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An Overview of Teacher-Child Interactions in Malaysian Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

This review synthesizes research on teacher–child interactions in Malaysian early childhood education (ECE), drawing from peer-reviewed studies published between 2013 and 2024. Using a structured search and thematic synthesis approach, the review examines the nature, quality, and influencing factors of these interactions across diverse preschool settings. Teacher–child interactions are widely recognized as central to young children's cognitive, language, and socio-emotional development. While studies from Western contexts are well-established, Malaysian research though growing is marked by variability in focus, methodology, and depth. Rather than a lack of studies, the field suffers from limited integration and a dominance of small-scale, qualitative inquiries with inconsistent frameworks. This review identifies four key themes: (1) emotional support as a consistent strength, (2) instructional support as a persistent weakness, (3) the impact of teacher characteristics and beliefs, and (4) contradictory evidence regarding baseline interaction quality. The review highlights the need for systematic frameworks and professional development to enhance interaction quality in Malaysian preschools. Strengthening teacher–child interactions can support national goals of developing confident, competent, and holistic learners.

Keywords: *teacher-child interaction, early childhood education, quality, interaction, instructional support, emotional support*

INTRODUCTION

The importance of early childhood education (ECE) in influencing children's academic, cognitive, and socio-emotional development has been highlighted by an increasing amount of research over the last 20 years. High-quality early learning experiences are especially crucial during the preschool years (ages 4–6), when foundational skills are being formed. While curriculum content and learning materials contribute to this development, research consistently highlights the importance of teacher quality, particularly the quality of teacher–child interactions (Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009).

Teacher–child interaction serves as a cornerstone of effective early childhood education, influencing children's learning trajectories, emotional regulation, and social competence. These interactions form the foundation for scaffolding children's understanding, promoting engagement, and fostering a supportive classroom climate. In Malaysia, the growing emphasis on improving preschool quality aligned with national policy initiatives such as the National Preschool

Curriculum Standards (NPCS) and Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025) has brought increasing attention to how teachers interact with young learners.

Despite these policy shifts that advocate for child-centred pedagogy, classroom practices in many Malaysian preschools continue to reflect traditional, hierarchical models of teacher authority and control. Although the literature on teacher–child interaction is well established in Western contexts and often measured through structured tools such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), Malaysian studies remain fragmented, typically small-scale, qualitative, and conducted in isolated contexts without a shared conceptual framework. The lack of synthesis across studies makes it difficult to draw broader conclusions about the state of teacher–child interactions in Malaysian preschools.

This review seeks to address that gap by synthesizing empirical studies published between 2013 and 2024, with a focus on understanding the nature, quality, and influencing factors of teacher–child interactions in Malaysian early childhood settings. In supporting Malaysia's objective of nurturing confident, capable, and well-rounded young learners, this review attempts to inform not only classroom practice but also teacher training, curriculum development, and policy planning by identifying prevalent patterns and contextual challenges.

Definition of Teacher-Child Interaction

The teacher-child interactions that take place between teachers and children throughout classroom sessions are referred to as teacher-child interaction. These exchanges involve both verbal and non-verbal of communication, such as eye contact, gestures, conversations, shared activities, and emotional displays. They have two main functions: (1) to create strong, nurturing bonds that enhance a child's feeling of wellbeing and belonging, and (2) to enable meaningful learning by encouraging children in experiences both developmentally and cognitively appropriate.

Emotional support, organized classroom management, and instructional interactions that foster concept and language development encourages high-quality teacher-child interactions (Mashburn et al., 2008). These interactions support children's learning and development, beyond formal education and including social and educational exchanges (Hamre et al., 2012).

According to Teachstone (2022), such interactions are intentional and meaningful, fostering connection, collaboration, and a positive classroom community. Teacher fosters an environment where children feel appreciated, involved, and inspired to study by exhibiting warmth, respect, and attentiveness. Effective early childhood education is essentially built on the interactions between teacher and children that will give impact towards academic performance, social-emotional development, growth, and classroom environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW OVERVIEW

Research related to Teacher-Child Interactions in Early Childhood Education

Research on Teacher-Child Interactions in Malaysian Early Childhood Education (ECE) is growing, but still relatively limited compared to Western contexts. Few studies use structured observational instruments to explicitly evaluate interaction quality; instead, frequently concentrate on general classroom quality, educational strategies, or child development. This will demonstrate the importance of teacher-child interaction, the framework and measuring instruments used, studies from Asian countries, and teacher-child interactions in Malaysia.

