

Preschool Language Education Goals in Three Asian Countries: A Content Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the research problem of understanding preschool language education goals across different cultural contexts, focusing on China, Malaysia, and Japan. The objectives are to identify commonalities and differences in their goals and to provide targeted recommendations for improving preschool language education. Using a content analysis approach, the study reveals shared goals among the three countries, including fostering children's language application, diverse expression, and early literacy development. However, significant differences are evident: China emphasizes developing language habits, Malaysia prioritizes the systematic acquisition of language skills, and Japan focuses on nurturing emotional expression. Based on these findings, the study offers tailored recommendations for each country. The conclusions highlight the need for preschool language education to consider national contexts and educational practices more comprehensively and call for further research into the impact of curriculum implementation and coherence on language education outcomes.

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Contribution/Originality: The study innovatively compares preschool language education goals in China, Malaysia, and Japan, analyzing similarities and differences through content analysis of educational documents, providing targeted recommendations based on distinct national focuses.

1. Introduction

Language is a crucial intermediary tool for acquiring knowledge, organizing thought, and expressing experience. It also serves as a means of transmitting traditional values and cultural identity (Xu & Najera, 2022). The development of language skills in young children not only helps enhance cognitive and thinking abilities but also promotes the development of social skills and supports emotional expression. Preschool language education also serves as the foundation for children to smoothly integrate into school

activities and prepare for life (Olga Domnica Moldovan, 2015). Globally, the field of early education places significant emphasis on developing children's language skills, with countries establishing corresponding developmental goals to guide early childhood language education activities and improve children's language abilities. Preschool language education is not only an essential component of early childhood education but also a key driver for children's holistic development.

As globalization continues to advance, the attention paid to early childhood language education by countries around the world is increasing. Language, as the cornerstone of cognitive and social development, is particularly crucial in the preschool stage (Zahra & Sit, 2024). China, Malaysia, and Japan, as representative countries in the Asian region, have both commonalities and differences in the formulation of language education goals. This report aims to analyze the specific goals of early childhood language education in these three countries and answer the following research questions:

- i. What are the specific goals of early childhood language education in the three countries?
- ii. What are the similarities and differences in the language education goals of the three countries?

From the perspective of globalization and educational objectives, what specific recommendations can be made for each country to improve early childhood language education policies?

2. Materials and Methods

This study primarily employs content analysis, an empirical method that provides a systematic and objective description of communication content (Gür, 2023). It involves commenting on and observing what is seen, heard, read, and spoken to explore the themes and issues within the material. This approach quantifies and categorizes information in texts, focusing on the content itself rather than subjective interpretation (Piñeiro-Naval, 2020). Content analysis typically takes two forms: conceptual analysis and relational (semantic) analysis. Conceptual analysis examines the concepts within text content, studying the meaning of a series of texts from both explicit and implicit perspectives, while semantic analysis investigates the relationships between meaningful concepts. In this study, a conceptual analysis of document content was conducted, resulting in descriptive data (description and interpretation).

2.1. Selection of Documents

The study's analysis is based on the most current preschool education policy documents from each of the three countries: China's "Guidelines for the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3-6" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2012), Malaysia's "National Preschool Curriculum Standards" (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017), and Japan's "Kindergarten Education Guidelines" (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan 2017). These documents, issued by the respective national ministries of education, serve as the foundation for our comparative analysis.

2.2. Development of Coding Framework

This study employs content analysis as the primary research method to systematically examine and compare the preschool language education goals of three countries. Content analysis is an empirical research technique that provides a systematic and objective description of communication content, quantifying and categorizing textual data while focusing on the content itself rather than subjective interpretation (Piñeiro-Naval, 2020). The coding process involves meticulously reviewing policy documents, identifying, and extracting keywords and core concepts related to five key areas (Table 1). The extracted keywords are then categorized and coded according to a predefined framework.

