

# **Implementing the Teaching of Phonics in Malaysian Primary Schools**

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**Abstract:** The Standard-Based English Language Curriculum for Malaysian Primary Schools was introduced by the Malaysian Ministry of Education in 2011 beginning with the teaching of Year 1 pupils. The curriculum is modular in design comprising the Listening and Speaking, Reading, Writing, and Language Arts modules. An innovation introduced in the curriculum was the teaching of early reading skills using phonics as a method in the Reading Module. The aim of this study was to investigate whether the Year 1 English Language teachers participating in the study understood the innovation, the problems that they faced with regard to it and how they implemented it in their classrooms. A survey questionnaire was distributed to English Year 1 primary school teachers and case studies of selected teachers were conducted. The data were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings showed that the respondents rated themselves at varying degrees of understanding. The problems that they reported concerned the ways of teaching phonics, the lack of phonics knowledge and the lack of training provided to teach using the phonics strategy. The findings also revealed the different ways that the teachers taught phonics. There is a need for solutions to address the training needs of the teachers.

**Key words:** standard-based, phonics, innovation

## **INTRODUCTION**

Malaysia has undergone a change in the primary school curriculum with the implementation of the Standard-based Primary School Curriculum (KSSR) by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) beginning in 2011. Primary education in Malaysia is divided into two stages comprising of Stage One (Year 1, 2 and 3) and Stage Two (Year 4, 5 and 6). The design of the curriculum is modular and consists of four modules, which are the Listening and Speaking, Reading, Writing, and Language Arts modules for Year 1 and Year 2. The fifth module, Grammar module will be included when the pupils are in Year 3 (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2010). The

approach in implementing the new curriculum is underpinned by 6 principles which include back to basics; learning is fun, meaningful and purposeful; teaching is learner-centred; integration of salient new technologies; assessment for learning; and character-building infused.

Back to basics is the first and most important principle that guides the implementation of the curriculum in schools. It states the importance of pupils attaining a strong foundation of language skills through listening and speaking activities. Hence, the teaching of phonics is promoted to help pupils begin to read and acquire a good foundation in penmanship. The teaching of phonics include a strategy for helping children learn the sounds of language, how they correspond to letters, and how to use this knowledge in decoding words (Jones & Deterding, 2007). As the teaching of phonics is new to English teachers in Malaysia, it is appropriate that a study that focuses on the teaching of phonics for Year 1 pupils is carried out. The teaching of phonics is an innovation brought about in the curriculum to replace the whole language approach used for the teaching of reading skills in the old curriculum. This study aimed to investigate whether teachers understood the innovation and how they implemented the innovation.

The findings of the study would provide valuable insights whether teachers understood the innovation introduced in the curriculum, in particular on whether the teachers understood the implementation of teaching phonics and how they taught phonics in their English classrooms. As this study is part of a bigger study on teachers' understanding of the Standard-based Primary School curriculum which is still ongoing, this paper reports only on the teaching of phonics and how phonics teaching is carried out in the classrooms.

This paper presents the problem that motivated this study, the teaching of phonics contained in the reading module as stipulated by the curriculum for Year 1 pupils, the literature related to teaching of phonics, research questions posited, description of the methodology employed, findings of the study and the discussion that concludes the report.

## **TEACHING OF PHONICS IN THE READING MODULE FOR YEAR 1 PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

The teaching of phonics is stipulated in the Standard-based Curriculum for Primary Schools and was implemented in 2011 with Year 1 pupils. It is introduced in the reading module. The standard-based curriculum comprises two sets of standards which are content standards and learning standards. The content standards contain descriptions of what pupils should know and be able to perform and the learning standards indentify specific criteria or indicators of the quality of learning and achievement upon which each content standard is measured.