Teacher–Child Interaction in Asian countries

Teacher-child interactions play a critical role in early childhood education (ECE) globally, and increasing attention is being paid to their significance within Asian contexts. In many Asian countries, such as China, Singapore, Philippines, and South Korea, there is a growing recognition that high-quality interactions contribute to children's holistic development, including their social-emotional well-being and cognitive growth (Li, 2016; Aik & Tan, 2021; Chee et al., 2014). These are some studies on teacher-child interactions from Asian countries.

A study examines preschool teachers' perspectives on quality teacher–child interactions in Singapore preschools. Through interviews with ten preschool teachers, the research highlights teacher–child interactions in fostering children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. The findings suggest that teachers' perceptions can influence the quality of interactions and children's developmental outcomes (Karuppiah, 2021).

The exploratory study in Singapore aimed to develop data on the quality of teacher-child interactions in Singapore pre-school classrooms. utilizing the Classroom Assessment Scoring System as the measuring tool. The study found that teachers often miss signs when children need extra support and show little sensitivity to their individual needs and talents. This leads to children being less likely to seek help or share their thoughts. Encouraging self-assessment and reflection can improve teacher–child interactions (Karuppiah, 2021).

This longitudinal research utilized piecewise growth modelling to examine how teacher–child interaction quality influenced children's academic and cognitive development over time. The key findings using Classroom Assessment Scoring System, underscores the importance of Instructional Support in fostering children's academic and cognitive development (Hu et al., 2020).

A study conducted in China examined the effects of teacher-child interactions in early years environments on the academic growth of kindergarten-aged children. By investigating the effects of the quality of teacher-child interactions during the first preschool year (at age 3) on the developmental outcomes in the next two preschool years, the study sought to close a gap in knowledge. The study evaluates the quality of interactions in three areas: Instructional Support, Classroom Organization, and Emotional Support using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). These findings underscore the importance of Instructional Support in early childhood education and suggest that enhancing this aspect of teacher–child interactions could lead to better developmental outcomes for children in Chinese preschools (Hu et al., 2018).

Research findings indicates that positive and responsive teacher–child interactions significantly enhance preschoolers' language development in both Filipino and English in Philippines. Teachers who actively engage children through frequent verbal communication, storytelling, and questioning promote stronger language acquisition and cognitive growth, fostering better overall communication skills in young learners (Garcia, & Blanco, 2019).

In many Asian educational contexts, including Malaysia, teacher–child interactions often reflect hierarchical cultural values rooted in respect for authority and age. Studies from China, Japan, and Singapore indicate that while teachers consistently demonstrate warmth, attentiveness, and care toward children, they also maintain a structured and authoritative presence in the classroom. This is evident in communication styles where teachers guide interactions, expect compliance, and emphasize order, reflecting broader societal norms of respect and discipline (Li et al, 2016).

Research on teacher–child interactions across various Asian contexts reveals a growing recognition of their critical role in supporting young children’s holistic development, particularly in cognitive, language, and socio-emotional domains.

The crucial role teacher-child interactions play in promoting young children's holistic development, particularly in the areas of cognitive, linguistic, and socioemotional growth, is evident in the reviewed literature from Asian contexts, including Singapore, China, the Philippines, and larger East and Southeast Asia. These studies underscore that high-quality teacher–child interactions are not only foundational to effective teaching practices but linked to improved developmental outcomes in areas for examples language acquisition, academic achievement, and emotional well-being.

In several of Asian studies, a standardized tool for analysing teacher-child interactions made available by the implementation of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). The findings are the Classroom Organization and Emotional Support score higher than Instructional Support. This indicate the need for intentional scaffolding of children’s language, reasoning, and thought processes.

