

TRIANGULATING ADAPTED CAMBRIDGE PRE-A1 STARTERS ASSESSMENT AND PRESCHOOL OBSERVATIONS: A MALAYSIAN CASE STUDY

ROS LI, A. K.¹ – FAUZI, W. J.^{1*} – RADZUAN, N. R. M.¹

¹ *Centre for Modern Languages, Universiti Malaysia Pahang Al-Sultan Abdullah (UMPSA),
Pahang, Malaysia.*

**Corresponding author
e-mail: jumani[at]umpsa.edu.my*

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Abstract. As CEFR becomes part of early childhood education in Malaysia, understanding how preschool learners perform against Pre-A1 standards in real classroom settings are increasingly important. This case study looked at how 34 four-year-old and five-year-old children at a private preschool performed in an adapted Pre-A1 English assessment and compared it to classroom observations of language use in daily routines and play. They were tested on topics they had learned and the test covered listening, speaking, reading and writing. Results showed that listening was the strongest skill, with five-year-olds doing slightly better than four-year-olds. Speaking, reading and writing were more challenging and children often used Malay language or gestures when talking to peers. English was mainly used by teachers for everyday instructions and children rarely spoke English spontaneously. Writing was the hardest skill, reflecting limited vocabulary and early literacy development. Overall, the study highlights a gap between understanding and using English. While children can follow instructions, they often struggle to express themselves. The findings suggest the need for classroom activities that give children more opportunities to speak and write in English, with support suited to their age and abilities.

Keywords: *CEFR Pre-A1, preschool English, Cambridge starters, classroom observation, triangulation, early childhood language learning*

Introduction

Through the English Language Education Reform Roadmap 2015–2025, Malaysia aims to significantly raise the standards of English by adopting the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) across all levels of education including preschool level. The CEFR, a standardized framework for assessing language ability with descriptors that guide curriculum development, classroom practices, as well as assessment, becomes a national benchmark for English language learning (Council of Europe, 2020). In the Roadmap, it is stated that preschool children should achieve A1 level before entering primary school and university students are expected to graduate with at least B2 proficiency (MOEM, 2015). In Malaysia, the National Preschool Standard Curriculum (NPSC) is designed for children aged four to six and places strong emphasis on holistic child development. The curriculum is organised into several strands, including communication, where English is taught alongside foundational Malay language in ways that are appropriate for early childhood learning. In practice, however, how English is implemented can vary across preschools, depending on institutional priorities, teacher preparedness, and available resources.

Although formal primary education begins at age seven, the NPSC is generally implemented over a two-year period, most commonly for children aged five to six and six to seven. Nevertheless, many preschools also introduce more structured learning from the age of four. At this age, children typically have shorter attention spans, require

greater adult support and are still developing fine motor and early literacy skills (Deja et al., 2025; Papadopoulos and Bourogianni, 2024; Rohr et al., 2018). Young learners also rely heavily on contextual cues and modelling to understand language, rather than abstract explanations (Atik et al., 2024; De Ruiter et al., 2020; Khu et al., 2020). *Table 1* illustrates the differences between 4- and 6-year-olds in terms of memory, phonological awareness and speech complexity.

Table 1. *Developmental differences by age group.*

Domain	Age 4	Age 6	References
Memory	Emerging, less robust	More developed, better recall	(Ha et al., 2024; Cunningham et al., 2021)
Phonological awareness	Basic (syllables, rhymes)	Advanced (phonemes, manipulation)	(Ramić et al., 2024; Bider Petelin and Ozbič, 2020; Kim et al., 2018)
Speech complexity	Simpler, more errors	More complex, fewer errors	(Scheffer et al., 2024; Bider Petelin and Ozbič, 2020)

Grouping all children aged four to six together can hide these important differences. This is why CEFR-based teaching and assessment should be carefully adapted to cater to the developmental needs of four-year-olds. This is especially important because CEFR has been gradually introduced across all levels of education in Malaysia, including preschools, since 2018 (Jamain and Jamaludin, 2023). Despite this widespread implementation, significant challenges persist in aligning pedagogical practices with internationally recognized frameworks like CEFR, especially concerning its application in kindergarten settings, which remains largely unexplored (Abdul Rahman et al., 2025). CEFR is designed to be used across different educational levels, but the way teaching materials are created plays a big role in meeting its descriptors. At the Pre-A1 level, preschool activities need to be suitable for young children's abilities. Making sure that preschool experiences align with CEFR descriptors helps teachers support meaningful language development in early childhood. However, research shows that there is often a gap between policy expectations and what actually happens in early years English classrooms (Kay, 2024; Braun and Maguire, 2020). This raises the question of how well current teaching approaches help children achieve the expected Pre-A1 outcomes by the end of the academic year for four- to five-year-old learners.

