names. Sally on the contrary did not even implement questioning strategy. She just read the story using children's name and encourage them to say the sound and recognize it. However, the study by Lovelace and Stewart (2007) suggest "that some concepts are more amenable to learning when they are presented during storybook reading than others" (p.25). However, Sally and Maria had a number of gaps in their literacy teaching when examined in relation to the research base.

To point out, questioning was indeed a teaching method used during the introductory story and in the teacher-led group. Whereas, most questions were factual, recall questions, with no predictive or inferential questions being used. Not to mention, an important part of the question and answer method is the feedback that is provided to children's responses, as this is a key area where learning occurs (Abd-Kadir & Hardman, 2007).

In comparison to the other early literacy components and skills, teachers had the most to say about teaching phonics in their classrooms. During interview, they were asked to mention what early literacy components they mainly focused in their classroom and they all reported that they concentrated more on letter sounds and blending three-letter words which was somehow observed in their classrooms. However, Maria mentioned in her interview that there were several changes in Early Childhood Education Preparation Program. She asserted that things were getting more intensive focusing more on academic development and there was lesser play time. To her this would put pressure on children since the parents expected their children to have the capability to read and write and teachers needed to fulfill the parents' expectations. As a result, teachers had to ask children to complete worksheets very often.

Besides, Sally said that it was important for children to develop their motor skills and be able to write. Both Maria and Sally believed that it was necessary to incorporate more hands-on materials in classroom. On the contrary, as the researcher observed their classes the literacy instruction was mainly focused on phonics and children were not encouraged to develop an awareness of connection between the sounds and print. Yet, as mentioned before, print awareness is one of the main components of early literacy instruction which was rarely observed in the teachers' classroom.

All things considered, what was missing from most of the lessons in the classrooms was the explanation and instruction of new literacy materials. Teachers spent most of the time having children complete the worksheets repeatedly or giving them certain materials to play. For example, it was not very common in the classrooms in IPC and Montessori preschool teachers teach the names or sounds of

letters embedded in words, explain how to decode or blend the phonemes, or link the new words to familiar ones. Similarly, children were normally required to point to the words in the book or board. Teachers were rarely explained children the meanings which referred to absences of cognitive processing in children.

To answer the first question on teachers' practices in English instruction, the teachers in Montessori and IPC preschool utilized several techniques in teaching children early literacy skills. The observation of the teachers' practices by the researcher revealed a number of approaches and activities used in their classes. Examples of these activities included circle time songs, children tracing alphabet letters on worksheets and utilizing sound object boxes. Moreover, teachers in the study performed tasks such as helping children match letters and recognize their corresponding sounds. They also used alphabet letters flash cards to enhance children's phonological awareness. These tasks indeed facilitated children's correct pronunciation and understanding (Ehri, 2012). It was observed that some teachers like Maria preferred hands-on activities and focused on children's sense of touch. For instance, Maria during the delivery of phonology instruction asked children to touch the letter and say the sound as she used sound object boxes. The teachers generally in both research sites gauged the children's competencies in recognizing alphabet letters and sounds and tracing letters.

The overall conclusion generated from the results of the data analyses is that although teachers and preschool principals perceived that they were effectively implementing early English literacy instruction, there was actually a divide between preschool curriculum and what teachers did provide in practice in their classrooms.

***Research Question 2: How do preschool teachers implement social interaction in practice?***

Social interaction would seem to be an important factor influencing effective implementation of early English literacy instruction. Language and the adult-child interaction are central ideas to Vygotsky's image of the child (Vygotsky, 1964). After all, the present study established a link between the construct of social skills or interaction and early English literacy skills. Likewise, Denham (2006) in a study recounted that students who enter school with the ability to develop and sustain friendships, as well as taking part in interactions with teachers, are more likely to view school positively. "Language use is thus not limited to ideational exchanges of messages, but is actively and agentively used to forge – achieve and renew – social relations, and to explore and manipulate the social world" (Cekaite & Björk-Willén, 2012, p.175).

This category that is to say, social interaction was investigated in the present study by observing teachers' literacy instruction while teaching in their classrooms. They were also asked a number of questions regarding the implementation of social interaction through interviews conducted by the researcher. As has been noted throughout this study, the implementation of instruction and social interaction refer to the teaching and learning activities and tasks provided by teachers in the classroom to enhance literacy and social skills development in children. Overall, there was a lack of opportunities and activities in either Montessori or IPC preschools to engage children in conversation whether individually, in small or large groups.