These results indicated encouraging future directions. The gap between established practices and child-centred approaches can be closed by promoting teacher reflection, professional development, and culturally responsive teaching. An awareness of local cultural values combined with the integration of global frameworks such as CLASS can help ECE systems in Asia transition to more effective, balanced, and culturally grounded forms of teacher-child interactions. Bridging global frameworks like CLASS with local cultural realities requires more than translation; it demands thoughtful adaptation, dialogue, and training that acknowledge the unique educational values that shape Malaysian classrooms.

Teacher–Child Interactions in Malaysia: What Do We Know?

The use of an observational methods, such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), to assess and improve teacher-child interactions in Malaysian early childhood settings has gained popularity in recent years. Large-scale and organized training are still few, though. While some exploratory efforts and pilot studies have experimented with CLASS in Malaysian preschools, such as Nor & Abdullah (2020), the implementation is still lacking. This represents opportunities to improve the quality of interactions through validated, research-based frameworks.

Key Studies on Teacher-Child Interactions in Malaysian Early Childhood Education

There is limited research on teacher-child interactions in Malaysia, although some studies have indicated otherwise. The literature review is based on peer-reviewed published articles between 2013 to 2024 are as follows:

According to researchers Liu & Nurfaradila (2024), examined teacher-child interactions within social-emotional teaching activities using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). Their findings revealed that the Emotional Climate dimension scored the highest among the assessed domains, which reflects that teachers generally create a warm, supportive, and trusting atmosphere in the classroom. This positive emotional environment is crucial as it helps children feel safe, valued, and motivated to engage in learning and social interactions. However, the study found that the other two domains: Educational Support and Classroom Organization scored at a moderate level. This suggests that while the emotional aspect of teacher–child interactions is

strong, there are noticeable gaps in how teachers support children's cognitive and language development (Educational Support) and in how well the classroom is managed to maximize learning opportunities (Classroom Organization). These areas are essential for fostering emotional well-being, academic growth and smooth classroom routines

The study by Roding & Che Mustafa (2022), the focus area is enhancing communication skills through Circle Time activities. Teachers played a crucial role in facilitating these activities, guiding children through interactive sessions that encouraged verbal expression and listening skills. Teachers guided the children through conversations and encouraged participation, creating a safe and supportive environment where children felt confident to express their thoughts and ideas. Storytelling and play-based learning, integral components of circle time, not only captured children's interest but promoted meaningful dialogue and turn-taking, which are essential for developing communication skills.

The quantitative study by Wai Leng et al. (2021) examined the relationship between preschool teachers' beliefs and their child-centred classroom practices in early childhood education. The findings suggest that teachers' beliefs in the category of "teaching to enhance development and learning" were high. The most significant belief in this component was regarding item No. 15, which emphasised, "Teacher-child interactions that foster children's self-esteem and positive attitudes towards learning, as well as the teacher's engagement with groups and individuals by providing suggestions, asking questions, and facilitating children's involvement with materials, activities, and peers."

Research findings by Rahmatullah et al. (2021) reveal a concerning lack of evidence for teacher-child interactions when viewed through the lens of process quality. Despite the widely acknowledged importance of high-quality care and education in supporting children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. The study found that in the observed preschool settings, there was a complete absence of meaningful interaction during classroom or learning activities. Teachers were largely passive, with minimal verbal or non-verbal engagement with children. This lack of interaction indicates a critical gap in the quality of instructional and emotional support provided to children, underscoring the need for professional development and training focused on process quality in early childhood education.

Research conducted by Ahmad et al. (2021) focused on an instrument designed to evaluate the overall quality of teaching, learning, and assessment practices within Malaysian Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings. This instrument is Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care, was developed to provide a structured and reliable framework for assessing critical components of early childhood education. The key findings from their study highlighted four main dimensions essential to quality ECCE: teacher-child interactions, environment and resources, teaching strategies, and observation and assessment. Teacher-child interactions reflecting how the quality of engagement between teachers and children influences learning outcomes. A safe, stimulating, and well-equipped environment supports children's development and learning. Teaching strategies including methods and approaches by teachers to facilitate effective learning experiences, while observation and assessment addressed the systematic monitoring and evaluation of children's progress to inform instruction.

