

Effectiveness of the Syllable Method in Developing Preschoolers' Reading Skills

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Abstract: *Reading proficiency is a critical skill for preschool children, supporting academic success and lifelong learning. Many Malaysian preschoolers struggle with reading, highlighting the need for effective early literacy interventions. This qualitative study examines the open syllable method's impact on 5-year-old children in preschools, framed by phonological awareness theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents, alongside classroom observations. Findings reveal that the syllable method enhances decoding skills, fluency, and learner confidence by segmenting words into consonant-vowel units. Challenges include limited teacher training, short attention spans, and insufficient parental support. Recommendations include structured teacher development, parental workshops, and interactive syllable-based activities. The method aligns with Malaysia's KSPK curriculum and offers potential to reduce early literacy gaps, emphasizing collaboration among educators, parents, and policymakers to strengthen reading readiness.*

Keywords: Reading proficiency, preschool literacy, syllable method, phonological awareness, literacy interventions

1. Introduction

Reading proficiency plays a crucial role in developing foundational literacy skills among preschool children, serving as a cornerstone for lifelong learning and academic success. Establishing a strong reading foundation at the preschool stage enhances children's literacy development and overall academic performance. Language comprehension directly influences both language use and reading comprehension, which are essential for future academic achievement (Rogde et al., 2019). Joshi and Shukla (2019) emphasize that reading is a vital stage in children's development, laying the groundwork for success in school and beyond. It forms a major component of language development, enabling children to build early literacy skills. Rubtsov (2020) highlighted Piaget's and Vygotsky's perspectives on reading, noting that it marks the beginning of formal learning processes. Similarly, Khavaidarova and Ekibaeva (2020) view reading competence as a literacy skill essential for continued use in primary education.

Introducing basic reading skills early is critical, not only for academic improvement but also for preventing literacy-related challenges such as dyslexia (Koifman, 2020). The National

Preschool Curriculum Standard (KSPK, 2013) identifies reading as an essential component, ensuring every child has the right to learn as preparation for primary school. Over the years, various teaching methods have been introduced to improve reading proficiency, yet many children still struggle when entering primary school, facing challenges in recognizing text and understanding comprehension (Ganasan, 2020). To address this, reading proficiency should be introduced in preschools using engaging methods that encourage active participation.

Recent data by Awani (2023) reported that 13% of primary school leavers and 5.03% of preschoolers face literacy problems. One approach to address this is the open syllable method, introducing vowel-consonant combinations (e.g., “ba,” “be,” “bi,” “bo,” “bu”) to build reading skills. Wahyuni (2021) advocates incorporating activities such as songs, flashcards, and guessing games to make learning enjoyable. While traditional, the syllable method remains effective, allowing teachers to focus on alphabet recognition and syllable manipulation through reading and spelling. Children learn to isolate syllables in different positions within words, enhancing spelling and reading fluency (Máčajová & Grofčíková, 2019).

Treiman et al. (2019) suggest that early spelling skills can predict later reading success and help identify children at risk of literacy problems. Early readers often perform better academically, understand tasks more easily, and develop stronger self-esteem and a love for learning (Blair et al., 2019). Conversely, struggling readers may face ongoing academic challenges due to difficulties in letter recognition (Prema & Praveen, 2023). Teachers must therefore identify and apply effective reading instruction methods from the preschool level.

Despite the recognized importance of early reading readiness, there remains a gap in identifying the most effective approaches in Malaysia. The open syllable method shows promise in promoting reading proficiency yet lacks comprehensive empirical evidence. According to Prof. Datuk Dr. Ishak Haron (Sinar Daily, 2024), a substantial proportion of Malaysian students lack basic reading and writing skills, prompting calls for earlier literacy exposure, ideally starting at age four or five. This study focuses on 5-year-old children from three preschools that use the open syllable method, involving teachers and parents through interviews, alongside classroom observations via video recordings.

This study examines how teachers apply the open syllable method, recognizing that mastering vowels and consonants is a prerequisite for reading assessments. Teaching methods influence academic performance, and learning through play helps stimulate curiosity, exploration, and skills relevant to reading (Neaum, 2022). Many preschools rely on phonemic methods, but children may struggle with spelling due to limited phonological awareness. KSPK includes open syllable methods, where children pronounce consonant-vowel patterns to form words. However, both teachers and parents face challenges in implementing these methods, particularly for children with literacy difficulties.