An emerging theme from the collected research data is that the level of engagement children experienced in class in both Montessori and IPC preschool was generally low. Play was indeed one of the frequent activities that guided practices of preschool teachers in both sites. According to Segal (2004), children acquire communication skills including confidence and self-assurance, skill at making friends, persistency and creativity through play. However, Carla, Maya, Sally and Maria did not implement different types of play in their classrooms except free play despite what was planned in the lesson plans. To support the key role of play, Copple et al. (2009) stated that teachers can engage children with several kinds of play such as dramatic play, constructive play, game with rules, object play, and physical play in order to enhance and expedite learning in children and boost their development in all domains. For instance, Greenfader et al. (2013) confirm that children's engagement in dramatic play helps "them to inject their own cultural understanding into the story, using other modes of communication to take part in a meaningful dialogue despite a limited English vocabulary" (p.173).

In addition, Baroody and Diamond (2016) agree that "children who are interested and engaged during literacy-related activities are likely to have more opportunities to learn and practice early reading skills" (p.147). Yet, it was observed that teachers in the present study provided fewer opportunities to converse with children except during shared book readings. In essence, children want to feel cherished and this occurs most efficiently when children are given important roles in the daily routines of the caring environment (Clark & Moss, 2011). In other words, "encouraging children to take the lead and initiate conversations enhances children's self-confidence and pleasure in communicating orally with others and provides them

with more opportunities to learn language” (Weitzman & Greenberg cited in Peterson et al., 2016, p.12).

Correspondingly, activities and tasks which involve children’s deep engagement enhance the cognitive processes in children that subsequently help them learn to read and write, whereas in reality mostly physical activities for example, playing with literacy materials, called for less active thinking and established shallow engagement. Additionally, in the current research children were merely asked to answer a few questions about the story during read aloud activity. Questioning was in fact the most common teaching strategy teachers used to instruct children. Their questions around the story only required students to recall basic information which was quite problematic as children were not encouraged to relate the story to their experiences therefore they only gained a superficial understanding of the skills being taught. In fact, teachers could instead facilitate children’s engagement during read aloud by altering the types of questions they used, even though it might be a challenge for some teachers.

Certainly, it is not enough that children just possess knowledge of reading skills; they indeed need to obtain a complete understanding of the connections among the skills and how to use the skills in different situations. This might a bit complicated for teachers as Dickinson and Tabors (2001) noted it is probably because novice teachers may focus more on curriculum fidelity and adhere to scripts due to their lack of experience. In fact, the early years of being a teacher is a special time in the teaching profession. In this regard, commonly new or less experienced teachers face several challenges no matter where they are positioned. As a result, Abbate-Vaughn, Paugh, and Douglass (2011) discuss that “a central element in the conversation for the improvement of early education must focus on teacher quality



and that the achievement of greater teacher quality does not come with an easy recipe” (p.216). Indeed one of the challenges new teachers might face is meeting the curriculum standards.

As it was obvious in the data analysis in the study, there was not enough interaction between teacher and children neither in Montessori nor in IPC preschool. All four teachers in both preschools with different curriculum and instructional approach took on the role of instructor and facilitator as a way to ensure that students were getting the same literacy knowledge in the same way. As a matter of fact, the instruction was mainly visual in these preschools, even though, teachers sometimes provided their children with this opportunity to take the lead in some activities for example “to choose their favorite story book” or “to choose the letter sound object box”. In general the interactions occurred between teacher and children were limited despite what four preschool teachers mentioned in their interviews that they would like to be friends with their students and communicate with them.

Observing teachers’ practices and listening to their perspectives on teaching and learning early literacy, it was illustrated that what constitutes early English literacy instruction is essential in teachers’ practices. Most tasks the participants of the study applied in their classrooms were limited in scope as they mainly tried to enhance certain specific skills and did not encourage the development of cognitive processing in children. Darling-Hammond (2006) stated that certainly teachers need to understand the spirit of each child and try to nurture that spirit. They are in fact required to have knowledge on early literacy skills to manage the class effectively. They should also be able to communicate with children well and reflect on their practices more often in order to improve them.

As was illustrated in the theoretical framework of the study in chapter one, it is crucial to focus on all the key early literacy skills incorporating social interaction as language and literacy do not require only skills but also involve complex interactions. Stockall et al., (2012) agreed that preschool curriculum is required to emphasize on children's both academic and social skills. Surprisingly, teachers in both preschools used to implement the same strategies to instruct children, yet Baecher et al. (2012) in their study emphasized that teachers are better to differentiate their instruction in order to meet children's needs. Similarly, Çakır (as cited in Tarakçıoğlu et al., 2014) supported that implementing different teaching activities to teach a foreign language, English language in the current study, has a significant effect on the children's learning process. Teachers actually can add interest to the class by utilizing a variety of teaching methods and strategies. As a matter of fact, "teachers need to ensure that the type of task, as well as the task content, is matched to the needs of the pupil" (Wray, Medwell, Fox & Poulson, 2000, p.76).

