

The Utilization of Phonics Songs in Phonics Reading Classes in Indonesia: Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract. The use of phonics approaches for teaching early reading skills to young learners in Indonesian EFL classes seems to be on the rise. However, as phonics relies on students' ability in corresponding letters and the sounds of the letters, the fact that the English pronunciation for the alphabet is different from that of Bahasa Indonesia could be an obstacle in a way that it might lead students to confusion. To cope with this problem, some teachers are found to have applied phonics songs in order to help their young learners. This paper aims to report teachers' perspectives on their experiences in utilizing phonics songs to help young learners in Indonesia develop their early reading skills. A case study is employed by using instruments of questionnaires and interviews involving 20 EFL teachers in Indonesia. The results show the teachers' positive perspectives on the utilization of phonics songs in early reading classes as well as its benefits and drawbacks which can be aspects that teachers should seriously consider when choosing the most suitable phonics songs to be applied in young learners' classes in Indonesia.

Keywords: EFL; phonics; phonics reading; phonics song; reading; young learners

Pemanfaatan *Phonics Songs* dalam Kelas Membaca Fonetik di Indonesia: Perspektif Guru

Abstrak. Penggunaan pendekatan *phonics* untuk mengajarkan keterampilan membaca awal kepada pembelajar usia dini di kelas bahasa Inggris EFL tampaknya sedang meningkat. Namun, karena fonetik bergantung pada kemampuan siswa dalam huruf yang sesuai dan bunyi huruf, fakta bahwa pengucapan bahasa Inggris untuk alfabet berbeda dari bahasa Indonesia dapat menjadi kendala yang dapat menyebabkan kebingungan siswa. Untuk mengatasi masalah ini, beberapa guru diketahui telah menerapkan *phonics songs* untuk membantu siswa usia dininya. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menyajikan perspektif guru tentang pengalaman mereka dalam menggunakan *phonics songs* untuk membantu pembelajar usia dini di Indonesia dalam mengembangkan keterampilan membaca awal mereka. Studi kasus digunakan dengan menggunakan instrumen kuesioner dan wawancara yang melibatkan 20 guru EFL di Indonesia. Hasilnya menunjukkan pandangan positif guru tentang penggunaan *phonics songs* di kelas membaca awal serta kelebihan dan kekurangannya yang dapat menjadi aspek yang harus dipertimbangkan secara serius oleh para guru ketika memilih *phonics songs* yang paling cocok untuk diterapkan di kelas anak usia dini Indonesia.

Kata kunci: EFL; fonetik; membaca fonetik; phonics song; membaca; pembelajar usia dini

INTRODUCTION

Phonics is a systematic way learners can use to decode a word in their early reading stage by using the sounds of letters (Bald, 2007). Some studies have reported that students could benefit greatly by using phonics approaches to develop their early reading skills. Research conducted at a primary school in Thailand showed that the implementation of phonics could lead to first grade students' significant progress in terms of their early literacy skills (Ngamkiatkhajorn & Kanoksilapatham, 2018). Jolly Phonics strategy was also revealed to be able to improve students' reading and writing skills in a bilingual school in Bali, Indonesia (Ariati, et al., 2018). This is due to the fact that compared to the commonly used whole language approach which requires a child to read a word as it is, phonics offers a more systematic way to read or decode a word (Paul, 2003). Therefore, it is not surprising that phonics is also getting more recognition in Indonesia. Studies conducted by Rahmah and Pandjaitan (2018), Retnomurti et al. (2019), Sudiarta (2017), as well as Wahyuni et al. (2016) reveal that phonics have been applied in various school levels in Indonesia as an alternative approach to teach early reading skills.

However, phonics approaches require learners to be able to "...associate a specific spelling with a specific sound" (Blevins, 2006, p.8). And since the pronunciation of the alphabets in Bahasa Indonesia is different from the English one, a problem has arisen among young learners in this country. Young learners might get confused with the different sounds of the English alphabets taught in their phonics reading classes. And in order to cope with this, some teachers are found to have applied phonics songs in their classes.

Songs are believed to be an integral part of English language teaching in young learners' classes. Students will find it easier to memorize things and grasp the materials (Paul, 2003) as well as improve their understanding of word

order (Campfield & Murphy, 2013) through songs. For solving problems caused by the fact that young learners cannot concentrate or focus on something for a long time (Brown & Lee, 2015; Musthafa, 2010; Scott & Ytreberg, 1990), songs can also be applied as a fun way of learning English which can prevent them from getting bored in class. In addition, songs can make students more motivated and less anxious in acquiring the language (Davis, 2017). Moreover, many other advantages related to linguistic, psychological/affective, cognitive, cultural, and social aspects of learning that songs can help students with, including pronunciation (Brewster, et al., 2002) are crucial in phonics reading classes.

