Trial of Synthetic Phonics extended to Storybook Reading to Improve Reading Skills of Indonesian Third Graders Enrolled in a Bilingual School

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Studies have shown that phonics instruction improves reading skills, with noticeable word recognition and pronunciation results. Despite the intensive use of this method in English countries, phonics has not been introduced or is minimally taught in Indonesian primary schools' English reading classes, where the teaching is mainly focused on text comprehension. This study aims to trial a systematic instruction in synthetic phonics to see whether the trial helps students improve their pronunciation and comprehension skills. Thirty-third graders from an Indonesian bilingual school and their English teachers were selected to participate in a six-month trial of synthetic phonics instruction, extended to a storybook reading programme. Pre- and post-experimental design was employed to measure the trial's effectiveness. Teachers' interviews and students' questionnaires were used to understanding their perspectives on the trial's benefits and feasibility for further implementation. The findings revealed that the trial accelerated students' decoding skills and improved word pronunciation and text comprehension. Another test of a paired sample t-test also highlighted the trial's significance (sig .01). Students also shared their experiences of improved vocabulary, confidence and enjoyment. The teachers agreed on the benefits of the trial. Still, they were unsure how to deliver the instruction in regular classroom sessions since it required long and vigorous direct teaching. Findings from this trial were not generalizable to EFL reading classes in Indonesian primary schools as it was tried out in a bilingual school where phonics was minimally introduced. However, the findings generally indicated the program's feasibility which can be re-tested.

INTRODUCTION

Previous studies in ESL/EFL reading indicated that reading was an efficient way for language learners to become good readers, develop better writing styles and improve vocabulary and grammar mastery, also the only way to become good spellers (Krashen, 2004, 2007; Lee, 2007; Cho & Krashen, 2019). Thus, teaching reading is essential and needs to be directly taught in ESL/EFL classroom learning. For Indonesian primary

school students, who are mostly beginners, learning how to read English texts accurately will help them learn good pronunciation and develop vocabulary. These two basic language skills will help their later stages of learning, as prior studies have claimed that young learners need to be explicitly taught rules about how words are written and spelt before working on text comprehension (Tierney & Readence, 2005; Torgerson et al., 2006, 2018). This study worked with Indonesian third-graders aged 8 to 9 years old who studied in a bilingual school where English was one of the instructional languages. Thus, the students were familiar with active English use at school. Previous studies pointed out that children under 12 years old are considered the most age-efficient in learning good pronunciation since they were recognized to be more proficient at imitating correct sounds of different languages than were adults (Kuhl, 2004, 2010, 2011). Consequently, it would be best to teach young learners to build their initial SL/FL construction from the phonological domain while at their optimal brain development (Kuhl, 2010). Children achieve a near-native speaker's accuracy in pronunciation when they have been given opportunities to learn SL/FL and have been provided with adequate exposure to the targeted language (Öztüfekçi & Dikilitaş, 2020)

This study was initially prompted by an urgent need to help Indonesian primary school EFL learners improve their reading skills. The students were engaged in phonics learning during the trial, which was then extended to storybook reading activities. Overall, Indonesian schools still follow traditional EFL learning instruction in which reading is just a part of text reading, focusing on comprehension skills, language features and vocabulary learning (Cahyono & Widiati, 2006; Nurkamto et al., 2021). Pronunciation was not a part of the targeted skills in reading. Moreover, Indonesian teachers' teaching pronunciation still lacked emphasis (Moedjito, 2016) despite this skill being essential to determine a language learner's communicative competence (Hismanoglu, 2006; Vafaei, 2013). To address this problem, this study adopted synthetic phonics instruction that introduced reading aloud to help the students with word pronunciation through sounding out letters and their associated words. Reading was also often seen as a classroom drill rather than a pleasurable activity in Indonesian English classrooms. Thus, this study also sought to establish enjoyable reading activities. Previous research has highlighted the importance of pleasurable learning in ESL/EFL reading to enhance language acquisition (Cho & Krashen, 2019). More studies pointed out the importance of enjoyment in learning to arouse students' interest (Ainley & Hidi, 2014) and promote classroom engagement (Ainley, 2012). The need for enjoyment became more profound in connection to primary school students who practically favour fun language learning (Pinter, 2011, 2017), as language learning can be more meaningful and productive when students enjoy the activities. Necessarily, an efficient approach to teaching reading should be based on students' needs, interests and preferences while aiming at targeted skills, which was also examined in this study.

Literature Review

Synthetic Phonics Based- Reading Instruction

In finding the best way to teach young learners to read, teachers need to understand the processes employed by skilled readers. Previous studies explained how proficient

readers recognize and pronounce written words using phonological recoding to make meaning. This process should be a fundamental approach in which young students learn to read and develop skills to become skilled readers (Stuart, 2006). Some reviews also produced considerable evidence that teaching young learners to read requires every learner to receive excellent reading instruction covering phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency (Ehri, 2005b; Rose, 2006; Ehri, 2020). Hence, the principle of instruction in Phonics teaching reading of decoding words and letters is considered the first step in teaching young learners to read.

