

## EARLY LITERACY CURRICULUM (ELiC) FRAMEWORK FOR NURSERIES IN MALAYSIA (Kerangka Kurikulum Literasi Awal (ELiC) Untuk Taska Di Malaysia)

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### Abstract

The main intention of this article is to describe the Early Literacy Curriculum (ELiC) framework for nurseries in Malaysia. The researchers conducted an analysis of early literacy documents from several countries such as National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) in United States, Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in United Kingdom, Te-Whariki in New Zealand, Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) in Australia and National PERMATA Curriculum in Malaysia. Components and characteristics of the documents have been reshuffled to build up the ELiC framework based on the theory of emergent literacy. The ELiC framework has been evaluated by qualified and experienced educators, and it has been confirmed by the lecturers who were experts in early literacy development. As the result, it was approved that the framework encompassed every component in early literacy development, and the focus of the components was organized by age groups. Finally, the researchers managed to develop the ELiC framework, which is more complete and specific for the use of 2+, 3+, and 4+ year-old children in Malaysia.

**Keywords** *Early Literacy Development, Early Literacy Curriculum (ELiC), Nurseries.*

### Abstrak

Tujuan utama artikel ini adalah untuk menerangkan kerangka Kurikulum Literasi Awal (ELiC) untuk taska di Malaysia. Pengkaji menjalankan analisis dokumen literasi awal daripada beberapa negara seperti Panel Literasi Awal Kebangsaan (NELP) di Amerika Syarikat, Peringkat Awal Tahun Asasi (EYFS) di United Kingdom, Te-Whariki di New Zealand, Kerangka Tahun Awal Pembelajaran (EYLF) di Australia dan Kurikulum PERMATA Kebangsaan di Malaysia. Komponen dan ciri-ciri dokumen telah dirombak untuk membina kerangka ELiC berdasarkan teori literasi yang wujud. Kerangka ELiC telah dinilai oleh pengajar yang berkeelayakan dan berpengalaman serta telah disahkan oleh pensyarah pakar dalam pembangunan literasi awal. Hasilnya, ia telah diluluskan bahawa kerangka ini meliputi setiap komponen dalam pembangunan

literasi awal, dan fokus komponen itu disusun berdasarkan kumpulan umur. Akhirnya, penyelidik berjaya membangunkan kerangka ELiC yang lebih lengkap dan spesifik untuk kegunaan kanak-kanak 2+, 3+, dan 4+ tahun di Malaysia.

**Kata kunci** *Pembangunan Literasi Awal, Kurikulum Literasi Awal (ELiC), Taska.*

## INTRODUCTION

Emergent literacy theory proposed by Clay (1966) stated that speech development process, early reading and early writing starts from birth until a child acquires standard reading and writing skills. The theory changes the existing perceptions about early childhood literacy. Prior to the theory, early literacy development was perceived to only emerge when children are involved in teaching and learning at a formal preschool or primary school (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001; Young, 2003). Instead, emergent literacy theory refers to the early children's proficiency from birth to continuous development (Beaty, 2013; Lonigan, 2006).

Most Western studies indicate that early literacy is an indicator to gauge level of reading and writing proficiency (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Nemours Brightstart, 2008). Children below four years old who have a good early literacy development will be proficient in reading and writing skills when they are enrolled in preschools (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). Therefore, a strong foundation of early literacy development among children needs to be established at least at a nursery level from birth to four years old. Previous studies claimed that it is appropriate to introduce early literacy development to children of the aged of four years old and below (Davis, 2014; Goodwin, 2014; Hilbert & Eis, 2014; Juppri, 2012; Scates, 2014).

This article aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of early literacy development within curriculum in several countries. The concept of early literacy development is emerging but has not been the focus in Malaysia. Hence, it is crucial to develop a quality, comprehensive as well as focused framework for children who attend nurseries in Malaysia.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Child care educators in Malaysia face challenges in terms of lack of knowledge and skills in early literacy development due to limited resources which only contains in National PERMATA Curriculum. The researchers undertook a critical analysis on the content of curriculum, particularly in the area of Language, Communication, and Early Literacy as it is closely related to early literacy development (Bahagian PERMATA, 2013). An identified weakness of the early literacy component is that there are no categories and detailed explanation. Instead, the curriculum only describes the early literacy component generally in terms of learning outcomes and milestone levels according to the ages.

In addition, there are differences in the aspect of terminologies used and types of components in early literacy development or early literacy developmental skills

within the curriculum in different countries. Educators may feel uncertain to identify either early literacy developmental components or skills for children.