According to Mamat et al. (2020), teacher-child interactions including verbal and nonverbal forms of communication, are fundamental for creating productive learning settings. Praising and encouragements such as persuasion, instruction, pampering, and advice are the communicative

acts that take place throughout verbal interactions. These verbal interactions serve multiple purposes: praise and advice reinforce positive behaviours and guide learning. Persuasion, instruction, and prompting actively involve children in the learning process by encouraging participations, and attention. Nonverbal interactions involve language tone, physical touch, and facial expressions. The nonverbal cues complement verbal communication by providing emotional support and reinforcing in ways children can understand. For example, a warm smile or gentle touch can convey encouragement and build trust. The children will feel valued and safe. The study emphasizes how teachers and children actively participate in the communication process, demonstrating that these encounters are co-constructed.

Research by Mamat et al. (2020) offers insightful information about teacher-child interactions in Malaysian preschools, "Observation of a Positive and Constructive Teacher-Child Interaction in Pre-School Setting in Selangor Malaysia". The key findings are teachers' characteristics, such as being caring, soft-spoken, and using appropriate body language, significantly influenced children's interactions. Teachers utilized non-verbal cues, including smiles and gentle touches, to convey warmth and support, which helped in building a harmonious classroom environment. The study underscores that certain teacher characteristics play a crucial role in promoting positive interactions. Specifically, teachers who exhibited caring attitudes, spoke in a gentle and soft-spoken manner, and used appropriate and culturally sensitive body language were more successful in engaging children effectively. Children experienced a sense of safety and appreciation, which motivated their participation and engagement in classroom activities.

A study which focused on teacher responsiveness, pointing out that levels of comprehension supported by teachers who were sensitive and appropriately reacted to children's verbal and nonverbal cues was conducted by Shah & Hanafi (2017) that highlighted several key aspects of high-quality teacher-child interactions in early childhood classrooms. The researchers saw how engaged the children were, pausing thoughtfully before responding. These pauses were seen as indicators of active cognitive processing, indicating that children were internalizing the information being conveyed and thinking critically rather than just reacting. It also identified specific learning indicators linked to the interaction process such as the timing of teacher responses, the pace of the exchange, and the depth of follow-up questioning. These aspects of interactions were viewed as reflective of children's learning progress.

In 2017, Hanum examined the impact that teacher-child interactions in influencing children's educational experiences and developmental outcomes. The study found that meaningful and classroom interactions influenced children's language development and their learning progress. It emphasized when teachers engaged children in rich, responsive conversations and provide emotional and instructional support, children tend to demonstrate stronger language skills. However, a key finding was the significant variability in the quality of teacher-child interactions across different classrooms. This suggests that not all children are receiving the same level of interactional support, which may impact their learning opportunities.

Teachers' pedagogical knowledge and emotional sensitivity have a significant impact on the quality of teacher-child interactions in Malaysian preschools according to Abdullah (2015). His research highlighted the importance of reflective practice and a deeper understanding of child development. Teachers who continuously evaluate and improved their interactions plays an important role in improving interaction quality. This allows teachers to become more responsive,

intentional, and adaptive in their communication, fostering classroom environments that promote both emotional development, and cognitive development.

Effective integration of play into pedagogy requires teachers to engage interactively with children, guiding and scaffolding their learning experiences through play-based learning. According to a study, enhancing teacher capability in play pedagogy led to more meaningful and developmentally appropriate interactions, benefiting children's overall growth (Abu Bakar, Daud, Nordin & Abdullah, 2015). Their findings emphasized that play is not just a recreational activity but important context for children's learning and development. Teachers must interact with children during playtime by watching, involve, and supporting the children's exploration and problem-solving in order for play to be instructive. These interactive involvement helps children make connections, extend their thinking, and develop key skills across cognitive, social, and emotional development.

A study by Fauzah and Nik Suryani (2013) found that verbal and nonverbal interactions between teachers and children begin with the development of carefully planned lesson plans, instructional materials, teaching strategies, and the overall learning process. The researchers identified two key interaction strategies in teacher-child communication: constructive-dialogic interaction and explicit correction. Constructive-dialogic interaction refers to a collaborative, two-way communication where teachers engage children in meaningful dialogue that encourages thinking and reflection. Explicit correction involves teachers providing clear, direct feedback to guide children towards the understanding or behaviour, which is essential for learning. According to the study, children's interactions with their peers are creative, and nonverbal through gestures, facial expressions, and cooperative play. By encouraging social skills and creativity in the classroom, the peer interactions enhance teacher-child interactions. It emphasized that interaction is a crucial process as it acts as the bridge between designed lesson plans and actual learning outcomes and objectives.

