

AN EXPLORATION OF TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF
SYNTHETIC PHONICS AND WHOLE LANGUAGE APPROACHES
IN EAL EARLY LITERACY CLASSROOMS

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Abstract:

Purpose - Although the discussion about the best method of teaching reading has been ongoing over the decades, little has been understood about the relative perceptions of synthetic phonics with the whole language approach in the early development of literacy levels among English as an Additional Language (EAL) students. The current paper aims to explain the way in which teachers conceptualise, interpret, and operationalise these strategies to facilitate the development of literacy among young learners. The study also offers information on the good practices in multilingual learning settings by demonstrating the importance of instructional decisions in determining literacy outcomes.

Methodology - The proposed study has a qualitative design that will use semi-structured interviews to explore the perceptions of teachers about synthetic phonics and whole language instruction in EAL early literacy classes. A total of six teachers were purposely selected in one international school in Selangor, who were involved, three in the Early Years and three in the Key Stage 1. The thematic analyses were used to determine common trends and lessons in teaching.

Findings - The study established a difference in perceptions among teachers in the use of synthetic phonics and whole language as tools for facilitating the early literacy development of EAL learners. Educators came to realise that synthetic phonics provides a solid base in abacus and spelling, which is especially beneficial to younger students who have little experience with the English language. At the same time, they appreciated whole language due to its ability to encourage understanding, word development, and reading interest. However, there were issues in trying to balance the two methodologies within curricular considerations since educators would often focus on phonics due to its guided and measurable results. Another theme of the analysis was related to the customization of whole language practices to the needs of different learners and the consistency across the classroom, which serves as the reason why integrated models of instruction are essential.

Significance - A major contribution of the study to the research body is that it enlightens teachers on their perceptions of synthetic phonics and whole language in early literacy classes. The research will help to make pedagogical decisions more informed by defining the strengths, limitations, and challenges of both methods and will help to develop instructional methods that cater more effectively to the diverse literacy requirements of multilingual learners.

Keywords: Synthetic phonics, whole language, EAL learners, early literacy, teachers' perceptions, reading instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Developing high-confidence-level readers among young learners is both fun and a complicated task, especially with the children who learn English as an Additional Language (EAL). During the first few years of practice, teachers are often faced with two possible approaches to literacy: synthetic phonics, which focuses on the explicit instruction of grapheme-phoneme correspondences, and the whole language approach, which emphasizes reading

meaning through real texts. Even though there are numerous debates about each of the approaches, their combination and how teachers perceive them have not been sufficiently examined in multilingual classrooms.

The significance of literacy teaching among EAL learners can hardly be overestimated. There has also been a consistent correlation between early reading proficiency and later academic success in different subjects (Snow, 2020). Literacy acquisition, in multilingual contexts, involves not just the learning of the decoding skill but also negotiating vocabulary and cultural references, as well as understanding strategies (Cummins, 2021). As a result, educators play a central mediatory role between pedagogical practices and student needs so that pedagogy is systematic and purposeful.

Synthetic phonics has gained increasing attention worldwide in terms of its effectiveness in helping children gain early reading skills. Empirical research proves that systematic phonics teaching makes it easier to learn the skills of word recognition, decoding, and spelling (Ehri, 2020; Johnston and Watson, 2005). Jamaludin et al. (2016) indicated that Malaysia, where decoding and comprehension showed great improvements in struggling ESL readers after teaching them synthetic phonics. In the same way, Odo (2021) found significant influences on word reading and pseudoword decoding among second-language learners, which supports the idea that the explicit and systematic teaching of letter-sound correspondences has a strong impact, especially on children with minimal experience in English.

Although these are the strengths, weaknesses also exist in synthetic phonics. Those who criticize phonics argue that, when phonics is taught in isolation, it can result in reading being taught as more of a decoding project, which does not teach comprehension, vocabulary, and higher-order thinking (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). Castles et al. (2018) stressed that, in addition to the importance of systematic phonics in initiating a reader, this method should not be introduced as an independent one and should be part of a larger literacy teaching framework. Those teachers who use phonics alone run the risk of losing students who need to be provided with meaningful and encouraging contexts in which they will practise reading, especially when they need assistance in using language to communicate.

On the other hand, the whole language approach is based on exposure to rich literacy where reading and writing are seen as natural processes (Goodman, 1986; Smith, 2004). Proponents believe that original texts promote understanding, fluency, and drive. Recent studies also suggest that multilingual storytelling can be used as a meaning-oriented pedagogy to incorporate EAL learners using their cultural and linguistic assets (Sun, 2022). This is in line with the literature of translanguaging practices that encourages one to use more than one language as an instrument of meaning-making in the progress of literacy (Garcia & Wei, 2018). The whole language strategies can legitimize the learners, who come to the classroom with their various home languages, and provide a boost in their interaction with English literacy.

However, the whole language approach has been criticized regarding low emphasis on decoding. According to Shanahan (2020), children who do not have the necessary phonics skills, particularly those with a linguistically diverse background, cannot learn to read by being exposed to actual texts only. Without systematic teaching, EAL students might have difficulties with reading the new words, which restricts their reading of more sophisticated texts. In that regard, whole language strategies, though effective in improving comprehension and engagement, do not meet the needs of decoding problems in the reading students during the early reading stages.

The phonics versus whole language reading wars remain a criterion that affects policy and practice in any part of the world. In Australia, the recent changes requiring the use of synthetic phonics in primary schools have demonstrated significant changes in the reading performance, especially among disadvantaged and EAL students (Buckingham, 2022). At the same time, educators worried about the need to balance between systematic phonics and holistic lessons that are conducive to understanding and critical literacy (Louden, 2021). In the UK, there are still debates about the balance between phonics testing and more comprehensive literacy, and researchers note that it is important to balance explicit teaching and meaningful interactions with the texts (Wyse et al., 2021). These global tendencies highlight the fact that teacher perceptions are at the heart of processes of implementing policies in classrooms and accommodating various needs of learners.

