Enhancing Preschoolers' Reading Fluency through Shared Reading with Decodable Texts: A Quasi-Experimental Study

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ABSTRACT

Early literacy development is a critical determinant of children's long-term academic success and social development. While substantial efforts have been made to promote early literacy, effective instructional strategies that enhance preschoolers' reading fluency remain an area of exploration. This study investigates the impact of shared reading with decodable texts on key early literacy skills, including phonemic awareness, decoding proficiency, and oral reading fluency. Using a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design, the study involved 30 preschoolers from two schools, divided into an experimental group receiving structured phonics-based instruction and a comparison group following conventional literacy practices. Over a 10-week period, the experimental group participated in daily 20-minute shared reading sessions incorporating phonics-based mini-lessons, guided reading with decodable texts, and fluency-focused activities. Findings reveal statistically significant improvements across all literacy components, reinforcing the efficacy of structured shared reading with decodable texts. Paired samples t-tests indicated notable gains in Letter Recognition (+9.10 points, $t(29) = -14.805$, $p < .001$), Phonemic Awareness (+11.30 points, $t(29) = -18.921$, $p < .001$), and Decoding Proficiency (+11.43 points, $t(29) = -15.838$, $p < .001$), with Oral Reading Fluency showing the highest increase. These results underscore the transformative potential of phonics-based shared reading interventions in accelerating preschoolers' literacy development. This study contributes to the growing body of research advocating for structured, evidence-based literacy instruction in early childhood education. The findings offer valuable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to implement phonics-driven approaches that foster reading fluency in preschool settings, ultimately equipping young learners with the foundational skills essential for lifelong academic success.

Keywords: Early literacy development, Phonics-based instruction, Shared reading intervention, Decodable texts, Oral reading fluency.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a foundational skill that underpins academic success and fosters lifelong learning. For young learners, early reading proficiency is more than just a milestone—it is a crucial component of cognitive development, language acquisition, and overall literacy growth (Al-Kiyumi et al., 2021). Children who develop strong reading skills in their early years are better equipped to succeed academically, whereas those who struggle with fluency often encounter persistent learning challenges (Husni et al., 2020). As students advance in their education, they must not only refine their reading abilities but also adapt their skills to comprehend and analyze diverse texts across multiple disciplines (Wigfield et al., 2016)

Integrating shared reading with phonics-based instruction using decodable texts is a highly effective approach to strengthening children's phonological awareness, word recognition, and reading fluency (Price-Mohr &

Price, 2020). Phonological awareness, a fundamental aspect of early literacy development, involves the ability to recognize and manipulate sounds in spoken language (Suárez et al., 2018). Children who develop strong phonological skills early are more likely to become proficient readers, while those who struggle in this area face a higher risk of reading difficulties and long-term literacy challenges (Gijbels et al., 2023). Phonological skills, including rhyming, syllable segmentation, and sound blending, help children decode words efficiently, making reading a smoother process. Integrating shared reading practices with the strategic use of decodable texts creates a powerful approach to nurturing early literacy skills in preschool classrooms. This combination bolsters children's emergent reading abilities, laying a strong foundation for future academic success (Hancock, 2019). Shared reading, characterized as a dynamic and pedagogically rich activity, entails educators and children engaging with a chosen text in a collective manner, thus constructing a collaborative learning environment wherein literacy competencies are not only explicitly modeled but also meticulously analyzed and investigated within a relevant (Lea, 2016).

