

A Phonemic Assessment Tool: Sounds Shopping Spree (SSS)

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, phonemic and phonic awareness have gained its recognition in teaching English literacy among young learners in recent years. Thus, this paper presents an action research study using Sound Shopping Spree; an innovative interactive shopping game designed to assess phonemic awareness among young learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. The main purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of Sound Shopping Spree as a tool to assess students' phonemic awareness. The project was conducted in a primary school in Kuching, Sarawak and the participants selected were based on purposive sampling. Observations and assessment forms were used in the data collection process. Findings in this action research indicated that Sound Shopping Spree was able to stimulate young learners' interest as well as enhancing young learners phonemic awareness through interesting interactive game.

Field of Research: *Phonemic awareness, assessment tool, game, primary school.*

1. Introduction

Phonics has been in the education for many years in various countries throughout the world particularly in the United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada and Australia, etc., as far as helping young learners to read in English is concerned. However, in Malaysia it is now becoming the latest word in schools. Teachers are now adding phonics to their method of teaching English to young learners as The Malaysian Ministry of Education (2011) English Standardized Curriculum for

Primary Schools (KSSR) also strongly recommends the use of phonics when teaching young learners to read. So what is phonics and how does it help with the acquisition of English?

Phonics involves learning the sounds heard in the English language and how to use these sounds to read and write. Basically the English language is made up of 44 principal sounds. Once a child learns to recognise these sounds and represent them with letter symbols, they are well on their way to understanding the nature of the English language. In addition, the child will then learn how to use their knowledge of sounds by blending the sounds together to create a word.

Therefore it promotes phonemic metacognition and is a successful tool for developing basic English literacy skills. Thus, if a child could master such skill in reading, he or she would be able to enjoy reading independently. The ability to read is one of the fundamental skills young students acquire at school and early literacy is a prerequisite for success in all aspects of education (Callinan & Zee Der Van, 2010; Cihon, 2011).

1.1 Introduction to the Problem

Teaching English as a second language (TESL) refers to the teaching English language to students whose first language is not English. In Malaysia, English is taught as a compulsory subject and as a second language in schools despite Bahasa Malaysia being the national language and language of instruction. The current most immediate priority as far as English language is concerned is to boost the basic literacy among young learners. Thus, in light with the new KSSR English curriculum, a great emphasis is placed in teaching phonics in ESL classrooms to help young learners to read. At the same time, KSSR curriculum also stresses that learning need to be of mastery learning. In mastery learning, students must demonstrate mastery of the material before moving on to the next topic (Brandman, 2013). In another word, a young learner will need to master his listening & speaking, reading and then only writing skills in sequence and accordingly on the theme of learning. Thus, assessments are also done through School Based Assessment. School-based assessment generally refers to any evaluation of students conducted in a classroom. It is also referred to as 'continuous assessment,' 'assessment for learning' and 'formative assessment' in its many forms around the world (Rajput, Tewari & Kumar, 2005; Black & Wiliam, 2003).

Through the researcher's own personal experience, it was found that it is quite challenging to assess learner's phonemic awareness. Through researcher's observation too, young learners learn and engage more through integration of sensory learning. In addition, young learners also responded positively in lessons with element of fun and hands-on activities. Therefore, this has lead to the development of SSS. It is hope that SSS would be able to assist ESL teachers in formative assessment of phonemic awareness among young learners with added element of fun and engagement.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify and manipulate individual sounds or phonemes in spoken words. Before young learners learn to read print, they need to become more aware of how the sounds in words work. They must understand that words are made up of speech sounds or phonemes. Phonemes are the smallest parts of sound in a spoken word that make a difference in a word's meaning. Phonemic awareness is important as it would help young learners to improve word reading and subsequently reading comprehension and reading fluency (Ashby, J., et. al., 2013). In

addition, through the findings of Suggate, S.P. (2016) he found that reading comprehension and phonemic awareness interventions showed good maintenance of effect among preschool children. Furthermore, Cena, J., et. al. (2013) also stated that early childhood literacy reading has an important relationship between phonemic awareness and reading acquisition.

On the other hand, phonemic awareness also help young learners to spell. According to Kame'enui and Baumann in their book *Vocabulary Instruction- Research to Practice* (2012), phonemic awareness can be developed through activities of identify and categorize sounds, blend sounds to form words, delete or add sounds to form new words and substitute sounds to make new words. Thus, with this in line, it is hope that SSS would be able to assist ESL teachers in assessing young learner's phonemic awareness effectively.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

SSS is an self designed innovative tool by the researcher. Thus, it is appropriate that this study to be carried out as an action research to examine the effectiveness of SSS as an assessment tool to assist teacher in assessing learner's phonemic awareness. According to Stringer E.T (2014), action research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to everyday issues and problems they confront and experienced in specific situations and localised settings in order to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of their work. The action research was carried out in a year one class with an enrollment of 28 students. The study was conducted in a single class as this was only a preliminary study to find out whether SSS served to be an effective tool in assisting ESL teachers in assessing learners' phonemic awareness. Preliminary findings is necessary in order to provide understandings and additional information for further discussions and improvement to SSS.