Therefore, an ELiC framework has been developed through a comprehensive approach to guide the educators in enhancing early literacy among children who attend the nurseries. The ELiC framework consists of complete and specific components for children aged 2+, 3+, and 4+ years old in Malaysia.

## **PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES**

This article aims to explain the ELiC framework for children who attend the nurseries in Malaysia. The objectives are as follows:

1. To explain the content of early literacy development documents in several countries.
2. To explain the Early Literacy Curriculum (ELiC) framework for nurseries in Malaysia.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The researcher organised a workshop which involved experts in the area of literacy namely a professor and a senior lecturer with a doctoral degree in language and communication. Both reviewers have over twenty years of experience in their respective fields. Apart from them, two child care educators with ten years of teaching experience were also involved. The workshop was to analyse the content of documents which are related to the early literacy development. Those were National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) in the United States of America, Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in United Kingdom, Te Whariki in New Zealand, The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) in Australia, and National PERMATA Curriculum in Malaysia.

The researcher, along with the experts, analysed and compared the extent of early literacy development in each document. Then, the researcher discussed with the experts on the development of the comprehensive and specific ELiC framework accordance to the children (aged two, three, and four) who attend nurseries in Malaysia. Experts' reviews were sought for content validity of the ELiC framework. The reviews were utilized by the researcher to determine the relevant data for the research.

## **FINDINGS**

### ***Content of Documents Related To Early Literacy Development in Several Countries***

#### **National Early Literacy Panel (NELP), United States of America**

National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) was established in 2002 affiliated with National Centre for Family Literacy (NCFL). The purpose of the NELP establishment was to investigate the impact of early literacy development practices among children from birth to five years old. The main aim of NELP is to identify intervention, parenting activities, and teaching practices which encourage early literacy development (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2010).

There are six components in early literacy development which have been identified to have average to strong relationship without the influence of intellectual factors and socio economic status. The components are: (a) alphabet knowledge; (b) phonological awareness; (c) rapid automatic naming of letters or digit; (d) rapid automatic naming of objects or colours; (e) writing or writing name; and (f) phonological memory.

Besides that, there are five related components of early literacy framework which have a weak relationship in reading and writing proficiency. These components will influence contextual variable factors such as (a) concept about print; (b) print knowledge; (c) reading readiness; (d) oral language; and (e) visual processing.

### **Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), United Kingdom**

Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), United Kingdom is a standard to be complied by all early childhood operators to ensure the wellbeing of children's development and learning (Department for Education, 2014). EYFS is a more comprehensive document because it emphasizes on the children's needs to learn, develop, and their need for safety and wellbeing. In this article, the researcher focuses only in learning and development areas of EYFS which are relevant in early literacy components, namely, communication and language component (prime area) and literacy component (specific area).

Language and communication development give opportunities for children to experience a rich language environment, to develop competencies and skills in expressing themselves; and to speak and listen in various situations. The goals of early learning for this development are (a) listening and attention; (b) understanding; and (c) speaking.

Literacy components encourage children to link sounds and letters and to begin to read and write. Children must be given access to a wide range of reading materials (books, poems, and other written materials) to ignite their interest. The goals of early learning for this development are reading (children read and understand simple sentences) and writing (children use their phonic knowledge to write words which matches their spoken sounds).

### **Te Whariki, New Zealand**

Te Whariki is an early childhood curriculum policy statement by New Zealand Ministry of Education which lays a foundation for preparing early childhood development and learning based on sociocultural context (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2014). In this curriculum, only Strand 4: Communication that relates to early literacy development which encompasses the following; (a) develop non-verbal communication skills for a range of purposes; (b) develop verbal communication skills for a range of purposes; (c) experience the stories and symbols of their own and other cultures; and (d) discover and develop different ways to be creative and expressive.

### **Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), Australia**

Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) was formulated by The Council of Australian Governments to ensure the provision of opportunities for children

by educators. This in order to maximise the children's potentials and building a foundation for achieving success in learning (Australian Government Department of Education, 2009). EYLF is the Australian first curriculum developed specifically for early childhood education for children from birth to five years old as a transition process before the children enrolled in mainstream education.

There is one learning area in EYLF which relates to early literacy development and views children as effective communicators. The learning area emphasizes on literacy and numeracy competence as a basis for communication and later, to achieve learning success. The researcher focuses only on literacy as capacity, confidence and disposition to use language in all its forms such as speech, listening, observing, reading, writing, and contemporary texts such as electronic and media-based prints. Children need to be exposed to their surroundings through technology and digital media. Among main components in literacy learning area are; (a) children interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes; (b) children engage with a range of texts and gain meaning from these texts; (c) children express ideas and make meaning using a range of media; (d) children begin to understand how symbols and pattern systems work; and (e) children use information and communication technologies to access information, investigate ideas and represent their thinking.

