UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

EFFECTS OF SYNTHETIC PHONICS APPROACH ON ESL PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S READING ABILITY

MUHAIDA AKMAL BINTI MD DIN @ MOHAMAD

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By

MUHAIDA AKMAL BINTI MD DIN @ MOHAMAD

Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to:

everyone out there who went through struggles
to complete a PhD thesis

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June 2020

Chairman : **Associate Professor Sabariah Md Rashid, PhD**
Faculty : **Modern Languages and Communication**

The importance in acquiring the ability to read in English at an early age among non-native speakers of English has led to the use of different approaches such as the synthetic phonics approach. The objectives of this study were to determine the effects of the synthetic phonics approach and traditional reading approach on six-year-old English as a second language (ESL) preschool children's reading ability, to compare the effects between the synthetic phonics approach and traditional reading approach on the ESL preschool children's reading ability, to determine the effects of the synthetic phonics approach across gender, to determine the relationships between alphabetic principle, reading fluency and reading comprehension, and to identify how synthetic phonics approach improves the ESL preschool children's reading.

This study utilised a quasi-experimental design and a mixed method for data collection and analysis. Two intact groups, which comprised 49 subjects from two preschool classes, constituted the experimental and control groups of this study. The experimental group underwent the treatment using the synthetic phonics approach, and the control group, used the traditional reading approach for 12 weeks. As for data of the study, the quantitative data were elicited via the pre-test and post-test measures of overall reading ability, alphabetic principle, reading fluency and reading comprehension. The qualitative data were gathered from the audio recordings of the subjects' performance during the pre- and post-tests. The qualitative data were used to support the quantitative data gathered from the pre- and post-tests.

The findings from the quasi-experimental study revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in alphabetic principle, reading fluency and reading comprehension. The findings indicated that there were no significant difference across gender within the experimental group after the group underwent the treatment of synthetic phonics approach. The findings of this study also revealed that alphabetic principle, reading fluency and reading comprehension were significantly associated with one another. The qualitative findings in this study supported the quantitative findings that the children in the experimental group had more positive response patterns compared to children in the control group. Based on the findings of this study, reading abilities which are the basic reading abilities from decoding to blending would contribute to the mastery of a later ability which is reading fluency.

KESAN KAEDAH FONIK SINTETIK KEPADA KANAK-KANAK PRASEKOLAH DI DALAM KEBOLEHAN MEMBACA

Oleh

MUHAIDA AKMAL BINTI MD DIN @ MOHAMAD

Jun 2020

Pengerusi : Profesor Madya Sabariah Md Rashid, PhD
Fakulti : Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi

Kepentingan dalam memperoleh keupayaan untuk membaca dalam Bahasa Inggeris pada usia dini di kalangan penutur Bahasa Inggeris bukan bahasa jati telah membawa kepada penggunaan pendekatan yang berbeza seperti pendekatan fonik sintetik. Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk menentukan kesan pendekatan fonik sintetik dan pendekatan membaca secara tradisional pada kanak-kanak berusia enam tahun penutur Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua, untuk membandingkan kesan antara pendekatan fonik sintetik dengan pendekatan membaca secara tradisional terhadap kebolehan membaca kanak-kanak prasekolah, untuk menentukan kesan pendekatan fonik sintetik merentas jantina, untuk menentukan hubungan antara prinsip abjad, kefasihan membaca dan pemahaman bacaan, dan untuk mengenal pasti bagaimana fonik sintetik dapat membantu meningkatkan bacaan kanak-kanak prasekolah.

Kajian ini menggunakan reka bentuk kuasi eksperimen dan kaedah campuran untuk pengumpulan data dan analisis. Dua kumpulan sedia ada, yang terdiri daripada 49 subjek dari dua kelas prasekolah, membentuk kumpulan rawatan dan kawalan kajian ini. Kumpulan rawatan didedahkan dengan eksperimen menggunakan pendekatan fonik sintetik, dan kumpulan kawalan menggunakan pendekatan membaca secara tradisional selama 12 minggu. Bagi data kajian, data kuantitatif diperoleh melalui ujian pra-ujian dan ujian pasca terhadap ujian keupayaan membaca keseluruhan, prinsip abjad, kefahaman membaca dan pemahaman bacaan telah digunakan dalam kajian ini. Sebaliknya, data kualitatif dikumpulkan dari rakaman audio untuk mengenalpasti prestasi subjek dalam praujian dan pascaujian yang digunakan untuk mengesahkan data kuantitatif yang dikumpulkan dari praujian dan pascaujian.

