

**IMPROVING STUDENTS' BLENDING SKILL USING ONSET-RIME APPROACH**

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Published online: 01 February 2018

**ABSTRACT**

This action research was conducted to find out whether using the onset-rime approach would improve the students' blending skill and increase their participation in the English class. Data were collected in 5 weeks using four types of instruments namely questionnaire, interview, observation, pre-test and post-test, allowing for triangulation of results. The findings revealed that the students who gained low marks in the pre-test were able to do well in the post-test, hence proving that onset-rime approach is one of the potentially viable approaches to be used in teaching phonics. The results also conveyed positive increase of students' participation in class. This research concludes that the use of onset-rime approach helps to increase reading ability among the students as they can phonically decode words when the method is integrated in teaching them enunciating and reading new words correctly.

**Keywords:** action research, onset-rime approach; LINUS; phonics; blending.

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doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jfas.v10i2s.60>



## **1. INTRODUCTION**

English language literacy has been highlighted as one of the key features of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2015. In transforming the education system, eleven shifts have been introduced and Shift Two of the blueprint emphasizes that Malaysian school children must be proficient in both Bahasa Melayu and English [1]. The English literacy rates of level one primary school students will be increased and remedial assistance will be provided to them to ensure that they acquire basic literacy in English and will be able to progress at expected pace. In achieving the outlined objectives, a new English teaching concept was introduced and integrated under the new KSSR syllabus in 2011. The use of phonics has been made a compulsory skill that the students need to master. Hence, phonics instruction must be embedded in English-rich reading classes as it will help the students to understand the link between the letters and sounds. Besides, they will also be able to distinguish sounds, isolate word syllables and blend sounds into words. In [2] claimed that differentiated phonics instruction had a positive effect on EFL learners' literacy skills. Though there are many different strategies for teaching phonics such as the embedded, analytical, synthetic and analogy phonics, this research focuses on the onset-rime phonics which is believed to be more effective than any other strategies.

The English language has 44 sounds or phonemes which are represented by 26 letters. Thus, to be fluent English speakers, the students must be familiar with all the 44 sounds. Mastering phonics is crucial in learning to read as it helps one to recognize letters with the correct sounds, blend and merge them together to form complete words. It is also important for students to learn phonics as it will help to increase phonemic awareness in their mind and thus, being able to manipulate any of the 44 phonemes in spoken words. Knowing phonics and phonemes alone is not enough to increase reading fluency and accuracy. Students also need to be taught phonological awareness, so that they will be able to acquire various skills such as rhyming, blending, segmenting and discriminating sounds in words.

A wealth of research has revealed that children's phonological awareness does influence their ability to read and those who have developed the skills well will be able to use the phonics knowledge in reading effectively [3]. Teaching phonological awareness specifically

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segmenting and phoneme blending to students can improve their reading ability significantly [4]. According to [5], phonological awareness type of instruction has a positive effect on students' communication and pronunciation skills thus, increasing their confidence to verbally interact in real situations. In [6] conducted a study on the effectiveness of phonological awareness training among young learners in Odisha and he found that activities, which stressed on phonic manipulation improved the students' proficiency significantly. Phonological awareness can be effectively developed among the students if they are presented with carefully selected phonemic awareness activities. According to [7], phonemic awareness is the ability to know, identify and use phonemes in spoken words. Teachers seek to introduce awareness of phonemes to their learners so that these learners will manipulate blending and segmenting skills when learning to read and write.

Another most effective way of developing phonological awareness is using onset-rime activities [8]. Onset-rime awareness is the capacity to recognize that a solitary syllable is comprised of two units, the onset which is comparable to any phonemes before the vowel and the rime which relates to the vowel sound and to any after phoneme [9]. The onset-rime awareness phonic teaching instruction refers to a teaching activity, where teachers help students recognizing common chunks to decode new words [10]. The idea of teaching students using onset-rime approach also helps to ease blending tasks as the students do not have to recall all the sounds when uttering words [11]. In [12] claimed that the students were able to decode unfamiliar words and read them correctly using the colour-coded onset and rimes. A study of onset-rime method by [13] also confirmed that the children with reading disability benefited a lot when they were taught reading using the rime-based method. In fact, in [14] has concluded that the use of rime analogies helps the students to manipulate their existing sound recognition knowledge to decode the unfamiliar words. In short, previous research has shown that the use of onset-rime approach or method is able to help students with reading problems. Hence, this action research adopted the approach to help the students with reading problem with the aim to improve their blending skill, thus increasing their reading fluency.