This study addresses this question by combining results from an adapted assessment with classroom observations to examine how preschool learners progress in relation to CEFR Pre-A1 descriptors. The study has three main objectives: (1) to explore learners' receptive skills based on Pre-A1 assessment results, (2) to examine learners' productive skills based on Pre-A1 assessment outcomes, and (3) to investigate how children actually use English in classroom activities through observation. By looking at both assessment data and real classroom interactions, this study contributes to understanding how well preschool English programs support children in reaching CEFR goals and highlights areas where teaching practices could be improved.

Literature review

Implementation gaps in preschool contexts

In English language teaching at the preschool level, several studies have reported that teachers often prioritise vocabulary and recognition over interaction and spontaneous communication (Aprilia et al., 2023; Lucas, 2023). This reflects teachers' limited ability to conduct meaningful classroom activities for young learners.

Developmental considerations for four-year-olds

Developmentally, four-year-old learners present distinct characteristics that complicate the direct application of CEFR descriptors. Compared to six-year-olds, they show greater dependence on adult support, limited fine motor control, and emerging phonological awareness (Deja et al., 2025; Bider Petelin and Ozbič, 2020). Their oral output is typically less complex and more reliant on contextual cues, especially during symbolic play, routines, or story engagement. These features necessitate careful pedagogical and assessment adaptation when attempting to evaluate CEFR alignment in this age group.

Theoretical grounding

This study is guided by sociocultural theory, particularly Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasizes the role of guided interaction and support in language learning (Vygotsky, 1978). From this perspective, the language children use spontaneously in the classroom often reflects their learning potential more accurately than formal test results. Young learners' developmental characteristics also shape how they acquire language. Four-year-olds have shorter attention spans, rely heavily on adult support, and use contextual cues to understand and produce language (Deja et al., 2025; Papadopoulos and Bourogianni, 2024). Compared to older children, they show emerging memory skills, simpler speech, and limited phonological awareness (Bider Petelin and Ozbič, 2020). This is supported by the Developmental Theory of Second Language Acquisition. Piaget identifies the preoperational stage (ages 2–7) as a period when children explore symbols and relationships through language (Piaget, 1976).

Bruner emphasizes scaffolding and routines, such as storytime and guided play, as critical for internalizing language (Bruner, 1983), while Tomasello notes that grammar and vocabulary emerge through repeated exposure in meaningful, real-world contexts (Tomasello, 1992). Together, these perspectives suggest that language develops through interaction and use, rather than rote memorization. CEFR “can-do” descriptors such as “Can understand simple instructions” or “Can respond to basic questions” fit these developmental patterns. While the Cambridge Pre-A1 Starters assessment provides structured measures of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (for children aged 6–12), even younger children may demonstrate behaviours aligned with CEFR descriptors (Council of Europe, 2020). However, formal assessments alone cannot fully capture children's communicative abilities in natural classroom settings, making observation essential. By combining structured assessment with classroom observation, this study captures both what children know and how they use English in real interactions. Observation allows researchers to see how learners respond to questions, initiate speech and participate in role-play. Triangulating these methods provides a more accurate and developmentally appropriate understanding of preschool learners' alignment with CEFR Pre-A1 descriptors.

Materials and Methods

Research design, participants and Quantitative component: Pre-A1 assessment

This single-site case study used a mixed-methods approach to examine how English language activities in a Malaysian preschool align with CEFR Pre-A1 descriptors. By combining quantitative assessment and qualitative classroom observation, the study aimed to capture both children's formal language performance and their actual use of English in everyday classroom activities (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). The research, carried out in one private preschool in Pahang, Malaysia, was selected because it is privately run, located in an urban area, uses a curriculum aligned with the NPSC, and most importantly, it allowed the researcher access for classroom observations and learner assessments. The participants comprised 19 four-year-old children, 15 five-year-old children and 6 teachers. The four-year-olds were assessed to determine their starting level in English, while the five-year-olds were assessed to see how well the previous year's (four-year-old) syllabus supported their progression toward CEFR Pre-A1 skills. Parental consent was obtained prior to participation. A purposive sample of 10–15 teachers was also involved to provide insight into teaching practices, lesson planning, and classroom language support. An adapted Cambridge Pre-A1 Starters assessment was used to evaluate learners' receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing). Assessment tasks were modified to match learners' prior exposure and their preschool curriculum. The items were revised to place greater emphasis on local vocabulary that had been introduced to the learners, such as the Malaysian flag (Jalur Gemilang), Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC), hibiscus, local festive terms related to Eid Fitri and Chinese New Year and images reflecting Malaysian settings. The assessment was conducted over four days at the start of the new academic year. Results were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to determine how learners performed relative to CEFR Pre-A1 descriptors.

