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Teaching Struggling Readers of English as a Second Language in the Malaysian Classroom

Abstract

Teacher plays an important role in students' reading growth through the implementation of various suitable instructional strategies in the classroom. This study contributes to the existing literature pertaining to the way the teacher worked with the students who were identified as struggling readers of English as a second language (henceforth ESL). This is a qualitative study involving one primary teacher as a research participant. Data was obtained from classroom observations, interviews and documents collection. Inductive analysis was carried out and the process incorporating a co-construction of meaning between the participant responses and the researcher's own understanding. Two main themes emerged in the study namely "involvement" and "challenges". In this paper, one of the themes namely "involvement" that incorporates "classroom environment" and "instructional methods" will be discussed. The findings of this study suggest that the Ministry of Education (henceforth MOE) can look into how support can be given to the teachers to assist them to have more effective teaching strategies in the ESL classroom.

Keywords: ESL Struggling Readers, ESL Classroom, Malaysian Primary Classroom, Teaching Instructions, Classroom Environment, Qualitative Study.

Introduction

Low literacy attainment among ESL primary school students, particularly in reading and writing, has long been a concern (Yunus & Chun, 2016). Children's reading development and attainment is influenced by individuals who surround them, including the teacher. It has been argued that "the principles of sound pedagogy as well as instructional techniques are closely related to the success and failure of language learning" (Murtiningsih, 2014). While there is "no consensus on the most effective way to teach reading" (Mokotedi, 2012), scholars agree that the choice of instructional strategy has an important influence on students in their reading (Mule, 2014). To date, not much study highlights teacher's strategy in the Malaysian ESL primary classroom. For example, Lee (2015) briefly discussed how struggling readers were taught in the ESL classroom and the problems facing the teachers in facilitating those students. Bokhari, Rashid & Chan (2015) also elaborated briefly on the teaching practices and obstacles that

teachers faced while working with struggling readers in the ESL classroom by interviewing the teachers. Additionally, a study to investigate the benefits of phonics instruction to facilitate reading development in ESL struggling readers was conducted by Jamaludin, Alias, Khir, DeWitt & Kenayathula (2016). Another two studies examine the impacts of reading strategies towards ESL students who struggle in reading (Nordin, Rajab, Nor & Ismail, 2019; Thuraisingam, Gopal, Sasidharan, Naimie, & Asmawi, 2017).

Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the literature pertaining to the way the teacher worked with the students to suggest ways in which those students can be supported more effectively. The research question of this study is: How does the teacher work with the struggling readers in the ESL classroom?

Literature Review

Some studies have been conducted to identify effective strategies for ESL students struggling in reading (e.g. Denton, Anthony,

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Parker & Hasbrouck, 2004; Jamaludin et al., 2016; Vaughn et al., 2006). These identify the following suggestions for teaching strategies to support outcomes among young ESL struggling students, including in respect to fluency and comprehension.

1) Explicit Teaching

Young ESL struggling readers' learning can be optimised when literacy skills are taught in a systematic and explicit way (Dubeck, Jukes & Okello, 2012; Gersten & Geva, 2003; Richards-Tutor, Baker, Gersten, Baker & Smith, 2015). Explicit instructions are also identified as direct instructions (Au, 2006) suggesting that students are taught about the concept in a direct way with teachers modelling and demonstrating the concept to the students. When teachers utilise explicit teaching students do not have to infer the lessons that the teacher intends to deliver and can apply the concept taught independently (Au, 2006; Dubeck et al., 2012). The purpose of explicit teaching is also to offer the essential scaffolds students require to understand the concepts taught (Richards-Tutor et al., 2015). Explicit teaching is also explained as teaching and learning that employed focused and deliberate learning. For example, students' attention is drawn into characteristics of English that contrast with their native language (Fashola, Drum, Mayer & Kanget, 1996). The term systematic on the other hand is described as teaching students "in a sequence moving from easiest to most difficult" (Dubeck et al., 2012). According to Rosenshine (1987), in a systematic method of teaching the emphasis is on "proceeding in small steps checking for student understanding and achieving active and successful participation by all students."

2) Phonemic Awareness and Decoding

Phonemes are the first reading component, referring to the smallest units comprising language that are spoken by people (National Reading Panel, 2000). Phonemic awareness is "the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the individual sounds in spoken words" (MOE, 2015). It has been argued that phonemic awareness is the essential precursor to learning phonics efficiently (Savage, 2008). Phonics can be defined as a reading process that "correspondences between graphemes (letters) in written language and phonemes (sounds) in spoken language and how to use this correspondence to read and spell" (Professional Development Service for Teachers (henceforth PDST), n.d). Children at the stage of just beginning to learn to read require the foundational skills of phonemic awareness and phonics

(Vaughn et al., 2006). Students who notice the letters in separation that form words are taught the associated matching sounds. Subsequently, students are encouraged to read unfamiliar words by investigating the separate letters and sounds and blending the individual letters and sounds together. It has been argued, however, that students with issues in decoding skills might not be able to read fluently with phonics instructions, losing focus on comprehending the text (Hartney, 2011; Pey, Min & Wah, 2014).