Penemuan dari kajian kuasi eksperimen menunjukkan bahawa kumpulan rawatan mengatasi kumpulan kawalan dalam prinsip abjad mereka, kefasihan membaca dan pemahaman bacaan. Penemuan menunjukkan tiada perbezaan yang signifikan merentas jantina dalam kumpulan eksperimen selepas melalui eksperimen pendekatan fonik sintetik. Kajian ini juga menemui bahan prinsip abjad, kefasihan membaca dan pemahaman bacaan saling berkait diantara satu sama lain. Penemuan kualitatif kajian ini juga menyokong penemuan kuantitatif dimana kanak-kanak di dalam kumpulan eksperimen menunjukkan corak tindakbalas yang positif dibandingkan dengan kanak-kanak kumpulan kawalan kajian. Berdasarkan kepada dapatan kajian, keupayaan di dalam kefasihan membaca berkait rapat antara satu sama lain, di mana keupayaan awal membaca iaitu mentafsir bunyi abjad dan penggabungan bunyi menentukan keupayaan membaca seterusnya iaitu kefasihan membaca. Oleh itu, perlu ditekankan keupayaan awal membaca supaya kanak-kanak mampu mendapat kefasihan di dalam membaca Bahasa Inggeris.

iv

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Sabariah Md Rashid, PhD
Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Chairman)

Yong Mei Fung, PhD
Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Member)

Ilyana binti Jalaluddin, PhD
Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
University Putra Malaysia
(Member)

ZALILAH MOHD SHARIFF, PhD
Professor and Dean
School of Graduate Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 11 March 2021

vii

Declaration by graduate student

I hereby confirm that:
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Signature: _____   Date:_____

Name and Matric No: Muhaida Akmal binti Md Din @ Mohamad, GS31411

Declaration by Members of Supervisory Committee

This is to confirm that:
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- supervision responsibilities as stated in the Universiti Putra Malaysia (Graduate Studies) Rules 2003 (Revision 2012-2013) were adhered to.

Signature:	
Name of Chairman of Supervisory Committee:	Associate Professor Dr. Sabariah Md Rashid

Signature:	
Name of Member of Supervisory Committee:	Associate Professor Dr. Yong Mei Fung

Signature:	
Name of Member of Supervisory Committee:	Dr. Ilyana binti Jalaluddin

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF APPENDICES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DIBELS	Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills
NWF	Nonsense Word Fluency
DORF	DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency
CVC	Consonant Vowel Consonant
VC	Vowel Consonant
CLS	Correct Letter Sound
WWR	Whole Word Read
ORF	General Oral Reading Fluency
ESL	English as a Second Language
SBELC	Standard-Based English Language Curricu

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the background of the study and provides an overview of the preschool education in Malaysia. This chapter also presents the statement of problem, purpose and objective of the study, research question, research hypotheses, scope and limitation of the study, significance of the study and the definition of the key terms used in this study.

1.2 Background of the study

Many factors contribute to the current changing scenario of preschool education in Malaysia. Firstly, what is documented in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Preschool to Post-secondary Education) (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013), of boosting students' language proficiency in Malay and English languages place extra demands on the educators to provide students with approaches that enable them to become literate. Secondly, English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015) stated that the ultimate goal of preschool English language learning is to provide confidence for preschool children in using English both inside and outside the classroom; as well as to provide a smooth transition to learning English in primary school. Both statements made by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2013, 2015) should be tackled immediately and at an early age in order to achieve the goals and therefore, it should start at preschool level.

Hence, the teaching of pronunciation amongst preschool children is vital. Jayapalan and Pillai (2011) revealed that there was a lack in focus on the teaching and learning of pronunciation. There are several approaches employed in teaching pronunciation to young learner whereby the goal of pronunciation is to aid in intelligible communication. On the other hand, the goal of phonics approach is to teach children the basics of how to read; beginning from decoding and moving towards developing their fluency in order to have more cognitive space for comprehension (Teacher Development Team, British Council, 2019). Both are similar because they involve the sounds of English. Beltrán, Andrade & Álvarez, (2016) carried out a research using phonics approach in order to improve pronunciation among young learners of English as a foreign language. The findings suggest that phonics approach improve pronunciation in English to these foreign language learners which then helps the learners to learn English easier and contribute to their reading in the language (Beltrán, Andrade & Álvarez, 2016).

