USING PHONICS SYSTEM TO DEVELOP PUPILS' READING PROFICIENCY

NOOR SHANA BINTI KAMARUNDZAMAN

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effects of using phonics approach on pupils' word attack and decoding skill, phonemic awareness and reading fluency. Besides that, it also examines teacher's perception on using phonics approach for reading lesson. This study was carried out through quantitative and qualitative procedures. The quantitative procedure employed the quasi experimental design using pre-test post-test. For the qualitative procedure, a semi structured interview was carried out. The participants of this study were 28 Year 2 pupils and an English teacher from a primary school in Johor Bahru. Synthetic phonics approach was used in the study and the pupils were taught explicitly on how to make and blend the sounds. The pupils underwent four assessments in the pre-test and post-test. The results from the tests were analysed statistically. The study found that phonics approach increased pupils' phonemics awareness but did not improve pupils' word attack and decoding skill as well as pupils' reading fluency. Moreover, the teacher viewed that phonics approach was confusing for the pupils. Besides that, it was noted that there was the interference of L1 during the lessons and assessments. It is suggested that for phonics approach to be effective in developing pupils' reading proficiency, it should be conducted in small group of pupils.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini telah dijalankan untuk mengkaji kesan penggunaan kaedah fonik pada kemahiran *word attack* dan *decoding*, kesedaran fonemik dan kefasihan membaca bagi murid Tahun 2. Di samping itu, kajian ini meneliti persepsi guru dalam menggunakan kaedah fonik. Kajian ini telah dijalankan melalui prosedur kuantitatif dan kualitatif. Bagi data kuantitatif, kajian ini mengunakan eksperimen kuasi dan mengadaptasi reka bentuk ujian pra dan ujian pos . Bagi mengumpul data kualitatif, satu temu bual separa berstruktur telah dijalankan. Peserta kajian terdiri daripada 28 murid Tahun 2 dan seorang guru Bahasa Inggeris dari sekolah rendah di Johor Bahru. Pendekatan sintetik fonik telah digunakan dalam kajian ini dan murid-murid telah diajar dengan jelas tentang bagaimana untuk membunyikan simbol-simbol dan mengabungkan bunyi. Murid-murid telah diuji dalam empat ujian dan keputusan daripada ujian-ujian tersebut telah dianalisis secara statistik. Kajian mendapati bahawa kaedah fonik telah meningkatkan kesedaran fonemik murid tetapi tidak meningkatkan kemahiran *word attack* dan *decoding* murid serta kefasihan membaca. Selain itu, guru menyatakan bahawa pendekatan fonik telah mengelirukan murid. Di samping itu, terdapat gangguan dari bahasa Malaysia semasa pengajaran dan penilaian dijalankan. Adalah dicadangkan bahawa pendekatan fonik berkesan dalam membangunkan kemahiran membaca murid, ia perlu dijalankan dalam kumpulan kecil.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

PAT	-	Phonemic Awareness Test
L1	-	First language
L2	-	Second Language
MOE	-	Ministry of Education
LINUS	-	Literacy and Numeracy
KBSR	-	*Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah*
KSSR	-	*Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah*

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Reading is one of the components in acquiring knowledge. In second language acquisition (SLA) reading plays an important role in helping learners to gain comprehensible input. According to Krashen (1985), comprehensible input means meaningful and useful input that learners need in acquiring the language. By supplying the learners with comprehensible input, it may help them to acquire the language in more meaningful ways and see how the language works in different type of situation and condition. Reading is one of the best ways of getting the inputs; however, teachers must assist the young learners in getting the right reading materials in order to ensure they will get comprehensible input through the reading. Furthermore, reading is a skill necessary for children's success both in school and throughout life (Anderson *et al*, 1985).

Reading is the fundamental skill for all elementary and primary school systems. Most primary schools require the students to be able to identify the words on the page accurately and fluently so that they have enough knowledge and thinking ability to understand the words (Torgesan *et al*, 2007). This basic skill will help

children to comprehend the knowledge that they acquire through printed materials. Through reading practice, their reading ability will improve and it will benefit them in both academics and daily life

In Malaysia, English is the second language (L2) and being taught in both primary and secondary schools. The aim of learning English in primary schools is to equip pupils with basic language skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing to enable them to communicate effectively in a variety of contexts that is appropriate to the pupils' level of development (MOE, 2011). This is to help them to comprehend the language and use it in their real life situation later on. Each pupil and student in Malaysia is provided with English reading materials from the Ministry of Education (MOE) starting in Year 1. Therefore, it can be concluded that each Malaysian citizen (at the age of 7 and above) had learnt English for at least 6 years in primary and 5 years in secondary school.