Synthetic phonics teaches students the alphabet code directly, systematically and discretely. The alphabet code is a reversible relationship between the phonemes (the minor discernible sounds in spoken words) and the graphemes (spellings). Thus, synthetic phonics starts with introducing the 26 alphabet letter names and sounds (letters – sounds association). Then, learners are taught to associate a spoken sound with a letter or letter pair to sound out corresponding words (McGuinness, 2004). Students repeatedly sound out and blend words through a whole process called decodable words that must be explicitly taught (Tierney & Readence, 2005; Ehri, 2020). This practice of basic phonetic rules (small units) helps students sound out words correctly. However, some words that do not follow the regular Phonics principles must be memorized. In systematic phonics, those words are called tricky ones, and the whole-word reading is applied to tricky ones (Ehri, 2005a). About half of all the English words cannot be pronounced using commonly taught Phonics. Therefore, in teaching reading based on code reading, both Phonics (letter-sound associations) and word reading (*sight word*) are employed together and classified as *systematic Phonics instruction or synthetic Phonics* (Ehri, 2020).

In connection to making meaning of the texts (comprehension), phonics advocates contend that children will understand the meaning after decoding the text correctly. Children who follow decoding and letter instructions will realize that there are codes to reading and that most words can be worked out (Fletcher-Flinn & Thompson, 2010; Torgerson et al., 2018)**.** Another study posited that good phonics teaching helps accelerate learners' phonological awareness and prompts their skills in lexical restructuring, which further allows them to work on text comprehension (Wang, 2019). Following the systematic phonics instruction and those studies above, the last process in reading instruction should be relating letter/sound associations and word reading to the larger scale of reading printed data in broader contexts. This reading activity can be done in book reading, as was adopted in this trial study.

Storybooks Reading in Synthetic Phonics

Storybook reading enables the teacher to interact with students and encourage them to pay more attention to text print and attend to illustrations and enjoy the story. Phonics is considered more efficient when it is applied in the context of engaging and meaningful literature. Teaching phonics involving storybooks was designed to endorse phonic knowledge during reading because decoding was embedded in the context in which the skills were continuously used, thus stimulating the generalization of taught knowledge. Embedding phonics in story reading was expected to nurture students' ability to read

words in related texts and raise comprehension through engaging reading activities (Brady, 2011). To become good readers, students need extensive opportunities to independently practise and apply strategies in high-success reading materials (Allington & Baker, 2007). Recommended storybooks for students under twelve years old are books that address exciting topics for young students while accommodating their developmental needs. For example, storybooks that illustrate moral concepts like friendship, bravery, loyalty, happiness, sadness, exclusion, and courage might empower primary school children to make meaningful connections to their own life. This study used the Oxford phonics reading series that met the standard mentioned above. It was hoped that the use of native English books would be valuable for the students to explore English ethics and culture. The students might use the knowledge they learn to compare with those in their environment to work on comprehension.

Synthetic Phonics instruction requires teachers to make lesson plans and materials designed to address explicit and small-group instructions, followed by intensive knowledge/skill exercises. Teachers should clearly state the skill being taught and then model the activity they want students to emulate. Students should practice the skill under the teacher's supervision until they become proficient. Gradually, as their mastery increases, students can practice the skill in pairs or individually (Ehri, 2005b, 2020). In a more extended text/book reading, the teacher should encourage automatic performance from the children to assess how far they can apply their current phonics skills in their reading (Fletcher-Flinn and Thompson, 2010). Book reading can be started while children still learn to sound the letters and do word reading. Thus, the students can practically begin exploring books while they are still learning Phonics. As they progress, they can develop their reading skills by reading a wide variety of children's literature, depending on their phonics levels, which can be enhanced with reading enrichment materials. Adopting the principles of teaching phonics, the trial was conducted inclusively in the classroom sessions where the teachers directly taught phonics following the pre-designed lessons' syllabus. The direct instruction was then followed by extended storybook reading activities where the teachers were also present, supervising and assisting the students. The students were left to independently read in voluntary reading, where they were encouraged to venture into further reading based on their book interest and reading preferences. Teachers were still present around for assistance.

EFL Teaching Reading in Indonesian Schools and Phonics Instruction Prospect

Reading is one of four language skills targeted by the English curriculum in the Indonesian educational system. Thus, reading is always a part of English classroom learning instruction (Alwasilah, 2013). In the science of reading, there were two main streams in the approaches to English teaching reading: the *code-emphasis approach*, which focuses on breaking the alphabetic code; and the *meaning-emphasis approach*, which focuses on meaningful units (Weaver, 2009; William et al., 2009). In the context of EFL learning in Indonesia, teaching reading focuses more on aiming at comprehension skills rather than learning to accurately sound out English words (Cahyono, 2006; Muhassin et al., 2021). More practices were developed aiming for

comprehension skills involving vocabulary mastery (Nurkamto et al., 2021) and practical strategies such as a fix-up strategy (Muhassin et al., 2021), the think-aloud method (Pradana, 2017), and frequent techniques of evaluating, organizing, visualizing, and summarizing (Kissau & Hiller, 2013). Still, those research-based practices had not yet been considered, including teaching pronunciation in reading instructions.

