

**USING WHOLE WORD APPROACH TO TEACH READING TO FORM ONE
STUDENTS WITH READING DIFFICULTIES IN A SELECTED RURAL
SECONDARY SCHOOL IN SAMARAHAN DISTRICT OF SARAWAK**

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ABSTRACT

Reading is recognized as a necessary part of obtaining a better job and access to knowledge. People with reading problems would find that their educational careers are imperiled due to the inability to read. Debates over the best approach to teaching early reading have been going on since the 1960s. Two of the main approaches are the Phonics Approach and the Whole Word Approach. Research has shown that having a strong sense of phonics can aid students in their early reading and develop them into better readers. On the other hand, using the Whole Word Approach would lead to memorization and limited vocabulary for the second language learner. Despite exposure to phonics in early reading, some students are left behind and still have reading problems. Their inability to read would hamper them from doing well in their studies as they would encounter problems in every subject in their school. Based on this premise, it is deemed necessary to conduct a study that could explore the use of the Whole Word Approach on students with reading problems. In this study, the subjects were made up of five Form One students who were current participants in the school's intervention program. This study employs a participant observation method. First, the participants were screened. Then they were asked to read key words, followed by spelling and pronunciation activities. When they had succeeded in these activities, they were allowed to read a book from LadyBird Readers. Then they were asked to read minimal pairs, give words that they knew and provide the first letter for the words given. The results indicated that the Whole Word Approach can be used as an effective method to overcome reading problems, especially among older students. Even though the students did not progress at the same pace, they emerged from the study with the ability to read. Taking into account that no one method works and succeeds with all learners, the Whole Word Approach in using key words has succeeded to facilitate the students' reading. This study is another useful contribution to overcoming reading problems among students.

ABSTRAK

Belajar membaca adalah proses yang sama rumit dengan mengajar membaca kepada mereka yang baru mula membaca. Membaca diketahui sebagai bahagian yang penting untuk mendapat pekerjaan yang baik dan akses kepada pengetahuan. Individu yang mempunyai masalah membaca akan mendapati bahawa kerjaya pendidikan mereka tersekat kerana ketidakupayaan untuk membaca. Debat berkenaan cara yang terbaik untuk mengajar bacaan awal telah bermula sejak 1960an. Dua pendekatan utama adalah pendekatan fonik dan pendekatan menggunakan *Whole Word*. Kajian telah menunjukkan bahawa mempunyai pengetahuan fonik yang kuat dapat membantu pelajar dalam bacaan awal dan menjadikan mereka pembaca yang mahir. Walau bagaimanapun, menggunakan pendekatan *Whole Word* akan menjurus kepada hafalan dan perbendaharaan kata yang terhad untuk pelajar bahasa kedua. Walaupun telah didedahkan kepada pendekatan fonik dalam bacaan awal, masih terdapat pelajar yang ketinggalan dan mempunyai masalah membaca. Ketidakupayaan mereka untuk membaca akan menghalang mereka daripada berkembang baik dalam pelajaran kerana mereka akan menghadapi masalah dalam setiap mata pelajaran di sekolah. Berdasarkan masalah ini, adalah dirasakan perlu untuk menjalankan kajian untuk meneroka penggunaan *Whole Word* pada pelajar yang mempunyai masalah membaca. Dalam kajian ini, peserta terdiri daripada lima orang pelajar Tingkatan Satu yang sedang mengikuti program intervensi di sekolah mereka. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan pemerhatian peserta. Mula-mula, peserta ditapis. Kemudian mereka diminta untuk membaca kata kunci, diikuti oleh aktiviti ejaan dan sebutan. Apabila mereka telah berjaya, mereka dibenarkan membaca sebuah buku daripada *LadyBird Readers* dan kemudiannya diminta membaca pasangan perkataan yang mempunyai bunyi yang hampir sama, memberi perkataan yang mereka tahu dan memberi huruf mula untuk perkataan yang disebut. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa pendekatan *Whole Word* boleh digunakan sebagai pendekatan yang efektif untuk mengatasi masalah membaca terutama di kalangan pelajar dewasa. Walaupun pelajar dalam kajian ini tidak berkembang pada tahap yang sama, kajian ini telah melengkapkan mereka dengan kebolehan untuk membaca. Dengan mengambil kira bahawa tidak ada mana-mana pendekatan yang berkesan dan berjaya dengan semua pelajar, pendekatan, *Whole Word* dengan menggunakan kata kunci telah berjaya untuk membantu pembacaan pelajar. Kajian ini adalah satu lagi sumbangan yang berguna untuk mengatasi masalah pembacaan di kalangan pelajar.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

