

# CASE STUDY: ENHANCING ENGLISH LISTENING COMPREHENSION SKILLS AMONG PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

Mahani Abdul Malik\* and Aliza Ali  
*Open University Malaysia, Malaysia*

**Abstract:** Listening comprehension skills encompass multiple processes that a child needs to master to enable the child to comprehend and make sense of spoken language. This study explored private preschool teachers' storytelling teaching experiences when appropriate teaching strategies were used to enhance preschool children's English listening comprehension skills. The study employed the qualitative approach in collecting data, and the thematic method was used in analyzing data. Data collection was done through teachers' semi-structured interviews and observations. A total of two female preschool teachers and six preschool children from a private preschool located in Kuala Lumpur were selected through purposive sampling. The data collection was done in two phases: Phase 1 involved data collection of the teacher's teaching strategy and challenges faced during teaching and learning. Phase 2 involved designing an appropriate strategy teachers can use to enhance children's English listening comprehension skills. This study found that the strategy developed in this research made it easier for teachers to motivate children further to improve their listening comprehension skills. The teachers also found the new teaching strategy very beneficial, systematic and easy to follow. Children made more efforts to participate in the storytelling sessions.

**Keywords:** English listening comprehension skills, preschool children

Listening is one of the primary skills in learning a language. Through listening, students can develop an understanding of how different linguistic systems interact and, as a result, establish a foundation for more proficient and effective mastery of the language (Yildirim & Yidirim, 2016). Research, however, has shown that spoken language was difficult to master as rote repetition, as it does not lead to language learning as learners do not think over what they hear (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). When a spoken language is understood, other skills, such as reading and writing, would be easier to master. Rost (2002) explains that second language acquisition cannot occur without the learners' contact with the comprehensible language; this makes good sense, especially when preschool children learn it as a new language hence understanding the language they hear is important. Yet, preschool teachers test children for their listening skills rather than focusing on the process of acquiring second language comprehension skills (Saraswati, 2018).

In Malaysia, little research was done on listening comprehension skills at the preschool level. Teachers used storytelling more as a teaching tool to teach English or as a medium to instill good values. Hazita (2016) and Kaur (2014) reported that the lack of language comprehension skills could explain why children are not performing well in the English language examination nationwide. In fact, according to Jafri and Hashim (2015), good listening skills should be a primary concern of language teaching. Despite having children, on average, beginning to learn English at 5 to 6 years old in Malaysia, many are still not competent in the oral English language (Hazita, 2016). This result was again replicated in Ho's (2016) study on listening comprehension skills to the other three language

skills, speaking, reading and writing. In his research, Ho found many Malaysian children lack English listening and speaking skills despite starting to learn English early.

Young children's learning is mainly determined by what they want to know and when they want to know it (Judith, Patricia, Barbara & Keith, 2014). They can figure out new ideas and concepts by themselves, but teachers must know when to explain concepts to children systematically. Teaching strategies must be purposeful and able to challenge children. Listening comprehension skill is the cognitive process of listening skills (Littlewood, 2004). However, there is currently little research on teaching strategies preschool teachers use in teaching listening comprehension skills. Most listening research is either done on adult learners or secondary-going children. Some examples of these studies are Gilakjani and Sabouri's (2016) study on issues concerning listening comprehension in secondary schools. According to Brown (2014), listening has taken a back seat in research because the focus was on acquisition and not the process of listening comprehension skill itself. In Malaysia, Rezaei and Fatimah (2013) reported that there seems to be a gap as not much research on teaching strategies for listening comprehension skills involves preschool children. Hence, studying what teaching strategies can enhance preschool children's listening comprehension skills is vital.