3.2 Research Instrument

As a primary method of data collection, a Likert Scale questionnaire was distributed to the ESL teacher to investigate her perception on the effectiveness of SSS as an assessment tool in assessing young learners' phonemic awareness. The items of the questionnaire were adapted from Sharmila, Pankaj & Raakhi (2012) and validated by the school English Panel Head as well as an English Language Fasilinus officer.

On the other hand, the questionnaires were further triangulated by interviewing the ESL teacher who did the phonemic assessment of learners through the use of SSS. The interview was conducted to further give voice to the closed structured questionnaire.

3.3 Research Participants

The participants of this study were selected through purposive sampling due to the nature of the action research. According to Palinkas et. al. (2015), purposive sampling is used to identify and select information-rich cases for maximum effectiveness with limited resources. At the same time, purposive sampling requires the researcher to identify and select participants who are specifically knowledgeable or has experience, and are readily, willingly available to provide information for the participation of the research.

Thus, the participants are of a year one class with an enrollment of 28 young ESL learners from an urban school in Sarawak. The ESL teacher who was being interviewed and used SSS as her

assessment tool for phonemic assessment have been teaching these young ESL learners for the past four months.

3.4 Research Procedure & Analysis

In order to collect the required research data, the ESL teacher doing the assessment was trained by the researcher on how to use SSS prior to the phonemic awareness assessment. After the phonemic assessment through the use of SSS, the ESL teacher was required to answer the Likert Scale questionnaire (Appendix A) as well as being interviewed by the researcher in order to investigate the effectiveness of SSS as an assessment tool phonemic awareness.

3.4.1 Likert Scale Questionnaire

The Likert Scale questionnaire was given to the ESL teacher to evaluate the effectiveness of SSS as an assessment tool to evaluate young learners' phonemic awareness.

The items from the questionnaire were analysed and the findings are presented in a table to illustrate the ESL teacher's perception on the effectiveness of SSS as a phonemic awareness assessment tool.

3.4.2 Interview

Following that, a semi-structured prompt questions were used to interview the ESL teacher to further triangulate the findings of the action research. The said data was also presented to further justify the findings on data of the questionnaire.

4. Findings and Discussion

The results of the study were presented in two sections, with one being the results of the young learners' phonemic awareness assessment sheet result while the other being the Likert Scale Questionnaire and the voice of the ESL teacher on the effectiveness of using SSS as an assessment tool to assess phonemic awareness.

4.1 Phonemic Awareness Assessment Sheet

Table 1 (a) shows the fins of the phonemic awareness assessment for phoneme /æ/, /t/ and /p/ of the 28 year one ESL young learners.

Phoneme					
/æ/		/t/		/p/	
F	%	F	%	F	%
21	75%	26	93%	26	93%

From table 1 (a), 75% or 21 out of 28 year one ESL young learners were able to identify /æ/ and 93% or 26 out of 28 year one ESL young learners were able to identify /t/ and /p/ respectively. From the findings, it showed that SSS was able to assist ESL teacher in assessing young learners' phonemic awareness with a high percentage of more than 75% of young learners being able to master the phonemic awareness assessment with SSS.

4.2 ESL Teacher's perception on the effectiveness of SSS as a phonemic awareness assessment tool

For each item identified in the Likert Scale questionnaire below, the ESL teacher need to highlight the number under the rating scale column red to best fits her perception of the effectiveness of SSS as a phonemic assessment tool.

The rating scales to the quality number were as follows:

- 1 Strongly Agree
- 2 Agree
- 3 Neutral
- 4 Disagree
- 5 Agree

Table 1(b) shows the perception of the ESL teacher on the effectiveness of SSS as a phonemic awareness assessment tool.

Items	Scale				
	1	2	3	4	5
1. SSS is clear and easy to use	1	2	3	4	5
2. SSS could assess young learner's phonemic awareness explicitly	1	2	3	4	5
3. The use of SSS enable young learners to identify the sound of the spoken language	1	2	3	4	5
4. The use of SSS enable young learners to manipulate the sound of the spoken language	1	2	3	4	5
5. SSS is attractive and caught learner's attention	1	2	3	4	5
6. SSS is suitable for the age of the young learner	1	2	3	4	5
7. SSS engages young learner's well	1	2	3	4	5
8. SSS is relevant to young learner's daily life	1	2	3	4	5

From table 1(b), the ESL teacher clearly stated that she agreed with most of the items investigated with 6 out of 8 items having a rating of scale 2. For item 3 and 4, the ESL teacher rated the scale of 3, giving a neutral stand point. Upon interview, she stated that she gave the rating of 3 for item 3 and 4 by taking into consideration of the weak ESL young learners who still could not master the phonetic awareness of the phonemes assessed thus unable to further manipulate the particular phonemes. Therefore in this setting, SSS would not be able to assist the ESL teacher as a phonemic assessment tool. However, she did further justified that given the appropriate guidance and repetition of the phonemes from the teacher in process of playing the game of SSS, the young learners would be able engage in the assessment more proactively. Thus, she still find that SSS is still an effective phonemic awareness assessment tool in conducting SBA assessment.