Furthermore, it is crucial for teachers to comprehend evidence-based reading strategies in order to effectively support children in enhancing their reading abilities. The role of teachers, particularly in preschool education, is vital in establishing a strong foundation for early literacy. With the advancement of the science of reading, it is essential for teachers to be equipped with the necessary skills to implement evidence-based instructional strategies (Ciesielski & Creaghead, 2020) By doing so, they can effectively support children's reading development using structured and research-backed methods. This shift is particularly important in moving away from outdated practices such as whole-word memorization or guess reading, which do not provide children with the systematic decoding skills needed for reading success. Instead, an evidence-based approach ensures that children develop strong phonological awareness, decoding abilities, and reading fluency, setting them up for long-term literacy achievement (Glazzard & Stones, 2020). The predictive relationships between phonological awareness and children's decoding and spelling abilities are supported by considerable research (Phillips et al., 2008; Suárez et al., 2018). Explicit and systematic phonics instruction, paired with decodable texts, allows children to apply their phonological knowledge to decode words, thereby reinforcing the connection between letters and sounds. Such approaches must be purposefully integrated into preschool curricula, given that many early childhood education settings may lack comprehensive instruction in this vital area.

THE CASE FOR REFORMING MALAYSIA'S EARLY LITERACY FRAMEWORK TO EMBRACE EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

The current early literacy framework in Malaysia requires reform to align with evidence-based instructional practices that have been proven to enhance reading proficiency. Despite various literacy programs implemented over the years, concerns remain regarding the number of students who struggle with basic reading skills, particularly in the transition from preschool to primary school. Many existing approaches rely heavily on rote memorization, whole-word recognition, or a mix of strategies that lack systematic phonics instruction. These methods fail to provide children with the essential skills needed for fluent and automatic reading, leading to gaps in literacy development (Bowers, 2020). Therefore, it is critical to evaluate and adopt strategies that are backed by scientific research to ensure that children develop strong foundational literacy skills.

The Science of Reading (SoR) is a research-based framework that explains how children learn to read, drawing on decades of studies in cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and linguistics (Moats, 2023). It emphasizes phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension as essential components of literacy instruction (Castles et al., 2018). Unlike whole-language or balanced literacy approaches, which often promote guessing strategies, SoR prioritizes structured and explicit instruction to help children decode words efficiently (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). Research highlights that systematic phonics instruction is particularly beneficial for early readers, especially those at risk for reading difficulties (National Reading Panel, 2000). Additionally, cognitive neuroscience findings show that proficient reading activates neural circuits linked to phonological processing and comprehension, reinforcing the need for a structured approach

(Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2008). Integrating SoR principles into Malaysia's early literacy curriculum can help educators transition from ineffective practices to evidence-based methods proven to enhance reading development. As literacy remains fundamental to academic success, SoR continues to shape effective reading instruction worldwide.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Importance of Early Literacy Development

Early literacy development is crucial as it lays the foundation for a child's academic success, cognitive growth, and lifelong learning. Research shows that children who develop strong literacy skills in their early years are more likely to excel in school, have higher self-confidence, and engage in critical thinking. Early exposure to phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension skills enhances a child's ability to decode words, understand meaning, and communicate effectively (Fernandez, 2023). Moreover, early literacy fosters brain development, improving memory, problem-solving abilities, and language acquisition. Without a strong literacy foundation, children may struggle with reading fluency, comprehension, and overall academic performance (Vaughn & Fletcher, 2021) Thus, implementing structured, evidence-based literacy instruction in preschools and early childhood education settings such as phonological awareness activities, interactive storytelling, and systematic phonics programs ensures that children develop essential reading and writing skills, reducing the risk of future literacy challenges and supporting their overall development. Preschool education plays a pivotal role in promoting literacy, preventing reading difficulties, and preparing children for formal reading instruction (Hancock, 2019).

Shared Reading and the Role of Decodable Texts

Shared reading is a powerful literacy practice that fosters engagement with text, promotes vocabulary development, and enhances print awareness (Risch, 2021). When paired with decodable texts, shared reading becomes even more effective in reinforcing phonics instruction. Decodable texts are structured reading materials designed to align with a child's developing phonics knowledge, allowing them to apply decoding skills systematically rather than relying on guessing or memorization (Peltier, 2024). These texts are carefully crafted using words that contain phonetic patterns children have already been taught, reinforcing their ability to sound out words and build fluency. Unlike traditional children's books that often include words beyond a child's phonics level, decodable texts provide controlled exposure to words that match their instructional progression, fostering confidence and accuracy in early reading.

