

TEACHER SCAFFOLDING AND PUPIL ENGAGEMENT IN EXPLICIT PHONICS INSTRUCTION FOR LOW-PROFICIENCY PRIMARY ESL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Low-proficiency primary English as a Second Language (ESL) learners frequently have difficulty with early reading because they are still developing basic word recognition skills, including letter-sound correspondence, blending, segmenting, and simple word reading. Although explicit phonics instruction has been widely recognised as an important approach to promoting early reading development, less attention has been given to how scaffolding is enacted during phonics instruction and how low-proficiency pupils engage with scaffolded phonics activities. This qualitative case study explored how scaffolding was enacted during explicit phonics instruction and how low-proficiency primary ESL learners engaged with scaffolded phonics activities. The study involved 24 Year 2 remedial pupils from an urban Malaysian primary school serving mainly low-income families. The pupils' classroom-based proficiency levels ranged from TP1 to TP2. Data were collected through teacher-researcher observation notes, teacher reflection notes, pupils' learning artefacts, lesson materials, and short interviews with pupils over eight weeks of explicit phonics instruction. The study was guided by scaffolding theory, based on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, and supported by the Active View of Reading, particularly word recognition. The data were analysed thematically. The findings show that modelling, teacher-created songs, and Total Physical Response fostered a safe space for phonics engagement. Visual and gestural scaffolds supported pupils' attention and sound recognition. Choral repetition, prompting, and corrective feedback sustained engagement during blending. Games, pair work, and praise encouraged confidence and scaffolded participation. The study suggests that explicit phonics instruction for low-proficiency ESL learners should not be limited to sound drills. Instead, it needs to be carefully scaffolded through modelling, repetition, prompting, visual support, gestures, guided blending, corrective feedback, peer support, and a constructive classroom environment. The findings carry implications for primary ESL teachers who support pupils with early reading difficulties.

Keywords: *Teacher scaffolding, pupil engagement, explicit phonics instruction, low-proficiency learners, ESL, word recognition, early reading.*

INTRODUCTION

Early reading remains an important concern in primary English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms because pupils who struggle to read simple English words may also struggle to understand instructions, complete written tasks, and participate in classroom activities (Leung, 2021; Manten et al., 2020). Reading development involves more than recognising printed words on a page. It requires pupils to connect print with speech, recognise sound-letter relationships, blend sounds, and gradually develop automatic word recognition. The Active View of Reading positions word recognition as a key component of reading development, alongside language comprehension, bridging processes, and active self-regulation (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). For low-proficiency primary ESL learners, weak word recognition can limit access to reading activities because they may not have secure control of letter-sound correspondence, blending, segmenting, and simple word reading.

Systematic and explicit phonics instruction has been widely recognised as an important approach to supporting early word reading. Ehri (2020) argues that systematic phonics instruction helps pupils acquire the knowledge and skills needed for word-reading development by connecting spelling, pronunciation, and meaning. Recent work with struggling beginner readers also shows that phoneme awareness, letter-sound knowledge, and decoding remain important areas of support for pupils who experience difficulty in early reading (Webber et al., 2024). In this sense, explicit phonics instruction is particularly relevant for low-proficiency ESL learners because it provides a clear route into word reading, rather than expecting pupils to discover English sound-letter patterns independently.

In the Malaysian primary ESL context, phonics instruction has received growing attention. Zin et al. (2023) examined lower primary teachers' beliefs and practices in phonics instruction and found that teachers' beliefs were related to their classroom practices. More recently, Shafee et al. (2025) explored Malaysian primary ESL teachers' phonics practices through classroom-based observation and highlighted how phonics teaching is shaped by teachers' instructional decisions, classroom routines, and pupils' learning needs. These studies are important because they show that phonics is not only a matter of curriculum content. It is also shaped by how teachers introduce, model, practise, and support phonics learning in real classrooms.

However, there remains a need to understand explicit phonics instruction focusing on teacher scaffolding and pupil engagement, especially in low-proficiency lower-primary ESL classrooms. Existing Malaysian studies have provided useful evidence on teachers' beliefs and practices in phonics instruction, but less attention has been given to how teachers scaffold phonics learning and how low-proficiency pupils engage with these scaffolds during lessons. This is an important gap because pupils who are still developing early reading skills may not automatically engage with phonics tasks. They may remain silent, depend on teacher answers, copy peers, or avoid reading aloud because they are unsure or afraid of making mistakes.

Teacher scaffolding is therefore central to this study. Scaffolding refers to support that helps learners perform tasks that they may not yet be able to complete independently. In early reading instruction, scaffolding may involve modelling sounds, using repetition, giving prompts, providing visual and gestural support, guiding blending, offering corrective feedback, and creating opportunities for peer-supported practice. Recent research on teacher scaffolding in early language and literacy contexts shows that teacher support can shape how pupils respond, participate, and develop emerging language skills (Deshmukh et al., 2022). For low-proficiency ESL learners, these supports may help make phonics learning less threatening and more accessible.

Pupil engagement is also important because early reading development depends not only on exposure to instruction, but also on pupils' willingness and ability to participate in learning tasks. Reading engagement involves behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, including attention, participation, motivation, persistence, and confidence (Alqahtani, 2024; Fredricks et al., 2004). In the context of explicit phonics instruction, engagement can be seen when pupils attend to teacher modelling, repeat sounds, respond to prompts, point to letters, participate in games, work with peers,

and attempt to decode simple words. These forms of engagement are especially significant for low-proficiency pupils because confidence and willingness to try often come before independent reading.

This study addresses the gap by exploring how scaffolding is enacted during explicit phonics instruction and how low-proficiency primary ESL learners engage with scaffolded phonics activities. The study does not aim to measure the effectiveness of phonics instruction through test scores. Instead, it provides qualitative classroom evidence on how teacher scaffolding creates access to phonics learning and how pupils engage with this support. The study focuses on a Year 2 remedial ESL class in an urban Malaysian primary school, where pupils' classroom-based proficiency levels ranged from TP1 to TP2. The findings are expected to contribute to language and literacy education by showing how explicit phonics instruction can be made more supportive, interactive, and accessible for low-proficiency primary ESL learners.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How is scaffolding enacted during explicit phonics instruction in a low-proficiency primary ESL classroom?
2. How do low-proficiency primary ESL learners engage with scaffolded explicit phonics instruction?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early Reading and Word Recognition in ESL Classrooms

Early reading involves several interconnected skills. Pupils need to recognise letters, connect letters to sounds, blend sounds into words, segment words into sounds, read words accurately, and later understand what they read. For low-proficiency ESL learners, word recognition is often a major challenge because they may lack sufficient familiarity with English's sound-letter relationships. They may be able to copy written words, repeat words after the teacher, or recognise familiar words from memory, yet still struggle to decode unfamiliar words independently.

