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SYSTEMATIC SYNTHETIC PHONICS: AN EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF USING THE JOLLY PHONICS PROGRAMME TO TEACH READING

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Highlights: The Jolly Phonics Programme focuses on helping young learners develop their reading skills at the early stage in a fun and effective way by combining letter sounds with actions to assist them with the memorization process. Contrary to the conventional way of learning phonics, this program would be able to help minimise learner's confusion when it comes to pronouncing the word correctly.

Key words: reading, jolly phonics, systematic synthetic phonics, spelling, letter sounds, school

Introduction

Reading is one of the earliest language skills that is taught at school before writing, speaking and listening. It is common practice especially in primary schools in Malaysia to teach spelling right after the students were taught the alphabets, then only come writing and other skills. Teaching reading starts with teaching students how to spell words by combining letters or group of letters or syllables to form words, also known as phonics.

There are two types of phonics which are analytic and synthetic phonics. The conventional way to teach phonics in Malaysia is via analytical phonics, where students are taught to analyse the sound of the letters after the word has been identified. The issue with analytic phonics is that it starts at the word level as opposed to the sound level, making it confusing for a 6 years old to understand why the /h/ sound in the word 'house' is different with the word 'hour' (Shahanan, 2020a). On the other hand, synthetic phonics focus on teaching children "the letter-sound correspondences" and how to blend the sounds for each of the letters or letter combinations (Shahanan, 2020b). Hence, unlike analytic phonics, synthetic phonics starts at the sound level which makes it easier for young learners to make sense of (Umezina & Udogu, 2018).

Content

Jolly Phonics was first developed by primary school teachers from the UK, Sue Lloyd and Sara Wernham. It is a commercial programme published by Jolly Learning Ltd. The objective of The Jolly Phonics Programme are as follows:

- To reduce word-blindness among primary school children.
- To introduce a new technique to teach reading (systematic synthetic phonics).
- To encourage students to learn reading in a fun way by combining letter sounds and actions.

In the present study, six children aged 6-7 years old were chosen to participate in the first phase of The Jolly Phonics Programme. They were nominated by their parents to ensure that these children were committed to participate and complete the 12 weeks programme beginning with the introduction to the letter sounds to combination of several letter sounds with correct pronunciation.

The Jolly Phonics Programme was designed so it could be taught remotely and monitored closely by the parents themselves. Weekly videos were provided catering to every stage involved in teaching phonics synthetically. Children were required to watch the videos, and with the help of their parents, to follow the instructions given in the videos and the parents would video record their tasks to be submitted. The platform that was used for communication between the teacher and the students was via WhatsApp group chat. This was where the students submitted their videos and others could watch them and vice versa.

From the preliminary findings of this study, The Jolly Phonics Project appeared to be able to assist young learners to get started more easily as they all had zero knowledge on alphabets or phonics before the start of this programme as systematic synthetic phonics simplify the process of combining the letter sounds without having the children to keep making assumption on how the words should be pronounced. It is deemed timely for the Ministry of Education Malaysia to consider substituting the teaching of reading in English language using analytic phonics to synthetic phonics instead.

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