

The Use of The Jolly Phonics Method in Improving English Reading and Writing Skills among Preschool Students

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Abstract

Reading and writing skills are basic skills that are emphasized in the education system starting as early as preschool. The inability of preschool children to read and write in English after finishing the educational session in preschool worries teachers and school administrators. Therefore, this study aims to determine the effectiveness of the Jolly Phonics method in helping to improve the mastery of reading and writing skills of preschool students. The researcher used Jolly Phonics in a preschool in Lundu district, Sarawak in teaching English. This study uses a quasi-experimental study of 16 respondents selected through intact sampling. The instruments used are the Burt Reading Test and the Jolly Phonics Assessment Set checklist. The pre-test and post-test were conducted using the Burt Reading Test to obtain reading scores and reading age. The findings of the study found that Jolly Phonics is effective in helping preschool students improve their mastery of reading and writing skills in English subjects. The findings of this study also show that teaching English using the Jolly Phonics method is practical and appropriate for the age and development of preschool children. The use of Jolly Phonics has positive implications for students, teachers, parents and guardians.

Keywords: Reading, Writing, Jolly Phonics, English, Preschool

Introduction

Although there are different systems regarding the implementation of preschool education programs in each country, preschool education is growing all over the world. This is due to the increased awareness of the importance of building and strengthening the emotional, social and overall potential of children before undergoing primary education. This increase can be seen globally where there is an increase in the enrolment rate for pre-primary school programs from 33 percent in 2000 to 61 percent within 20 years in 2020 (UNICEF, 2022). Looking at the preschool education curriculum as a whole, English is one of the preferred languages that is absorbed as a second language in the preschool curriculum, especially in countries that do not use English as the main language. Malaysia is one of the countries that empowers the use of English in the education system as early as preschool. Early literacy in

English is one of the goals to be achieved through preschool education. Literacy is defined as the ability to read and write (Kamus Dewan Edisi Keempat, 2016). Therefore, reading and writing skills are two skills that affect a person's level of language literacy.

The education system in our country has from the beginning emphasized 3M skills which are reading (*mengira*), writing (*menulis*) and counting (*mengira*). These 3M skills are very important because the mastery of 3M will affect the students at the next level of schooling. But, now another skill that needs to be mastered is reasoning skills. Therefore, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (KPM) pre-school education outlines four main basic skills that preschool students need to master, namely reading skills, writing skills, counting skills and reasoning skills. The Curriculum Development Division (2012) has summarized these four basic skills as 4M skills. However, this study will only focus on reading and writing skills in English to help children master early English literacy at the preschool level. This is due to concerns about students who fail to master the 3M reading and writing skills before continuing their education to Year One is a dilemma that teachers and school administrators often face, and this matter is seen to be getting worse after the outbreak of COVID-19. The Movement Control Order (MCO) enforced in 2020 in our country has forced virtual or distance learning methods to be introduced. The method of teaching and learning at home implemented over a period of two years has a significant negative impact in affecting the students' mastery of reading and writing skills. Following the continuous closure of schools, a total of 131,281 level one students in Johor were found to have failed to master 3M skills (Harian Metro, 2021). Many students who progressed to the next level for face-to-face classes after the MCO period showed a worrying level of mastery of reading and writing skills when 269,332 primary school students nationwide were found to be unable to master the basic 3M skills (Utusan Malaysia, 2023).

In line with the National Preschool Standard Curriculum (2017), English reading and writing skills among preschool students are among the skills that are emphasized. Preschool students are expected to be able to master the basics of reading and writing skills for English with a good level of mastery before entering Year One because they will be faced with a high-level syllabus in Year One. Pupils will not have difficulty understanding the context of the curriculum syllabus in English subjects only but also in Science and Mathematics subjects through the Dual Language Program. Moreover, for primary schools in Sarawak that have implemented the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English from 2020. The Ministry of Education has also introduced the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) syllabus in 2018 for the teaching of English in preschool, primary school and secondary school as a transformation to help the mastery of English in Malaysia.

Therefore, this study is to see the effectiveness of using the phonics method known as Jolly Phonics in helping to improve the mastery of reading skills and writing skills for English subjects among preschool students in a preschool class in Sarawak. The researcher has chosen to use Jolly Phonics which is one of the phonics method programs developed by Sue Lloyd and Sara Wernham which is widely used in the United Kingdom. In fact, this method is also used in more than 100 countries around the world. This program has been proven successful in producing a positive impact in helping students master English reading and writing skills in those countries. Jolly Phonics is a reading method using phonics/letter sounds where there are 42 letter sounds divided into seven groups containing six letters in each group.

