

ESL SIX-YEAR-OLD RESPONSE PATTERNS IN EARLY READING

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Abstrak

Kajian kebolehan membaca di kalangan penutur Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa kedua telah mendapat tempat dikalangan penyelidik kuantitatif. Walaubagaimana pun, kajian kualitatif dari aspek kebolehan awal membaca tidak mendapat tempat sewajarnya. Justeru, tujuan kajian kualitatif ini bertujuan untuk melihat pola jawapan kanak-kanak enam tahun di dalam ujian menyebut perkataan yang direka dan bacaan teks berdasarkan senarai semak DIBELS. Peserta kajian terdiri daripada 25 orang kanak-kanak enam tahun dari pra-sekolah kerajaan di Lembah Klang. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan pola jawapan yang berkaitan dengan kesalahan didalam huruf-huruf konsonan dan vokal, menukar perkataan yang direka kepada perkataan sebenar, menggunakan strategi penyahkodan dan seringkali meninggalkan sebutan beberapa abjad dan perkataan. Oleh itu, dicadangkan pendidik untuk mengenal pasti kelemahan kanak-kanak ini serta mencari kaedah untuk memastikan kejayaan didalam peringkat awal membaca di kalangan kanak-kanak berusia enam tahun penutur Bahasa Inggeris.

Kata kunci: pola jawapan, kanak-kanak penutur Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua, perkataan yang direka, bacaan lisan, peringkat awal membaca

*Abstract*

*The ability to read amongst six-year-old non-native speakers of English has led to various studies especially in the quantitative paradigm. The studies in the qualitative aspects of early reading are often overlooked. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the response patterns made by six-year-old ESL children in reading nonsense word and oral reading text based on DIBELS checklist. The participants of this study are 25 six-year-old children from a government preschool in the Klang Valley. The results of this study provided an insight into the responses that the six-year-old children gave when reading nonsense word and oral reading text. The majority of the participants portrayed responses which were related to miscues in consonant and vowel sounds, turning nonsense words into real words, uses decoding strategies and frequently omit words or letters. Therefore, it is recommended that educators to be aware of the children's inabilities and find measures to ensure successful early reading amongst six-year-old ESL children.*

*Keywords: response patterns, ESL children, nonsense word, oral reading, early reading*

A child's achievement in school and in later life depends on his or her ability to read. The advantages of early reading can contribute to a better success in formal reading, greater ability to read and instilling more interest in reading among children (Sparks, Patton, & Murdoch, 2014). Cooper, Moore, Powers, Cleveland, and Greenberg (2014) indicate in their findings that children who are very strong early

readers performed well in their fifth-grade academic performance. The Department for Education UK has listed seven reasons in their report why reading matters and among the reasons being; it is important to ensure every child can read well, the gap those with and without literacy is established in early years, poor literacy can restrain adult lives and, reading is one of life's pleasure and enjoyment hence, every child should have that opportunity (DfE, 2015). Temple, Ogle, Crawford & Freppon (2005) defined reading as an act of getting meaning from a written text and listed word recognition, phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency and reading comprehension as the components of reading ability.

Reading among preschool children has gained tremendous interest among researchers. The area of interests varied from instruction to early literacy, elements that promote reading success to elements that have better connection in promoting reading success (Applegate, Applegate, & Modla, 2009; Xue & Meisels, 2004). Ham, Stoolmiller, & Chard (2008) analysed on the relationship between measures of alphabetic principle, nonsense word fluency, fluency with connected text and oral reading fluency across first grade and found that there were linear relationships across the measures. Their findings stated that the development of nonsense word fluency was related to the development of oral reading fluency and which predict the future reading proficiency among learners.

In the Malaysian context, some preschool children who are second language learners of English (ESL) can read well in the language. However, some ESL preschool children still struggle to read in the English language despite its position as the second language in Malaysia (Norlida Ahmad, Munirah Ghazali, Anna Christina Abdullah & Amir Yazid Ah, 2004) and; despite it is being widely-used by the society. Kamarudin, Hussain, Applegate and Yasin's (2018) ethnographic research has found that early exposure as one of the reasons behind the low literacy level among Malaysian preschool children. For many, the exposure to the language during their early years is not immense since most children come from non-English speaking families. These children only learn English when they have formal schooling in preschools at the age of five or six.