3) Vocabulary Development

Developing students' vocabulary serves to enrich and extend students' knowledge of words (PDST, n.d). It is believed that developing students' vocabulary also helps promote reading comprehension because, without adequate vocabulary, one is not able to acquire comprehension (Bartlett, 2017; Hartney, 2011; PDST, n.d; Shin & Crandall, 2019). Besides that, Gersten and Geva (2003) and Shin and Crandall (2019) have suggested that explicit and systematic vocabulary instruction is helpful for young ESL students. To this end, pre-teaching particular words and continually engaging the students with those words while reading is perceived as helpful (Denton et al., 2004; Gersten & Geva, 2003). This can be done through meaningful discussions about those words with students (Gersten & Geva, 2003) so as to integrate students' background knowledge and previous experience related to the words (Denton et al., 2004). Additionally, teachers need to provide opportunities for students to use the language, since young ESL students are more successful when they "receive meaningful exposure to language and plenty of opportunities to practice" (Shin & Crandall, 2019). Teachers can encourage students to employ the words in sentences and to answer questions with the target words included as part of their answers (Vaughn, 2006). Similarly, activities such as "crosswords, charades, sketching, and drawing to represent word meanings" (Baker et al., 2014) can also be carried out by the teacher. Such activities aim to increase students' encounter and experiences with the words. In essence, this rests on the belief that words and their definitions need to be taught in context and within the topic that they will be employed, instead of as isolated word lists and meanings. Linking words are particularly important and activities such as a graphic organiser and word family associations can be used to illustrate how words are associated (Baker et al., 2014). Apart from that, solid representations such as pictures, diagrams and video clips can make language that denotes abstract ideas more tangible (Baker et al., 2014).

4) Interactive Teaching

Students' attention needs to be secured and maintained throughout the reading lessons (Gersten & Geva, 2003). Teachers may need to amend activities to suit the needs of ESL struggling students so as to get them engaged with the learning and to extend their task behaviour (Gersten & Geva, 2003). Since children have short attention spans, they need to be exposed to a combination of appropriate activities through the course of teaching and learning sessions (Harmer, 2012). For instance, if a story-reading activity is utilised in a lesson, other activities such as those related to Total Physical Response (TPR), which promotes physical movement, can be used in tandem (Kirkgöz, 2018). Stories, songs, acting out and games are among the activities recommended by as ways of helping young students to learn more effectively. A study by Lee (2015) revealed that when teachers of ESL struggling readers in the Malaysian classroom utilise phonics songs every day students' reading attainment is improved. Scott and Ytreberg (1990) also recommended having a balance between activities conducted in the classroom. These include exercises which have both quiet and noisy activities, a mixture of individual, pair work, group work and whole class activities and teacher-student and student-student activities. Such an approach could possibly attract students' attention and increase the opportunities for learning to take place. The integration of writing activities within ESL reading lessons may also benefit young learners (Clay, 2001; Gersten & Geva, 2003). For example, the writing process facilitates students to write what they have verbalised and help form an association between oral and written language (Clay, 2001). According to Gersten and Geva (2003), an efficient teacher in their study utilised writing activities to strengthen the students' phonological and word attack skills. These activities included taking dictation, employing words in workbooks to build a graphic organiser and composing stories about one's individual life. It was discovered that the students appeared to love the activities that helped to illustrate their knowledge of phonics. In addition to that, Gersten and Geva (2003) further argued that another way to promote interactive teaching is by providing students with time to respond to questions posed in the lessons. Besides that, students' answers and thoughts shared in the classroom, as well as experiences known by the teacher, should be selected and incorporated into lessons (Gersten & Geva, 2003).

5) Promotion of English Language

Another aspect that is highlighted by Gersten & Geva is the promotion of English language

while teaching reading to the children. This is supported by Harmer (2007) who mentioned that the "English-language classroom should have English in it, and as far as possible, there should be an environment in the room, where English is heard and used as much of the time as possible" (p. 38-39). During teaching and learning activities, gestures, facial expressions, actions and visual aids can be utilised to illustrate the meaning of the vocabularies (Baker et al., 2014; Gersten & Geva, 2003) which are taught in an explicit manner to promote the use of English language. In addition to that, providing a print-rich environment in the classroom as suggested by Harmer (2007) Shin and Crandall (2019) would also assist the promotion of English language. For example, by setting up a reading corner (Harmer, 2012) and putting up other suitable resources such as maps, a word wall and others (Shin & Crandall, 2019), teachers can engage the students with activities that are related to these printed materials, such as by updating the word wall as the students learn new words in the classroom.

