TOWARDS A NEW FRAMEWORK OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN MALAYSIAN PRESCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

At the preschool level in Malaysia, all preschools, including those from public and private sectors are required to follow the guidelines stated in the National Preschool Standard-based Curriculum (NPSC) issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2017. However, the NPSC is very general and schools are not provided with any further guidance on the program, which leads to some preschools, mainly private ones, to supplement their curriculum by subscribing to various private education franchisors available on the market. There seems to be a need to propose improvements to current curriculum practices. It is proposed that this is best done by investigating the theoretical foundations of language learning. In particular, this paper discusses Pienemann's Processability Theory (1998, 2005) and elaborates on the Developmentally Moderated Focus-on-Form instruction (DMFonF) (Di Biase, 2002,2008). It proposes the development of a new model of English language learning based on the latter leading towards a new framework aiming to assist teachers, linguists and syllabus-designers to create a developmentally moderated English curriculum.

Keywords: English, Malaysian preschools, developmentally moderated focus-on-form instruction

BACKGROUND

Malaysia is a postcolonial, multi-ethnic and multilingual country that consists of Malays (67.4%), Chinese (24.6%), Indians (7.3%) and numerous minority communities, which include the indigenous groups (0.7%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017). *Bahasa Melayu* or the Malay language is the official language of the nation and English is widely spoken, especially in urban areas (Gill, 2014). In the education sector, *Bahasa Melayu* is used as the medium of instruction in primary and secondary national schools while other ethnic languages such as Mandarin and Tamil are used as the medium of instructions in national-type (vernacular) primary Chinese and Tamil schools (Ying et al., 2015). In these national-type schools, *Bahasa Melayu* is taught as a compulsory subject. With regard to English, in the Southeast Asian region, Malaysia is one of the nations in which English plays a pivotal role as the second 'strong' language (Hashim, 2020). Realising the importance of English globally, it is included as a compulsory subject in national and national-type schools (Azman, 2016).

MALAYSIAN NATIONAL CURRICULUM AND THE LANGUAGE LEARNING OF PRE-SCHOOLERS

Generally, Malaysian children are introduced to the English language from as early as 4 to 6 years old, which is at the preschool level. English then continues to be taught as a compulsory subject throughout primary school (7-12 years old). This is continued at the secondary school level (13-17 years old) and then at the tertiary level of education (Azman, 2016). It is safe to say that for most Malaysians, due to the status of English in Malaysia, English has naturally become their second language (L2). It can be safely concluded that, by and large, Malaysian learners are exposed to English for a minimum of 11 years within the education system.

Despite this protracted exposure to the language, Malaysian students have largely been unable to be proficient users of the language. It is reported that English language performance amongst school leavers and tertiary students is below the level of competence that may be reasonably expected (Che Musa et al., 2012; Sulaiman et al., 2015; Yamat et al., 2014). Malaysian students' limited communicative skills in English present a key educational concern and this concern can be found abundantly in the literature and the media (Ali et al., 2011).

Thus, as corrective measures to elevate the standard of English among Malaysian learners, the government has embarked on several educational reforms, spanning from pre- to post-independence (see Gill, 2014 for a comprehensive review). The government has recently taken the initiative to reform English language learning in school through what is termed as "The Roadmap 2015-2025" (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). The Roadmap is a guide for English language curriculum designers and educators aiming at Malaysian students achieving international English communication standards, which is benchmarked against the Common European Framework of Reference or CEFR.

The Roadmap is essentially a 10-year reform plan to improve English language education in Malaysia, with the goal to produce proficient users of English. It regards English language education as a continuous learning journey from preschool to university. The guide foresees that by the completion of primary schooling (which is at Year 6, at age 12 years old), students should possess rudimentary skills in English, based on the A2 CEFR target. However, a major drawback of CEFR scales and predictors lies in insufficient empirical validation and the lack of correlation with Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research (Wisniewski, 2017). Wisniewski notes that CEFR scales were never matched onto empirical learner language; hence it is unclear whether the scales correspond to authentic learner output or simply derived from the teachers' perspective of learners' development or some official desiderata. Further analysis of the Roadmap reveals that the main focus lies in standardising English lessons and assessments to CEFR and improving the English teachers' English proficiency and pedagogical knowledge. It appears that the crux of the matter, i.e., the English language performance of the students, are not given adequate attention, and this is simply lumped together under "Teaching and Learning" (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015, p.173). It appears then that the Roadmap is a top-down process, where people of authority make decisions to be implemented in schools across the nation, perhaps with insufficient knowledge and empirical support of the tasks at hand.