Overall, research from Malaysia indicates that improving early childhood education and bridging developmental gaps in classroom settings require improving the quality of teacher-child interactions through reflective teaching, cultural responsiveness, and instructional support. Every child encouraged to have enjoyable and learning experiences in their formative years, improving the quality of interactions should be the priority in Malaysian early childhood education policy, curricula, and teacher development initiatives.

METHODOLOGY

An overview of the research on teacher-child interactions in early childhood education by Malaysian scholars is the goal of this article. Electronic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar were used to search the literature. Peer-reviewed journal articles written by Malaysian writers and published between 2013 and 2024 and the keywords were "teacher-child interactions" and "early childhood education."

Indicators to quality and relevance, articles were selected for this overview based on a several factors. First and foremost, the research focus on early childhood education and include children ages three to six. Second, only studies that emphasized the effectiveness of teacher-child interactions in terms of classroom organization, academic support, or emotional support were taken into consideration. Thirdly, they were included to keep everything current and consistent from 2013 until 2024.

This study is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic, identifying key trends, emerging themes, and research gaps in the field of early childhood education in Malaysia.

Frameworks for Measuring Teacher-Child Interactions

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) widely used tool for evaluating teacher-child interaction quality in early childhood education. CLASS was developed by Robert Pianta at the University of Virginia is a tool for analysing the quality of teacher-child interactions in the classroom. CLASS conceptualizes interaction across three key domains: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support (Pianta et al., 2008). Studies applying CLASS have found strong correlations between higher interaction scores and improved child outcomes (Curby et al., 2009; Burchinal et al., 2010). Other frameworks include Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Quality' instrument.

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), the leading quality improvement system for teaching, helps to focus, measure and improve classroom interaction and is the important factor proven for children's academic, and lifelong success. CLASS not only defines teaching quality through the lens of interactions, but it provides the ability to measure and improve the interactions (Teachstone 2nd edition, 2022). CLASS observes and scores interactions in three broad domains: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) is a widely used observational assessment tool designed to evaluate the quality of early childhood education environments. It was developed by Thelma Harms, Richard M. Clifford, and Debby Cryer, it has undergone several updates, with ECERS-3 (third edition) being the most current version (as of 2015). The purpose is to assess process quality in early childhood settings for children aged 2.5 to 5 years. Process quality refers to what children experience daily in the classroom such as interactions, materials, and activities that directly affect their development. This tool helps early childhood programs identify strengths and areas needing improvement.

The Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Quality (TLAQ) instrument is a core component of the broader Quality of Malaysian Early Childhood Care and Education (Q-MECC) tool, developed and copyrighted by the National Child Development Research Centre (NCDRC) at Sultan Idris Education University (UPSI). It is designed for the Malaysian context, Q-MECC evaluates the quality of early childhood settings through dimensions such as teacher-child interaction, physical environment, teaching strategies, and assessment practices (Ahmad, Mamat, Che Mustafa, & Mohd Yusoff, 2021). It is widely used in national-level monitoring and is aligned with local curricula and policy objectives.

The World Bank's 2023 preschool report highlights low teacher quality as a persistent challenge in Malaysia and recommends the use of Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) as a reliable, evidence-based observational tool. CLASS measures the process quality of teaching focusing on daily teacher-child interactions across emotional, organizational, and instructional domains which are consistently linked to children's academic, social, and emotional outcomes. While this review supports the potential benefits of CLASS, especially for elevating Malaysia's alignment with global benchmarks, it is important to acknowledge that CLASS is not yet widely adopted in the local research landscape. The disconnect between the advocacy for internationally recognized tools like CLASS and the current reliance on context-specific or non-standardized instruments is a significant issue. This gap presents both a limitation in cross-national

comparability and an opportunity for Malaysian research and policy to adopt more robust, scalable methods for evaluating teacher-child interactions.

Assessment tools such as Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and Malaysia's own Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Quality instrument play vital roles in quality assurance, Classroom Assessment Scoring System is distinct in its targeted measurement of interaction quality and its structured approach to improving teaching practices.