2.3. Reliability and Validity Checks

To ensure the reliability and validity of the content analysis, several checks were implemented. This study assessed the consistency of coding through inter-rater reliability checks, with the second rater being a graduate student specialized in early childhood education. The results showed a Cohen's Kappa value of 0.85, indicating good agreement between the two raters. For coding content that had discrepancies, the research team engaged in discussions and adjustments until consensus was reached. Furthermore, experts in the field of early childhood education were invited to review the coding framework and provide feedback. Based on this feedback, the coding framework was further refined and optimized.

3. Results

Language is the foundation of cognitive and social development, making early childhood language education vital (Zahra & Sit, 2024). Each country develops its own educational regulations to guide preschool language education.

The Guidelines for the Development of Children Aged 3-6 in China specifically outline the objectives of early childhood language education, focusing on two subdomains: "Listening and Speaking" and "Reading and Writing Readiness". These objectives establish a series of concrete goals that detail the knowledge, skills, and expected developmental levels children aged 3-6 should achieve at various stages of growth. In the educational recommendations section, a range of effective approaches and methods are provided, aiming to offer scientific guidance and support for children's language learning and development.

Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan (KSPK) [National Preschool Standard Curriculum] is developed based on developmentally appropriate practices and child development theories, and is a curriculum standard for children aged 4 to 6. In principle, all kindergartens in Malaysia, whether public or private, should adhere to this standard (Aquino et al., 2017). The document covers six major areas: communication, spirituality, attitudes and values, physical development and aesthetics, science and technology, and personal capabilities. Among these, language skills are central to the communication domain, including listening and speaking skills, reading skills, and writing skills, hence the focus on language development goals is primarily in this area.

Table 1: Comparison of Preschool Language Education Goals in 3 countries

	China	Malaysia	Japan
Listening	1.Able to listen attentively and understand common language.	Respond to various sensory stimuli heard 1.Hear and respond to various sounds in the environment 2.Listen, understand, and respond through actions and speech 3.Listen to and identify language sounds	1.Developing an interest in and curiosity about what teachers and friends have to say, listening in a friendly manner themselves. 2.Listening with interest and engagement 3.Listening to understand and imagine:
Speaking	1.Willing to speak and able to express oneself clearly.	Communicate and convey ideas 1.Use simple sentences for interaction 2.Convey thoughts through speech	1.speaking in a friendly manner themselves. 2.Expressing in their own words what they are doing, seeing, hearing, feeling, thinking, etc. 3.Expressing verbally what they want or want someone to do, and asking for clarification when they do not understand. 4.Paying attention to what people are saying, ensuring that they make themselves understood to their conversation partner. 5. Understanding and using words essential to life. 6. Greeting people in a friendly manner.
Reading	1.Enjoys listening to stories and looking at books. 2.Has basic reading comprehension skills.	Reading and Understanding Simple Sentences 1.Master pre-reading skills 2.Recognize the alphabet 3.Build and read syllables and words 4.Read and understand phrases and sentences 5.Read and understand reading	1.Familiarity with picture books and stories 2.Enjoying and imagining during reading

materials
6.Develop a habit of extensive reading

Writing 1.Possesses a desire for written expression and basic writing skills.2. Perceiving words and symbols, preparing children for writing

Write Simple Words, Phrases, and Sentences
1.Master pre-writing skills
2.Master writing skills

Emotional and Cultural Experience 1.Demonstrates polite and appropriate language habits.
2. Fostering imagination and appreciating the beauty of literary works and language

1.Recognizing the enjoyment and beauty of language in daily life.
2.Experiencing the enjoyment of conveying thoughts and feelings in writing in everyday life.
3.Enriching images and language through various experiences.

As a multicultural country, Malaysia's main ethnic groups include Malays, Chinese, and Indians, and its education system is committed to respecting and reflecting this cultural diversity (Yee Wan & Tjin Ai, 2023). According to *Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan* (KSPK) [National Preschool Standard Curriculum], all preschool children must learn Malay and English, and in public kindergartens, children are also required to learn Mandarin or Tamil. Given the significant status of Malay as the national language, this study will focus on the analysis of Malay language education.