The Science of Reading (SOR) emphasizes decodable texts because they support the systematic and explicit phonics instruction critical for developing strong readers (Lawson, 2024). Research has consistently shown that when children learn to decode through phonics-based instruction, they become more proficient readers in the long term (Reed, 2023). Decodable texts ensure that children practice their learned phonics skills in real reading situations, reinforcing their ability to recognize letter-sound relationships and blend sounds into words. This method moves away from ineffective strategies such as memorizing sight words or guessing based on pictures, ensuring that children develop the necessary skills to read unfamiliar words independently (Ehri & Roberts, 2023). By prioritizing decodable texts in early literacy instruction, educators can provide students with the tools they need to become fluent and confident readers, setting them up for long-term academic success (Fernandez, 2023).

One of the most effective ways to develop reading fluency in young children is through read-aloud sessions combined with decodable text practice. Read-alouds expose children to rich language, story structures, and expressive reading, all of which help develop listening comprehension and oral language skills (Yulianawati et al., 2022). When teachers or parents read aloud, they model prosody (expression, rhythm, and intonation), helping children understand how fluent reading sounds. Additionally, read-alouds introduce new vocabulary and concepts in a meaningful context, strengthening comprehension and motivation to read independently (Maulidina & Rita, 2022).

However, while read-alouds lay the foundation for comprehension and language development, fluency requires direct decoding practice, which is where decodable texts play a crucial role. Decodable texts provide children with the opportunity to apply their phonics knowledge in a structured manner. Since these texts follow a systematic phonics progression, children can decode words with confidence rather than guessing or memorizing. Regular practice with decodable texts helps improve word recognition, reading accuracy, and automaticity, all of which are key components of fluency (Moats, 2023). When used together, read-alouds and decodable texts create a balanced approach to literacy instruction. Read-alouds develop comprehension and language skills, while decodable texts ensure that children can apply phonics skills effectively to become fluent readers. By integrating both strategies, educators can create a supportive literacy environment that builds fluency, confidence, and long-term reading success in young learners. (Buckingham, 2020)

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design to assess the impact of shared reading with decodable texts on preschoolers' reading fluency. A quasi-experimental design is a research methodology that allows researchers to examine causal relationships between variables when random assignment is not feasible. Unlike true experiments, quasi-experiments rely on existing groups, making them particularly useful in real-world settings such as education and healthcare (Basse et al., 2024). These designs often include pretest and posttest measurements to assess changes over time, though they are more susceptible to threats to internal validity due to potential confounding variables. Common types include non-equivalent control group designs, time-series designs, and regression discontinuity designs, each offering varying levels of control over extraneous factors. Despite their limitations, quasi-experimental designs are valuable tools for evaluating interventions, especially when ethical or logistical constraints prevent the use of randomized controlled trials (Muse & Baldwin, 2021). Given the practical constraints of school settings, random assignment was not feasible; however, the quasi-experimental approach ensures meaningful comparisons while maintaining educational continuity. The study includes two groups: an experimental group (n=15), which participates in structured shared reading sessions using decodable texts, and a comparison group (n=15), which receives standard literacy instruction without structured phonics-based shared reading. Pre- and post-intervention assessments are conducted to evaluate improvements in phonological awareness, decoding skills, and reading fluency.