### **Problem Statement**

Reading problems are different from one child to another. Research has shown that lower-level skills facilitate in learning to read and the overall development among the second language reading students (Kato, 2012) and teaching preschool children letter-sound association has shown an increase in their ability in reading (Wolf, 2016). The inability to read among ESL preschool children may also be associated with the teaching approach employed by preschools and their inability to introduce the low-level skills to these ESL preschool children. In order to learn to read, the two skills involved are crucial in developing their reading ability. The lower-level skill involves the phoneme, segmenting and blending and, the higher-level skills involve comprehension, inference and evaluation. Teaching these early readers, the lower-level skills first in a systematic approach will facilitate them in better understanding on how to read.

Acquiring the knowledge in low level skill at an early stage would determine ESL preschool children's reading development (Ray & Smith, 2010) as well as predicting reading skills such as fluency and comprehension in their later grades (Schaughency, Suggate & Reese, 2017). In order to develop early reading ability amongst preschool children, the first low level skill that preschool children should master is sounds and letters associations. Preschool children need to know that there are predictable relationships between sounds and letters. Unfortunately, many ESL preschool children still struggle to automatically identify the letters of the alphabets and make connections between the letters and the sounds (Dilorenzo et al., 2011). Children who have difficulties at this initial stage are predicted to have some difficulties in reading later, both in isolated words and connected text (Dilorenzo, et al., 2011) and that skills in decoding are related to reading fluency (Turna, & Guldenoglu, 2019). This is in line with what some scholars have stressed that is the alphabetic skill is significant in reading development (Molfese et al., 2011). The ability to associate sounds and letters allows them to apply these relationships to both familiar and unfamiliar words.

In the Malaysian context, studies on the response patterns in early reading focusing on nonsense words and oral reading is scarce. Previous study using quantitative approach was carried out on Malaysian

rural primary school students and the findings showed that greater gains in sounds fluency, basic reading, number awareness, nonsense words and simple writing test was found amongst students who received direct phonemic awareness tuition as compared to those who only attended regular English language classes (Johnson & Tweedie, 2010). Therefore, it is important to look into the qualitative aspects of early reading problems among preschool children to really tackle the issues of early reading. This study contributes to the knowledge base by investigating the response patterns in reading nonsense word and oral reading among ESL preschool children.

### **Research Objectives**

Based on the purpose of the study, the specific objectives of this study are:

1. to identify the response patterns in reading nonsense word among preschool children.
2. to identify the response patterns in oral reading among preschool children.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the response patterns in reading nonsense word among preschool children?
2. What are the response patterns in oral reading among preschool children?

### **Literature Review**

Reading is one of the important skills that language learners need to master because it is the fundamental skill in one's life during their school years and throughout their life (Sabatini, O'reilly & Doorey, 2018). Without adequate reading and comprehension skills, one's life's opportunities will be abridged (Sabatini et al., 2018). The terms reading skill, reading strategies or reading ability are used interchangeably. Hudson (2007) listed the overlapping terms and concepts of skills, strategies and ability which were used variably by the scholars in the applied linguistics and language literature when discussing reading. Research in reading amongst children addressed issues pertaining to the process of children learning to read and the stages children had to go through in order to become mature readers (Hudson, 2007).

Reading is one of the topics widely researched in education (Musti-rao & Cartledge, 2007) and several reviews on reading research were commissioned by governments (Rowe & National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy Australia, 2005; National Reading Panel, 2000; Rose, 2005). National Reading Panel (2000), one of the United States' governments' commissioned reviews, has reviewed hundreds of researches in reading in order to find the literacy skills that can enhance learning to read. The five components identified as effective reading instruction are phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). Several other studies examined the factors that influence success in reading (Rupley, 2009; Yopp & Yopp, 2000) and some research provided reading programmes or approaches designed to promote reading at all levels and with either phonics approach or whole language approach such as Head Start, Orton-Gillingham and reading their way (Donat, 2006; Savage, 2007; Washington & Bailey, 1995).

