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Teachers' Perspectives Towards Equipping Pupils with Phonological Awareness to Improve English Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of LINUS 2.0 LBI (Linus Bahasa Inggeris) programme saw the rise of phonological awareness in the Malaysian education system. Many researchers are of the view that phonological awareness helps young pupils to improve their English proficiency. However, there are also educators who do not adhere to this belief. Therefore, this article aims to discover teachers' perspectives towards equipping young pupils with phonological awareness to improve their English performance. It focuses on teachers' readiness to teach phonological awareness and conducting the LINUS 2.0 LBI programme, the effect of phonological awareness on pupils' English proficiency, the challenges that are encountered by teaachers while implementing phonological awareness and conducting the LINUS 2.0 LBI programme, and the views of English Language teachers towards phonological awareness skills. In order to collect the data, a mixed method research design was used. 38 teachers answered an online questionnaire in order to discover their readiness to teach phonological awareness. The official LINUS 2.0 LBI results from the year 2015 until 2017 of one of the schools in Johor Bahru area were also collected in order to gauge the effectiveness of phonological awareness instruction while interviews were conducted with one foreign and seven local teachers in order to discover their views regarding phonological awareness and the challenges while implementing it in class. The findings revealed that the teachers were fully prepared to teach the skill and were able to produce positive outcomes despite the challenges they faced when implementing it.

Keywords: Phonological awareness, LINUS 2.0 LBI programme, English proficiency, teachers' readiness

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Mastering English is seen as a crucial ingredient for success for the nation to be at par with other countries around the world. Thus, our pupils are introduced to the language as early as five or six years old when they enter kindergarten. Subsequently, they learn the English language which is a compulsory subject at school, from the time they are in Year 1 in the primary school until Form 5 or 6 in the secondary school.

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However, the number of years being exposed to a language they hardly use in their daily lives does not necessarily correlate with the level of mastery in the language. In 2013, it was reported that the number of learners still lacking English literacy even after attending 6 years of primary school was below 50%. Through the Literacy and Numeracy Screening (LINUS 2.0) programme which was introduced in 2013, it was then made compulsory, for all 100% of primary school pupils to be literate in Malay literacy and Numeracy, and 90% to be literate in English literacy by the end of their Year 3. In addition, this programme also aims to reduce the ratio between remedial teacher and remedial pupils from one for every school to one for around 15 pupils (Chen, 2012).

This article thus presents the perceptions of teachers with regard to the focus of the LINUS 2.0 programme which is the teaching of phonological awareness, the effectiveness of instilling phonologicl awareness on pupils' English performance, the challenges that teachers encounter while teaching phonological awareness, and the views of the English Languge teachers on the influence of phonological awareness on the language learning.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Phonemic Awareness

LINUS 2.0 Bahasa Inggeris (LBI) programme was developed on the basis of the concept of phonological awareness. Phonological awareness is defined as the learner's ability to analyse and manipulate sounds and syllables. It is the ability to be mentally and consciously aware that sentences, words, and sounds are connected to each other (Yopp & Yopp, 2000). This is because, according to McDowell and Lorch (2008), phonological awareness involves multilevels of language abilities related to various sub-skills during syllabic, intrasyllabic, and phonemic stages in order to achieve word recognition ability. This view is also supported by Keesey, Konrad, and Joseph (2015) who list three major skills that are required to achieve phonological awareness: dividing words into syllables, rhyming and alliteration, and phonemic awareness.

Syllabic awareness involves the pupils' ability to recognize that the combination of syllables will create words and that words can be segmented into syllables such as the word 'gen-der' (Torres-Fernandez, 2008). Intrasyllabic awareness on the other hand, involves more difficult skills compared to recognizing syllables. It focuses mainly on the onset and rhyme of the language such as the word '/raet/', in which /r/ is the onset and /aet/ is the rhyme (McDowell & Lorch, 2008). According to Swanson, Trainin, Necoechea, and Hammill (2003), intrasyllabic awareness requires the readers to be able to detect similar or different rhymes or onsets. The third level of awareness is phonemic awareness which is the pupils' conscious ability to manipulate sounds (Atwill, Blanchard, Gorin, & Burstein, 2007). With phonemic awareness, the pupils will be aware that words are made from combinations of sounds and combinations of sounds will create words. This involves difficult skills such as blending and segmenting. Thus, these sub skills; moving from dividing words into syllables, to rhyming, alliteration, and phonemic awareness will guide a young reader to move from a beginner reader to a more proficient reader level (Keesey, Konrad, & Joseph, 2015).