1

The ability to read at an early stage provides multiple benefits to children's overall academic achievement in the future. The advantages of early exposure to print can contribute to a more successful formal reading, greater ability to read (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Lonigan, Burgess & Schatschneider, 2018; Mol & Bus; 2011; Stanley, Petscher & Catts, 2017) and the desire to read among children (Cartwright, Marshall & Wray, 2015; Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala & Cox, 1999; Marinka & Gambrell, 2010; Morgan & Fuchs, 2007). Children who are provided with this benefit often learn to read with greater ease (Sparks, Patton, & Murdoch, 2014). Research has demonstrated that successful reading in the early years gives confidence to schools and parents that children are on-target in becoming successful readers when they are in the third grade (Baker, Park, & Baker, 2010); and that good early reading fluency predicts later reading comprehension (Sparks et al., 2014).

A review conducted in the United States indicates that on average twenty percent of young children went through some reading problems before their third grade (National Reading Panel, 2000). This review has substantiated the study done more than twenty years ago that poor early reading ability during preschool age will affect the performance in reading in the later years (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). Baker et al., (2010) reveal that among the reasons for poor reading ability among English second language learners are their position as second language learners of English and that they are from poor family background.

Another contributing factor in poor reading ability is gender. Several studies have shown that gender is also a contributing factor in determining reading ability (Below, Skinner, Fearrington, & Sorrell, 2010; Price-Mohr & Price, 2017; Robinson & Lubienski, 2011). The concern on gender difference in reading success dated as early as 1909 by Ayers who was concerned with the male shortfall in reading achievement (Below et al., 2010). Ofsted report (2012) mentions that there was a nine percent difference between girls and boys in reading for 5 years old children. There are various findings in the literature showing that the gender gap in reading may be related to the different way children approach learning to read (Price-Mohr & Price, 2017). For instance, report on international research have consistently provided evidence that girls tend to outperform boys on measures of reading ranges from all age group (Price-Mohr & Price, 2017). This is also evident in the Malaysian context where the gender gap is both significant and is increasing in the last five years where girls were found to outperform boys from preschool to university level (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

In the Malaysian context, some preschool children who are second language learners of English (ESL) can read well in the language. However, some ESL preschool children still struggle to read in the English language despite its position as the second language in Malaysia (Norlida Ahmad, Munirah Ghazali, Anna Christina Abdullah & Amir Yazid Ah, 2004) and; despite it is being widely-

used by the society. Kamarudin, Hussain, Applegate and Yasin's (2018) ethnographic research has found that early exposure as one of the reasons behind the low literacy level among Malaysian preschool children. For many, the exposure to the language during their early years is not immense since most children come from non-English speaking families. These children only learn English when they have formal schooling in preschools at the age of five or six.

Preschool children in most Malaysian preschools are taught to read using the whole language approach which immerses young children in reading activities that are authentic and involves real purpose for reading which is reading for comprehension (Vaish, 2014). For this approach, learning to read is considered as a natural process and it is unnecessary to teach phonics. Whole language used story books that are not decodable and the stories will be read aloud by their teachers (Donat, 2006). According to Chapman, Tunmer and Prochnow (2001), one of the fundamental strategies in the whole language approach in identifying unfamiliar words is using contextual clues and not phonological awareness. Children are not introduced to the sounds of the letters. This approach does not help children to read well especially for English as a second language (ESL) learners who are struggling readers and do not have the literacy skills to guess the meaning of an unfamiliar word only from contextual clues (Vaish, 2014).

The whole language approach became most popular in the late 1980s and the term 'whole language' was popularized by Goodman (1986). This approach believes in immersing children in authentic reading and writing activities with real purpose (Goodman, 1986). Chapman, Tunmer and Prochnow (2001) state that the whole language approach uses contextual clues in identifying unfamiliar words and not phonological awareness. However, this approach was not well received by some practitioners. Some scholars said that the whole language approach was inadequate for struggling readers who did not have the literacy skills to guess the meaning of an unfamiliar word only from contextual clues.

The obvious counterargument to the whole language approach is the phonics approach. Phonics approach is the bottom-up approach which is the opposite of whole language approach which is top-down. The US National Reading Panel (2000) has listed five phonics approaches namely, analogy phonics, analytic phonics, embedded phonics, phonics through spelling and synthetic phonics approach. While the analogy phonics approach teaches students unfamiliar words by analogy between words that they already know, the analytic phonics approach teaches students to analyse the relations between letter-sound from the words learned previously. On a different stance, the embedded phonics approach is an approach that teaches students to embed phonics in a reading text whereas, the phonics through spelling approach teaches students to segment words into phonemes and select the equivalent

3

letters of the sounds in order to spell words. In contrast, the synthetic phonics approach requires students to explicitly convert letters into sounds and blend the sounds learnt to form recognizable words. After which, readers are introduced to decodable reading texts which is to reinforce letter-sound association and make learning to read easier at an early stage.