Up till now, we have yet to see any positive outcomes from the curricular reforms. We contend that this scenario arises from the mismatch between the objectives attributed to

the current English syllabus and the reality of learning a second language. In other words, the current syllabus is not developmentally based. It does not reflect how second language learners acquire the language in an empirically founded sequence, nor what the teachers require to teach that syllabus in terms of appropriate in-servicing or materials.

In the Malaysian setting, there is a clear need to create a carefully thought-out developmental syllabus based on empirical linguistic findings and, at the same time, incorporate the local contexts. It is entirely possible that the low English proficiency among school leavers stems from the fact that the English syllabus is not developmentally moderated. At the preschool level in Malaysia, all preschools, including public and private sectors are required to follow the guidelines stated in the National Preschool Standard-based Curriculum (NPSC) issued by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) in 2016. There are six components in NSPC; Communications, Spirituality, Attitude and Values, Humanity, Self-Esteem, Physical and Aesthetics as well as Science and Technology (Aquino et al., 2017; Nachiappan et al., 2018). English proficiency is part of the Communication component in NSPC. According to NSPC, which closely follows the Roadmap (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015), all pre-schoolers are required to learn *Bahasa Melayu* and English. For the national preschool, *Bahasa Melayu* and English are equally allotted 600 minutes each week as the medium of instructions. For the national-type preschools, equal instruction time is divided between Mandarin or Tamil (400 minutes), *Bahasa Melayu* (400 minutes) and English (400 minutes). Bilingualism and multilingualism are thus highly promoted by the government in the educational domain (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). The emphasis is given to English due to its status as a global language and to provide a competitive edge to Malaysian learners and school leavers.

However, upon closer perusal of the NPSC, it is found that the prescribed curriculum guidelines are very general. For English lessons, for instance, the learning outcomes specified by the NPSC for English are that children may be able to listen and respond using verbal and non-verbal responses, communicate using simple sentences, read and comprehend simple sentences and also able to write words and phrases (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2016, p.32). Due to these 'generic' guidelines, it was reported that some preschool operators (mainly private ones) resorted to complement the syllabus with other materials provided by various education franchisors available on the market, such as Smart Reader, Q-DEES, Kinderland and Montessori (Saidi et al., 2013). The situation is further exacerbated by the fact that the Ministry does not supply or indicate any English textbook at the preschool level. For public preschools, the budget is limited, and the preschools may not be at liberty to subscribe to such privately sourced materials. Thus, this new model based on a language learning model may be able to contribute by developing a specific English learning framework that will assist teachers in conducting English lessons in class.

With regards to English acquisition studies in Malaysia, there is a limited resource to determine milestones and normative data for English language acquisition among Malaysian children. The crucial need is to establish milestones that will indicate when Malaysian children can acquire certain English morphemes, lexical items, as well as semantic and pragmatic features in the local context (Razak, 2014; Razak et al., 2011). A thorough search of past literature reveals that few studies were conducted to investigate English acquisition among Malaysian children. Mohamed Salleh et al. (2016, 2019) and Mohamed Salleh (2017) investigated English development in a Malay-English bilingual child. However, the studies were conducted on a single child's language development. In a recent study, Mohamed Salleh

et al. (2020) investigated the acquisition of English grammar among Malay-English bilingual primary school children. The findings show that other than language input from school and home environments, the children's language aptitude also contributes to their attainment of English grammar.