Classroom observation, document analysis and data integration

Classroom observations captured learners' actual use of English during regular activities, including teacher-led storytelling and play-based learning. Observations document spontaneous language use, patterns of teacher input and peer interactions. Data from these observations addressed the third research question regarding learners' everyday classroom language use and provided insights into how instructional practices supported or limited CEFR-aligned language development. Curriculum documents were reviewed to check how well they matched CEFR Pre-A1 descriptors and to help adjust the assessment tasks. The review followed Bowen's approach to systematically compare intended learning goals with CEFR standards (Bowen, 2009). The assessment and classroom observation data were triangulated to provide a comprehensive view of learners' English proficiency. This combination allowed the study to examine both formal assessment results and real-life language use, highlighting strengths and gaps in CEFR Pre-A1 skill development and the effectiveness of the four-year-old syllabus.

Results and Discussion

CEFR Pre-A1 assessment

Across both age groups, receptive skills, especially listening were significantly stronger than productive skills such as speaking and writing. This highlights a clear gap between what children can understand and what they can produce independently. Table 2 summarises the CEFR Pre-A1 Assessment results. The 5-year-old group outperformed

the 4-year-olds, scoring about 26.5% higher in listening and 17.6% higher in speaking. This suggests that additional exposure to English over the preschool year helps improve both receptive and productive skills. The 4-year-olds were more likely to revert to Malay language or remain silent when prompted to speak English, showing that younger learners rely heavily on their native language when English proficiency is limited. Writing was the lowest scoring skill among all participants. Very few children could spell basic words like “ice-cream” or “book” without copying, indicating that productive literacy remains a major challenge at this stage.

Table 2. *CEFR Pre-A1 assessment results.*

Skill category and data type	4 years old	5 years old
Receptive Skills (Listening & Reading)		
Average Listening Score	45.6%	72.1%
Instructional Independence	Frequently requires demonstration	Generally understands verbal cues
Word/Picture Matching	Low; often unable to identify words	Moderate; some can identify “Yes/No”
Productive Skills (Speaking & Writing)		
Average Speaking Score	36.2%	53.8%
Writing Capability	Minimal; mostly writes own name/numbers.	Low; can spell simple words (e.g., ten, pen, hat) or numbers
Oral Response Style	Heavy reliance on Malay language	Short, minimal English phrase
Overall Performance		
Highest CEFR Level Reached	A2 Flyers (Participant 012)	A2 Flyers (Participants 004, 011)
Most Common Level	Pre-A1 Starters	Pre-A1 Starters/ A1 Movers

Receptive skills outperform productive skills

The study revealed a clear pattern in which preschool learners’ receptive skills, particularly listening, were consistently stronger than their productive skills. This difference can be seen in the higher listening scores compared to speaking and writing in both age groups, showing that children find it much easier to understand English than to actively use it (Abdul Rahman et al., 2025). Across both age groups, children were able to identify familiar vocabulary such as colors, body parts, and everyday objects. This finding is consistent with developmental linguistics, where passive comprehension typically precedes active production in early language acquisition (Tse et al., 2021). The 5-year-olds scored approximately 15.7% higher in listening than the 4-year-olds, reflecting the benefits of additional exposure to English over the preschool year. Despite this, the ability to translate comprehension into spoken or written responses remained limited, highlighting a significant gap between what learners can understand and what they can actively produce.

Speaking skills remain underdeveloped

Speaking skills were relatively weak for both age groups, averaging between 37% and 39%, indicating that children’s ability to use spoken English develops more slowly than their listening comprehension. Many younger learners relied on Malay language or gestures when responding and some remained silent, showing limited confidence in producing English. This aligns with findings that children generally perform more accurately in their first language (L1) than in their second language (L2), particularly in spontaneous speech (Hamim et al., 2021). Difficulties with prepositions also affected learners’ ability to describe or place objects correctly, while several low-performing students spoke slowly or in a whisper, making their communication hard to understand.

This limited verbal output may be linked to children's still-developing awareness of English sounds and their small vocabulary, which makes it difficult for them to speak smoothly and accurately (Mohamad et al., 2024). Notably, even though 5-year-olds demonstrated stronger listening skills, their speaking abilities were only slightly higher than the 4-year-olds, suggesting that productive oral skills require targeted practice and structured support beyond simple exposure.

Early literacy challenges

Reading and writing emerged as the weakest areas for both age groups, with average scores falling below 11%. This shows that early English literacy remains a major challenge, as many children found it difficult to recognise even simple words or write more than their own name. These difficulties reflect wider issues in building vocabulary and using English spontaneously (Mazlan et al., 2023; Budianto et al., 2022). While children could respond to simple yes/no reading tasks, they struggled to match words with pictures and to recognize written vocabulary independently. Writing posed an even greater challenge; very few students were able to spell basic words such as “ice-cream” or “book” without copying. These findings highlight the literacy gap at the Pre-A1 stage, indicating that children are only beginning to connect letters and sounds with meaning, and that productive literacy requires additional guided support and repeated practice.

