

Basic Literacy Instruction in the Standard-Based English Language Curriculum in Malaysian Primary Schools

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Abstract

The Standard-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC) for Malaysian national primary schools was designed to help pupils achieve 100% basic literacy in the language after three years of schooling at foundation level. Basic literacy becomes the focal point in this paper since the operational proficiency in English is still much lower. Furthermore, literacy in English is the key feature of Shift 2 in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 that needs to occur to ensure that every child is proficient in English. The English language curriculum specifically recommends the use of synthetic phonics approach in teaching basic literacy to Year 1 and 2 of national primary schools. This paper reviews the theory and practice of basic literacy instruction using synthetic phonics approach that serves as the framework in SBELC.

Keywords: English literacy, basic literacy, approaches to teaching literacy, phonics instruction, synthetic phonics approach

1.0 Introduction

The English language curriculum for national primary schools in Malaysia has made a significant change in teaching basic literacy to Year 1 to 3 in relation to curriculum content and instructional approach. In former language curriculum the teaching of basic literacy was addressed using whole language approach. The whole language approach assumes that pupils acquire reading skills largely through their experience of reading for meaning, with relatively little explicit teaching (Bowey, 2006). Stahl and Miller (1989) found that whole language approach appeared to work effectively in kindergarten but not in first grade, where their effectiveness diminished and more structured approaches seemed to produce better result. Accordingly, basic literacy is specifically addressed in Year 1, 2, and 3 using phonics approach in Malaysian national primary schools, and pupils are expected to attain 100% basic literacy after three years of schooling at foundation level (Ministry of Education, 2012). With the emphasis on phonics in the new curriculum content, English teachers are recommended to use synthetic phonics approach to teach beginning reading. Furthermore, the synthetic phonics approach advocates explicit teaching of letter-sound correspondences and blending skills to develop decoding skills among pupils at foundation level.

2.0 Approaches to Teaching Literacy

In the standard-based English language curriculum, basic reading literacy receives attention in term of development of beginning reading ability using phonics instruction. The English language curriculum specifically recommends the use of phonics instruction in teaching beginning reading to Years 1 to 3 of national primary schools, though the literature offers two main teaching approaches as the key to solving problem of teaching pupils to read: the sight-word or whole-word approach and phonics instruction.

2.1 *Sight-word/Whole-word Approach*

The sight-word or whole-word approach is an instructional approach stressing the visual representation of whole words so that pupils develop a sight vocabulary that enables them to read simple material almost from the beginning (Salinger, 1995). Sight vocabulary is selected in terms of frequency with which they occur in pupils' reading texts. Sight-word or whole-word approach actually encourages the idea of developing a sight vocabulary by rote learning key words (Tann, 1992). Gradually, their skills for independent word attack increase and they can figure out unfamiliar words. This approach emphasizes visual recognition and memory. Therefore the reading approach tends to be rather repetitive

and not always inviting to read. As such this approach is sometimes referred to as 'look and say' approach.

Sight words are words that are common and useful words that do not follow regular phonics rules, such as *were*, *who*, and *you*. They are often called sight words because they are memorized by sight with the whole language approach. Pupils acquire sight words by meeting them often and in meaningful contexts. Teaching sight words often involves drill-like activities and usually involve repetition using a variety of techniques and media (Chitravelu, 2005). Sight words and high frequency words are often associated with the whole-word approach which usually uses embedded phonics. Embedded phonics is described as indirect instruction where pupils are taught letter-sound correspondences during the reading of connected text. Essentially, pupils memorize words from which they generalize letter-sound correspondences. Teachers who use embedded phonics also often teach pupils to memorize the most high frequency English words, such as *it*, *he*, *them*, and *when*, even though these words are fully decodable. Since pupils encounter different letter-sound correspondences as they read, this approach is not systematic or explicit.