2.2   Advantages and Disadvantages of Phonological Awareness

In language, symbols such as alphabets and punctuation marks have their own meanings. Hence, the more conscious the pupils become towards the connection between symbols, the better readers they will be (Griffith & Olson, 1992). Therefore, the knowledge of phonological awareness will help them to become conscious of this and allow them to organize their thoughts and always be aware of what they read and hear. It is important to teach phonological awareness in the target language, especially for second language pupils who have a more limited access to the language compared to native-speaking learners as it can help them to be conscious of what they read (Johnson & Tweedie, 2010; Griffith & Olson, 1992). This will facilitate them to be able to differentiate both their first language and second language sound systems and learn to read from texts in the second language. In addition, the knowledge of phonological awareness is not only useful for pupils during the initial stages of learning, but also after they have become proficient readers (Biedroń, & Szczepaniak, 2012). The explicit instruction on phonological awareness will prepare and equip the pupils to be proficient enough to read independently and become lifelong readers.

However, even though phonological awareness has its benefits, research has also shown how it only helps in terms of fluency and accuracy but not with comprehension of the texts (Ehri *et al.*, 2001). This is because, phonological awareness is the ability to manipulate sounds and words metalinguistically even without knowing its meaning. Besides, according to Dixon, Zhao, and Joshi (2010), differences between phoneme and grapheme relationship between languages can cause difficulties for second language learners to learn the language. These differences will actually confuse second language learners who have just started learning a second language. Besides, not all vocabularies in English language can be encoded and decoded by using phonological awareness (Dixon *et al.*, 2010) which increases the complexity of the language to second language pupils. Even with phonological awareness, pupils may still be unable to apply the skills that they possess when encountering specific vocabularies which might cause confusion to them.

2.3   LINUS 2.0 Bahasa Inggeris (LBI) programme

LINUS was first introduced in 2012. Due to its success in reducing the number of pupils who did not master literacy in Mathematic and Bahasa Malaysia, LINUS Bahasa Inggeris or LBI followed suit and was introduced in 2013 to facilitate English Language literacy among learners. The aims are to help every student to possess at least basic literacy skills and to avoid any of them from being left behind in their learning in order for them to be able to catch up with the rest of the mainstream (Menteri J. P., 2011). According to the Education Ministry's Curriculum Development Division Deputy Director (Humanities), Shamsuri Sujak, this programme is also known as an early intervention programme, which focuses on improving the quality of remedial English classes teaching and learning (Nasir, 2014). This programme aims to help teachers in making sure that their lessons will be able to help the identified remedial learners. Pupils who do not pass the LINUS 2.0 screening tests will be identified as either LINUS Tegar or remedial pupils. The LINUS pupils will receive the same lessons as their mainstream peers but with extra attention. For example, the pupils will receive English Literacy Pupil's Module, while the teachers who conduct the classes will need to attend courses on remedial teaching and are supplied with English Literacy Teacher's Module (Sujak, cited in

Nasir, 2014). The selected pupils will be receiving the same lessons as their fellow mainstream peers alongside extra support focusing on LBI.

2.4   Teachers' Readiness in Teaching Phonological Awareness and Conducting LBI Programme

Most teachers gain their first-hand knowledge of phonological awareness by attending in-service courses or from what they learned during pre-service training. However, not all possess adequate information regarding this. According to Hadzir *et al.* (2016), teachers are not provided with ample time to prepare themselves before conducting the programme during the first year. Another research revealed that the teachers involved requested to be given extra support and guidance as they believe their knowledge of the language is not enough for them to conduct this programme (Azman, 2016). The teachers also claimed that the courses they attended did not provide them with sufficient knowledge to conduct the programme, especially, in relation to phonological awareness. Apart from the teachers, it was discovered that the trainers who conducted the training sessions too did not possess enough knowledge to guide the teachers (Bokhari *et al.*, 2015). These factors led to the lack of knowledge in teachers which in turn affected the dissemination of knowledge to the pupils. Tchoshanov (2011) stressed on the importance of teachers' strong content knowledge on pupils' education development as teachers are the learners' first source of knowledge. Hence, without enough preparation, it will be almost impossible for teachers to impart the knowledge to the learners. Besides, teachers' belief and knowledge will be reflected in their teaching practice (Zohar, 2006).