However, according to The News Straits Time (2006), MOE reported that 162 000 students from primary and secondary schools in Malaysia are illiterate. Furthermore, a research by Fong Peng Chew (2012) showed that the overall English literacy rate for the secondary school students in Malaysia is only 27.2%. This shows that most of the students graduated from secondary schools are illiterate in English.

Literacy or the ability to read and write (Cambridge International Dictionary of English, 1997) crisis is not just a concern of MOE but to other countries as well. In America, the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that 25% of their eight grade students are reading below basic level (of reading proficiency). The major factor that leads to the illiterate students at the secondary school is the insecure foundation of their reading skill at the primary school level. Due to this matter, MOE shows their concern and had revised the English syllabus in both primary and secondary level.

1.1 Background of the Problem

Even though English had been the main subjects in all of national schools in Malaysia, the number of students who are illiterate in English is still high. Illiterate in this context means students are not able to read, communicate or write in English. Students who score poorly in English often struggle in securing a better career in their working environment.

According to Eidger (2001), although there are many different definitions of literacy, reading seems to be important skill in literacy. Reading skill is seen as the important skill for young learners as it is one of the important sources for language input. Moreover, delayed readers usually score poorly in language test. Any child who does not learn to read early and well will not easily master other skills and knowledge, and is unlikely to ever flourish in school or in life (Teaching Reading is Rocket Science, 1999). This may relate to the recognition that reading is probably the most important skill for L2 learners in academic context (Grabe, 1991). Besides that, reading is also known as an important source of language input. Previously in the *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah* (KBSR), MOE emphasise on the integrated skills approach and reading was taught using the whole language approach. However, many pupils, especially in the rural areas faced the difficulties in reading and it led to other literacy problem when they enter the secondary school.

In order to avoid the illiterate problem, MOE had implemented the new curriculum standard to provide students with a strong foundation of English. At the primary level, MOE emphasises on the development of basic language skills and introduced the basic literacy using the phonics system. The strategy of phonics is introduced in order to help pupils begin to read (MOE, 2011). In Year 1 and Year 2 pupils' phonemic awareness had been highlighted and teachers need to develop pupils' phonemic awareness even though the pupils can read well.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

In 2011, MOE decided to use the traditional skill-based approach to promote basic literacy among the primary school pupils and introduced the Standard-based English language Curriculum (KSSR) for primary school which uses the modular structure. By organising the curriculum standards under five modules (for Year 1 and Year 2), pupils will be able to focus on the development of salient language skills or sub-skills under each module through purposeful activities in meaningful contexts (MOE, 2011). This modular approach is different from the previous syllabus where the focus is on the integrated skill.

The KSSR reading module will focus and emphasise on phonemic awareness. This is to ensure that the pupils will be able to recognise letter sound which is useful to promote early reading skill. According to Curtis (2004), even though the approach may be different for older children, phonemic awareness is a critical building block for comprehension. Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify and manipulate individual sound in spoken words (MOE, 2011). The phonemic awareness can be developed by means of phonics. According to Brook *et al* (2006), phonics is an approach of teaching reading which focuses on the relationship between letters and sound. In adapting the new KSSR syllabus, teachers need to use phonics system in teaching reading skill.

Reading modules for Year 1 and Year 2 focus on the basics principles of reading and emphasise on phonemic awareness. The strategy of phonics is introduced in order to help pupils begin to read (MOE, 2011). Previously, in KBSR syllabus the reading approach featured the combination of phonics and whole language approach. However, phonics remains unpopular among the teachers. Teachers tended to choose the whole language approach instead of phonics approach because reading proficiency was not recorded as a formal evaluation. In the national examination *Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah* (UPSR), pupils were tested in written test and reading comprehension. Due to the examination, the pressure of getting the pupils to pass the examination was higher than to produce proficient readers.

However, in the new curriculum standard, pupils' reading skill will be assessed in separation of other skill and teachers need to develop accuracy and fluency in pupils reading skills as well as their understanding of the text.

In implementing the new reading approach in Malaysian primary schools, selected teachers from all primary schools in Malaysia were given a short course on how to use the phonics system in teaching reading skill. Though, not all the English teachers had attended the course and they are not familiar with phonics system, they still have to teach pupils how to read by using phonic system. The effectiveness of using the phonics system to develop pupils' reading proficiency is indefinite as there is very little research has been conducted on the effects of using phonics system to develop reading proficiency in Malaysia. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effects of using phonic system to develop reading proficiency among Year 2 pupils in Malaysia.