Reading failures are always connected to low socioeconomic status, low phonological awareness (Cavanaugh, et al., 2004; Koutsoftas, et al., 2009; Musti-rao & Cartledge, 2007) and language learners or language minority group (Vadasy & Sanders, 2010). Vadasy and Sanders' (2010) findings on the performance of low minority English learners on reading skills are at par with the native English-speaking children who underwent the same literacy instructions in phonological and phonics skills.

Mcgeown, Johnston, and Medford (2012) did a study on whether approaches of reading influence the skills children employ when they learn to read. This study examined the cognitive skills related to early reading development when taught using different types of instruction. Seventy-nine children were taught to read using an eclectic approach and analytic phonics, or synthetic phonics approach which the former

consisted of sight-word learning, guessing from context and, the later consisted of teaching sound and blending letters of unfamiliar words. The results revealed that differences in the skills that support children's word reading based on their reading instruction approach. The pre-test letter knowledge, vocabulary and rhyming skills for the eclectic group projected later reading ability. The letter knowledge, phonemic awareness and memory span predicted later reading skill for the synthetic phonics group. The results suggested that different cognitive skills were applied when children were taught using different word recognition strategies.

There are three main theories that explain the nature of learning to read. They are; the traditional theory which encompasses the bottom-up approach; the cognitive theory that focuses on the top-down approach; and thirdly, the metacognitive theory which is based on the control and manipulation that a reader has in comprehending a text. Although reading theories have undergone a paradigm shift, each of the theories is still relevant in reading research to date.

In the traditional view of reading, novice readers acquire a set of hierarchy of sub-skills that subsequently build toward comprehension. Having mastered all these sub-skills, readers are viewed as experts who are able to comprehend what they read. According to Nunan (2003), reading in this view is decoding a series of written symbols before deriving to making sense of the reading text. Nunan (2003) referred to this process as the bottom-up view of reading. The bottom-up approach to reading was influenced by the behaviourist psychology of the 1950 which claimed that learning was based on habit formation. McCarthy (2004) called the view as 'outside-in' which perceive that meaning exists in the printed page and then being interpreted by the reader.

The second theory of reading is the cognitive view. The cognitively based views of reading comprehension emphasize the interactive nature of reading and the constructive nature of comprehension. In other words, readers use two skills; their knowledge of language and the subject matter to make prediction of the text. According to Nunan (2005), the psycholinguistic model of reading and the top-down model are in agreement. The schema theory also fits within this cognitive theory. Rumelhart (2005) stated that if the schemata are incomplete, problems will occur in processing and understanding the reading text.

The third theory in reading is the metacognitive view which involves thinking about what one is doing while reading. Klein et al. (2004) stated that readers from the metacognitive view attempted reading in these steps: identify the purpose of reading and form of text before reading itself; think about the general features of the text; project the author's purpose for writing; read and lastly make continuous predictions of the text while reading it. Metacognitive strategies involve both knowledge about oneself and knowledge on strategies to solve problems. Many researchers believe that the development of metacognition is at a later age, and that young children have less of this knowledge than older ones (Myres & Paris, 1978).

However, learning to read is not an easy task. Kraayenoord (2010) asserts that active and strategic notion of reading involves a complex and multifaceted ability. Justification, knowledge, experience and purpose of the reader as well as the content and features of the text influence reading comprehension. However, Boulware-Gooden, Carreker, Thornhill and Joshi (2007) once emphasized that the basic of learning to read involves learning skills of print awareness, word recognition and decoding. Any lack in these components mentioned could hamper comprehension.

The simple view of reading proposed by Hoover and Gough (1990) asserts that reading comprehension is the product of two key elements which are word reading (decoding) skills and linguistic comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990). In this simple view, Hoover and Gough (1990) mentioned that what distinguishes reading is that the reader is exercising reading abilities by responding and decoding the graphic shapes into linguistic forms.