The battle between the advocates of phonics who stress the importance of teaching the relationship between letters and sounds and those of the whole language approach who made a stand that children should be taught reading from authentic text even at an early stage of reading has created an endless debate over which approach best contribute to successful early reading.

The great debate over which approach is best to teach young children to read dated as early as 1967 by Chall. Chall (1967) found that studies done on beginning readers over the decades had supported decoding. She also found that early decoding produced better word recognition and spelling as well as it helped children to read with understanding. In addition, Chall (1967) mentioned that this method was effective for children from the lower social economy status, home not surrounded with books or adults who could not help them to learn to read.

Chall's statement is supported by several studies mentioned that children should be able to connect and blend the letters to their sounds or phonemes (Boyer & Ehri, 2011). This is because knowledge of the sound-letter or phoneme-grapheme association is a very crucial element in learning to read and to be successful in reading (Castles, et al., 2009; Laugle, 2009).

The ability to read connected text accurately and fluently would categorise readers as proficient readers. Brady and Kritsonis (2008) point out that students will have to spend more time decoding words or texts rather than on understanding the meaning of what they are reading when they are not fluent readers. Bowey (2006) mentions that reading approaches utilised should permit the children to identify words independently and effortlessly to focus on meaning and understand what they have read. In addition to this, Hoover and Gough (1990), in his famous Simple View of Reading Theory emphasize that reading happens only when it is meaningful.

1.3 Preschool education in Malaysia

In the history of Malaysian preschool, early childhood care and education existed in Malaysia before the 1960s, and the preschool providers were from religious bodies or non-governmental organizations (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). The first early childhood education legal document was

drafted in 1972 which included the registration of preschool procedures, employment of the teachers and the board of governors.

By 1980s, preschools in Malaysia were run by several government agencies, volunteering bodies and private sectors (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). Hence, various programmes were offered, different teaching materials and teachers' qualification. Due to this, the 1986 Preschool Guidebook, a guidebook on curriculum document on early childhood education was first formalized (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). The 1986 Preschool Guidebook was reviewed in 1993 and the 1993 Preschool Education Curriculum Guideline consisted of general and specific guidelines, detailed activities covering various areas, student activity books, reading materials, cards and building blocks (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015).

Preschool education was not considered an important part of the national education system until 1996. It was declared as one through the National Education Act 1996 (Act 550, 2005) (Curriculum Development Centre Malaysia, 2012). Commencing from there, the implementation of the National Preschool Curriculum was required for all public or private preschools. In 2003, the Ministry of Education instructed that all public and private preschools to follow the National Preschool Curriculum developed by Curriculum Development Centre, Ministry of Education Malaysia. The Ministry of Education has given a freedom for the private preschools to use any languages as the medium of instruction, however, the national language should be taught as one of the subjects.

The first type of preschool is set up by the Ministry of Education and its purpose is to give children with families from very low income in the sub-urban, rural and remote areas opportunity to have early education. Classes were built annex to the main primary school buildings and the expenditure was borne by the Ministry of Education itself. This opportunity to have early education was given to children at the age of 5+ years old. The children who enrolled in the Ministry of Education preschools are given four types of assistance by the ministry namely, food assistance, learning materials, co-curricular assistance and insurance coverage.

The Ministry of Education pre-school education aims at nurturing children's potential in all aspects of development, mastering basic skills and developing a positive attitude towards learning and school as a preparation to enter primary education. Among the objectives of the pre-school education are to have positive personal traits, characters and self-concept to be a patriotic citizen. In relation to leaning English, the objective at the pre-school education is to be able to use English in daily lives this is in line with its status as the second language in Malaysia. Hence, Ministry of Education targeted that all National

5

Primary Schools in Malaysia will eventually have their own preschool class in a near future.