1.3 Conceptual Framework of the study

In this study, all the key concepts were highlighted in the conceptual framework as in Figure 1.1. The first key concept is the phonic approach. Generally there are two types of phonics; analytic phonics and synthetic phonics. Both have different features and criteria. In this context of study, the synthetic phonics will be used as it matches the requirement listed by MOE for teaching phonics in reading module. There are three main factors that relate with the phonic approach which are; the synthetic phonics features, teacher's role and classroom activities.

The second key concept is the reading skills promoted in the synthetic phonic approach. In general, reading proficiency covered few aspects which are accuracy, fluency, fluency rate and reading comprehension. However, in this context of study, the focus will only be on reading proficiency as highlighted by MOE for Year 2

pupils. The focuses are on accuracy and fluency. According to the Year 2 KSSR syllabus (2011), the pupils need to fulfil three content standards to ensure that they achieve the objectives of reading skill in Year 2. Two of them are for reading accuracy and the other one is for reading fluency (Table 2.1).

The third key concept is the reading assessment which will be carried out to investigate the effects of phonics approach on pupils' reading proficiency. There will be four reading assessment on reading accuracy and reading fluency at the end of the reading lessons. In order to assess pupils' knowledge in letter sounds and ability to recognise words, a Phonemic Awareness Test (PAT) will be conducted. To assess pupils' word recognition and word attack skills, the key words test and a decoding test will be carried out. Then, the fluency test will be carried out to assess pupils' fluency in reading the whole text.

The last key concept is the effects of phonics approach on pupils' reading proficiency. There will be two factors that lead to the effects of phonics approach which are results from the assessments and teacher's perception on using phonic approach to teach reading.