FINDINGS

A synthesis of Malaysian studies on teacher-child interactions in early childhood education reveals several recurring themes, patterns, and contradictions. This section organizes findings around four core themes that emerge consistently across the literature: (1) the consistent strength of emotional support, (2) the persistent weakness in instructional support, (3) the role of teacher characteristics and beliefs, and (4) contradictory evidence on baseline interaction quality.

Consistent Strength of Emotional Support

One of the most consistent findings in Malaysian Early Childhood Education studies is the emphasis on emotional warmth and supportive classroom climates. For example, Liu & Nurfaradila (2024) found that among the three CLASS domains, Emotional Support scored the highest, indicating that many Malaysian preschool teachers are skilled at creating environments where children feel safe, valued, and emotionally secure. Similarly, Mamat et al. (2019) observed that teachers' caring attitudes, soft-spoken manner, and appropriate body language helped foster harmonious and trusting teacher-child relationships. Researchers Roding and Che Mustafa (2022) reported that during circle time activities provided a safe and encouraging space for children to express themselves, supported by teachers' empathetic facilitation.

These results are in line with global research that views emotional support as essential to children's involvement, self-control, and learning preparedness (Mashburn et al., 2008). Emotional warmth seems to be a cultural strength in Malaysia, perhaps reflecting the country's principles of respect and peace among people. However, while emotional support is well-established, the challenge remains to extend this strength into other interaction domains.

Persistent Weakness in Instructional Support

Many studies highlight a consistent weakness in instructional support and cognitive stimulation. Liu & Nurfaradila (2024) found that instructional support was among the lowest-rated CLASS domains. This suggesting that teachers may struggle to extend children's learning through questioning, feedback, or concept development. Similarly, Rahmatullah et al. (2021) observed the lack of meaningful instructional engagement in classroom activities, with teachers often remaining passive during learning sessions.

The gap is echoed in a study by Fauzah & Nik Suryani (2013), their findings that while teachers planned lessons that allowed for interaction, actual implementation often lacked dialogic or reflective conversation. In the classrooms where verbal communication was present, much of it involved procedural talk rather than instructional dialogue (Mamat et al., 2020). The findings suggest a necessity for enhanced pedagogical support, with training in promoting higher-order thinking and instructional scaffolding as the key elements of high-quality early education.

Role of Teacher Characteristics and Beliefs

A third theme examines how the teacher's traits and beliefs influence the quality of interactions. Research indicates that reflective practices, pedagogical attitudes, and teacher responsiveness all affect how well children interact in the classroom. According to Wai Leng et al. (2021), teachers who firmly believed in child-centred learning environment were more likely to use strategies that encouraged active learning and self-worth. According to a study by Abdullah (2015), teachers who possess a more profound understanding of pedagogy and a reflective mindset are more inclined to improve their interactions to accommodate the developmental of the children.

In a similar study, Shah and Hanafi (2017) discovered that children's cognitive development was linked to responsive teacher which includes sensitivity to verbal and nonverbal cues. These results demonstrate how important teacher preparation, and attitude rather than merely technical proficiency to determining the quality of classroom interactions. While emotional sensitivity is frequently emphasized, research suggests that intentional use of scaffolding and feedback, as well as teaching beliefs, are just as important.

Contradictory Evidence on Baseline Interaction Quality

A final theme reviews the contradictory findings on the baseline quality of teacher-child interactions across Malaysian preschool settings. Several studies depict warm, interactive classrooms, others point to serious gaps. In some observed classrooms, for example, Rahmatullah et al. (2021) noted a "complete absence of meaningful interaction" with teachers demonstrating little or no involvement. However, some research (Mamat et al., 2019; Liu Yang & Nurfaradila, 2024) represents settings with high levels of emotional support and interactions.

These discrepancies could be the result of contextual variations in teacher's training backgrounds, type of preschools (private vs. public), or geographic location (rural vs. urban). The variation implies that efforts to standardize training and assessment at the national level are insufficient and that quality is not uniformly distributed across contexts. Without consistent use of tools like CLASS or similar frameworks, such disparities are difficult to detect and address systematically.