The reading aloud strategies advocated by previous studies (Pradana, 2017; Ledger & Merga, 2018) still focused on comprehension skills even though they technically practice word reading (reading aloud). This method might suit older students or adults who have mastered L1 reading and have aimed for comprehension skills in ESL/EFL reading. However, reading aloud can be associated with the chance also to learn accurate pronunciation, which, for children, would be beneficial as previously mentioned that young learners tend to learn faster in sounding out foreign sounds/words than adult learners (Kuhl, 2004, 2010, 2011). Accordingly, this study tried to accommodate those young students' needs to improve their reading skills by adopting and modifying the existing practices of English teaching reading, aiming for both pronunciation and comprehension skills. Besides, texts can be understood when the readers apply complicated skills covering vocabulary knowledge, word awareness and fluency (Brady, 2011), which practically involve both codes- and meaning- emphasize approaches.

Acquiring accurate pronunciation in foreign language learning is vital for successful communication skills. However, a previous study indicated that pronunciation is considered the most challenging area in teaching English in Indonesia (Moedjito, 2016). The study further suggested that the primary source of difficulty came from a lack of appropriate instruction and classroom sessions which should be allocated explicitly for pronunciation learning. The teacher participants of the study then voiced that including teaching pronunciation starting from code-reading approaches is essential to learning accurate English speaking. This study has tried to address this need by implementing phonics instruction at the primary school level, where the students are just starting to learn to read. The participating school was a bilingual school where English was used as language instruction, apart from *Bahasa Indonesia,* the other language used. English was taught three days a week, with each day's class duration being 70 minutes. Thus, the students received 210 minutes of instruction weekly, encompassing all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, following the coursebook's syllabi.

The students' English classroom used the coursebook series *Our Discovery Island*, published by Pearson Longman. The series consisted of a teacher's book and a students' book accompanied by an activity book. Phonics was briefly introduced in each book chapter. As expressed by the teachers, they had no ideas on how to connect phonics learning into text reading activities as the book just introduced several letters and some corresponding words. As a result, the teachers focused on reading texts and limitedly taught phonics as they felt they were unrelated to the reading texts they were learning. Teachers also focused on text comprehension during the reading and on the worksheets done following the reading. The most noticeable drawback was that the students often found it difficult to accurately pronounce words during text reading aloud as they

contained a vast vocabulary and many complex sentences. Consequently, accurate word sounds were frequently neglected in the more extensive text, such as story reading or reading passages.

The trial used one of the three weekly English classroom sessions to deliver the pre-designed synthetic phonics instruction. The session aimed to equip students with basic phonics skills before expanding into extended reading activities. The extended storybook reading was done in the school's one-hour weekly free-reading time and break times between classes. Self-selected and voluntary reading activities were encouraged during those hours for the students to exercise their reading skills, while the teachers were made available to supervise and help. This study was expected to benefit both theories and practices connected to EFL teaching reading, particularly concerning Indonesian primary school children English language learners. Theoretically, it was hoped to support the current views of comprehensive literacy approaches initially applied in L1 learning of native English speakers and tried in EFL classroom learning. Practically, it was hoped that the results of this study would inspire teachers to creatively modify and develop reading instructions based on students' needs and interests while also being agile in increasing situational opportunities. For example, the teacher can optimize break times at school to establish the free-reading and voluntary reading. With the current English curriculum in Indonesian schools consuming most classroom sessions, teachers needed to find alternative approaches to develop feasible methods in EFL teaching reading.

Research Questions

This study examined the significance of phonics instruction extended to storybook reading in improving the Indonesian primary school students' reading skills, focusing on pronunciation and comprehension skills. This study also aimed to promote students' interest in reading based on voluntary actions and pleasures to enjoy the learning. The programme offered hundreds of graded storybooks following the standard of synthetic phonics instruction and reading enrichment materials from the Oxford phonics reading series and other relevant children's stories enrichment materials. Four research questions were employed to guide the investigation, as follows:

1. Did the trial of synthetic phonics instruction extended to storybook reading improve students' pronunciation skills?

2. Did the trial of synthetic phonics instruction extended to storybook reading improve students' comprehension skills?

3. How did the trial help improve the students' reading skills from both the students' and teachers' perspectives?

4. What did teachers think about the possible implementation of synthetic phonics instruction if it was integrated into the school's English curriculum?

METHOD

This trial study employed mixed-method quantitative and qualitative inquiries in a small sample and an individual case group of participants. Quantitatively, the pre-and post-experimental design assessed the programme's effectiveness in improving Indonesian

third graders' pronunciation (word reading) and text comprehension skills. The experimental design consisted of two measures, pre-test and post-test, tested on the same experiment group of student participants. Qualitatively, open-ended questionnaires were administered to the students, and interviews were carried out with the teachers to examine their perspectives on the programme's benefits. Teachers were also asked to comment on the programme's practicality in integrating into the school's current English curriculum.

Participants

This study was conducted in a bilingual Indonesian primary school. The school's consent was obtained before the participants' recruitment. The selected grade was based on the school's permission and the availability of the students and the English teachers. Thirty students from the third graders' class were selected with two respective English teachers. All consents from participating teachers, students and their parents were obtained before the data collection process.

