

ALIGNING PRESCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHING WITH CEFR PRE-A1: INSIGHTS FROM PRIVATE PRESCHOOL TEACHER

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Abstract. Early English learning in Malaysian preschools is increasingly important as educators prepare children for a globalised world. While the CEFR has been adopted nationally, little is known about how private preschool lessons align with Pre-A1 expectations. This study explored teachers' beliefs, classroom practices and CEFR alignment through interviews with ten teachers and twenty hours of observations in three private preschools. Findings show that teachers value oral exposure and playful activities such as songs, chants, repetition and worksheets, which support vocabulary recognition and basic listening. However, opportunities for spontaneous speech, simple communication and story comprehension remain limited, partly due to teachers' unfamiliarity with CEFR. To address this gap, a practical seven-step process model is proposed to guide lesson planning, CEFR alignment and reflection. The study highlights the need for professional development and clear guidance, enabling teachers to implement CEFR principles effectively and create richer, more interactive English learning experiences for young learners.

Keywords: *CEFR Pre-A1, ESL preschool Malaysia, early childhood English learning, preschool English curriculum, CEFR alignment, English language education for 4-year-olds*

Introduction

In the Malaysian English Language Education Reform: The Roadmap 2015–2025, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was adopted as a national strategy to align English language teaching and assessment with international standards from preschool to tertiary levels of education. The CEFR offers a clear way to describe language ability, ranging from A1 to C2, with the Pre-A1 level created especially for complete beginners, including young children who are just starting to use a new language (Prajapati, 2022). At the Pre-A1 level, children are expected to recognise familiar words, follow simple instructions, respond with short phrases and begin to understand very simple stories (Kravtsova et al., 2023; Zhetpisbayeva et al., 2023; Ng and Yunus, 2021). For Yee Wan and Tjin Ai (2023), the Pre-A1 descriptors focus on very early communication skills such as understanding simple questions, recognising familiar words and using short, memorised phrases to help the children build the basics of language learning. Young learners usually show these abilities through real, hands-on interactions, which means teachers need to create learning spaces rich in visual support, movement and practical cues that help children make sense of the language (Chua and Sulaiman, 2021).

The reform plan emphasises that all children, including those in private preschools, should develop proficiency in both Bahasa Malaysia and English to succeed in an increasingly global environment (Pazilah et al., 2024). However, while the Ministry of Education has trained primary and secondary teachers on CEFR through a cascade model, according to Gökkaya and Duman (2022), private preschool teachers have not

received the same level of support, especially regarding adaptations for Pre-A1 learners. This is somewhat a missed opportunity as early childhood is widely recognised as a period when children learn new languages most easily, as they are especially receptive to new sounds, words and simple communication (Ceylan and Cesur, 2025; Kalkan and Genç, 2024; Boese et al., 2023). Malaysian preschools follow the National Preschool Standards-Based Curriculum (NPSC) and children are exposed to formal language learning, including English from age 4 to 6. Although national efforts encourage early English learning, there is still limited research on how preschool teaching matches the CEFR standards used internationally. This gap matters because children's early English experiences help shape how prepared they are for primary school, where CEFR-based syllabuses are applied. Bringing these expectations into preschool classrooms requires teaching approaches that combine structured exposure with opportunities for children to communicate naturally, often through play, stories and other interactive activities.

Literature review

In private preschools, the way English is taught can vary greatly because schools differ in their curriculum choices, resources and teachers' language abilities. These differences often lead to uneven learning experiences for children (Salim and Mohamed, 2023; Mamat et al., 2022). This study draws on two complementary ideas: the CEFR Pre-A1 descriptors for young learners and sociocultural theories of language. The CEFR provides a clear benchmark for what children are expected to achieve in English (Council of Europe, 2020), while sociocultural theory highlights the importance of interaction, guidance from teachers and meaningful real-life contexts in helping children learn a new language (Vygotsky, 1978). The CEFR uses a six-level scale (A1–C2) with simple “can do” statements that describe what learners are able to do in a language. This helps schools and teachers measure language ability in a consistent way and supports curriculum planning, assessment and goal-setting (Prajapati, 2022; Wok Zaki and Darmi, 2021). It is also important to note that the CEFR is not a teaching method, it is only a reference guide. Its success depends on how well teachers combine it with methods that are suitable for young children and relevant to their cultural context (Zhu et al., 2023). Sociocultural theory, based on the work of Vygotsky (1978), explains that children learn language best through social interaction (Pathan et al., 2018). They develop faster when they receive guidance, support and encouragement from teachers or peers which is known as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Real-life conversations, group activities and hands-on experiences help children build confidence and make learning meaningful (Panhwar et al., 2025; Alkhudiry, 2022; Pathan et al., 2018). The combination of these two theories in *Figure 1* shows the proposed conceptual framework for how English learning can be structured in preschool.