The Active View of Reading provides a useful lens for understanding this issue. Duke and Cartwright (2021) explain that reading involves word recognition, language comprehension, bridging processes, and active self-regulation. Word recognition is the ability to identify written words accurately and efficiently. In this study, word recognition is understood through letter-sound correspondence, blending, segmenting, and simple word reading. These skills are important because pupils need to decode printed words before they can move towards fluent reading and comprehension.

Recent reading research supports the importance of attending to word recognition as a foundation for reading development. Ehri (2020) explains that learning to read words involves forming connections between spellings, pronunciations, and meanings. When pupils develop these connections, they are better able to recognise words and decode unfamiliar words. For pupils who are still weak in letter-sound knowledge, direct support is needed to help them understand how print maps onto speech. Webber et al. (2024) also highlight the importance of phoneme awareness, letter-sound knowledge, and decoding for struggling beginner readers. These areas are closely related to the learning needs of low-proficiency ESL pupils in early reading classrooms.

In ESL classrooms, weak word recognition may also affect pupils' classroom participation. Pupils who cannot read simple words confidently may avoid reading aloud, wait for peers to answer, rely on teacher prompts, or guess from pictures and initial letters. These behaviours suggest that reading difficulty is not only a technical problem related to decoding. It is also connected to pupils' confidence, willingness to participate, and engagement in reading activities. Therefore, early reading support for low-proficiency pupils needs to address both word recognition and the classroom conditions that allow pupils to participate.

Explicit Phonics Instruction

Explicit phonics instruction refers to direct and structured teaching of letter-sound relationships and word-reading strategies. In explicit phonics instruction, the teacher introduces target sounds, models how to produce them, guides pupils to repeat and practise them, and shows how to blend them to form words. This approach is useful for low-proficiency pupils because it does not assume that they will discover English sound-letter patterns independently.

Ehri (2020) argues that systematic phonics instruction supports pupils' word-reading development by helping them connect spellings, pronunciations, and meanings. This is important because beginning readers need to understand how letters and sounds work together before they can decode words independently. The Education Endowment Foundation also notes that phonics approaches are supported by extensive evidence and are particularly relevant for younger pupils and older pupils who struggle with decoding (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). For low-proficiency ESL learners, explicit phonics instruction can provide a structured pathway into early reading.

However, phonics instruction should not be reduced to mechanical sound drilling. Pupils need to see how sounds are used in meaningful words and reading tasks. They also need repeated opportunities to practise letter-sound recognition, blending, segmenting, and word reading. In low-proficiency classrooms, pupils may require more time, clearer modelling, and more concrete support because English sound-letter relationships may be unfamiliar to them. They may also need visual cues, gestures, songs, peer support, and corrective feedback to remain engaged in phonics activities.

Malaysian research has shown that phonics instruction is an important area in primary ESL teaching. Zin et al. (2023) found that lower primary teachers' beliefs were related to their phonics teaching practices. Their study suggests that teachers' perception of phonics directly influences their classroom instruction. Shafee et al. (2025) further examined how Malaysian primary ESL teachers used phonics approaches in classroom practice. Their classroom-based study is particularly relevant because it shows that phonics teaching is shaped by practical classroom decisions and the ways teachers respond to pupils' learning needs. Although these studies have contributed to understanding phonics instruction in Malaysia, there is still a need to examine how phonics instruction is scaffolded for low-proficiency pupils and how pupils engage with such support. This is the specific focus of the present study.

Teacher Scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development

Scaffolding is closely linked to Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development. The Zone of Proximal Development refers to the distance between what learners can do independently and what they can do with guidance from a more knowledgeable person (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). In classroom learning, the teacher provides support so that pupils can attempt tasks they may not yet be able to complete independently.

Wood et al. (1976) described scaffolding as the support given by an adult or expert to help a learner solve a problem, carry out a task, or achieve a goal that would be difficult without assistance. Although these are foundational works, more recent studies continue to show the relevance of scaffolding in classroom interaction. Van de Pol et al. (2010) explain that scaffolding involves support that is adjusted to learners' needs. Deshmukh et al. (2022), in a study of teacher scaffolding during shared book reading, show that teacher responses after pupils' answers can function as opportunities to scaffold emerging language skills.

In phonics instruction, scaffolding may include teacher modelling, breaking sounds and words into smaller parts, using mouth movement, providing gestures, repeating sounds, giving prompts, offering corrective feedback, and gradually encouraging pupils to try independently. Scaffolding is not the same as giving pupils the answer. Instead, it supports pupils in participating in the task and gradually taking more responsibility for their learning. For example, a teacher may first model a sound, then ask pupils to repeat it chorally, then point to each sound during blending, and later invite pupils to attempt reading the word with less support.

For low-proficiency ESL pupils, scaffolding is important because phonics tasks can be difficult when pupils are not confident with English sounds and print patterns. Some pupils may require teacher modelling several times before they attempt a sound. Others may need visual cards, songs, gestures, peer support, or choral repetition before they are ready to read individually. Therefore, scaffolding needs to be responsive to pupils' readiness, confidence, and learning behaviours.

Pupil Engagement in Early Literacy Learning

Pupil engagement refers to the way pupils participate in learning. It may include attention, task involvement, willingness to respond, persistence, confidence, and emotional readiness to participate. Fredricks et al. (2004) describe engagement as a multidimensional construct involving behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. More recent work on reading engagement also emphasises that engagement is shaped by learners' abilities, motivational beliefs, and learning environments (Alqahtani, 2024).

In early literacy learning, engagement is important because pupils who struggle with reading may not participate automatically. Low-proficiency pupils may feel anxious when asked to read aloud, especially when unsure of sounds or words. They may be physically present in the classroom but emotionally withdrawn from the reading task. They may copy friends, wait for the teacher's answers, or avoid responding. These behaviours show that engagement needs to be created and supported through classroom interaction.

In the present study, pupil engagement is linked specifically to phonics learning. Pupils are considered engaged when they attend to the teacher's modelling, repeat sounds, join songs, respond to prompts, point to letters, use flashcards, participate in games, work with peers, and attempt to decode simple words. This view of engagement is practical for low-proficiency primary classrooms because it recognises early participation as meaningful. Pupils may not immediately become independent readers, but their willingness to try, repeat, and participate can show emerging engagement with word recognition.

