

The Development of a Malay Language Pretend Play Assessment Kit for Assessing Malaysian Children's Pretend Play

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Abstract

Pretend play involves representation of objects or individuals as another for amusement seeking and one of the multifaceted play activities that children engage in for fun, yet promotes a myriad of skills development and learning including cognitive, language, social, and emotional skills. Children across gender, geographical and cultural backgrounds engage in pretend play, however, there is still limited information available about Malaysian children's pretend play. It could be attributed to limited pretend play assessment available in the Malay language, or suitable for usage in Malaysian culture. Therefore, this study aimed to develop a Malay-language pretend play assessment kit to be used for assessing Malaysian children's pretend play. The study adopted the mixed method study guided by the Design and Development Research (DDR) approach. Phase I determined 115 early childhood education (ECE) educators' and 85 parents' needs for a pretend play assessment kit through an online survey. In Phase II, the assessment protocol and kit were designed based on the online survey, the Taxonomy of Pretend Play, and children's play observation. The final protocol and kit were developed through Nominal Group Technique (NGT) process with five experts comprises of an observation protocol and suggested play materials. The usability of the developed protocol and kit was conducted with an ECE educator and parents of young children in Phase III. The pretend play assessment kit is valid, reliable and deemed usable to assess children's general pretend play skills, but needs to be interpreted with caution due to the absence of age-affiliated scores.

Keywords: Pretend Play, Assessment, Malaysia, Observation, Development Study

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Introduction

Play is the main activity for children, they spend most of their time engaging in various play activities including object play, social play and pretend play. It is one of children's right (UN General Assembly, 1989). Children engaged in play activity for fun, but unbeknown to them, it is also promoting their development and learning (Catalano, & Campbell-Barr, 2021; Shamsudin, 2021). This reflects the definition of play as something fun, intrinsically motivated, flexible and imagination inducing activity (Schlesinger et al., 2020; Zosh et al., 2018). One of the multifaceted and most complex type of play is pretend play, benefiting children's cognitive, language, social and emotional skills (Hashmi et al., 2020; Hutagalung et al., 2020; Lillard, 2017).

Pretend play

Pretend play is a type of play involving representation of objects or individuals as another for amusement seeking (Fein, 1982; Lillard, 2015; Whitebread, & O' Sullivan, 2012). The main component of pretend play is the nonliteral behaviour or the 'as if' behaviour, also known to be the symbolic behaviour, which is the most complex play behaviour (Fein, 1981). Children engaging in pretend play engaged in at least one of these complex skills – '*decentration*', '*decontextualization*' and '*integration*'. '*Decentration*' is the ability to direct play actions outside of themselves, onto something or someone else, '*decontextualisation*' refers to the play actions of substituting an object or individual for another, taking it outside of its original context, and '*integration*' that is typically present in a more complex pretend play, is the ability to organize play into patterns and/or sequences (Casby, 1992; Fenson, 1986; Hughes, 2010; Rubin, 1986). Often pretend play behaviour is accompanied with vocalization from children to explain or to confirm the pretend play behaviour of the player or toys involved (Barton, 2010; Barton, & Wolery, 2008) which also indicates a more complex pretend play. Typically, children start engaging in pretend play on their own, later progress into pretend playing with other children or adult, recognized as social pretend play, the most complex form of pretend play.

Categories of pretend play

There is lack of unified category of pretend play (Barton, 2010; Barton & Wollery, 2008), however scholars in the field recognizes three essential elements of pretend play. These elements sometimes referred to as the categories of pretend play, that are substitution, assigning attribute, and referring to an absent object (Lewis, & Boucher, 1997). Similarly, Taxonomy of Pretend Play proposed by Barton (2010) outlines two categories of pretend play– (i) functional play with pretence (FPP) and (ii) substitutions. The first category, FPP involves playing or using objects or toys with its intended function without the reality-based outcome (i.e., the pretence behaviour), characterized by involvement of functional use of objects, showing of nonliteral behaviour, and might not be symbolic in nature. The second category, substitution involves actual objects or absent objects or person for another. Substitution encompasses of three sub-types, that are object substitution (OS), imagining absent objects (IAO), and assigning absent attributes (AAA). OS can be characterized by substituting actual objects or individuals for something or someone else that are similar in shape and size, or different shape and size. IAO involves children making the action or sound referring to an absent object or person that is related to the play activity, and AAA involves assigning objects or person an attribute that is not present at the time (Barton, 2010). These types of pretend play can sometimes occur in sequences where more than one type of pretend play is observed at the

same time relating to the same play theme, indicating a more complex pretend play. In the context of this study, the taxonomy proposed by Barton (2010) guided the four types of pretend play used, that are – FPP, OS, AAA, and IAO.