The students were between eight to nine years old and had learned English since they entered the bilingual school (grade 1). 13 out of 30 students had started learning English in their preschool times by enrolling in a preschool that offered English conversation. The two participating teachers were the English classroom teacher and the English project teacher. The classroom teacher was 34 years old female who was in charge of delivering the classroom lessons. The English project teacher was 28 years old male who led the students' practical assignments, outside classroom projects, and group works. The classroom teacher held a Bachelor's degree in English Education and a teaching certificate and experienced eight years teaching English in primary school. She was also pursuing her master's degree in English Language Education. The project teacher held both bachelor' and master' degrees in English Literature and a teaching certificate and had taught English in primary school for four years.

Research Procedure and Data Collection Process

This study was conducted in one semester of the Indonesian academic year (24 weeks). There were six days of school active days applied by the school. One session (a week) of the students' English classroom (70 minutes) was used to deliver synthetic phonics instruction. The storybook reading used 60 minutes of the school free-reading time run every Thursday morning, and 45 minutes of break times between lessons every school day. Thus, the students were engaged in storybook reading for around 330 minutes every week following the 24 weeks of the trial. Below are the procedures for the data collection process.

Week 1: Planning a systematic instruction of synthetic phonics with the teachers

The researcher worked with the English teachers in planning all the materials and syllabi, classroom sessions and the period of instruction.

Week 2: Assessing the students' reading level and diagnosing their reading problems

Students were assessed on their reading level using the Oxford phonics reading series to decide the books' reading level used for the pre-test. All six levels of the phonics book series were tested for each student participant. The graded book for the pre-test was

decided based on the current reading skills of most students. The assessment was also used to identify the students' reading problems covering pronunciation, word recognition and comprehension.

Week 3: Pre-test

Students were tested on two aspects of reading skills, word reading (pronunciation) and text comprehension. Each student was required to read a list of words corresponding to letters' sounds they had learnt in their regular reading lessons. The list of tested words represented 42 sounds of phonetic letters, each followed by three corresponding words. The reading test was individually recorded and graded based on the percentage of how many words they were able to sound correct. The comprehension test was held together in their English classroom for about 40 minutes. The class was presented with the same storybook, a copy of *Dolphin Rescue*, Oxford Phonic series level 5. Students were given 15 minutes to read and 15 minutes to answer ten multiple-choice questions related to the story's content. The scoring was measured by the number of correct answers the students gave.

Weeks 4 –15: 12-weeks of phonic instructions

There were five steps of teaching which were delivered following the standard systematic instruction of Phonics (Ehri, 2020). These were letters and sounds recognition, blending, identifying sounds in a word, learning tricky words, and book reading. The Phonics teaching was delivered in direct instruction using classroom procedures of the P.P.P. model: presentation, practices and production.

Weeks 8 - 19: 12 weeks of self-selected and supervised reading

The students were engaged in a reading activity for twelve weeks in which they could read any storybook based on their interests. They could do this during break times between lessons during the school hours and during a one-hour reading time run by the school every Thursday morning. Hundreds of Oxford phonics reading series and graded storybooks were offered to the students through the school library and the students' classroom library. Teachers joined and supervised the activity while encouraging the students to apply their phonics knowledge to their book reading. Teachers also provided help when needed. The reading was done individually or with peers in a group.

Weeks 20 - 23: Four weeks of voluntary reading and assessing students' reading level

Students were encouraged to continue their reading activities following the earlier 12-weeks reading programme. There was no brief revision of phonics anymore from the teachers, and the teachers occasionally came to observe the students and assisted them upon necessary. This voluntary reading was to see the students' commitment to their tasks and encourage them to become independent readers.

Week 24: Post-test, questionnaire administration, and teachers' interviews

Students' reading level was assessed to decide the book's reading level for the post-test. The decision was based on the reading skills of most students. The students' reading

skills covering word reading (pronunciation) and text comprehension were again measured. The alternative sounds (tricky words) were included in the post-test (see Appendices C and D*), which were previously excluded in the pre-test. For the comprehension test, students were tested using the story of *The Hairy Scary Monster*, Oxford phonics series level 6. Students were given 15 minutes to read and another 15 minutes to answer ten multiple-choice questions. Both tests were graded based on how many correct answers the students had.

After the post-test, an open-ended questionnaire was administered to all participants asking the students to reflect on their experience in joining the trial, particularly their experience in storybook reading, and how it helped them in their regular reading lessons. Below are the questionnaire's items:

What do you think about our trial reading programme? Did you enjoy it?

How did you enjoy the programme?

Does the programme help you improve your reading skills?

How does the programme help you encounter your regular reading lessons?

The students were free to answer the questions in the English or Indonesian language. The teachers helped explain the questions to help the students understand the intended meaning of the questions. The teachers encouraged the students to elaborate their answers by reflecting on what they felt and learnt from the programme. During the questionnaire, the teachers were present to help the students when needed.

Interviews with the two teachers were carried out after the programme finished. The items below guided the conversations with the teachers.

What do you think about our trial of synthetic Phonics instruction in the class?

Did you think the instruction and the storybook reading helped students improve their pronunciation skills? How?

Did you think the instruction and the storybook reading helped students improve their comprehension skills? How?

Did the instruction and the book reading help you teach the students to read English texts accurately? How?

What problems did you face when you delivered the Phonics instruction and the book reading activity?

What do you think about the possibility of the instruction being integrated into the students' regular English classroom sessions?