Teachers, especially in Malaysian preschools, teach listening comprehension skills like reading. They also tend to teach listening skills as a by-product of their activities, such as answering questions, learning to sing songs and listen to stories as a fun way to create interest in the language. This is not surprising because most preschool teachers in Malaysia are young, inexperienced, and unqualified (Foong, Veloo, Dhamotharan, & Loh, 2018). Instead, teachers should teach listening comprehension systematically because it affects children's speaking, reading, and writing mastery. This is especially true when children are not in an environment with sustained contact with proficient English speakers (Hamouda, 2013; Hassan, 2000). Several authors, such as Field (2004) and Swee Choo (2010), call for more teaching of listening as a skill in its own right rather than something teachers assume can develop naturally. Storytelling is an effective teaching strategy for developing listening skills and keeping children engaged during teaching and learning sessions.

### ***Storytelling***

According to Zevenbergenn and Whitehurst (2003), stories are helpful materials teachers can use to develop listening comprehension and literacy in their first and second language. This reinforces Mello's (2001) research on how storytelling could enhance fluency, vocabulary, writing, and recall. Storytelling is a useful teaching strategy to increase children's competencies. A study conducted by Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer and Lowrance (2004) on the impact of storytelling on language development showed children had good comprehension, as demonstrated in their ability to retell the stories. The children could give details of the story and infer the moral. Isbell et al. (2004) further explained the importance of pictures, repetition, and sounds in helping children's listening comprehension.

According to Hemmati, Gholamrezapour and Hessamy (2015), compelling storytelling can engage children's thinking and emotions. Furthermore, when children listen to stories, they are involved in various cognitive activities to make sense. Children should be made to understand a story in different situations to develop their listening comprehension skills. This paper addresses how storytelling is used as a teaching strategy to enhance listening comprehension skills in English to preschool children.

This case study explores teachers' experience when using appropriate teaching strategies to develop children's listening comprehension skills through storytelling.

### ***Listening Processes***

Listening comprehension skills have often been confused with listening skills. Listening comprehension skills are a cognitive process rather than just an interactive process of constructing and managing, which requires the listener's complete involvement (LittleWood, 2004).

Previous studies have used cognitive, metacognitive and social affective strategies to enhance students' listening comprehension skills. However, these strategies were used mainly for primary, secondary, and university students. This study combined all these strategies to be used with preschool children. The cognitive strategy is similar to the reading strategy, where an interactive process incorporates bottom-up and top-bottom processes. The bottom-up process builds meaning by recognizing words and grammatical relationships. Beginners and low-skilled learners, such as preschoolers, tend to use this process more (Vandergrift, 2019). The top-down process uses prior knowledge to understand the meaning of the message. Most listening processes combine top-down and bottom-up to increase listening comprehension, called interactive processing. Applying prior knowledge, contextual information, and linguistic information makes comprehension and interpretation easy, especially if the content is familiar to the listener or the listener is listening to topics stored in long-term memory. Hence for this study, it would make sense to use familiar stories for children. Familiar stories would help the children to proceed to top-down processes quickly. This was an important strategy, especially when this study involved teaching Mandarin-speaking children. It was important for the teachers to promptly bring the children from the bottom-up to the top-down process.

Recent studies into the effectiveness of listening strategies used by second language (L2) listeners used tools such as note-taking, listening dairies, talk-aloud procedures, and strategy instructions (Iliyas, 2017; Vandergrift, 2007) that were more suitable for older learners. For preschoolers, a more informal strategy, such as using storytelling and teachers' instilling motivation and raising fundamental questions to encourage assessing relevant information and making inferences, could be an alternative strategy to develop children's listening comprehension skills. This would be an excellent way to unconsciously make young children organize and evaluate their thinking and learning.

According to Cross (2010), although listening success is not directly linked to metacognition, it helps the listeners coordinate, regulate and control their listening processes. Although this strategy may seem difficult for preschool children, teachers can use this strategy to make children realize the different listening task demands that could increase children's self-efficacy in listening. The study used scaffolding such as moment-to-moment feedback, asking questions, giving hints, and breaking information into smaller units to help children coordinate and regulate their listening processes. The social affective strategy was used to give children confidence and lessen anxiety in answering and giving feedback. The social affective strategy involves collaborating to verify understanding or lower

anxiety. Listeners must reduce stress and feel confident and motivated in listening activities (Vandergrift, 1999).