### **National PERMATA Curriculum, Malaysia**

National PERMATA Curriculum is a guideline for the early childhood care operators and educators in Malaysia which covers aspects of education, child care, nutrition, and health (Bahagian PERMATA, 2013). Child care operators and educators must ensure about their roles in enhancing the children's potential. To date, however, the National PERMATA Curriculum is only implemented by government and semi-government nurseries.

Based on National PERMATA Curriculum, there is only one learning area which is related to early literacy development which is Language, Communication, and Early Literacy. The learning area aims to ensure children are able to start early and be proficient in language, particularly the home language, Malay as well as English language. Specifically, the learning objectives are to develop verbal proficiency, interaction, early reading, and early writing as early steps to inculcate culture knowledge in children.

Activities to develop communication skills, speech, and early literacy have been planned carefully so that children can acquire communication skills (according to their level) while attending the nurseries. However, the division of the components is not clear and systematic as the components only stated random learning outcomes according to the children's age which is from six months to four years old.

### **SUMMARY**

The researchers refer to five main components of early literacy development in order to analyse content of each relevant document. These components have been referred to the literature review in the context of language and communication, print concept and environmental print, phonemic and phonetics, reading and narrative comprehension,

and early writing (Beaty, 2013; Creech, 2008; DeBaryshe & Gorecki, 2007; Juppri, 2012; Lonigan, 2006; Strickland & Ayers, 2007; Wasik, 2010; Zainiah, 2013).

The NELP and EYFS curriculum indicate the division of components and explicit early literacy skills; however, there are redundancies in some components. The NELP component such as alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, automatic fluent letter naming, and phonological memory are included in phonemic and phonics, while EYFS components such as listening and concentrating, and speech are the components in language and communication.

Te Whariki, EYLF, and National PERMATA Curriculum indicate that division of components and skills of early literacy development are rather general compared to main components of early literacy development. Nevertheless, each curriculum has its uniqueness and strength when compared to other curriculum. For instance, Te Whariki curriculum emphasizes on aspects of their culture, creative art, and expressive art; EYLF focuses on the use of information communication technology (ICT); and National PERMATA Curriculum describes milestones of children's ability according to their age group, in the context of early literacy development.

The researchers also compared and rearranged components or skills in each curriculum based on the main components of early literacy development to obtain clearer and more specific view. The researcher found that only NELP and National PERMATA Curriculum emphasize on the main components of early literacy development. EYFS, however, does not focus on the print concept and print environments, and phonemic and phonetic; and EYLF does not stress on early writing.

Generally, based on the findings of comparative analysis of early literacy development in several countries, the researcher found that all curriculums focus on early literacy development. However, there are differences in the use of terminologies, types of components, or skills of early literacy development. Thus, every curriculum has its own strength and weaknesses in the context of early literacy development.

### **Development of ELiC Framework for Nurseries in Malaysia**

According to Table 1, the content of ELiC framework has obtained a high validity which was 80 percent from both reviewers. According to Tuckman and Harper (2012), 70 percent achievement can be considered as high content of validity. All components of early literacy development such as language and communication, print concept and print environments, phonemic and phonetics, reading and narrative comprehension, and early writing are emphasized in ELiC.

Each component of early literacy component has its focus according to children's age (aged 2+, 3+, and 4+ years old). Each focus does not necessarily emphasize on all levels of children, but on the level of suitability and the children capabilities. Based on the discussion with the experts, children of the aged of 2+ to 3+ years old do not have to be exposed to too many components. However, all components can be introduced to children who are 4+ years old.

This is the advantage of the curriculum framework because the division of components is clearer, complete, and arranged according to the level of difficulty and is stated in accordance to the age of the children in the nursery (refer to Table 1).