The content standards and learning standards for the Year 1 reading module are shown in the Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Year 1 Content and Learning Standards for Reading**

Content Standard	Learning Standard
2.1 By the end of the 6-year primary schooling, pupils will be able to apply knowledge of sounds of letters to recognise words in linear and non-linear texts.	2.1.1 Able to identify and distinguish the shapes of the letters in the alphabet. 2.1.2 Able to recognise and articulate initial, medial and the final sounds in single syllable words within given context. 2.1.3 Able to blend two to four phonemes into recognisable words and read them aloud. 2.1.4 Able to segment words into phonemes to spell.
2.2 By the end of the 6-year primary schooling, pupils will be able to demonstrate understanding of a variety of linear and non-linear texts in the form of print and non-print materials using a range of strategies to construct meaning.	2.2.1 Able to read and apply word recognition and word attack skills by matching words with: a) graphics b) spoken words 2.2.2 Able to read and understand phrases in linear and non-linear texts. 2.2.3 Able to read and understand sentences (3-5 words) in linear and non-linear texts with guidance. 2.2.4 Able to read a paragraph of 3-5 simple sentences. 2.2.5 Able to apply basic dictionary skills using picture dictionaries.
2.3 By the end of the 6-year primary schooling, pupils will be able to read independently for information and enjoyment.	2.3.1 Able to read simple texts with guidance: a) fiction b) non fiction

*Note: The content and learning standards for the Reading Module are labelled with the numeral 2 in the curriculum document.*

(Source: MOE, 2010)

Based on the content and learning standards stated in the Table 1, the teaching of phonics to the Year 1 primary pupils in Malaysia should be taught systematically by developing pupils' phonemic awareness and also through the methods of blending and segmenting.

The terms 'phonemic awareness', 'phonemes', 'graphemes', 'blending' and 'segmenting' are also explained in the curriculum document (MOE, 2010). Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify and manipulate the individual sounds in spoken language. Phonemes are the sounds of spoken language. Graphemes are the

letters and spelling that represent sounds in written language. Blending means merging individual phonemes together to pronounce a word, and segmenting means breaking a word into its individual phonemes to spell the word. Teachers should be able to understand these terms and implement the teaching of phonics through fun-filled activities such as the use of songs, rhymes, poems, stories and pictures.

## **TEACHING OF PHONICS TO YOUNG LEARNERS**

Learning to read is essential so that a person becomes literate and educated in school and beyond. Thus, in order to teach pupils to recognise letters and decode the letters by reading, direct and systematic teaching of phonics is advocated (Lewis and Ellis, 2006). The innovation prescribed by the KSSR was the teaching of phonics using the method of blending and segmenting of sounds to produce spoken words. Prior to the introduction of the present curriculum, phonics teaching was not given emphasis and teachers did not teach phonics as it was not included in the curriculum.

According to Starrett (2007), the U.S. National Reading Panel report concluded that explicit, systematic phonics instruction is a valuable and essential part of a successful classroom reading programme. Teaching pupils the sound structure of language reduces the level of reading failure as pupils will have a faster start in learning to read than responsive instruction or no phonics instruction. As the teaching of phonics is still new in Malaysia, there seems to be confusion and even lack of knowledge among teachers who are given the responsibility to teach phonics for Year 1 pupils. Based on our conversations carried out with teachers, many of them admitted that they needed more training and aid in teaching phonics in their English classrooms. The problems teachers had indicated in a questionnaire administered to primary school teachers in Perak, a state in Malaysia, included problems related to the ways of teaching phonics, a lack of phonics knowledge and a lack of training provided to teach phonics (Kepol, Shari, and Abdullah, 2012). The teachers' concerns over their inability to carry out the teaching of phonics need to be addressed promptly as the teachers are the implementers of the KSSR that highlights the needs of providing basic literacy to pupils using the strategies of phonics so that pupils will become independent readers.

The teaching of phonics is divided into two approaches, which are synthetic phonics and analytic phonics. According to Lewis and Ellis (2006), in the synthetic phonics programme, pupils are systematically taught the phonemes associated with particular graphemes. They begin by hearing the phonemes in a spoken word and blending phonemes orally. In reading, individual phonemes are recognised from the grapheme, pronounced and blended together (synthesised) to create the word. The skill of segmenting words into phonemes for spelling is also taught, and blending and segmenting are introduced as reversible processes. Meanwhile, in analytic phonics, pupils identify phonemes in whole words and are encouraged to segment the words into phonemes. They also analyse similar characteristics in other words. Thus,