In IPC preschool for example, it was observed by the researcher that children were given this opportunity to choose their short story of interest to read on their own and in unison. Using short stories in preschools have in fact several benefits (Collie & Slater cited in Tarakçıoğlu et al., 2014). The first benefit is that short stories do not normally contain difficult concepts therefore children are able to read them on their own. Next advantage of using short stories is that they are practical to be used in preschools as they are not long in content. Furthermore, they can be used for children in all levels and ages. However, communication and interaction between teacher and child was missing or insufficient. As an illustration, it was noticed in Carla's class that one strong reader was reading the text and communicating with the teacher on

the story whereas the rest of children were lagging behind and were just browsing the pictures on the story book. Not to mention, comprehension strategies include techniques such as predicting, summarizing, retelling, self-questioning to monitor understanding, and using graphic organizers. Yet, many children in Carla's class over-relied on pictures to understand the passage. This actually can hamper reading skills in more complex passages.

In general, the level of engagement that children experienced in classes in the research sites was generally low. They spent a lot of time engaging in free play, doing a number of alphabet letter worksheets, sometimes reading books and the rest of time eating snack or lunch. Total productive time on task was minimal. This refers to the concepts of children's shallow and deep engagement. And as stated earlier, tasks with deep engagement enact the cognitive processes that are associated with learning to read, but physical activities mostly need less active thinking and demonstrate shallow engagement. When children in this study were asked to copy alphabet letters or repeat the words after their teacher, they were indeed engaged in the activity shallowly. On the contrary, children were engaged more in Maria's class comparing to other classes especially during utilizing sound object boxes.

To answer the second question on the implementation of social interaction, reading Big books in a large group in Montessori preschool and reading short stories individually in IPC preschool were implemented by teachers which would somehow help children to develop social interaction. In support of social interaction, New (2002) and LoRusso (2010) claim that early literacy initiates at birth, is progressive, and is influenced by sociocultural experiences. Children at the very young age interact with the world through social interaction with their parents or other adults and caregivers. And play supported by both Montessori and IPC program is

considered as a useful strategy for children to develop early skills together with social skills. Elkind (2007) encourages a hands-on or self-directed early childhood curriculum in which children are provided with ample opportunities to play. Though, it was observed by the researcher that in spite of numerous kinds of play, free play was merely performed in the classrooms in the study.

The overall deduction is that teacher-child interaction is an important factor influencing effective implementation of the related practices for establishing a language context. Similarly, Berry and O'Connor (as cited in Nurmi & Kiuru, 2015) emphasized that "children with a higher-quality teacher-child relationship demonstrated greater social skills from preschool through to sixth grade than their peers with lower quality relationships" (p.450). According to Mofrad (2012), encouraging high quality interactions in preschools need to be the main concern of constructive intervention. She believes "quality early childhood programs foster positive relationships among children and adults" (p.244). In other words, teacher-child interactions are one of the main aspects of quality early childhood education programs (Mofrad, 2012). However, there was scarce of activities preschool teachers in the study implemented in their classroom to promote English language literacy and social interaction in young children.

To sum up, principals and preschool teachers of both preschools perceived themselves to be implementing quality language and literacy experiences and instruction for young children. However, the findings in the present research indicated that there are associated strengths and weaknesses inherent in preschool teachers' practices and activities. The research data also indicated that teachers were pressured by parents or felt somehow constrained with the practices they were able to

implement in their classroom. And this caused practices contradicted with both curricula program and instructional approach.

### **Analysis of Findings**

In general, the findings of the study revealed the kind of early English literacy instruction is being implemented in preschools in the context of Malaysia. Understanding the practices of preschool teachers on the strategies and activities they used to teach early literacy skills as well as implementing social interaction could lead to better understanding of how these practices could be improved to ensure children develop early literacy effectively.

**State policies and teachers' practices.** The teachers in the current research were working in a policy climate that expected them to implement social interaction in their classroom to promote the development of early literacy in young children. Each teacher in the research sites had various perspectives on the concept of social interaction and tried to implement it in different ways. Maria and Sally in Montessori preschool for example, considered daily English speaking or talk on routines as social interaction while Carla and Maya in IPC preschool regarded children's cooperation and being able in getting their bottles and sharing color pencils with peers as a kind of social interaction. In fact, the focus of teachers in Montessori was on finishing the certain tasks they were supposed to complete on specific days. The IPC teachers on the other hand, concentrated on children's freedom as they believed they would not have to force the students to study. In their opinions, children are indeed the ones who decide when to start teaching.

The teachers in this study appeared on the surface to be implementing visible pieces of the early literacy policy in different ways. To put it differently, on the researcher's first day in the field in -Montessori preschool- she noticed that the

classes were not started at the same time mentioned in the syllabus or lesson plan. This could probably affect the instruction time. As an illustration, there was not enough time for teachers to interact with students since they needed to finish the lesson of that certain day. It was confirmed by Thang, Murugaiah, Lee, Hazita, Tan and Lee (2010) that lack of time is one of the challenges teachers might face while implementing programmes. On the contrary, in the IPC preschool, the students of all classes would go to their own class after singing the morning songs all together as a routine. Though, teachers instead of conducting literacy instruction and communicating with children usually allowed children to play with certain toys while other few students were completing worksheets.