The Japan Kindergarten Education Syllabus comprises five domains: health, interpersonal relationships, environment, language, and expression (including music, rhythm, drawing, and handicrafts). In the language domain, the key objectives include: Experiencing the joy of expressing personal feelings through their own words. Actively listening to others, articulating experiences and thoughts, and enjoying communication. Developing essential language skills for daily life, engaging with picture books and stories, and expressing feelings while interacting with teachers and peers.

3.1. Language education goals

The overall goal of China's Preschool Mandarin Education is to enhance children's enthusiasm for language communication and develop their language abilities. Guidelines for the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3-6 focus on two key subdomains: listening and speaking and reading and writing, outlining specific objectives for preschool language education and setting developmental expectations for children at different stages.

In the listening and speaking domain, the Guidelines emphasize three main aspects: language listening, language expression, and polite language habits. The objectives are to help children “listen attentively and understand commonly used language,” “be willing to speak and able to express themselves clearly,” and “develop polite language habits.” Specifically, the Guidelines encourage fostering children's conscious listening skills to enable them to analyze and understand what they hear while forming good listening habits. They also emphasize encouraging children to express their ideas clearly, actively engage in verbal communication, use language for interpersonal interactions, and experience the joy of communication. Additionally, the Guidelines highlight the importance of teaching children to use appropriate language in different contexts, communicate politely, and form good language behavior habits.

In the reading and writing domain, the Guidelines recognize that the preschool years are not only a critical period for oral language development but also a key stage for early reading and writing preparation. The educational goals aim to stimulate children's interest in reading and cultivate good reading habits, develop their reading comprehension skills and imagination, and enable them to appreciate the beauty of literary works and language. Furthermore, the Guidelines emphasize introducing children to written words and symbols, helping them develop awareness of print, and preparing them for future writing activities.

The KSPK language education framework outlines the overarching goal of “using language effectively for communication,” emphasizing the effectiveness of language

education. Under this goal, language skills are categorized into listening, speaking, reading, and writing, with specific sub-goals defined for each area.

In the listening domain, KSPK highlights the importance of children's sensitivity to environmental sounds, including both natural and man-made sounds, requiring children to identify these sounds and respond appropriately. Additionally, children are expected to receive and comprehend information through both non-verbal means (such as gestures) and verbal communication, followed by appropriate responses. KSPK further emphasizes children's ability to focus on linguistic sounds, fostering their ability to recognize and differentiate various sounds and languages.

In the speaking domain, children are encouraged to use simple sentence structures to engage in communication and interaction. They should be able to clearly express their thoughts and feelings, gradually improving their oral communication skills.

In the reading domain, KSPK establishes a progressive series of goals, ranging from pre-reading techniques to extensive reading. Children are expected to acquire pre-reading skills, such as letter recognition and understanding letter sequences, and to correctly blend letters into syllables and words. As their abilities develop, they should comprehend phrases and simple sentences, progressing to reading various materials, including storybooks and children's literature. KSPK also promotes independent reading habits, aiming to enhance reading speed, comprehension, and sustained interest in reading.

In the writing domain, KSPK divides writing skills into pre-writing skills and writing skills to facilitate comprehensive development in this area. Pre-writing skills form the foundation for formal writing and include the correct use of stationery, maintaining proper grip and posture, and engaging in hand-eye coordination activities, such as drawing shapes and lines. Writing skills focus on mastering the correct writing of uppercase and lowercase letters. Children are further encouraged to practice copying words and simple sentences to reinforce their understanding of word structures and sentence coherence. Additionally, KSPK supports children in combining drawing, symbols, and text to express their ideas, fostering creativity and expressive abilities.

In summary, the KSPK language education framework not only focuses on the systematic development of language skills but also emphasizes the practical application of language in everyday life. It aims to build a solid foundation for the holistic development of children's language competence.