## **Methods**

This study used in-depth exploration to understand the teachers' experience using appropriate teaching strategies to teach preschool children listening comprehension skills. Therefore, this research used a qualitative research approach and a case study as a research design to enable the researcher to understand what was being practiced in the natural setting. The data collection method for this research is field notes, teachers' interviews and reflective reports.

The qualitative data were collected in two phases. The study's first phase was to understand the teaching strategies used by private preschool teachers to develop children's listening comprehension skills through storytelling and to examine preschool teachers' challenges experienced during teaching and learning when developing children's listening comprehension skills. The preschool teachers were interviewed, and the data collected were transcribed. This phase was essential, as information on teachers' strategies and challenges were the practitioners' views. The practitioners' views were crucial to creating usable and practical teaching strategies to develop the children's listening comprehension skills through storytelling. In the second phase, the researcher developed teaching strategies in three lesson plans based on the data collected from phase one, the National Preschool Standard-Based Curriculum (NPSC), listening strategy and learning theory. For preschool children to master their listening comprehension skills, they require a systematic strategy. The study used the Mastery Learning Model, Cognitive Strategy and Metacognitive as a framework to produce the teaching strategy in three lesson plans. The three lesson plans were then used to study the teacher's experience during teaching and learning when using appropriate teaching strategies. Three subject matter experts reviewed the teaching strategy in the three lesson plans. The three subject matter experts were early childhood education and English experts.

The study's decision to use three storybooks was based on previous research by Santos (2018) to improve learners' listening skills through storytelling. The researcher considered the children's different affective entry behavior and interest when selecting the storybooks, as this was a requirement in the mastery learning model. She also considered the complexity and familiarity of the stories and pictures in the storybook and took into account the teachers were teaching Chinese-speaking children. Familiarity with the stories and pictures will help the children to top-down process faster as they can use their prior knowledge to understand the story better (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*List of storybooks*

Title	Author and Publication Date	Moral Value
The Blue Balloon	Mick Inkpen (2019)	Don't judge someone by their appearance
The Ugly Duckling	Hans Christian Anderson (2019)	Old things can be valuable
My Monster and Me	Nadiya Hussain (2019)	Always talk about your worries and problems

Each lesson was 45 minutes, as preschool lessons were generally between 30 to 45 minutes. Each lesson was divided into three phases: pre-listening, while listening and post-listening (see Table 2). The teachers prepared the children for listening in the pre-listening stage, as children from different backgrounds needed to be on the same platform. It was also important to note that the extent of the pre-listening task depended on the children's familiarity with the text and degree of proficiency, especially when a second language was involved. The teachers used their preferred teaching style to get the children to predict the story and prepare them for listening; however, this study could not identify whether teachers' quality of instruction made any difference. The teachers also gave facilitation and support through scaffolding throughout the lesson. Post-activities were carried out to reinforce and help teachers assess children's understanding.

Table 2  
*Implementation of lesson*

Stages	Activity
Pre-listening	The teacher showed the cover of the book: <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Discuss the book cover and relate it to children's experience.</li><li>2. Children predict the story's content and characters based on their prior knowledge.</li><li>3. Discuss the meaning of difficult words and how to use them.</li><li>4. Children were made aware of the purpose of listening to the story.</li></ol>
While Listening	The teacher told the story using varying intonations and facial expressions. Point to pictures and tell the story with excitement.
Post-listening	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Children were encouraged to retell the story; the teacher discussed their differences. Repetition, scaffolding in the form of a moment-to-moment feedback, breaking the story into smaller units, questioning and encouragement were done to assist children in their thinking processes.</li><li>2. Post-listening activities were done in small groups, such as rearranging picture cards, role play, drawing and worksheets.</li></ol>

Note: Different storybooks had different post-activities.