Conceptual Framework for Effective Preschool English Learning

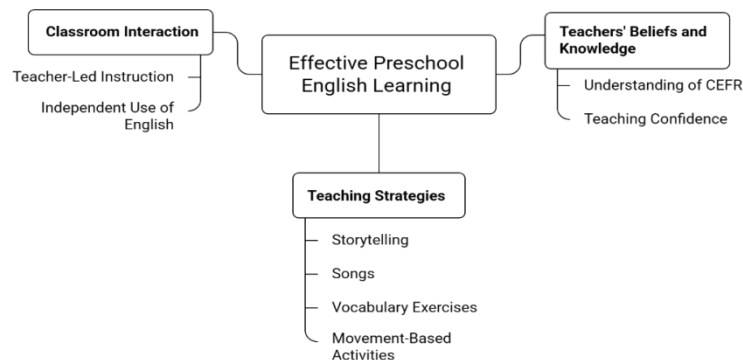


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for preschool English learning.

The proposed framework suggests that effective preschool English learning depends on several key factors. These include teachers' beliefs and knowledge, especially their understanding of CEFR and confidence in teaching as well as the strategies they use, such as storytelling, songs, vocabulary exercises and movement-based activities. Classroom interaction is also important, particularly the balance between teacher-led instruction and opportunities for children to use English independently. Together, these factors affect how well children develop basic listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, as described in the CEFR Pre-A1 level. This approach allows the study to take a close look at current teaching practices, highlighting both strengths and areas that could be improved to help children reach Pre-A1 proficiency. Understanding these connections also makes it possible to give practical recommendations for curriculum planning and teacher training. In addition, the framework helps explore how teachers' knowledge of their students, digital skills and 21st-century teaching abilities influence how they teach English in Malaysian preschools (Pazilah et al., 2024).

Research consistently shows that what teachers believe about language learning shapes how they plan lessons, interact with children and provide language input (Mohamad et al., 2024; Yan and Zhao, 2022; Nicholas et al., 2021; Reynolds et al., 2021). While many teachers value communicative and child-centred approaches, they often face practical challenges such as limited proficiency, curriculum expectations or large class sizes (Alghamdi, 2021; Borg, 2017). Studies in Malaysia also reveal a strong dependence on songs, drills and worksheets, with relatively few opportunities for children to speak freely or initiate conversation (Bokiev and Ismail, 2021). This dependence on rote methods can narrow children's learning experiences and reduce the richness of language needed for real communication (Karim and Sulaiman, 2023). Thus, this study aims to address these gaps by combining teacher interviews and classroom observations to understand current practices, identify where they align with CEFR Pre-A1 expectations and propose a practical process model to guide CEFR-informed English teaching in preschools. The research questions guiding this study are: What are preschool teachers' beliefs and perceptions regarding English teaching and learning? How do classroom practices reflect CEFR Pre-A1 descriptors? What challenges do teachers face in implementing CEFR-aligned teaching? How can findings inform a process model for CEFR-aligned preschool English pedagogy?

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine preschool teachers' beliefs and classroom practices related to CEFR Pre-A1 implementation, as this method effectively captures classroom complexity and the gap between intended and actual teaching (Han, 2023; Wang et al., 2023; Gu, 2022; Choy et al., 2021; Nassaji, 2015). Data were collected from ten preschool teachers (T1–T10) from three private preschools in Pahang, Malaysia, with varied teaching experience and English proficiency. Data supports similar findings by Wang et al. (2023) as well as Yüce and Mirici (2019). The participants' teaching experience ranged from one to fifteen years and their English proficiency varied from beginner to advanced. This mix allowed the study to capture a wide range of teaching approaches and views on working with CEFR Pre-A1 guidelines. All participants voluntarily agreed to take part in interviews and classroom observations, ensuring ethical and thorough data collection. *Table 1* presents the participants' demographic information.

Table 1. *Participants' demographic information.*

Teacher	Teaching Experience	Highest Qualification	Field of Study	CEFR Awareness	CEFR Training
T1	13 years	Diploma	Early Childhood Education (ECE)	Yes	Yes
T2	1 years	Diploma	Islamic ECE	Yes	No
T3	2 years	Diploma	ECE	No	No
T4	6 years	Diploma	Islamic Studies and Human Resource Management	No	No
T5	2 years	Diploma	ECE	No	No
T6	4 years	Diploma	ECE	Yes	No
T7	3 years	SPM*	Arts	No	No
T8	2 years	SPM*	Science	No	No
T9	14 years	Bachelor's degree	Accounting	Yes	No
T10	3 months	Bachelor's degree	English Language	Yes	Yes

Note: SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) is equivalent to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and the GCE Ordinary Level (O-Level).