These tensions are experienced in Malaysia. Abdullah et al. (2020) discovered that the majority of teachers at primary school who used phonics lacked confidence and mostly used memorisation as the main strategy instead of systematic teaching. Zulkifli (2014) documented that teachers were conversant with the basic phonics, but their knowledge was usually restricted, and they were likely to incorporate phonics in whole language practice implicitly. These results indicate that teacher beliefs have a strong impact on adaptation and implementation of literacy practices in Malaysian classrooms, with instruction practices being based on policy expectations as well as classroom reality.

Another layer of complexity is brought in by research carried out in foreign schools. Such schools generally have more flexible curricula and are attended by students of extremely diverse linguistic backgrounds. According to Tan (2022), teacher agency in these settings is vital in the personalization of literacy teaching to students, especially when considering having to strike a balance between structured ones, such as phonics, and holistic ones, such as whole language. Educators working in international schools often base their curriculum choices on professional judgement and combine practices to fit the needs of the students in the face of parental, administrative, and examiner board expectations.

This study adds to the comprehension of how theoretical arguments are transformed into the practical realities of the classroom through the foregrounding of the voice of teachers. The emphasis on the views of teachers provides the information on how teachers conceptualise the benefits and constraints of synthetic phonics and whole language, how teachers cope with the difficulties of implementation of these methods, and how they balance such methods in practice to facilitate the development of the literacy skills of EAL students. These views can be useful in theoretical discourse as well as offer valuable information to curriculum designers, policy makers, and teacher educators interested in enhancing the teaching of literacy in multilingual settings.

Conclusively, EAL early literacy education falls at the crossroads of decoding and meaning-making. Synthetic phonics provides a systematic basis of word recognition, and whole language promotes a sense of understanding and involvement. The difficulty is not in picking one approach as opposed to the other, but rather it is to know how teachers view, modify, and integrate these approaches in actual classes. The role that teachers' perceptions play as a key prism of understanding the nature of literacy pedagogy is an emphasis on the role of context-specific, balanced strategies of early literacy learning in Malaysia and other regions. Hence, at the end, this study is intended to address the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the phonics instructions and whole language approach in supporting reading fluency among early literacy EAL learners?
2. How do teachers perceive the role of whole language instruction in comparison to synthetic phonics in shaping students' reading fluency and spelling accuracy during early literacy development?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Whole Language Approach

The current research scholarship still supports the usefulness of the whole language approach in primary literacy, especially in multilingual and culturally diverse classrooms. According to Aisyah et al. (2024), primary school students in Indonesia were found to exhibit improved reading comprehension when taught using activities that were rich in narratives and had contextual meanings as opposed to using single-skill decoding activities. In like manner, a review study based in Malaysia showed the importance of immersive, narrative-based pedagogies in enhancing the reading proficiency of preschoolers, particularly those with a multilingual background (Idris et al., 2024).

Outside Southeast Asia, Ollerhead and Pennington (2024) reported that a multilingual storytelling project in Australia led to a significant effect on the learners, especially emergent bilingual learners, by fostering their involvement in early reading and writing. The pedagogical approach empowered classroom engagement and oral literacy by authenticating home languages and cultural identities (Ollerhead & Pennington, 2024). This evidence highlights the effectiveness of genuine, culturally responsive texts related to motivation and language awareness.

Yatri et al. (2023) in the Indonesian setting showed that multimodal materials and whole-language materials enhanced the reading comprehension, motivation, and critical thinking of children. Their research confirmed the usefulness of resources that incorporated activities including read-alouds, shared reading, and guided writing by stating that contextual and holistic instruction enhances language engagements.

In addition to this, Sukmayasa and Sudiana (2023) established the positive impact that whole language instruction had on the motivation and productive communication ability, stressing the effect of the approach on the affective spheres and communicative competence in real life.

Taken together, this new research represents the idea that when early literacy is rooted in genuine and interesting text and student identities, whole language practices can not only lead to understanding and motivation but also to emergent literacy competence among multilingual learners. The data justify the application of whole language pedagogy as an important, culturally responsive addition to the systematic decoding interventions.

Phonics Instruction

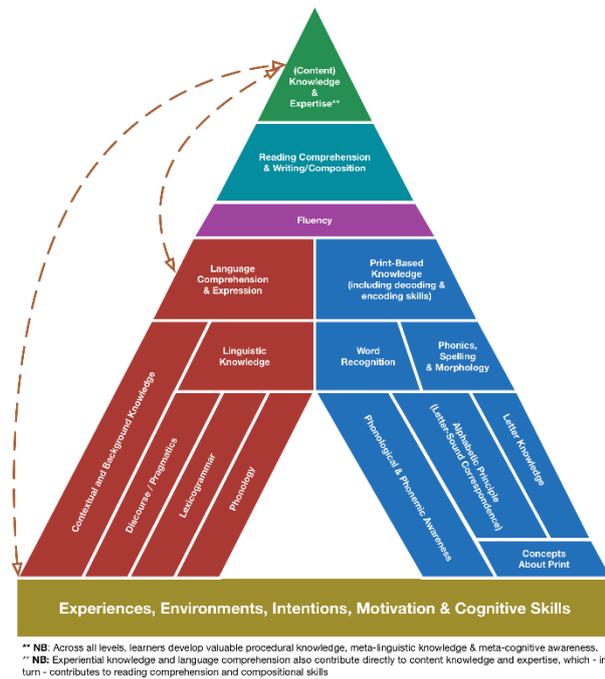
Phonics teaching has been revived in the literacy education over the last ten years because strong empirical data support its effectiveness in enhancing reading and spelling development during the early years. According to Castles et al. (2018), systematic phonics teaching provides children with the necessary skills in terms of decoding, thus helping them to form an effective connection between phonological units and orthographic representations. Their analysis emphasised the fact that phonics cannot be considered a full-blown reading program; instead, it represents a major point that must be incorporated with more extensive, comprehension-based teaching methods.