Teacher scaffolding can support this engagement by making phonics tasks less threatening and more accessible. When the teacher models the sound first, pupils have a clear example to follow. When pupils repeat chorally, they can practise without the pressure of individual performance. When visual cards and gestures are used, pupils have concrete cues to support attention and memory. When praise and corrective feedback are given constructively, pupils may become more willing to try again. These forms of support help create the conditions for low-proficiency learners to engage with explicit phonics instruction.

The Present Study

The literature shows that word recognition is central to early reading, explicit phonics instruction supports word-reading development, and teacher scaffolding can help learners participate in tasks that may be difficult for them to complete independently. Recent Malaysian studies have examined teachers' beliefs and practices in phonics instruction, but there remains limited qualitative attention to how scaffolding supports low-proficiency pupils' engagement during explicit phonics lessons. This study addresses that gap by examining how scaffolding was enacted during explicit phonics instruction and how Year 2 remedial ESL pupils engaged with scaffolded phonics activities in an urban Malaysian primary classroom.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by Scaffolding Theory, which is grounded in Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD refers to the distance between what learners can do independently and what they can do with support from a more knowledgeable person (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory is suitable for the present study because low-proficiency primary ESL learners often require guided support before they can participate meaningfully in phonics-related tasks such

as recognising sounds, blending phonemes, segmenting words, and reading simple words. In this study, the teacher serves as the more knowledgeable person, providing temporary, responsive support to help pupils access early reading tasks that may otherwise be difficult for them to complete independently.

Scaffolding is not merely the act of helping pupils. It refers to structured support that enables learners to attempt a task, remain engaged in the learning process, and gradually take more responsibility for their own learning. Wood et al. (1976) describe scaffolding as support that allows learners to solve a problem or complete a task that would be difficult without assistance. More recent discussions of scaffolding also highlight that teacher support needs to be responsive to learners' needs and adjusted during classroom interaction (Van de Pol et al., 2010). In early literacy contexts, such responsiveness is important because pupils may require different forms of support depending on their readiness, confidence, and ability to process sound-letter relationships.

In this study, scaffolding is understood through the teacher's use of modelling, repetition, prompting, visual support, gestures, guided blending, corrective feedback, peer support, songs, Total Physical Response, and praise. These scaffolds are relevant because the pupils were low-proficiency learners whose classroom-based proficiency levels ranged from TP1 to TP2. Many of them were not yet confident in producing English sounds, blending phonemes, or reading simple words independently. Therefore, scaffolding provided an entry point into phonics learning by allowing pupils to listen, observe, repeat, respond, and attempt reading with support.

The study also uses the Active View of Reading as a supporting literacy lens. Duke and Cartwright (2021) explain that reading involves several interconnected components, including word recognition, language comprehension, bridging processes, and active self-regulation. The present study focuses specifically on word recognition because the pupils' early reading needs were closely linked to letter-sound correspondence, blending, segmenting, and simple word reading. Word recognition is important because pupils need to connect printed forms with spoken sounds before they can move towards more fluent reading and comprehension.

The Active View of Reading helps clarify the study's literacy focus. The study is not concerned with all aspects of reading development. Rather, it focuses on how teacher scaffolding supports pupils' engagement with early word recognition tasks during explicit phonics instruction. This is consistent with recent reading research highlighting the roles of phonics, letter-sound knowledge, and decoding in early word-reading development (Ehri, 2020; Webber et al., 2024). For low-proficiency ESL learners, these early word recognition skills need to be taught explicitly and supported through classroom interaction.

Together, Scaffolding Theory and the Active View of Reading provide the theoretical foundation for the study. Scaffolding Theory explains how teacher support helps pupils participate within their ZPD, while the Active View of Reading explains what reading component is being supported. Explicit phonics instruction becomes the pedagogical setting where these two lenses meet. Through scaffolding, pupils are supported to engage with phonics tasks that involve sound recognition, blending, segmenting, and simple word reading. Therefore, the theoretical framework directly informs the two research questions: the first focuses on how scaffolding is enacted during explicit phonics instruction, while the second focuses on how pupils engage with scaffolded phonics activities.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of this study is presented as a conceptual progression rather than a causal model. It does not suggest that one component automatically causes the next. Instead, it shows how the main theoretical, literacy, pedagogical, and empirical components of the study are logically connected.

The framework begins with Scaffolding Theory as the main theoretical lens. In this study, scaffolding

refers to teacher support provided within pupils' Zone of Proximal Development. This support is important because the pupils were low-proficiency ESL learners who required assistance to participate in early reading tasks. The teacher's scaffolding included modelling, repetition, prompting, visual support, gestures, guided blending, corrective feedback, peer support, songs, Total Physical Response, games, and praise. These strategies were used to make phonics learning more accessible and less threatening.

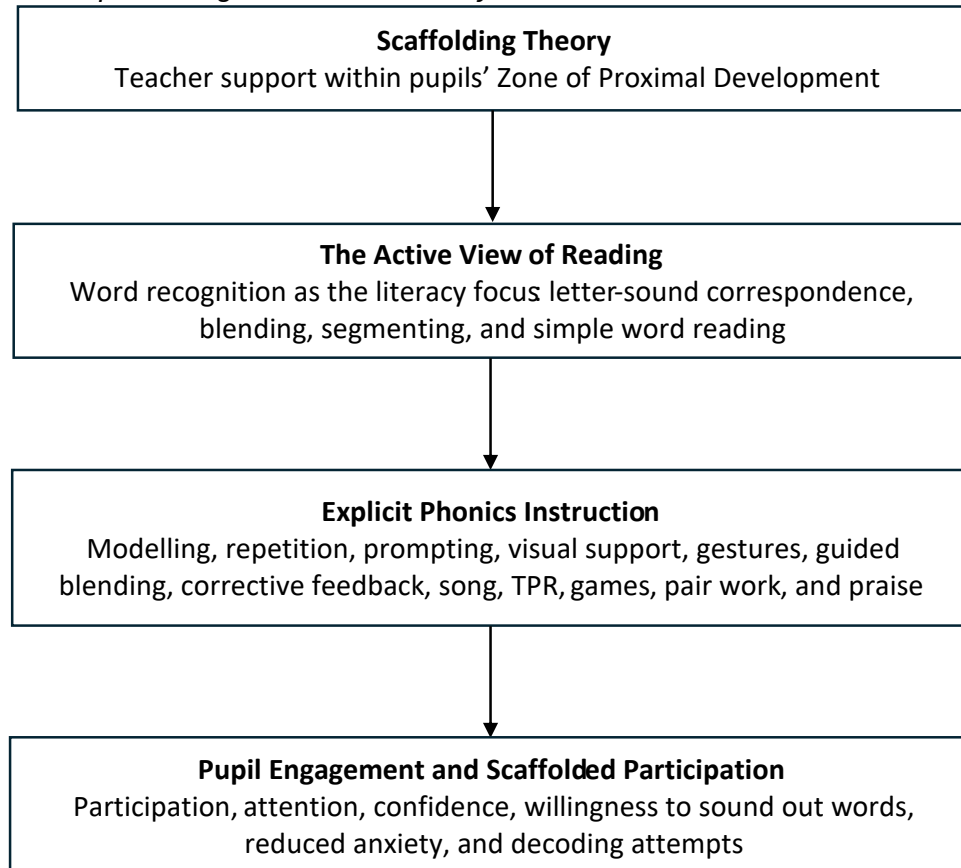
The second component is the Active View of Reading, which functions as the supporting literacy lens. This framework identifies word recognition as one important component of reading development (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). In the present study, word recognition is operationalised through letter-sound correspondence, blending, segmenting, and simple word reading. This component clarifies the literacy skill being supported through teacher scaffolding.