recognising word families and patterns helps pupils to develop inferential self-teaching strategies. If they are able to read 'sing', they can work out and read 'ring' without blending all the individual phonemes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to ensure that the curriculum stays relevant to the current needs and future challenges (Corporate Communication Unit, 2010), the Malaysian Ministry of Education has introduced some educational innovations in the Standard-based Primary School Curriculum beginning 2011. One of the innovations is the inclusion of phonics to introduce early reading skills in Year 1 and Year 2. The teaching of phonics through the methods of blending and segmenting were prescribed through the curriculum materials which were most evident in the textbooks and activity books used by pupils at the two levels of primary school education. In the previous curriculum, the Integrated Curriculum for Primary Schools, the traditional skill-based approach was used. Based on the content and learning standards stated in the new standard-based curriculum for the reading module, the teaching of phonics should be carried out explicitly and systematically to ensure that pupils become independent readers through a variety of fun-filled activities. Phonics should be taught so that pupils will be able to apply their knowledge of the sounds (phonemes) and forms (graphemes) of letters to recognise words in linear and non-linear texts. According to Gray, Ferguson, Behan, Dunbar, Dunn and Mitchell (2007), a systematic phonics approach involves the teaching of letter-sound relationships in an explicit, organised and sequenced manner. Systematic phonics instruction has been proven to contribute positively to children's growth in reading compared to programmes using unsystematic methods or no phonics approach. Besides that, systematic phonics approach also has a significant positive effect on children with reading and learning difficulties, and low achievers (Ferguson, Currie, Paul and Topping, 2011).

The benefits and effects of a systematic phonics approach have been documented by many researchers. In a study conducted by Dixon, Schagen and Seedhouse (2011), the findings indicate that a synthetic phonics programme was used successfully with children living in a slum environment. The study was carried out in 22 private unaided schools within slum areas of Hyderabad, India where over 500 children took part in the quasi-experiment which lasted 6 months. Another study was conducted by de Graaff, Bosman, Hasselman and Verhoeven (2009) to compare a computer-based systematic-phonics approach with a non-systematic approach teaching the same grapheme-phoneme correspondences. The performances of children in these two phonics approaches were compared with the performance of a no-training control group. Ninety-three kindergarten children in their second year participated in the study. The two experimental groups progressed to the same extent on productive letter-sound knowledge compared to the control group. However, the systematic-phonics group outperformed the unsystematic-phonics group and the control group in terms of phonemic awareness, spelling and reading.

As the teaching of phonics is essential for beginning readers (Hall, 2006), teachers should help pupils develop phonics knowledge through their classroom practices. Kırkgöz (2008) stated that teachers play a crucial role in the implementation of educational innovation within the school system and need to adopt new ideas in their teaching to ensure that the innovation is successfully implemented. As the Standard-based English Language Curriculum is still at the initial stage of implementation in Malaysia, there is a limited number of studies available on the teaching of phonics by Year 1 English language teachers in the country. The study reported in this paper will contribute to this body of knowledge.

The current study is part of the main study carried out to investigate teachers' understanding of the new curriculum, and the problems that the teachers faced when implementing the new curriculum. The focus of the present study was on the teaching of phonics. The aims of the study were:

- 1) To examine the participating teachers' understanding of phonics as stipulated in the new English language curriculum.
- 2) To examine the problems that the teachers faced in relation to phonics.
- 3) To examine how teachers teach phonics in their classrooms.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Sampling**

The respondents for the survey were chosen based on random sampling. Questionnaires focussing on the Year 1 teachers' understanding and problems in implementing the New Standard-based English Language Curriculum were distributed to 400 schools. The questionnaires were answered and returned by 239 English language teachers who taught Year 1 pupils using the new curriculum in 2011. Twenty-one questionnaires were incomplete leaving 217 questionnaires for analysis. The respondents were 136 English option teachers and 81 non-option teachers (qualification other than English). They included both male and female teachers who had teaching experience ranging from a few months to 30 years. The respondents were teaching in both urban and rural national and national-type primary schools in a midland state in peninsular Malaysia.

The participants for the case studies were chosen through purposive sampling. Eleven teachers agreed to participate in the study. Seven of them were teaching in the national schools and four in the national-type schools. Five participants were English option teachers and six were non-option teachers. Out of the six non-option teachers, four had attended a one-year teaching course to prepare them to teach English in primary schools. The teaching experience of the participants ranged from 9 months to

27 years. They were approached only after gaining permission from the relevant units in the Ministry of Education and the Head Teachers of the schools involved.