Findings of recent research indicate that explicit phonics instruction positively influences reading fluency and word recognition, especially in learners with problems in acquiring literacy. Ehri (2020) noted that systematic phonics teaching increases the abilities of children to decode unfamiliar lexical materials, and Johnston and Watson (2021) reestablished its long-term effects on spelling accuracy and reading comprehension. On the same note, Buckingham (2022) found that the effect of mandatory phonics screening in Australia yielded some measurable results in terms of reading performance (particularly among disadvantaged and those whose first language is not English), which justifies its equity potential.

Phonics has been identified in multilingual situations to act as a link to the early literacy acquisition gaps. As Jamaludin and Hashim (2019) reported, Malaysian ESL students taught using synthetic phonics performed better in decoding and comprehension activities compared to their counterparts. More recently, Odo (2021) established that explicit phonics instruction had strong effects on word and pseudoword reading in second language learners and thus showed that it was applicable to EAL settings where children often do not have consistent access to English.

One word of warning, however, is that critics do not want phonics to be shown as a panacea. In their caution, Wyse and Bradbury (2022) expressed that a singular focus on decoding might shrink reading as a collection of mechanical capabilities and exclude understanding and critical assessment. However, the general trend in modern research suggests that systematic phonics that is balanced with meaning-related activities can provide children with the necessary means to read fluently and confidently (Castles et al., 2018; Ehri, 2020; Johnston and Watson, 2021).

Figure 1.
Comparative overview of Synthetic Phonics and Whole Language Approaches in Early Literacy Development



The figure contrasts the teaching focus of synthetic phonics and whole-language instruction in early-literacy classrooms. These gaps take special salience in a setting that involves English as a Second Language (ESL/EAL) students. Synthetic phonics predicts explicit and systematic teaching of grapheme-phoneme correspondence, thus allowing learners to decode new lexical units more accurately and fluently (Castles et al., 2018; Johnston & Watson, 2017). The whole-language paradigm, in its turn, places literacy in the context of real, valuable texts and thus promotes the development of comprehension and lexical knowledge through the contextual exposure of learners (Hsu, 2021; Kim, 2020).

Applying the phonics approach to the context of EAL students provides a sequenced platform assisting in decoding in a second language- an aspect that may prove critical to students with limited knowledge of English speaking (Torgerson et al., 2019). Whole language instruction, in its turn, helps stimulate motivation and cultural involvement by immersing learners in the natural use of the language, but does not necessarily help to resolve the decoding issues that EAL students face (Lin & Morrison, 2021).

Both strategies have distinct affordances and constraints as shown in the figure. It is therefore necessary to ask the teachers about their perception of such methodologies to help explain how they can balance between the systematic teaching approach and the meaning-based learning to facilitate the early-literacy acquisition of EAL students.

Comparative Perspectives on Phonics and Whole Language in Early Literacy

The phonics vs. whole language debate is more of an epistemological argument on the best methods of acquiring literacy skills, especially in situations in which English is a second or second language (EAL). Even though both paradigms eventually intend to provide learners with the ability to read with confidence and be able to read and understand the text, they differ radically in their core assumptions of introducing and practicing literacy teaching.

Empirical research on synthetic phonics has continually pointed to it as a very effective way of developing early decoding skills. In this way, they can master the principle of alphabetic with the assistance of explicit, systemic teaching about phoneme-grapheme correspondences, which can be particularly beneficial in the case of EAL learners who may not be exposed to English orthographic conventions (Castles et al., 2018; Johnston & Watson,

2017). The aspect of synthetic phonics provides clarity and reduces cognitive load because, by decomposing language into comprehensible phonological units, young learners gain an early ability to decipher isolated words before they can combine them into prose (Wyse & Goswami, 2021).

On the other hand, the whole-language approach focuses on the inclusive nature of meaningful texts and concomitant development of reading, writing, and speaking in real contextual situations (Hsu, 2021; Kim, 2020). Advocates of the whole-language approach insist that exposure to culturally relevant literature through immersion leads to greater understanding, learner motivation, and an overall love of reading throughout life. In the case of EAL learners, this type of natural linguistic experience may simultaneously lead to the improvement of lexical growth and cultural competence that are essential to an effective acquisition of a language (Lin & Morrison, 2021).

However, the comparative studies indicate that even though whole language can potentially facilitate interaction and contextual meaning-making, it might not be effective for students who experience problems with word-level decoding (Bowers, 2020; Wyse et al., 2019). Unless EAL students receive systematic training in phonics, they risk continuing to have difficulties in identifying new words, which impedes their long-term fluency and general understanding. Simultaneously, phonics should not be the only method that can lead to defining literacy as a kind of mechanical process of decoding, without paying attention to important aspects of meaning, context, and motivation.

In line with this, a significant number of scholars in the modern world propose a balanced or combined teaching model that combines the advantages of the two paradigms (Castles et al., 2018; Wyse & Goswami, 2021). In the context of EAL settings, a balanced model may be the use of synthetic phonics in order to build a strong background of decoding and to incorporate this teaching into contextual reading and writing praxis. Such a comparative point of view highlights the need to explore the perception of teachers since classroom practitioners are the ones who are called upon to reconcile the tension between prescriptive structure and authentic meaning in their day-to-day pedagogical choices.

Linking Literature to the Present Study

A comprehensive literature review shows that the two teaching methods (synthetic phonics and whole language) have useful, albeit differentiated areas of contribution to early literacy teaching. Synthetic phonics helps learners to develop strong decoding skills that enhance precision and fluency, and whole-language approaches develop comprehension, vocabulary, and motivation of learners by engaging with texts meaningfully (Castles et al., 2018; Kim, 2020; Wyse & Goswami, 2021). However, the controversy about the comparative efficacy of these strategies has not decided yet, especially in relation to learners of English as an additional language (EAL).