The third component is explicit phonics instruction, which represents the pedagogical focus of the study. Explicit phonics instruction refers to direct and structured teaching of sound-letter relationships and word-reading strategies. In this study, the instruction progressed from the introduction of phonemes to sound recognition, blending and segmenting, word reading, and independent reading. The teaching activities included teacher modelling, songs, flashcards, ditties cards, gestures, choral repetition, guided blending, sound recognition games, pair work, corrective feedback, and praise.

The final component is pupil engagement and scaffolded participation, which forms the empirical focus of the study. Engagement is understood through pupils' attention, participation, confidence, willingness to sound out words, reduced anxiety, peer-supported responses, and attempts at decoding. This focus is important because the study does not measure reading improvement through test scores. Instead, it examines how low-proficiency pupils engage with explicit phonics instruction when the teacher provides scaffolding. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework guiding the study.

Figure 1

Conceptual Progression of the Study



METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design from a teacher-researcher position. This design was considered suitable because the study aimed to explore how scaffolding was enacted during explicit phonics instruction and how low-proficiency primary ESL learners engaged with scaffolded phonics activities within a real classroom context. The purpose of the study was not to measure pupils' reading improvement through test scores. Instead, it sought to understand the instructional process and pupils' visible engagement during scaffolded explicit phonics instruction.

The case was bounded by one Year 2 primary ESL classroom in which low-proficiency pupils received explicit phonics instruction over eight weeks. A qualitative case study allowed the teacher-researcher to examine the classroom experience in depth using multiple sources of data, including teacher-researcher observation notes, teacher reflection notes, pupils' learning artefacts, lesson materials, and short pupil interviews.

The study did not adopt an action research design because it did not aim to report iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection. Instead, it focused on describing and interpreting how scaffolding was enacted during explicit phonics instruction and how pupils engaged with these scaffolds in a bounded classroom case.

Research Context

The study was conducted in Year 2 Berlian, an urban Malaysian primary ESL classroom serving mainly pupils from low-income families. The class consisted of 24 pupils who were identified as remedial learners. Their classroom-based English proficiency levels ranged from TP1 to TP2, indicating that they required substantial support in English learning, particularly in early reading.

The explicit phonics instruction was conducted for one hour per lesson over eight weeks. The lessons progressed from the introduction of phonemes to sound recognition, blending and segmenting, word reading, and independent reading. The reading focus included CVC words, digraphs, and diphthongs. The instructional activities included teacher modelling, teacher-created songs, Total Physical Response, flashcards, ditties cards containing lyrics, choral repetition, guided blending, prompting, corrective feedback, games, pair work, and praise.

Role of the Teacher-Researcher

The researcher was also the English teacher of Year 2 Berlian and had been teaching the pupils for two years. Therefore, the study was conducted from a teacher-researcher position. This role was appropriate because the study focused on naturally occurring classroom scaffolding during explicit phonics instruction. The teacher-researcher's prolonged engagement with the pupils provided rich contextual understanding of their learning needs, classroom behaviours, confidence levels, and early reading difficulties.

At the same time, the teacher-researcher role required reflexive awareness. Since the researcher was actively involved in teaching the lessons, observation was conducted within classroom interactions rather than from an external observer position. To address this limitation, observation notes were written during brief lesson pauses and immediately after lessons. These notes were triangulated with teacher reflection notes, pupils' learning artefacts, lesson materials, and short pupil interviews. Reflexive notes were also used to consider how the teacher-researcher's familiarity with the pupils may have influenced the interpretation of classroom events.

Participants

The participants were 24 Year 2 Berlian pupils. They were selected through purposive sampling because they were low-proficiency ESL learners who required remedial support in early reading. Their early reading needs included difficulty recognising sounds, blending and segmenting phonemes, reading simple CVC words, identifying digraphs and diphthongs, and moving towards independent

word reading. Pseudonyms were used to protect pupils' identities. Since the findings focus on classroom patterns rather than individual pupil profiles, pupil excerpts are presented using general labels such as Pupil 1, Pupil 2, and Pupil 3.

Research Instruments

Four qualitative research instruments were used in this study: a teacher-researcher observation protocol, a teacher reflection journal, a pupil learning artefact checklist, and a short pupil interview protocol. These instruments were designed to align with the two research questions. The observation protocol and reflection journal were mainly used to examine how scaffolding was enacted during explicit phonics instruction. The artefact checklist and pupil interview protocol were used to understand how pupils engaged with scaffolded phonics activities.

The teacher-researcher observation protocol focused on scaffolding strategies and pupil engagement behaviours during lessons. The scaffolding strategies included modelling, choral repetition, songs, Total Physical Response, visual support, gestures, prompting, guided blending, corrective feedback, peer support, games, pair work, and praise. Pupil engagement behaviours included attention, participation, sound production, pointing to letters, movement towards sound cards, hesitation, peer-supported responses, willingness to try, and attempts to decode words.

The teacher reflection journal was used after lessons to record the teacher-researcher's reflections on the lesson. The entries focused on which scaffolding strategies appeared to support pupils, how pupils responded, and what adjustments were needed. This instrument also supported reflexivity by allowing the teacher-researcher to distinguish between observed pupil behaviours and personal interpretations of those behaviours.

The pupil learning artefact checklist was used to examine pupils' engagement with phonics tasks. The artefacts included worksheets, sound-matching tasks, flashcard activities, ditties cards containing lyrics, word cards, word-building tasks, and simple reading activities. The checklist focused on how pupils attempted the tasks with teacher or peer support rather than on assigning marks.

The short pupil interview protocol was used to gather pupils' views on scaffolded phonics activities. Since the pupils were low-proficiency Year 2 learners, the interview questions were simple and age-appropriate. Pupils were allowed to respond in English, Malay, or a mixture of both. The excerpts were translated into English where necessary while preserving the meaning of the pupils' responses.