In the English language curriculum for Malaysian primary schools, sight words are chosen according to their usefulness (Chitravelu et al., 2005). Usefulness is usually determined by the frequency with which they occur in pupils' reading texts. In the standard-based English language curriculum, the words are listed in the word list (Level 1) attached to the Standard Document. The word list forms part of the language contents in the curriculum (Curriculum Development Division, 2011). The words must be mastered by all pupils according to their stages of development. These are the minimum words that need to be taught and teachers may expand upon the list according to the level and ability of their pupils as well as the topic under study. Among the words are grammar words such as articles (*a*, *an*, *the*), common prepositions (*on*, *of*, *to*, *up*, *at*, *in*, *by*, *from*, *down*, *about*, *than*), pronouns (*I*, *me*, *my*, *she*, *her*, *he*, *him*, *his*, *we*, *us*, *our*, *you*, *your*, *they*, *them*, *their*, *it*), conjunctions (*but*, *and*, *after*, *because*, *if*, *or*), adjectives (*big*, *good*, *new*, *old*, *little*, *last*), adverb (*away*, *here*, *back*, *again*, *first*, *once*, *so*, *there*, *very*, *just*, *next*, *not*, *out*, *too*, *now*), determiners (*another*, *half*, *all*, *some*, *that*, *these*, *many*, *little*, *more*, *much*), verb-to-be (*are*, *is*), wh-questions (*where*, *who*, *what*, *when*), modal verbs (*will*, *would*, *should*, *may*), nouns (*name*, *night*, *time*, *way*), and verbs (*go*, *going*, *went*, *get*, *got*, *come*, *came*, *said*, *do*, *dig*, *play*, *call*, *see*, *saw*, *seen*, *make*, *made*, *pull*, *jump*, *put*, *ran*, *take*, *took*, *want*, *laugh*, *live(d)*, *love*, *push*), names of common things (*cat*, *ball*, *door*, *home*, *dog*, *water*, *tree*, *bed*), people (*boy*, *girl*, *man*), places (*house*, *home*, *school*), words related to relationships (*mother*, *father*, *brother*, *sister*), common names of colours (*red*, *blue*, *white*, *black*), days of the week, months of the year, and numbers to twenty.

In systematic phonics approach however, pupils are taught the rules and the exceptions; they are not instructed to memorize words. Memorizing sight words and high frequency words has not been found to help fluency. Although some pupils may recognize words automatically in isolation or on a list, they may not read the same words fluently when the words appear in sentences in connected text. Instant or automatic word recognition is a necessary, but not sufficient, reading skill. Pupils who can read words in isolation quickly may not be able to automatically transfer this speed and accuracy in connected text.

2.2 Phonics Instruction

Alternatively, phonics instruction is an instructional approach that focuses on learning letter (graphemes) and sound (phonemes) correspondence to sound out words (Lane & Pullen, 2003; Salinger, 1995). Stotsky (2006) specifically points out that phonics instruction could be used to teach beginning reading by making explicit letter-sound correspondences. Simultaneously, pupils learn to recognize that words are made up of a discrete set of sounds and to manipulate such sounds, which is called phonemic awareness (Cunningham et al., 2004). In other words, phonemic awareness is the ability to understand that spoken language is composed of tiny segments of speech called phonemes (Stotsky, 2006). Pupils' level of phonemic awareness is very highly correlated with their success in beginning reading. Phonemic awareness develops through a series of stages during which pupils first become aware that language is made up of individual words, and that words are made up of syllables, and the syllables are made up of phonemes.

It is not the terms that pupils are required to learn but their ability to hear and recognize when words start with the same sound. Once they can distinguish when words begin alike, they can begin to learn which letters make which sounds. Letter sounds can be learned by association. Associative learning is the easiest, quickest and longest lasting way to learning letter-sound correspondences (Cunningham et al., 2004). Once they are taught letter sounds, they can associate these with words that they have already known, thus making the learning of these sounds easier and longer lasting. Teachers can provide this opportunity for associative learning for pupils who did not know words when they came to school by capitalizing on the words they have learned before. Pupils can develop this phonemic awareness as a result of the oral and written language they are exposed to.