A study by Omar (2016) investigated the read-aloud technique in teaching English vocabulary to Malaysian pre-schoolers. Omar (2016) states that the strategy deployed by the teacher, which was using L1 (Malay) to explain the difficult English vocabulary to the children was shown to be effective as it helped enhance the children's grasp and comprehension of the English words taught in the sessions. Goh (2019) investigated the use of English in Malaysian preschools, but the study's focus is on the teachers' perception of English as the language of instruction. Another work by San and Abdullah (2014) found that English vocabulary production is highly correlated with the English proficiency of Malaysian Chinese pre-schoolers; the more vocabulary the children produced, the more proficient they are in using the language. Similar results were also found in a study on Filipino multilingual indigenous children; the lack of English vocabulary was found to be the main obstacle for the young learners to acquire English (Leaño et al., 2019). Other than these studies, to our knowledge, studies on English acquisition among Malaysian children are scant. Information about English milestones is fundamental to inform educators, curriculum designers and policymakers to enable optimal curriculum design and devise strategies for its implementation that may be suitable for young learners acquiring English in the Malaysian context. We surmise that the unavailability of such data is a major obstacle to designing a developmentally moderated English syllabus in Malaysia.

Given the above premises, there is a need to construct a new English language learning model with a particular focus on the Malaysian public preschool system. The focus on pre-schoolers links naturally to the Malaysian education National Key Results Area (NKRA) as preschool enrolment is expected to increase exponentially and this new framework might contribute significantly to the creation of quality preschool education in English. This need is also in line with the fourth objective of sustainable development goal (SDG): obtaining a quality education. The model will inform linguists, teachers, stakeholders and policymakers on the milestones of English acquisition among Malaysian children and directly assist in designing a developmentally moderated syllabus and hence more efficient because it reflects the natural developmental path followed by child learners. This would then underpin the CEFR by offering clear, evidence-based, linguistic milestones for teachers and curriculum designers. The theoretical framework that will be the foundation of the new framework will be elucidated in the following section.

PROCESSABILITY THEORY

The developmental framework that will be used to design the novel English syllabus at the preschool level is the Processability Theory (henceforth PT) (Pienemann, 1998, 2005; Di Biase et al., 2015). PT is a theoretical framework originally devised for second language acquisition. It views language acquisition as a hierarchically ordered process whereby learners will follow a specific trajectory of acquisition. According to PT, there are four stages of morphological development in English second language acquisition. The following table summarises the universal sequence in the development of morphology in PT, as proposed by Di Biase et al. (2015) after Pienemann (1998, 2005) (See Table 1).

Table 1

Developmental Stages Hypothesis for L2 English Morphology (Di Biase et al., 2015; after Pienemann, 1998, 2005)

Processing Procedure		Structure	Example
Sentence Procedure		SV agreement: 3rd person sg -s	*Peter loves rice.*
Phrasal Procedure	NP Procedure	phrasal plural marking	*these girls* *three black cats* *many cats*
	VP Procedure	AUX + V: have + V-*ed* MOD + V be + V-*ing*	*they have jumped* *you can go* *I am going*
Category Procedure		past -*ed* plural -*s* possessive '*s* verb -*ing*	*Mary jumped* *my brothers working* *Mary's car* *he eating*
Lemma Access		single words, formulas	*station here* *my name is Pim*

Upon learning a second language, the learner begins at the lemma access stage, a starting point where the learner is able to produce single words and lexical items in the language. Examples include names of animals, fruits, colours, numbers, greetings and formulaic expressions, i.e., the learner builds up lexical resources comprising words and fixed expressions. The next stage is the category procedure, where the learner begins to annotate lexical items. In English, the process is materialised when the learner is able to use lexical level morphemes such as progressive –*ing*, plural –*s*, possessive 's and past tense –*ed*. The learner then proceeds to the phrasal stage; at this stage, the learner produces phrases with the correct word order and grammatical agreement, i.e., plural agreement as in *many cats, many dogs* and later the use of some auxiliaries with verbs e.g., *you can go* and *I am going*. The final morphological stage is reached when the learner is able to construct morphological agreement across phrase boundaries such as the Subject-Verb agreement in English, e.g., *Peter loves rice.*

Evidence for the acquisition of a particular developmental stage in PT depends on the production of a structure belonging to that stage in a form and quantity sufficient to satisfy the emergence criterion. According to Pienemann (1998, p. 138), the emergence criterion is "the point in time at which certain skills have, in principle, been attained or at which certain operations can, in principle, be carried out". This means that a particular stage is considered to be acquired if the learners produce both formal and lexical variation involving the same structure. For example, in the category procedure (Stage 2), plural suffix -*s* is deemed acquired if the learner is able to produce both formal variation, that is, the singular and the plural contexts of the same word (e.g., *apple* versus *apples*), as well as lexical variation, where the suffix -*s* is used on different words (e.g., *apples, bananas*) (Di Biase & Kawaguchi, 2002). In other words, as operationalised by Pallotti (2007), the emergence criterion requires evidence of systematic and productive use of the structure.