KIA2M	Early Intervention Program for reading and writing K – Kelas I – Intervensi A - Awal 2 – represents the number for two skills M – the skills of reading and writing
MWIA	Miller’s Word Identification Assessment M – Miller’s W – Word I – Identification A – Assessment
PMR	Penilaian Menengah Rendah P – Penilaian M – Menengah R – Rendah
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia S – Sijil P – Pelajaran M – Malaysia
UPSR	Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah U – Ujian P – Penilaian S – Sekolah R - Rendah
MOI	Margin of Improvement M – Margin O – of I – Improvement

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

An English teacher comes out from her classroom after two periods of teaching English to a class of Form One students. At the staff room she starts to grumble about the students who could not read in the class. Other teachers agree with her stating that the students only hinder the objectives of the lesson to be achieved.

Apparently, it is a recurring problem that happened, not only among students of Form One but also among students of other forms in the school. Yet nothing is done and it seems as if the teacher hopes that with some sheer miracle, the students would somehow learn to read. This has been the normal scenario in school these days. No one wants to take the blame, not even the parents.

Learning to read is as complex a process as teaching beginners to read. Despite its difficulty, reading is an important skill and it plays a role as the gateway to all other knowledge and opportunities. Reading is the road to knowledge. Everywhere we go, there are signs that we need to read and interpret. Sometimes we need to read the labels on the bottles of medicine. In other words, reading is a life support system as we need it for all kinds of purposes (Chitravelu, Sithamparam & Teh Soo Choon, 1999). The importance of reading cannot be ignored.

The ability to read is highly valued and is important for social and economic advancement. Hence, reading is essential to success. There are many whose educational careers are imperiled due to the inability to read. For these groups of people, unless

something is done, they are at a losing end as they would encounter problems in every subject in their school. If reading can come easily to other students, then there is no reason why it cannot come easily to these students. What needs to be done is to find a way to help them.

In relation to this, the Ministry of Education, through its Deputy Education Minister, Datuk Noh Omar, revealed that last year 120,000 primary school students (2.2%) and 42,000 secondary school students (0.8%) still had not mastered the basic skills of reading and writing (Berita Harian, 2006). In most schools in Malaysia, children who have problems in reading are placed in intervention programs so that they can receive proper training and skills to help them to read and catch up with their peers. These programs, found in some primary schools, are normally managed by remedial teachers who have received some form of training from courses organized by the Ministry of Education.

1.1 Background of the Study

In teaching a class with mixed ability students, a teacher has to be creative and sensitive to cater to the needs of the different learning styles of her students. Her task becomes even more demanding especially with the presence of those students who cannot read at all. This is where intervention program plays a very important role in every school.

The purpose of any intervention program is to address the needs of the students who have reading problems. In fact, the present Deputy Education Minister commented that schools which have students with reading and writing problems should provide intervention for them to master these skills. He further added that such a program

should be carried out continuously (Berita Harian, 2006). One such program initiated by the ministry is the early intervention program for reading and writing (KIA2M) for Primary One students to prevent them from being illiterate before they proceed to Primary Two.

As mentioned, this particular program is carried out only at the primary school level. In the secondary schools, usually the program is run on the initiative of the school authorities. Guidelines on the approach to the intervention is discussed and planned by the teachers involved in the intervention program of the school. Certain schools in Sarawak are adopted by the Inspectorate Body of the Education Department and receive reading materials for intervention program from this body. As they are adopted by this body, their progress is constantly monitored. However as the school in study was not adopted by the Inspectorate Body of the Education department it did not receive any form of materials and materials used are bought commercially.

Even though the Ministry claims that remedial teachers are placed in schools, not all schools are provided with the needed manpower. This is the case with secondary schools. That is why it is up to the conscience, responsibility and initiative to take up the challenge to improve the English of their students. These teachers sometimes lack training in these areas but adopt methods that they believe would work with their students.