**Table 1:** Early Literacy Curriculum (ELiC) Framework for Nurseries in Malaysia

Component	Focus	Age (Year)		
		2+	3+	4+
1.0: Language and Communication	1.1: Active listening skills in a variety of situations (instructions / story / music / rhythm / song / poem).	√	√	√
	1.2: Focus during conversations / activities.	√	√	√
	1.3: Respond using facial expressions / body language.	√	√	√
	1.4: Engagement in conversation (speech / question).	√	√	√
	1.5: Basic vocabulary acquisition by age.	√	√	√
	1.6: Language acquisition (speaking using verbal language with proper and smooth manner).	X	√	√
	1.7: Speak according to the situation / culture / manners.	X	√	√
2.0: Print Concept and Print Environments	2.1: Exploration of printed materials (books / handbook / print environments).	√	√	√
	2.2: Book functions (show some parts and features of book such as front cover / page / back / title / author).	√	√	√
	2.3: Picture's understanding (picture knowledge / differentiate between print and picture).	√	√	√
	2.4: Print rules (reading direction / punctuation).	X	√	√
	2.5: Print environment (symbol / logo / letter / number).	√	√	√
	2.6: Knowledge of text print (letters / words / phrases / sentences).	X	√	√
	2.7: Functions of print (aware print takes messages / has a variety of uses).	X	√	√

3.0: Phonemic and Phonetic	3.1: Identify and manipulate sounds in speech / environment.	√	√	√
	3.2: Knowledge of languages rhythm / song.	√	√	√
	3.3: Knowledge of sound / letter names appearing in alphabetical order.	√	√	√
	3.4: Recognize the relationship between sounds and letters.	X	√	√
	3.5: Connect the syllables to build the word.	X	X	√
	3.6: Build or spell words / phrases / sentences easily.	X	X	√
4.0: Reading and Narrative Comprehension	4.1: Interest on reading / reading listening / storytelling.	√	√	√
	4.2: Introduction of local literature or cultural (poem / story / poem / song / poetry).	X	√	√
	4.3: Understanding of story (predict / connecting with experience or knowledge / retell).	√	√	√
	4.4: Make reading activities (reading alone / dialogic reading / reading aloud).	X	√	√
	4.5: Response to literature (continued activities such as making books / acting / make song after reading or storytelling).	X	√	√
5.0: Early Writing	5.1: Know and use stationery.	√	√	√
	5.2: Scribble / sketch / draw that has meanings to the child.	√	√	√
	5.3: Imitate the writing / picture.	X	√	√
	5.4: Writing techniques (knows about starting point, direction, and writing position).	X	√	√
	5.5: Make / write self-name.	X	√	√
	5.6: Imaginary writing (understanding by children before standard writing acquisition).	X	√	√
	5.7: Write letter / syllable / word / phrases / sentences.	X	√	√
	5.8: Write for a variety of purposes (poetry / story / experience).	X	X	√

Legends: (√) Yes; (X) No



## DISCUSSION

The development of ELiC framework is relevant because it can support and complement the National PERMATA Curriculum for nurseries in Malaysia. Goodwin (2014) study found that child care education programme gives a positive impact to early literacy development. Most literature claimed that early literacy development is appropriate to be introduced to children of the aged of four and below while they attend nurseries (Davis, 2014; Goodwin, 2014; Hilbert & Eis, 2014; Juppri, 2012; Scates, 2014).

Based on ELiC framework, it is easier for educators to understand the components of early literacy development in accordance to children's age. Therefore, educators need to adapt their strategies according to the children's individual needs (Lovelace, 2010). In addition, the framework will improve educators' practices which have direct relationship with the increasing of early literacy development (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Davis (2014) argues that educators' practices need to be supported with trainings, resources, and positive experience with children. Therefore, ELiC framework can be the main supporting materials for educators to teach children more effectively and ultimately to optimize the children's learning.

Furthermore, most relevant literature, locally or internationally, have discussed on several main components which refer to balanced literacy (Creech, 2008). The researchers undertook studies on early literacy development in Malaysia (Juppri, 2012; Zainiah, 2013). Juppri's (2012) study focused on four year-old children's early literacy components such as print knowledge, early writing, phonological awareness while Zainiah's (2013) study focused on six years old children and components of print concept, readers' strategies, phonemics, phonetics, and understanding. Both studies are still not comprehensive and indicated that there is a need for the Malaysian framework of the early literacy development. Hence, the framework will contribute to the body of literature in early literacy development for children who attend the nurseries in Malaysia.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the development of early literacy framework complements the early literacy development because it is based on the comparison of early literacy curriculum and relevant literature review in Malaysia and internationally. Therefore, it is suggested that more studies should focus on early literacy development for children who attend nurseries. Among aspects that could be investigated are the implementation of the activities, and evaluation of early literacy level among children in child care centres. The early literacy concept is still emerging and has not been a focus of study in Malaysia. The research is relevant to the current needs which focus on early care and education programmes especially since the National PERMATA Curriculum was implemented at the nurseries.

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