Age-related differences and instructional needs

Age was an important factor in learners' performance. The 5-year-olds outperformed the 4-year-olds in both listening and speaking, reflecting the benefits of additional exposure and accumulated learning. Younger learners frequently needed physical demonstrations and guided support to understand instructions, while older children were more capable of following verbal cues independently. This suggests that teaching approaches for early language learning should vary by age. Younger children benefit more from hands-on activities and visual support, while older children are better able to engage with language tasks that involve less physical guidance and more abstract thinking (Simanjuntak, 2024). *Figure 1* illustrates the average age scores by age group and skill type.

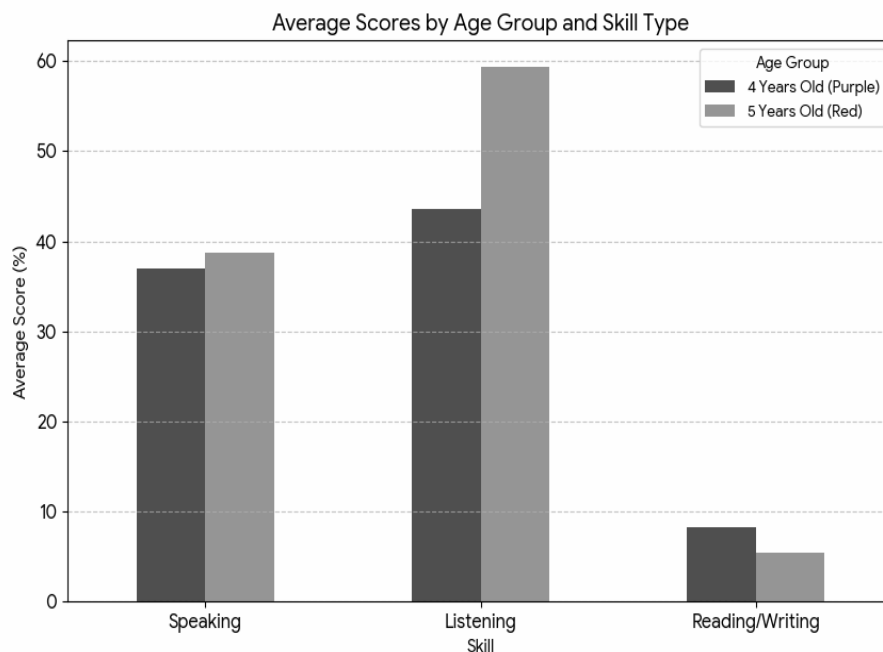


Figure 1. Average scores by age group and skill type.

Classroom language use and the receptive-productive gap

Although the children performed reasonably well in structured listening and speaking tasks, classroom observations showed that English was used very little in daily interactions. Even among the five-year-olds, children rarely spoke English to one another. English was mainly used by teachers for routine instructions such as “Clean your table,” “Please queue properly,” or “It’s lunchtime.” Outside these moments, children mostly spoke Malay or stayed quiet. This suggests that while children could understand English, they struggled to use it naturally in everyday classroom situations (Akdeniz and Gelmez Burakgazi, 2020). Overall, the findings show a clear gap between understanding English and using it. Listening was the strongest skill for both age groups but speaking, reading and especially writing were much weaker. Many children still needed help or demonstrations, particularly for tasks involving spelling or independent responses. Five-year-olds generally listened better than four-year-olds, likely due to greater familiarity with classroom routines but their speaking skills were still at a similar level. Since English was rarely used in children’s own conversations, many understood what was said but lacked confidence to respond. These results highlight the need for more opportunities for children to actively use English in meaningful and engaging classroom activities (Akdeniz and Gelmez Burakgazi, 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows that preschool learners at the Pre-A1 level are much stronger in understanding English than in using it. Listening emerged as the most developed skill across both age groups, while speaking, reading, and especially writing remained challenging. Although five-year-olds demonstrated better listening ability and slightly more confidence in classroom tasks, this advantage did not translate into a clear improvement in spoken or written production. The findings suggest that increased age alone does not automatically lead to stronger productive skills without sufficient

opportunities for active language use. Overall, the results highlight the need for learning environments that move beyond routine classroom instructions and provide children with more meaningful chances to speak, interact, and experiment with English. While exposure to English through teacher talk supports comprehension, young learners also require guided practice, modeling, and encouragement to express themselves. Strengthening this balance between understanding and use is essential for supporting early English development in preschool settings.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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