Contrary to the importance of social interaction in early literacy instruction, there was not any specific lesson plan, materials, textbooks or activities neither in Montessori nor in IPC preschool for implementing social interaction and providing children with the opportunity to learn social skills. Part of the problem could be due to the teachers' understanding of or perspectives on the concept of social interaction. In other words, they did not have a research-based definition regarding social interaction which could consequently affect their practice. Another reason might be related to the kind of training programs teachers received during literacy courses. Not to mention, in order to implement any kind of change in literacy practices requires that teachers receive support in the form of professional development (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007). Though, teachers declared in their interview with the researcher that it was not clearly stated in curriculum policy and program how preschool teachers could implement social interaction in their classrooms to facilitate the development of early literacy especially early English literacy and skills in children. Similarly, Jensen (2011) affirms that "the real challenge seems to be how to position

early literacy teaching in relation to the domains of policy (school effectiveness), curricula and indicators, and the children's own perspectives”(p.313).

**Disparity between teachers' practices and curriculum.** To point out, the preschool teachers in the current study clearly knew the rhetoric of early childhood education and that through play they could encourage children and engage them in activities. However, the data in the present study points to the fact that it is hard for teachers to implement all the teaching theories learned in training programs in actual practice. Supporting the study's theoretical framework and sociocultural approach to literacy learning, the researcher's examination of teacher early literacy practices during data analysis evolved to become more about the teacher's overall goals for children rather than specific practices and teacher-child interactions used to help children gain the key English literacy skills such as phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness and oral language. This could be due to the lack of sophistication of the teachers in the present study as well as their inability to name and implement research based practices and activities in language and early literacy, which emerged as a major finding of the study. In fact, “there is clearly a gap between research and practice of” Emergent Literacy in Early Childhood Education “(ECE) programs. This disparity may be due to a lack of resources or knowledge in providing high-quality EL learning opportunities in ECE classrooms” (Rohde, 2015, p.2).

In addition, the conversations between teacher and children that were observed in the classrooms either in Montessori or IPC preschool were generally limited in depth and lacked intentionality on the part of the teachers to encourage higher order thinking skills, the use of analysis or reasoning, and the introduction of new and varied vocabulary. According to teacher's report in the study, these beliefs

were also echoed by the parents, who told teachers that their goal for sending their children to preschool was for the children to be capable of reading and writing since they needed to take the assessment tests in order to enter international school.

In spite of a number of researches (such as Arce, 2000; Mofrad, 2012) on the efficacy of interaction between teacher and children being placed on early childhood education, results from the current study indicated the lack of interaction in preschool classrooms. Teachers tended to compartmentalize literacy learning, and viewed circle time and large group activities as the opportunity to directly teach academic skills. Circle time or morning meetings have indeed a long history in the early childhood curriculum. Scholars of early childhood education claim that the purpose of bringing children together is to build a community that values and respects the sharing of children's ideas (Kantor, 1988; Lown, 2002). Circle time is in fact supposed to help children learn academic concepts in a low stakes environment. It enables children and the teacher to efficiently communicate with each other and share ideas. As the teacher controls the discourse to some extent, there is supposed to be opportunities for student's input as well.

Despite teachers' being familiar with the rhetoric of the field and the notion that children learn through play, this belief system was not consistently translated into practice. Although teachers did engage in playful methods to teach the children literacy and numeracy skills, enacted practices were not in line with the child initiated and play based foundations of the Creative Curriculum of Montessori and IPC program. Surely, "early childhood educators must find more effective ways to provide children, in particular those who struggle, with ample opportunities to encounter and practice literacy targets and patterns in engaging instructional activities" (Bingham, Hall-Kenyon, & Culatta, 2010, p.39).



**Teachers' professional development.** Moreover, the results of the collected data indicated that teaching and learning are very multifaceted procedures and that teacher practices are influenced by various overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, standards, principles, and belief systems. They are also influenced by the formal structure of specific curriculum. As mentioned before, the teachers in the current study used research based practices infrequently and were unable to name them during interview with the researcher. As a matter of fact, they were not even able to name the research based teaching theories they were implementing in their classrooms. The only technique they mentioned they did apply to deliver instruction was teaching through play or repetition. Additionally, the teachers in this study were not able to name the research based literacy strategies and activities described in the review of literature, and exhibited a narrow view of early literacy learning that was oftentimes disconnected from other areas of development, such as social emotional and language development. As a result, in keeping with sociocultural framework of the study, teachers should be aware of and implement research based strategies into their instruction and relationship based interactions with children.