Literature Review

OK, et al (2011); Chee, et al (2018) each stated that the method factor or teacher's teaching method strategy is a contributing factor to the problem of students' failure to master reading skills. Nor Laila (2014) also supports the statement through her study by stating that the problem of reading skills can be overcome with effective teaching strategies. Therefore, teachers play a role in diversifying teaching strategies to help students gain mastery of various language skills quickly and effectively (Oxford & Crookall, 1989).

Preschool students who use the phonics method show good achievement in reading skills (Yahya et al., 2012). This statement is also supported by Suwarsi (2014) where the findings of his study found that there was an increase in the level of student mastery after using the phonics method. Bielby (1999) in Yahya et al (2012) stated that phonics is systematically taught to students at an early stage by sounding out letters to encode words. This approach is used by teaching students to sound the letters out loud before combining the sounds and will then be heard by the teacher. He also added that this approach is a positive way to identify new letter sounds and can be used for a long period of time.

After repeatedly learning the relationship between visual cues (letters) and sounds, students will be able to recognize and recognize words. Once at this level, students are already in the phase of learning to read and the problem of recognizing letters can be solved by identifying words (Heilman, 1993 in Yahya et al., 2012). Goswami and Bryant (1990) in Campbell (1995) also agreed that phoneme awareness is the main factor to progress in learning to read. Therefore, knowledge of letters and sounds contributes to the mastery of reading and writing.

Stuart (1999) in Ruhaena (2008) states that the Jolly Phonics method is able to improve the mastery of reading and writing for children who are native speakers of English or as their second language. Ruhaena's (2008) study also proved that the Jolly Phonics method is effective in improving preschool students' reading and writing skills.

Katechaiyo, et al (2021) also have the same opinion as Farokhbakht (2015) which is that the Jolly Phonics method is found to help improve the literacy of reading skills of preschool students who are in ESL classrooms. From the findings of the researchers, it can be proven that preschool students who use the Jolly Phonics method in learning English show a higher improvement compared to the usual teaching method.

Problem Statement

The 2017 Revision of the National Preschool Standard Curriculum (KSPK) has stated the Content Standards and Learning Standards that must be mastered by preschool students for ages 4+ and 5+. Table 1 and Table 2 below shows the description of the Content Standard and Learning Standard of reading skills and writing skills for English at the preschool level.

Table 1

*Description of Content Standards and Learning Standards of English Reading Skills
KSPK Revision 2017*

Content standard	Learning standard	
	4+	5+
		2.0 Reading skills
BI 2.2 Apply sounds of letters to recognise words	Pupils can:	Pupils can:
	BI 2.2.1 Recognise letters of the alphabet by their: (i) shape (ii) name	BI 2.2.5 Recognise and sound out letters of the alphabet
	BI 2.2.2 Recognise small letters of the alphabet	BI 2.2.6 Recognise and sound out initial, medial and ending sounds in a word
	BI 2.2.3 Recognise capital letters of the alphabet	BI 2.2.7 Blend phonemes (sounds) to form single syllable words
	BI 2.2.4 Name letters of the alphabet	
BI 2.3 Demonstrate understanding of a variety of texts in the form of print and non print materials	Pupils can:	Pupils can:
	BI 2.3.1 Recognise and read logos and signs	BI 2.3.3 Recognise and read high frequency/sight words
	BI 2.3.2 Read familiar words printed in the surroundings	BI 2.3.4 Read simple phrases BI 2.3.5 Read simple sentences

As can be seen in Table 1, for the Learning Standard for preschool 5+ reading skills, sound mastery and combining sounds (phonemes) are reading skill constructs that preschool students need to master before moving on to reading words, phrases and simple sentences. The 2017 Revised KSPK syllabus shows that Malaysia wants to implement the teaching of English reading through the phonics method.

According to Yahya et al (2012) in his study, it was found that the phonics method is suitable to be incorporated in the teaching of reading skills at the preschool level. This method

is effective in helping students quickly master reading skills. However, according to a study by Mullins (2013), many teachers are confused about phonics terms and lack basic knowledge about phonics and how to implement it in the classroom. The study of Nadiah Yan et al. (2015) and Naning et al (2016) also support this statement by finding that teachers are not familiar with the phonics approach and have never implemented it in the classroom. However, Marima's study (2016) proved that 90% of preschool teachers who chose to use the phonics method in teaching English reading skills compared to only 10% of preschool teachers who chose to use the 'whole-language' method.