Some phonics programmes recommend pupils learn letter-sounds in isolation from words, so that they can make automatic connections between letters and their sounds. Sight words normally are not introduced until most sounds have been mastered. Yet, the resulting problem is many words in English do not neatly fall within common phonics rules and cannot readily be sounded out. Consequently, motivation to read can lag before pupils master all the phonics rules to allow them to read their own interesting stories.

However, some phonics programmes do include some irregular sight words, while others have personified the sounds as distinct characters, using singing, introduced typing, or provided games for reinforcement. Others coded symbols to represent the letter-sound correspondence. For example, they use colours to code vowels, consonants, and digraphs. With these, coded material is gradually removed as pupils make a transition to regular print. Research on coded symbol-sound systems has indicated some success, but the use of such system is limited, most often because of the expense to develop special materials.

In brief, phonics instruction is a method for teaching beginning reading by developing pupils' phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge. Fostering phonemic awareness is a critical aspect of emergent literacy development (Allington, 2013). Developing phonemic awareness includes teaching pupils to recognize individual sounds in words (phoneme isolation), to recognize common sounds in various words (phoneme identity), to recognize initial, medial and final sounds in single syllable words (phoneme categorization), to listen to separate sounds and combine those sounds to make new words (phoneme blending), to separate words into their individual sounds (phoneme segmentation), and to add, delete, or substitute phonemes to make new words (phoneme manipulation).

In addition to that, teaching phonics knowledge enables beginning readers to decode new written words by sounding them out, or in phonics terms, blending the sound-spelling patterns. In this context, pupils are taught to recognize shapes of the letters in the alphabet, to understand relationships of letters and sounds, to be able to apply letter-sound knowledge during daily reading practice, to learn phonics along with word study instruction, to look at words and recognize regular patterns and similarities, to be able to use word recognition and word attack skills, and to recognize consonants, short and long vowels, beginning and ending digraphs, various blends, high frequency words, silent letters in words and inflectional endings in words.

At present, phonics instruction has been widely used in primary education in teaching reading literacy throughout the world such as in Australia (Callinan & Zee Der Van, 2010; Wilson & Colmar, 2008), the United Kingdom (Griffiths, 2008; Rose, 2006; Treiman, Stothard, & Snowling, 2013), the United States of America (Stotsky, 2006; Treiman et al., 2013; Walsh, Glaser, & Wilcox, 2006), and even in Malaysia (Gan et al., 2013; Siik & Hawkins, 2013).

Research findings revealed that direct and systematic instruction in phonics contributes more significantly to children's initial and on-going literacy development than any alternate approach of either unsystematic or non-phonics instruction (Wilson & Colmar, 2008). Though phonics instruction is claimed to increase reading performance, few teachers are able to teach the 44 phonemes and the graphemes with confidence (Davies & Ritchie, 2003). Apparently, a challenge in the teaching of English literacy is teachers' own mastery of phonemes, phonics and ability to competently teach these skills in

the classroom; therefore, teachers need to develop competency with phonemes and phonics so that they can teach their students effectively (Siik & Hawkins, 2013).

The cognitive process of how pupils learn to read involves lexical and sub-lexical reading. Lexical reading includes acquiring words or phrases without attention to the letters or groups of letters that compose them or by using whole-word approach. Sub-lexical reading encompasses teaching reading by associating letters or groups of letters with sounds or by using phonics instruction. Since it focuses on the spoken and written units within words, phonics is a sub-lexical approach and, as a result, is often contrasted with whole-word approach.