Hoover and Gough (1990) mentioned that for the Simple View of Reading, decoding is defined as simply efficient word recognition. However, they stated that for beginner readers, decoding should be phonologically based and that assessing decoding to the beginner readers should be at their ability to

pronounce isolated pseudowords. In the Simple View of Reading, linguistic comprehension is the ability to take lexical information and derive sentence and discourse interpretation (Hoover & Gough, 1990). Therefore, it is imperative that a measure of linguistic comprehension assesses the ability to understand language.

The simple view holds the belief that the complexities of reading process can be divided into two parts which are of equal importance. The simple view does not reduce reading to decoding alone but ascertain that reading involves the full set of linguistic skills. Hence, emphasizing that decoding without the presence of the linguistic skills is not reading (Hoover & Gough, 1990). Likewise, the simple view holds the belief that decoding is of central importance in reading, without it, linguistic comprehension is meaningless.

Various studies were conducted to test the simple view of reading after it was introduced by Hoover and Gough (Bast & Reitsma, 1998; Juel, 1988). Studies conducted have shown the role of decoding in relation to reading comprehension. Their findings have shown that the role of decoding is more prominent for beginning readers compared to proficient readers. Study conducted by Verhoeven and van Leeuwe (2012) on the Dutch learning English Language also supported Hoover and Gough's Simple View of Reading. The development of reading comprehension is closely related to the development of decoding skills as well as listening comprehension skills. From researches conducted on Simple View of Reading, it can be concluded that the Simple View of Reading provides a framework not only for native language reading comprehension but also the second language learners' reading comprehension. The simple view of reading has provided a very valuable framework for the study of reading (Catts, et al, 2015).

Cadime et al., (2016) findings from their study indicate that, similar to what has been found for other orthographies, the simple view of reading is a valid framework to explain variability in reading comprehension in European Portuguese. In addition, any interventions which aims at increasing reading comprehension levels should focus on word recognition, fluency, and, especially, listening comprehension. The researchers further emphasize that oral reading fluency has the role of a mediator in the relationship between word recognition and reading comprehension, thus having an important role in reading.

The traditional bottom-up approach can be depicted in Carroll's (1964) definition of reading where it is an activity of reconstructing a spoken message from a printed text and making meaning from it. The first theory based on the bottom-up approach which was called 'one second of reading' was proposed by Gough in 1972 (Hudson, 2007). Gough describes how readers pass through a reading process where one scans the series of letters one by one and decode them into phonemic units. The second theory based on the bottom-up processing is the initial framework proposed by LaBerge and Samuels (1974). The idea they brought forward is on automaticity in reading skills beginning from letter identification to comprehending the text.

In 1980, Stanovich pointed that bottom-up approach is hierarchical, indicating that it is necessary for students to master the lower-level skills before the introduction of higher-level skills. This approach provided early instruction in learning the alphabets and the relationship between letters and sounds as well as reading connected text. Similarly, Hudson (1998) highlighted that bottom-up approach which focuses on cognitive information processing assumes that a reader construct meaning from letters, words, phrases, clauses and sentences. Braunger and Lewis (2006) hold a similar view that a bottom-up approach to reading is the ability to sound out and identify the meaning of words which will help in understanding sentences and then paragraphs.

The bottom-up processing in reading is associated with the phonics approach in teaching beginning reading. The bottom-up approach views reading start from understanding the language from alphabets, sound-letter association and finally proceed to comprehension. This view is in line with phonics approach which refers to an approach which teaches the learners the relationships between alphabets and sounds and how to use this system to produce words (Adams, 1990).

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## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study is situated within the qualitative paradigm. The qualitative method was chosen in order to study the response patterns in the early reading tests namely in reading nonsense word and oral reading tests among preschool children. The rationale for choosing this method is due to its scarce research in looking into the qualitative aspect of early reading among preschool children.

### **Research Participants**

Research participants involved in this study were 22 children aged six years old. The subjects were chosen from one ethnic group, Malay. The subjects were selected from one preschool in the Klang Valley. The ethics of doing research with children were adhered to in this study since participants were six years old. For this study parental consent was obtained from the children's parents before the research was conducted.