Table 2

Description of Content Standards and Learning Standards of English Writing Skills KSPK Revision 2017

Content standard	Learning standard	
	4+	5+
3.0 Writing skills		
BI 3.2 Develop writing skills	Pupils can:	Pupils can:
	BI 3.2.1 Write recognisable letters	BI 3.2.5 Copy simple phrases in legible print
	BI 3.2.2 Copy and write small letters legibly	BI 3.2.6 Copy familiar simple sentences in legible print
	BI 3.2.3 Copy and write capital letters legibly	BI 3.2.7 Communicate ideas and information by using drawing, marks, symbols and writing within vented spelling
	BI 3.2.4 Copy familiar words in legible print	BI 3.2.8 Write familiar words and phrases in legible print

Table 2 shows the writing skills that students need to master is to be able to write words and phrases in legible print. However, the researcher found that preschool students could not write words and phrases correctly when the teacher said the words or phrases and asked the students to write on paper or books. Students have difficulty spelling words and writing simple phrases and sentences correctly. The average student who has graduated from preschool or kindergarten shows a weak and unsatisfactory level of mastery in reading skills and writing skills in English. Reading skills and writing skills in English among Year 1 students, even at Level 1, are increasingly worrying.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine whether the Jolly Phonics method can help pre-school students master English reading and writing skills.

Research Objectives

This study has two research objectives which are

- i. Identifying the effectiveness of Jolly Phonics in improving preschool students' mastery of English reading skills.
- i. Identifying the effectiveness of Jolly Phonics in improving preschool students' mastery of English writing skills.

Research Design

Quantitative research approach which is quasi-experimental is chosen for this study because the study will have a pre-test and post-test. This pre-test and post-test will be implemented to a selected group of respondents.

Location and Sample

This study was conducted in a preschool in Lundu district located in the state of Sarawak. The researcher's purpose in choosing that location is because the researcher feels that there is a lack of research done related to preschool teaching and learning in that location.

The study sample for this study was selected by 'intact sampling', which only focuses on preschool students in a preschool class in Lundu district only. Researchers can also decide the criteria and information they want to know from the selected people (Bernard, 2002). The researcher chose all 16 preschool students in a preschool class because this study was only conducted in the researcher's preschool.

Research Instruments

The research instrument used in this study is the Jolly Phonics assessment set in the form of a checklist developed by the founders of the Jolly Phonics Program themselves, namely Sue Lloyd and Sara Wernham. This research instrument was used to identify the effectiveness of Jolly Phonics on preschool students' reading and writing skills. The researcher obtained the instrument through the website jollylearning.co.uk and used this research instrument. In addition, pre-test and post-test are also implemented in this study. Therefore, the same test set was used in the pre-test and post-test. The Burt Reading Test Revised (1974) test set was used to identify the level of pre-school students' reading proficiency before and after the intervention was implemented using the Jolly Phonics teaching set. Jolly Phonics teaching sets include letter sound cards, word cards, cartoon worksheets and Jolly Phonics software. Burt Reading Test Revised (1974) is a reading test that has been standardized for use in New Zealand and is available for children between 6 and 12;6 years. It has high test-retest reliability ($r > .95$), internal consistency reliability ($r > .96$) and criterion validity (Gilmore et al., 1981). The Burt Reading Test Revised was originally introduced in 1974 and since then it has been revised and standardized year after year.

Data Collection Method

The data of this study was collected by first performing a pre-test of students' reading skills with the Burt Reading Test. This test will be carried out within a week. Next, the implementation of Jolly Phonics learning in preschool with respondents will begin. There are 42 letter sounds divided into 7 groups will be taught in Jolly Phonics. Each group has 6 sounds as follows:

1. s, a, t, i, p, n
2. ck, e, h, r, m, d
3. g, o, u, l, f, b
4. ai, j, oa, ie, ee, or
5. z, w, ng, v, oo, oo
6. y, x, ch, sh, th, **th**
7. qu, ou, oi, ue, er, ar

The first phase of Jolly Phonics learning will include letter sound learning sets for Group 1, Group 2 and Group 3. This first phase is expected to take 18 days or 4 weeks as only one letter sound will be taught each day. Once the three sets of Jolly Phonics groups are introduced, the first assessment will be carried out within a week. Next, the second phase begins with letter sounds from Group 4. After completing all seven groups within 15 weeks, the second assessment will be carried out. A post-test using the Burt Reading Test will also be implemented. All of this data was collected using a checklist form.