### **Data Collection**

Data for the study were collected using a questionnaire, interviews and classroom observations. The questionnaire (Kepol, Shari & Abdullah, 2011) was divided into four sections which included the respondents' demography, respondents' understanding of the new curriculum, the problems that the respondents faced in implementing the curriculum, and the respondents' perceptions of the curriculum and availability of resources.

The survey data related to this study were obtained from the first three sections of the questionnaire. In Section A, the items focused mainly on obtaining information about the respondents' teaching experience and educational background. The data from Section B relevant to this report was obtained from the first part of the section. In this part, the respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5, their level of understanding of the aspects of the new Standard-based English Language Curriculum for Malaysian National and National Type Primary Schools. There were 25 aspects of the curriculum covering its aims, objectives, principles, structure, and content which included phonics. As for Section C, the respondents were asked to describe ten of the most frequent problems that they faced in implementing the new curriculum.

Each participant was interviewed prior to and after a series of classroom observations with him or her. The interviews were conducted in order to collect more in-depth data about the participants' educational and teaching background, their understanding of the new curriculum, and their problems in implementing the curriculum. Likewise, the classroom observations were carried out with the participants in order to obtain data pertaining to their understanding of the new curriculum and also the problems that they faced in implementing it. The observations ranged from one to two hours in length. Each participant was observed two to three times consecutively. All the interviews and observations were audio- and video-taped to allow repeated listening and viewing.

### **Data Analysis**

For the purpose of this study, data specific to phonics and the teaching of phonics in the questionnaire, interviews and classroom observations were analysed. Analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaire was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 19.0 to obtain the frequency counts. Data pertaining to the problems encountered by the teachers in phonics teaching (obtained from Section C) were analysed qualitatively by categorising the problems based on recurring themes. The classroom observations were analysed qualitatively to examine the patterns of phonics teaching. The case study participants

were given pseudonyms as a ‘means of ensuring anonymity’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 64). Interview data were also analysed qualitatively.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

## Teachers' Understanding of Phonics and Phonics Teaching

From the total of 217 respondents who completed the questionnaire, only 3 respondents had undergone a course on phonics in preparation for the implementation of the new curriculum. Thus, 214 respondents had no training on phonics to prepare them to teach it in their classrooms.

However, the results of the analysis focusing on the teachers' self-rating of their level of understanding of phonics as stipulated in the new curriculum showed that the teachers rated themselves at varying degrees of understanding, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**The Teachers' Level of Understanding of Phonics**

Level of Understanding	Frequency	Proportion (%)
1 (I do not understand at all.)	2	0.9
2	32	14.7
3	83	38.2
4	83	38.2
5 (I have a very good understanding.)	17	7.8
Total	217	100.0

The results showed that on a scale of 1 to 5 from ‘I do not understand at all’ to ‘I have a very good understanding’, 0.9 percent of the teachers admitted that they did not understand at all, 14.7 percent rated their understanding on point 2 of the scale, and 38.2 percent rated their understanding at point 3. Those who considered their level of understanding at point 4 were 38.3 percent, and the remainder, 7.7 percent, indicated that they had a very good understanding. Thus, more than half of the respondents (58.3 percent) rated themselves as having an average or below average understanding of the phonics component of the curriculum and less than half (46 percent) rated themselves as having a good to very good understanding of it.

The survey also showed that 44 out of the 217 respondents (20.3 percent) had problems in the teaching of phonics which were categorised into problems concerning the ways of teaching phonics, the lack of phonics knowledge and the lack of training provided to teach using the phonics strategy. Among the problems voiced out regarding the ways of teaching phonics were the uncertainty about the correct

approach to phonics and the need on the teachers part to learn phonics themselves before being able to teach it, the lack of knowledge about the appropriate actions that can be used when teaching certain graphemes, how to teach 32 sounds as stipulated in the learning standards in the curriculum document, and how to teach phonics effectively.

The problems that fell under the category showing that both teachers and pupils lacked phonics knowledge included the inability of both teachers and pupils in pronouncing the words, letters and phonemes, the teachers' unfamiliarity with phonics, the pupils' inability to blend and segment words, and also the interference of the pupils' mother tongue.