The demographic data gathered from the parents revealed that the majority of the family were middle-class families. The data also revealed that English was not the main language and their exposure to the language was from English programmes on television.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

The qualitative data was obtained through the audio recorded during the assessments of Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) and General DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency (DORF) tests from DIBELS Next. The data were analysed by looking at the response patterns from both tests as listed in the DIBELS Next Benchmark Assessment Scoring Booklet.

The response patterns list from the DIBELS Next Benchmark instrument was used as a way of gaining insight into the response patterns associated with reading. The response patterns were based on the DIBELS Next list of response patterns for NWF and general DORF response patterns. The list of response patterns listed in the DIBELS Next for NWF were 10 patterns which are: says correct sounds out of order (sound-by-sound); makes random error; says correct sounds, does not recode; says correct sounds, recodes out of order; says correct sounds, recodes with incorrect sound(s); says correct sounds and correctly

recodes; doesn't track correctly; tries to turn nonsense words into real words; makes consistent errors on specific letter sound(s); and other responses not listed here. For general ORF, the list of response patterns this study analysed were 13 patterns and the list were: reads with appropriate phrasing, intonation/expression and observed punctuation; self-corrects/monitors meaning; shows automaticity on re-read words; uses effective decoding strategies; errors preserve passage meaning; errors violate passage meaning; frequently omits words or letters; frequently add words or letters; frequent errors on sight words; frequent errors on phonetically regular words; frequent errors on phonetically irregular words; skips lines and other responses not listed here.

The recordings were performed with the consent of the children and they were informed they were being recorded. The tests of this study were administered individually by two assessors. The assessors then transcribed the recordings and evaluate the response patterns made by the children based on the list of response patterns mentioned above. The data from the audio recording were analysed using a descriptive method.

### **Research Findings**

The findings from this study were based on the response patterns which was based on the list in the DIBELS Next Scoring booklet as listed in the above section for both Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) and General DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency (DORF) tests.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The analyses for nonsense word test were based on the transcribed data of the audio recordings and the response patterns are categorised into the following aspects: saying out correct sounds out of order, random miscue, says correct sounds but does not recode, says correct sounds but recodes out of order, says correct sounds but recodes with incorrect sounds, says correct sounds and correctly recodes, does not track correctly, attempts to turn nonsense words into real words, makes consistent miscue on specific letter sounds and others, which is for the response patterns not listed above. The analysis of the findings revealed that the children's response patterns were random miscues on vowels and consonants, inability to track consistently and display of silence.

The response patterns observed were mostly on the miscues made by the children, which were on the consonant and vowel sounds. In this regard, the children seem to randomly replace the consonant sounds /b/, /d/, /h/, /k/, /s/, /t/ and /n/ with other sounds like /d/, /dz/ and /t/. A few random miscues were made by the children for the word 'hej' which was the second word listed in the test. The word 'hej' was said out as /dʒɜ:dʒ/ by Child 1 and /hæk/ by Child 2. Both children 3 and 6, said out the second consonant to represent the word 'hej' as /t/. Another instance, child 11 replaced the second consonant in the word 'hej' with /k/ and the second consonant in the word 'zos' with /z/. Child 20 also said out the first consonant in the word 'viz' as /z/.

Some miscues in saying out the vowels were also made by the children. The miscues in the vowel sounds suggest the interference from the first language, which occurred during the initial stage of this study. For instance, both children 3 and 5 said out the vowel in the word 'sab' as /ʌ/. This finding showed that the children did not have the ability to decode sounds and letters during the pre-test of the alphabetic principle. For example, child 11 made a vowel error in the word 'sab' by saying out the vowel sound as /ʌ/. These observations suggest that these children have the same level of ability in associating letters with sounds prior to the reading lessons.