Although studies in regular classroom settings have outlined the benefits and constraints of the approaches, little empirical data exist on how EAL teachers themselves view such practices (Bowers, 2020; Lin & Morrison, 2021). Teacher ideologies may be very important regarding the identification of which teaching methods are deemed effective and the reasoning behind those choices, considering the special needs of EALs, who may have a low level of exposure to the target language at home, struggle to develop phonological awareness, need to integrate into the cultural context, and more (Hsu, 2021; Wyse et al., 2019).

To fill this gap, this paper explores the perceptions of the teachers towards the use of synthetic phonics and whole-language instructional methods in the EAL early literacy classrooms. It looks into the effectiveness of these methodologies as measured by educators in reading fluency, spelling accuracy, and general literacy.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Participant

The selection of an appropriate research design and sampling strategy is fundamental to the integrity of qualitative inquiry, particularly when investigating the multifaceted nature of educational practices. In the field of qualitative traditions, the case study approach remains a cornerstone for researchers seeking to explore complex phenomena within their inherent, real-life contexts. This study investigates the implementation of English as an Additional Language (EAL) literacy instruction, specifically the interaction between synthetic phonics and whole language approaches at an international school in Selangor, Malaysia. To capture the nuances of this environment, the

methodology must acknowledge the blurred boundaries between the instructional phenomenon and its cultural surroundings. The following analysis explores the strategic rationale behind the use of a case study design and the implementation of a stratified purposive sampling plan, justified by both classical frameworks and recent empirical literature from 2024 to 2025.

The choice of a qualitative case study design is predicated on its ability to evoke descriptive viewpoints and offer a subtle, in-depth account of a phenomenon as it exists in a specific context. As noted by Creswell and Poth (2018), the qualitative paradigm is uniquely suitable for understanding lived experiences, beliefs, and practices rather than quantifying variables. Yin (2014) defines the case study as an empirical investigation into a phenomenon in the real-life context, particularly in instances where the boundary between the phenomenon and the surrounding context is not clear.

This design is highly appropriate for questioning multifaceted educational practices in Malaysia, where the instructional medium (English) interacts with the diverse linguistic backgrounds of EAL learners. Stake (1995) further emphasizes that case studies allow the researcher to reflect the particularity and complexity of a specific case, in this instance, the teachers' views at a Selangor international school, and make it associated with larger educational issues. By exploring these views within the specific cultural and institutional background of the school, the researcher can gather descriptive information that depicts the "genuineness" of the participants' voices.

A purposive sampling plan guides the selection of participants, a technique widely recognized in qualitative research for identifying and selecting information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest. Purposive sampling (also termed judgmental or selective sampling) relies on the researcher's prior knowledge to identify individuals who can provide the most enriching and valuable information to achieve the study's specific goals. According to Palinkas et al. (2015), this approach is especially effective in qualitative studies as it enables researchers to enrol respondents capable of providing deep insights into complex subject matter. For this study, the population was narrowed to six teachers at a single international school. To ensure that the views along the different levels of early literacy development were sufficiently represented, a stratified purposive sampling technique was employed. The sample was divided into two strata:

1. Early Years: Three educators.
2. Key Stage 1 (KS1): Three educators.

This stratification ensures that the developmental spectrum from initial phonological awareness to more formal reading fluency is adequately captured. Recent scholarship by Pudasaini (2025) and Ibeziako (2025) underscores the value of stratified purposive sampling in educational and implementation research, noting its effectiveness in improving data "trustworthiness" by capturing institutional variation. Within these strata, teachers were randomly chosen from those meeting the eligibility criteria to reduce individual bias and enhance the credibility of the findings. A sample of six participants is considered sufficient for an in-depth case study when the participants are highly specific and informational. According to Lim (2025), sample size in qualitative research is best treated as an analytical judgment of adequacy rather than a number derived from statistical formulas. Recent empirical evidence suggests that in homogeneous samples with narrow research goals, "meaning saturation," the deeper understanding of contextual issues often begins occurring within small groups of six to nine participants.

To enhance the credibility of the study, the diversity of the participants' professional backgrounds was taken into consideration. The six teachers taught different classes and possessed varied professional experiences, facilitating a comparison of viewpoints that reduces bias and highlights both commonalities and differences in the implementation of EAL literacy instruction. This alignment between expertise, stratified selection, and research goals ensures that the findings are both contextually grounded and methodologically rigorous. To provide more background information, Table 1 below shows the demographic data of the participants.

Table 1
Participants' Demographic Profile

Participant	Gender	Teaching Level	Educational Background		School Setting	Years of Teaching Experience
Teacher 1	Female	Key Stage 1	Master in Psychology		International School	7
Teacher 2	Female	Key Stage 1	Master in Education		International School	20
Teacher 3	Female	Key Stage 1	Master in English as a Second Language (TESL)		International School	13
Teacher 4	Female	Early Years	Master of Education (TESL)		International School	9
Teacher 5	Female	Early Years	Postgraduate Teaching	Diploma	in International School	5
Teacher 6	Female	Early Years	Postgraduate Teaching	Diploma	in International School	5

Methods

To enhance the credibility and authenticity of the findings, this study employed a rigorous qualitative interview-based approach to data collection. Semi-structured interviews were used as the sole data collection method, as they enabled in-depth exploration of teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and professional experiences related to early literacy instruction for EAL learners. This approach is widely recognised in qualitative research as effective for capturing participants' perspectives systematically and transparently (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews in this study helped teachers to give their views on the effectiveness of synthetic phonics and whole-language instruction in promoting reading fluency and spelling accuracy among early-literacy EAL students. The interviews, therefore, captured teachers' conceptualisations, beliefs, and professional insights within a semi-structured, yet formalised, framework. This interview-based approach enabled the researcher to obtain rich, detailed accounts of teachers' instructional reasoning and experiences, while allowing participants to reflect critically on their own pedagogical practices (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Noble & Heale, 2019). By focusing on teachers' professional narratives, the study was able to generate a contextualised understanding of how synthetic phonics and whole language approaches are perceived and justified within an international school setting.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method due to their ability to balance consistency across participants with flexibility in probing individual experiences (Kallio et al., 2016). Open-ended questions were used to elicit teachers' perceptions of synthetic phonics and whole language instruction, their reflections on instructional successes and challenges, and their understanding of early literacy development among EAL learners. This approach ensured that participants could articulate their views in depth while allowing the researcher to pursue emerging issues relevant to the research questions. As noted by Kallio et al. (2016), this approach provides a balance between comparability across interviews and openness to unanticipated but meaningful data. Six teachers participated in the study, and each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, allowing sufficient time for reflective discussion of phonics and whole-language practices.