The conversation was recorded and transcribed. Some teachers' comments in Bahasa Indonesia were translated.

Analysis

Students' scores from pre-test and post-test were analyzed using descriptive statistics to see the scores' improvement. Paired sample *t-test* was run to examine the trial's

significance in improving the students' reading skills, while the results from the questionnaire were collected and analyzed using thematic analysis. All responses in *Bahasa Indonesia* were translated to English. Salient themes were extracted to find critical information about students' views on the programme's benefits. Students' comments were summarised to make it easier to understand their intended meaning, and the researcher also discussed the purpose of their comments before making conclusions and quotations. Additionally, data acquired from teachers' interviews were examined to support the findings relevant to the benefits and practicality of the trial programme

FINDINGS

Test Results

Word reading (pronunciation) test

Table 1
Frequency descriptive statistics – word reading test

Word reading		Pre-test scores	Post-test scores
N	Valid	30	30
	Missing	0	0
Mean		67.63	88.50
Median		67.00	90.00
Mode		65	90
Variance		18.240	12.948
Range		16	12
Minimum		58	81
Maximum		74	93

Source: Primary data processed, 2021

The table shows that all statistical figures examined from the test results have considerably changed after the reading programme. Students' average score (*Mean*) rose from 67.63 to 88.50. *The median* score also increased from 67 to 90, and the most frequent score (*mode*) improved from 65 to 90, which implied more students gained good scores. Before joining the trial, the minimum score shown by the population of participants was 58, and the maximum score achieved was 74. These figures significantly increased after the students joined the trial, with the lowest score being 81 and 93. The values of *variance* and *range* were shown to decline, further indicating that scores gaps among student participants were decreasing. In other words, the trial was adequate for most student participants to help them improve their pronunciation skills, as further highlighted by the *t-test* results below.

Table 2
Paired sample t-test of word reading test

Paired samples t-test					
Word reading (N = 30)		Mean	Dif. Mean	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Score pre-test	67.63	20.87	3.433	.000
	Score post-test	88.50			

Source: Primary data processed, 2021

The *Mean* column in the table displays the average difference between the average scores of student participants achieved in the pre-test and post-test, showing a considerable increase at 20.87 points. The *t* statistic (3.433) signified a significant improvement in the pre-test and post-test results at .000 or under a 1 % significant level (*sig .01*). In other words, the test scores were getting higher for the overall participant population, and the change in the scores was consistent across the test subjects (student participants).

Text comprehension test

Table 3
Frequency descriptive statistics - comprehension test

Comprehension		Pre-test scores	Post-test scores
N	Valid	30	30
	Missing	0	0
Mean		41.67	84.33
Median		40.00	80.00
Mode		30	80
Variance		193.678	128.851
Range		50	40
Minimum		20	60
Maximum		70	100

Source: Primary data processed, 2021

The table above shows that all statistical figures for the comprehension test have significantly improved, just like the word reading test. The *mean* and *median* scores values have increased from 41.67 to 84 (*mean*) and 40 to 80 (*median*). Students' most frequent scores (*mode*) had risen almost triple, from 30 to 80. The minimum score was also increased threefold (20 to 60), while the maximum score was 70 to 80. On the reverse, figures for variance and range were shown to decline, indicating more homogeneity in the population's figures in terms of all students' scoring achievements. The double and triple increase in the comprehension figures suggested that the programme was even more significant in improving students' comprehension skills than pronunciation. It might imply that the students were more adapted to comprehension-targeted skills than pronunciation in English reading classes. The book reading programme also it suggested helped them significantly build up their comprehension skills. Below are the significant test results to see the trial's effectiveness on the students' comprehension skills.

Table 4
Paired samples t-test of comprehension test

Paired sample t-test					
Comprehension test (N = 30)		Mean	Dif. Mean	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Score pre-test	41.67	42.667	12.990	.000
	Score post-test	84.33			

Source: Primary data processed, 2021

The doubled increase of the mean value of whole student participants (41.67 to 84.33) strongly signified that the programme was very significant in improving the students' comprehension skills (at *sign .01*), addressing a whole population of participants.

Questionnaire Results

All 30 student participants responded to the questions as expected. Those responses were collected and thematically analyzed. Two perspectives were identified based on the recurring themes found in the students' responses. *First,* students' perspectives toward the trial program were associated with their positive enjoyment experience. *Second,* students' perspectives on the effectiveness of the trial related to their improved skills. Each view was further classified based on the students' comments' salient themes. The summary of the themes derived from students' responses to each question is presented in the following table. Some quotations from the students are included to highlight the recurring themes.

Table 5
Students' perspectives on trial (positive experience of enjoyment)

No.	Questions	Themes	Number of responses (Out of 30)	Samples of students' comments
Students' perspective on the programme (positive experience of enjoyment)				
1.	What do you think about our trial reading programme? Did you enjoy it?	really enjoy	13	"I am really enjoying my reading program."
		enjoy	14	I enjoy. It is more enjoyable than reading in my English lessons."
		Just so-so	3	"Sometimes I am lazy to read, so I feel neutral".
2.	How did you enjoy the programme?	Interesting storybooks	25	"The books are interesting. I like reading storybooks".
		Free to choose the books	21	It is very enjoyable. I can read any books I like".
		Individual reading	15	"I like choosing books myself and reading alone".
		Peers' reading	17	"It is so fun. I can choose any books and read with friends".