The second type of preschool is set up by the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development known as KEMAS preschools. It also gives opportunity to children with low income family from sub-urban, rural and remote areas opportunity to learn. KEMAS preschools are run at the community halls, residence area, private property, commercial areas or buildings developed by the Ministry. Children aged 4 to 6 years old are given the opportunity to enrol in this preschool. The assistance for the children's food and learning materials are provided by the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development. They apply the National Preschool Curriculum since 2003. KEMAS preschools emphasise on two main language skills which are reading and writing, mathematics, development of individual potentials and building characters, instilling moral values and self-awareness, developing physical skill, health skill, cleanliness skill as well as safety skill.

The third type of preschool provider in Malaysia is the preschool run by the private sectors which offers reputable education to children especially by parents who can afford to pay more. Private preschools provide education to children as early as 3 years old until 6 years old. It is compulsory for the private preschools to use the National Preschool Curriculum as specified in the National Education Act 1996. The medium of instruction for the private preschool can be from any languages from the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia namely, Malay language, Chinese or Tamil and as well as the English language. The curriculum emphasises on skills which focus on communication, social and other relevant skills as preparation for the primary education.

1.4 Statement of the problem

Reading problems are different from one child to another. The whole language approach advocates believe that language learning possess a problem if it is not taught as a whole and taught separately and, that children do not use their background knowledge in learning to read (Goodman, 1986). It is also said that the whole language approach helps children understand spoken and written language (Fauzi & Basikin, 2020). However, the opposing view towards the whole language approach believes that children learning English as a second language will not have adequate background knowledge and experience to infer meaning from context if taught using that approach (Zashchitina & Moysyak, 2017). Therefore, the phonics advocates proposed that most of the problems of early reading among ESL preschool children are to match letters of the alphabets to sounds, blend the sounds into words, pronounce words and have smaller vocabulary than that possessed by children the same age. These problems are related to low level skills in reading. Nevills and Wolfe (2009) describe the low-level skills as involving decoding skills and high-level skills involving comprehension skills. They state that the lower-level

6

phonological skills (decoding) are dedicated to translating the reading code. Accordingly, the functions of these systems must be in order so that individuals can read quickly and make meaning from the text. However, these problems have not been addressed in a more systematic way to enable the preschool children to master the lower level skills before proceeding to the higher level skills.

Research has shown that lower level skills facilitate in learning to read and the overall development among the second language reading students (Kato, 2012) and teaching preschool children letter-sound association has shown an increase in their ability in reading (Wolf, 2016). The inability to read among ESL preschool children may also be associated with the teaching approach employed by preschools and their inability to introduce the low level skills to these ESL preschool children. In order to learn to read, the two skills involved are crucial in developing their reading ability. The lower level skill involves the phoneme, segmenting and blending and, the higher level skills involve comprehension, inference and evaluation. Teaching these early readers the lower level skills first in a systematic approach will facilitate them in better understanding on how to read.

Acquiring the knowledge in low level skill at an early stage would determine ESL preschool children's reading development (Ray & Smith, 2010) as well as predicting reading skills such as fluency and comprehension in their later grades (Schaughency, Suggate & Reese, 2017). In order to develop early reading ability amongst preschool children, the first low level skill that preschool children should master is sounds and letters associations. Preschool children need to know that there are predictable relationships between sounds and letters. Unfortunately, many ESL preschool children still struggle to automatically identify the letters of the alphabets and make connections between the letters and the sounds (Dilorenzo et al., 2011). Children who have difficulties at this initial stage are predicted to have some difficulties in reading later, both in isolated words and connected text (Dilorenzo, et al., 2011) and that skills in decoding are related to reading fluency (Turna, & Guldenoglu, 2019). This is in line with what some scholars have stressed that is the alphabetic skill is significant in reading development (Molfese et al., 2011). The ability to associate sounds and letters allows them to apply these relationships to both familiar and unfamiliar words which is applied by the synthetic phonic approach in the teaching of reading.

In order for ESL preschool children to progress in reading ability they also need fluency in reading. Jiang, Sawaki, and Sabatini (2012) findings have shown that there is a strong relationship between reading fluency and reading comprehension. Therefore, it is recommended that reading fluency should be addressed in order to achieve reading comprehension. A child who reads with speed, accuracy and expression are more likely to comprehend better and remember the content of reading more compared to when they read with

difficulty (Dooner, 2012). When speed and accuracy become automatic, there will be more space for comprehension which is another skill required by young ESL learners.