The aim is to determine the effectiveness of syllable methods in enhancing preschoolers’ reading proficiency and their impact on academic performance.

The objectives are to:

- 1) Assess the effectiveness of syllable spelling in improving reading proficiency among 5-year-olds.
- 2) Identify challenges teachers face in applying the method.
- 3) Identify challenges parents face when supporting the method at home.
- 4) Explore solutions and best practices to enhance reading proficiency.

This study highlights the potential of the syllable method to improve early literacy outcomes, aligning with KSPK goals and addressing national literacy concerns. It aims to provide educators and stakeholders with empirical evidence to improve reading instruction and reduce the percentage of children unable to read fluently.

The study draws on phonological theory, emphasizing the role of sound recognition and manipulation as precursors to reading (Pfoost et al., 2019), and dual-route theory, which integrates phonological decoding and word recognition. It also incorporates Piaget's constructivist theory, where children actively build knowledge through interaction, and Vygotsky's social development theory, highlighting the role of social context in literacy learning.

The study's small sample from Hulu Langat limits generalizability. Its short-term nature focuses on immediate outcomes, and inconsistent teacher training may affect implementation. Parental involvement also varies, impacting children's progress.

Findings could influence curriculum design by making syllable-based instruction compulsory in preschools, enhance teaching practices through targeted training, and guide policymakers in standardizing literacy assessment tools to reduce early literacy problems.

The syllable method offers a structured approach to building early reading skills, helping children recognize letters, spell words accurately, and develop essential phonological abilities. While further research is needed to assess long-term outcomes, existing evidence supports its potential to improve literacy rates among preschoolers. With appropriate teacher training, engaging instructional activities, and parental involvement, this method can make a meaningful contribution to early childhood education in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

Parental involvement plays a crucial role in preschoolers' literacy development, particularly when implementing structured methods such as the syllable approach. While teachers provide direct instruction, parents reinforce learning at home by supervising practice, offering encouragement, and creating supportive environments. However, the effectiveness of such interventions can be influenced by socioeconomic factors. Research has shown that parental engagement, irrespective of socioeconomic standing, has consistently been linked to enhanced academic and creative outcomes, fostering children's mental well-being, self-confidence, and overall developmental success (Mohd Azim, Nik Evina, Siti Farhana, Jayce, & Eunice, 2024). This highlights the importance of equipping both educators and parents with strategies to strengthen early reading skills, ensuring equitable opportunities for children across diverse backgrounds.

Preschool education plays a crucial role in developing early literacy, laying a strong foundation for children's future academic success and lifelong learning. Children who attend preschool gain experience and adapt more easily to the school environment. Among the techniques designed to enhance reading proficiency, the syllable method has been found effective in capturing children's attention and improving phonemic and reading skills. Ali and Yunus (2019) found that children improve vocabulary and reading by breaking down letters into syllables to form words. This method emphasizes syllable recognition and pronunciation, enabling children to decode and read fluently.

In Malaysia, early childhood education is guided by the Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan (KSPK) and PERMATA curriculum, which focus on literacy development before children enter primary school. These curriculum covers cognitive, physical, social, emotional, language, and religious development from birth to six years old, ensuring equitable educational opportunities regardless of family background (Rahmatullah et al., 2021). Despite this, limited research exists on the effectiveness of syllable-based methods on children's reading proficiency, indicating a gap in awareness and implementation that may impact educational outcomes.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted early childhood education, particularly in relation to reading proficiency. The shift to online learning environments presented numerous challenges for both students and teachers, leading to disruptions in literacy development. Nik Roseli et al. (2023) found that students experienced boredom and disengagement during online classes, and teachers struggled to effectively deliver educational content through digital technologies. These issues, combined with limited teacher interaction and insufficient at-home resources, contributed to a decline in basic reading skills among many children. Kim (2020) noted that prolonged school closures affected children's access to quality teaching. UNICEF Malaysia (2019) reported that nearly 30% of children struggled with basic reading skills due to limited teacher interaction and insufficient resources at home. Socioeconomic factors also contribute; children from low-income families (B40) are less likely to achieve expected literacy levels compared to higher-income groups (T20), with only 60% meeting literacy targets versus 80% from T20 families (Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2013–2025).

