Omani Teachers Perspectives of Teaching Phonics Online During COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: *The aim of this study is to identify the perspectives of teachers of grades one and two with regard to teaching phonics online during the COVID-19 pandemic in Al Batinah North Governorate. The paper provides a detailed description of the advantages and difficulties of teaching phonics online and the steps that teachers included and omitted when teaching phonics online. It concludes with a few suggestions and recommendations for teaching phonics online.*

Keywords: Phonics; online teaching; COVID19

1. Introduction

The spread of the novel coronavirus COVID-19 has led to profound changes in the education sector (Murphy, 2020). On March 24th, UNESCO announced that the pandemic affected nearly 1.37 billion students and 60.2 million teachers in 138 countries (UNESCO, 2020). Based on medical research, there seems to be a global consensus among infectious disease specialists and public health officials to limit face-to-face classes as a means of protecting the students and the community at large from the spread of the pandemic (Murphy, 2020) Therefore, The Oman Supreme Committee on COVID 19 announced the suspension of classes, schools and educational institutions for a month starting March 15th, 2020 (Syahrin & Salih 2020), due to the exponential increase in societal transmission of the virus, the Supreme Committee took further safety measures and decided to end the academic year for all students in public and private schools, on 7 May 2020, and authorised the Ministry of Education to implement suitable assessment alternatives for students' transfer to higher levels from grades 1 to 12 (Osman, 2020).

The Ministry of Education in the Sultanate of Oman announced other alternatives for public schools (e.g., on-air lessons and some e-learning platforms) to keep the students in touch with the schooling process and continue their education online from home. On the other hand, both the Private and International Schools were able to shift to online schooling using various platforms such as Google Classrooms, Schoology, Seesaw, Blackboard and Moodle (Osman, 2020).

Teachers are the backbone of the schooling system. During this pandemic, it is the adaptability and the tenacity of teachers that proved to be the main factors behind the successful implementation of online learning. However, it is expected that the responsibilities of teachers are bound to multiply as they would be dealing with yet another changed learning environment especially when they need to rotate between face to face and online teaching (V.K & Sam, 2020). Hence, English teachers have shifted to teach English language online like other subjects because the status of English in Oman is widely recognized as second in importance to the Arabic language (Al-Issa, 2005). English teachers started to prepare an electronic preparation supported with videos, links and worksheets to achieve the daily objectives of lessons. In addition, English supervisors and headmistress are allowed to access the online lessons and evaluate the teachers like the previous pre- pandemic way (face-to-face) teaching.

Several studies of teachers' opinion of the role of technology in the English classroom have been conducted in various contexts. For example, Shin and Son (2007) investigated the attitudes and practices of 101 Korean high school English teachers with regard to Internet- based instruction. The researchers found that almost half of teachers used the internet in class. Web-surfing, crosswords, and email tasks were the three most common online activities used by teachers. Among other findings was that less than half of the participants had attended training courses on using the Internet for teaching purposes. The teachers also cited several barriers and problems associated with Internet-assisted teaching, including technical problems, slow connection speeds, students visiting irrelevant websites, their own lack competence in using Internet- based materials, and the time needed for lesson preparation. However, most participants agreed that online classes were generally of benefit to student, and most viewed the Internet as a rich source of information and authentic materials (Bracher, 2013). In addition, Dashtestani (2012) used a combination of a survey, semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations to investigate 212 Iranian teachers' attitudes towards Computer -Assisted Language Learning (CALL), and to discover whether there were any barriers to its implementation. The study found that Iranian teachers had generally positive attitudes towards CALL, seeing it as potentially beneficial for their students, but they perceived several barriers to the incorporation of technology in their classes. These included internet factors, such as teachers' lack of knowledge and resources, lack of experience, and difficulty in accessing CALL materials, and external ones, such as lack of time, insufficient teacher training, a shortage of proper facilities, and inflexible curricula (Bracher, 2013).

Furthermore, Al Shumaimeri (2008) used a questionnaire to survey 183 secondary school EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia, focusing on the teachers' previous Computer -Assisted Language Learning (CALL) training and their attitudes towards the use of computers in the English language classroom. The results showed that more female than male students had generally positive attitudes towards CALL

technology, and that teachers who had attended CALL training courses reported more positive attitudes, but that the fact of having attended a general computer training courses was not in itself enough to ensure a likelihood that teachers would use the school's computer room for their English classes (Bracher, 2013).