2.5   Challenges Faced by Teachers Involved in LINUS 2.0 Bahasa Inggeris (LBI) Programme

Conducting a new and unfamiliar programme is not easy especially when the huge responsibility of ensuring its success is in our hands. One of the challenges raised by the teachers is related to mixed-ability classrooms. Most teachers did not have the background knowledge in conducting remedial lessons (Hadzir *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, the Ministry of Education authorities should look into this matter more seriously in order to ensure the success of this programme. Another obstacle raised by teachers is that the LINUS Tegar and remedial pupils need to receive the same input as the mainstream learners. This means that they need to learn two different topics at the same time (Bokhari *et al*, 2016). This will not only confuse the pupils who are already known to face difficulties in learning the language, this will also make what is taught to them harder for them to digest and comprehend. Another challenge cited by the teachers is that, unlike any other assessments, the screening allows teachers to provide guidance to the pupils to answer their task. However, most teachers claimed that they did not have enough time to provide sufficient assistance for their pupils as there are time constraints when conducting the screening (Hadzir *et al.*, 2016). In addition, some teachers also claimed that it is too time-consuming for them to use the English periods for both conducting the lesson and screening the pupils for their reading and writing (Hadzir *et al.*, 2016).

Due to these challenges voiced out by the teachers, this research was conducted in order to investigate how ready the teachers are in implementing the LINUS 2.0 programme and what the challenges are they facing.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This research used a mixed-method research design. Mixed method is a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods and it is believed that the data gathered from both methods will enable researchers to have a better understanding of the topic area compared to data collected from one single method only (Creswell, 2012). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) stated that through the mixed-method design, a researcher will be able to apply various positive sides of research approaches in order to provide an in-depth discussion of the topic highlighted. Besides, this research also employed the embedded mixed method design. Through this design, the data can be collected by the researcher either sequentially or simultaneously, depending on the significance of the data collection and its purpose (Creswell, 2012). The data are analyzed to provide rich insights into the issues at stake.

3.2 Participants

Thirty-eight teachers from around Johor Bahru who have been involved in conducting the LBI programme were selected as participants of the research. Subsequently, 7 local teachers out of these 38 teachers and one native-speaking Australian female teacher who is teaching EFL pupils were also interviewed. It was felt that the native-speaking English teacher needed to be included in the study so as to gain insights into how a native user of the language feels his language needs to be taught to learners of the language.

3.3 Research Instrument

Three research instruments were used in this study to gather data in response to the research objectives. They are a questionnaire, the LBI programme screening results and structured interviews. The questionnaire comprised two parts; the first of which was adapted from Lewis' (2008) 'Teachers' Perceptions Survey and Linguistic Knowledge Assessment' to identify the teachers' knowledge of phonological awareness and the second part which was adapted from Sekel's (2003) 'Teacher Survey' and 'Phonological Awareness Survey' which aimed at discovering the teachers' level of readiness in teaching phonological awareness.

The second research instrument is the learners' LBI programme screening results. The results were based on the first and second LBI screening instruments from year 2015 to 2017 for Year 1 until Year 3 learners who participated in the LINUS 2.0 programme. These LBI results were collected from one of the schools in Johor Bahru, with the consent of the school administration.

In addition, audio recorded semi-structured interviews were conducted with a native-speaking Australian EFL teacher and 7 teachers who were selected from among those who participated in the questionnaires. Semi-structured questions were posed to the respondents to discover their views towards the teaching of phonological awareness to young ESL pupils.