Participants

The study involves 30 preschoolers aged 4 to 5 years from two different preschools. Participants are selected based on initial literacy assessments to ensure comparable baseline reading abilities. To maintain instructional fidelity, trained pre-service teachers deliver the intervention, following prior training in phonics-based literacy instruction. The intervention for the experimental group consists of daily 20-minute shared reading sessions over 10 weeks, structured into three key components. First, a 5-minute phonics mini-lesson introduces specific phonics concepts, such as letter-sound relationships, blending, and segmentation. Next, 10 minutes of reading decodable texts reinforce phonics concepts through structured, controlled vocabulary designed to promote systematic decoding. Finally, 5 minutes of fluency development activities focus on accuracy, automaticity, and prosody, helping children build reading confidence and comprehension. Meanwhile, the comparison group continues with the standard preschool literacy curriculum, which does not systematically integrate phonics-based shared reading. By examining differences in literacy outcomes between the two groups, this study seeks to determine the effectiveness of structured shared reading with decodable texts in enhancing preschoolers' early reading fluency.

Intervention Structure for Experimental and Comparison Groups

The experimental group engaged in daily 20-minute shared reading sessions over 10 weeks, structured into three key instructional components: (1) a 5-minute phonics mini-lesson focusing on letter-sound relationships, blending, and segmentation; (2) 10 minutes of reading decodable texts to reinforce phonics concepts and promote systematic decoding; and (3) 5 minutes of fluency development activities aimed at improving

accuracy, automaticity, and prosody. This structured approach ensured a systematic and explicit phonics-based intervention to strengthen foundational reading skills. The comparison group followed the standard preschool literacy curriculum, which did not systematically integrate phonics-based shared reading. Instead, literacy instruction emphasized storybook reading, letter recognition, and oral language development without structured decoding or fluency-building activities. Table 1 outlines the specific instructional components of both the experimental shared reading and comparison groups.

Table 1 :- Intervention Structure for Experimental and Comparison Groups

Component	**Experimental Group (Phonics-Based Shared Reading)**	**Comparison Group (Standard Literacy Curriculum)**
Phonics Instruction	Phonics Mini-Lesson	Letter Recognition Activities
Reading Practice	Reading Decodable Texts	Storybook Reading
Fluency Development	Fluency Activities	Language & Literacy Games

Hypothesis

This study examines the impact of structured shared reading sessions using decodable texts on early literacy development in preschool children. It hypothesizes that children who participate in these sessions will show greater improvements in phonological awareness, decoding proficiency, and reading fluency compared to those receiving standard literacy instruction. The study also considers the possibility of no significant difference between the two groups, as stated in the null hypothesis.

1. Alternative Hypothesis (H_1): Preschool children who engage in structured shared reading sessions using decodable texts will demonstrate significantly greater improvements in phonemic awareness, decoding proficiency, and reading fluency than those receiving standard literacy instruction.

2. Null Hypothesis (H_0): There will be no significant difference in literacy skill improvement between children in the experimental group (structured shared reading) and the comparison group (standard literacy instruction).

This hypothesis framework allows for evaluating the effectiveness of phonics-based shared reading interventions, contributing to research on evidence-based early literacy instruction.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study, analyzing the impact of structured shared reading with decodable texts on preschoolers' letter recognition, phonemic awareness, decoding proficiency, and oral reading fluency. A paired samples t-test was conducted to measure improvements within the experimental and comparison groups, while an independent samples t-test was used to compare post-test scores between groups. The results indicate statistically significant improvements across all literacy components, with the experimental group consistently outperforming the comparison group. These findings suggest that explicit phonics instruction, supported by decodable texts, enhances early literacy development, reinforcing the importance of structured, evidence-based reading interventions in preschool education.