Teacher preparation significantly influences children's reading outcomes. Taha et al. (2020) emphasized that well-trained teachers implement curriculum effectively, improving children's learning experiences. However, rural preschools often face limited resources and inconsistent curriculum, affecting both teachers and students. Khazanah Research Institute (2018) reported that only about 50% of rural preschool teachers received formal training in literacy programs, critical for ensuring children achieve the 3M skills (reading, writing, counting) before primary school.

Reading is a process of recognizing letters and syllables, decoding them, and constructing meaning, contributing to language development. Emergent literacy begins at birth and continues through preschool, with stages aligned to the 3M skills (Septiani & Syaodih, 2021). Reading helps children extract information from texts and develop auditory and visual skills, fostering confidence and engagement (Topping, 2019).

Learning to read involves several stages. Snowling (2019) identified key stages such as symbol recognition, phonological awareness, rapid naming, and language-specific predictors. Chall (1983) described stages including pre-reading, initial decoding, fluency, reading new information, multiple viewpoints, and construction/reconstruction of words. In pre-reading, children develop print concepts and syllable awareness. Valcheva (2023) noted that children may decode letters but struggle to synthesize sounds into syllables. In later stages, repeated reading, especially using the syllable method, enhances vocabulary, word recognition, comprehension, and confidence (Azizah, 2010; Babadjanova, 2022; Dickinson et al., 2019).

Balanced literacy, combining syllable-based and whole-language approaches, supports cognitive development and decoding skills. Studies show that systematic syllable instruction improves reading performance and comprehension (Budianti & Wardhani, 2023; Rogde et al.,

2019). Multilingualism in Malaysia presents additional challenges, as children must learn in multiple languages, potentially complicating syllable decoding (Yusoff, 2020).

Reading proficiency can be developed through phonology, syllables, reading aloud, and repeated reading (EYFS). The syllable method involves breaking words into consonant-vowel subunits (e.g., “ba,” “ca,” “baca”) to improve decoding and pronunciation. Nurmahanani (2023) stressed the need for diverse methods to enhance fluency, while Novelita (2023) recommended interactive lessons, such as flashcards and games, to maintain attention.

In Malaysia, KSPK promotes a balanced approach to reading. Most government preschools adopt syllable-based methods, while some private preschools use mixed approaches. The syllable method develops phonological skills and decoding ability, enhancing confidence and fluency (Ehri, 2023; Mohammadi, 2022; Jungjohann et al., 2023). Fluency improves reading speed, comprehension, and classroom performance, aligning with KSPK and PERMATA goals.

Syllable methods help children decode, spell, and pronounce words efficiently. Chambrè, Ehri, and Ness (2020) emphasized its impact on reading skills. The approach aligns with phonological awareness theory, which posits that understanding syllables is critical for literacy development. Syllable methods also support multilingual learners, facilitating transfer between home and instructional languages (Larson et al., 2020). Teachers implement interactive materials such as visual aids, flashcards, and games to enhance engagement (Neaum, 2022).

Phonological awareness theory underpins the syllable method, highlighting the importance of recognizing phonological units for decoding and reading success (Milankov et al., 2021). Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller et al., 2019) suggests that breaking words into syllables reduces cognitive load, aiding memory and fluency. Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory emphasizes social interaction and scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to support learning, with teacher and parent collaboration enhancing reading outcomes (Gauvain, 2020; Margolis, 2020; Hamid & Purwanti, 2020; Daniel et al., 2019).

Teachers face challenges such as limited training, large class sizes, and insufficient resources, particularly in rural areas (Ann, 2019; Chand, 2023; Shaari et al., 2021). Continuous professional development is essential to maintain teaching quality (Dhamotharan & Loh, 2019). Parents also encounter difficulties, including limited time, knowledge, and multilingual barriers, especially in low socio-economic households (Vadivel et al., 2023; Fischer et al., 2023; Davis-Kean et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2021; Yusoff, 2022). Addressing these challenges requires government support, targeted training, accessible materials, and parent engagement, ensuring children achieve literacy outcomes as outlined in KSPK and the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025).