On the other hand, Paul (2003) warned that songs can also be harmful for Asian EFL classrooms as they could distract the students' focus on the main target language. If songs are not applied properly, students might end up with only enjoying the songs or music, instead of learning the English materials. Thus, there needs to be more research conducted exploring both the benefits and drawbacks of songs in EFL classrooms since such kind of research is still relatively hard to find (Campfield & Murphy, 2013).

Aside from the aforementioned studies discussing the use of phonics in reading classes, there is little research which reported teachers' perspectives on the practice of using phonics songs to support their phonics reading classes. The investigation on the teachers' perspectives on using phonics songs can give insights on the practice and challenges on this issue. Therefore, this study aims for discovering teachers' perspectives on the utilization of phonics songs in phonics reading classes in Indonesia as well as its benefits and drawbacks.

METHODS

In this study, the authors applied qualitative approach and case study research design (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The data were gathered by using questionnaires and interviews. The

questionnaires contain open-ended questions related to the phonics songs utilized by the participants in their phonics reading classes and their perspectives on it. Meanwhile, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants' consent to dig up more information about the matter, such as the benefits and drawbacks of using phonics songs as well as the aspects needed to take into account when selecting the best phonics songs to apply.

The participants taking part in this research study are 20 teachers who teach English in either private schools or language institutions in Indonesia, consisting of 18 Indonesians, one American, and one Australian. They have been using phonics to teach reading to students aged 3 to 7 years old for quite a while, ranging from a year to more than 20 years. Therefore, they are assumed to have enough experiences dealing with the use of phonics songs to support the phonics reading approaches in young learner classes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers' perspectives on the utilization of phonics songs in phonics reading classes in Indonesia

The results from the questionnaires and interviews found that 95% of the participants had positive opinions towards the use of phonics songs to support their phonics reading classes. These teachers perceived phonics songs for three main purposes: 1) phonics songs are beneficial for helping students learn correct letter and word pronunciation, 2) phonics songs can improve student engagement in young learner classes, and 3) phonics songs can facilitate students with different learning styles.

Thirteen out of twenty participants agreed that phonics songs containing simple lyrics that introduce the sounds of the English alphabets were effective for teaching letter and word pronunciation to young learners. As these teachers applied phonics approaches in their institution for teaching early reading

skills to young learners, they believed this knowledge is important for developing students' pre-literacy skills in a way that it helps them remember the sounds of the alphabet. Participant 8 said:

I believe utilizing phonics songs in my reading classes can aid students to improve their reading skills. They enable students to practice and recognize letter sounds. By acknowledging the letters through their sounds, their reading skills are expected to improve. Listening to the songs frequently would allow the students to get familiar with simple words and how to read them. Thus, eventually, they can read the words independently and consistently. (Participant 8)

Participant 2 also added, "It significantly helps with their literacy and pre-literacy skills. The song is equipped with mnemonic devices, and they help them with remembering the patterns of English sounds." This is in line with a research study stating that music has been proven to help 4-6 years old children develop their early literacy skills (Moreno, et al., 2011).

Aside from the pronunciation aspect, 5 out of 20 participants utilized phonics songs for the purpose of increasing student engagement in their young learner classes. Participant 15 mentioned "Kids love the phonics song applied in my class. It makes them think that they are having fun instead of studying. It is arguably effective". Participant 17 also added, "What is important is that the kids are having fun and these songs make that happen when learning".

Similarly, participant 19 mentioned "This kind of song helps a lot. Kids or maybe older students too tend to memorize expressions or vocabulary better when there is a rhyme or melody with it." Since it is relatively challenging to grab young learners' attention, this would be a good sign that phonics songs are a strong tool to be implemented in order to brighten the typically monotonous reading classes.

The other purpose of using phonics songs mentioned by one of the participants is that phonics songs can help

students with different learning styles learn effectively in class. Participant 7 mentioned “It helps a lot especially for audio-visual students to improve their sensitivity of phonics”.

However, although the majority of the participants gave positive feedbacks on the application of phonics songs, one participant came up with the opposite perspective. Despite having been using phonics songs as requested by the curriculum in her institution, participant 12 mentioned “I am not a big fan honestly. I prefer teaching sight words and sounding words out”. It means that this participant found phonics songs and phonics approach in general less effective than whole language approach.

The benefits of phonics songs

Having constantly applied phonics songs for quite a long time to support the phonics approaches used for helping young learners develop early literacy skills, the participants must have noticed some good qualities in this kind of songs. According to them, there are several benefits teachers can draw from using phonics songs in their classes: 1) phonics songs help students learn correct pronunciation, 2) they keep students engaged to the lesson, and 3) they support students with different learning styles.