Summary of Findings

Across the Malaysian literature, there is strong consensus on the importance of emotional support, moderate recognition of the role of teacher beliefs, and consistent identification of instructional gaps. At the same time, the contradictory evidence about overall interaction quality points to broader systemic challenges. These include disparities in teacher training, lack of standardized evaluation tools, and limited emphasis on reflective teaching. A thematic synthesis of the research thus highlights not only what Malaysian ECE teachers are doing well, but also what remains to be strengthened to ensure all children benefit from high-quality interaction in the early years.

DISCUSSIONS

Over the last decade (2013–2024), there has been increasing focus on teacher–child interactions within Malaysian Early Childhood Education (ECE), both in academic research and policy discussions.

Diverse children's groups from a variety range of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic origins are common in Malaysian early childhood education classrooms. Malaysian early childhood education classes frequently have diverse student groups with a variety of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Because of this diversity, teachers are particularly customized and culturally aware

engagement and interactions of teacher-child strategies. Effective teacher-child interactions in Malaysia, therefore, require not only sensitivity and warmth but an understanding of multicultural dynamics and multilingual communication skills. This diversity requires teachers to adopt and adapt culturally responsive interaction strategies such as recognized and respect individual differences in communication styles, values, and learning preferences (Aik & Tan, 2021; Yussof, Alias, & Ismail, 2020).

Malaysian teachers' interactions styles have an impact on how they engage with the children in early childhood classrooms. Malaysia's education system has historically placed a strong emphasis on teacher authority and obedience, which has resulted in more teacher-centered practices that may limit inquiry-based learning and child-initiated discourse (Mokhtar, Halim & Kamarulzaman, 2020; Alias & Ismail, 2021).

However, recent educational reforms and curriculum frameworks, such as the National Preschool Standard Curriculum (KSPK), reflect a shift toward interactive, play-based, and inquiry-driven pedagogies that encourage meaningful teacher-child communication and active learner participation (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017; Aik & Tan, 2021).

Although research on teacher-child interactions in Malaysia has increased since 2013, several gaps persist. Longitudinal studies that link interaction quality to child learning outcomes remain scarce. There is also limited research on how interactions differ based on preschool type (public, private, international), geographic location (urban vs. rural), or teacher's demographic factors (age, gender, educational background & teaching experienced). More research is needed to guide teacher training, classroom practice, and policy development.

The synthesis of studies shows that Malaysian preschool teachers often excel in creating emotionally supportive environments, yet frequently struggle with providing effective instructional interactions. This pattern suggests that emotional support may be culturally emphasized and naturally integrated into teaching, whereas instructional support requires more deliberate pedagogical training.

Teacher beliefs and characteristics consistently emerge as critical factors, highlighting the need for teacher education programs to integrate reflective practice and child-centred philosophies. At the same time, contradictory evidence across settings signals systemic inconsistencies that point to unequal access to training, differing curriculum expectations, and a lack of standardized evaluation tools.

Strengthening teacher-child interactions in Malaysia requires a holistic approach that goes beyond classroom practice. It involves integrating observation-based tools, investing in teacher's professional development, and addressing structural disparities between preschool programs. Without these reforms, many children may continue to experience warm but academically to be improved in integrating particularly the teacher-child interactions.

More longitudinal and experimental studies are needed to examine how variations in teacher-child interaction affect cognitive, social, and emotional development of the children's learning and development in Malaysian Early Childhood Education. Investment in longitudinal and experimental research will provide evidence-based guidance for early childhood educators, policymakers, and stakeholders in designing higher-quality structural and process components of early learning environments that promote holistic child development in Malaysia.

FUTURE DIRECTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Research evidences have established that every child's early experiences, whether at home, in child care, or in preschool settings, matters. The child is regarded as the jewel of the nation as children are potential leaders of tomorrow (Mohd Majzub, 2013). The findings mentioned the final key measure towards improving the Malaysian Preschool Education is to increase the pedagogical pertaining to learning outcomes rather than focusing excessively on academic abilities, ensuring that children are involved and empowered in children's learning through a child-centred approach and improving teacher-child interaction in using an assessment tool such as Classroom Assessment Scoring System.