The Processability Theory has been widely tested over two decades now in many works on second language acquisition of a wide range of languages such as English

(Pienemann, 1998; Zhang & Widyastuti, 2010), Arabic (Mansouri, 2005; Mansouri & Håkansson, 2007), Chinese (Zhang, 2002, 2005; Gao, 2005), Japanese (Di Biase & Kawaguchi, 2002; Kawaguchi, 2007, 2010, 2015), Italian (Di Biase & Kawaguchi 2002, Di Biase & Bettoni, 2015), Swedish (Pienemann & Hakansson, 1999), Spanish (Bonilla, 2014) among others. PT has also been used for children's bilingual acquisition (Hardini et al., 2019, 2020; Itani-Adams, 2013; Medojevic, 2014; Mohamed Salleh, 2017; Mohamed Salleh et al. 2016, 2019, 2020). In all these studies, the results show that the trajectory of learners' language development, adults and children alike, follow the stages hypothesised by PT.

As discussed earlier, studies investigating English development among Malaysian children are scarce, reflected in a systematic review on bilingualism and language processing from 2015 up till 2019 (see Soh et al. 2020 for a comprehensive review). In very few research conducted on Malaysian children's language development, such as by Mohamed Salleh et al. (2016, 2019, 2020) and Mohamed Salleh (2017), the findings show that the children's lexical and morphological development in English develop accordingly based on PT sequence; which is lemma/word > category procedure> phrasal stage. What this means is that the children first accumulate and develop words in English (e.g., *cat, dog*) then gradually annotate the words with English grammatical markings as reflected in the category stage of PT (past tense *-ed,* plural *-s*, possessive *'s* and verb *-ing*) (e.g., *cats, dogs*), followed by producing English Noun Phrase (NP) (e.g., *many cats, many dogs*) and Verb Phrase (VP) (e.g., *playing with cats*) utterances. Therefore, due to this theory's well-established nature, the PT sequence is the theoretical foundation in lesson design in the new Developmentally Moderated Focus-on-Form (DMFonF) instruction, further elaborated in the following section.

FOCUS-ON-FORM AND DEVELOPMENTALLY MODERATED FOCUS-ON FORM (DMFONF)

In Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, the issue of natural versus instructed learning has been debated perennially. Krashen (1982) claims that acquisition happens 'naturally', i.e., by exposing learners to sufficient comprehensible input and instruction is unnecessary for learners to acquire the language. This view has led to the widespread adoption of the 'communicative approach' where the focus is mainly on the communicative aspect of language and conscious learning is minimised (Di Biase, 2002). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as advocated by Wilkins (1976), Widdowson (1978), Nunan (1991) and others has a long history in English language teaching in the Malaysian context. The KBSR English syllabus (which is now replaced with KSSR) and also the recent adoption of CEFR in the English curriculum reflect this communicative aim (Che Musa et al., 2012).

Regarding instructed learning or specifically Focus-on-Form (FonF) instruction, Long (1991) states that it is an instructional approach which "...overtly draws attention to the linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (p.45-46). FonF involves a focus on specific linguistic features and occurs in a communicative context, which requires the use of tasks in which learners' main attention is on the meaning. However, the teacher may provide periodic attention to the form as well (Ellis, 2016). FonF relies on the incidental emergence of linguistic forms in the course of the meaning-based lesson. The teacher gives feedback on a form only if a communication problem happens to arise. However, there is no guarantee that the problem will arise in conjunction with the learner's current developmental stage.