Besides this problem, there was also lack of training given to teachers to help the students who had reading problems in English. Most remedial problems were centred in teaching reading in *Bahasa Melayu*. An analysis on the lists of courses offered for the whole of Sarawak for this year revealed that there were no courses offered to address this need. There were, however courses given out in the year 2005 to instill in students the interest to read. In addition, courses on how to read effectively were offered and had been carried out. These courses included the Big Book Approach and Budding Readers which utilize group reading, shared reading and independent reading.

Having an intervention program in any school should be a relief for any teachers who face problems with students who are unable to read. This is because the presence of any students who are unable to read together with those who can read well in a particular class would certainly hamper the teacher from achieving his or her objectives. Nevertheless, not all intervention programs address the students' inability to read in English. The intervention program in the school selected for data collection in this research for example, only caters for the students' inability to read in *Bahasa Melayu*, the national language. One of the reasons for this is because the teacher-in-charge of the program, who is not a language teacher, attended a course for remedial in *Bahasa Melayu*.

Bahasa Melayu and English are two different languages and the phonology of each language also differs. English has a lot of exceptions and should be taught with much care especially at the beginning of the students' early phase of reading in English. Whether there is problem with the students' learning abilities, retention or memory, socio-economic or genetic problem, is something to be reckoned with. At the same time, elements related to the teacher might play a role in the students' reading problem. The approach adopted by the teacher might not be a suitable one and might not address the needs of some of the learners. As a result they slowly drifted away from their peers especially in terms of reading and nothing was done to rectify the problem.

These students were no longer in primary school and the fact that they still could not read when the research was carried out proved that a new approach needed to be introduced. The students' age had to be taken into account as it would not be appropriate to use a method that they had received when they were still in preschool and in primary schools.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Every year when the public examination results are announced, there seem to be some kind of improvement. Whether the improvement is significant or not depends on individual subjects and the results from the previous year. Despite the improvement, the level of English continues to be questioned. One of the main reasons for this is because students lack the ability to read fluently in English apart from their lack of proficiency in the language itself. Addressing the problems of students' inability to master the reading and writing skills, Datuk Noh Omar admits that the current system cannot allow students who have not mastered these skills to postpone their public examinations (*Berita Harian*, June, 2006). This is understandable because if students were given allowance, then other students might make excuses to delay themselves from sitting for the public examinations. This in turn might lead to serious repercussions for their future.

It is undeniable that learning a second language can be very difficult especially if learners are not motivated and they have a preconceived idea that learning English is not interesting at all. In addition, the learners' home, school and community environments also contribute to their lack of ability to read in English. There is also the question of aptitude and the different levels of acceptance and learning styles of each learner.

Even though for the most part the students who have reading problems can read a little of *Bahasa Melayu*, although not fluently, this is not the case for the English language. This is understandable, to a certain extent because for most Malaysian students where the majority are Malays, *Bahasa Melayu* or the local Malay dialect is their mother tongue. English is like a foreign language to them. This is because other races such as Chinese, Indian, Iban and Bidayuh, can speak well in the national language or the local Malay dialect. Hence, they are very proficient in Malay language having had more exposure to it. With proficiency also comes understanding. Thus, the students' ability to read in the first language is derived from their prior knowledge of the language. This could be one of the reasons why most students do not have many problems in mastering *Bahasa Melayu*.

It is a well known fact that except for English, Science and Mathematics all other subjects are taught in *Bahasa Melayu*. The same is the case for Science and Mathematics-based subjects which are taught to the science stream students in Form Four this year. Earlier this year, the Orientation Program for the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English has been carried out on Form One students to introduce to them the terms used in Science and Mathematics. Even though the program was a success, it did reveal that the students' inability to read in English can hinder their progress and might cause them to fall back if nothing was done to remedy it. Therefore, something has to be done to address the problem of students' inability to read in English.

Phonics might be useful to teach reading to beginning readers, especially in terms of getting them familiar with the sounds of each letter but it might not be practical to use the same method to teach older children who have only a couple of years or so before they sit for public examinations such as PMR and SPM. In addition, any teacher would find that having a student who cannot read in English in class during her lesson could hamper her from achieving her learning objectives. At the same time these students need to catch up on their studies and do their assignments as part of their examinations. So, they need a program which can help them to read in a short period of time. Ignoring them and hoping that somehow they would catch up and be able to read like their fellow classmates is risky.