6) Small Group Interactions

Small group instructional practice is also recommended while working with ESL struggling readers (Bokhari et al., 2015; Baker et al., 2014; Denton et al., 2004; Gersten & Geva, 2003; Richards-Tutor et al., 2016; Vaughn et al., 2006). The implementation of individual or small group instruction improves outcomes since students have more opportunity to interact with teachers, more time to practice, and receive more attention according to their individual needs (Richards-Tutor et al., 2016). Teachers can also check students' comprehension with the lessons by eliciting their responses. In two different studies by Bokhari et al. (2015) and Lee (2015), it was revealed that some of the teachers in the study would spend about ten minutes of each English lesson specifically with the struggling readers in the classroom of mixed-attaining students. A slight improvement was reported by the researchers when the students were taught in groups and they also appeared to be more interested when taught in small groups rather than as a whole class (Bokhari et al., 2015). In the same study by Bokhari et al., (2015), another teacher spent about twenty minutes every morning before the bell went to teach the struggling readers in a small group.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study focuses on one principal teacher, who taught in an ESL struggling readers classroom. Informed consent was sought before the study began. The participant received explanation about the research objectives and

their rights to withdraw at any point of time without having to inform the researcher.

One of the methods used on this study was interview. I had a formal interview with the teacher before the classroom observation was carried out. The questions covered in the interview were related to the demographic information of the teacher, such as questions about her age, educational qualification, working experience and teaching experience, teaching aspirations, typical ways of working with struggling readers in the reading classroom, curriculum and syllabus, teaching materials and assessment, as well as questions associated to the teacher's perceptions in respect to the struggling readers. Additionally, I conducted a post-observation interview which was intended to confirm the objectives of the lesson, to ascertain the teacher's feelings regarding the lesson and to explore any particular issues that attracted my interest during the observation.

Another method that I employed in my study was observation. In this study I observed five reading lessons in the ESL classroom which lasted between approximately thirty and sixty minutes. During the observations, I observed the ESL struggling readers' classroom with some specific focuses. These were:

1. The physical setting of the classroom
2. The teaching methods that the teacher utilised
3. The objectives of the lessons
4. The materials that were employed by the teacher

I also devoted attention to things that the teacher stated in the interviews. I wrote field notes on what was happening in the reading classroom. The choice of field notes highlights that my report was not based on behaviour counting of the participants or length and frequency of the activity or instructions in numeric forms (Yaacob, 2006).

I collected materials included those employed as teaching resources in the struggling readers' reading lessons too. I made copies of all the documents collected in the classroom for permanent record (Yaacob, 2006). "The reviewed documents augmented the interview and observational data and thus served a useful purpose" (Bowen, 2009).

Data Analysis

I transcribed the interviews and classroom observations on my own and found that this activity helped me to become immersed in the data. In transcribing the interviews, the technique pertinent to my study is unfocused transcription. I decided to employ this technique because the focus was given to the "intended meaning" of the data and not to "the intonation of voices, overlap

in talk or non-verbal forms of communication like gestures or gazes" (Gibson & Brown, 2009) which are emphasised in focused transcription. While transcribing the observation, I placed emphasis on the substance of the data (e.g. how the students learn and how the teacher delivered the lessons in the ESL classroom) rather than the characteristics of the data (e.g. changes in intonation like raising and falling, pauses, pace of speech, loudness of speech and others) which are significant in focused transcription (Gibson & Brown, 2009).

In essence, the process of analysing data in my study involved the following stages:

- Transcribing interviews and observations, managing the field notes and documents.
- Choosing and highlighting relevant data and identifying codes by jotting down words, phrases or sentences to them.
- Thinking about the codes and situating the selected codes into categories. At this stage, I looked at the list of codes and identified those which emerged repeatedly in the data. These codes were not necessarily similar in words but conveyed similar concepts or ideas.
- Looking for connection between categories and placing the categories into themes
- Rereading the themes, categories and modifying them by referring to the literature
- Finalising the themes and categories for findings presentation

Findings

This paper presents one main finding of this study, namely involvement which incorporates classroom environment and teaching instruction.