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the initial and final data obtained through the checklist from the Burt Reading Test in the pre-test and post-test. Data analysis from the assessment set checklist was also performed after the intervention. Comparison of initial data and final data to assess the level of student mastery to identify the effectiveness of Jolly Phonics in learning English.

Research Findings

After performing a pre-test of reading skills using the Burt Reading Test, it was found that all 16 respondents could not read a single word listed in the test. After completing the three sets of Jolly Phonics groups taught in the classroom with the respondents, the post-test using the Burt Reading Test and the first set of assessments was used to improve the reading and writing skills of the respondents. Burt's Reading Test is a word reading test where the number of words read correctly will give a score that will be shown to the respondent 'reading age' by referring to the attached table. Table 3 shows the results of the pre-test and post-test after completing the first phase of learning Jolly Phonics to the respondents.

Table 3

Pre-Test and Post-Test Burt Reading Test Results

Respondent	Pre-test		Post-test	
	Score	Reading age	Score	Reading age
1	0	5.3	3	5.3
2	0	5.3	10	5.7
3	0	5.3	11	5.8
4	0	5.3	1	5.3
5	0	5.3	1	5.3
6	0	5.3	1	5.3
7	0	5.3	7	5.6
8	0	5.3	6	5.5
9	0	5.3	2	5.3
10	0	5.3	0	5.3
11	0	5.3	0	5.3
12	0	5.3	2	5.3
13	0	5.3	18	6.1
14	0	5.3	1	5.3
15	0	5.3	1	5.3
16	0	5.3	2	5.3

Table 3 shows that all respondents recorded the same score on the pre-test for the Burt Reading Test and recorded a 'reading age' value of 5 years and 3 months. The post-test showed an increase in the overall value where one respondent reached a 'reading age' of 6 years and 1 month. Although there are still 11 respondents who are still at the same 'reading age' which is 5 years and 3 months, but 9 of them showed an improvement in reading scores after 4 weeks. This makes the percentage of increase in reading score is 87.5% while the increase in reading age level is 31.25%.

The Assessment set used is divided into three parts namely *Letter sound knowledge*, *Reading* and *Writing from dictation*. The *Letter sound knowledge* section has 18 items, *Reading* has 10 items and *Writing* also has 10 items. The evaluation results obtained are summarized in the following bar graph.