Table 2 :- Letter Recognition

Paired Samples Test								
	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Letter Recognition Pretest Score - Letter Recognition Posttest Score	-9.10000	3.36667	.61467	-10.35714	-7.84286	-14.805	29	.000

The paired samples t-test was conducted to determine whether there was a significant improvement in Letter Recognition Scores from pre-test to post-test. The results of the paired samples t-test indicate a statistically significant improvement in letter recognition scores from pre-test to post-test ($t(29) = -14.805$, $p < .001$), suggesting that the intervention had a meaningful impact. The p-value is less than 0.001, which is highly significant ($p < 0.05$)

Table 3:- Effect Sizes for Letter Recognition Improvement

Paired Samples Effect Sizes					
		Standardizer[a]	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Letter Recognition Pretest Score - Letter Recognition Posttest Score	Cohen's d	3.36667	-2.703	-3.477	-1.919
	Hedges' correction	3.41100	-2.668	-3.431	-1.894

The effect size, measured by Cohen's d = -2.703, confirms that the improvement was extremely large, well beyond the standard threshold for a strong effect ($d > 0.8$). The 95% confidence interval [-3.477, -1.919] further supports this finding, indicating that the observed effect is unlikely to be due to chance. These results provide strong evidence that structured shared reading with decodable texts significantly enhances letter recognition skills in preschoolers.

Table 4 :- Phonemic Awareness (Segmentation)

Paired Samples Test								
	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Phonemic Awareness pretest Score - Phonemic Awareness posttest Score	-11.30000	3.27109	.59722	-12.52144	-10.07856	-18.921	29	.000

The paired samples t-test results indicate a statistically significant improvement in Phonemic Awareness Scores from pre-test to post-test ($t(29) = -18.921$, $p < .001$). On average, participants' post-test scores were 11.30 points higher than their pre-test scores, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 10.08 to 12.52, confirming a consistent and reliable improvement. The large negative t-value (-18.921) and small standard deviation (3.27) suggest a strong intervention effect across participants. Since the p-value is below 0.001, the observed improvement is highly significant and unlikely to have occurred by chance. These results provide

strong evidence that structured shared reading with decodable texts significantly enhances phonemic awareness skills in preschoolers.

Table 5 :- Decoding Proficiency Scores

Paired Samples Test								
	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Decoding Proficiency pretest Score - Decoding Proficiency posttest Score	-14.80000	3.32597	.60724	-16.04194	-13.55806	-24.373	29	.000

The paired samples t-test results indicate a statistically significant improvement in Decoding Proficiency Scores from pre-test to post-test ($t(29) = -24.373$, $p < .001$). On average, participants' post-test scores were 14.80 points higher than their pre-test scores, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 13.56 to 16.04, confirming a consistent improvement across participants. The large negative t-value (-24.373) and small standard deviation (3.33) suggest that the intervention had a strong and widespread effect on decoding skills. Since the p-value is below 0.001, the improvement is highly significant and not due to random chance. These findings provide strong evidence that structured phonics-based instruction significantly enhances decoding proficiency in preschoolers.

Table 6 :- Oral Reading Fluency (Words Per Minute - WPM)

Paired Samples Test								
	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Decoding Proficiency pretest Score - Decoding Proficiency posttest Score	-11.43333	3.95390	.72188	-12.90974	-9.95692	-15.838	29	.000

The paired samples t-test results indicate a statistically significant improvement in Decoding Proficiency Scores from pre-test to post-test ($t(29) = -15.838$, $p < .001$). On average, participants' post-test scores were 11.43 points higher than their pre-test scores, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 9.96 to 12.91, confirming a consistent improvement. The large negative t-value (-15.838) and standard deviation (3.95) suggest that the intervention had a strong and meaningful effect on decoding skills across participants. Since the p-value is below 0.001, the improvement is highly significant and unlikely to be due to random chance. These findings provide strong evidence that structured phonics-based instruction significantly enhances decoding proficiency in preschoolers.