3. Methodology

This study examines the effectiveness of the syllable method in enhancing reading proficiency among preschool children. A qualitative approach was adopted to explore its impact on children’s reading development, teachers’ instructional practices, and parents’ support at home, capturing nuances that quantitative methods may overlook (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes understanding human experiences through subjective interpretation (Lytovchenko, 2022). Unlike positivism’s focus

on objective measurement, interpretivism aligns with qualitative inquiry by exploring beliefs, perceptions, and lived experiences (Asian Journal of Research in Education and Social Science, 2022). This framework is well-suited for capturing teachers' and parents' perspectives on syllable-based reading instruction.

Qualitative design was chosen for its ability to generate rich, detailed insights through interviews and observations (Marecek & Magnusson, 2020). Descriptive and interpretive analysis (Lindgren et al., 2020) guided data interpretation, with semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis used to identify key patterns in participant responses (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Purposive sampling was used to select 14 participants comprising seven preschool teachers and seven parents from Hulu Langat. Teachers contributed professional insights into literacy instruction, while parents shared observations of their children's reading progress at home (Ligita et al., 2019). This non-probability sampling method ensured participants had relevant experience with syllable-based methods (Bhardwaj, 2019).

Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to elaborate freely while keeping discussions focused (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Teachers described their instructional strategies, and parents detailed their children's reading development. Open-ended questions encouraged depth of response, though occasional reluctance to share was noted (Boşnak, 2022).

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes in interview transcripts (Castro-Filho & Bias, 2022). Coding and categorization facilitated the interpretation of patterns related to the method's effectiveness. Triangulation, which drew from both interviews and observations, strengthened the validity of findings (Noble & Heale, 2019).

Informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure voluntary participation and confidentiality (Ajemba & Arene, 2022). Participants reviewed transcripts for accuracy, and anonymity was maintained throughout the research process (Rowlands, 2021).

The study has several limitations. First, the small participant pool limits the generalizability of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, interpretations may be influenced by researcher subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Finally, the results are context-specific and may not be applicable to all preschool settings (Zhuang et al., 2019). Despite these constraints, the study provides meaningful insights into syllable-based reading instruction and offers a foundation for future research in more diverse educational contexts.

4. Findings

This study examined the effectiveness of the syllable method in enhancing reading proficiency among preschool children and its impact on academic performance, while also identifying challenges faced by teachers and parents in its implementation. A qualitative approach was adopted, involving semi-structured interviews with preschool teachers and parents from the same preschool. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes, with interview questions designed to align with the research objectives. Respondents received questionnaires beforehand to ensure clarity and preparedness.

Two main themes emerged: (1) the effectiveness of syllable methods, and (2) challenges and barriers to implementation.

Theme 1: Effectiveness of Syllable Methods

Teachers and parents agreed that the syllable method improves children's ability to break words into syllables, blend consonants and vowels, enhance reading fluency, recognize words, and build confidence. Teachers commonly incorporated daily reading routines, breaking syllables by consonant-vowel pairing, and using storybooks. Some stressed the need for children to first master vowels and consonants before progressing to reading. Others incorporated interactive games, such as maze syllable activities, to sustain engagement and improve pronunciation skills.

Parents supported these practices by supervising homework, providing materials, engaging in revision, and offering additional activities at home. Those with limited resources often borrowed materials from teachers. Success stories from both groups highlighted children's ability to decode and blend syllables into words, with some achieving reading fluency before age six. Parents noted increased readiness for primary school and greater self-confidence.

Theme 2: Challenges and Barriers

Teachers identified short attention spans, limited alphabet recognition, lack of parental involvement, insufficient prior knowledge, and time constraints as key obstacles. While some children focused well if they were interested, others lost attention during turn-taking reading. Teachers also cited limited training in syllable-based reading methods. Parental challenges included lack of guidance, insufficient resources, and limited knowledge of the method. Some parents attended private reading courses, while others suggested schools provide training sessions or workshops.