Semi-structured interviews and 20 hours of classroom observations of the 5 to 6 years old classrooms were conducted to examine teachers' beliefs, instructional practices and classroom interaction patterns, allowing for triangulation between reported and observed practices (Muchie et al., 2025; Decraene et al., 2023; Suryadien et al., 2023; Yussof and Sun, 2020). Interviews were conducted in English and Bahasa Malaysia to support open communication (Aprilia et al., 2023; Laila et al., 2023), and short stimulated-recall interviews encouraged teacher reflection. Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006), enabling systematic identification of alignment and gaps with CEFR Pre-A1 descriptors while allowing themes to emerge inductively (Liu and Demetriou, 2025; Hatmanto and Sari, 2023). First, all interview transcripts and classroom observation notes were read several times so the researchers could become very familiar with the data. While reading, brief notes were made to highlight recurring ideas related to teachers' beliefs, teaching practices and how lessons reflected CEFR expectations.

Next, the data were examined more closely and labelled by hand. Short sections of text were grouped under simple descriptive labels such as teaching that focused on repetition, limited opportunities for children to speak, indirect awareness of CEFR and frequent use of worksheets. These labels were drawn directly from what teachers said and what was seen in classrooms rather than being decided in advance. This allowed patterns to develop naturally from the data. In the following stages, related labels were

brought together to form broader themes by comparing similarities and differences across the data. For instance, labels linked to songs, drills and group repetition were combined under the theme Performative Learning Through Play. Similarly, labels describing brief or memorised responses were grouped as Limited Communicative Intent. These themes were checked repeatedly against the interview and observation data to ensure they accurately reflected what was reported and observed. To strengthen the reliability of the analysis, a second researcher reviewed and coded about a quarter of the data independently. Any differences in interpretation were discussed until agreement was reached. This process helped clarify how labels were used and reduced the influence of individual bias. The final themes were then confirmed by revisiting all the data to ensure they were clear, consistent, and clearly distinct from one another.

Results and Discussion

In terms of RQ1, preschool teachers' beliefs and perceptions regarding English teaching and learning, the findings reveal three emergent themes which illustrate a clear gap between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. Theme 1 is Performative Learning Through Play. Teachers reported to routinely use songs, vocabulary games, and storytelling. However, observation revealed that lessons were teacher-centred and had minimal child output as stated by Teacher 3: "I use a lot of songs and flashcards for new words. The children enjoy it, but they mostly repeat after me. They don't really speak much on their own." This suggests a performative rather than a communicative orientation as vocabulary exposure is emphasized over interaction. Theme 2 is Limited Communicative Intent in which children's oral production was mostly formulaic, with few open-ended speaking opportunities. Activities lacked prompts that could stimulate spontaneous dialogue. The teachers were observed to be satisfied with short answers from the children as revealed by Teacher 1: "During games, they just say the word. If it's a fruit game, they say 'banana' or 'apple'. We don't really ask them to make sentences or questions." This reinforces the lack of scaffolding toward individual oral performance or interactive speech, which are essential at the Pre-A1 level.

Theme 3 is Limited Familiarity with CEFR Descriptors. This is primarily due to the majority of the teachers being unaware of CEFR, let alone Pre-A1 descriptors, as stated by Teacher 2: "I heard about CEFR in a workshop once, but it was for primary school. For us, we just follow our own syllabus." This is further reinforced by Teacher 5: "We don't use those descriptors. We just want them to say some words in English." This lack of awareness limits the ability to integrate speaking functions like turn-taking, question-response, or self-expression into their interaction. It can be concluded that although teachers value fun, interactive and input-rich activities such as songs, stories and movement, their limited understanding of CEFR as well as multiple constraints restrict effective implementation. As Borg (2017) argues, teacher beliefs alone do not guarantee effective practice. In reality, lessons remain largely teacher-centred, with heavy reliance on drills, repetition and worksheets, leaving limited space for child-initiated language use. This reduces opportunities for productive language practice, which is essential for communicative competence (Saad et al., 2024). As for RQ2, whether classroom practices reflect CEFR Pre-A1 descriptors, findings show a strong alignment with receptive skills, particularly vocabulary recognition and following simple instructions. However, productive and interactive skills such as spontaneous phrase construction and basic interaction were weakly developed. This imbalance reflects a classroom focus on

recognition-based learning rather than meaningful communication, falling short of CEFR's communicative goals (Bayuong et al., 2025; Mohammed et al., 2021). Narrative activities further demonstrated partial alignment, as storytelling emphasised word repetition rather than plot understanding or cause-effect reasoning, limiting functional language use (Arrifqi, 2020).