SUMMARY

The paired samples t-tests conducted for all components—Letter Recognition, Phonemic Awareness, Decoding Proficiency, and Oral Reading Fluency—revealed statistically significant improvements from pre-test to post-test, supporting the effectiveness of the structured shared reading with decodable texts intervention. The experimental group, which received systematic phonics-based instruction with decodable texts,

demonstrated substantial gains across all literacy skills, with Letter Recognition improving by 9.10 points ($t(29) = -14.805$, $p < .001$), Phonemic Awareness by 11.30 points ($t(29) = -18.921$, $p < .001$), Decoding Proficiency by 11.43 points ($t(29) = -15.838$, $p < .001$), and Oral Reading Fluency showing the highest increase. The use of decodable texts played a crucial role in these improvements by providing controlled exposure to phonetic patterns, allowing children to apply their phonics knowledge systematically, reinforcing decoding skills, and fostering reading fluency. These findings align with the Science of Reading framework, which emphasizes the importance of explicit phonics instruction and decodable texts in early literacy development. The structured format of the experimental group, which included daily phonics-based mini-lessons, guided reading with decodable texts, and fluency-building activities, ensured that children developed strong foundational reading skills. The consistently low p-values ($p < .001$) and large negative t-values indicate that these improvements were statistically significant and unlikely to be due to chance, further reinforcing the necessity of structured, evidence-based reading instruction in preschool education.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study strongly support the effectiveness of structured shared reading with decodable texts in enhancing early literacy skills among preschoolers. The statistically significant improvements observed across key literacy components—Letter Recognition, Phonemic Awareness, Decoding Proficiency, and Oral Reading Fluency, emphasise the impact of explicit phonics instruction when paired with decodable texts. These findings align with the Science of Reading framework, which emphasizes the necessity of systematic, phonics-based instruction to build foundational literacy skills (Hansford et al., 2023). Research has consistently demonstrated that structured literacy programs outperform balanced literacy approaches, particularly for early readers and struggling learners (Hansford et al., 2023). The experimental group in this study, which received structured reading sessions using decodable texts, consistently outperformed the comparison group. This supports prior research indicating that structured, sequential, and evidence-based approaches to literacy instruction yield superior results (Pennell et al., 2024). Decodable texts played a pivotal role by reinforcing letter-sound correspondences, improving word recognition, and fostering fluency, thereby reducing reliance on guessing strategies and promoting confident reading behaviors (Dornbrack & Kazungu, 2023). The high effect sizes recorded further indicate that the observed improvements were not only statistically significant but also practically meaningful, validating the intervention's effectiveness (Cheatham & Allor, 2012). Furthermore, there were indications of improvement in spelling skills throughout the study, suggesting that structured shared reading with decodable texts may also contribute to orthographic development. However, further investigation is needed to determine the extent and consistency of these improvements across different literacy contexts.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EARLY LITERACY EDUCATION

The findings of this study highlight the critical need to integrate evidence-based reading strategies into early childhood education, particularly in the design of literacy curricula. Structured phonics instruction and the use of decodable texts should be systematically incorporated into preschool reading programs to establish a strong foundation for reading success (Blevins, 2023). However, effective implementation depends on ensuring that educators receive targeted training in these research-backed strategies and have access to high-quality, developmentally appropriate materials to enhance literacy outcomes (Pennell et al., 2024)

The significant improvements in phonemic awareness and decoding proficiency observed in this study reinforce the necessity of prioritizing phonics-based reading instruction over whole-language approaches, which lack the systematic decoding practice essential for reading fluency (Spear-Swerling, 2019). Without structured, evidence-based instruction, children are at risk of developing persistent reading difficulties that could hinder their long-term academic progress. Future research should further investigate the sustained impact of structured phonics instruction on vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension, ensuring a holistic approach to early literacy development (Cheatham & Allor, 2012).

Given the compelling evidence supporting structured literacy instruction, there is an urgent need for policymakers to reform teacher training programs and mandate the inclusion of evidence-based reading strategies in early literacy education. Teachers must be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to implement these strategies effectively, as they are proven to be the most effective approach for fostering reading proficiency in young learners (Hansford et al., 2023). Aligning with decades of research, these findings reinforce that structured, evidence-based literacy instruction is not just beneficial but essential for ensuring equitable and effective early reading education (Dornbrack & Kazungu, 2023).

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