In the final analysis, it appears as if the teachers in the investigation lacked a comprehensive understanding of the integrated nature of early learning, and tended to view the development of socialization skills as the primary form of social emotional development. During the data collection period, the researcher observed many missed opportunities for teachers to build on children's interests and provide them with meaningful activities that required higher order thinking skills. Tang et al. (2011) mentioned that "most of Malaysian preschool programmes are not required to hire teachers who meet even the most basic professional requirements" (p.98). They stated that the majority of teachers observed in their study were required "a further

training for professional development so as to understand the importance of lesson planning and implementation especially for preschool teaching” (p.97). Hence, it is critical to focus on ensuring that preschool teachers are developed professionally to implement appropriate practices in early English literacy instruction. By receiving suitable instructional training and support, preschool teachers can obtain the knowledge and the required skills in early English literacy instruction and consequently be able to promote early literacy skills and motivation of young children.

**Pathway to becoming a teacher.** When analyzing the interview data, classroom observations and documented materials such as lesson plan, syllabus, portfolios and worksheets on how each teacher in the current study decided to get into the profession, what practices they provided in their classroom and how they implemented social interaction a number of themes emerged that helped the researcher to explain the role of curriculum, teachers’ experiences, approaches and participation in social communities on teacher practices and consequently children’s early literacy development. To put it differently, data from semi-structured interviews provided the researcher with information about how and why each teacher entered the field of early childhood education as well as with information about her early experiences as a teacher. A theme to emerge across all data sources was the similarity between each teacher’s educational background and teacher preparation experiences. In fact, the examination of the role of teacher preparation and experiences in the classroom helped the researcher to explain the research to practise gap described in the examination of the research questions. It was realized by the researcher that all four teachers in IPC and Montessori preschool were hired to work in classrooms with a little formal education on the theory and practices of early

childhood education. They indeed had obtained simply diploma and passed a few short courses in Montessori program and on phonics. As Ali et al. (2011) approve, a lot of teachers do not have adequate knowledge and skills required to provide young children with high-quality edification and instruct them how to read. Overall, the analysis of each teacher's pathway to becoming a teacher indicated several common themes such as the desire to work as a teacher and time flexibility of this job.

The present research contributed to the existing literature in the field of early childhood education signifying various pathways to becoming a preschool teacher and the often times irreconcilable evidence as to what type of education is needed in order to be an effective preschool teacher. It was illustrated through this research that in order to raise the efficiency and success of early childhood education, a wide range of activities and tasks in professional development are required and that support should be targeted towards teachers' interactions with children (Early, Maxwell, Burchinal, Bender, Ebanks & Henry, 2007). Other researchers such as James, Howes, and Richie (2003) and Fuligini et al (2010) have indeed recognized various pathways to becoming a preschool teacher that consist of formal education, child development training and supervision and mentoring.

Although the teachers in the current research had been educated in universities and had passed courses in Montessori program and on phonics, they had difficulty describing their instructional practices and strategies. During the interview with the researcher they were not able to detect a specific research-based strategy to implement early English literacy instruction. This in fact indicates that simply having a certificate or degree does not guarantee a quality teaching. Teachers need to be trained and supported to be able to utilize the acquired theories and lessons in practices through a specific early literacy model or framework. As Meerah (2009)

states, “more efforts should be put in training and developing teachers to have the required characteristics” (p.1760).

In addition, the findings of the current research provided the primary evidence that professional development for early childhood teachers needs to comprise ample opportunities that are aimed to support them see themselves as literacy educators rather than focus merely on literacy content knowledge in order to change and improve their literacy practice. Not to mention, how educators perceive their role in developing early literacy is important because of the implications for classroom literacy practices, which as previously noted, have demonstrated improvement through professional development (see Dickinson & Caswell, 2007; Jackson et al, 2006; Justice et al., 2009; Powell et al., 2010, Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst, 1992; Wasik & Bond, 2001; Whitehurst et al., 1994; Whitehurst et al., 1999). Besides, in-service training in early literacy instruction is regarded essential for teachers to possess sufficient skills and knowledge to effectively teach reading and writing to young children. Rashid et al (2017) refer to a study in which teachers revealed that there is a disparity between what is taught in training courses and what teachers face in practice in real classrooms. In other words, teachers are trained what to do in classrooms but they have limited opportunity to implement a teaching approach that meets the needs of children (Rashid et al., 2017). Rashid et al. (2017) consider this as one of the main shortcomings of Teacher Professional Development programmes for in-service teachers.

Given these points, future intervention work can consider the results and findings of the current study when preparing their early literacy curriculum and program. In addition, policy makers and educators should consider educating young children as part of their role as early childhood educators and that providing efficient

and appropriate English literacy activities daily is a crucial part of their role. This may, as the results and findings suggest, lead to improvements in their early literacy practices in the classroom, which may, in turn, directly influence children's early English literacy growth and development.

