

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

# Conducive eco-system for learning in preschools

DR ANNA CHRISTINA ABDULLAH AND  
ROSLIN NOOR ONG ABDULLAH  
education@nst.com.my

**T**HE learning of languages is commonly believed to be most effective and efficient in the early years and even though there are studies that support this belief, an added pre-condition to this maxim is that the learning context has to be carefully managed and the learner appropriately supported.

Based on this premise, as well as the current demands of globalisation and future trends in education, it is difficult to deny the learning of the English Language as a modern-day imperative. Hence, whilst the introduction of English Language learning in preschool is a laudable and important move on the part of the Education Ministry, it has to be done in a developmentally appropriate manner and through research-driven or evidence-based strategies.

The current English Language scenario in Malaysian preschools reveals several challenges, among which are teachers' low level of English Language proficiency, children's lack of exposure to English Language speaking environments, as well as parents' ignorance of the importance of the English Language to acquire knowledge.

It is partly due to the above as well as because research supports the notion of young children being taught using their first language (L1), that the learning of English Language as an additional language should commence with creating language awareness and nurturing a positive attitude towards the language.

English Language learning should not have a heavy cognitive load nor be assessed in a developmentally inappropriate manner.

In the context of English Language learning then, the preschool should be a place that introduces them to the language in an enjoyable and meaningful way and not one that causes feelings of insecurity or anxiousness.

The preschool teacher has to ensure that a conducive eco-system is provided for children's English Language learning.

A conducive eco-system should be one that prioritises the child's needs and planning that revolves around his interests and abilities. The child needs to feel safe and comfortable enough to take risks involved in exploring and attempting new things. Hence, the use of play-based learning experiences is most apt as play comes naturally to children, and involves hands-on, interactive and concrete sensorial activities. There should not be an artificial play-work divide as children's work is play.

Creating playful interactions with preschoolers around games, songs, storytelling, storybook reading, rhyming and oral language not only supports language learning but also helps make learning English less scary and more fun. For example, what 4- or 5-year-old would not love speaking into a microphone and hearing his own voice or singing along with gestures/actions to a song with a big purple dinosaur? In the process, play-based activities allow preschoolers to learn new concepts, words and skills.

Enticing preschoolers to speak through the use of realia, props and visuals can make learning more meaningful and impactful. The selection of appropriate teaching aids is equally crucial.



Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak and his wife Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor paying a visit to Sekolah Bimbingan Jalinan Kasih at Kampung Baru, Kuala Lumpur. The preschool should be a place that introduces preschoolers to the English language in an enjoyable way.

For example, in a thematic unit on fruits and vegetables, how can a teacher go about facilitating the acquisition of related vocabulary? Teachers tend to frequently use flashcards and pictures. However, by bringing a basket full of fruits into the classroom, and having the children name and describe each fruit is more authentic, and thereafter a surprise indoor picnic with the fruits will surely be all the more exciting.

One thing is certain: this is one lesson they will not forget for they will have had the opportunity to touch, feel, smell and even taste the fruits. Hence, they will have learnt vocabulary related to the names of the fruits, plus the words for describing them (size, colour, texture) and their taste.

Dispensing meaningful praise and encouragement will help motivate and support children in learning a new language. However, teachers should not be too troubled if there are children who are reluctant to speak initially.

Some, if not most preschoolers will go through a "silent period". This is when they are absorbing the new language and are reluctant to speak for fear of making mistakes. Thus, it is very important that teachers do not pressure or punish them for not speaking. Instead, timely praise and encouragement can work wonders.

Additionally, the teacher should not react negatively if the child uses his L1, as the L1 at this stage can act as an enabler of the target language. Reprimanding the child will introduce an element of fear and reinforce the idea that his L1 is not valued while the target language is viewed as a threat to the L1.

Having a buddy system is a great way to help preschoolers cope with the mammoth task of learning a new language. This involves pairing a child who is more proficient in English with a child who is less, where the former can scaffold the latter in language learning. It can take place during play time or another learning activity, where buddies have each other to talk to and practise their speaking skills.

**The important thing is not so much that every child should be taught, as that every child should be given the wish to learn.**

JOHN LUBBOCK

The buddy system helps create a non-threatening language learning environment and builds confidence among less proficient preschoolers.

Involving parents in their children's learning is crucial in supporting the child's learning outside the classroom. Parental involvement can help extend the experiences that a child has in the classroom to include real-world activities that happen in the home. Families should be encouraged to engage in oral language and read to their child in English at home.

Consequently, these shared activities create a more positive experience for children and help them perform better when they are in school. To engage parents in their child's learning, the first important step for the teacher is to establish good lines of communication with parents as well as create opportunities to involve them as an important partner in their child's education.

Summing up, creating a conducive eco-system for English Language learning in preschool is challenging but not impossible. Preschool teachers can inject fun and playfulness into classroom interactions and thus, promote a non-threatening language learning situation for preschoolers. This combined with appropriate teaching resources, positive reinforcement and social interaction that scaffold language learning will further impact learning among preschoolers.

To quote John Lubbock: "The important thing is not so much that every child should be taught, as that every child should be given the wish to learn."

Dr Anna Christina Abdullah is a Professor of Preschool Education at the School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia. She also serves on the Panel of Experts for English Language Standards and Quality Council. Roslin Noor Ong Abdullah is Head of Department, Language and Literacy at the English Language Teaching Centre, Ministry of Education.