Other common response patterns made by the children were their inability to track correctly, and the consistent miscues on specific letter sounds such as one-sound utterance, difficulties in reading and display of silence. The tendency for them to utter a single sound for every word listed and the difficulty in reading the list of words despite their effort in sounding out the words were evident in their responses. For example, children 4 and 8 were struggling to read, and they only uttered a single sound for every word they tried to read. A few other children were also silent when they were asked to read the words pointed at in the list

and were assisted by the assessors in reading the words from the list. However, child 11 was not able to say out any sounds for the words 'sab' and 'ut', and child 2 was silent when she was shown the word 'ut' and 'zos'. These children (14, 15, 16, 18, 19 and 21) either produced a single sound or remained silent when asked to read all the words during the one-minute test of NWF. Most of the children tended to struggle in reading the list of words in the test. For instance, child 18 uttered single sounds for all the words he read in the list: 'sab' was uttered as /a./, 'hej' was said out as /a./, 'ut' as /v./ . Whereas for the word 'zos', the child said out the first consonant sound /z./ of the word but was not able to say out the other letters in the word. These findings suggest that the children had problems in the association of letters and sounds before they are taught to read in English in the preschool.

The analysed data for the oral reading fluency test indicated several response patterns made by the children. In total, thirteen patterns in the reading fluency are listed but only six were present in the participants responses. The response patterns made by the children indicated that most of them tended to only produce one sound when they read the listed words prior to the English lesson in the preschool. Children 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10 and 11 only produced one-sound utterance for almost all the words that they had read. Nevertheless, this indicates that there were attempts to read the word list despite. However, Child 1 was able to read three sight words 'day', 'to' and 'go'; Child 2 was able to read more sight words 'was', 'had', 'over', 'fish' and 'Tim'. These results may be explained by the fact that some of them had reading experience at home.

Another highlight was that the response patterns made by some of the children showed some of them attempted to read sight words and simple decodable words. However, most of these children still made miscues by uttering a single-sound for the words read. Miscues were also made for words with consonant clusters and digraphs. A few children were also able to read sight words and simple decodable words despite a few attempts of only saying out the first consonant and vowel in a word. This could be due to other factors that could not be explained in this study.

The results from the qualitative analysis support the notion emphasised decades ago by Cruickshank (1977) that 'diagnosis must take second place to instruction, and must be made a tool of instruction, not an end in itself'. Children's problems in early reading should be one of the major focus in teaching them early reading. By looking into the aspects where bring problems to them would help educators to handle the early reading problems at an earlier stage. As a whole, the participants struggled in reading nonsense word and oral reading test from the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency (DORF). Therefore, it is evident that these are the problematic areas in early reading amongst preschool children which educators need to tackle.

Based on the findings from this study, it was evident that problems faced by these preschool children were in the areas of random miscues on vowels and consonants, inability to track consistently and display of silence for both nonsense word and oral reading tests. Hence, the result of a review done on error analysis which stressed that assessing children's errors made in any form of academic learning is needed in selecting and implementing interventions or approaches suitable for them (Mather & Wendling, 2017). It is suggested that errors made by second language learners of English should be the focus of educators prior to teaching these children to read and it was found that letter and sound associations should be the main focus in early reading programme.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this research support the idea that children's errors in early reading should be acknowledged and tackled before they begin their reading class. This further shows that it should be made a prerequisite to the teaching of early reading amongst six years old children. In addition, this study has given insights into the area of ESL reading literacy among young children, in that early reading needs to develop from the lower-level skills, namely the ability to know and associate sounds and letters, and oral reading fluency. The findings from this study have indicated that these reading skills are interrelated with one another and a success in accomplishing earlier skills will contribute to the mastery of a later skill.



It is recommended for future research to replicate this study. The sample size of this study was relatively small, which involved only 22 participants and furthermore the study was carried out at one preschool. The data and findings could be richer if a similar study is conducted using a bigger sample size and involving a few preschools. Future research could also diversify the subject by including all the major ethnic groups in Malaysia. Similarities and differences in their performance may provide better understanding of the possible issues in early reading ability among preschool children.

Further research should also consider the possibility of parents or family influence in early reading ability among preschool children. It will enable educators and researchers to find the best possible approach in ensuring our preschool children become proficient readers at an early age. It is hoped that better understanding of errors made by second language learners of English will contribute to them in having the ability in reading at an early age.

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