In the Sultanate of Oman, the pandemic has also forced the education system to move to online classes. Teaching phonics is one of the ELT method, which has been shifted to be taught online. In fact, teaching phonics is an essential part in the English curriculum of grades one and two. Consequently, the Ministry of Education provides teachers of grades one and two with a phonics guide including the steps and activities that should be followed in teaching each letter sound and reading texts particularly that useful building blocks for successful EFL literacy instruction is to give explicit instruction in phonics (Campbell et al, 2014).

Based on that, the current paper shades light on grades one and two teachers' opinions on teaching phonicsonline and the effect it has on students' leaning of phonics. Furthermore, this paper provides a detailed description to the advantages and difficulties of teaching phonics online. As well as, listing the steps that teachers included and/ or omitted when teaching phonics, according to the phonics guide provided from Ministry of Education.

2. Statement of the Problem

Reading is a vital part of life and a focus of elementary school teaching (Pinkett,2020). According to Wonder-McDowell (2010), "Teaching young students to read has been described as one of the most important responsibilities of primary grade teachers and yet a significant number of students struggle to develop proficient skill" (p.45). Therefore, the Ministry of Education in many countries implemented different reading programme to improve students' level in their reading skill, likewise the Ministry of Education in Oman. Phonics programme is one of reading programme that aims to improve students' basic reading and writing skills. It has been applied in the whole Cycle One Basic schools since 2016. Yet, teaching phonics has a systematic plan provided from the Curriculum department at the Ministry of Education, teachers of grades one and two are supposed to follow some multisensory strategies in teaching it. For instance, learners are encouraged to read and write the letters in the air, on their hands, and on their partners' backs (Nahed & Heba, 2015) or using clay, sand or any creative ideas to shape the new studied sound each period. Furthermore, there are some sound actions, specific steps in teaching the way of writing each letter sound and steps of blending and segmenting. The current health situation of COVID-19 pandemic has shifted teaching phonicsfrom the previous face- to -face method into E-learning, which is considered as a great challenge for teachers and students especially those who are not get used to online teaching and learning. So, this paper aims to explore grades one and two teachers' opinions of teaching phonics online after a long time of teaching it face-to face-in real classes. In addition, to know the steps that teachers added in teaching phonics and steps that were deleted which

were supposed to be applied with students as a part of the recommended steps in the phonics guide.

3. Significant of the Study

Investigating teachers' opinion of teaching phonics online will enlighten policy makers and curriculum designers at the Ministry of Education in Oman on the advantages of it as well as the difficulties that teachers face in teaching phonics online. Consequently, this research will suggest alternative steps, techniques and ideas in the provided phonics guide to be suitable for either teaching phonics face-to face or online. In addition, the curriculum designers might design a new guide to be used in such sudden circumstances and that is applicable for distance learning.

4. Research Objectives

1) To know grade one and two teachers' opinions of teaching phonics online
2) To obtain grade one and two teachers' opinions about the effects of teaching phonics online on students' learning.
3) To explore the advantages of teaching phonics online
4) To explore the difficulties of teaching phonics online
5) To identify the steps that teachers add when teaching phonics online
6) To identify the steps that teachers omit when teaching phonics online

5. Research Questions

The intended paper aims to answer the following research questions.
1) Do you like teaching phonics online?
2) Do you think that teaching phonics online has any influences on students' learning?
3) What are the advantages of teaching phonics online?
4) What are the difficulties of teaching phonics online?
5) Have you added any steps when teaching phonics online?
6) Have you omitted any steps from the phonics guide when teaching phonics online?