The data from the questionnaires which were on teachers' knowledge of phonological awareness and teachers' readiness for teaching phonological awareness were analyzed statistically, by calculating

the means, modes and standard deviations for each item in the questionnaire. The data from the the first and second LBI screenings from year 2015 to 2017 were processed by calculating the percentages of pupils who passed each screening. As for the interviews, the respondents' responses were transcribed line by line and then coded by using thematic coding. This was done to discover the frequency of each aspect of the themes that surfaced during the interviews.

4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section presents the findings on the readiness of teachers in using the Phonological Awareness technique with the learners based on the questionnaires, the effectiveness of the programme based on the LINUS 2.0 screening results, and the teachers' views towards phonological awareness and challenges that the teachers faced while conducting the programme based on the semi-structured interviews.

Teachers' readiness are reflected by the teachers' level of phonological knowledge as well as their level of pedagogical knowledge and techniques that they use in implementing phonological awareness in the classroom. Data on these two aspects were gathered through a short questionnaire that was conducted online by using the Google form. The findings revealed that almost all of the teachers have undergone courses on the subject matter of phonological awareness either during their studies at college (86.5%), or during their teaching career (79.4%). Besides, they were not just taught and trained about phonological awareness, but they were also trained on the pedagogical aspects of phonological awareness either during the pre-service teachers' training programmes or during the in-service courses which they attended. The skills that they were provided training on include how to assess phonological awareness skills (70.3%) and how to provide remediation for learners with low phonological awareness skills (70.3%). Most participants also agreed that the courses that they received during college (79.4%) and during their teaching career (82.8%) helped them to conduct the LINUS 2.0 programme and teach phonological awareness in class.

The results indicated that the teachers have an acceptable level of phonological awareness and pedagogical knowledge regarding this matter. Out of 38 teachers, 14 were able to answer all 6 questions correctly, 14 teachers answered 5 questions right, 7 answered 4 questions right and 3 teachers answered 3 questions correctly. According to Stronge (2007), one of the main qualities of an effective teacher is his expertise in the subject matter. This is to ensure that the class is always in control and the lessons taught can be conducted efficiently. These results actually contradicted past research (Hadzir *et al*., 2016; Bokhari *et al*., 2015) which claimed that English language teachers who conduct the LINUS programme do not possess enough knowledge and are not provided with sufficient training to conduct the programme. This discrepancy in the findingsbetween earlier studies and this particular study is most likely due to the number of participants involved in the studies. The previous studies were qualitative studies with both having only two participants each while this study is a mixed method research with 38 participants participating in the questionnaire. According to Newman and McNeil (1998), larger samples always hold more benefits compared to those with much smaller

sizes. Besides, a larger sample size is also more valid to represent the population compared to a much smaller sample (Singh, 2007). Data inaccuracy increases as the sample size decreases.

The screening results for the LINUS 2.0 LBI programme from 2015 to 2017 revealed that the percentage of learners who passed the screening test increased from the first screening to the second screening. In 2015, the percentage of passes increased from 38.89% to 86.11% for Year 1 learners, from 79.49% to 90% for Year 2 learners and from 94.29% to 97.30% for Year 3 learners. In 2016, the percentage of passes increased from 45% to 77.5% for Year 1 learners, and increased from 83.33% to 91.67% for Year 2 learners. In 2017, the percentage of pupils who passed also increased from 40.54% during the first screening to 69.44% during the second screening for Year 1 learners, increased from 81.57% to 83.78% for Year 2 learners and from 91.89% to 97.22% for Year 3 learners.

These results proved that the learners' phonological awareness increased the most among Year 1 learners who were mostly beginner English Language learners. Among Year 2 and Year 3 learners, an increase in their phonological awareness is still observed although the percentages in increased performance tend to become smaller as the learners move from Year 1 to Year 3, due to the learners' increased familiarity with the sound system of the language. These screening results in general indicate that teaching the learners phonological awareness does lead to improved abilities in recognizing the sound system.