The interviews were conducted in a familiar school setting to ensure participants felt comfortable and at ease, which has been shown to support more authentic and detailed responses (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The guiding questions were carefully aligned with the research objectives. Teachers were asked to describe their views on synthetic phonics instruction, their experiences with whole-language approaches, and their perceptions of how these instructional methods influence reading fluency and spelling accuracy among EAL learners. Participants were also encouraged to reflect on the perceived advantages and limitations of whole-language instruction, with follow-up probing questions used to elicit concrete examples. This semi-structured format enabled teachers to raise issues that the researcher may not have anticipated, often revealing deeper insights into the emotional demands of EAL teaching and the pressures associated with curriculum expectations and learner diversity (Alsaawi, 2017). Overall, the interview data captured the voices, beliefs, and professional reflections of teachers regarding early literacy instruction in EAL contexts. This approach was particularly effective in addressing the research questions,

as it foregrounded teachers' perceptions of the role of synthetic phonics and whole language approaches in supporting reading fluency and spelling accuracy among EAL learners.

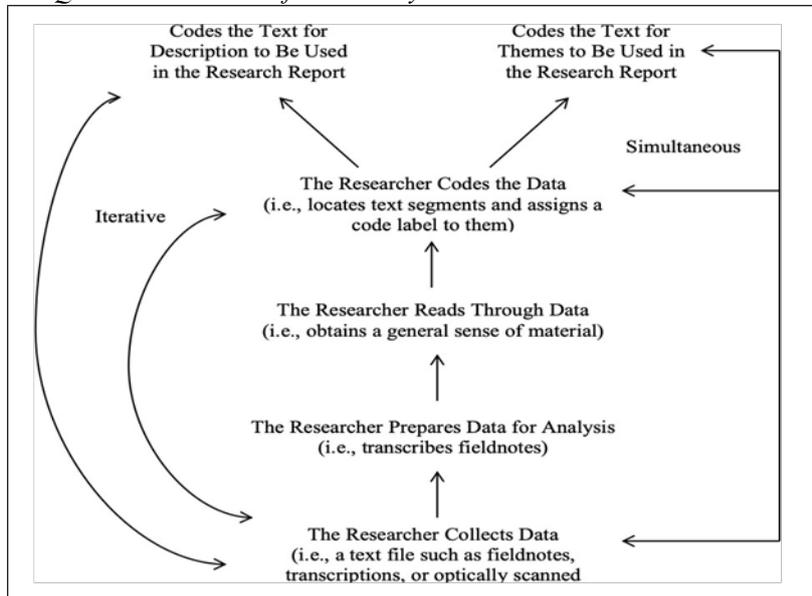
To access the research site, permission was first obtained from the school administration of the selected international school in Selangor. A formal letter outlining the aims, objectives, and methodology of the study was submitted to the school principal. The voluntary nature of participation, the scope of involvement, and the ethical safeguards adopted throughout the research process were clearly explained. Following approval, meetings were held with senior leadership to clarify the purpose of the study and to explain how the findings could support the school's literacy development initiatives. This process helped to establish trust and ensure transparency among all stakeholders. After receiving institutional approval, the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with the EAL teachers, as recommended by the school leadership team. Each participant was provided with an information sheet detailing the purpose of the study, the type of data to be collected, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Written informed consent was obtained before data collection, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. The interviews were scheduled at mutually convenient times during the school day to minimise disruption to teaching routines. Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study to ensure participants' professional integrity and privacy were respected while enabling the collection of rich and meaningful qualitative data.

Data Analysis

In response to the research questions, the trends in the teacher perception of phonics instruction and whole language were found by analyzing the interview transcripts. Several readings and scrutiny of the transcripts generated a set of codes that echoed the opinion of the teachers and the classroom practices. The comparison between the codes in the datasets of the participants helped to find out the key themes in the study. These themes were then divided into three major groups, including the perceptions of teachers towards phonics instruction, perceptions of teachers towards the whole language instruction, and the comparative knowledge of their impact on reading fluency and spelling accuracy. This classification helped to offer a systematic insight into the conceptualisation and execution of such instructional strategies. The analysis of the results based on semi-structured interviews was followed with the help of the thematic analysis steps, which are presented by Creswell and Poth (2018) and Braun and Clarke (2006), as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 2.

The Qualitative Process of Data Analysis



The data were handled using Atlas.ti programme used to analyze qualitative data. This qualitative data analysis software will help researchers to systematically invest and structure qualitative data, assign labels or codes to

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transcripts, and find particular texts or words in the course of the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Such computer programmes are not aimed at doing the analysis as such; instead, they are designed to minimize the manual work of the researcher and increase efficiency (Bryman, 2016). The steps to take were initiated by organising and processing the data collected. When the data collection was completed, a new file was prepared and assigned the label of each participant. The semi-structured interview transcript of each participant was included as a dossier. The assessment phase of data entailed acquiring an overall feel of the data by reading the data of each participant several times and taking the data as a whole (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Accordingly, the data used to initiate the analysis were the data of each teacher, i.e., the transcripts of the interview. This was done to each participant in a systematic manner to bring about a sense of consistency. Due to the intricacy of the research design, a systematic system of classification was created to safeguard the fact that no data was ignored. Categories of codes were formed according to the research questions of the study: perceptions of phonics instruction by teachers, perceptions of whole language approaches, and the relative contribution of both in promoting reading fluency and spelling accuracy of EAL learners. After grouping and refining these codes, thematic trends emerged that directly answered the research questions, which were done according to the approach of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022).