Instructional Procedure

The explicit phonics instruction was carried out over eight weeks. Each lesson lasted approximately one hour. The instruction followed a gradual sequence, beginning with phoneme introduction and sound recognition, then moving to blending, segmenting, word reading, and independent reading.

At the beginning of the lessons, the teacher introduced the alphabet and target phonemes. The teacher modelled the sounds using clear mouth movement, teacher-created songs, and Total Physical Response. Pupils were then guided to repeat the sounds chorally and through songs. Visual support was provided through colourful flashcards and ditty cards containing simple lyrics.

During blending activities, the teacher pointed to the first, middle, and final sounds before guiding pupils to combine the sounds. Prompts such as "Look at the first sound," "Look at the middle sound," and "Now we want to combine them together" were used to guide pupils through the blending process. When pupils hesitated or produced incorrect sounds, the teacher provided corrective feedback and encouraged them to try again. Games, pair work, and movement-based activities, such as running to identify sounds, were also used to support participation and engagement.

Data Collection

Data were collected from five sources: teacher-researcher observation notes, teacher reflection notes,

pupils' learning artefacts, lesson materials, and short interview with pupils.

Teacher-researcher observation notes were recorded during brief lesson pauses and immediately after explicit phonics lessons. Since the researcher was also the classroom teacher, the observation focused on naturally occurring classroom behaviours during instruction. The notes documented how scaffolding was enacted during the lessons, including modelling, repetition, prompting, visual support, gestures, guided blending, corrective feedback, peer support, games, songs, Total Physical Response, and praise. Pupils' engagement was observed through attention, choral responses, sound production, pointing to letters, movement towards sound cards, hesitation, peer-supported responses, willingness to try, and attempts to decode words.

Teacher reflection notes were written after lessons. These notes captured the teacher-researcher's reflections on which scaffolding strategies appeared to support pupils, how pupils responded, and what instructional adjustments were needed. For example, the teacher-researcher noted that pupils responded better when choral repetition was used before individual reading, that visual cards helped pupils focus, and that guided blending worked better when each letter was pointed to slowly. These notes helped distinguish between observed classroom events and the teacher-researcher's interpretation of those events.

Pupils' learning artefacts included worksheets, sound-matching tasks, flashcard activities, ditties cards containing lyrics, word cards, word-building tasks, and simple reading activities. These artefacts were used to examine how pupils engaged with scaffolded phonics tasks. The focus was not on assigning marks, but on identifying how pupils attempted the tasks with teacher and peer support.

Lesson materials were also examined to provide supporting evidence of the scaffolds used during explicit phonics instruction. These materials included flashcards, ditties cards, word cards, and teacher-created songs. They helped contextualise the scaffolding strategies described in the observation and reflection notes.

Short pupil interviews were conducted informally after selected lessons. The questions were simple and age-appropriate because the pupils were low-proficiency ESL learners. Pupils were allowed to answer in English, Malay, or mixed Malay-English to help them express their views more comfortably.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis involved familiarisation with the data, initial coding, code grouping, theme development, theme review, and theme refinement. The teacher-researcher first read and reread the observation notes, reflection notes, pupils' learning artefacts, lesson materials, and pupil interview responses to become familiar with the data.

Initial codes were generated based on the two research questions. For Research Question 1, the coding focused on how scaffolding was enacted during explicit phonics instruction. Codes included modelling, choral repetition, songs, Total Physical Response, visual support, gestures, prompting, guided blending, corrective feedback, pair work, games, and praise.

For Research Question 2, the coding focused on how pupils engaged with scaffolded explicit phonics instruction. Codes included attention, participation, confidence, willingness to sound out words, reduced anxiety, peer-supported responses, movement towards sound cards, and attempts at decoding.

The codes were then grouped into broader categories that showed the relationship between scaffolding and pupil engagement. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure each was supported by multiple data sources and aligned with the research questions.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. First, data triangulation was

carried out by comparing teacher-researcher observation notes, teacher reflection notes, pupils' learning artefacts, lesson materials, and short pupil interviews. This helped ensure that the findings were not based solely on the teacher-researcher's interpretation.

Second, a thick description was provided to explain the classroom context, participants, explicit phonics activities, scaffolding strategies, and pupils' engagement behaviours. This allowed the reader to understand the context in which the findings were produced.

Third, an audit trail was maintained through organised observation notes, reflection notes, artefacts, interview excerpts, lesson materials, and coded data. This made the analytical process more transparent. Finally, reflexive notes were used to acknowledge the teacher-researcher's dual role. Since the researcher had been teaching the pupils for two years, this relationship provided a deep contextual understanding of the pupils' learning needs. However, reflexivity was necessary to reduce the risk of over-interpreting pupils' responses based only on teacher familiarity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Permission was obtained from the school administrator before data collection. Parental consent and pupil assent were obtained before pupils were involved in the study. Pupils' identities were protected through pseudonyms, and no identifying information about the school or pupils was included in the report.

Participation was voluntary. Pupils were informed in age-appropriate language that they could choose whether to answer interview questions and that they would not be penalised if they did not wish to respond. The classroom activities were part of regular instructional support, but the use of pupils' responses, artefacts, and interview excerpts for research purposes was confidential.

FINDINGS

The findings are presented per the two research questions. The data were drawn from teacher-researcher observation notes, teacher reflection notes, pupils' learning artefacts, lesson materials, and short pupil interviews. The study involved 24 Year 2 Berlian pupils from an urban Malaysian primary school serving mainly low-income families. The pupils were remedial learners whose classroom-based proficiency levels ranged from TP1 to TP2. The explicit phonics instruction was conducted for one hour per lesson over eight weeks. The lessons moved progressively from the introduction of phonemes to sound recognition, blending and segmenting, word reading, and independent reading. The reading focus included CVC words, digraphs, and diphthongs.

As the pupils were low-proficiency ESL learners, the short interviews were conducted using simple questions. Pupils were allowed to respond in Malay, English, or a mixed Malay-English format. The excerpts presented in this section were translated into English while preserving the meaning of the pupils' responses.

Research Question 1: How Is Scaffolding Enacted During Explicit Phonics Instruction in a Low-Proficiency Primary ESL Classroom?

Theme 1: Modelling, Songs, and TPR Created a Safe Entry Point for Phonics Participation. Scaffolding was first enacted through teacher modelling, teacher-created songs, and Total Physical Response. The explicit phonics lessons began with the introduction of the alphabet and target phonemes before pupils were guided to identify and produce the sounds. During the sound introduction stage, the teacher-researcher modelled the target sounds using clear mouth movements. This helped pupils observe how the sounds were formed before they were expected to repeat them.