The Developmentally Moderated Focus-on-Form (DMFonF) is an instructional approach modelled after Di Biase (2002, 2008). This method for L2 learning through instruction in a country where the prevalent language spoken is different from the L2 (e.g., English taught in Indonesia), combines "(a) modest form-oriented communicative component within an otherwise meaning-based L2 programme, in combination with (b) a focus-on-form approach … to feedback concentrating on developmentally targeted structure(s)" (Di Biase, 2008, p. 198). DMFonF instruction was inspired both by Pienemann's (1984, 1998) Teachability Hypothesis and Long's (1991) Focus on Form (FonF) feedback. According to the Teachability Hypothesis (Pienemann, 1984), instruction is constrained by development; hence developmental stages cannot be skipped through instruction. The form to be taught may be learned if the learner has already achieved the stage to which that form belongs, or the learner has achieved the immediately earlier stage as specified by PT. In other words, learning can happen if the learner is 'developmentally ready' for that particular structure (c.f. Mackey, 1999).

However, the difference between Long's (1991) FonF and Di Biase's (2002,2008) DMFonF is that the latter espouses a proactive role within instruction. Given that developmental sequences may be hypothesised in advance (by following the PT sequence), the teacher using this approach would initially establish what might be the stage of development achieved by the learner, i.e., by finding out first what is the learner's baseline. Having found what the current stage of development is, the teacher proceeds thereby to design a programme focusing on specific developmentally moderated forms to be introduced gradually and communicatively in the lesson, which continues to be primarily meaning-based. Furthermore, the teacher's feedback focuses only on the form that is the focus of the lesson and ignores other linguistic errors (Di Biase, 2002, 2008). This ensures that feedback is developmentally moderated. Once the programme based on the specific stage is well underway and having established that the learner is able to produce structures belonging to that stage (by using emergence criteria), the teacher proceeds, in parallel, to design the program for the next stage.

In Di Biase's studies (2002,2008), early primary school pupils had been receiving meaning-based Italian L2 instruction for 2 to 3 years within their school programme. Before the experimental study started, the children were all at stage 1 (lemma access) in terms of their grammatical development. After receiving DMFonF instruction for 18 weeks, the experimental group with the DMFonF instruction and feedback reported more consistent language development than the control group who received the same instruction programme, but the teachers were not asked to control for developmentally moderated feedback. Thus, developmentally moderated instruction with FonF feedback helped speed up L2 language learning significantly.

Recently, DMFonF instruction has also been empirically tested on Indonesian children (Hardini et al., 2019, 2020). In the studies, the participants were divided into two groups, one that received the DMFonF instruction (experimental group) and the other that received instruction without DMFonF (control group). The participants went through the instructions for 12 weeks and their development was assessed based on PT's developmental stages. The findings indicated that the children in the experimental group acquired the vocabulary and the specific grammatical structures taught to them. In contrast, the control group was not able to do so even though they had been exposed to the English language earlier and longer than the experimental group. Thus, DMFonF instruction has been shown to expedite the development

of English vocabulary and grammar of Indonesian children, who are EFL learners. Thus, English being a second language of the nation, it is hypothesised that DMFonF might also bring similar benefits to Malaysian children as it does to Italian and Indonesian children as shown in these studies.