In term of writing system, English spelling is based on the alphabetic principle. In an alphabetic writing system, letters are used to represent speech sounds (phonemes). For example, the word *pat* is spelled with three letters, *p*, *a*, and *t*, each representing a phoneme, respectively /p/, /æ/, and /t/. The spelling structures for some alphabetic languages, such as Arabic, English, and Spanish, are comparatively orthographically transparent, or orthographically shallow, because there is nearly a one-to-one correspondence between sounds and the letter patterns that represent them. In Malaysia context however, teachers must be aware of the differences between English and the national language, *Bahasa Malaysia* in the sense that letters have different sounds in English and *Bahasa Malaysia*. In teaching English phonics and pronunciation, teachers may come across with some pupils who unlearn the sound in *Bahasa Malaysia* when reading in English.

In second language acquisition, the extent to which learners' first language orthographic features are similar to those of the second language will affect the ease with which they make the transition into fluent second language reading (Hudson, 2011). However, even if readers come from a language that uses the same alphabetic script as that of the second language, the language will differ in terms of the distribution of letters, general length of the written words, amount and types of diacritical marks, allowable consonant clusters, and frequency of upper and lower case (Ferreiro, 2002). Nevertheless, the learning of second language will be easier if a learner comes from a language that uses alphabetic script too though it is somewhat different, for example from Malay to English, than if the learner is from a non-alphabetic script, for example from Chinese to English. Unlike Malay which uses alphabetic script, Chinese is a logographic writing system that each Chinese character is associated with a syllable and represents a lexical morpheme (Cheung, 1999).

However, teaching reading using phonics approach may be a challenge to teachers because English spelling is more complex due to the fact that English is less regular in its sound-symbol match, or the relationship between letter shapes and phonic sounds (Tann, 1992). There are 44 phonemes or phonic sounds (Salinger, 1995; Tann, 1992) represented by only 26 letters. As a result, two letters are often used together to represent distinct sounds, referred to as *digraphs*. For example *t* and *h* placed side by side to represent either /θ/ or /ð/.

Another challenge that teachers may come across is when teaching English spelling in relation to phonics. English has absorbed many words from other languages throughout its history, usually without changing the spelling of those words. As a result, the written form of English includes the spelling patterns of many languages, such as, the Old English, Old Norse, Norman French, Classical Latin and Greek, as well as numerous modern languages, superimposed upon one another. These overlapping spelling patterns mean that in many cases the same sound can have different meaning (homophone), such as in *rose* (flower) and *rose* (past tense of rise), or the same sound and spelling can have different meaning (homonym), such as in *tire* (car wheel) and *tire* (fatigue), or the same sound can be spelled differently and have different meanings (heterography), such as in *two* and *too*, or the same spelling can have different meaning (homograph), such as in *bear* (animal) and *bear* (to carry), or the same spelling can have different sound and meaning (heteronym/heterophony), such as in *desert* (arid region) and *desert* (leave).

Consequently, English spelling patterns vary considerably in the degree to which they follow rules. For example, the letters *ee* almost always represent /i:/, but the sound can also be represented by the letters

i and *y*. Similarly, the letter cluster *ough* represents /ʌf/ as in *enough*, /oo/ as in *though*, /u:/ as in *through*, /ɒf/ as in *cough*, /aʊ/ as in *bough*, /ɔ:/ as in *bought*, and /ʌp/ as in *hiccough*, while in *slough* and *lough*, the pronunciation varies. Although the patterns are inconsistent, there are dozens of rules that are reliable.

Systematic phonics instruction is a very prominent discussion topic among teachers and researchers today (Kathryn, 2010). This type of instruction relies on teaching letter-sound correspondence (phonemic awareness) and applying these relationships to beginning reading. Systematic phonics instruction helps students read more efficiently than a non-systematic form of instruction and the effects are greater when the instruction starts at kindergarten (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2001) which later benefits future reading progress in primary school pupils (Kathryn, 2010). In fact, systematic phonics instruction contributes more significantly to children's on-going literacy development than any alternative approach (Wilson & Colmar, 2008). Teachers who do not have a systematic phonics instruction may make up the rules of English literacy and this tends to lead to greater confusion for teacher and students (Cihon, 2011; Rose, 2006).