Learning how to pronounce letters correctly is one of the foundations of phonics approaches, as they rely on students' ability to recognize the sounds of the letters (Blevins, 2006). Some participants found that phonics songs could help students pronounce letters and words in English correctly. Participant 3 said “It helps students identify sounds and pronunciation”. This kind of song is also believed to serve its purpose to get students' familiar with the sounds of the English alphabet which are different from the Indonesian one, as participant 6 said “When students forget the sounds of the alphabet, teacher can sing the phonics songs to remind them of the sounds”. Furthermore, participant 13 added, “We can use it as a prompt so they will easily

recall the sound”. These statements supported Moroder's (2013) research study which highlighted the successful application of music in students' decoding skill improvement.

The second benefit reported by some participants is that phonics songs can help teachers keep students engaged to the lesson. This can further result in students getting motivated to learn English better. The fun, engaging, and motivating aspects of phonics songs are what teachers need in order to keep their young learners' classes lively. Participant 11 stated:

I suppose the songs can make the reading class fun since the teachers find teaching phonics reading to young learners challenging. The music can at least motivate the children. Further, the lyrics can be a tool for the children to keep remembering the phonics and the corresponding words. (Participant 11)

Participant 16 said “Kids love singing, so using songs when teaching phonics will make the lesson more engaging and easily grasped”. In line with this, participant 19 shared, “Besides using them merely to deliver the materials, songs can also hype up the class and can be used as the transitions between activities”. Moreover, participant 15 added “It helps create a happy and friendly atmosphere in class. Thus, it is efficient for learning process”. These excerpts supported Hawkins's argument that “having young children chant, sing, or listen to music while doing their work helps their minds focus on the task at hand, but also helps them engaged in the lesson” (2015, p.19). This kind of relaxing environment can reduce students' anxiety and increase their concentration (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). As a result, students can pick up the new language with ease.

Lastly, some teachers also reported that phonics songs could help students with different learning styles grasp materials effectively. When asked about the benefits of using phonics songs in her phonics reading classes, participant 8 explained as follows.

First, phonics songs are fun. Students love watching and listening to the songs, so they do not get bored easily. Second, they have good and multimode resources including audio and visual. Also, easy access to get them as they are available online and many are free. (Participant 8)

As it has been revealed that all the phonics songs used by the participants are in the form of videos, students with different learning styles could be facilitated optimally. Visual learners can read the letters and words through the video, including the visualization that helps them comprehend the meaning of the words. The auditory ones can also enjoy learning about phonics while singing along. Not to mention some videos provide sample movements that kinesthetic students can follow, as participant 4 claimed below.

It really helps the students with pronouncing the words pretty well as it has pictures and it is an ear catchy song. Besides, students and teachers normally dance together to make the shapes of the alphabets so the students find it more fun and memorable. (Participant 4)

This echoed Nasution (2019) who asserted that videos can benefit students with different as well as multiple learning styles. He further explained that they are also able to reduce students' cognitive load while taking part in the learning process.

The drawbacks of phonics songs

Apart from the advantages, the participants realized that the utilization of phonics songs in supporting their reading classes also has drawbacks. Some drawbacks mentioned by the participants include: 1) the complexity of the phonics song lyrics could be tricky, 2) phonics songs could lead to students' confusion with new materials, 3) they could distract students from the core lesson, 4) the successful results are still questionable, 5) they are impractical, and 6) there are

limitations in the application of phonics songs.

Just like typical songs, phonics songs contain lyrics. Some of them might include lyrics which only consist of certain phonetic sounds or very simple and easy words to follow, but the others might have the long and complicated ones for young learners. Participant 1 said "sometimes students have difficulty catching up with the lyrics" when asked about the disadvantage of using phonics songs in her reading classes for young learners. A similar opinion comes from participant 6 who are concerned with the students' ability to read complex lyrics in order to sing along.

The phonics songs don't have any drawbacks I think, but the implementation of phonics itself is a bit difficult to do if students can't read in Bahasa Indonesia yet. Except for students who have more interest to letter and better reading skills than the others. (Participant 6)

On the other hand, the fact that phonics song lyrics could be too repetitive is also considered as something troublesome by some teachers. Participant 4 who applied only one type of phonics song provided by his institution mentioned "it is quite repetitive as we often play that song before starting to have phonics activities. It would be better if there some varieties of ABC songs to make it more interesting". In this case, he might be worried that young learners might get bored easily when the phonics song contains the same lyrics repeated over and over again.

Another drawback of using phonics songs reported by several participants deal with students' confusion with the phonics itself, which is something new for them. Participant 3 reported "Some students may be confused with the song at first, especially knowing some sounds and spellings are not the similar". Participant 5 added "At first, students get confused on how to differentiate sounds and letters or when they do not know or remember the lyrics. However, after a

period of time, I think students will get used to singing the song well". On top of that, participant 9 also agreed on the fact that phonics songs could lead to "confusion between phonics and spelling". This problem could be caused by the non-phonetic nature of the English language which is different from that of Bahasa Indonesia, their first language. Furthermore, phonics songs could also make students confused with letters which are pronounced in two or more different ways. Participant 8 voiced her opinion as follows.