1) Theme: *Involvement*

• *Classroom Environment*

The classroom seemed to be spacious enough to accommodate all the struggling readers. Additionally, there were sufficient tables and chairs for all the students. The bulletin board was also available, and displayed information such as duty rosters, the classroom committee and learning information on selected subjects. The classroom had a scarcity of English reading materials, however. For example, in the English section bulletin board, only one material was put up, namely a poster related naming colours, and this did not seem to be up-to-date in accordance with the topics that the students were learning in the ESL subject. There was also no reading section for recreational reading available in the classroom. Although the teacher stated that the

students need to be exposed with reading materials such as story books, this belief did not seem to be implemented by the teacher in the classroom.

• **Instructional Method**

A few prominent instructional methods were identified from the study included whole-class teaching, drilling, look-and-say, code switching and writing embedded instructions.

• **Whole-class Teaching**

The study reveals that the teaching and learning of reading in the ESL struggling readers' classroom predominantly adopted whole-class teaching in which the teacher primarily led the instructions. The reason that this technique was applied was because it assisted Mrs. Leena managing the classroom. Mrs. Leena said, "For the students in this class teaching to the whole class is the most suitable strategy because I think it helps me to control the class". It was evident in the observations that the typical organisation of the reading lessons centred on a few activities which can be divided into three stages: pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading. In the first stage, Mrs. Leena introduced the topics and reviewed the words of the day by reading the words aloud to the students.

For Example

Mrs. Leena: Yes, are you ready class? Okay so today we are going to do some revisions. Listen to me. I will go through the words.

In this example, Mrs. Leena instructed the students to listen to her reading without further discussing about the topic or involving the students to discuss the topic.

In the second stage, Mrs. Leena practised the words with the students by asking them to read after her. Mrs. Leena also interspersed that activity by asking the students the meaning of the words, or asking them to read the text without additional in-depth discussion. In performing these activities, Mrs. Leena involved the whole class, although on occasions she nominated an individual student.

In the third stage, Mrs. Leena also conducted a writing activity based on the topic that she had taught. In one reading lesson, she also rearranging jumbled words in a sentence activity led by her in front of the class by using word cards.

Referring to the MOE (2015), a student-centred approach is highly advocated for fun and meaningful learning. The role of the teacher is not only as a knowledge provider but a learning facilitator. To this end, small group activities are encouraged for students so that

students can "share their strengths and also develop their weaker skills as well as their interpersonal skills""in any tasks, questions or problems given by the teacher" (p. 11).

• **Drilling**

It was evident that drilling was quite extensively employed in the lessons. This was discovered from the interviews and throughout all the classroom observations. Drilling was led by Mrs. Leena and often carried out with the whole class, and at times with individual students. The teacher would model the words and the students would repeat after the teacher by pointing to the words using their finger. Mrs. Leena typically accompanied the activity with written text or pictures, asking the students to look at them.

Example

Teacher: Okay can you repeat after me? Repeat after me. The. Show me your finger, show me your finger. Show me your finger. *Jari awak mana?* [where's your finger?] Okay, point to the word the. I want you to recognise the words.

Students: The

Teacher: The. Finger *mana* finger? [Where is your finger?] This is your finger right? (showing her index finger) Okay find the word the. Say together.

Students: (In unison) the

Teacher: The

Students: (In unison) the

Teacher: The

Students: (In unison) the

Teacher: Okay the

Students: (In unison) the

Teacher: The

Students: (In unison) the

Teacher: The

Students: (In unison) the

Teacher: Okay enough for number one.

Number 2? Anyone of you? Number 2 who wants to answer? Please stand up? Can you read number two? The first one is the. The second one? The second one? (point to one student and no answer was given by the student)

Teacher: and

Students: (In unison) and

Teacher: and

Students: (In unison) and

Teacher: and

Students: (In unison) and

Teacher: and

Students: (In unison) and

Teacher: and

Students: (In unison) and

Teacher: Okay how about number 3? Number 3? a
 Students: (In unison) a
 Teacher: Okay a
 Students: (In unison) a
 Teacher: a
 Students: (In unison) a
 Teacher: Number 4? to
 Students: (In unison) to
 Teacher: to
 Students: (In unison) to

Mrs. Leena indicated drilling as another main method employed in the ESL reading lessons with struggling readers that she taught. She believed that drilling would help to control the students' behaviour. She also thought that such a method would help the struggling readers to pay attention to the lesson. She further stated that, through drilling, the students who were initially not focusing would join in with other students who read after the teacher. In addition to the above, the teacher also admitted that drilling and repetition resembled the religious method of recitation of the Quran. She said,

I think repetition like what we did in the Quranic classes is most practical and works the best. In the Quranic classes that we attended we repeat time and again until we can read. Similar to what I did in the classroom, the students read after me many times.