Benefits of pretend play

A myriad of development is promoted when children engage in pretend play activities including cognitive, language, social, communication, emotional and learning (Barton, 2010; Catalano, & Campbell-Barr, 2021; Gmitrova, Podhajecka, & Gmitrov, 2009; Hong, Ko, & Lee, 2019; Hutagalung et al., 2020; Lillard, 2017; Pearson, Russ, & Spannagel, 2008; Saracho, 2002). Everyday life routine behaviour is typically involved in children's pretend play and this helps shape children's behaviour and functional skills (Shamsudin, 2018). Representation is the main element of pretend play, they imagine, interpret, express and transform the play ideas and behaviour beyond themselves using words, images and also actions. This reflects an integration of cognitive, language, physical, social and even emotional developments in a child, all in one pretend play activity (Piaget, 1962, Russ, & Wallace, 20013; Stagnitti et al., 2020; Vygotsky, 1966).

Pretend play assessment

A number of pretend play assessment is available used by professionals and researchers in the field of play. The assessment is used to measure children's play abilities including Child-Initiated Pretend Play Assessment (ChIPPA; Stagnitti, 2007), Test of Pretend Play (ToPP; Lewis, & Boucher, 1997), Affect in Play Scale – Preschoolers (APS-P; Fehr, & Russ, 2009), and Play in Early Childhood Evaluation System (PIECES; Kelly-Vance, & Ryalls, 2005). All these assessment tools were developed in the context of western countries and available in English language and some other language except Malay language. Since the assessment tools were developed in western countries, some of the items are not climate and culturally-appropriate to be used in the Malaysian context since pretence behaviour has been noted to be highly context dependent (Barton & Wollery, 2008; Shamsudin, 2018). These reasons warrant the development of a pretend play assessment kit in this study that is based on the Malaysian context.

Therefore, the objective of the study is to develop a Malay-language pretend play assessment kit and to test its usability.

Methodology

This mixed method study is guided by the Design and Development Research (DDR; Richey, & Klein, 2007) approach for the systematic process of developing and evaluating the pretend play assessment kit. Phase I involved online needs survey of 200 early childhood education (ECE) educators and parents of young children aged two to six years old. Following the needs for the development of pretend play assessment kit, Phase II commenced with the design of pretend play assessment kit based on the surveys output, available pretend play assessment and the Taxonomy of Pretend Play (Barton, 2010). A pretend play observation protocol and observation form were form and validated through a focus group discussion (FGD) followed suit after the observation of pilot pretend play recordings. The FGD discussed the issues noted by the three blinded raters when rating pilot pretend play recordings. Meanwhile, the reliability of the observation rating was determined using Fleiss Multirater Kappa (Fleiss, 1971; Fleiss et al., 2003). A nominal group techniques (NGT) process took place in the development of the

pretend play assessment kit involving five experts to reach a consensus on issues noted from the previous FGD. The reliability of the observation rating once again established from the observation of 48 video recordings completed by three blinded raters. The developed pretend play assessment kit consists of recording protocol, observation protocol, observation form and sets of play materials were evaluated its usability in Phase III involving an ECE educator and parents of young children. Quantitative data collected in each phase was analyzed descriptively (mean, standard deviation, frequencies, percentage) or inferentially using the Fleiss Multirater Kappa (Fleiss, 1971; Fleiss et al., 2003). Meanwhile, qualitative data was analyzed using quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004).

Conclusion

Through the systematic and rigorous process, a Malay-language pretend play assessment kit has been developed and evaluated its usability. The assessment kit comprises of a recording protocol guiding the user about the setting, condition and duration of the recording to be taken; an observation protocol and observation form that includes the instruction for rating the pretend play and description of all indicators (types of pretend play, types of vocalizations, etc.); and play materials that includes both toys and non-toys objects) to be presented during the pretend play recording. Based on the three blinded inter-rater ratings Kappa values showed that the rating of the revised and final version of the observation rating ranged from poor to moderate indicated that it is reliable. Children's pretend play can be recorded for five minutes and rated using the observation form where raters will rate the pretend play behaviour as presence or absence during the 30-seconds time interval. The play materials include non-toys objects such as handkerchief, pencils, and cellophane tape, and toys such as doctors set and cooking sets are to be presented to children when recording their pretend play to elicit pretend play, however, it is not compulsory to be used.

The pretend play assessment kit found to be reliable and usable. However, only the absence of age-affiliated scores limits the interpretation of the scores obtained from the observation of pretend play using the developed assessment kit. Interpretation of the scores need to be made with caution, the scores describe the general pretend play skills of the children observed.

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