Source: Primary data processed, 2021

Most students (27) commented that they enjoyed the reading activities, indicating the programme's efficiency in reading for pleasure. The students stated four reasons that made the trial programme enjoyable for them. Of the four reasons, their interests in the storybook were suggested to be the main factor of most students (25 responses). The following factor, which was also stated by most students (21 answers), was the freedom to choose the books based on their interests. More than half of the student participants said that students also seemed to enjoy reading with a small group of friends (peers' reading), as stated by more than half of the student participants (17). Half of the participants (15) also expressed that they enjoyed reading independently. The following table summarises the collective responses of students indicating their opinions on the trial's effectiveness.

Table 6
Students' perspectives on the effectiveness of the trial

No.	Questions	Themes	Number of responses (Out of 30)	Samples of students' comments
3.	Does the programme help you improve your reading skills?	Very helpful	9	"I like the program. It is very helpful to improve my reading and understanding".
		helpful	17	"It helps me improve my reading. I can read better".
		Just so-so	4	"I think, just so-so. Sometimes it helps, sometimes it does not help my reading skills in the class".
4.	How does the programme help you encounter your regular reading lessons?	Text comprehension	23	I learn many new words, which helps me understand what I read in the book".
		Vocabulary improvement	21	"I read more, so I learn more words and their meaning".
		Pronunciation	15	"I now can read many new words in English correctly".
		Confidence	19	"I feel more confident in my English lessons".
		Lessons Enjoyment	15	"I think I more enjoy reading in my English lessons at school now".

Source: Primary data processed, 2021

Twenty-six students mentioned that the programme was helpful or very helpful in improving their reading skills, while only the remaining four students felt it was just moderately beneficial. These positive revelations mirrored the students' increased scores. Improved comprehension was cited by most students (23) and followed by vocabulary mastery (21) and increased pronunciation skills (15 students). Many students disclosed two positive learning experiences from the affective domain: their improved confidence (19) and enjoyment (15) when they encountered reading in their English lessons. The findings from the questionnaire even further showed the benefits of the trial, which covered more skills apart from comprehension and pronunciation.

Interview Results

Both teachers practically agreed on the benefits of the trial in helping the students improve their pronunciation and reading skills. Phonics instruction taught in the classroom was suggested to have influenced the students' accurate pronunciation of words, as mentioned by the project teacher below.

> "The instruction focuses on sounding out letters and words accurately. Something that our current English curriculum does not pay much attention to it. It is important to learn proper English, and the instruction helps the students a lot".

The English classroom teacher even emphasized the programme's benefits for the students' accurate speaking skills, thus not only helping their reading targeted skills.

> "We rarely paid attention to letters and words pronunciation before. My students learned proper pronunciation with this systematic interaction. It helped a lot when we aim for accurate English speaking, not only for reading".

As for comprehension skills, both teachers highlighted that word recognition and book reading helped the students improve their text comprehension, as quoted from the project teacher below.

> "The instruction was designed for both reading aloud and extended to book reading. The students have learnt more words during the phonics instruction. Then they apply their word recognition skills to read longer texts and books. It helped them a lot in building up comprehension skills".

When both teachers asked their general opinions on the instructions, the English classroom teacher said,

> "It was good. The audio materials were helpful. It took time for me to learn the instruction first because I want to make sure I teach my students the right way".

The teacher's comment above implied that training/practice might be needed for teachers to deliver the instruction properly. The use of native speakers' recording materials was also suggested to help the students learn accurate English pronunciation and help the teachers provide the materials.

Responding to similar questions about the instruction and the trial, the project teacher mentioned his perspective on students' learning experience.

> "I like the trial. It was fun. We were doing something different in reading classes. It should be continued. I think many students like the phonics lessons, especially when there are songs and singing involved."

He further explained that he had no problems with the instruction and emphasized his opinion on the trial's prospect of integrating into the school's current English curriculum, as quoted below.

> "I don't have any problem. The instruction is easy to follow. I think we can adjust the workload in our normal reading sessions by breaking down the syllabus to fit the current timetable. Or we can use outside classroom activities. Besides, our school has free reading time, and book reading is strongly encouraged."

On the other hand, the English classroom teacher expressed her doubt about implementing the instruction into the regular classroom sessions even though she agreed with its necessity. She also thought about the possible training that needed to be done for teachers to deliver the instruction, as she said below:

> "The instruction is feasible and beneficial. However, I am still unsure how to fit the instruction into our current English timetable. There should be pre-arrangement before since it seems that Phonics instruction needs its sessions. I think the teachers also need to be trained first. We are new with this systematic synthetic Phonics Instruction."

(All quotations above were translated and summarised from the interviews with the teachers).