Prior to KSSR, language learning through phonics was not a direct approach of teaching

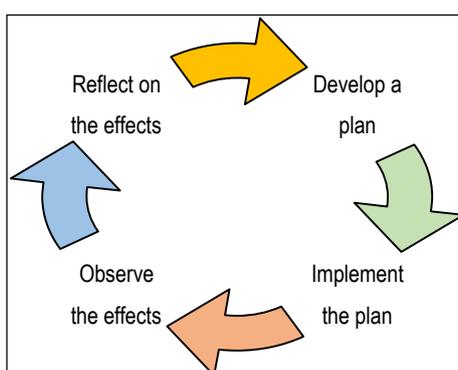
language to learners. Learners commonly read words based on visual images or by changing letters into sounds. The results led to low participation during English lessons because some learners were unable to associate the image to the right word. There is an urgent need to initiate a type of learning that will help young learners improve their reading fluency and at the same time increase their enjoyment and participation in class. Hence, the onset-rime approach is chosen to solve the problem. This study was set out to answer these research questions:

1. Can the use of the onset-rime approach improve students' blending skill?
2. Can the use of the onset-rime approach increase students' participation in class?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Research Design

Four types of instruments namely pre-test and post-test, questionnaire, interviews and observation checklist were used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data to find out whether the use of onset-rime approach will improve the students' blending skill and increase their classroom participation. This action research adopted [15] cyclical-research model which involved planning, acting, observing and reflecting as illustrated in Fig. 1.



**Fig.1.** Cyclical-research model [15]

### 2.2. Participants

The participants of this study were ten Year 2 students of Sekolah Kebangsaan Jerangau in Dungun district, Terengganu. Six girls and four boys were selected based on the LINUS Part 1 Screening result, in which most of them scored either 0 or 1 for Construct No 4 in the LINUS screening.

### 2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through both quantitative and qualitative methods to allow triangulation of the findings to increase the validity and credibility of this research. The data were collected over a period of five weeks. The oral pre-test was firstly conducted in the computer lab before the implementation of the onset-rime approach and the post-test was administered to the participants after five intervention sessions took place. Both pre-test and post-test consisted of 16 questions adopted from the material developed by the Michigan Literacy Progress Profile (MLPP). 8 of the questions evaluated the participants' recognition of onset and rime, whilst the other 8 questions evaluated their ability to blend phonemes. Intervention sessions then took place for 5 weeks and followed by the oral post-test. During the five-week intervention sessions, the participants' behaviours were carefully observed and recorded by using the checklist to find out if they enjoyed the lessons and actively participated in the activities.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Research Question 1: Can the Use of the Onset-Rime Approach Improve Students' Blending Skill?

**Table 1.** Comparison of pre-test and post-test scores

No. of Respondents	Pre-Test Scores	Post-Test Scores	Increase, %
Respondent 1	25%	69%	+44%
Respondent 2	56%	100%	+44%
Respondent 3	56%	75%	+19%
Respondent 4	25%	75%	+50%
Respondent 5	63%	94%	+31%
Respondent 6	44%	100%	+56%
Respondent 7	31%	81%	+50%
Respondent 8	19%	82%	+63%
Respondent 9	50%	100%	+50%
Respondent 10	38%	94%	+56%
Mean scores	41%	87%	+46%

The comparison of the test scores showed a significant increase as all participants scored higher marks in the post-test. The mean score for the pre-test was 41%, whilst the post-test mean score was 87% which showed an increase of 46%. Participant 8 marked the highest increase of the test score (63%) as the scores increased remarkably from 19% to 82%. Both participants 6 and 10 achieved the second highest increase of the test scores (56%) from 44% to 100% and 38% to 94% respectively. Participants 4, 7 and 9 achieved an increase of 50% of the scores, whilst participants 1 and 2 achieved an increase of 44%. Participant 5 achieved only 31% increase and the lowest increase of the test scores was achieved by Participant 3 (19%) who scored 56% in the pre-test and 75% in the post-test. These results suggest that the students can distinguish onset-rime on sight successfully, in which they were able to differentiate the connections between sounds and blend them into words. Hence, it can be concluded that the students' blending skill has been significantly improved after undergoing intervention sessions conducted using the onset-rime approach activities.

Next, the feedbacks from the interviews conducted with the participants have further confirmed the claim that the use of onset-rime approach is able to improve the students' blending skill. Table 1 summarizes the interview feedbacks conducted after the last intervention session conducted with the students. Interview feedbacks for Questions 3, 4 and 5 revealed that 100% of the participants agreed that onset-rime method and activities improved their blending and reading skills and they also preferred the onset-rime approach to the synthetic approach when learning to read in the classroom.