To summarise, Figure 1 shows the key elements and the theoretical underpinning that constitute DMFonF.
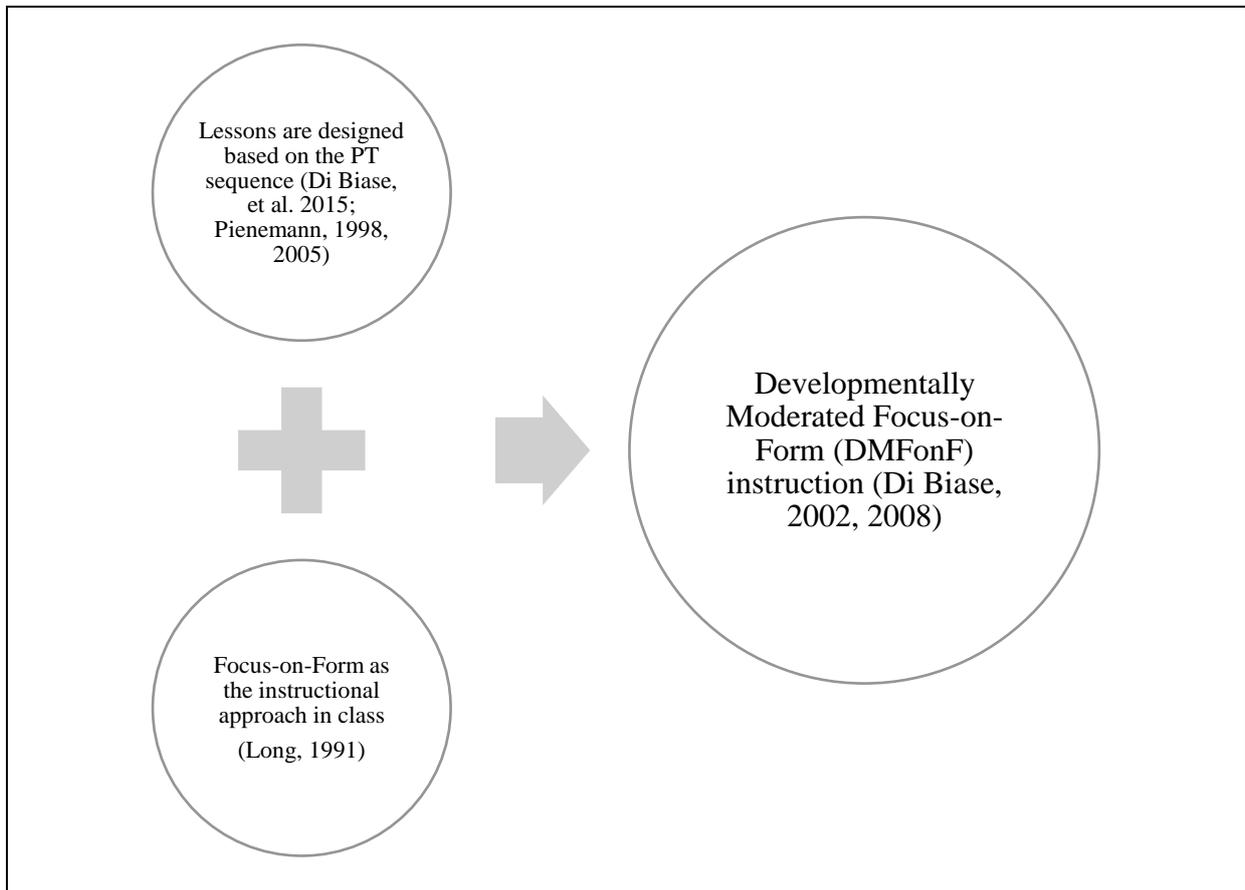

Figure 1. Key Elements in DMFonF

POTENTIAL IMPACT OF THE NEW MODEL ON THE NATION AND EDUCATION SYSTEM

The new model should help to improve the early acquisition of English among Malaysian learners from the onset of acquisition. As mentioned above, many reports are lamenting the deteriorating standard of English in the country despite protracted exposure to the language. Perhaps, the standard can improve if changes or interventions are planned from the beginning of English language learning, which is at the preschool level.

Secondly, the new model will produce age-sensitive and developmentally sensitive milestones of English acquisition among young Malaysian learners and this will contribute significantly to designing an English syllabus that is empirically founded and based on normative data. It is also crucial that the English syllabus is appropriate to the local

Malaysian context as English is not the L1 of the nation but the L2. The comparison of idealised English proficiency shall not be based on the monolingual norms as the trajectory of the language development of monolingual and bilingual speakers have been shown in the literature to be different (Genesee et al. 1995: Paradis, 2007). Indeed, they should neither be based on learning the language in the European context, where languages are often typologically closer to English than Malay and other ethnic languages in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

The paper aims to introduce and propose a new framework of language learning modelled on Di Biase's (2002, 2008) Developmentally Moderated Focus-on-Form (DMFonF) instruction, which is based on the psychological framework of the Processability Theory and the instructional approach of focus on form (FonF). DMFonF serves dual purposes; a) facilitate teachers and syllabus designers to create English lessons which are grounded on empirically validated developmental schedules, and b) provide a pedagogical approach that integrates communicative aspects of language learning and grammar teaching. It is hoped that this new model will contribute significantly to understanding early English education in a multi-ethnic country such as Malaysia. The model is also envisaged to facilitate teachers, syllabus designers and policymakers in designing an English curriculum appropriate to the local context. Extensive studies on the development of English among young children in Malaysian context are still lacking and thus, it is hoped that this paper will contribute to bridging the gap by providing a framework that is contextualised to Malaysian local needs.

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