Researchers have identified four approaches to phonics instruction as synthetic, analytic, embedded and analogy; yet, the first three are the most common forms of phonics instruction (Kathryn, 2010). Synthetic and analytic take the most direct and explicit approaches to teaching phonics. Analogy is a particular type of analytic approach. Embedded phonics approach is sometimes referred to as contextualized or whole language approach. It may also use explicit instruction, but usually uses authentic reading material to introduce phonics-based skills. These approaches vary in their use of materials, approach to learning, activities and their effects on learners (Kathryn, 2010). Therefore, teachers need to understand the approaches first before they apply them in their English classrooms.

2.2.1 Synthetic Phonics

Synthetic phonics is a method employed to teach phonics to pupils when learning to read. This form of phonics instruction begins with teaching pupils grapheme-phoneme correspondence, and does not begin by establishing initial sight word vocabulary (Johnston & Watson, 2005). Pupils are asked to examine every letter within the word as an individual sound in the order in which they appear, and then blend those sounds together. For example, *shroud* would be read by pronouncing the sounds for each spelling, /ʃ/, /r/, /aʊ/, /d/ and then blending those sounds orally to produce a spoken word, /ʃraʊd/. Pupils are also taught how to utilize letter-sound correspondences to decode and spell words (Kathryn, 2010). Synthetic phonics has been recognized in some countries, such as, Australia (Callinan & Zee Der Van, 2010; Wilson & Colmar, 2008), the United Kingdom (Callinan & Zee Der Van, 2010; Rose, 2006), the United States (Stotsky, 2006; Walsh et al., 2006), and Malaysia (Siik & Hawkins, 2013) as a strategy to teach English literacy.

2.2.2 Analytic Phonics

Analytic phonics is a method employed to teach phonics by asking the pupils to analyse sound-symbol correspondences, such as the *ou* spelling of /aʊ/ in *shroud* but pupils do not blend those elements as they do in synthetic phonics lessons. Furthermore, consonant blends (separate, adjacent consonant phonemes) are taught as units (e.g., in *shroud* the *shr* would be taught as a unit).

2.2.3 Analogy Phonics

Analogy phonics is a particular type of analytical phonics in which the teacher has pupils analyse phonic elements according to the phonograms in the word. A phonogram, known in linguistics as a rhyme, is composed of the vowel and all the sounds that follow it in the syllable. Teachers using the analogy method assist pupils in memorizing a bank of phonograms, such as *-at* or *-am*. Teachers may use learning word families when teaching about phonograms. Pupils then use these phonograms to analogize to unknown words.

2.2.4 *Embedded Phonics*

Embedded phonics is the type of phonics instruction used in whole language programs. Although phonics skills are de-emphasized in whole language programs, some teachers include phonics mini-lessons in the context of literature. Short lessons are included based on phonics elements that students are having trouble with, or on a new or difficult phonics pattern that appears in a class reading assignment. The focus on meaning is generally maintained, but the mini-lesson provides some time for focus on individual sounds and the symbols that represent them. Embedded phonics differs from other methods in that the instruction is always in the context of literature rather than in separate lessons, and the skills to be taught are identified opportunistically rather than systematically.

2.3 *Synthetic Phonics Approach*

To become good readers, pupils need to have deep knowledge of letters, spelling patterns, and words because skilful readers always process each letter in a word and associate a sound while reading (Adams, 2013). Habitually they translate spelling to sounds as they read and spelling to sound translation is crucial to developing fluency. This association and then blending of sounds allow readers to identify words that they have never seen before or are nonsense words (Pressley, 2006). Synthetic phonics approach is one way to teach letters and its corresponding sound. The goal of synthetic phonics instruction is that pupils identify the letter-sound correspondences as a first step toward learning to read, and identify sound segments in spoken words before they begin to read an alphabetic written language (Morris, 2011).