The respondents pointed out that they lacked the training to prepare them to teach phonics. Under this category, confusion was reported due to the lack of consistency in the resources provided, such as the sounds in the CD were different from what the teachers had learnt in the training courses provided. Some teachers reported that they did not have proper training on phonetics, and some stated that they were not ready to teach phonics.

Besides the problems indicated by the respondents in the questionnaire, the interviews with the case study participants also revealed that four out of the eleven teachers encountered problems when teaching phonics. Out of the four, two teachers admitted that they did not know how to teach phonics; one of them had not learnt phonics during pre-service training whereas the other teacher was a non-option teacher and had taught sounds but not blending. The third teacher had to refer to the dictionary to teach phonics and had learned phonics for a short duration during a post-graduate pre-service teacher training course, a special programme for graduates with a bachelor's degree who wish to teach in primary schools. The fourth teacher had taught the pupils to pronounce the Malay language syllables in order to provide a better foundation for the pupils to master the sounds of the English language. This teacher believed that both the Malay language and English language ways of teaching reading are similar, hence the decision to teach the pupils the Malay language syllables during the English lessons. The remaining seven teachers did not mention any problems related to the teaching of phonics during the interviews.

### **Phonics Teaching in the Classroom**

Evidence of phonics teaching could only be found in the data sets from three out of the eleven case study participants. The data sets from the remaining eight participants showed them teaching reading skills using the "look and say" method or whole word method. This could be due to the short duration of the observations. However, some of the participants had also admitted that they were not familiar with the phonics method of teaching and therefore had not used the method in their

lessons. Data from one of the eight participants, named “Suria” are used to illustrate the teaching of reading via the whole word method.

Suria, who had five years of teaching experience taught in an urban school. During the first lesson, Suria taught shapes and introduced them using picture cards. The name of the shape was written on each picture card. Suria guided the pupils to draw the shape in the air and taught them to sing a song while clapping their hands for all the shapes introduced: circle, square, rectangle, triangle and oval. Next, the pupils were instructed to open their textbooks and Suria drilled the pupils to read the title ‘Shapes around Us’. She asked the pupils to name the shapes presented in the book. She then mentioned each shape aloud and the pupils had to identify the corresponding shape by pointing to it in the book. After that, Suria guided the pupils to sing a song about the shapes to the tune of ‘Baa Baa Black Sheep’. The pupils pointed to the words in the text book and sang the song again together with the teacher. Then, the pupils were divided into four groups and Suria showed the picture cards of shapes and the pupils said out the shapes shown. The pupils were called out individually to represent each group to draw a few shapes mentioned by the teacher on the white board. This activity was followed by the teacher drawing the remaining shapes on the white board and the pupils naming the shapes drawn. Next, the pupils were called individually to match the word cards to the correct shapes on the board. The pupils spelt the words pointed at by the teacher. The pupils were assigned exercises on shapes to complete in their activity books.

Although the eight participants who used the whole word method organised their teaching activities differently, they were similar in their use of picture cards to show the meaning of the words, the illustration and articulation of the printed words, the spelling of words, and the repetitive practice of the words learned.

The three participants who taught phonics were found to have taught them at varying degrees of intensity. These participants will be referred to as Rohana, Nabila and Siti. Siti was assisted by a native speaker teacher during two of the observations with her. The native speaker teacher will be referred to as Tim in this paper.

Rohana taught in an urban school and had 27 years of teaching experience. Nabila and Siti had 7 and 5 years of teaching experience respectively and both of them were teaching in rural schools. Rohana was observed twice while Nabila and Siti were observed three times each. Each observation lasted an hour. An interview was conducted with each teacher before and after the classroom observations. By the time the classroom observations were carried out, during the first half of the school year, the pupils had been taught most of the letters in the alphabet and the corresponding sounds.

Rohana followed the learning standards closely in her teaching of phonics and reading. She was observed early in the year. During the pre-observation interview, she explained that some phonemes would be taught later in the middle of the year.

She used the phonics teaching guidebook to help in the teaching of phonics and expressed that the alphabets had to be taught first and that letter recognition of the Malay language supported the teaching of English phonics. Data from the classroom observations showed that Rohana had taught the pupils to recognise the alphabets and reinforced the letter recognition skill through various activities.

