

# THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ONLINE MENTORING IN TRAINING THE COMPETENCY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN TEACHING READING SKILLS USING THE BASIC PHONICS METHOD

<sup>1\*</sup>Wan Abdul Rahman Wan Ali & <sup>2</sup>Hasnah Toran

<sup>1\*&2</sup>*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*

<sup>\*</sup>*wanabdulrahman1412@gmail.com*

## ABSTRACT

Special education teachers often face challenges such as limited training opportunities and lack of effective resources when teaching reading skills to students with special educational needs (SEN). This action research study investigates the effectiveness of structured online mentoring in enhancing teachers' competencies in delivering reading instruction using the basic phonics method. Utilizing Kemmis and McTaggart's Action Research model (1988), the study involved 25 PPKI (Special Education Integration Program) teachers from various regions of Malaysia with 3 to 15 years of teaching experience. The intervention consisted of two action research cycles, each including planning, implementation, observation, and reflection. Teachers participated in a six-week online mentoring program featuring theoretical modules, guided practice, and video-based feedback. Findings revealed a substantial improvement in teacher knowledge—post-intervention, 44% reported strong understanding compared to 0% before—and a complete increase in practical implementation, rising from 16% to 100% adoption of phonics strategies in classrooms. Moreover, student reading outcomes improved, with teachers reporting enhanced letter-sound recognition and syllable reading skills. The results underscore the potential of structured online mentoring to significantly enhance teacher competencies and student literacy outcomes.

**Keywords:** action research, online training, PPKI teachers, basic phonics module, special education, reading skills, MBPK.

## INTRODUCTION

Education for All is a fundamental principle that must be upheld by education providers globally. In Malaysia, educational provision is inclusive and extends to all individuals regardless of their ability levels. Special education services have been introduced to cater to the needs of students with disabilities, ensuring that they, too, have access to quality education. However, the foundational elements of education—such as reading skills—remain essential for all learners, including those with special educational needs (SEN).

Reading is a foundational skill that supports academic achievement and socio-emotional development, particularly among students with special needs. According to Smith and Carol (2017), reading proficiency facilitates broader curriculum access and fosters the independence of students with SEN. Mastery of reading skills enables these students to participate more fully in educational activities and enhances the development of other basic skills such as emotional regulation and social interaction.

Despite its importance, teaching reading to students with SEN presents numerous challenges. The diverse and specific learning needs of these students often hinder the successful implementation of reading instruction and achievement of learning objectives. Therefore, it is essential that teachers employ specialised instructional strategies and methods tailored to the abilities of their students. Mastropieri and Scruggs (2018) assert that effective and targeted instructional practices are vital for overcoming the difficulties in teaching reading to students with SEN.

One such strategy is the use of basic phonics, which emphasises the relationship between letters and their corresponding sounds. This method has been proven effective in promoting early reading skills in young learners, including those with special needs. Phonics instruction helps students identify and articulate letter sounds, build syllables, and form meaningful words. The successful implementation of this approach, however, requires that teachers receive appropriate and continuous professional guidance.

Ongoing professional development is essential in equipping teachers with the necessary skills and confidence to implement evidence-based reading instruction effectively. According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), continuous and relevant support enhances teachers' pedagogical knowledge and instructional practices. Online coaching has emerged as a flexible and accessible model of professional learning, providing teachers with increased access to resources and expert guidance.

Although the effectiveness of phonics instruction and teacher coaching has been explored in existing literature, there is limited research specifically examining the impact of *online coaching* on enhancing the competencies of special education teachers in delivering phonics-based reading instruction—particularly within the Malaysian educational context. This gap presents an opportunity for further exploration.

## OBJECTIVE

This action research aims to examine the effectiveness of online coaching in enhancing the competence of special education teachers in implementing reading instruction using the basic phonics approach. The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To enhance special education teachers' knowledge of the principles and instructional strategies of basic phonics.
2. To improve special education teachers' skills in implementing basic phonics in classroom instruction.
3. To explore special education teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of online coaching in improving their instructional competence.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of effective ways to train special education teachers in teaching reading skills. It also holds potential to inform policy and practice in the professional development of special education teachers, both in Malaysia and internationally.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. The Importance of Reading Skills for Students with Special Educational Needs

Reading is a complex process involving multiple cognitive and linguistic components, including phonology, decoding (the ability to sound out words), comprehension (understanding the meaning of text), fluency, and vocabulary development. For students with special educational needs (SEN), reading skills are especially crucial, as they serve as a foundation for academic success across all subjects. In addition, reading proficiency contributes to social-emotional development and promotes independence in students with SEN (Carnine et al., 2010; Smith & Caron, 2017). Due to their diverse learning needs, these students require specialised strategies and methods to ensure effective reading instruction.

### 2. The Basic Phonics Approach in Reading Instruction

The basic phonics approach is a systematic and explicit method that teaches the relationship between graphemes (letters) and phonemes (sounds) in a language. This approach enables learners to decode words by blending letter sounds (sound synthesis) and to segment words into individual phonemes (sound analysis) (Ehri, 2020). Strong empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of phonics instruction in improving early reading skills, particularly decoding and spelling, for all learners, including those at risk of reading difficulties (Castles et al., 2018; National Reading Panel, 2000). To ensure that phonics instruction has a significant impact, teachers' instructional competence must be acknowledged and strengthened.