2.3.1 *Curriculum and Instructional Strategies*

Synthetic phonics instruction teaches pupils how to utilize letter-sound correspondences to decode and spell words. Therefore, the instructional methods are based on letter-sound drills and the actual reading is delayed until the pupils have mastered phonemic awareness (Kathryn, 2010). Synthetic phonics instruction is a part-to-whole approach which teaches pupils to convert graphemes into phonemes, and then blend the phonemes together to create words (Ehri et al., 2001). This type of phonics instruction requires pupils to develop phonemic awareness as a first step toward learning to read, and they need to be able to identify sound segments in spoken words before they begin to read an alphabetic written language (Morris, 2011). For example, pupils should be able to identify the three phonemes, /k/, /æ/, /t/ first, and then blend the phonemes together before they could read the word *cat*. In fact, teaching phonemic awareness is a prerequisite in learning to read using synthetic phonics instruction because English writing represents a sound written down (Bowey, 2006). According to Bowey (2006), synthetic phonics instruction teaches pupils to read new words by sounding letters out and blending phonemes. Hence, decoding and blending are explicitly taught to pupils so that they can employ these strategies during reading.

One of the strategies that could be applied to teach letter knowledge is the use of manipulative letter tiles (Jennings, Caldwell, & Lerner, 2013). Using the tiles, pupils practice exchanging letters to make new words, using the same first consonant to make another word, blending sounds together, or spelling words that a teacher utters. Another resource that can be used to help pupils master letter knowledge is the alphabet cards (Savage, 2004). Teachers can laminate large upper case and lower case letters and use the cards for several types of activities. For example, teachers can assign each pupil a letter and ask them to put the cards in the correct order. Teachers can also ask the pupils to match the lower case with the upper case letters. Another fun activity that teachers can organize using the alphabet cards is making a path with them on the floor, and asks the pupils to hop from one letter to the next letter and say the letter that they land on and its corresponding sound (Savage, 2004).

After teaching the letter knowledge, teachers can proceed with phonics. Many programmes suggest teaching consonants first, followed by vowels, and then syllables, including prefixes and suffixes, compound words, contractions, and inflectional endings (Starrett, 2007). Teachers cannot teach consonants before vowels because a string of letters cannot be a word without at least one vowel (Beck & Beck, 2013). Teacher is also not suggested to teach the complexities of vowels having more than one sound to pupils, but they must learn a few vowels in order to figure out pronunciation of a word. I. L.

Beck and Beck (2013) believes that by learning a few consonants and at least one vowel, pupils are able to blend those letters together and make small words.

2.3.2 *Learning Resource*

A phonics-based classroom should include multiple types of print and text (Kathryn, 2010). Pupils need to have opportunities to practice what they are explicitly taught and apply their knowledge to activities and texts. Synthetic phonics instruction requires some texts, either for assessment purposes or for learning practice. Texts that support various aspects of synthetic phonics instruction are phonetically controlled, trade books, predictable or patterned, or contain high frequency words. Each type of text provides opportunities for pupils to gain proficiency in various reading skills, but teachers need to encourage variety. Too much reliance on one type of text to improve one skill or strategy can impede learning of other strategies (Barr, Blachowicz, Bates, Katz, & Kaufman, 2012).

In synthetic phonics approach, decodable books are common for lower primary graders. They are highly controlled texts which contain patterned language and repetition (Savage, 2004). They focus on segmenting words into letters, sounding them out, and blending them together. Some texts might be predictable. The books can be used for phonics if teachers draw specific attention to words in the text.

To support synthetic phonics instruction, the wall of the classroom and other areas should contain a variety of printed materials (Kathryn, 2010). Word walls are a crucial part of a literacy rich classroom. The word walls should be visible from anywhere in the classroom that pupils might be writing (Lapp, Flood, Moore, & Nichols, 2005). Having multiple word walls is even better. To support pupils' learning of phonics, high-frequency sight words that are decodable could be listed on one of the word walls. Pupils should be able to manipulate the words, as well as recognize the graphemes and phonemes and sound out the words.