These results prove that teacher readiness is crucial in ensuring that what teachers deliver to the learners can be applied by the learners. Teacher readiness is important as their abilities and skills to connect and convey the knowledge of the subject matter that they possess will result in their learners' ability to practise what is being taught to them (Miller, 2014). The significant improvement in the learners' English Language performance based on the first and second screening results of the learners of Year 1 to Year 3, is evidence of the achievement of this programme as outlined by the government. The aims of this programme as set by the government are to provide opportunities to teachers and school administrators to plan, collect, and analyze pupils' literacy development in order to provide the most suitable pedagogical approach that can accommodate both the pupils' needs and the outcome set by the government (Luyee, Roselan, Anwardeen, & Mohd Mustapha, 2015). Consequently, the results from the screenings will be able to help the teachers to re-evaluate what they had taught since the beginning of the year until the end, and reflect on its effect on pupils' English literacy performance.

The teachers reportedly faced several challenges in the effort to implement the LINUS programme. It was earlier hypothesized that the main challenges faced by the respondents would be the mixed-ability classes and the syllabus used for the LINUS learners which is not synchronized with the mainstream syllabus. However, the respondents reported other challenges which are the number of pupils in the class, pupils' previous knowledge, the complicated sound system, and the interference of the learners' mother tongue.

One teacher commented that the number of pupils in a class would affect the teachers' way of teaching. As echoed by previous researchers (Bokhari *et al.*, 2015; Hadzir *et al.*, 2016), class size is one of the important factors that affect the lessons taking place especially for a mixed-ability class. According to Nye, Hedges, and Konstantopoulos (2000) class size plays an important role in pupils' accomplishment as small-sized classes allow for a more personal and focused lesson compared to bigger-sized classes. This can help to avoid any pupils from being left behind.

Nonetheless, Blatchford, Basset, Goldstein, and Martin (2003) concluded in their research that, even though a much smaller class size provides many benefits to the learners especially in terms of aids, support, and assistance from teachers to the pupils, pupils' attainment and development also depend on the teachers as well. Teachers' ability to modify and accommodate to their teaching situations play a bigger part in the pupils' development. Teachers' positive quality especially in relation to their ability to adapt to any situation is as important as class size (Bruhwiler and Blaatchford, 2011).

Two respondents of the study were of the view that it is important for pupils to have at least basic knowledge of phonological awareness in order for them to be able to cope with the rest of the class.These teachers revealed that this lack of basic phonological awareness among the learners was one of the difficulties that they needed to face and this issue is aggravated especially when these learners are placed in a mixed-ability classroom. Basic foundation and exposure to phonological awareness skills and knowledge are important in order for the pupils to not be left behind in a big classroom with mixed ability pupils. While the rest of the class gain more confidence in their learning, the huge gap between the high and low-achievers might cause the latter to have lower academic self-concept compared to their better peers (Liem, Marsh *et al*, 2013). Marsh (2006) stated that one of the effects of the huge gap between the pupils is that it might affect the motivation of the weaker learners if they were to see other pupils performing better and this might have a negative effect on their self concept.

The findings also indicated that this situation is probably caused by the lack of support from home wherein the pupils did not receive sufficient support from their parents or guardian. Past research have shown that parents' involvement in pupils' learning process especially in terms of support from home will result in higher academic achievement (Harris & Goodall, 2008; DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, and Duchane, 2007). According to Harris and Goodall (2008) and DePlanty *et al*. (2007), both parents' involvement in school activities and at home were important, however, parents' participation in the process of learning at home was more beneficial to learners as it affects their learning performance. Therefore, parents' involvement is important in making sure that the pupils receive adequate background knowledge especially before they enter the primary school in order for them to be able to keep up with the rest of the pupils, and not be left behind, while at the same time possessing positive self concept towards learning. .

In addition, it was also discovered that that most of the teachers perceived the sound system to be complicated as the sound system has in it, similar sounds spelled with different letters, diphthongs, and silent letters. These caused confusion to the pupils and hindered their learning process. The challenges that the pupils face in instilling phonological awareness actually cause problems to the teachers. The complicated sound system is a common problem among the learners, especially among the LINUS pupils. Three out of the seven teachers who were interviewed attribute this challenge to teach the phonological awareness technique to the learners to the interference from the learners' mother tongue which further complicates the language learning process due to the English Language sound system which is already complicated in the first place. These challenges are mainly due to the nature of the English language which is more complex compared to other languages. According to Dixon, Zhao, and Joshi (2010), the English language is more complex compared to other languages as not all vocabularies in this language can be decoded by using phonological rules. Therefore, teachers

should be aware about these differences in order to understand and prepare themselves for the issues that might transpire while teaching English literacy.

