The effectiveness of synthetic phonics in the development of early reading skills among struggling young ESL readers

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ABSTRACT
A quasi-experimental research design was used to investigate the effectiveness of synthetic phonics in the development of early reading skills among struggling young English as a second language (ESL) readers in a rural school. The pretest and posttest, adapted from the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) for Preschool Students and Grades 1 to 3 tests, assessed children’s early reading skills. A semi-structured interview was used to gather information. The findings indicated that the performance of students in the experimental group in decoding was significantly higher in the posttest, where $t(39) = 31.441$, $p < .00005$. Likewise, in comprehension, the experimental group achieved significantly higher scores in the posttest, where $t(39) = 15.322$, $p < .00005$. There was a significant difference in the achievement between the two groups, where $t(78) = 31.010$, $p < .00005$. This indicates that synthetic phonics could be effective in developing early reading skills for struggling readers.

Background
In Malaysia, the difference in literacy rates between students in rural and urban areas is a cause for concern. Since 1989, the literacy rate in rural areas has been lower (84.3%) than in urban areas (approximately 90%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DSM], 2009). The 2010 statistics show that the literacy rate in rural areas was lower (94.5%) than in urban areas (98.3%) (DSM, 2013). Specifically, the state of Kelantan, which has the second largest proportion of rural population (886,776) in Peninsular Malaysia, has the lowest literacy rate (90.4% in 2000 and 95.7% in 2010) (DSM, 2012, 2013). This is so despite the slight increase in the literacy rate in the year 2010.

Lehr and Osborn (1994) believe that the development of literacy is a result of being familiar with literate pieces, as well as having the core skills of being able to identify and decode words. The development of literacy is aligned with the development of reading skills (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009). Alvermann and Phelps (1998) highlighted that deciphering the written text is an important skill. A weak foundation in reading and the lack of these skills make children less familiar with literature and hence, limit their reading ability (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009).

In 2004, the Education Development Master Plan (PIPPP) indicated that 115,000 (7.7%) primary students across Malaysia had not mastered basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills (Ministry of Education Malaysia [MOEM], 2006). The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025 has noted that the literacy rate has not improved much since 2004 (MOEM, 2012). The overall performance of Malaysian students in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) for reading,