In order to be proficient readers, it is essential that children comprehend the reading text that they read. This is another problem that exists among ESL preschool children which is the inability to comprehend texts that they read. One of the factors that contribute to this inability to comprehend reading text is age (Keenan, Betjemann & Olson, 2008). However, by the end of six years old children could comprehend what they read. Comprehension needs accurate decoding and recognition; thus, it is appropriate to say that the ability to decode and recognise words are the indicators of comprehension ability (Landi, 2010) and decoding in preschool age is found to predict later reading comprehension ability (Caravolas et. al, 2019). Good comprehension allows children to take meaning from the text and transform it into something else which they can make it more personal. Without good comprehension learning in all subjects area will be affected (Dooner, 2012). These studies (Caravolas, et.al, 2019; Jiang, Sawaki & Sabatini, 2012; Landi, 2010) have shown that early decoding skills, reading fluency and reading comprehension are interrelated and they contribute to the success in reading.

However, studies have shown that gender differences in reading do exist (Amadi, 2019; Logan & Johnston, 2010; Logan & Johnston, 2010; McGeown, et.al, 2015; Ofsted, 2012; Price-Mohr & Price, 2017). Price-Mohr and Price's study (2017) indicated that boys learned easily using a mix of whole language approach and synthetic phonics approach. However, prior to Price-Mohr and Price's study, a survey in England found that girls outperformed boys in reading (Ofsted, 2012). Other studies have suggested that girls performed better than boys in reading comprehension regardless of the content of the reading text. Nonetheless, several studies revealed that boys would perform better in comprehension if the text content is meaningful to them (Logan & Johnston, 2009; McGeown, et.al, 2015). Nevertheless, a recent study using synthetic phonics approach have shown that synthetic phonics approach was able to stimulate and sustain students' interest in reading regardless of gender (Amadi, 2019).

National-based reviews on reading were carried out since 2000 which were The United States National Reading Panel (National Reading Panel, 2000), The United Kingdom enquiry (the Rose Report, 2005) and the Australian government report (2005); and these reviews had come to a consensus that synthetic phonics approach should be the chosen approach for young learners. This is because it attends to mastering the low level skills issues and that studies have shown that this approach is not gender bias (Amadi, 2019; Chia & Kee, 2013 and Dodd & Carr, 2003).

However, there has been some concerns with synthetic phonics, namely, the problems with the blending part of the approach, that it tends to be difficult for learners to add vowel sounds to individual consonant phonemes (Shanahan, 2018). However, this problem could be overcome if synthetic phonics includes "explicit teaching in blending, including engaging kids in the kinds of exercises one finds in *Words their Way*, morphological teaching, or other more analytic approaches" (Shanahan, 2018). Hence, to address the problems of early reading ability among ESL preschool children, they should be provided with a synthetic phonics approach in learning to read as an approach which introduces the letter-sound association, reading with speed and accuracy, and skill that enable the child to comprehend what is read.

In the Malaysian context, studies on the use of synthetic phonics approach are evident in the literature. However, the study of synthetic phonics approach on preschool children is scarce. An experimental study on the effectiveness of synthetic phonics approach in teaching reading to primary school students aged 11 and 12 years old was carried out. The findings showed that the students in the experimental group employed a structured decoding strategy and were able to read more fluently as opposed to students exposed to the whole language approach (Jamaludin, et.al, 2015). Previous study on the phonics approach was carried out on Malaysian rural primary school students and the findings showed that those students who received direct phonemic awareness tuition had greater gains in sounds fluency, basic reading, number awareness, nonsense words and simple writing test as compared to those who only attended regular English language classes (Johnson & Tweedie, 2010). Therefore, it is important to look into early reading among preschool children.

This current study contributes to the knowledge base by investigating the effects of synthetic phonics approach on reading ability among ESL preschool children; comparing between synthetic phonics approach with the traditional reading approach; examining the effect of synthetic phonics approach on gender difference; investigating the relationships among the variables in reading ability namely decoding or known as alphabetic principle, reading fluency and reading comprehension; and examining the response patterns in reading when applying both approaches among the preschool children (see Table 3.1).

1.5　　　　Objectives of the study

The purpose of this quasi-experimental study is to investigate the effects of using synthetic phonics approach on the reading ability among Malaysian English Language learners' (ESL) preschool children and to investigate the relationships among the variables in reading ability. In addition, this study also looked into the gender factor in early reading ability as well as how synthetic phonics approach facilitates ESL preschool children.

9

Based on the purpose of the study, the specific objectives of this study are:

1) To determine the effects of the synthetic phonics approach and the traditional reading approach on ESL preschool children's reading ability as measured by alphabetic principle, reading fluency and reading comprehension.