### 3. Online Coaching as Professional Development

Online coaching has emerged as a flexible and potentially effective modality for teacher professional development. It encompasses various formats, such as self-paced learning modules, interactive webinars, online discussion forums, video-based coaching sessions, and access to digital instructional resources (Kennedy, 2016). Research has demonstrated that online coaching can effectively enhance teachers' knowledge, instructional skills, and classroom practices across diverse content areas and educational levels (Fishman et al.,

2013; Hixon et al., 2019). Its adaptability and accessibility make it a valuable tool, particularly in contexts where in-person training is limited or impractical.

#### **4. Teacher Competence in Teaching Reading**

Teacher competence refers to the knowledge, skills, and classroom implementation capabilities required to teach specific content or skills effectively. In the context of reading instruction for students with SEN, teacher competence involves a deep understanding of the components of reading, knowledge of how children—especially those with difficulties—learn to read, mastery of evidence-based strategies such as phonics, the ability to assess student progress, and the capacity to adapt instruction to meet individual needs (Moats, 2009). Improving these competencies through structured and relevant professional development is key to enhancing reading outcomes for students with special needs.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts an action research approach conducted by the researcher. The aim of the action research is to examine the effectiveness of online coaching in enhancing the competence of special education teachers in teaching reading skills using the basic phonics approach to students with special educational needs (SEN). Action research is chosen as it allows the researcher to work collaboratively with participants to identify issues, implement interventions, and evaluate outcomes within the real-world context of classroom practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2014).

#### **Participants and Sampling**

This study involved 25 special education teachers from diverse regions across Malaysia, selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance and commitment. Participants had between 3 and 15 years of experience teaching students with learning disabilities and were actively teaching in the PPKI (Program Pendidikan Khas Integrasi) system. All participants consented to join a six-week online mentoring program as part of the intervention.

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research design adopted in this study is based on the Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) action research model, which comprises four key phases: planning, action, observation, and reflection.

In the planning phase, the researcher identifies the focus of the study, namely the competence of special education teachers in teaching reading using the basic phonics approach. Preliminary data is collected on the teachers' knowledge and current classroom practices. Based on this initial data, the researcher plans an intervention—online coaching sessions—aimed at improving the teachers' competency in using the basic phonics method to teach reading skills.

During the action phase, the researcher implements the online coaching over a period of six weeks with the participating teachers. The coaching is based on the *Modul Membaca Kanak-Kanak Masalah Pembelajaran* (Reading Module for Children with Learning Disabilities) developed by Hasnah Toran. The coaching includes discussions, guided support, and feedback sessions with the participants.

In the observation phase, data is collected both during and after the online coaching period. This data covers various aspects including teacher knowledge, classroom practices, and participant feedback on the effectiveness and usability of the reading module.

The reflection phase requires the researcher to analyze the collected data. This analysis is conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the online coaching in enhancing teacher competence, and to identify areas for improvement in preparation for the next cycle of the action research.

This action research involves 25 special education teachers from across Malaysia, who will participate as study respondents. Participants will be selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they have experience teaching students who require reading instruction and are willing to engage in the online coaching programme.

## **DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

Data were collected using multiple methods to obtain a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the impact of the intervention, namely online coaching, on improving the competence of special education teachers in applying the basic phonics approach. Pre- and post-interviews were conducted with the study participants to identify changes in their knowledge, skills, and classroom practices related to teaching reading using the basic phonics method. The post-interviews also aimed to explore the teachers' experiences and perceptions of the effectiveness of the online coaching and its impact on their instructional practices.

In addition, teaching video analysis was carried out to assess the level of teacher competence in using the basic phonics approach during reading instruction. Video submissions were assessed using a predefined rubric evaluating fidelity to phonics instruction principles, engagement strategies, and accuracy of sound-letter mapping. The rubric was developed based on best practices from Ehri (2020) and the National

Reading Panel (2000). To ensure objectivity, two raters independently coded the videos; inter-rater reliability was calculated with Cohen's Kappa ( $\kappa = 0.87$ ), indicating strong agreement.

A questionnaire was also administered to determine the level of knowledge and skills of special education teachers regarding the basic phonics approach and to gather their perceptions of the reading module used in the coaching sessions.

For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed for the interview data, enabling the researcher to systematically and clearly identify issues and perceptions related to online coaching among special education teachers. For the questionnaire data, descriptive analysis was used to determine the levels of teacher knowledge and skills in using the basic phonics method, and to help identify perceptions of the effectiveness of the reading module used.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first objective of this study was to improve special education teachers' knowledge in using the basic phonics method as an instructional approach for teaching reading to students with special needs. A questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument. The questionnaire was administered to participants after completing the online coaching intervention, which focused on guiding special education teachers in using the *Modul Membaca Kanak-Kanak Masalah Pembelajaran*. In the questionnaire, participants responded to items assessing their knowledge before and after the online coaching sessions. Prior to the intervention, 56% of the teachers reported limited understanding of the basic phonics method, while 44% claimed to have some understanding. After six weeks of online coaching, a significant improvement was observed: 56% of participants reported understanding the method, and 44% reported a strong understanding of the basic phonics approach. This notable increase indicates that structured online coaching can effectively enhance teachers' understanding and competence in teaching reading using basic phonics. A key factor contributing to the initial lack of knowledge was limited exposure and training. Continuous exposure and professional development opportunities are crucial in enhancing the knowledge, skills, and professionalism of special education teachers.