Japan's language education goal is to encourage children to express their feelings and thoughts, fostering sensitivity, expressiveness, and creativity (Kudryavtsev, 2017). This is broken down into three main objectives and nine specific indicators aimed at improving language skills. First, the guidelines encourage children to describe experiences and thoughts, show interest in others' speech, and express needs and curiosity clearly. They also learn to listen, ensuring two-way communication, and practice polite language through daily interactions. Diverse experiences are used to boost imagination and language expression. Secondly, the guidelines emphasize enjoying the beauty of language and discovering the charm of words. Finally, through picture books and stories, children learn the language needed for daily life and communication, enjoying listening and imagination.

These goals aim to develop children into effective communicators, passionate language learners, and creative individuals. The guidelines stress learning through real-life experiences, promoting language learning as fun and engaging. Additionally, diverse media like picture books help expand language skills and enhance emotional expression and cognitive development.

3.2. Commonalities in Language Education Goals

Through comparative analysis of preschool language education goals in China, Japan, and Malaysia, the following commonalities emerge:

Cultivating Listening Skills: All three countries emphasize the development of children's listening skills. China's Guidelines highlight attentive listening, Japan encourages children to "pay attention to others' speech," and Malaysia values children's sensitivity to language sounds.

Diversity in Language Expression: Each country emphasizes self-expression through language. China encourages "clear expression of thoughts," Japan promotes "expressing experiences and thoughts in their own words," and Malaysia urges the use of simple sentences to express feelings. This highlights the importance of communication, self-expression, and emotional, cognitive, and social development.

Enjoyment and Aesthetics in Language Education: All three countries emphasize the joy of language learning. China encourages speaking and language interaction, Japan focuses on the joy of expressing feelings, and Malaysia uses activities like singing and storytelling to engage children. These shared goals highlight the importance of emotional experiences in learning and the promotion of language skills through enjoyable activities. However, Japan places significantly greater emphasis on this aspect compared to the other two countries.

Fostering Creativity and Imagination: Both China and Japan emphasize the role of imagination and creativity in language development. China's guidelines encourage children to appreciate literature and develop their imagination through reading. Similarly, Japan's guidelines use picture books and stories to boost imagination and language expression. Malaysia, while focused on the systematic development of language skills, also encourages creativity in children's language use, particularly in the speaking and writing domains.

At the same time, both China's and Malaysia's educational documents specify the requirements that children of different ages should meet, reflecting the characteristics of staged development.

3.3. Differences in Language Education Goals

From the overall language education goals of the three countries, China emphasizes enhancing children's proactive use of language for communication and the development of language skills; Malaysia focuses on using language for effective communication; Japan emphasizes expressing personal feelings and thoughts through language, fostering sensitivity and expressive abilities, as well as enriching creativity and imagination through reading and storytelling. Under these overall goals, each country's specific characteristics are also noteworthy.

China's preschool language education focuses on cultivating language civility habits, such as using appropriate language in different contexts and developing civilized language habits, highlighting the importance of language behavior norms. Additionally, the "Guidelines" explicitly combine language development with social interaction, emphasizing the improvement of language expression skills through interaction.

Malaysia's language education systematically breaks down listening, speaking, reading, and writing into several specific steps, especially in the development of writing skills, such as the gradual progression from correct pen grip to writing short sentences, showing a focus on the fine-tuning and structuring of the language learning process. Moreover, the KSPK uniquely emphasizes the sensitivity to environmental sounds, reflecting an interdisciplinary perspective.

Japan emphasizes the integration of language with imagination and creativity, focusing on enriching one's language and imagination through diverse experiences. Furthermore, the syllabus places greater emphasis on the social and interpersonal aspects of language, requiring children to enhance communication through language, reflecting a focus on social and emotional development (Karen & Kiyomi, 2019).

In summary, the language education goals in the three countries are highly consistent in fostering the foundational abilities for children's language development. At the same time, each country, based on its cultural background and educational needs, showcases different focal points. China places more emphasis on language civility habits and communication skills, Malaysia excels in the systematic and diverse approach to skill development, and Japan stresses the combination of language with emotions and imagination. These similarities and differences reflect the educational philosophies and features of each system, providing diverse pathways to achieve the common goal of early childhood language education.

