

Developing an Evidence-Based Linguistic Framework for Malay-Language Children's Storybooks

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Abstract

Children's storybooks play a central role in supporting early language acquisition, yet their effectiveness depends on whether linguistic content is developmentally appropriate and aligned with the structural properties of the target language. For Malay, an agglutinative language with a rich morphological system, no comprehensive and age-specific linguistic framework for children's storybooks has been systematically established. This study addresses this gap by developing an evidence-based linguistic framework for Malay-language children's storybooks using an integrated mixed-methods approach. Evidence was synthesised from a scoping review of empirical studies and complemented by qualitative input from parents, educators, and speech-language pathologists, followed by expert consensus. The resulting framework spans five developmental age bands from infancy to preschool and is grounded in both empirical evidence and expert judgment. The findings reveal an imbalance in existing research, with semantics and pragmatics receiving greater attention than phonology and morphology, which are critical for Malay language development. This pattern is further shaped by the dominance of Western and English-focused studies. Through expert consensus and structural modelling, the study generated age-tiered linguistic specifications across five domains and established a hierarchical design blueprint. Visual support and core vocabulary form the foundation, followed by phonological, morphological, and syntactic features, with pragmatic skills emerging at later stages. This study presents the first age-specific linguistic framework for Malay children's storybooks grounded in empirical evidence and expert consensus. The framework provides publishers, educators, and speech-language pathologists with a structured guideline for designing developmentally appropriate storybooks and offers a transferable reference point for other morphologically rich languages facing similar evidence limitations in early language-supportive materials.

Keywords

Children's storybooks, linguistic framework, Malay language, language acquisition, age-appropriate design.