The second objective of this action research was to enhance teachers' skills in implementing the basic phonics method in the classroom. Before the intervention, only 16% of participants reported using phonics-based strategies in teaching reading to students with special needs. This low percentage was attributed to limited knowledge and awareness of the basic phonics approach among special education teachers. The online coaching provided participants with training and relevant knowledge to implement the phonics method accurately. Over the six-week intervention, all participants applied the phonics method in their reading instruction. The initial 16% increased to 100% adoption of the method, demonstrating full implementation by all participating teachers.

For the third objective, interviews were conducted to gather the teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the online coaching in improving their teaching competence. All participants reported that the online coaching enhanced their knowledge and skills in teaching reading to students with special needs. The improvement in knowledge and skills directly contributed to increased teaching competence. These findings were further supported by the observed increase in the teachers' ability to implement the basic phonics strategy in their reading instruction. Additionally, interview data revealed noticeable improvements in students' reading skills. Data collected by the participants showed significant progress among students in recognizing and pronouncing letter sounds. Students were also able to read basic syllables (CVC patterns) after their teachers implemented the basic phonics method.

The findings suggest that structured online coaching has a significant impact on improving teachers' knowledge, skills, and overall teaching competence. These findings are consistent with previous studies by Fishman et al. (2013) and Hixon et al. (2019), which demonstrated that structured and targeted online coaching is an effective form of professional development, especially in enhancing the teaching practices of special education teachers. Online coaching offers flexible and accessible training, and can include expert input to deepen understanding of specific topics or skills. This flexibility provides space and autonomy for teachers to engage in continuous professional learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

To ensure that online coaching yields meaningful outcomes, it must be well-structured and focused. Unstructured and unfocused online coaching may hinder teachers from achieving intended learning outcomes and limit the impact on their teaching competence. A clear and coherent structure enables teachers to have autonomy and make informed choices in their professional development journey, thereby enhancing the knowledge and skills needed to support their students effectively.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This action research aimed to examine the effectiveness of online coaching in enhancing special education teachers' competence in implementing reading skills instruction using the basic phonics approach. The findings revealed that structured and focused online coaching had a significant impact on improving teachers' competence in applying basic phonics as a strategy for teaching reading. Online coaching enhanced both the knowledge and skills of special education teachers, which subsequently contributed to their professional growth and instructional competence. As such, online coaching presents a viable and effective training method for special education teachers.

It is essential that special education teachers receive continuous training to strengthen their existing knowledge and skills. Relevant authorities must ensure that teachers are equipped with up-to-date knowledge and pedagogical skills to ensure that the education provided to students with special needs is on par with that of their typically developing peers. Online coaching offers a flexible training format, allowing teachers autonomy in selecting and engaging in professional development suited to their individual needs. Additionally, online coaching facilitates direct interaction, which makes it easier for teachers to understand and participate actively in the training process.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that relevant stakeholders design and implement a variety of structured and targeted online coaching programs to ensure that special education teachers receive the necessary training and guidance to support their instructional practices effectively.

## REFERENCE

- Carnine, D. W., Silbert, J., Kame'enui, E. J., & Tarver, S. G. (2010). *Direct instruction reading* (6th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K. (2018). Ending the reading wars: Reading acquisition from novice to expert. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 19(1), 3–51.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, E. R., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development*. Learning Policy Institute.
- Ehri, L. C. (2020). The science of teaching reading. *Reading Psychology*, 41(1-2), 9–37.
- Fishman, B. J., Penuel, W. R., Allen, A. R., Cheng, B. H., & Sabelli, N. (2013). Design-based implementation research: An emerging model for transforming the practice of education. *Educational Researcher*, 42(5), 236–242.
- Hixon, E., Buckenmeyer, J., Teresa, R., Powers, K., & Roberts, J. (2019). Comparing the effectiveness of online versus face-to-face professional development for K-12 teachers: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 70(2), 121–133.
- Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (2014). *The action research planner: Doing critical participatory action research for social justice*. Springer.
- Kennedy, A. (2016). Understanding continuing professional development: The contribution of research to policy and practice. *Professional Development in Education*, 42(5), 688–702.
- Mastropieri, M. A., & Scruggs, T. E. (2018). *The inclusive classroom: Strategies for effective differentiated instruction* (6th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Mills, G. E. (2014). *Action research: A guide for the teacher researcher* (5th ed.). Pearson Education.
- National Reading Panel. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction: 1 Reports of the subgroups*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. 2
- Smith, C. R., & Caron, J. (2017). *Teaching reading to children with special needs: A practical guide for educators*. Corwin Press