During the post-listening phase, the teachers asked questions orally from worksheets prepared in advance as a group. The storytelling worksheets were developed as a group task to assess children's engagement when answering the worksheets. After each storytelling session, the teachers gave each group the worksheets as a final activity. The teacher reads the question, and the children work as a group to tick the correct answer. Three worksheets were developed to assess understanding of main ideas, details, and inferences. The worksheets were different for each story. Each worksheet has 3 to 5 questions, depending on the story. The worksheets' format for each storytelling session in this study was an adaptation of worksheets used in Santos' (2018) research on listening skills using storytelling.

### *Sample*

A case study was chosen as a design for this research to give the researcher an in-depth understanding of the strategy used in the natural setting. This would help the researcher develop a teaching strategy based on the teachers' needs. Hence data were collected in only one private registered preschool in Kepong, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. If the study were done in several preschools, the teachers and students would come from different backgrounds. The preschool settings and curriculum would be different as well. Hence the strategy designed might not cater for the needs of every school. The researcher chose this preschool as it met several criteria of the study. The primary curriculum the school uses is the National Preschool Standard-based Curriculum (NPSC) which makes this preschool suitable. The NPSC was essential as the researcher wanted to ensure that the study was in a typical preschool situation. Some preschools also include their own grown curriculum together with the NPSC. Non-probability sampling was used in this case study because of the small sample. The study was intended to examine a real-life phenomenon and not make any statistical inference about a broader population (Yin, 2009). The sample of this study was two private preschool teachers in Kepong, Kuala Lumpur. The teachers were selected based on their qualifications, experience, and, most importantly, teaching English to six-year-old children. Both teachers had many years of teaching experience, Teacher A had six years of teaching experience, and Teacher B had 40 years of experience. Teacher A already has a Diploma in Early Childhood. Teacher B's education was until the Malaysian Certificate of Education or an equivalent to the Commonwealth of Nations O level. Both teachers are senior teachers teaching six-year-old children English. With a long experience teaching English, both teachers could give the researcher an in-depth understanding of the strategy used and the challenges faced by both teachers (see Table 3).

Table 3  
*Participants Involved in the Study*

Participant	Gender	Number of Years Teaching	Academic Qualification	Class
Teacher A	Female	6 years	Diploma in Early Childhood Education	Class 1
Teacher B	Female	40 years	Malaysian Certificate of Education	Class 2

Two six-year-old classes consisting of 15 children in each class participated in the study. However, the researcher focused on six children grouped as advanced, moderate and weak. This was done to assist the researcher in the data collection.

### ***Method of Data Collection***

This study used three data collection methods to answer the research objectives and questions.

### ***Field Notes***

In this study, the researcher used field notes when observing the teachers while teaching the children listening activities in the classrooms. Observation helps identify and guide relationships with the respondent, and it is an excellent method to learn how people interact and how things are prioritized and organized in the settings. It can also help the researcher understand what is essential to the people

in the setting. The researcher used the field notes to help verify what the teacher discussed in her self-reflection to triangulate data.

### ***Teacher's reflection***

In this study, the researcher used the teacher's self-reflection to understand the experience she went through when implementing the recommended teaching strategy to develop children's listening comprehension skills. After every lesson, the teachers involved in this study had to reflect on their teaching. The teacher's reflection was essential as her notes of her beliefs and values reflected how she carried out her lessons in the classroom. Hammond–Stoughton (2007) believed that teaching reflection is essential in helping teachers promote self-awareness and better understand themselves and their actions and perceptions.

### ***Semi-Structured Interview***

According to Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel (2013), the interview allowed flexibility in questioning and capturing the participant's thoughts, feelings and experiences. Therefore, it was a suitable instrument for this research. A semi-structured interview was done before the lesson to understand the teachers' current teaching strategy and challenges and after self-reflection submission to verify what was observed and recorded in the teacher's self-reflection.