DISCUSSION

All findings from the tests, the students' questionnaire and teachers' interviews pointed out the benefits of the trial to help the students improve their pronunciation and comprehension skills. The pre-post-test design showed a considerable increase in the

students' test scores, which was further validated by the paired *t*-test confirming the trial's significance. Students' responses to the open-ended questionnaire also revealed more aspects of language improvement, encompassing vocabulary mastery, confidence, and lesson enjoyment. All those skills are crucial for successful EFL learners. Teachers' interviews revealed that both teachers agreed on the benefits of the trials and expressed positive views on phonics instruction. However, they have different opinions on the practicality of the instruction in the usual students' English classrooms. The English classroom teacher sounded unsure due to the time constraint. At the same time, the project teacher was more optimistic by emphasizing the feasibility of the instruction and pointing out the conducive environment of the school where the current curriculum also supported reading activities.

As previously mentioned, the student participants have learned some primary phonics in their regular English classrooms. However, phonics was taught minimally as a part of reading instruction. There were no designated times and lesson plans to practice the knowledge in more complex reading activities in the students' reading sessions. The trial, however, gave them more opportunities to learn correct letters and word sounds in more systematic instruction and offered more opportunities to exercise the skills in storybook reading. More practices sharpened the students' reading skills, and they would be more aware that the sounds in the English spoken words are practically connected to the sounds of letters that form those words. This way, the students learn to pronounce words more accurately, as pointed out by the previous studies (Ehri, 2005b, 2020; Fletcher-Flinn & Thompson, 2010). The blending practice is not a foreign concept in the Indonesian language; Indonesian children start to learn *Bahasa Indonesia* by also first recognizing alphabetical letters and their sounds. Then they learn to read the words by breaking them down into syllables which consist of consonant (s) and vocal (s) to produce the syllables' sounds. Indonesian words usually consist of two to four syllables which can be read out by sounding out all the syllables in sequence to form a whole word's sound (Wari et al., 2020). Thus, learning to read in English and Bahasa Indonesia are very similar apart from the differences of both languages in sounding out letters and words. The student participants have read fluently in the Indonesian language. These L1 reading skills suggested helping them adapt to phonics instruction quickly and learn the letters' and words' pronunciation quickly. This finding was aligned with previous studies that discovered bilingualist children tended to accelerate their learning of other languages due to their first language learning strategy (Bialystok et al., 2005). This effect occurred even more profoundly in the phonological development of ESL/EFL learners (Öztüfekçi & Dikilitaş, 2020).

Synthetic Phonics includes a whole word reading (*sight word*), particularly for cases of tricky words that do not follow basic phonics rules. The students need to memorize and practice the accurate pronunciation of those words (Ehri, 2005a), as the practice was also included in this trial (see appendices A and D). These word reading practices accelerated the students' vocabulary mastery. As the students further engaged with the longer texts and book reading, they could further exercise their decoding and word reading skills and work out the meaning. The findings practically aligned with previous studies that pointed out book reading helped students learn new vocabulary and generate

the text meaning (Suk, 2016; Chen, 2011). The extended storybook reading allowed the students to apply their phonics knowledge/skills in pleasure reading outside controlled classroom learning. As most students disclosed in the questionnaire, pleasure reading was promoted by storybooks. They enabled students to improve their vocabulary and helped them in comprehension and fluency, as previously also revealed by other studies by Lee (2007, 2019), Nakanishi (2015) and Sholeh et al. (2019).

Constructivism through problem-based learning was also actively approached in this trial by providing the students with a collection of books addressing exciting topics connected to their developmental needs promoting their knowledge construction (Funa & Prudente, 2021). Storybooks that addressed human life, environment, society, and human relationships were also selected to help children make sense of their world and expand their understanding of life and the human condition. Reading materials that students have prior knowledge of and can easily relate to their own experiences suggests attracting their interests, activating their cognitive and affective functioning and helping them comprehend texts (Dong et al., 2022). A previous study also emphasized that integrating students' prior knowledge in learning materials is valuable for promoting students' problem-solving skills (Magaji, 2021). The students' cognitive skills in comprehending the texts were mainly seen in the case of this study.

Results from the open-ended questions supported the test analysis in which 26 out of 30 student participants expressed that the trial was beneficial in improving their reading skills. 23 out of 30 participants explicitly mentioned that they experienced improved understanding of the texts after joining the trial program; 21 students noted their vocabulary improvement. A half number of participants disclosed their experience of improved pronunciation skills. The storybook reading designed in this study encouraged the students to enjoy reading by choosing books based on their interests. By engaging more with reading, the students had plenty of opportunities to exercise their decoding skills, as Ehri (2020) pointed out. Other studies also discovered that free voluntary reading (Krashen, 2011) and self-selected reading (Krashen & Mason, 2015) accelerated vocabulary mastery and comprehension. Voluntary reading was suggested to be more effectively achieved in pleasure reading based on the students' book interest and reading preferences (Cho & Krashen, 2019). The significant increase in the test scores after the students joined the trial provided empirical evidence that the trial considerably helped improve their reading skills, signifying the effectiveness of Phonics instruction, including the extended storybook reading programme.