The teacher further added that she hoped that the students could recognise and become familiar with the words, remembering them when they encountered them again later. As well as using drilling to enhance the memory of the students and for classroom control, the teacher also gave other reasons, including to model the pronunciation and for students to practise the reading. She believed that the students did not have a lot of exposure to English reading activities at home, and therefore, since they were primarily learning at school, they would reap the benefit from drilling. Overall, they would learn how to pronounce the words correctly and to practise reading as much as possible by copying the teacher.

Referring to the Year 1 English document, several steps were highlighted for early learning, including modelled reading by the teacher and choral reading (MOE, 2015). These were followed by several other steps such as shared reading, guided reading and independent reading. Looking at the methods suggested in the document and how reading was carried out, as well as the response given by Mrs. Leena, it was shown that Mrs. Leena integrated the first two steps into her teaching. She mostly adopted modelled reading by having the students listen to the words or

sentences read aloud by her. In choral reading, the students then repeated the reading together in unison. Students did not read aloud in unison by themselves, either in groups or as individuals, as the activity was entirely led by the teacher. There were no occasions where other reading steps were integrated.

• **Look and Say Approach over Phonics**

Another practice incorporated by the teacher in the ESL reading lesson was look-and-say or the whole word approach. This was done by Mrs. Leena reading aloud the whole words in the text without separating them into phonetic script.

Example 1

Teacher: Can all of you read this?
 Students: Silence
 Teacher: pin
 Students: Read loudly
 Teacher: pin
 Students: pin
 Teacher: pin
 Students: pin

The excerpts in example 1 show that Mrs. Leena employed the look-and-say approach to teach the students to read the words 'pin' instead of sounding out the letter as would be practised in a phonics approach.

Example 2

Teacher: It is not map, it ends with the letter T. So, mat. Mat, understand? Now we are going to read this sentence. *Tunjuk kat kawan* [show it to your friends] It. I.T. *dengar ni?* [Are you listening?] I, T? [ai/ti] The pronunciation is? it.

Students: It
 Teacher: It
 Students: It
 Teacher: It
 Students: It

In example 2, Mrs. Leena incorporated the spelling activity by reciting the individual letters that are comprised in the words 'it' and 'rat' rather than using the letter sounds. She also focused on the individual letter T in the word 'mat' without sounding it out.

From the interviews, it was discovered that Mrs. Leena hoped that look-and-say would help students build vocabulary which would lead to the development of comprehension. She also preferred to use the whole word approach because she was quite confident that the children did not have any exposure to using phonics before. She also mentioned, "Looking at their

background and the type of pre-school they attended earlier I would say they are not familiar with phonics". Additionally, Mrs. Leena admitted that she is not very confident to use the approach because she felt that not enough training had been provided.

Referring to the Standard-Based English Language Curriculum for Primary Schools, one of the core pedagogical principles of teaching and learning was teaching literacy by using phonics strategies (MOE, 2015). This strategy aims to facilitate primary school students to become independent readers. Phonics strategies were also selected because the approach would be helpful to build a strong foundation of reading skills for Year 1 students (MOE, 2015).

• Code Switching

Another practice evident in the reading instructions that I observed was code switching. It appeared in each lesson that I observed and was also stated by Mrs. Leena in the interviews as one of the methods that she utilised. Mrs. Leena code switched between the English and Malay languages on many occasions throughout the reading lessons. The following excerpts display examples of how code switching was applied in the lessons. The Malay language employed by the teacher is illustrated in italics alongside the English explanation of the language.

Example 1

Teacher: I mean *saya*. [I] Understand? I *maksudnya apa?* *Saya, saya* [what does it mean with I? I, I]

Example 2

Teacher: Okay we use our nose to? Smell. What is smell?

Students: *Hidung* [nose]

Teacher: *Smell maksudnya bau. Kita gunakan hidung kita untuk bau.* [Smell means to sniff. We use our nose to smell]. Okay do you understand?

Example 3

Teacher: Do you know what is chew? Chew tu *maksudnya mengunyah* [chew]

Example 4

Teacher: Make it bigger ye, *tulis besar* [Write in a large print]

Example 5

Teacher: Okay I count to 5, teacher kira sampai 5, duduk tempat masing-masing

kalau tak balik tempat...(go back to your seat, if not...)

Code switching was used by Mrs. Leena to check students' understanding and to provide explanations about the words that she taught in the reading lessons, as shown in examples 1 to 3. She code switched between the English and Malay language when she asked questions to the students to ensure that the students could comprehend the meaning of the words that were taught in the lessons. It is also noted that instead of using actions the teacher preferred to translate the meaning of particular words such as 'I' and 'smell' and 'chew'.

Mrs. Leena code switched to explain the instructions for the lesson too. She asked the students to use an appropriate size of handwriting as shown in Example 4. I also noticed that Mrs. Leena code switched the instructions about the print size instead of showing examples of what print size was appropriate.