6. Literature Review

Phonics refers to the ability to learn the individual sounds in spoken language and map those sounds to specific written letters in English language. Phonics instruction is a way of teaching reading that stresses the acquisition of letter- sound correspondences and their use in reading and spelling. In addition, Students who have strong phonics skills can connect individual sounds with letters and use those sounds to read words (National Reading Panel, 2000). The phonics instruction plays a vital role in helping students comprehends texts. It helps the student map sounds into spelling, thus enabling them to decode words. Decoding words aids in the development of word recognition, which in turn increases reading fluency (Blevins, 2014). Reading fluency improves reading comprehension because as students are no longer struggling with decoding words, they can concentrate on making meaning from the text (Hempenstall, 1999). Therefore, teaching students the most frequent sounds of the alphabet letters are the first crucial

step in good phonics instruction (Gordon, 2010). The International Reading Association (1977) has asserted three basic principles regarding phonics and the teaching of reading:

- The teaching of phonics is an important aspect of beginning reading instruction.
- Classroom teachers in the primary grades should value and teach phonics as part of their reading program; teachers make appropriate instructional decisions for the inclusion of phonics based on their knowledge of children and their language development.
- Phonics instruction is more meaningful when it is presented within the contexts of language use that provides patterns and structures to support learners' understanding. Therefore, effective phonics instruction needs to be embedded in the context of a total language reading program and not just presented in isolation.

6.1 Why Has the Ministry of Education Chosen Jolly Phonics?

Jolly Phonics helps children develop reading and writing skills. It teaches students the 24 sounds of English and their corresponding letters. By learning sound letter relationships, students can start to read by blending (putting together) the sounds in words, and write by segmenting (identifying) sounds in words and relating them to letters (MoE,2020). The English Language Curriculum Section (ELCS) in the Ministry of Education in Oman states in the newsletter for English Teaching staff, 2016 the reasons behind the decision to adopt the Jolly Phonics programme, which according to (ELCS) came after considering the following:

- This is a synthetic phonics reading programme, and a lot of research nowadays supports the use of this type of phonics for building reading skills.
- This programme has been specifically recommended by international reading panels and institutions.
- The method of reading emphasized in this programme resembles the Arabic method of teaching reading which makes it familiar to both teachers and students.
- The multisensory way of teaching phonics in this programme, especially the use of actions, is an added advantage that distinguishes Jolly Phonics from other programmes in the field.
- This programme is very popular and is used in many countries around the world including English speaking countries.

6.2 Applying the Jolly Phonics in Oman

The programme was implemented in 2014/2015 following a successful pilot in 2013/2014. The feedback after the first year of implementation of Jolly Phonics in all schools has been very positive, and teachers have reported improvements in their students' basic reading skills. As an international programme, Jolly Phonics will not completely meet the needs of Omani students. Therefore, the Curriculum Department has, as far as possible, adapted the programme to better meet Omani students' needs as well as providing additional supplementary materials for teachers to use to support the teaching of reading (Newsletter for English Teaching Staff, 2016).

6.3 Materials from the Curriculum Department

In the 2015/2016 academic year, Jolly Phonics was introduced to grade two as well as grade one. The newsletter for English teachers' staff, 2020 mentioned that the curriculum department provided students of grades one and two with a phonics booklet for semesters one and two. Also, it provided teachers with Jolly Phonics Kit, which contained (the phonics Handbook, finger Phonics Big Books, Letter Sound Flashcards and Regular Word Blending Cards), videos demonstrating blending, segmenting and tricky words activities and videos demonstrating the semester 2 reading lesson steps for grade one. In addition, the curriculum department offered phonics guides, lesson plans and a sound set guide.

7. Methodology

The aim of this paper was to investigate the perspectives of teachers of grades one and two with regard to teaching phonics online during the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on students' learning of phonics. In addition, the aim was also to explore the advantages and difficulties that these teachers face in teaching phonics online. Further, the paper discussed the steps that teachers included when teaching phonics and the steps that they omitted which are supposed to be applied when teaching students in accordance with the phonics guide.

7.1 Population

The population of this research included teachers of grades one and two in Al Suwaiq Cycle One schools in the academic year 2020–2021.

7.2 Instruments

In this research, an online questionnaire was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data regarding teaching phonics online during the COVID-19 pandemic. The online questionnaire consisted of six questions; the first and second questions were intended to collect quantitative data and the third and fourth questions were aimed to collect qualitative data, while the fifth and sixth questions were planned to collect both qualitative and quantitative data.

8. Data Analysis and Discussion

The online questionnaire was sent to teachers of grades one and two in Al Suwaiq Cycle One Schools (1–4) in Al Batinah North Governorate. A total of 70 teachers of grades one and two were contacted and 58 answered the online questionnaire. The main aim of the questionnaire was to collect their opinions regarding teaching phonics online during the COVID 19 pandemic.