## **Results**

The data analyzed was from a triangulation of three methods of data collection: field notes, self-reflection, and interviews. All three data were seen and verified by the teachers. The researcher interviewed the teachers to clarify the data collected in the teacher's self-reflection. Altogether ten themes were extracted from the triangulation. The field notes collected by the researcher supported what was reflected by the teacher. The themes extracted were enjoyment experienced during teaching, explaining difficult words from the storybooks, the usefulness of the teaching strategy, the usefulness of the post-listening activities, the usefulness of the pre-listening activities, children's improvement, experiential learning, weakness of the teaching strategy, teachers' ability in producing similar lessons and scaffolding used during the storytelling. Both teachers A and B found the children enjoyed the stories and responded well in all three sessions, which was not the case previously. Both teachers also felt telling the meaning of words was beneficial as the children understood the story and never interrupted the storytelling sessions to ask for clarification. Both teachers also found breaking the storytelling into three parts made their teaching more systematic and efficient. The new strategy also helped them to assess what the children knew and did not know. The children were participative and could answer questions and retell the story. The teachers found the post-listening activities beneficial as they helped the teachers to understand the extent of the children's listening comprehension. The teachers also felt the activities helped develop the children's listening comprehension skills (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Private preschool teachers' experience during teaching and learning when using the recommended teaching strategy to develop children's listening skills through storytelling*

Theme	Teacher A Feedback	Teacher B Feedback
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a.	Enjoyment experienced during teaching	The children enjoyed the stories and responded well to all three stories The stories were exciting	The children enjoyed the stories and responded well to all three stories The stories were unique, relevant and fun
b.	Explain difficult words from the storybooks.	Telling the meaning of difficult words was beneficial as the children never interrupted to ask for meaning which they usually did. I never thought of explaining difficult words I realise using simpler words or translating did not help	Telling the meaning of difficult words helped. Children learn new words. Children did not interrupt to ask for the meaning.
c.	The usefulness of the new strategy	Make my teaching more efficient and systematic I could assess what the children know or did not know Just asking the question does not give an accurate picture of their understanding	Beneficial as children were interactive Previously my children could not answer questions I was surprised children did not interrupt Saw the children excited and understood the story It never occurred to me to ask children to retell the story.
d.	Usefulness of the Post-listening Activities	It was beneficial and helped me understand the extent of the children's listening comprehension. The drawing activity allowed the children to express themselves and share their opinion.	Beneficial and help the teacher understand the extent of the children's listening Role play helps children to understand
e.	Usefulness of Pre-Listening Skills	Discuss the storybook cover was beneficial Help predict the storyline and character Children able to relate the character to their feelings	Discuss storybook cover beneficially Help predict storyline and character Able to relate the character to their feelings
f.	Children Improvement	Saw improvement in the children More responsive, excited, able to retell a story or part of the story, answer questions and learn new words	I saw improvement in the children More responsive and excited, I could see they were happy. They can retell a story or part of the story. They can answer questions and know how to use new words
g.	Experiential Learning	I now understand that it was better to explain the meaning of difficult words than replacing with easier words or translating Learn that I could combine storytelling with activities from other domains	Understand that listening comprehension is a process that needs a systematic way of teaching. Understanding children's feedback was important Realise the importance of discussing the storybook cover
h.	Weakness of Teaching Strategy	The lesson was too long, time-constraint	The lesson was too long, and I had difficulty finishing
i.	Ability to produce similar	I am confident I can create a similar	Confident and able to create



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lesson	lesson	similar lesson
j. Scaffolding	The moment-to-moment feedback, repeating, and breaking into smaller chunks were very useful.	The moment-to-moment feedback, repeating, and breaking into smaller chunks were helpful to me.