We have adopted the narrative discussion as our method of representation and reporting of findings, and the detailed analysis of data. Once the analysis stage was over, interpretation of the findings was necessary to respond to the research questions. The results of the research were then framed in the background of the contemporary literature in order to offer a more theoretical and practical insight into the perception and way phonics and whole language teaching are practiced in EAL classrooms. The codes and themes that were determined in this research were further evaluated with respect to intercoder reliability (ICR). To determine reliability in the coding procedure, a second coder went over a part of the dataset on his/her own, and the level of agreement was determined with the help of the Cohen-Kappa. As shown in Table 2, this analysis gave a statistical agreement between coders. The use of Cohen-Kappa enhanced the reliability and validity of the results because it ensured that the determinations of coding were not arbitrary but could be replicated consistently (Campbell et al., 2013; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Table 2
Cohen's Kappa Threshold of Agreement

Values	Indication of Agreement
≤ 0	No agreement
0.01-0.20	Slight agreement
0.21-0.40	Fair agreement
0.41-0.60	Moderate agreement
0.61-0.80	Substantial agreement
0.81-1.00	Perfect agreement

The Trustworthiness of the Study

The Intercoder Reliability (ICR) test was also used to enhance the validity and reliability of the results. This analysis was conducted to assess the level of consistency and agreement among coders in their identification and categorization of emergent codes and themes. This strict process allowed the study to increase the validity of the results and minimize the chances of subjectivity (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Overall, two independent raters picked fifteen codes to cross-analyze. To create the first coding frame, Coder 1 split and coded the information from the semi-structured interviews. After this was done and saved in the coded file, Coder 2 was presented with a clean copy of the same transcript. The data was coded by Coder 2 using the same framework and without referring to the file of the first rater. When the two raters were done coding, the level of agreement was measured between each of the codes. The coding decisions were put into nominal values, where 0 referred to no agreement and 1 referred to perfect agreement between two raters. Since the Cohen Kappa coefficient falls between 0 and 1, the use of codes converted into nominal values helped to compute the reliability (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). The intercoder reliability was determined through SPSS. The findings indicated the Cohen Kappa value was $k = 0.65$ and $p = < 0.05$, meaning that there was a significant degree of agreement among raters. This was further compared with the generally accepted value in terms of agreement introduced by Landis and Koch (1977), as shown in

Table 3. This kind of comparison proves the fact that the coding process had a high degree of reliability and thus validates the strength of the thematic analysis used in this research.

Table 3
ICR Symmetric measures

	Value	Asymptotic Standardized Error ^a	Approximate T ^b	Approximate Significance
Measure of Kappa Agreement	.65	.14	3.55	.00
N of Valid Cases	15			

- a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.
- b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

The data were analyzed, and the results indicated that the coders achieved a substantial agreement during the coding process as indicated by the Cohen-Kappa statistic. With a predetermined threshold of agreement as set out in Table 3 using the results as benchmarks, the results supported the idea that the coding procedures were performed with an acceptable degree of reliability. As a result, the results presented in the following chapters are supported by a well-developed coding system, hence upgrading the overall credibility of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from the thematic analysis of the interview data. To enhance clarity and transparency, Table 4 summarises the themes and representative codes generated in relation to the research questions.

Table 3
Summary of Themes and Codes Derived from Interview Data

Research Question	Theme	Representative Codes
RQ1: Teachers’ perceptions of synthetic phonics	Acquisition of Sounds	Phonemic awareness, sound identification, sound–letter correspondence
	Reading Development	Skill Reading fluency, confidence, decoding unfamiliar words
	Decoding Strategies	Segmenting, blending, multisensory decoding
	Foundation for Language Learning	Spelling accuracy, literacy readiness, long-term language development
RQ2: Teachers’ perceptions of whole language instruction	Rote Learning	Memorisation, repetition, visual reliance
	Difficulty in Word Recognition	Guessing words, lack of decoding strategies
	Impeded Reading Development	Slow progress, hesitation, reduced fluency

Table 4 summarises the themes and representative codes generated from the interview data and illustrates their alignment with the research questions. This table is provided to enhance clarity and transparency of the qualitative analysis process.

Themes for Research Question 1

Consistent with the direction of the current study, the results concerning Research Question 1 are classified into four major themes, which include the acquisition of sounds, the development of reading skills, the strategies of decoding, and the language learning foundation. These themes bring to the fore how teachers have seen synthetic phonics as the key to the early reading fluency and literacy development of EAL learners.

Acquisition of Sounds. The former emergent theme emphasizes the common knowledge among teachers of synthetic phonics as a sound-based strategy, which forms the basis of the early reading process. The six participants were uniform in their explanations on phonics, as starting with the identification and distinction of single sounds and later moving on to blending, word building, and sentence construction. Teacher 1 commented that phonemic awareness allows children to differentiate the sounds that they hear when they are engaged in reading activities:

“Phonic awareness is auditory; my children learn to identify the sound and match it with the letter: a snake” (T1)

Teacher 2 also spoke about apparent improvement among the children who initially had difficulties with basic recognition of the letters:

“Phonic awareness is auditory; my children learn to identify the sound and match it to the letter: a snake” (T2)

Teacher 3 mentioned, that even the lowest-achieving students can be brought up to the level of reading and writing confidently, at least after being exposed to the process of MF phonics:

“I have had really weak students who did not even recognise the alphabets or the sounds... at the end of the year, they are able to read, write and talk.” (T4)

This development was emphasized by Teacher 4, who focuses on introducing sounds prior to stimulating word and sentence production:

“We introduce the kids to the sounds and then are able to blend and produce a sentence out of the words they form.” (T4)

Teachers have also reflected that the introduction of individual phonemes through sound provides subsequent blending and fluency. Pronunciation was the second advantage experienced by the participants; Teacher 5 explained the way students combine sound units to make words and then read them in a sentence:

“When you are on the simple phonics and progress to blending into a word and reading it in a sentence, it makes them learn more easily” (T5).