2) To compare the effects between the synthetic phonics approach and the traditional reading approach on the ESL preschool children's reading ability as measured by alphabetic principle, reading fluency and reading comprehension.

3) To determine the effects of the synthetic phonics approach between genders.

4) To determine the relationships among alphabetic principles, reading fluency and reading comprehension.

5) To identify how synthetic phonics approach facilitates ESL preschool children's reading.

1.6   Research Questions

Based on the objectives of this study, the following research questions guided the study:

1) What are the effects of the synthetic phonics approach and the traditional reading approach on ESL preschool children's reading ability as measured by alphabetic principle, reading fluency and reading comprehension?

2) Are there any difference between the synthetic phonics approach and the traditional reading approach on the ESL preschool children's reading ability as measured by alphabetic principle, reading fluency and reading comprehension?

3) What are the effects of the synthetic phonics approach between genders?

4) Are there any relationships among alphabetic principles, reading fluency and reading comprehension?

5) How does synthetic phonics approach facilitate ESL preschool children's reading?

1.7   Research Hypotheses

Various research hypotheses were formulated under the first four objectives of the study. Specifically, eight research hypotheses were formulated under Objective 1:

H_1 1 : There is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores on reading ability within the experimental group

H_1 2 : There is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores on reading ability within the control group

H_1 3 :There is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores on the alphabetic principle test within the experimental group

H_1 4 : There is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores on the alphabetic principle test within the control group.

H_1 5 :There is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores on reading fluency within the experimental group.

H_1 6 :There is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores on reading fluency within the control group.

H_1 7 :There is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores on reading comprehension within the experimental group

H_1 8 :There is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores on reading comprehension within the control group.

There are four research hypotheses under Objective 2:

H_1 9 :There is a significant difference between the experimental and the control groups' post-test mean scores on the overall reading ability

H_1 10 :There is a significant difference between the experimental and the control groups' alphabetic principle post-test mean scores

H1 11 : There is a significant difference between the experimental and the control groups' reading fluency post-test mean scores

H1 12 : There is a significant difference between the experimental and the control groups' reading comprehension post-test mean scores

Four research hypotheses were formulated under Objective 3.

H1 13 : There is a significant difference between the ESL preschool children's male and female mean scores on reading ability within the experimental group

H1 14 : There is a significant difference between the ESL preschool children's male and female mean scores on alphabetic principle test within the experimental group

H1 15 : There is a significant difference between the ESL preschool children's male and female mean scores on reading fluency test within the experimental group

H1 16 : There is a significant difference between the ESL preschool children's male and female mean scores on reading comprehension test within the experimental group

There is one research hypothesis under Objective 4.

H1 17 : There are significant relationships between alphabetic principles, reading fluency and reading comprehension.

1.8   Scope of the study

This study aims to investigate the effects of synthetic phonics approach on the reading ability among the ESL preschool children using the design of non-equivalent control group quasi-experimental. The early reading abilities focused on were alphabetic principle and reading fluency. One component from the higher level reading skill which is reading comprehension was also investigated. The study also seeks to compare the effects synthetic phonics approach has across gender and the relationships among the variables in reading ability.

The scope of this study, therefore, focuses only on two groups of preschool children from one government school in the Klang Valley. It is not generalised

to all preschool children in Malaysia nor does it generalised to other government preschools. This study also utilised specifically the synthetic phonics approach and not other phonics approaches in its experiment.

1.9 Significance of the study

This study conducted will be able to provide greater insight into achieving the goals of ESL preschool children in learning English which are to boost their English language proficiency and to provide confidence for preschool children in using English both inside and outside the classroom. The various approaches employed in teaching reading to preschool children create uncertainty in which approach would best contribute to successful early reading. Inconsistencies in the findings of studies done on reading approaches are varied. Claims were made over the years for one best approach of teaching reading however, they did not refer to the same approach (Clark, 2013).

The synthetic phonics approach employed in this study helps to boost ESL preschool children early reading ability. The achievement of early literacy indicates the main step in education. Therefore, it is important to teach beginning literacy to be based on a clear understanding of principles (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015) which is what synthetic phonics approach delivers.

The results from this study will reveal how an approach like synthetic phonics can affect the reading ability of the ESL preschool children specifically in the area of decoding, fluency in reading and comprehending the text read. Thus, achieving the goals of preschool education in Malaysia specifically, where at the end of preschool education, a child should acquire five readings skills which are, ability to identify letters of the alphabet, read simple words with understanding, read phrases with understanding, read simple sentences with understanding and develop interest in reading.