With regard to the views of the native English language speaker who participated in this study, the native speaker teacher has mixed views regarding this issue as according to her, phonological awareness is a complex skill as it actually depends on the stress and tone used by the speakers who articulate the words. This native speaker is of the view that ESL teachers should be focussing more on developing the pupils' vocabulary knowledge instead of on the sounds of each word. This is in line with the view of cognitive linguists who uphold the belief that form cannot stand alone without meaning and that one must be developed alongside the other (Holme, 2012). Besides, according to Silverman, Barber, Doyle, and Templeton (2016), while pupils will be able to catch up with phonological awareness skills, vocabulary knowledge can cause the pupils to really be left behind in their learning. Hence, the native speaker proposes that English language teachers focus on the teaching of vocabulary rather than phonology.

On the other hand, the local teachers view phonological awareness as a very useful skill that the pupils should equip themselves with especially during the early stages of learning the English Language. To them, phonological awareness does not only assist the pupils who did not have any basic knowledge to use the language, but it also helped to improve the pupils' performance in the English literacy. This view is supported by other researchers (Snider, 2007; Griffith & Olson, 1992; Johnson & Tweedie, 2010) who belief in the importance of phonological awareness in developing pupils' ability in English literacy especially during the initial stages of learning. Other researchers also belief that this skill is not only useful during the preliminary stage, but also useful for the pupils when learning other types of skill such as word recognition (Bhat, Griffin, & Sindelar, 2003). Hence, for the local teachers, phonological awareness does pose certain benefits to the pupils as it helps them to improve their English literacy skills.

However, the teachers also believe that phonological awareness alone is not enough to help the pupils survive in the English literacy world. This sentiment was also shared by the native speaker who views the English Language to be a complicated language and that phonological awareness alone will not be sufficient to help them in learning English language (Atwill *et al.* 2007; Ehri *et al.* 2001; Fukkink *et al.* 2005; and Dixon *et al.* 2010. As suggested by Dixon *et al.* (2010), teachers should be prepared to teach and equip their pupils with other language skills as not all English vocabularies can be easily decoded through phonological awareness.

Besides, by not preparing them with other reading skills, the pupils will face difficulties when they encounter other vocabularies that are not decodable by using phonological awareness rules (Atwill *et al.*, 2007). The local teachers suggest using memorization for words that cannot be decoded especially for 'sight words' or 'high frequency words'. Therefore, it is important for teachers to try to explain to the pupils that not all words can be decoded. It was also felt that teachers need to comprehend the issues behind the pupils' ability or inability to learn phonological awareness in the first place. According to Dixon *et al.* (2010) and Chan and Li (2000) the differences between pupils' first and second languages will affect their language development. Hence, it is first of all important to understand the issues faced by language learners.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

As this research has demonstrated, English Language teachers have an acceptable level of phonological awareness and pedagogical knowledge in instilling phonological awareness in their learners. They however face several challenges in teaching the learners how to acquire phonological awareness. Among the challenges faced by these teachers are large-sized classes, the LINUS syllabus which is different from the mainstream syllabus, the complexity of the English language sound system and the interference from the learners' mother tongue and the English Language. Nevertheless, these challenges did not stop the teachers from helping to educate and equip their pupils with phonological awareness skills. In contrast to the native speaker's perspective regarding this issue, local teachers belief that phonological awareness does bring several benefits to their pupils. It helps the pupils to improve their English performance and their abilities to read and write in the language. However, similar to the native-speaking teacher's opinion on these issues, the local teachers too feel that phonological awareness skills alone is inadequate to improve the pupils' performance in English literacy. Perhaps ESL teachers can take heed from the native speaking teacher's recommendations for ESL teachers to focus more on developing the weak pupils' vocabulary knowledge instead of on the sounds of each word as the sound system of the English Language is known to be a complex system that causes confusion to beginner learners of English.

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