The knowledge of phonics was believed to make learners pronounce words more effectively than those who were taught using memorisation-oriented methods: “Kids who know phonics can identify, distinguish and blend sounds and thus pronounce words and sentences with more confidence.”

Reading Skill Development. The second theme that comes out explains how teachers are optimistic that synthetic phonics works in enhancing reading by pupils. In the six interviews, teachers have described phonics as a system that would enable the learner to decode, identify, and read new words with no fear. Teacher 1: Teacher 1 informed me that phonics could be used as an effective tool in assisting children to improve their reading performance now and in the future, as this would assist the child in breaking down new words:

“Phonics teaches them how to decode the words and how to be more active in reading in the future and writing as well” (T1)

Teachers kept on emphasizing to me that phonics is a predetermined means of early success in reading:

“It can be taught to the children through phonics, which will assist them in breaking the unfamiliar words and enhancing their ability to read and write in the future.” (T1)

This is one of the most efficient techniques that Teacher 2 said helps children to learn the language generally:

“Naturally phonics has been shown to be effective... it works... it will have an impact on reading achievement and the general language acquisition later in life” (T2)

[12]

The same teacher has defined it as a very effective way, which may help to contribute to the general language mastery of children, saying that it is possible to notice the enhancement of the skill of recognizing words and reading them properly:

“Naturally, phonics has been shown to be effective... it works... it will influence reading achievement and language acquisition in its entirety in later life” (T2)

Teacher 4 emphasized the phonics implications on long-term reading development:

“Yes, synthetic phonics... In my opinion, it will eventually affect the reading success and language overall in the future” (T4)

Teachers 5 and 6 also remarked that the phonics will ensure a faster reading process because children will be able to read the unknown words by themselves and spell them correctly. Collectively, these remarks allow us to infer that teachers consider synthetic phonics as a highly valuable method of raising the reading fluency level of EAL students, along with the development of their decoding and the general increase in their literacy levels.

Decoding Strategies. The third theme is arising where teachers note that synthetic phonics is one of the most important strategies that learners can be instilled with appropriate decoding skills. Throughout the interviews, teachers were consistent in saying that phonics helps students to learn how to relate individual sounds with written letters, combine these sounds, and use them when learning how to spell a new word. This knowledge was common among Teachers 1, 3, 4, and 5, who underlined that phonics enhances the capacity of students to decode new language independently.

Teacher 1 said that phonics offers children systematic means to deconstruct words, which helps in the development of reading and writing:

“It offers the children with the means of decoding the words as well as mastering their future writing” (T1)

She also pointed out that she incorporates phonics into a hybrid instructional style by incorporating the sound-based instructions into whole language tasks:

“I would adopt a hybrid method in which I would integrate or incorporate phonics with the whole language methodology” (T1)

Teachers also emphasized the use of multisensory decoding. Teacher 5 explained the difference of letting learners visually interact with letters before trying to read the words:

“The children have to be able to see the letter visually, and then be allowed to draw it on their whiteboards” (T5)

On the same note, Teacher 4 explained that phonics teaching would be most effective when the children are still in the initial stages of word recognition and manipulation:

“The most opportune moment to start phonics is when they are learning words- they are recognising words” (T4)

All these testimonies demonstrate that teachers consider decoding a necessary skill that is developed with the help of synthetic phonics. They reckon the strategy enhances the correspondence between letters and sounds as well as helps the learners to advance with respect to mastering the recognition of individual letters, eventually, decode complete words more independently.

Basis in Language Learning. The last theme is that of mutual agreement among teachers that synthetic phonics offers a solid scaffold to the initial stages of literacy acquisition in EAL learners. All six teachers explained phonics as the key point of departure that equips children with the knowledge of spelling, reading, and gaining confidence

in using English. Teacher 4 pointed out the importance of phonics as a preparatory framework that facilitates the development of early spelling:

“It offers some kind of predestination background to young children in order to learn how to spell” (T4)

The teachers have always considered phonics as an effective and essential method to be used with students with different degrees of exposure to English. Indicatively, Teacher 6 observed that phonics assists children to learn essential language aspects, without any prior knowledge of English:

“It will form a very good basis to them regarding their language skills” (T6)

Another advantage that phonics has in the classroom, which was brought forth by the participants, is the practical aspect of phonics. Teacher 5 explained the phonics as incredibly beneficial for early readers:

“Phonics classroom is quite helpful particularly in cases where the child lacks sufficient basic reading” (T5)

In all the replies, teachers described synthetic phonics as an effective, useful, and universal method. They stressed that it is more effective because its approach to sounds allows children to decode and spell more correctly, and thus can be used as an effective tool in teaching English to various categories of learners. As Teacher 2 concluded:

“Those phonic sounds assist, assist, assist, really helpful to teach them English, really help them” (T2)

Together, these views make synthetic phonics an essential linguistic platform, which can facilitate early literacy gains, spelling acquisition, and the acquisition of language in the long term in EAL students.

Themes for Research Question 2

The Research Question 2 analysis revealed that there are three different themes that summarize the experiences of teachers with whole language instruction: rote learning, word recognition difficulty, and reading development hindrance. These themes highlight how whole language, as determined by the participants, affects the reading development of the learners, and compare the results of the introduction of synthetic phonics. The excerpts of the interviews provide information about the observations of the teachers about the effect of whole language on the literacy development of English as an Additional Language (EAL) students.