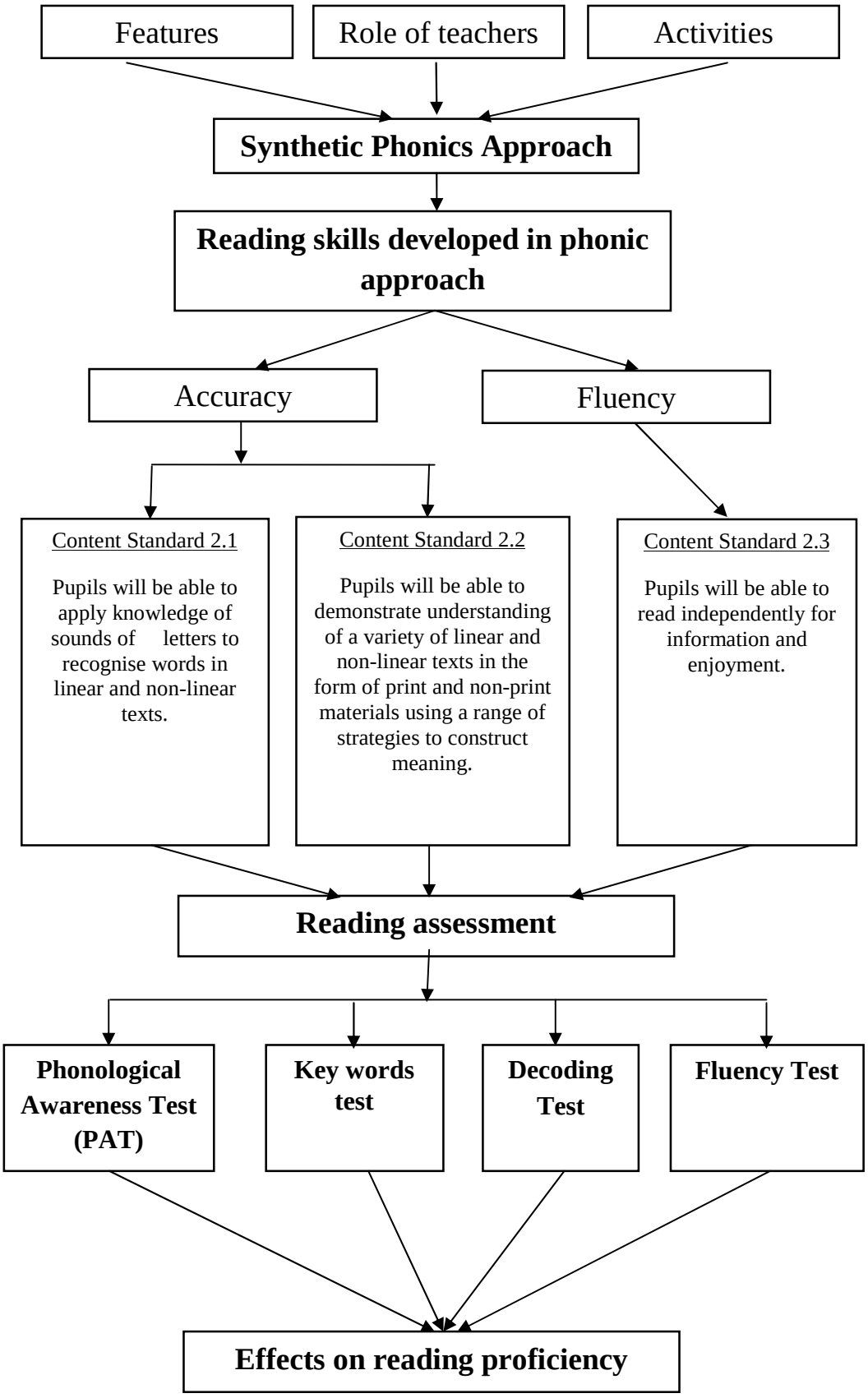

Figure 1.1 : Conceptual Framework

1.4 Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1 To study the effects of phonics approach on:

a pupils' word attack and decoding skill

b pupils' phonemic awareness

c pupils reading fluency

2 To examine teachers' perceptions on using phonics approach for reading lesson

1.5 Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1 What are the effects of using phonics approach on:

a pupils' word attack and decoding skill ?

b pupils' phonemic awareness ?

c pupils' reading fluency ?

2 What are teachers' perceptions on using phonics approach for reading lesson?

1.6 Significance of study

This study is beneficial for MOE, Year 2 teachers and Year 2 pupils. Firstly, MOE may use the findings from this study as feedback to their new curriculum design especially for reading module in Year 2 curriculum standard. Even though the KSSR started in 2011, it is necessary to have a study on the teaching approach required, in order to get feedback from teachers and pupils. Moreover, from this study, MOE can get the empirical evidence on the issues that arise related to the new reading module in Year 2 curriculum standard. Besides MOE, the teachers training centre may use the findings as a reference for them to design or improvise their syllabus for future trainees program for teachers.

Secondly, since phonics system is new to many teachers, from this study teachers can gain feedback on the effect of using phonics and make comparison on other teaching approach. Moreover, teachers can make modification and refine their teaching strategy especially for reading lessons.

Finally, it may increase pupils' motivation on reading when they can blend the letter sounds. Besides that, through this study, it may improve pupils' spelling and speaking skill. This is because learning through phonics system is not only help reading proficiency but improve pupils' spelling and pronunciation as well.

1.7 Scope of the study

This study investigated the effect of using phonics on pupils' reading proficiency. It focuses only on the use of synthetic phonics on teaching reading to Year 2 pupils in a primary school in Johor Bahru. The participants will be twenty-eight Year 2 pupils in a suburban school in Johor Bahru. The pupils are from the same level of English proficiency. All of the pupils had been exposed to the basic

phonics approach when they were in Year 1. However, the lesson was only for single letter sounds for examples /s/, /æ/ and /t/. Furthermore, the Year 1 teachers may not use the same approach as they were not given any briefing/course on how to carry out the phonics approach.

In this study pupils were taught by a teacher who had been briefed on how to conduct their lesson using synthetic phonics and what phonemes and graphemes that they need to cover in their lessons. The teacher needs to follow the guidelines listed by the researchers but she is free to create her own activities.

The duration of this study consisted eight reading lessons or equal to eight hours. In each lesson, teacher introduced different types of phonics symbols and carry out relevant and meaningful activities to promote pupils' reading fluency. At the end of the eight lessons, four tests were conducted to assess pupils' reading proficiency.

The assessments investigated pupils' reading proficiency in two aspects, accuracy and fluency in reading. To investigate pupils' accuracy, three tests were conducted which are PAT, key words test and the decoding test. The PAT will examine pupils' knowledge of how sounds make words. This is to meet Year 2 content standard objective 2.1; Pupils will be able to apply knowledge of sounds of letters to recognise words in linear and non-linear texts. Key words test and decoding test are to examine pupils' word recognition and word attack skills which are the requirement under learning standard 2.2.1; Pupils able to apply word recognition and word attack skills. Finally, pupils' fluency was assessed through the fluency test. This is to meet Year 2 content standard objective 2.3; Pupils will be able to read independently for information and enjoyment.

1.8 Limitation

In this context of study, pupils' reading proficiency was assessed only on pupils' accuracy and fluency. This is to meet the content standards objective as in KSSR curriculum standards. Furthermore, the guidelines and requirement of teaching lessons followed the KSSR curriculum standards. In future there should be a study to investigate the effects of phonics system to promote pupils reading proficiency that will also cover the reading comprehension skill and orthographic knowledge.