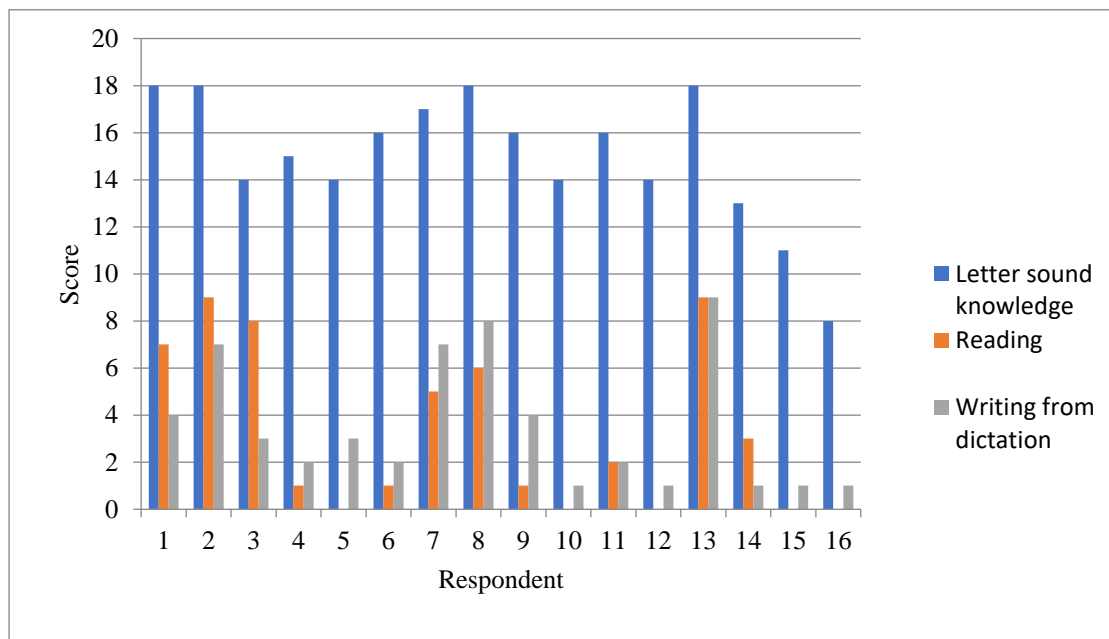


Figure 1 Results of Evaluation Set 1

Based on the results of this evaluation, it was found that 15 respondents could master more than 10 letter sounds out of the 18 sounds that had been taught. Six respondents showed encouraging progress in mastering the basics of reading skills with the 'blending' technique. Five respondents are still trying to master the 'blending' technique and four respondents have yet to master the basics of the 'blending' technique to read English words. As for the writing part, all respondents showed progress where all respondents could write at least one word correctly by listening to the sounds that were spoken.

The diagrams below show the scores of the Assessment Set 1 checklist and the writing results for the Writing section by some respondents.

Letter sound knowledge			Reading		Writing from dictation			
Group 1	Says sound when shown letter(s)	Writes letter(s) from dictated sound		Blends words accurately		Spells words accurately		
s	/		tin	/	lot			
a	/		cap	/	bid	/		
t	/		bud	/	set			
i	/		kid		rim			
p	/		leg	/	can	/		
n	/		gas	/	pug	/		
			fin	/	fit			
			elf		hog	/		
Group 2	Says sound when shown letter(s)	Writes letter(s) from dictated sound	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 10px auto;"> 1. lot x 2. bid ✓ 3. set x 4. rim x 5. can ✓ 6. pug ✓ 7. ref x 8. hog ✓ 9. tap x 10. beu x </div>					
c k	/							
e	/							
h	/							
r	/							
m	/							
d	/							
Group 3	Says sound when shown letter(s)	Writes letter(s) from dictated sound						
g	/							
o	/							
u	/							
l	/							
f	/							
b	/							
_ / 18			_ / 10					

Figure 2 Assessment Set 1 Respondent 1

Letter sound knowledge			Reading		Writing from dictation			
Group 1	Says sound when shown letter(s)	Writes letter(s) from dictated sound		Blends words accurately		Spells words accurately		
s	/		tin	/	lot	/		
a	/		cap	/	bid	/		
t	/		bud		set	/		
i	/		kid	/	rim	/		
p	/		leg	/	can	/		
n	/		gas	/	pug	/		
			fin	/	fit			
			elf	/	hog	/		
			hem					
			rot					
Group 2	Says sound when shown letter(s)	Writes letter(s) from dictated sound	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 10px auto;"> 1. lot ✓ 2. bid ✓ 3. set ✓ 4. rim ✓ 5. can ✓ 6. pug x 7. lif x 8. hog ✓ 9. lat x 10. den ✓ </div>					
c k	/							
e	/							
h	/							
r	/							
m	/							
d	/							
Group 3	Says sound when shown letter(s)	Writes letter(s) from dictated sound						
g	/							
o	/							
u	/							
l	/							
f	/							
b	/							
_ / 18								

Figure 3 Assessment Set 1 Respondent 2

Letter sound knowledge			Reading		Writing from dictation	
Group	Says sound when shown letter(s)	Writes letter(s) from dictated sound		Blends words accurately		Spells words accurately
Group 1			tin	✓	lot	
	s	✓	cap	✓	bid	
	a	✓	bud	✓	set	
	t	✓	kid	✓	rim	✓
	i		leg		can	✓
	p	✓	gas	✓	pug	
	n	✓	fin	✓	fit	
Group 2			elf	✓	hog	
	c k	✓	hu			
	e		r			
	h	✓				
	r	✓				
	m	✓				
	d	✓				
Group 3						
	g					
	o	✓				
	u	✓				
	l	✓				
	f	✓				
	b					