1.3 Objective of the Study

This study aims at achieving the following objectives:

- (a) To find out the reaction of the Form One students who have reading problems towards the use of the Whole Word Approach

- (b) To evaluate the effectiveness of using the Whole Word Approach in teaching reading to Form One students who have reading problems
- (c) To accomplish the task of exposing a method to help the Form One students to read in English before they proceed to Form Two

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the possibility of using the Whole Word Approach to overcome the problem of reading disability in English of Form One students in a selected rural school in Sarawak. This study is part of the school's Intervention Program. It also sought to evaluate the use of the Whole Word Approach in teaching reading in English to students who have reading problems.

The Whole Word Approach is also associated with the Look Say method. It is also known as 'sight method' or 'configurational reading'. It is a method to teach reading by introducing words to children as whole units without analysis of their subparts (Beck and Juel, 2002). It involves teaching children to sight read words and to be able to pronounce a whole word as a single unit. In this study, whether the students can pronounce the words accurately is not the major goal. What the researcher is interested in is to see if children can read at all through the Whole Word Approach given the limited period of time.

Phonics is the word used to describe the sound the letters make. They are a system of teaching reading that stresses on the relationship between the sounds of English letters and the letters or combination of letters that produce them. The word *bat* for example can be read from its three sounds /b/ /a/ /t/. The word *thick* is also made up of three sounds /th/ /i/ /ck/. Phonics advocates argue that in order to learn to read, most

children require a great deal of explicit instruction in the rules of printed text (Wren, S., 2003).

1.5 Research Questions

This study tried to answer the following questions:

1. How do the Form One students react to the Whole Word Approach?
2. Are the Form One students able to develop the phonics of the words through constant exposure to whole words?
3. Can the Whole Word Approach be an effective tool to teach reading to Form One students who have reading problems?

1.6 Significance of the Study

For some groups of secondary teachers, it is easy to put the blame of their students' inability to read on the poor instruction that they received at the primary school level. The blame can conveniently be put on the primary school teachers. Rather than pointing fingers, this study hoped to find a solution to help those illiterate in English so that not only can the students read in English but also improve in other subjects taught in school. This is every teacher's and every school's dream.

Through this study it was also hoped that school teachers, school administrators and curriculum developers face the hard fact that secondary school students with reading problems could not be neglected any longer. In addition, the intervention programs in schools have to be proactive and made to function in full sincerity.

Furthermore, this study also hoped to be an eye opener to teachers that the students' performance in school reflects our dedication in improving them, no matter how little we have done or how hard to do it. The students' improvement, no matter how small, would become a proof that we have tried our best.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This study made use of six samples who were involved in the Intervention Program in the chosen school. When the research was conducted, there were 29 students involved in the Program but they made up a combination of Form One to Form Three. Form One students made up the largest number. For the purpose of this study, only Form One students were included.

This study utilized the Whole Word Approach to teach reading. This did not mean that the importance of phonics was neglected. Rather, it was embedded but was not the main essence of the study. The Whole Word Approach was the main approach and through constant exposure to words, students should be able to develop the phonics. In other words, the students were not exposed directly to phonics. Rather, the research tried to find out whether they would develop it on their own through the words given.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

A number of approaches were used in developing early reading skills and each had its own special focus. In Malaysia, the Whole Word Approach which focuses primarily on the development of sight words and the phonic approach is the major approach used today.

In this study, the Whole Word Approach was used as the main approach. Phonics was not stressed because the students had been exposed to it in their earlier reading lesson in pre-school and primary school. The amount of exposure to phonics might not be the same for each student as their teacher would have different beliefs in the teaching of reading as have been found in the preliminary study. Hence, the rate of understanding of phonics for each student might differ. This could also be due to their aptitude and different learning styles. Thus, the impact of the use of whole word approach might also differ for different students.

This study was also carried out in a limited time frame. Teaching reading to students who had reading problems in English might be an exhaustive process. More could have been done if given more time. In addition, as this was a small scale study involving only 10 students in a particular school in Sarawak, it might not represent the samples of the whole population. Therefore the results of the study would not be representative of the school's population and the country in general. Thus, the findings of the study should be interpreted with these limitations in mind.