This study covered only eight hours of lessons and four phonics symbols as listed in Year 2 English textbook. The symbols selected are the symbols that pupils need to learn in their first 5 units. Therefore, the findings did not generalise the effect of using phonics system on pupils' reading proficiency in other context.

In general, there are two types of phonics, synthetic phonics and analytic phonics. For this study, synthetic phonics approach was used instead of analytic phonics. This is because the features and procedures of synthetic phonics approach meet the criteria of teaching phonics as in KSSR curriculum standards. According to Brook *et al*, (2006), synthetic phonics refers to an approach to the teaching of reading in which phonemes and graphemes are blend together. While based on MOE (2011), pupils should be made aware of the relationship between phonemes and graphemes.

This study was carried out in a primary school in Johor Bahru. There are ninety-four Year 2 pupils in this school but this study only involved twenty eight pupils with the same English level of proficiency. The others were not participate because their levels of English proficiency are good and below average. The differences may influence the findings. Hence, the finding from this study may not reflect the real situation for other primary schools and Year 2 pupils of different context.

1.9 Definition of terms

In this study, a few keywords that relate with Standard-based English language Curriculum (KSSR) and phonics are highlighted.

1.9.1 KSSR

Standard-based English language Curriculum (KSSR) is a new curriculum standard introduced by MOE in 2011. In this study, KSSR curriculum standard is used as a reference and guidelines. This is because this study was carried out in national primary school and the participants were the Year 2 pupils. Furthermore, the teaching lesson was based on the KSSR requirements.

1.9.2 Content standards and learning standards

KSSR curriculum content is organised in terms of content standards and the sub standards; learning standards. Content standards specify the essential knowledge, skills, understandings and strategies that pupils need to learn. Learning standards describe in detail the degree or quality of proficiency that pupils need to display in relation to the content standards for a particular year (MOE, 2011).

1.9.3 Phonics

In general phonics is an approach of teaching people to read by pronouncing letters and sounds. According to Longman Dictionary of Cotemporary English (2005), phonics means a method of teaching people to read in which they are taught to recognize the sounds that the letter presents. There are two types of phonics which are synthetic and analytic phonics.

1.9.3.1 Synthetic phonics

In this context of study, synthetic phonic approach was used in the teaching lesson. This is because it meets the guidelines as listed in the KSSR curriculum standards. Synthetic phonics refers to an approach to the teaching of reading in which the phonemes associated with particular graphemes are pronounced in isolation and blended together (Brooks *et al***,** 2006). Phonemes is the sounds of spoken language and graphemes is the letters and spelling that represent those sounds in written language (MOE, 2011).

1.9.4 Phonemic Awareness Test

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate sounds in words. In this study, Phonemic Awareness Test (PAT) was carried out to examine pupils' knowledge of how sounds make words. The pupils were asked to pronounce the words by blending the phonemes and graphemes during the test. Besides that, the pupils were asked to break spoken words into parts, or to blend spoken parts of a word into one word.

1.9.5 Decoding Test

Decoding is the process of using letter sound correspondences to recognize words. Decoding test is an assessment that examines pupils' decoding skills to assess their reading accuracy. As for this study, in the decoding test, the pupils need to read a list of words, passage of text or paragraph as clearly and correctly as possible. The teacher recorded any mistakes that the pupils make and analyse them.

1.9.6 Key words test

For this study, the key words test tested pupils in reading and pronouncing 20 words accurately. The words list was taken from the KSSR curriculum standard. According to MOE (2011), the key words are the words that must be mastered by all pupils according to their stages of development.

1.9.7 Fluency Test

Fluency is the ability to read words/text easily, well and quickly, or spoken easily without any pauses (Cambridge International Dictionary of English, 1997). In this study, fluency test is an assessment that recorded pupils' ability to read without any mistakes and pauses. The fluency rate was not recorded for this assessment, as it is not in the KSSR curriculum standard requirement. Teacher conducted the test and only recorded the mistakes. The number of correct words read is counted and converted into percentage.

1.10 Conclusion

This study investigated the effects of using phonics system on pupils' reading proficiency. It is derive from the illiterate issues that concern MOE for the past recent years. Due to the issue, MOE introduced the new KSSR curriculum standard in 2011. With the new KSSR curriculum standards, it is essential for teachers to begin teaching the basic literacy skills. This is to help to build a strong foundation of language skills.

As for reading skills, MOE emphasises that teachers need to teach reading using phonics system in order to instil the basic literacy skills among the Year 1 and Year 2 pupils. In this study, synthetic phonics will be used in the reading lessons because it meets the requirement of teaching phonics as in the KSSR curriculum standards (2011).

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