The use of mouth movements was important because several pupils were not yet confident in producing English sounds. When the sound was modelled slowly and repeated several times, pupils had a clear example to follow. This was followed by choral repetition, where pupils repeated the

sounds together rather than individually. This reduced the pressure of immediate individual performance and allowed pupils to enter the task more gradually.

Teacher-created songs were also used as a scaffold. The songs contained simple and familiar words that were easy for pupils to sound out. The teacher's reflection notes indicated that pupils responded positively to the songs because the words were familiar and the rhythm helped them remember the sounds. The use of songs shifted the lesson away from formal sound drilling and created a more relaxed entry point into phonics learning.

Total Physical Response was used together with songs and sound modelling. Pupils responded to the sounds through body movements, gestures, and repeated actions. This allowed pupils to hear, see, say, and physically respond to the target sounds. In the teacher-researcher observation notes, pupils who were usually quiet participated more actively when the sounds were introduced through songs and body movements. After a few rounds of repetition, pupils repeated the sounds with louder voices and showed greater willingness to join the activity.

One pupil explained:

I can follow when the teacher says it first.

Another pupil shared:

I am scared to read alone.

These responses suggest that modelling, songs, and TPR provided a safer starting point for low-proficiency pupils. Pupils were not expected to produce sounds or read words immediately on their own. Instead, the scaffolds allowed them to listen, observe, follow, repeat, and participate with support.

Theme 2: Visual and Gestural Scaffolds Made Sound Recognition More Concrete. Scaffolding was also enacted through visual and gestural support. The teacher-researcher used colourful interactive flashcards and ditties cards containing lyrics. These materials helped pupils connect letters, sounds, pictures, and familiar words. Gestures and body movements were also used to reinforce sound recognition.

Visual support played an important role in sustaining pupils' attention. The teacher's reflection notes indicated that visual cards helped pupils focus, while without the cards, pupils tended to wait for the teacher's answer. This shows that the pupils still needed concrete visual references to process the target sounds and complete the phonics tasks. The cards gave pupils something visible to look at, point to, and use during sound recognition.

Pupils responded positively to the picture cards. One pupil explained:

I like picture cards because they help me remember.

This excerpt suggests that the picture cards functioned as memory aids. For pupils who struggled to remember sounds through oral explanation alone, visual scaffolds helped them connect the target sound with a familiar object or word. The flashcards also encouraged active participation because pupils could point to the letters and sounds during the activity.

Teacher-researcher observation notes showed that pupils were not merely passively looking at the cards. They physically responded to them. During sound recognition games, pupils pointed to target letters and ran to identify the correct letter or sound after it was produced. These behaviours showed that visual and gestural scaffolds supported behavioural engagement. Pupils attended to the task, moved towards the sound cards, pointed to letters, and participated actively in sound recognition

activities.

Research Question 2: How Do Low-Proficiency Primary ESL Learners Engage with Scaffolded Explicit Phonics Instruction?

Theme 3: Choral Repetition, Prompting, and Corrective Feedback Sustained Engagement During Blending. Pupils engaged with scaffolded explicit phonics instruction through choral repetition, teacher prompting, and corrective feedback. During blending activities, the teacher-researcher pointed to the phonemes or sounds and guided pupils to combine them. Prompts such as “Look at the first sound,” “Look at the middle sound,” and “Now we want to combine them together” were used to guide pupils through the sequence of sounds before blending.

Blending was one of the more challenging parts of the lessons. Although pupils could repeat individual sounds after the teacher-researcher, many were hesitant when asked to combine the sounds. Some pupils paused midway through the blending process. Others looked at their friends before answering or copied their friends’ responses. These behaviours showed that pupils were engaged in the task, but they still needed support to complete the blending process.

One pupil explained:

When the teacher points to the letters, then I know the sound.

This response shows that pointing acted as an important scaffold during blending. It helped pupils track the sounds in sequence and reduced uncertainty. The teacher’s reflection notes also showed that guided blending worked better when each letter was pointed to slowly. At times, the teacher-researcher used the analogy of a train to explain how sounds needed to be joined. This helped pupils understand that the sounds should not remain separate but should be smoothly connected to form a word.

However, pupils still found blending difficult. One pupil stated:

Joining the sounds is difficult. Sometimes I forget the first sound, sometimes I forget the middle sound.

Another pupil explained:

Joining them is hard. I need to repeat many times.

These excerpts show that pupils were aware of the challenge of blending. They did not reject the task, but they recognised that they needed repeated practice. This suggests that choral repetition and prompting sustained engagement, even though pupils still needed continued scaffolding before blending independently.

Corrective feedback also supported engagement. When pupils produced an incorrect sound or word, the teacher-researcher corrected them gently and asked them to try again. Teacher reflection notes showed that pupils were more willing to attempt the task when their effort was praised, even when not fully correct. This indicates that corrective feedback, when given supportively, helped pupils remain emotionally engaged during difficult phonics tasks.

Theme 4: Games, Pair Work, and Praise Encouraged Confidence and Scaffolded Participation. Pupils also engaged with scaffolded phonics instruction through games, pair work, and praise. The teacher-researcher used sound recognition games, pair activities, and movement-based tasks such as running to identify sounds. These activities created a more active classroom environment and helped pupils engage with phonics beyond worksheet-based tasks.

Games were especially useful for pupils who were usually quiet. During sound recognition games, pupils became more active because the activity involved movement and quick responses. Pupils ran to identify letters or sounds after the teacher-researcher produced the target sound. This showed that they were listening, processing the sound, and responding physically. The game format appeared to reduce anxiety because pupils experienced phonics learning as playful and meaningful.

One pupil explained:

I like games. I feel happy, so I remember.

This response suggests that enjoyment supported engagement and memory. The pupil connected positive feelings with remembering the sounds. For low-proficiency learners, this is important because enjoyment can reduce fear and encourage participation.

Pair work also supported pupils' engagement. Some pupils copied their friends, but this behaviour did not always indicate disengagement. In this classroom context, copying sometimes served as peer-supported participation, as pupils were unsure and relied on peers before attempting the task themselves. During pair activities, pupils listened to their friends, repeated sounds together, and attempted word-building tasks with support.

Pupils' confidence was also supported through praise. The teacher-researcher gave positive feedback when pupils attempted sounds or words, even when their responses were not fully correct. This encouraged pupils to try again. Over time, pupils became more confident in reading small words. They still needed support, especially during blending and independent reading, but they showed greater willingness to attempt the words.

One pupil shared:

When we read together, I am brave.