Many Malaysian preschools with structural and resource challenges that impact the quality of teacher-child interactions. Large class sizes often limit teachers' ability to provide individualized attention and tailor their interactions to each child's unique needs. Additionally, insufficient instructional materials and under-resourced learning environments hinder opportunities for active engagement and hands-on learning. To address these issues, policymakers and stakeholders must prioritize reducing teacher-to-child ratios, enabling teachers to build stronger, more meaningful connections with each child. Equally important is the provision of adequate teaching aids and well-designed learning spaces that foster exploration, play, interactive engagement and involvement.

More research is needed to examine how specific qualities of teacher-child interactions directly influence various child development outcomes, including cognitive, social, emotional, and language growth. Evaluating the impact of professional development programs on improving these interactions is also critical to identify effective strategies for teacher training and support. By generating more locally grounded data, policymakers and early childhood educators will be better equipped to design evidence-based interventions and policies.

Based on the reviewed evidence, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) presents a valuable, research-based framework for enhancing the quality of teacher-child interactions in Malaysian early childhood education (ECE). CLASS emphasizes emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support domains that have been consistently linked to children's developmental outcomes. Integrating CLASS into Malaysia's ECE quality assurance systems could support more effective teacher evaluation, targeted professional development, and a shared language around quality teaching practices (Teachstone, 2022).

However, while the adoption of CLASS is theoretically sound, several practical considerations must be acknowledged. First, CLASS is a Western-developed tool, and its implementation in Malaysia would require cultural adaptation, especially in areas where traditional, hierarchical interaction styles may limit child-led dialogue an aspect heavily emphasized in the Instructional Support domain. Furthermore, training and certification costs for observers, the need for ongoing coaching, and technical support infrastructure are critical factors that must be addressed to ensure sustainable and scalable use. Without proper investment in localized training and contextualization, the tool risks being used superficially or misaligned with local classroom realities.

In addition, the impact of classroom structure particularly class size on interaction quality emerged as a key theme in the literature. Several studies reviewed, particularly those using CLASS or qualitative observational frameworks, highlighted that large class sizes limit teachers' ability to provide individualized feedback, attend to children's emotional cues, and engage in extended

learning conversations. This finding underscores the need to reduce class sizes in Malaysian preschools, not just as a generic quality improvement measure, but specifically to create conditions that support higher-quality teacher-child interactions. Smaller classes allow for more responsive and dialogic exchanges, which are foundational to the types of instructional support that CLASS aims to promote.

The World Bank (2023) reviewed and recommendations to the Ministry of Education (MOE) Malaysia effort to continuously review the National Preschool Quality Standard assessment to ensure its usefulness for schools and ultimately its positive impact on children outcomes, The MOE may consider the following enhancements in one of the selected tools to measure the preschool quality is Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) Pre-K is an observation-based tool that assesses classroom quality in settings for children aged 36 months to kindergarten an assessment for teacher-child interactions. The systematic integration of the CLASS into Malaysian ECE should be pursued with careful consideration of cultural alignment, implementation resources, and teacher capacity building. At the same time, structural improvements such as smaller class size need to be addressed to create an environment meaningful, and high-quality teacher-child interactions.

CONCLUSION

Studies conducted between 2013 and 2024 have reaffirmed how important teacher-child interactions are in Malaysian early childhood settings. There has been progress, particularly in the areas of classroom organization and emotional support; instructional interactions are still lacking. A greater focus on teacher preparation, the use of observational instruments such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, and culturally sensitive teaching approaches are all necessary to address this.

In general, encouraging positive learning outcomes for children depends on enhancing teacher-child interactions. Teachers can empower to develop caring relationships with children if they receive thorough training, reflective practice, and sufficient resources. Enhancing teacher-child interactions will help Malaysia achieve its larger objectives of developing capable, self-assured, and well-rounded children who are ready for success in school in the future. By concentrating on these areas, Malaysia can advance toward more effective and equitable early childhood education, where teacher-child interactions are essential to children's development and learning.

The significance of teacher-child interactions in influencing children's early developmental outcomes is consistently supported by Malaysian research. Enhancing teacher-child interactions hope to continue to be a top priority for educational reforms and professional development programs as Malaysia moves closer to achieving high-quality early childhood education.

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