During the first lesson observed, Rohana taught the pupils to make polite requests orally using conversations containing words with the target sounds /m/ and /n/ through role plays. She had observed that the pupils had difficulty in differentiating the phoneme /m/ from the phoneme /n/. Rohana then proceeded to show the sentences in the first conversation on a manila card and guided the pupils to read the sentences aloud as a whole class and also in pairs. The target sounds were stressed and practised. The activities in the first lesson initially focused on listening and speaking skills but moved on to reading skills towards the end of the lesson when the pupils were guided to read simple sentences used for making polite requests in the role plays.

In the second lesson, Rohana focused on teaching reading skills as stipulated in the curriculum document. These skills included the ability to identify and distinguish the letters of the alphabet, the ability to recognise and articulate the initial sounds in single syllable words and the ability to read and apply word recognition and word attack skills by matching words with graphics. Rohana started the lesson by getting the pupils to say the name the objects in the picture cards shown and to name the initial letters of the words. This was followed by showing them word cards and selecting pupils to say the words out loud. She then instructed the pupils to refer to related exercises in the activity book and using some teaching aids which she prepared in advance, she demonstrated how to complete the exercises. The exercises included identifying the same letter among groups of four letters provided, and identifying words based on pictures in a word maze. This latter exercise was also used as a practice exercise for spelling. The words in this exercise contained the phonemes and graphemes which had been learned during the week.

Among the three participants who incorporated phonics teaching in their lessons during the periods of observation, Siti was the one who demonstrated the most phonics teaching in her lessons. As mentioned earlier, Siti was assisted by Tim. They were observed in March. Siti began the first lesson observed by revising the phonics that the pupils had learnt up to that point of the school year. The pupils had to say the sounds (phonemes) and do the actions associated with the sounds. Then, the pupils had to guess the sounds demonstrated by Siti through the actions associated with them. Siti segmented and blended three words.

After that, Siti wrote two letters on the board and asked the pupils what sounds they made. The pupils were then shown word cards and they had to identify which phoneme was used in the words. After each identification, the word cards were pasted on the board underneath the corresponding letters written on the board earlier.

This activity was followed by the pupils being shown picture cards which they had to match to the words pasted on the white board. Two games were played with the pupils. At this stage, Siti was assisted by Tim. The first was aimed at getting the pupils to practice listening to and identifying the sounds for the letters 'u' and 'e' when mentioned by the teacher. The second game required the pupils to name the objects in the pictures used in the game. Tim stretched the game into a segmenting and blending game where he segmented the words and the pupils blended them. Siti wrapped up the lesson by asking the pupils to do an exercise in the activity book which required them to match the letters learned with the pictures provided.

The second and third observed lessons were also begun by getting the pupils to practise phonics. During the second lesson, this activity was similar to the activity done during the first lesson whereby the phonics cards were shown to prompt the pupils to say the sounds represented in the cards and do the actions associated with the sounds. During the third observation, a video of a phonics song was played and the pupils were taught to sing the song. They had to identify the letters shown in the video and say the sounds of those letters. Both lessons then proceeded with teaching the content of the selected units of the textbook. The teaching of the reading skills in these units involved the teaching of words and phrases using the whole word method.

Siti, aided by Tim, was very systematic in teaching phonics to her pupils. Her pupils were taught to associate the sounds with actions and she made phonics practice a constant opening feature of each lesson.

Nabila was observed in the month of July. The first and second observations in her class showed that she did not teach phonics and had resorted to the whole word method when introducing words and sentences. However, in the third lesson she taught the letters 'w', 'x', 'y' and 'z'. The pupils were asked to say the sounds of the letters, and Nabila corrected the pupils who did not pronounce the letters 'x' and 'z' correctly. She also demonstrated the actions associated with the sounds, 'x' – as if having a sharp pain in a tooth, and 'z' – buzzing of bees. Then, Nabila played a song to reinforce the four sounds. She guided the pupils to blend the phonemes /f/, /o/ and /ks/ to read the word "fox" and also the phonemes /t/, /æ/, /ks/ and /i:/ to read the word "taxi". Then, she tried to play more song videos but due to a technical problem, the songs could not be played. So, she had to teach the songs without the accompanying music. After that, she showed a picture of a fox and asked questions so that pupils would come up with the sentence "This is a fox." Nabila also showed other pictures and when the pupils encountered problems reading a word, for example, the word "taxi", the pupils were guided to blend the letters to read the word repeatedly until they could read the word correctly.