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## Discussion

This study's findings indicated that appropriate teaching and learning strategies used during storytelling could enhance preschool teachers' experience in teaching children's listening comprehension skills. The result of this study is aligned with Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) on interactive strategies used in improving listening comprehension and (Nguyen & Abbott, 2016) on the metacognitive approach used in storytelling. Since previously, storytelling was not typically taught as a listening activity, the teacher's strategy in telling the story was ineffective as it did not support or facilitate listening comprehension. Therefore, the Mandarin-speaking children who participated in this study could not comprehend stories and were not responsive during storytelling, as reported by the teachers before using appropriate teaching strategies to help in listening comprehension. Teaching and learning were more organized and systematic with the proposed appropriate teaching strategy. The teachers said the children were task-focused and tried to retell the story despite struggling initially. Although the children were young, they could be made aware of their thinking processes. The study demonstrates that even though the metacognitive method is challenging, preschoolers can benefit from it. When teachers consciously encourage the children to be aware of their listening process, they can become independent learners. Previously in past studies, metacognitive strategies were mainly used on older children or university students (Jin, 2020; Nguyen & Abbott, 2016). The teachers in this study found the new strategy to be very beneficial as they saw the children's improvement in their responsiveness, participation, attentiveness, excitement, ability to answer questions correctly, and effort to retell during storytelling. The children's interruptions throughout the narration also decrease tremendously. Previously, teachers used storytelling as a teaching tool during English lessons or to instill moral values. It was never used as an activity for listening skills. Children could not understand the story and were not responsive in class.

Teachers A and B had different experiences and qualifications and understood the new strategy differently. Despite her professional training, Teacher A understood that providing meaning to difficult words instead of translating was more helpful in increasing children listening comprehension skills, and post-listening activities helped her understand the children's comprehension of the story. On the other hand, teacher B understood that listening comprehension is a process and is not a discrete practice. For a teacher who lacks theoretical knowledge, she understood that listening comprehension is complex and it needs a systematic process. Teacher B further explains that facilitation and support are as important as preparing children for listening to ensure success in listening comprehension. Teacher B also understood the importance of feedback. Previously she thought no feedback from children meant they fully understood the story. Now she understands that children's feedback is essential, not as a test of their ability to answer questions but to understand the depth of their understanding.

## **Recommendation and Implications**

This research was a case study and cannot be generalized. However, what is apparent in the study is that a systematic teaching strategy managed to help children in their listening comprehension skills even when they are non-English speakers. Therefore, this case study would be a good stepping-stone to further research its effectiveness in a more significant sample. When preschool teachers are made aware of the importance of listening comprehension skills and that it cannot be learned naturally, this would motivate the teachers to prepare lessons specially targeted to improve children's listening comprehension skills. Preschool children would benefit the most indirectly; when their listening comprehension skills improve, so will their language mastery. This study also helps policymakers, especially in designing training for preschool teachers. Future research is needed to further test the effectiveness of this teaching strategy in a more significant sample. Technology could also be another strategy that can be used to improve listening comprehension skills such as using digital storytelling and using gamification for post-listening activities.

## **Conclusion**

This study addresses the issue of private preschool teachers' ability to use appropriate teaching strategies to teach children listening comprehension skills. According to Babae (2017) and Richards (2005), listening comprehension is essential for learning and developing other language abilities. Since success in speaking, reading and writing depend on an English language ability to listen, it is crucial to acknowledge that this study offers students and teachers an alternative or remedy to improve listening comprehension and other language skills (Yasin, Burhannudin, Mustafa, Faisal & Permatasari, 2018).

This study's results indicate that when a systematic strategy is used when teaching children listening comprehension skills, it can facilitate and reinforce teachers' teaching practices. The study also shows that metacognition strategies can be applied to preschool children when proper support is given, such as scaffolding, chunking the stories, asking the right questions, repeating, and giving appropriate moment-to-moment feedback. Teachers can use the metacognitive approach with preschool children, provided the teachers are constantly aware of giving the proper support and scaffolding to the children. The study also showed that preschool teachers still lacked the knowledge and skills to teach listening comprehension skills. Teachers should teach listening skills rather than testing them as a product, and there should be more teaching of listening as a skill than assuming that it could develop independently (Field, 2008; Swee Choo, 2010).

The result of this study is beneficial to preschool teachers teaching English to young children and trainers as well as universities when designing modules for teacher training and professional development.

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