### **Educational Implications of the Study**

The educational implications of the current investigation are wide-ranging. It would seem that all four preschool teachers in Montessori and IPC preschool could have benefited from more opportunities to help them make the links between the curriculum and practice, between what they were doing in their classrooms and what they were supposed to be doing with regard to the early literacy and childhood education curriculum. In fact, "what 'emergent literacy' entails largely depends on one's understanding of the sociocultural curriculum" (Zhang, 2015, p. 2). The knowledge gained in the present research can be helpful in a few ways such as encouraging teachers, educators and researchers to pay attention to preschool teachers' practices and activities on early English literacy instruction. Significantly, the findings of the research provide great support for the conceptual principle that understanding preschool teachers' practices and activities are important in order to improve early childhood educational processes. The same holds true for stakeholders as they continue to reshape policy in the area of early childhood education.

By all means, the findings of this study offer several implications for preschool teachers' development. These implications can be classified into three categories such as implications for theory and research, implications for teaching practice, and implications for curriculum. Not to mention, the fact that there are quite a lot of implications continues to add value to the findings of the present study.

***Implications for Theory and Research:*** In general, this study supports Vygotsky's (1978) theory on the necessity of helping teachers to improve their understanding of the links between learning, teaching and social interaction since most teachers in the current research did not have a clear definition of the concept of social interaction specifically in the area of early English literacy. In a study by Field (as cited in Test & Cornelius-White, 2013), it was noticed that a few teachers encouraged engagement in their classrooms. It was also stated that probably teachers interfere children's engagement by presenting teacher-oriented structured activities. Besides, the study of Bryant, Lau, Burchinal and Sparling (as cited in Bradley & Reinking, 2011) showed that regarding classroom quality 26 of 32 preschool classrooms performed below minimal standards and there were poor interactions between teacher and child. Some teachers in this study did not have enough experience in early childhood education and they simply attended some training courses of preschool's own curriculum (Montessori and IPC). Therefore, they did have limited knowledge of the methodology and theories of early literacy instruction which could consequently affect their teaching practices. In a study by Tang et al. (2011), it was found that the lesson preparation and implementation by preschool teachers were low and not in a good quality. As a result, teacher educators should rethink how they can approach the early English literacy instruction to help future preschool teachers to see that social interaction, teaching and learning are not apart from each other.

***Implications for Teaching Practice:*** Teachers around the country and around the world already do a great job in teaching young children to read and write. Yet, as it was clear through the research, there were some teachers who did not have enough experience in the area of early childhood education. They were indeed majored in

different subjects and decided to get into this field because of its time flexibility and they were being interested in children. Therefore, professional development and specified or specifically detailed curriculum in early childhood education are vital in providing support for preschool teachers' efforts. The findings of the study support that idea that lack of professional development as well as teacher education or training courses can affect teachers' practices. Therefore, teachers should be provided with consistent suitable teaching training courses in the period of teaching experience. Preschool teachers need professional development opportunities to be able to decide how to choose efficient pedagogy and the main early literacy skills to focus on during instruction. Through this, administrators can assure that students receive the key skills they need to have formal education and accomplish at school. According to Anderson (2013), not only preschool teachers need to be trained in common aspects of teaching but also they are required to learn the certain aspects of teaching that has its own specificities.

Another key point is that teachers are required to be up to date on the latest researches in the field of early childhood education and be encouraged to implement new literacy activities and practices. To support this, Crim et al. (2008) in fact affirmed that teachers require professional development training on certain early literacy skills such as phonological awareness in order to utilize explicit strategies to boost the development of early reading and writing. Mashburn, Downer, Hamre, Justice and Pianta (2010) also asserted that it is beneficial for preschool staff to receive training on how interact with children in order to promote the development of language and vocabulary in them.

Furthermore, teachers need to discuss and work through the practices in their literacy instruction. Some of the participants in the present research mentioned that

since they had no experience, they did need to ask their colleagues or friends what to do or how to deliver certain instruction or activity even though they had passed early childhood or training courses. Hence, Sofou and Tsafos (as cited in Ortlipp, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011) supported that teachers who have less experience consider the preschool curriculum as necessary to their work. As a result, early literacy courses need to teach teachers the teaching practices and help them to learn how to collect meaningful documentation of children's literacy learning. Using a developmentally efficient curriculum is indeed imperative as it offers a wide range of group activities, various kinds of play along with opportunities for regular, positive communication and interactions that consequently lead to higher process quality in preschool settings (Öun, 2009). Besides, more well-defined environment for different required activities in preschool classrooms should be designed, so as to promulgate and foster more apposite social behaviors among the children (Abbas & Othman, 2010).