From the excerpts shown in example 5, Mrs. Leena code switched when she wanted to manage the students' behaviour in the classroom. Example 5 illustrates that Mrs. Leena was reminding the students who were out of their seats to return to their seats by counting to five.

From the interview, Mrs. Leena also stated that the use of code switching, in which the struggling readers' first language is incorporated, is very necessary to facilitate the students' comprehension of the lessons and to control the classroom. She further mentioned that if the lessons were fully conducted in English, the students would face difficulties to understand the content of the lesson. Likewise, she admitted that she would experience a great challenge to deliver the lessons and to provide instructions to the students without using the Malay language. She also believed that managing the classroom required her to use Malay so that the students can understand her messages.

Referring to the Year 1 English syllabus, the use of the students' first language was not mentioned anywhere in the document. The MOE (2015) does, however, highlight the importance of the use of an accurate medium of instruction in teaching and learning: "emphasis is given on the aspects of pronunciation, sentence structure, grammar and the terminology of the language in order to assist pupils organise ideas as well as communicate effectively" (MOE, 2015). Judging from this it is suggested that the use of the first language is not encouraged as the focus should be given to the good modelling of the target language as a medium of instruction by the teacher.

• *Writing Embedded Instructions*

Another prominent strategy that I observed in most of the reading lessons was writing activities. In one of the observations that I conducted, students were asked to circle the words on the reading text listed in the HFW lists. For instance, the first word on the list is 'the'. Students needed to circle the same word 'the' which could be found on the reading text.

Another lesson that I observed required the students to circle the parts of the body on the reading text provided by the teacher. There were six body parts that are accentuated in the lesson, which are eyes, ears, nose, hands, mouth and teeth. The teacher read the words aloud and the students circled the correct words.

There was also one lesson which required children to copy down the question from the whiteboard and write the answer with the teacher's guidance. The activity was related to the topic 'My Name' in the big book reading session the students had earlier. The students were required to copy the question 'What is your name' and answer 'My name is (their own names)'.

The teacher gave her opinion about the integration of writing activities in the lesson, which includes an activity to reinforce the students' comprehension on words they have learnt:

I consider writing activity to be a form of drilling or repetition that can be useful to strengthen students' comprehension on what the children had learnt from the lesson. After verbal repetition, writing activity may be helpful too.

She further added:

Even though it might seem to just copying down the sentences they read, I think it is still good. They engaged with the words repeatedly. Referring to the Year 1 English syllabus, it is illustrated that writing activity is suggested to be conducted in the reading lessons (MOE, 2015). Among the activities that are suggested are "read and draw, read and complete the text, read and categorise, read and predict and read and infer" (MOE, 2015).

Discussion

1) Classroom Learning Environment

The scarcity of ESL reading resources found in the classroom could impede the ESL students' reading development (Shin & Crandall, 2019). This is because the students needed to be immersed in the print literacy environment and engaged with the activities related to the print to become successful readers (Shin & Crandall, 2019).

2) Involvement

The findings reveal that whole-class teaching approach was employed as the main method when working with the ESL struggling readers. The method was mainly utilised to ease classroom management. In this respect, the teaching and learning centred on a few routines revolving around teacher-centred activities. The strategies described above are not interactive and could hinder the effectiveness of the teaching and learning. Instead, a combination of more suitable activities (Harmer, 2012; Kirkgöz, 2018) as part of interactive teaching could probably be of more benefit to ESL struggling readers in the classroom (Gersten & Geva, 2003; Harmer, 2012). Furthermore, learning opportunities could increase if the activities employed involved a mixture of approaches consisting of whole class, group work, individual and pair work (Scott & Yterberg, 1990). In addition, the tendency in the observed classes for question and answer sessions, which normally involve students answering questions about the meaning of particular words or reading words that they are assigned to without in-depth discussion (Gersten & Geva, 2003; Kieffer, Faller & Kelley, 2010), could have restricted the integration of the students' responses into teaching and learning. Again, this limits the interactivity of the teaching (Gersten & Geva, 2003). Moreover, the teacher did not engage the students' previous knowledge before the lessons began and she only read the words that the students were going to learn. Such an approach would not be helpful to assist students' comprehension because the students might not be able to link what they knew with the instructional content of the lessons (Bartlett, 2017). Many researchers highlight that struggling readers are best taught in groups or individually (Bokhari et al., 2015; Denton et al., 2004; Baker et al., 2014; Richards-Tutor et al., 2016; Vaughn, 2006).