Below were some of the additional voice of the ESL teacher in the course of the interviewing session:

- "A good tool to use to assess young learner's phonemic awareness...However could be time consuming to be carried out in a big enrollment class."

- "Because low proficiency young learners could not manipulate the sound of the graphics due to lack of vocabulary....(rated scale of 3 for item 4)"
- "Low proficiency learners could not participate well and played the game according to their own preferences....(rated scale of 3 for item 3 and 4)"
- "Young learners are very excited on the concept that they can go shopping"
- "Colourful apparatus that grasp the young learners' attention..."

The ESL teacher expressed her agreement that the introduction of a new assessment tool caught the young learners' attention as the apparatuses used were very colourful. This was due to the fact that most of her young learners were very visual-spatial inclined. She further claimed that her learners were ecstatic with the hands-on task and it was during such activities that learners experience student-centered learning where learners take an active role in participating in the learning process. The ESL teacher also commented that SSS was rather relevant to the young learners' daily lives as the activity requires learners to 'shop' for appropriate 'things' by putting them into correct baskets. Besides being fully engaged during the activity, she also commented that such strategy was very age-appropriate for her young ESL learners as it involves repetitive chanting while engaging learners to apply their schemata in sounding out the phonemes through meaningful a task.

In addition, she observed that her learners were putting their social interaction skills in practice subconsciously as they followed instructions, rehearsed the chants, took turns to participate in the activity, assisted their friends and even correcting their friends from time to time. Lastly, the ESL teacher gave her approval and agreed that SSS served as an effective phonemic awareness assessment tool in assisting ESL teachers in the process of SBA. Overall, the interview findings support the results obtained from the questionnaires and that the teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of SSS as a phonemic assessment tool.

5. Conclusion and Future Recommendation

As a whole, the ESL teacher perceived that SSS is an effective tool in assisting ESL teachers in assessing young learners' phonetic awareness. Based on the research findings and discussions, it can be depicted in generally that the preliminary study an affirmative outlook on the use of SSS as a phonemic awareness assessment tool. However, the minority of the weak ESL learners who seem to not engaging well in the assessment process should be provided with necessary feedback and guidance to further enhance learning. Teachers should take note of their learners' affective needs and assist them to overcome these hindrances in their language learning process (Nazri, Yunus, & Nazri, 2016). Nevertheless, these weaknesses could be acknowledge and resolved by giving more time for the said learners to discover and familiarize themselves with SSS.

While the research questions have been answered, there are certain limitations that have to be addressed. Due to time constraint, only a small size of population was selected for the participation of this research. This study could be extended to involve a larger population of primary one ESL learners across different schools with the intention of making generalization over bigger groups. Also, a more detailed study could be carried out to look into effectiveness of SSS as a phonemic assessment tool.

The research has some implications for ESL teaching and learning. Through this innovative tool of SSS, ESL teachers are also providing a positive environment for young learners to learn. This is supported by Saad & Yunus (2015) who also encourages teachers to provide positive environmental conditions for English language learners to facilitate and not hamper second language learning.

Similarly, curriculum designs should adopt and incorporate supplementary approaches so that teachers and learners would not only be exposed to certain ways of teaching and learning. This resonates with the findings and conclusion from Yahya, Yunus, & Toran (2013) on the need of providing teachers with better teaching and learning support: "...teachers are generally aware of students' conditions, they need a lot more support in terms of professional development. Besides getting input from training or coaching, teachers would need support in terms of teaching materials or resource books in order to help them teach effectively."

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Appendix A

Items	Scale				
	1	2	3	4	5
1. SSS is clear and easy to use	1	2	3	4	5
2. SSS could assess young learner's phonemic awareness explicitly	1	2	3	4	5
3. The use of SSS enable young learners to identify the sound of the spoken language	1	2	3	4	5
4. The use of SSS enable young learners to manipulate the sound of the spoken language	1	2	3	4	5
5. SSS is attractive and caught learner's attention	1	2	3	4	5
6. SSS is suitable for the age of the young learner	1	2	3	4	5
7. SSS engages young learner's well	1	2	3	4	5
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