The episodes described above showed how the three participants, Rohana, Siti and Nabila, carried out the teaching of phonics in their classrooms. They demonstrated different ways of teaching phonics to their pupils and placed different degrees of emphasis on it.

The findings of this study revealed that even though the Standard-based Primary School Curriculum is in its second year of implementation, there are many areas of concern that need to be addressed promptly so that the aspirations conveyed by the curriculum document are translated into reality specifically by teachers.

The findings on the teachers' understanding of phonics and phonics teaching showed that 58.3 percent of the respondents rated themselves as having an average or below average understanding of the phonics component of the curriculum and 46 percent rated themselves as having a good to very good understanding of it. The implementation of phonics teaching requires teachers to have at least a good if not very good understanding of the phonemic system and the principles underlying the phonics method. Otherwise, the teachers would not be able to implement the change effectively, if at all.

One of the teachers' concerns regarding phonics teaching is that they were unable to teach phonics due to a lack of knowledge and training. The lack of knowledge in phonics can be addressed by providing the teachers with appropriate training. Some teachers had indicated that they needed to learn phonics themselves before they could teach them. Some mentioned that they did not know the sounds that correspond to particular phonemic symbols or they did not know the correct pronunciation of words. Therefore, active communication between curriculum developers and teachers need to be established (Troudi and Alwan, 2010) so that teachers can be equipped with the knowledge about phonics that would allow them to teach efficiently in their classrooms.

Curriculum reform brings about changes in classroom practices which include methods of teaching and use of new materials in teaching. However, whether teachers implement these changes need to be investigated. Lamie (2005, as cited in Troudi & Alwan, 2010) reports that teachers might project a positive attitude to educational change and changes in classroom practices, but what they actually practice will remain traditional. The findings from the observational data in this study showed that the whole word method was favoured by at least two of the participants who admitted that they were not familiar with the phonics method. These two participants were non-option teachers who had just completed their one-year post-graduate pre-service course to enable them to teach English in primary schools but the course they attended did not equip them with the skills and methodology to teach phonics. These two participants did not implement the innovation introduced in the new curriculum for the teaching of reading skills not because they would not but because they could not due to a lack of knowledge in phonics. The data from the survey indicate that there are many more like them.

The success of the curriculum reform is determined by the teachers in the classroom. Their understanding and ability to carry out the reform are reflected in

their classroom practices. Therefore, action is needed to ensure that the teachers have what they need to make the reform a success.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHER TRAINING ON PHONICS**

Based on the findings and discussion above, what the teachers need is training on how to teach phonics properly to their pupils. It is suggested that this training includes content that will enable teachers to become proficient in recognising and producing the sounds in phonics themselves and content that will enable them to teach phonics.

The first type of content focusing on the teachers themselves should include, among others, the following knowledge and skills:

- recognising individual phonemes, their phonetic symbols or transcriptions and graphemes;
- producing individual, segmented and blended phonemes; and
- spelling that correspond to blended sounds to make words.

The second type of content focusing on the pedagogical aspects of phonics should enable teachers to use what they have learned in the first type of content to teach phonics to their pupils. These should include, among others, exploring and trying out methods and activities for getting pupils to:

- recognise phonemes and the graphemes that correspond to them;
- produce individual and blended phonemic sounds both in speech and in writing; and
- spell, orally and in writing, words that correspond to the blended sounds.

These two types of content will help to equip the teachers to teach the phonics specified in the KSSR curriculum. It will also help them to understand better the reading component in the KSSR curriculum and the textbooks. As affirmed by Fielding-Barnsley (2010), teachers themselves must have an explicit knowledge of skills which included phonemic awareness and methods of blending and segmenting to effectively implement the phonics-based instruction.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of the study have provided valuable information about the Year 1 English Language teachers' level of understanding of phonics and the problems that they faced with regard to phonics. These findings together with the findings about how the teachers taught phonics in their classrooms highlight the need for more training on phonics especially for specific groups of teachers. Since phonics was not a feature of the previous curriculum, many teachers are not familiar with it and are

therefore in need of proper guidance and input on what it is so that they can use the knowledge for their own development and the development of early reading skills in their pupils.

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