**Table 2.** Interview feedbacks

No.	Interview Feedbacks	Frequency (%)
	Q1. What is your favourite activity in the English class?	
	Feedback 1: Games	8 (80%)
1.	Feedback 2: Singing, chanting	1(10%)
	Feedback 3: Group work	1 (10%)
	What do you remember the most from the lesson?	
2.	Feedback 1: Action and the sounds of phoneme	8 (80%)
	Feedback 2: Song, chant	1(10%)

	Feedback 3: Word slider	1 (10%)
	Does onset-rime approach improve your blending?	
3.	Yes	10 (100%)
	No	0 (0%)
	Does onset-rime approach improve your reading?	
4.	Yes	10 (100%)
	No	0 (0)
	Would you like your English teacher to use;	
5.	Onset-rime approach?	10 (100%)
	Synthetic approach?	0 (0%)

### 3.2. Research Question 2: Can the Use of the Onset-Rime Approach Increase Students' Participation in Class?

**Table 3.** Observation analysis

No.	Observation Checklist	Frequency (%)
1.	Students chanted/sang loudly.	7 (70%)
2.	Students did the actions happily.	8 (80%)
3.	Students enjoyed doing activities in pairs.	6 (60%)
4.	Students were able to make word slider and used it interactively.	10 (100%)
5.	Students were able to blend sounds independently.	10 (100%)

Table 3 illustrates the observation analysis of the participants' behaviours and actions during the last intervention session. Most of the participants actively participated in the activities carried out in the class. 100% of the participants were able to make word slider, use it interactively and blend the sounds independently. 80% of the participants seemed to enjoy the lesson as they did the actions happily and 70% of them chanted loudly. Lastly, 60% of them enjoyed carrying out the activity in pairs.

**Table 4.** Participants' preferences and participation

Questionnaires	Yes (%)	No (%)
1. Did you like doing the action?	10 (100%)	-
2. Did you enjoy chanting?	7 (70%)	3(30%)
3. Did you like doing activities in pairs?	6 (60%)	4(40%)
4. Did you like making the word slider?	10 (100%)	-
5. Do you think onset rime is worth to learn?	10 (100%)	-

Table 4 summarizes the questionnaire feedbacks on participants' preferred activities which also corresponded with the classroom participation observation in Table 3. 100% of them thought that onset-rime was worthy to learn and they liked making word slider. In fact, 100% of them also enjoyed doing the actions, 70% of them enjoyed chanting and another 60% of them liked pair work thus, prompting them to participate in the activities carried out during the intervention.

In short, the participants enjoyed the activities, participated and were excited to learn more during the intervention sessions. They responded well to directions, performed actions instructed to them eagerly and showed the readiness to learn and chanted along throughout the lessons. They were also less shy after some friends offered encouragement and motivation.

Hence, it can be concluded that onset-rime approach can improve young learners' blending skill. Besides, it has also enabled them to enjoy reading and they are also keen to get involved in the onset-rime related activities. This will positively influence their reading ability and fluency. Similar findings were also revealed by [9-12] who conclusively agreed that onset or rime related instruction and activities would be able to improve reading accuracy of young learners and children with reading disability.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This action research investigated the effectiveness of using the onset-rime approach to improve blending skill among the primary school students in a rural area in Terengganu. The findings conclude that the approach does not only improve the students' blending skill, but also

increases their participation in class. In fact, interesting activities conducted during intervention sessions such as playing language games, group chanting and doing actions while singing English songs have created a fun-learning English environment which have subconsciously promoted student-centred and cooperative learning methods. Since, it is evident that the approach can effectively improve the students' reading fluency, it is highly recommended that teachers who teach the students who have reading problems to adopt the approach. They may also adapt the activities to ensure the students will have a fun-learning experience, which could overcome their weaknesses in understanding phonics. In a nutshell, there is no approach that can fit all learners. Hence, it is always safe for the teachers to adopt an eclectic approach when teaching different groups of learners with different proficiency levels. Teachers must always be ready to experiment different teaching techniques and activities to provide the best learning experience to the students.

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**How to cite this article:**

Zuriyatiaslina Y, Jawanees AHN, Norhamimah R, Juliana MN, Ngo KL, Salihah A. Improving students' blending skill using onset-rime approach. *J. Fundam. Appl. Sci.*, 2018, *10(2S)*, 847-857.