In addition, with detailed knowledge of the types of strategies and activities that the teachers can use during the literacy events and the delivery of instruction, teachers will also be able to more effectively guide the children to the next level of emergent literacy instruction, along the line of Vygotsky, who said to look for the buds of development.

***Implications for Curriculum:*** The numerous researches in the field of early childhood education have resulted in a number of effective practices that aim to guide curriculum and education in the early childhood environment. The first factor that is recognized as leading to positive long term gains is that of the connection and interaction between the teacher and the child. Numerous researches (see Bowman, Donovan & Burns, 2000; Kostelnik & Grady, 2009) confirm that teachers had better



develop a relationship with every child and get to know the strengths and weaknesses of the child.

Besides, teachers need to think about not only how to interact with children during different instructional spaces but also how to use these different spaces to take anecdotal information about children. According to Baroody and Diamond (2016), “children who participate in environments where reading and literacy activities are promoted in appealing ways and where there are ample opportunities to participate in literacy activities are likely to have higher interest and rates of engagement in literacy activities” (p.149). Teachers must also consider ways to organize and document these interactions. During classroom observations in the study, the researcher did not see any teachers’ evaluation of students. They were indeed required to learn to evaluate children’s work every week so that they could see it as a meaningful picture of their suitable practices and connect children’s learning to the interactions they had provided.

Another factor to be considered in early childhood curriculum approach is the necessity of focusing on children’s language development and consequently provides children with ample hands-on opportunities to explore. Along with this, early childhood environment should be safe as well as prearranged to boost children’s early literacy growth.

It was discussed previously that teachers in the present investigation were not clear of how to implement early literacy instruction in their classrooms. It is worth mentioning that teachers had difficulty with describing their instructional practices. For instance, when they were asked during interview what methods and strategies they implemented in their classrooms to enhance early English literacy instruction or

engage English language learners in activities, they responded as follows respectively;

Maria (in Montessori preschool): “the teaching approach is using phonic programmes like Jolly Phonics but priority is Montessori materials” (ID: 1-8-2015)

Sally (in Montessori preschool): “through play maybe like ...role play or maybe through blocks ....will be a gun car or truck ...through creativity through their imagination...maybe they build a car ...” (ID: 1-6-2015)

Carla (in IPC preschool): I don't have my own specific teaching approach but I learn it from my working experience other students teachers...normally they will do it but how do you call it approach eh they will do it like two weeks interaction learning yeah other than that they do it one way... let them anything you wanna ask them....individually” (ID:8-24-2015)

Maya (in IPC preschool): “repetition” (ID: 8-25-2015)

As it is shown on the interviews, the four preschool teachers had no clear and specific research-based instructional teaching approach and methodology.

Therefore, a framework or model of early literacy would help them in this regard as Rohde (2015) states that the existing models of early literacy merely focus on discrete skills without considering early literacy environment and social interaction. This study presented and elaborated the main early literacy skills in literacy instruction for teachers and other educators to explore the key elements of early English literacy coupled with its context. This can assist teachers especially less experienced teachers in implementing appropriate and efficient early English literacy instruction.

### **Limitations of the Current Study**

While the sample was generated from a larger list of possible early childhood education programs and each of those programs was contacted with an opportunity

of selection for the study, it was exclusive in that participants were from full-time privately-funded child care preschools. Therefore, a number of biases may have occurred and characteristics of the sample, for both educators and children, were not distributed across ethnic populations, educational backgrounds, and other demographic factors that represent the general population. Thus, the results of the study merely generalize to educators and children from urban or suburban privately funded full time early childhood education centers. Although this presents a limitation, this is also beneficial in that it enables one to see the upper end of what is possible in a setting that included relatively a few incidences of factors linked to poor teacher performance and most of the children did not possess risk factors linked to risk for lower levels of literacy learning. The findings of the present research are indeed from a small number of classrooms. As a result, related research with more classrooms could help in the verification and the extension of the present findings.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

A number of recommendations emerged from this study and its conclusions concerning the preschool English teachers' practices in early English literacy instruction. These recommendations are presented in the following segments.

First, while the present study considered preschool teachers, it did not sort out particular samples of preschool teachers for example, teachers in the first and second grades, independently to see if these groups gathered more precisely to the models on one end or the other.

Second, since the findings of the research indicated that the majority of preschool teachers detained beliefs and associated practices toward the early literacy instruction to children aged 3 to 5 year olds, future developmental activities for

personnel engaged in literacy instruction for young children could focus on identifying those particular practices that are developmentally appropriate for the other age groups.

Third, the current investigation was a qualitative case study and the researcher needed to consider the “sensitivity to the challenges and ethical issues of gathering information face-to-face and often in people’s homes or workplaces. Studying people in their own environment creates challenges for the qualitative researcher” (Creswell, 2012, p.205). And this might affect the results and findings of the study. Therefore, conducting a quasi-experimental study with groupings of preschool teachers to determine the effects on the acquisition of selected early literacy skills for young children would be recommended.