8.1 Findings from Quantitative Data

The online questionnaire collected quantitative and qualitative data from teachers of grades one and two in the

Al Suwaiq Cycle One Schools (1–4) in Al Batinah North Governorate regarding their opinions of teaching phonics online during the COVID-19 pandemic and if teaching phonics online has any influences on students' learning. In addition, the online questionnaire asked teachers if they added new steps in teaching phonics online or omitted certain steps that they are supposed to apply with students as per the recommendation of the phonics teaching guide. The findings related to the first research question "Do you like teaching phonics online?" revealed that the majority (67.2%) of the respondents did not like teaching phonics online, while only 32.8% of them liked teaching phonics online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, the second research question, "Do you think that teaching phonics online has any influences on students' learning?",revealed that almost 65.5% of the respondents believed that teaching phonics online during the COVID-19 pandemic had an influence on students' learning, whereas only 34.5% of the respondents did not believe that teaching phonics online had any influence on students' learning. Moreover, the findings of the fifth research question, "Have you added any steps when teaching phonics online?", illustrated that approximately 56.4% of the participants includeda few additional steps when teaching phonics online and that teaching online helped them obtain easy access to various educational games, videos, and worksheets to use them with their students, while only 43.6% had not added any steps when teaching phonics online and stated that they follow the same steps as those provided in the phonics guide. Further, the response data to the sixth research question,"Have you omitted any steps when teaching phonics online?",showed that the majority of the respondents (63.6%) omitted a few steps when teaching phonics online and the minority (36.4%)did not omit any steps recommended in the phonics guide (see Table 8.1 for all these percentages).

Table 8.1: The percentages of the responses regarding teaching phonics online

Questions	Yes	No
Do you like teaching phonics online?	67.2	23.8%
Do you think that teaching phonics online has any influences on students' learning?	65.5%	34.5%
Have you added any steps when teaching phonics?	56.4%	43.6%
Have you omitted any steps when teaching phonics?	63.6%	36.4%

Findings from Qualitative Data

The online questionnaire collected qualitative data from teachers of grades one and two in Al Suwaiq Cycle One Schools (1–4) in Al Batinah North Governorate regarding the advantages, difficulties, suggestions, and recommendations of teaching phonics online. Moreover, the online questionnaire collected qualitative data regarding the steps that teachers included in the process of teaching phonics online during the COVID-19 pandemic and the steps that they omitted that were part of the recommended steps in the phonics guide. The following sections present the findings drawn from the qualitative data collected for this study.

8.2 The Advantages of Teaching Phonics Online

The data revealed that the participants stated a few advantages related to teachers and students when teaching phonics online during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the findings clarified that teachers were able to access to various educational programmes and applications when teaching phonics online. Therefore, they began applying new strategies that supported and enhanced their online phonics lessons. In addition, the data showed that teachers can easily apply various practical videos, games, activities, worksheets, and images when teaching letter sounds that were beneficial for students. Moreover, the findings indicated that participants found more online activities to practice blending and segmenting activities as well as tricky words for each phonics lesson. Consequently, the steps of the phonics lesson became clear for the students. Moreover, the data showed that teachers had a good experience in using technology and they became creative in applying different applications, thereby enabling them to prepare easily for daily lessons. The findings also indicated that teachers had not exerted a great effort in online classes as they had in an actual real class.

Further, the data revealed that students benefited from teaching phonics online. For example, teaching online helped shy students to participate freely and easily since they were able to learn individually in their private spaces at home. Similarly, Harasim, Calvert and Groeneboer (1997) stated that with good online learning applications or software, students have the opportunity to participate in the discussion, express opinions, and share knowledge equally regardless of classroom size and time. Additionally, the data illustrated that students were attracted to and enjoyed the live videos, games, songs, and worksheets that were used by teachers to achieve the objectives of the lesson. The most notable advantage that data revealed was the constant access to recorded lessons, videos, games, and activities that were used by teachers during the lesson. Therefore, Clarkes and Hermens (2001) indicated that online learning is student-centred because students can control the pace of their own learning and activities. Similarly, the data indicated that students had a good experience in using different online applications as a requirement to do their online activities or the homework. This implies that they had a great opportunity for self-learning and becoming independent. Further, the findings showed that online teaching strengthened the communication and cooperation among students, teachers, and their families. In general, some respondents stated that online teaching helped students to manage their time and they were able to have plenty time for learning and doing their homework when learning online compared with that in face-to-face learning.