RQ3 addresses challenges faced by teachers in implementing CEFR-aligned teaching. Findings reveal the main challenge is their uncertainty about CEFR implementation. Of the 10 teachers interviewed, only 5 have heard of CEFR and 2 received some form of training. Many rely on the syllabus instead of CEFR descriptors and lack training in using "can do" statements. This challenge was also reported in Malaysia and other CEFR contexts (Birgün and Polat, 2023; Jamain and Jamaludin, 2023; Nii and Yunus, 2022; Ng and Ahmad, 2021). Misconceptions of CEFR as a fixed syllabus or as requiring native-like proficiency further lower teacher confidence (Hamid et al., 2025; Ng and Ahmad, 2021; Phoolaikao and Sukying, 2021). Other noteworthy challenges include structural challenges which refer to large class sizes, limited lesson time, curriculum pressure and teachers limited English proficiency further restrict communicative teaching. These conditions encourage reliance on worksheets and rote learning, which often overshadow CEFR's communicative intent (Briceño Martínez and González Reyes, 2025; Almanea et al., 2024; Karim and Sulaiman, 2023). Limited access to suitable materials and insufficient professional development also weaken implementation, particularly for teachers without formal English training (Alih et al., 2021; Md Nawawi et al., 2021; Mohammed et al., 2021; Nawai and Said, 2020). The findings yielded by this study allow the researchers to develop a process model to design a CEFR-aligned English pedagogy for preschools to bridge policy and practice. *Table 2* shows the proposed CEFR Alignment Process Model.

Table 2. *Proposed CEFR alignment process model.*

Step	Phase	Key action
01	Initial Evaluation	Assess current classroom practices to establish a baseline.
02	Activity Mapping	Map existing activities against CEFR Pre-A1 descriptors.
03	Outcome Definition	Translate descriptors into measurable, child-friendly outcomes.
04	Method Integration	Incorporate CEFR-aligned communicative and interactive pedagogies (including storytelling).
05	Lesson Planning	Create lesson plans using standardized CEFR-aligned templates.
06	Implementation	Execute interventions, monitor progress, and reflect on results.
07	Targeted Training	Provide professional development to refine instructional skills.

The model responds directly to teachers' feedback and classroom realities (Md Nawawi et al., 2021; Ng and Ahmad, 2021). Through the interviews and observations, Steps 01, 02, and 03 are identified which leads to Steps 04 to 06, to fill in the missing parts by incorporating CEFR-aligned communicative and interactive strategies, creating and implementing standardised lesson plans that are CEFR-aligned. This would be possible through strengthening the teachers' professional development. This approach supports a shift from rigid routines towards meaningful language use while emphasising system-level support, adequate resources and teacher collaboration as key conditions for successful CEFR implementation (Nallamuthu and Gandhimathi, 2026; Diyanti and Madya, 2021; Barendsen and Henze, 2019).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reveals there exists misalignment between English teaching practices in selected private preschools in Malaysia and the communicative goals of the CEFR Pre-A1 level. While teachers did indeed conduct play-based, engaging activities such as songs, stories and movement, classroom practices remain largely teacher-centred and vocabulary-focused, offering limited opportunities for meaningful interaction and language production. The activities often lack the necessary scaffolding required for spontaneous oral interaction and functional language use. The gaps in CEFR knowledge, large class sizes and curriculum demands contribute to the underdeveloped productive language skills of the young learners. In other words, while the teachers' beliefs are aligned with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the implementation needs fine tuning. The findings highlight the importance of age-appropriate, hands-on English exposure to support early language development. Thus, based on teacher feedback and class observation, a seven-step CEFR aligned process model is proposed to guide lesson planning, reflection and professional development, helping teachers create more interactive, communicative classrooms. While the findings provide insights on teacher beliefs and practice within private preschools, this study involved a relatively small sample of ten teachers from three private preschools which limits the statistical generalisability of the findings. However, the aim of this qualitative inquiry was not broad generalisation but in-depth exploration of classroom practices and teacher beliefs within a specific educational context. The findings offer analytic insights that may be transferable to similar private preschool settings where teachers have limited formal CEFR training and rely heavily on prescribed syllabi. Despite the sample constraints, the consistency between interview data and classroom observations strengthens the credibility of the findings. Future research may replicate this study across a wider range of preschools, including public and rural settings or employ mixed-method designs to examine the effectiveness of the proposed CEFR Alignment Process Model on young learners' communicative outcomes over time.

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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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