Both groups emphasized that consistent parental involvement and adequate guidance significantly enhance outcomes. Socio-economic factors influenced access to materials and training, underscoring the need for free or subsidized programs to ensure equitable opportunities.

The findings confirm that the syllable method is effective in improving preschoolers' reading proficiency by systematically breaking down and blending syllables. However, successful implementation requires overcoming challenges related to resources, training, and parental guidance. These results align with existing literature on the importance of structured reading strategies and collaborative support between teachers and parents. Future research should explore diverse, engaging classroom activities to sustain children's attention and develop practical solutions to address implementation barriers, ensuring the method's long-term effectiveness.

5. Discussion and Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that the syllable method is an effective strategy for improving reading proficiency among preschool children. Teachers and parents observed that children became more adept at decoding words, blending consonants and vowels, recognizing syllables, and reading with greater fluency and confidence. Daily reading routines, interactive syllable games, and story-based activities effectively sustained engagement and facilitated skill mastery. These findings align with phonological awareness theory, which emphasizes the importance of recognizing and manipulating sound units for reading development (Milankov et al., 2021), and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, highlighting the role of social interaction and scaffolding in early literacy learning (Gauvain, 2020).

Despite its effectiveness, several challenges were noted. Teachers reported limited training in syllable-based instruction, time constraints, and students' short attention spans (Ann, 2019; Chand, 2023). Parents highlighted barriers such as lack of guidance, insufficient materials, and limited understanding of the method (Vadivel et al., 2023; Roberts et al., 2021). Socio-economic factors also influenced access to resources, suggesting a need for equitable support to ensure all children benefit from early literacy interventions (Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2013–2025; UNICEF Malaysia, 2019).

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, teacher training programs should emphasize syllable-based reading strategies, interactive classroom activities, and techniques to manage attention and engagement (Taha et al., 2020; Dharmotharan & Loh, 2019). Second, parental involvement should be promoted through workshops, guidance materials, and home-based reading support, particularly in low-resource households (Daniel et al., 2019; Hamid & Purwanti, 2020). Third, preschools should integrate systematic syllable instruction into literacy curricula, complemented by regular assessment to identify children at risk of literacy difficulties (Budianti & Wardhani, 2023; Pfof et al., 2019). Future research could explore long-term outcomes, multilingual applications, and innovative strategies to maintain motivation and attention during early reading activities (Yusoff, 2020; Neaum, 2022).

In conclusion, the syllable method provides a structured, evidence-based approach to developing early reading skills. With adequate teacher preparation, engaging instructional activities, and strong parental involvement, it has significant potential to enhance literacy outcomes, improve academic readiness, and foster a lifelong interest in reading among preschool children (Treiman et al., 2019; Blair et al., 2019; Máčajová & Grofčíková, 2019). Implementing these recommendations can help address early literacy gaps in Malaysia and support the goals of KSPK and the national education blueprint.

6. Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to examine the effectiveness of the syllable method and to identify challenges and barriers faced by educators and parents in enhancing reading proficiency among preschool children. The syllable method provides a structured approach for children to learn reading by developing decoding skills and breaking down syllables. Mastery of these skills enables children to spell words correctly and write them accurately, supporting their overall literacy development.

Children's academic success, however, depends not only on teaching methods but also on active parental involvement. Parents play a crucial role in reinforcing learning, guiding practice at home, and building children's confidence. Collaboration between teachers and parents ensures supportive learning environments that enhance reading proficiency. Addressing challenges requires cooperation with relevant agencies or stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Education, to provide training programs for both teachers and parents. The study highlighted that a lack of training for educators and insufficient parental guidance are significant barriers to effectively implementing the syllable method.

Overall, the findings indicate that the syllable method is a powerful tool for improving reading fluency among preschool children, aligning with the KSPK curriculum, which emphasizes mastery of the 3M (writing, spelling, and counting) before primary school. Continued application of this method, combined with active cooperation between teachers and parents, can foster confidence in capable learners. Providing specialized training for educators and

parents on the syllable method is essential to ensure its effective implementation and long-term benefits for children's literacy development.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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