Rote Learning. The initial theme explains the perception of teachers about whole language as a memorisation-based paradigm that facilitates little independent reading. Several participants described whole language as very dependent on repetition, as opposed to genuine decoding, which they considered a limiting aspect in the ability of a learner to decode an unknown word. Teacher 2 noticed that the students who learn using a whole language tend to memorise words without understanding how they are constructed:

“Students that have been taught through the whole language actually do not read the words but memorise.” (T2)

Similarly, when Teacher 4 spoke of memorisation, she was worried that it would hinder the process of reading in the long run, especially when the learners were faced with new words:

“I do not want my children to memorise the words, they should know how to spell them when they encounter some words that they do not know.” (T4)

Teacher 5 supported this perspective by describing whole language as a methodology that was based on repetition as opposed to phonological interpretation:

“It is further on reciting the words and memorising.” (T5)

These views indicate that teachers perceived whole language as limiting students to use transferable reading strategies, which is very unlike the phonics approach that they thought encouraged independent decoding and spelling.

Difficulty in Word Recognition. The second theme that emerged is the issue that students are having with word recognition, where they are taught by a whole language approach. In all six interviews, the teachers mentioned similar challenges because they said that the learners who were dependent on whole-word memorisation often could not decode new words. The teacher 1 described how her former whole language instruction focused on meaning and visuality, and thus, students were not well-prepared to handle new or unfamiliar vocabulary:

“I concentrated more on meaning and pictures, then I realised that my students struggled when they met new and unfamiliar words since such strategy is based on memorising rather than on reading.” (T1)

This point was repeated by several teachers who emphasized that whole language promotes the concept of recognizing words as a unit, instead of being based on letter-sound associations. This mismatch is a problem for English, which is an alphabetic system, as Teacher 4 observed:

“Whole language is being instructed in the manner of an ideographic language... but English is alphabetic, and the students become confused with recognising the words.” (T4)

This is also a report by the teachers who indicated that children who were being taught by the whole language tended to have difficulties in pronouncing new words correctly, as they did not have a way of breaking down the sounds individually. Teacher 6 noted that students were likely to ignore letters during reading, a strategy that also later affected their spelling:

“Some of them could read, but it became their habit not to pay attention to the letters, and they will lose their spelling in the future.” (T6)

In general, educators agreed that whole language instruction complicated the ability of students to identify, decode, and read unknown words, which confirmed their belief that synthetic phonics is a surer way to develop early literacy.

Impeded Reading Skills. The last theme presents the interests that teachers have regarding the long-term implications of the whole language approach to the reading process of learners. Participants provided reasons that pupils whose learning is based on whole-word memorisation often cannot decode new or complicated words because they do not have a systematic approach to break the word into phonetic units. According to teacher 3, this limitation was identified as a serious obstacle to further reading development:

“The application of this method means that a child would not be able to understand complex words as they mature without proper way of decoding them.” (T3)

Educators observed that pictures and meaning put more emphasis on pictures as opposed to phonological processing in some children. Teacher 6 noted that in that case, such learners tend to hold and make pauses when they are challenged with new vocabulary, trying to remember the image or meaning they already memorised instead of blending sounds:

“They develop reading slower, when reading a new word, they attempt to recollect the picture, the meaning, how to articulate it, etc. compared to EAL students who already know the sounds” (T6)

The participants reported that, according to them, this trend slows reading fluency and produces hesitation and loss of confidence among the learners whenever they come across unknown text. The whole language approach was therefore seen to make it difficult to build an independent decoding skill that supports continued reading abilities.

CONCLUSION

This study explored teachers' perceptions of synthetic phonics and whole language approaches in supporting early literacy development among English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners. Drawing on semi-structured interview data, the findings demonstrate that teachers overwhelmingly perceived synthetic phonics as a foundational instructional approach due to its emphasis on systematic decoding, phonemic awareness, and spelling accuracy. Teachers consistently reported that explicit phonics instruction enabled learners to decode unfamiliar words independently, thereby supporting reading fluency and long-term literacy development.

In contrast, while whole language instruction was acknowledged for promoting meaning-making and engagement with texts, teachers expressed concern regarding its reliance on memorisation and visual cues. According to participants, this often-limited learners' ability to decode unfamiliar words and resulted in slower reading development, particularly among EAL learners who require explicit instruction in sound-letter correspondences. These findings reinforce existing research advocating for systematic phonics instruction in the early stages of literacy acquisition, especially in linguistically diverse classrooms.

This study contributes to the existing literature by foregrounding teachers' voices in the ongoing debate between synthetic phonics and whole language instruction, an area that remains underexplored in EAL contexts. By focusing on teachers' professional reasoning and instructional beliefs rather than solely on student outcomes, the study highlights the central role educators play in shaping early literacy practices.

The findings also offer important pedagogical insights into how teachers perceive the strengths and limitations of both instructional approaches. While synthetic phonics is widely viewed as essential for establishing early decoding skills, whole language elements are perceived as valuable when strategically integrated to support comprehension and reading motivation. This perspective reinforces the importance of informed and balanced instructional decision-making in early literacy education.

In addition, the study provides contextual contributions by presenting evidence from an international school setting in Malaysia, thereby extending the geographical scope of research on early literacy instruction in multilingual environments. The findings are particularly relevant for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers working with EAL learners in comparable educational contexts.

Implications and Future Research

The findings suggest that early literacy programmes for EAL learners should prioritise systematic synthetic phonics instruction while incorporating selected whole language practices to support comprehension and engagement. Teacher training programmes should therefore emphasise not only the technical implementation of phonics but also informed decision-making regarding balanced literacy instruction.

Future research could build on this study by incorporating classroom observations to examine how teachers' stated beliefs align with instructional practices. Longitudinal studies exploring the impact of instructional approaches on learners' reading development over time would also provide valuable insights. Additionally, further research involving a larger and more diverse sample of schools could enhance the transferability of findings and deepen understanding of literacy instruction in varied EAL contexts.

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