Alphabet and phonics cards are also good for lower primary graders. They are helpful when letters are associated with picture or words that pupils are able to recognize (Lapp et al., 2005). The cards should be big and laminated so that pupils can see them from around the classroom. Smaller cards could be used to provide more practice to individual pupils. Another great resource that can be used for synthetic phonics instruction is the individual pocket chart (Beck & Beck, 2013). Pupils can also use this pocket chart in pairs by spelling words based on individual phoneme sounds.

Synthetic phonics instruction can consist of drills and worksheet (Kathryn, 2010). However, this does not have to be the main learning resource. Instead, teachers should try to make synthetic phonics instruction as fun as possible and should avoid rote memorization. Teachers can incorporate games, word sorts, and rhymes in synthetic phonics instruction to allow pupils to experiment with sounds and engage with each other (Lapp et al., 2005).

Teachers should take into account learning resources when planning opportunities for pupils to practice what they are taught. In addition to having a supportive and positive learning environment, there must be sufficient visual reinforcement (Kathryn, 2010). Hence, every classroom should be print rich, but classrooms that stress synthetic phonics instruction should be even more decorated with learning resources.

2.3.3 *Assessment*

The instructional methods of synthetic phonics approach rely heavily on studying individual phonemes and letter-sound correspondence. Hence, phonics assessment should emphasize on studying grapheme-phoneme relationship (Kathryn, 2010). Phonics assessment can be administered in formal and informal ways to see whether pupils comprehend word formation and letter sounds, and have decoding abilities. However, phonics assessment is often given shortly or directly after whole class or group instruction with synthetic teaching materials (Starrett, 2007).

Some tests assess pupils' knowledge of letter formation, beginning and ending consonants, and vowel sounds. Teachers can assess letter knowledge through a Manuscript Alphabet test, in which pupils fill

in the blanks of the alphabet, and write each letter in uppercase and lowercase format (Starrett, 2007). A suggested assessment for first primary grade is beginning and ending consonant, in which pupils receive a piece of paper with word endings or beginnings on it. Teachers read words orally, pupils listen as the teachers repeat the word, and then they fill in the sound that they hear (Starrett, 2007). Another kind of test which is appropriate for synthetic phonics approach is Common Ending test, in which pupils are provided with a list of word endings and they are supposed to fill in the blank with any consonant that will make a word (Kathryn, 2010).

These tests can be designed based upon curriculum requirements and instructional approaches. One of advantages of having such kind of assessment is that they are short and to the point. However, they are meant for diagnostic purposes only. Simultaneously, they can be a source of learning evidences that can be presented to parents to show their children's success or needs in phonics (Starrett, 2007). However, the findings of such tests are not intended for grading, instead they are used to give teachers some feedback and differentiate instruction for individual pupils' needs.

2.3.4 Learning Implication

Phonics instruction should not take up more than 25% of reading instruction time (Stahl, 1992). Teachers should vary their instruction by bringing in various types of text. A vast selection of book types will increase practice of skills that pupils are struggling. For instance, if students are struggling with phonemic decoding strategies then they should practice more with decodable texts (McEwan, 2009). Students who are lacking this ability should not be reading predictable texts because they may already rely too much on context, or they may need to work with more common sight words. The focus of good synthetic phonics instruction should be on reading words, not learning rules (Stahl, 1992). Synthetic phonics instruction may positively influence future reading progress, but the type of instruction and the amount of instruction needs to be planned and balanced based on pupils' needs (Kathryn, 2010).

3.0 Conclusion

The standard-based English language curriculum for national primary schools in Malaysia has made a significant change in teaching basic literacy to Year 1 to 3 through phonics in relation to curriculum content and teaching approach. With the emphases on basic literacy and phonics as the curriculum content, English teachers are required to use synthetic phonics approach to teach beginning reading. Through synthetic phonics approach, pupils are expected to learn letter-sound correspondences and blending skills to develop their decoding skills at foundation level.

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