Moreover, small group activities are advocated by the MOE (2015) as a way of helping students to learn more effectively. Findings in this study showed that struggling readers are taught as a whole class because there is no specialised teacher available to teach the students. The onus, therefore, was on the class English teacher to design the lessons based on the learning objectives and the needs of the students. Such a situation might hinder the effectiveness of the teaching and learning in respect to struggling readers. This study also noticed that drilling was utilised as one of the main instructional methods in teaching ESL struggling readers. This finding is in accordance with other studies conducted in the ESL Malaysian primary classroom (Lee, 2015; Md-Ali et al., 2016; Yaacob, 2006) and internationally (Arikan, 2011).

In this study, drilling was applied to a whole group (Arikan, 2011; Yaacob, 2006; Harmer, 2007) or sometimes to individual students (Lee, 2015). The teacher utilised drilling to help the students recognise and become familiar with the words which echoed Harmer (2012) and Md-Ali et al. (2016). Besides that, in this study, drilling was applied in the ESL classroom to demonstrate pronunciation (Yaacob, 2006; Lamsal, 2011; Project Trust, 2016) as well as to get the students to practise reading and to attract the students' attention. Furthermore, in the drilling activities that I observed, the teacher would lead the session and let the students listen to her reading before the students read after her. This is in agreement with the recommendations of the MOE (2015), which identified modelled reading as one of the steps in early reading. In addition, the use of teaching materials that supplemented the drilling method was also perceived as helpful to assist struggling readers' learning (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Higa, 2002; Li, 2006). The literature has highlighted that getting the students to follow the words with their finger when reading is good practice (Harmer, 2012) and this was evident as a practice in the observations in this study. On the other hand, although drilling is acknowledged as a helpful method for low attaining students such as in this study (Harmer, 2007), other approaches to drilling such as pair level drilling or semi-chorus level drilling rather than just whole class and individual drilling could also be implemented to make the instructional method less dull (Lamsal, 2011, p.14), to avoid the students feeling bored and tired (Harmer, 2007) and to ensure the effectiveness of the method for the ESL students' learning (Basuki, 2018; Heward, 2003; Liu, 2006; Richards & Rodgers, 2002; Swanto & Din, 2014). This would help the students to enjoy drilling as part of the learning process (Higa, 2002; Yuwanda, 2017).

Besides that, the extensive amount of drilling discovered in this study could make the learning less effective because drilling entails a rather unnatural use of language (Harmer, 2007; Lee, 2015). This was particularly concerning since drilling was so dominant that meaningful exposure and opportunities for struggling readers to practise the language scarcely existed (Shin & Crandall, 2019) as the teacher was the one who initiated and controlled the interactions (Richards & Rodgers, 2002). The teaching of reading could benefit students more if other reading steps suggested by MOE (2015) were to be applied to encourage student participants, such as shared reading. In addition to that, the emphasis on drilling suggests that the teacher focused too much on correct pronunciation and oral practice, with little attempt to help students engage with the main ideas of the sentences or the texts, which could be more helpful in developing students' comprehension.

Another prominent instructional method employed was the look-and-say or whole word approach, aiming to facilitate the development of the students' vocabulary and comprehension. Research suggests that the method can be helpful for ESL young students to increase their reading development, as discovered by Budiana (2011), Nurnianti (2012) and Nofiandari (2016). In contrast to the participating teachers in the research conducted by Nofiandari (2016), who perceived look-and-say as a reading approach familiar to parents, the teacher in this study mainly applied look-and-say because she was not comfortable with phonics and believed that the struggling readers were not familiar with a phonics approach. She made the judgment based on the students' family background and the type of pre-schools that the students had attended in the previous year. Apart from that, materials such as pictures which accompanied the method can be good practice to further assist students' comprehension of the words being taught (Nofiandari, 2016; Baker et al., 2014). By putting the words into context, the method utilised by the teacher could facilitate the struggling readers to read and understand the words (Nofiandari, 2016). The findings therefore suggest that the use of the look-and-say approach is appropriate and helpful for ESL struggling readers. Another important finding, however, was that look-and-say was the only method utilised and preferred by the teacher. In other words, the teacher did not apply a phonics approach at all while working with the students, although it has been widely suggested by researchers for its various benefits (Dubeck et al., 2012; Farokhbakht, 2015; Gersten & Geva, 2003; Jamaludin et al., 2016; Shin & Crandall, 2019), and is also heavily emphasised by the MOE (2013); (2015). One of the reasons why the teacher did not use phonics instruction was that she lacked confidence because she felt that she had not received enough training on phonics instruction. This concern about confidence with phonics echoes the findings of the studies by Dubeck et al. (2012), Mokotedi (2012) and Shafee (2019). The neglect of the phonics method in the ESL struggling readers' classroom is significant, however, since it risks "serious consequences" for the students' progress in reading (Dubeck et al., 2012) since the teaching and learning overall lacked an explicit and systematic approach, meaning that the learning process could not be optimised (Dubeck et al., 2012; Gersten & Geva, 2003; Richards-Tutor et al., 2016). Since the phonics approach is taught in an explicit and systematic way, focusing on the concept of phonemic awareness, coding and the letter-sound relationship taking place in small steps, from easiest to difficult (Dubeck et al., 2012; Rosenshine, 1987), struggling readers could benefit a lot more if phonics were fully integrated in the teaching and learning (Gersten & Geva,