This response indicates that shared practice reduced anxiety. Pupils were more willing to participate when they did not feel alone. Choral reading, pair work, and games created a supportive environment where low-proficiency pupils could attempt phonics tasks without feeling too exposed.

Overall, the findings show that scaffolding was enacted through modelling, songs, TPR, visual support, gestures, choral repetition, prompting, corrective feedback, guided blending, games, pair work, and praise. These scaffolds supported pupil engagement by creating safe entry points into phonics learning, sustaining attention, encouraging participation, reducing anxiety, and supporting attempts at decoding. However, pupils still needed continued support, especially when moving from sound recognition to blending and independent word reading.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how scaffolding was enacted during explicit phonics instruction and how low-proficiency primary ESL learners engaged with scaffolded phonics activities. The findings show that scaffolding was enacted through teacher modelling, teacher-created songs, Total Physical Response, visual and gestural support, choral repetition, prompting, corrective feedback, guided blending, games, pair work, and praise. These scaffolds supported pupils' engagement by creating safe entry points into phonics learning, sustaining attention, reducing anxiety, encouraging participation, and supporting pupils' attempts to decode simple words.

The findings are consistent with Scaffolding Theory and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. The pupils in this study were remedial Year 2 learners whose classroom-based proficiency levels ranged from TP1 to TP2. Many of them were not yet able to recognise sounds, blend phonemes, or read simple words independently. However, when scaffolding was provided, they were able to

participate in sound production, follow blending steps, point to letters, respond to prompts, and attempt to read words. This supports the view that scaffolding helps learners perform tasks that may be difficult to complete independently but are possible with appropriate support. The findings also support Van de Pol et al.'s (2010) view that scaffolding needs to be responsive to learners' needs rather than fixed or uniform.

Regarding the first research question, the findings show that scaffolding was enacted as a gradual, layered process. It did not occur through one single strategy. Instead, the teacher-researcher combined oral, visual, physical, social, and emotional supports to make phonics learning more accessible. Teacher modelling provided pupils with a clear example of how English sounds were produced. Songs and Total Physical Response allowed pupils to engage with sounds through rhythm and movement. Flashcards, ditty cards, and gestures helped pupils connect sounds with visible cues. Prompting and guided blending helped pupils process sounds in sequence. Corrective feedback and praise supported pupils emotionally when they made mistakes.

This finding is important because explicit phonics instruction is sometimes viewed narrowly as the teaching of sounds and letters. However, this study's findings show that phonics instruction for low-proficiency pupils requires more than sound drilling. It needs careful scaffolding so that pupils can enter the task, stay engaged, and attempt reading without feeling overwhelmed or embarrassed. This aligns with Ehri's (2020) argument that systematic phonics supports word-reading development by helping pupils connect spellings, pronunciations, and meanings. However, the present study adds a classroom interaction perspective by showing how such instruction becomes accessible to low-proficiency ESL learners through scaffolding.

The findings also relate to the Active View of Reading. Duke and Cartwright (2021) position word recognition as one important component of reading development. In this study, word recognition was operationalised through letter-sound correspondence, blending, segmenting, and simple word reading. The findings show that pupils did not engage with these word recognition tasks automatically. They needed teacher support to access them. For example, pupils could repeat individual sounds after modelling, but they needed pointing, prompting, choral repetition, and repeated practice to attempt blending. This suggests that word recognition instruction in low-proficiency ESL classrooms needs to be mediated through scaffolded classroom interaction.

The findings also support recent evidence that letter-sound knowledge and blending are important areas of support for struggling beginning readers. Webber et al. (2024) found that decoding requires letter-sound knowledge and the ability to blend sound units. In the present study, pupils' engagement during blending was sustained through teacher prompts such as "Look at the first sound," "Look at the middle sound," and "Now we want to combine them together." The use of the train analogy also helped pupils understand that sounds should be joined rather than produced separately. This shows that guided blending was not only a teaching technique but also a scaffold that helped pupils remain engaged in a difficult phonics task.

In relation to the second research question, the findings show that pupils engaged with scaffolded explicit phonics instruction in behavioural, emotional, and cognitive ways. Behaviourally, pupils joined choral repetition, pointed to letters, moved towards sound cards, participated in games, and worked with peers. Emotionally, pupils became more willing to try when they could read together, receive praise, and participate in less threatening activities such as songs and games. Cognitively, pupils attempted to connect sounds with letters, follow blending sequences, and decode small words with support. This reflects Fredricks et al.'s (2004) view that engagement involves behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions.

The pupils' interview excerpts show that engagement was closely linked to the support provided. For example, one pupil stated, "I can follow when teacher says it first," which shows the importance of modelling. Another pupil said, "I like picture cards because they help me remember," which shows how visual scaffolds supported memory and attention. A pupil also explained, "When teacher points

to the letters, then I know the sound,” showing that pointing helped pupils track the sound sequence during blending. These excerpts suggest that pupils’ engagement was not merely enjoyment. Rather, it was supported by specific scaffolds that made phonics tasks more understandable and less threatening.

The findings are also consistent with those of Deshmukh et al. (2022), who show that teacher responses during early literacy interactions can serve as scaffolding for pupils’ emerging language skills. In the present study, the teacher-researcher’s responses after pupils’ attempts were important. When pupils produced incorrect sounds or hesitated during blending, corrective feedback and encouragement helped them continue participating. This is significant because low-proficiency pupils may withdraw if correction is too direct or negative. The findings suggest that feedback in phonics instruction should be corrective but emotionally supportive.

The use of games, pair work, and shared practice also supported pupils’ engagement. Pupils who were usually quiet became more active during sound recognition games and movement-based tasks. Pair work allowed pupils to listen to peers, repeat sounds together, and attempt word-building tasks with support. Although some pupils copied their friends, this behaviour was not interpreted simply as passive dependence. In this classroom context, peer copying sometimes served as peer-supported participation, as pupils were still developing confidence and used their friends as temporary support before attempting the task themselves. This finding supports the idea that engagement in low-proficiency classrooms may manifest in small, gradual ways, such as watching, pointing, repeating, copying, trying, and joining shared activities.

This study also extends recent Malaysian phonics research. Zin et al. (2023) examined lower primary teachers’ beliefs and practices in phonics instruction, while Shafee et al. (2025) explored how Malaysian primary ESL teachers used phonics approaches in classroom practice. The present study contributes to this body of work by focusing specifically on how scaffolding was enacted during explicit phonics instruction and how low-proficiency pupils engaged with these scaffolds. It moves the discussion from what teachers believe or generally practise to how scaffolding operates in a remedial Year 2 classroom and how pupils respond during phonics learning.