The students frequently cited some reasons that made them enjoy and become engaged with the trial programme. *First*, their interest in the English storybooks enabled them to enjoy the story and the reading activity. *Second* is the opportunity for them to choose the books freely. The findings followed previous studies about students' better attitudes toward EFL reading when they did it voluntarily and were free to select any reading materials (Cho, 2017). *Third,* they had the chance to do the reading based on their preferences (individually or with peers). The choices of reading activities might prevent students from soon getting bored with the activities. Reading in a group also promoted discussion and engagement (Harmer 2005; Lee, 2019), which students could use to

share their reading skills. Most students recounted their positive experiences during the trial, which further affected their confidence (19 students) and enjoyment (15 students). These findings were aligned with a previous study that claimed fun reading kept students engaged and promoted a prolonged interaction with the book, which later secured their improved reading skills (Cho & Krashen, 2019). Pleasurable voluntary reading also enabled students' self-directed reading, and independent learning, thereby boosting the students' aptitude to become independent readers (Sholeh et al., 2019), as was aimed to be established by the end of this trial.

Pedagogically, storybook reading designed in this study gave an alternative for teachers to systematically teach phonics involving storybook reading to exercise their skills further. Phonics teaching reading is best delivered in direct instruction (Tierney & Readence, 2005), as performed by the teachers during the trial using the pre-constructed syllabus. This method required constant interaction between the students and the teachers. This direct teaching method, added with audio learning materials through songs, music, and stories, and accompanied by picture cards, is suggested to promote classroom engagement, and provide the students with interactive activities to exercise their reading skills further. From the teachers' comments on the efficacy of the instruction, it can be assumed that the instruction did help the teachers teach the students to read English words/texts accurately. They further acknowledged the significance of the instruction to help their students reading skills. As was also found in a previous study about the importance of teaching pronunciation in Indonesian English classrooms (Moedjito, 2016) and the need to explore new methods in teaching comprehension (Nurkamto et al., 2021), the two participating teachers agreed that there were benefits in the phonics instruction. They raised the possibility of integrating it into the school's English curriculum. Additionally, the English classroom teacher pointed out that training for teachers might be needed, and the sessions might be arranged beforehand to fit the current school curriculum.

CONCLUSIONS

The empirical results from this study provided evidence of the trial's significance in improving the students' pronunciation and comprehension skills (*sig .01*). The results were further emphasized by the students' recounting experiences of the trial's effectiveness. They expressed that the trial even helped them improve their vocabulary mastery, confidence, and enjoyment. Interviews with the teachers supported the findings above as they agreed on the benefits of the trial. Their further comments on the efficacy of the instruction brought the possibility of the instruction to be implemented in the students' regular English reading classes. The findings from this study signified ways to implement EFL teaching reading by emphasizing three crucial aspects for successful reading: decoding skills, vocabulary mastery, and comprehension skills. Decoding skills helped students to improve word reading skills and pronounce words accurately. Word recognition from the decoding process enabled the students to learn new words and improve their vocabulary mastery. The students worked further on their comprehension skills when they engaged more in storybook reading and exercised their reading skills. All processes were covered in the synthetic phonics instruction extended to storybook

reading introduced in this trial study. This code- and meaning-emphasized approach was expected to provide students with more holistic reading instruction.

IMPLICATIONS

Phonics teaching reading was rarely introduced in Indonesian schools for reasons including unfamiliarity of the teachers and students with the synthetic Phonics instruction, the insufficient time required to deliver systematic methods of phonics instruction, and teachers' lack of experience in phonics instructional methods. Current approaches to EFL teaching reading in Indonesian schools also focused mainly on comprehension, while pronunciation was less attention in reading classes. This trial aimed to see the effectiveness of phonics instruction while also finding the feasibility of integrating the instruction into the school's current English curriculum. The study's findings might be unique to the bilingual school where this study was conducted; however, it can be assumed the results of the trial had confirmed the feasibility and practicality of synthetic Phonics instruction and the reading programme. The programme could be included in Indonesian primary schools with some pre-arrangement to fit the current curriculum timetable and possibly train teachers.

In developing reading activities, teachers should provide their students with a wide variety of children's literature depending on their phonics levels, enhanced with reading enrichment materials. The inclusion of book reading in synthetic phonics instruction may help teachers develop interactive teaching reading aiming at comprehensive reading skills while also accommodating the students' book interests and preferences. Consequently, teachers should be more creative in using students' interests, learning styles and situational opportunities. This study also revealed that the reading programme should be run based on voluntary, self-selected reading materials, free reading times, and free access to individual and peers' reading. The programme can also be connected to the targeted curriculum for students to relate to their regular English lessons. Thus, teachers would need lesson plans and materials designed for regular reading lessons and the extended reading activities outside classroom sessions.

LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study supports theories on the principles of teaching reading using a comprehensive literacy approach which promotes both decoding and meaning approaches. However, the trial was initially designed as a supplementary reading programme to support the regular English classroom sessions in the bilingual school where the study was conducted. Accordingly, the programme focused on providing enriching materials relevant to the school's English curriculum. It was a research study based on students' needs and aimed at the school's targeted curriculum. In short, this programme was still limited in answering the problems faced by the school. Different conditions and environments may require other solutions which need further research based on need analysis. This study also focused on assessing the effectiveness of the trial and worked with a small number of participants. Future studies that involve more significant numbers of student and school participants with a more extensive reading program are suggested to validate further the significance of the synthetic phonics, and storybook reading advocated in this

study. One of the participating teachers also emphasized that the instruction, particularly the classroom interaction for Phonics, was time-demanding and needed its classroom sessions. Future studies that work on developing EFL reading classes, including phonics and book reading, would be pedagogically beneficial.

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