4. Discussion

Based on the comparative analysis of the preschool language education goals in China, Malaysia, and Japan, the following suggestions are proposed to further enhance the development of language education in each country.

In China, the language education goals are comprehensive and operational, emphasizing that language ability is a multifaceted skill. However, the connection between language education and the other four domains is still somewhat weak. To strengthen this connection, it is recommended to introduce interdisciplinary language education methods. For example, by drawing inspiration from Malaysia's focus on environmental sound sensitivity, language education could be integrated with subjects such as music and nature observation, fostering children's multisensory abilities and making language learning more engaging and holistic.

Additionally, while the Guidelines address the expansion of children's creativity, specific implementation suggestions remain limited. It would be beneficial to incorporate more creative language activities, similar to those in Japan, such as storytelling, story adaptation, and role-playing, to stimulate children's imagination and creativity, further enriching the content of language learning.

Furthermore, although China's preschool language education emphasizes the cultivation of language civility, there is room for improvement in focusing on children's emotional development. It is recommended to adopt Japan's educational philosophy, paying more attention to individualized learning experiences for each child. Tailoring learning content to each child's interests, abilities, and developmental characteristics would encourage autonomous exploration and independent thinking, thereby enhancing children's interest in language learning, expressive abilities, and active participation.

Malaysia's preschool language education could place greater emphasis on cultivating language behavior norms. Building on the existing systematic development of language skills, it could adopt China's approach to contextualized language education, guiding children to use appropriate language in various situations to enhance cultural adaptability and social skills. Additionally, Malaysia could learn from Japan's focus on the integration of language and emotional expression, encouraging children to express emotions and experiences during language learning, particularly through picture book reading and interactive games, allowing children to feel and convey emotions through language. Furthermore, beyond the detailed steps in listening and writing, more creative forms of expression based on storytelling and dramatic activities could be incorporated to stimulate children's interest and initiative in language learning.

Compared to China and Malaysia, Japan places greater emphasis on children's emotional attitudes, but its focus on writing skills is noticeably weaker than the other two countries. However, this does not mean that writing skills are entirely neglected in Japanese kindergartens. Most children in Japan have some experience with writing to06Fols and picture books before entering elementary school, and they are already able to write hiragana correctly to some extent (Nonaka, 2017). Japan focuses more on stimulating children's interest and engagement through diverse activities and games, thereby indirectly fostering writing skills. To address this gap, Japan could adopt Malaysia's phased approach to writing skills development, gradually guiding children from basic pen-grip techniques to short sentence writing, thereby establishing a foundation for written expression.

Additionally, in fostering children's ability to feel and express themselves, Japan could refer to the systematic categorization of language skills used in China and Malaysia, breaking down listening, speaking, reading, and writing into actionable goals and specifying educational objectives according to age. This would help teachers more effectively implement language education plans.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

Due to the limitations of space, this study primarily conducted a comparative analysis of the preschool language education goals of China, Malaysia, and Japan. However, to gain a more comprehensive perspective, future research should further explore the specific circumstances of curriculum implementation. Curriculum implementation serves as an important bridge between educational goals and actual teaching outcomes. It not only involves practical aspects such as teaching methods, teaching resources, and teacher roles, but also plays a key role in evaluating whether the educational goals have been effectively achieved.

Although this study proposed preliminary recommendations for improving the preschool language education goals in the three countries based on an analysis of

educational documents, it still has certain limitations. For instance, the study did not fully delve into the specific national contexts and educational practices of each country, which are crucial factors influencing the feasibility and practical impact of the recommendations. Therefore, future research should consider a multidimensional approach that incorporates each country's educational system, cultural background, and societal needs to refine and validate the suggestions further. Moreover, the coherence of the curriculum is a critical factor in the sustained development of children's language abilities. While this study focused on the preschool stage, the transition of children's language learning from preschool to primary school, as well as the integration and alignment across different subjects, should be further explored in future research. This would contribute to optimizing curriculum design and enhancing the overall effectiveness of language education.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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