The findings will help to convince educators and curriculum developers to consider the application of synthetic phonics approach to teach early reading among ESL preschool children. The result of the investigation will also suggest whether the phonics approach implemented in Malaysian preschools should be more focused and should be improvised towards a more systematic and structured phonics approach that is the synthetic phonics approach rather than a mixed approach in teaching reading in English to the preschool children.

However, this study does not deny the contribution of other reading approaches to early reading ability. Each early reading approach, to a certain

extent, facilitates early reading among preschool children. Nevertheless, studies done have shown better contribution from the synthetic phonics approach towards early reading ability compared to other approaches (Dixon, Schagen & Seedhouse, 2011; Ehri, Nunes, Stahl & Willows, 2001).

1.10   Definition of key terms

For better understanding of the various key terms used in this study, their definitions and/or operational definitions are provided as follows:

Synthetic Phonics approach

Synthetic phonics trains children to translate letters or graphemes into sounds or phonemes and then blend the sounds to form words (Goouch & Lambirth, 2011). The important aspects in synthetic phonics are sounding out and blending. The synthetic phonics approach is the independent variable in this study. It refers to the approach of teaching reading to preschool children based on these sequences:

- teaches the association of sounds to letters
- blending the sounds taught
- reading words from the sounds previously taught
- individual reading

The lessons were based on the *ReadEasy Phonics Reading Series* written by Nik Nawi and Ahamad (2001).

Reading ability

Reading ability is the ability to read reading texts and comprehend any given text. In this study, this term refers to the basic ability in early reading, which consists of 3 important aspects, alphabetic principle, reading fluency and reading comprehension.

Alphabetic principle

The alphabetic principle has two elements. The first element is the alphabetic understanding that words are composed of letters that represent sounds in a language and the second element is phonological recoding which uses the systematic relationship between sounds and letters as a basis for pronunciation of words (Laugle, 2009; Xue & Meisels, 2004).

In this study alphabetic principle is measured using the nonsense words test from DIBELS Next. The test comprises the whole word read (WWR) and correct letter sound (CLS). The scores for alphabetic principle is the total scores for both WWR and CLS test.

Reading fluency

Reading fluency is the ability to read a text quickly, accurately and with proper expression. It provides a bridge between word recognition and comprehension (Graves & Graves, 2001). In this study, reading fluency is measured by oral reading fluency test from DIBELS Next. The scores of the test will be the number of correct words read per minute.

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension refers to the ability to retell orally what has been read from the reading text. Comprehension of reading materials takes place when readers acquire the ability to put meaning of individual words into the structure and context of the whole sentence (Sousa, 2005). In this study, reading comprehension is measured by the retell component in the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency (DORF) subtest.

ESL Preschool children

English as a second language (ESL) preschool children refers to children or students at the age of 5+ who are learning English Language as a second language.

The term ESL preschool children in this study refers to the 6-year-old English language learners attending one government preschool in Selangor, Malaysia. It is used interchangeably with 'preschool children', 'children' and 'subjects of the study'.

Response patterns

The term response patterns in this study refers to the list of responses provided in the DIBELS Next test. For the complete list of response patterns used in this study, refer to Table 3.1.

Traditional reading approach

In this study, the term traditional reading approach refers to the reading approach that is employed by the preschool teacher of the control group. The

15

approach utilised both phonics and whole language approach in teaching reading to the control group. The term is used interchangeably with 'traditional approach'.

1.11   Conclusion

Reading ability requires a set of language skills to be acquired by a child in order to be able to read well. These language skills develop in stages where it should begin from a simple level and move to more difficult level. Research has extensively shown that lower level skills aid in learning to read and the overall development among the second language reading students(Kato, 2012). The ability to associate letters to sounds, to read fluently with speed and accuracy and to comprehend the reading text is vital in successful reading ability especially among ESL preschool children (Kato, 2012). The approach that contributes to this learning is the synthetic phonics approach. The use of this approach among ESL preschool children allows for better achievement in their early reading ability.

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BIODATA OF STUDENT

Muhaida Akmal Mohamad is a lecturer at Institute of Teacher Education, Islamic Education Campus in Bandar Baru Bangi, Selangor. She is currently involved in the curriculum review for Bachelor of Teaching (TESL) courses for Institute of Teacher Education Malaysia undergraduates. Her research interests focus on preschool early language learning, phonetics and phonics.

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