8.3 The Difficulties Associated with Teaching Phonics Online

The findings illustrated that there are a number of difficulties that teachers faced when teaching phonics online. These difficulties were related to teachers, students, and network services. For example, the participants remarked about the difficulty of associating actions with sounds and employing multisensory strategies, which enable students to draw, shape, and write each letter sound. Therefore, some participants justified that teaching online was not the suitable method for all students, particularly because there are individual differences among learners and

there was notsufficient time to give all of them suitable feedback or monitor each student as is possible in face-to-face learning. Moreover, the lack of communication and groupwork between students made teaching phonic online a challenge,even though most of the young and teenaged learners prefer to and are familiar with studying with peers (Crim &Reio, 2011;Vonderwell, 2003)

In addition, it was difficult to follow students' progress in writing and reading letter sounds as well as to assess their performance in each task when teaching online. The findings revealed that certain participants had less experience of technological skills in designing the daily activities or they took a long time in preparing for the lessons. Moreover, a few participants stated that some families helped students in doing their daily tasks and activities when teaching online. The data also revealed that teachers couldnot control students during their participation andfound it difficult to check the pronunciation and handwriting of all studentsduring the online lesson. All these difficulties prevented teachers from presenting the lessons easily and, consequently, the data illustrated that teachers were unable tocomplete the daily lessons in one day, as they had planned.

With regard to the difficulties that students faced when teaching phonics online, the data illustrated that certain students were not able to attend the daily lessons due to a slow and weak internet connection. Consequently, when a computer system or network system is down, students feel frustrated because they are unable to follow the lessons. This causes anxiety among students with lower Internet skills (Ekizoglu & Ozcinar, 2010; Saade & Kira, 2009). In addition, a few students did not have laptops or computers and, thus, they accessed the lesson via their parents' mobile. Therefore, they were unable to concentrate for along time with teachers online because of the small size of the screen or because of the easy access to other applications during the lessons. Moreover, a few students had little knowledge about using the internet and computer during an online phonics lesson and, consequently, they were unable tocomplete the required task during the lesson or work with the teacher appropriately. Further, the data revealed that the slow network caused a few students to fail being able to watch live videos, games, and songs, which implied that they were unable to participate easily in each step of the lesson; thus, the participants remarked that the absence of a good educational environment prevented students from benefiting fully from an online phonics lesson.

8.4 Included and Omitted Steps When Teaching Phonics Online

The findings illustrated that the participants includeda few steps and omitted a few recommended steps in the phonics guide when teaching phonics online. The data clarified that the new videos that participants added enabled their students to write letter sounds on the four lines or helped to explain the action of each sound. Further, the data revealed that new songs, live worksheets, activities, and games were added to phonics lessons, which enhanced the steps of the lesson and motivated students to participate effectively. In addition, the participants remarked that they used new applications such as PowerPoint, Ward Wall, Norbord, Word clouds, chat

rooms, and electronic white boards to facilitate the steps of the lesson and enabled students to participate eagerly in each step. Overall, the data revealed that tactile steps and multisensory strategies were the only recommended steps in the phonics guide that had been omitted when teaching phonics online.

8.5 Suggestions and Recommendations for Teaching Phonics Online

The findings revealed that there are a number of recommendations that must be considered when teaching phonics online:

- Provide teachers with more training programmes and courses
- Provide excellent network services in schools
- Provide teachers with readymade lessons for each sound
- Provide teachers with free applications to simplify the steps of the lesson
- Provide students with electronic devices and tools
- Provide teachers with specific specialized applications for teaching phonics
- Increase the number of phonics lessons
- Provide teachers with more phonics materials
- Provide teachers with fully equipped educational classes
- Allow the use ofthe WhatsApp chat application as the most frequently used application to send homework and worksheets.
- Teaching the phonics lessons based on students' individual differences and not follow certain recommended steps

9. Conclusion

Teaching online is a new experience in the Sultanate of Oman and the sudden shift to online learning is considered a great challenge for all those involved in the educational process. Therefore, cooperation among all members is an essential obligation to meet the challenges they face duringonline teaching. Moreover, online teaching has provided a profound and beneficial experience for teachers and students in terms of developing technological skills and a means to deal with various applications.

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