Next, it was revealed in the study that evaluating the need and providing for the professional development of preschool teachers is an important factor when inspecting instructional practices to support English language learners. Lazarus et al. (2007) also support and consider the availability of professional development opportunities for teachers as one of the elements of high quality teaching. As such, teachers have to have an understanding of appropriate experiences to plan for children. It was stated by Rashid, Abdul Rahman and Yunus (2017) that Teacher Professional Development (TPD) programmes in Malaysia are ineffective; therefore, many “teachers suffer from the heavy workload and the lack of opportunity to professionally develop themselves” (p.109). They think that in spite of the aim of new policies to improve the quality of education in Malaysia, the changes are implemented in haste which cause teachers to challenge in the process.

Hence, future research can examine the types of programmes in professional development and the amount of time in which teachers take part which are specially connected with the acquisition (and evaluation) of apposite teacher beliefs and principles concerning early English literacy instruction for young children.

Lastly, the findings were unbalanced because the great number of preschool teachers in the study did not have enough experience in the field of early childhood education. In a future replication, the design could be adjusted to guarantee a more impartial representation with ample number of participants for the experience variable in order to consistently sort out potential differences.

## **Conclusion**

Conducting this study has taught the researcher that curriculum can be a useful tool and guide in helping teachers focus instruction on important goals. However, curriculum is not helpful unless teachers understand it and know how to use and implement it in actual practices. Lacina and Collins Block (2011) refer to a number of previous studies which confirmed that some literacy teacher education programs did not provide any field experiences prior to student teaching, even though others needed 50 or more hours every semester.

It is actually crucial for teachers to carefully think about and consider the influence, value and impact of different teacher belief systems and to comprehend how these can be implemented to enhance or build apposite and efficient literacy experiences for young children. Besides, it is crucial that the conditions under which teachers may be hindered to implement efficient practices be identified and improved. The recommendations for further research presented in this research can continue the search for such understanding.

Additionally, the results and findings of the study could be used as a basis for improving existing instructional methods to help increase the number of preschool students who meet the standards on early English literacy skills. The teachers subsequently could help reveal the various factors that limited students from benchmarking in early English literacy skills. As a matter of fact, by identifying the specific areas where children have difficulties, an action plan to address these problems and improve the educational experience of preschool students could be formed, and thus in the long run improve their performance with regard to meeting standards on early English literacy skills.

Furthermore, the present study findings are important to both local and state policy makers responsible for funding and evaluating preschools in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. The results are also important to curriculum supervisors who are responsible for designing and implementing future professional development programs and teacher education training courses.

### **The Researcher's Reflexivity**

During this study the researcher was frustrated at times about how to find certain research sites or how to gain access to them. She did later try to provide preschool principals and teachers with information to guide the study. Besides, the researcher was concerned about early English literacy standards moving into preschool classrooms as her fear was that the principals would not accept her as a foreigner to conduct a study in their preschools.

It was indicated in the study that preschool teachers and the practices and activities they implement in their classroom have a significant effect on children's later academic success and later accomplishment in schools.

It is concluded through this research that while there might be a rich theoretical knowledge base surrounding evidence based practices that lead to improved outcomes for children including English language learners, this knowledge base is not being translated at the practitioner level. In other words, even though teachers in the present study had educated at university, received diploma or passed a number of training courses they were not able to put all those learned theoretical knowledge into practice. They were indeed uncertain on how to interpret their teaching knowledge and deliver it in activities and practice in classroom. This signifies the vitality of providing preschool teachers with an early literacy model to guide them in implementing efficient instruction.

I hope the present research would provide educators and teachers with a newly developed early literacy framework and model to effectively teach young children. The early literacy model presented in this study was comprised of two main components including early literacy learning environment and preschool teachers' practices. This model can in fact guide preschool teachers, especially less-experienced teachers step by step through the delivery of early English literacy instruction. Policymakers may also be able to account for the consistencies or inconsistencies regarding teacher implementation of effective practices, thus emphasizing a need for more common and precise standards and requirements for teaching in preschools.

## **Summary**

This chapter began with a summary of the current study project and research questions were answered afterwards by looking across the cases of the study. The analysis of findings was discussed as well by presenting state policies and teachers' practices on early childhood education development, the disparity between teachers'

practices and curriculum, teachers' professional development and pathway to becoming a teacher. The findings of the study offered several implications for preschool teachers' development such as implications in theory and research, teaching practice and curriculum. Later the limitations of the study and some recommendations for future research were discussed. This chapter later ended with presenting the overall conclusion of the research findings as well as the researcher's reflexivity.

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