Most songs only promote and focus on simple words consisting of three or four letters with common or general sounds. However, there are letters in English which have more than one sound. It might cause confusion among students when they encounter words that contain letters with different sounds from the ones they have learned through the songs. (Participant 8)

In addition, Participant 12 also stated her concern with the same problem.

Children get "stuck" for example (with) the letter "C". The standard reading is as in "cat". But if they have learned the same song over and over, they will then have trouble when they encounter the soft "C" as in "city" or "circle". This is made even worse with vowels. (Participant 12)

The third problem that teachers have to overcome is that phonics songs could distract students from the main lesson. Participant 7 claimed "Sometimes the students get distracted and focus on listening and dancing too much rather than singing along the song". Likewise, Participant 19 shared his opinion on this matter as follows.

If we don't really control the usage of it, kids might want to listen to the song again and again. Also, if we have too many stirring activities, then we put songs in it, the class will be out of control. (Participant 19)

This issue might arise when teachers are not careful enough to apply songs in a right manner (Paul, 2003).

Music and songs are definitely one of the best ways to teach young learners. However, when teachers are not careful enough, this practice can lead to failure in delivering the teaching materials.

The next drawback reported by some teachers is related to the questionable results of students' comprehension on the materials delivered through the songs. Participant 11 said "We cannot really guarantee that the children do learn the phonics reading from the songs". In line with this, Participant 18 stated "It does not foster comprehension of what the words mentioned in the lyrics mean". -find related studies-

The application of phonics songs to support phonics reading activities for young learners is also labelled as impractical. Teachers need to put more effort and spend extra time to find the suitable phonics songs for their classes. Participant 8 said "during this pandemic when teaching is online, some phonics songs need to be downloaded and uploaded to the virtual classrooms. Advertisements on the YouTube videos can be bothersome". Besides, participant 14 added "more resources and preparation are needed for the lesson."

The last drawback reported on the utilization of phonics songs is that there are limitations in their application in class. One limitation mentioned by participant 8 deals with vocabulary that can be covered in the lyrics of the songs, as he explained below. "

Most songs only promote and focus on simple words consisting of three or four letters with common or general sounds. However, there are letters in English which have more than one sound. It might cause confusion among students when they encounter words that contain letters with different sounds from the ones they have learned through the songs. (Participant 8)

Similarly, Participant 17 said "The basic phonics cannot be implemented to every word in the English language because English has wide complex rules of phonics". The other limitation found was that students have different preferences in

songs. Participant 14 stated “Particular songs might not be suitable to all students’ taste”.

Based on the research results dealing with the advantages of the utilization of phonics songs in young learners’ phonics reading classes, phonics songs could be an effective media to help teachers who adapt phonics approaches in their young learner classes in Indonesia. They can also be applied by teachers in formal schools where phonics is not a part of the curriculum as an alternative teaching media for introducing English pronunciation to students. Furthermore, phonics songs also give students with different types of learning styles a chance to learn English in a fun way. Although empirical research about this matter is still limited, Davis (2017) agreed that songs in general are good for helping students acquire new vocabulary, improve their pronunciation, and motivation to study. Songs are also able to break down the learning barriers that children could experience when they learn a new language (Yeni & Amelia, 2020).

On the other hand, the disadvantages found in the application of phonics songs should also become aspects to take into account when choosing the most suitable phonics song to be used in a young learner class. Teachers need to seriously consider the fact that phonics songs could burden young learners with complicated lyrics, lead them to confusion, or even turn into distraction during the learning process. They also need to put in more effort in finding and preparing the best phonics that can support their teaching goals.

CONCLUSION

The utilization of phonics songs to support the application of phonics approaches in young learners’ reading class was viewed as something constructive by the participants of this research, who have mostly had extensive experiences with it. The fact that phonics songs can help introduce the sounds of

letters to students as the foundation of phonics approaches, maintain young learners’ engagement to the lesson, as well as provide a multimode resource for students with various learning styles were the things that they value highly. In addition, phonics songs were reported to benefit students in many different aspects, namely pronunciation, student engagement, as well as learning styles. However, the list of drawbacks that came with it should never be ignored: the complexity of its lyrics, its potential to cause confusion among young learners about the materials, its distracting aspect, its questionable effectivity, its impracticality, and also its limitations when applied in a class with different characteristics of students. The latter aspects need to seriously be taken account by young learner teachers before deciding to pick a particular phonics song to be implemented in their class.

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