A key contribution of this study is positioning pupil engagement as an important part of early phonics learning. The study does not claim that pupils fully mastered phonics after eight weeks. Instead, it shows that scaffolding created opportunities for pupils to participate in phonics tasks that they might otherwise avoid. This distinction is important. For low-proficiency pupils, engagement may come before independent reading. Their willingness to repeat sounds, point to letters, join games, attempt blending, and read together with peers can be seen as early signs of access to word recognition learning.

Overall, the findings suggest that explicit phonics instruction for low-proficiency primary ESL learners should be scaffolded, interactive, and emotionally supportive. Teachers need to provide clear modelling, repeated practice, concrete visual cues, guided blending, supportive correction, peer opportunities, and positive feedback. Without these supports, low-proficiency pupils may remain dependent, silent, or hesitant. With scaffolding, however, they can participate more actively and begin to engage with the early word recognition skills needed for reading development.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings have several implications for primary ESL teachers who teach early reading to low-proficiency learners. First, explicit phonics instruction should be carefully scaffolded rather than delivered as isolated sound drills. The findings showed that pupils were more willing to participate when sounds were introduced through modelling, teacher-created songs, Total Physical Response, and choral repetition. This suggests that teachers need to provide a safe entry point before expecting low-proficiency pupils to produce sounds or read words independently.

Second, visual and gestural scaffolds should be used to support pupils' attention and sound recognition. In this study, colourful flashcards, ditties cards, picture cues, gestures, and body movements helped pupils connect sounds with letters and familiar words. These scaffolds were important because the pupils were still dependent on concrete support to focus, remember sounds, and complete phonics tasks. For low-proficiency learners, visual and gestural support can make phonics learning more accessible and less abstract.

Third, blending should be taught through guided and repeated practice. The findings showed that some pupils could repeat individual sounds but struggled to combine them into words. This indicates that teachers should not assume that pupils who know letter sounds can automatically blend them. Guided blending, finger-pointing, sound-by-sound prompting, and simple analogies such as joining sounds like a train can help pupils understand how sounds are connected to form words.

Fourth, corrective feedback should be supportive and encouraging. Pupils in this study were more willing to try when their attempts were praised, even when their answers were not fully correct. This suggests that feedback during phonics instruction should correct pupils' errors while still protecting their confidence. For low-proficiency pupils, mistakes should be treated as part of learning rather than as failure.

Fifth, games, pair work, and shared reading can support engagement among pupils who are usually quiet or hesitant. The findings showed that movement-based sound recognition games, pair activities, and reading together reduced anxiety and encouraged participation. This implies that phonics instruction for low-proficiency pupils should include opportunities for shared practice before individual performance.

Finally, the study suggests that pupil engagement should be viewed as an important early outcome of scaffolded phonics instruction. Low-proficiency pupils may not show immediate independent reading mastery. However, their willingness to repeat sounds, point to letters, participate in games, work with peers, and attempt decoding are meaningful signs of engagement with early word recognition. Teachers should therefore observe not only whether pupils read correctly, but also how they participate in scaffolded phonics activities.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, the study was conducted in one Year 2 remedial ESL classroom in an urban Malaysian primary school serving mainly pupils from low-income families. The findings are therefore context-specific and are not intended to be generalised to all primary ESL classrooms. However, a detailed description of the context, participants, scaffolding strategies, and pupils' responses may help readers assess the relevance of the findings to similar low-proficiency ESL settings.

Second, the study involved 24 pupils from one class whose classroom-based proficiency levels ranged from TP1 to TP2. The findings reflect the engagement patterns of this particular group of low-proficiency learners. Pupils from different year levels, proficiency levels, school contexts, or language backgrounds may respond differently to scaffolded explicit phonics instruction.

Third, the study was conducted from a teacher-researcher position. The researcher was also the English teacher of the class and had been teaching the pupils for two years. This prolonged engagement provided rich contextual understanding of pupils' learning needs, confidence levels, and classroom behaviours. However, the dual role may also have influenced classroom interaction and data interpretation. To address this limitation, the study used multiple sources of data, including teacher-researcher observation notes, teacher reflection notes, pupils' artefacts, lesson materials, and short pupil interviews. Reflexive notes were also used to consider how the teacher-researcher's familiarity with the pupils may have shaped the interpretation of classroom events.

Fourth, the study focused on teacher scaffolding and pupil engagement rather than measuring pupils' reading improvement through pre-test and post-test scores. Therefore, the findings do not make claims about the measurable effectiveness of explicit phonics instruction on pupils' reading achievement. Instead, the study provides qualitative evidence on how scaffolding was enacted and how pupils engaged with scaffolded phonics activities.

Finally, the pupil interviews were short and simple because the participants were low-proficiency Year 2 learners. Although this made the interviews more suitable for the pupils' language level, it also limited the depth of pupils' verbal explanations. To strengthen the interpretation, interview excerpts were triangulated with observation notes, reflection notes, pupils' artefacts, and lesson materials.

Future research may examine scaffolded explicit phonics instruction across different classrooms, school contexts, and year levels. Further studies may also include independent classroom observation, longer data collection periods, or mixed-method designs that combine qualitative evidence of engagement with reading assessment data.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study explored how scaffolding was enacted during explicit phonics instruction and how low-proficiency primary ESL learners engaged with scaffolded phonics activities. Guided by Scaffolding Theory and supported by the Active View of Reading, the study focused on teacher support within pupils' Zone of Proximal Development and on early word recognition skills, particularly sound recognition, blending, segmenting, and simple word reading.

The findings showed that scaffolding was enacted through modelling, teacher-created songs, Total Physical Response, colourful flashcards, ditties cards, gestures, choral repetition, prompting, guided blending, corrective feedback, games, pair work, and praise. These scaffolds helped create access to phonics learning for pupils who were not yet confident in producing sounds, blending phonemes, or reading simple words independently.

The study also showed that pupils engaged with scaffolded explicit phonics instruction in several ways. They participated in choral repetition, pointed to letters, responded to visual cues, joined sound recognition games, worked with peers, attempted blending, and showed greater willingness to try. Their engagement was behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. They did not always achieve independent reading immediately, but they showed signs of participation, confidence, reduced anxiety, and emerging attempts at decoding.

Overall, the study suggests that explicit phonics instruction for low-proficiency primary ESL learners should be understood as a scaffolded classroom process. It should not be limited to teaching sounds and letters in isolation. For pupils with low proficiency, teacher scaffolding is needed to make phonics learning accessible, supportive, and engaging. By providing modelling, repetition, visual support, guided blending, peer-supported practice, and positive feedback, teachers can help pupils participate more meaningfully in early word recognition tasks and gradually move towards more confident word reading.

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