_ /18

1. lot ✓

2. blee x

3. 2ei x

4. rim ✓

5. can ✓

6. pge x

7. fil x

8. hoe x

9. lag x

10. den ✓

Figure 4 Assessment Set 1 Respondent 3

Letter sound knowledge			Reading		Writing from dictation	
Group	Says sound when shown letter(s)	Writes letter(s) from dictated sound		Blends words accurately		Spells words accurately
Group 1			tin	✓	lot	✓
	s	✓	cap	✓	bid	✓
	a	✓	bud	✓	set	
	t	✓	kid	✓	rim	✓
	i	✓	leg	✓	can	✓
	p	✓	gas	✓	pug	✓
	n	✓	fin	✓	fit	✓
Group 2			elf	✓	hog	✓
	c k	✓	hem	✓	lap	✓
	e	✓	rot	✓	den	✓
	h	✓				
	r	✓				
	m	✓				
	d	✓				
Group 3						
	g	✓				
	o	✓				
	u	✓				
	l	✓				
	f	✓				
	b	✓				

_ /18

1. lot ✓

2. bid ✓

3. sat x

4. rim ✓

5. can ✓

6. pug ✓

7. fit ✓

8. hog ✓

9. lap ✓

10. den ✓

Figure 5 Assessment Set 1 Respondent 13

Discussion

This study aims to identify the effectiveness of Jolly Phonics in increasing the mastery of reading skills and also English writing skills of preschool students. The findings of the study show parallel findings with Ruhaena (2008); Farokhbakht (2015); Katechaiyo, et al (2021), namely Jolly Phonics has a positive effect in improving preschool students' reading and writing skills. Mastering letter sounds makes it easier for students to understand the concept of reading and writing in English faster. However, the findings from Ha Mei Ling and Fitri (2018) show that the Jolly Phonics teaching method and conventional teaching in the classroom do not show a different mastery gap. Both of the teacher's teaching methods help improve students' mastery.

The Jolly Phonic method is not only about teaching language orally by using letter sounds, but also because there are interesting supporting materials to stimulate the children's various senses. The components used in Jolly Phonics such as actions (gestures), songs, letter cards, word cards and structured writing practice sheets make it easier for teachers to teach students more systematically and efficiently. The integration of fun learning elements in Jolly Phonic teaching attracts students to concentrate and it is easier to understand the lesson. Supar (2017) also thinks that the use of the body (gesture) helps students master skills more quickly and that fun educational elements involving various sensory stimulation can reduce stress and help calm students during the learning process. As such, it is important to use all available support materials to provide a fun and consistent learning environment.

Reviewing letter sounds using letter cards at the beginning of each learning session is very helpful for students to recognize and master letter sounds more quickly. Juriah Long et. al (1994) also stated the same thing that students' memory increased with the repeated use of letter cards in teaching with children. Farah (2011) also stated the same thing in his study where there was an increase in students' reading skills after the use of cards. In fact, Jolly Phonics also meets the needs of students' diverse ways of learning because Jolly Phonics offers learning that involves various senses such as sight, hearing and movement at the same time.

Since Jolly Phonics is a new teaching method implemented in the preschool, it may be better if parents or guardians are involved. The involvement of parents or guardians can ensure that students' learning can continue outside the classroom with them. For example, students can review the sounds of letters and words learned in the classroom together with parents or guardians at home to optimize students' mastery of reading and writing skills. Among the activities that can be carried out at home is accessing the Jolly Phonics application for self-learning through games and learning sets provided in the application. Parents can also make assessments for students through the application.

Conclusion

This study shows that the use of Jolly Phonics indeed has positive implications in the teaching of teachers and the learning of preschool students for English subjects. The progress achieved in a short period of time gives a clear picture to teachers that Jolly Phonics is an effective alternative method to improve the mastery of reading and writing skills of preschool students. The mastery of letter sounds will help preschoolers to more easily understand the concept of reading with the combination of letter sounds. Preschool students are also able to master writing skills by associating letter sounds and letter shapes through continuous writing practice.

Through this study, preschool teachers can improve their teaching skills using phonics to diversify the way English is taught at the preschool level and may also be able to expand its use with 1st year students who are still weak in English proficiency. Knowledge sharing or skill training in teaching using the phonics method between preschool teachers needs to be implemented from time to time.

The use of technological support materials such as the Jolly Phonics application provides a more active and enjoyable independent learning space for students outside of school hours. Learning with parents and guardians is also easy to do because there is easy access to the application via smartphone or computer. This shows that this study has implications for many parties such as students, teachers, parents and guardians.

A suggestion for a study that can be carried out in the future by the researchers is to carry out the same study on Year 1 students or any student who has not yet mastered the English language. This study can also be extended to nearby preschools by examining the perception of preschool teachers on the effectiveness of using Jolly Phonics in teaching English.

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