2003; Vaughn et al., 2006). Besides that, neglecting the phonics approach and focusing only on a look-and-say approach could not effectively support young ESL struggling readers' development, since the research indicates that the use of both approaches in tandem is the most helpful for assisting struggling readers (Apandi & Nor, 2019).

Another instructional method widely applied by the teacher was code switching. The findings show that code switching was used for a number of reasons, but mainly to facilitate students' comprehension. Particularly, code switching was used to give instructions to the students (Azman, 2006; Mokotedi, 2012), interpret particular English words (Yaacob, 2006; Azman, 2006; Mokotedi, 2012), check students' understandings (Yaacob, 2006) and manage the classroom (Azman, 2006). Although code switching can be perceived negatively (Low, 2016) and is not mentioned in the Malaysian curriculum document as a recommended practice (MOE, 2015), the benefits of code switching for ESL students (Kuchah, 2019). I also discovered in this study, however, that there were times when code switching was not necessarily needed. For instance, instead of code-switching, the teacher could utilise gestures, actions or show real examples of things available in the classroom to make the students' understand what she was trying to convey (Baker et al., 2014; Gersten & Geva, 2003). The findings suggested that, although code switching is recommended by many researchers for its benefits, the teacher in this study could have used code switching more selectively and effectively, as suggested by Yaacob (2006) and Harmer (2007).

The teacher however relied on just a few quite limited writing activities such as copying the sentences and circling the correct words as part of the reading lessons for reinforcement so that students can engage repeatedly with the vocabulary learnt. The integration of writing activity into the reading lessons in ESL primary classroom is supported by researchers (e.g. Clay, 2001; Hakimi et al., 2014). MOE (2015) has further suggested that a cohesive and coherent organisation between all of the language skills would benefit the students and there are a number of ways in which writing activity can be utilised more effectively besides from copying down sentences and circling the correct words as practised by the teacher. Additionally, no other activities to increase the students' encounter of the words were identified in the lessons conducted by the teacher apart from the writing activity that the teacher conducted in all lessons. Those activities can include "crosswords, charades, sketching, and drawing to represent word meanings" (Baker et al., 2014).

According to social constructivist theory, children function as active learners (Vygotsky,

1978). They learn through communication with others which could be more likely to happen if they are positioned in small groups and receive scaffolding on their identified current knowledge, or ZPD in the classroom. Furthermore, according to Vygotsky (1978) in his social constructivist theory, learning is a social process that accentuates the roles of other people such as teachers, family members and friends in mediating the learning process (Moll, 1990; Ebrahimi, 2015). The findings of this study suggest that the students have limited opportunities to learn as they are positioned in a low attaining class in which most of the students share similar issues in terms of reading attainment, motivation and behaviour. This means that the students might not be able to learn from one another, to communicate with each other and build up their knowledge. The students in the study had scarce opportunities for teacher-student or student-student interactions as the main focus was on drilling of language items, specifically in teaching vocabulary.

Conclusion and Implications of the Study

From the findings, it is evident that more support should be provided to teachers, and this could take many forms. For example, professional development courses on areas that need improvement, such as phonemic awareness and phonics instructions, sight word knowledge, developing comprehension through suitable strategies, getting into students' background knowledge, and classroom management are all essential for teachers of young struggling ESL readers aiming to enhance reading attainment. Schools in Malaysia can also adopt "training days" program as normally conducted by schools in the UK a few times a year. Apart from that, provision of online resources (webinars, suggested lesson plans, learning resources) can be made available formally by the MOE to cater for the teacher's needs. It is also important for the MOE to make amendments to the content of teacher training modules to provide more efficient and better quality teaching.

Moreover, guidance on how the particular methods applied in this study such as drilling and code switching can be integrated into the ESL classroom and used more effectively during teaching and learning also needs to be considered by the MOE (Azman, 2006). In addition, the whole-word method that is mainly employed by the teacher should be integrated into curriculum planning as parts of a teaching technique as teacher is more familiar with such an approach. In addition, a mentoring system among teachers or colleagues at school can also be established to help teachers deliver the instructions effectively. By equipping teachers with such support, it is hoped that they will be able

to successfully deliver the instructions aligned with the methods that are “understood to promote reading acquisitions” to children (Dubeck et al., 2012).

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