



The Impact of Using Jolly Phonics Instructions to Increase Reading Fluency Among 1st Grade Students at International Schools in Benghazi, Libya

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Abstract

Reading fluency is a crucial indicator for mastering reading skills at early stages of second language acquisition. The current study aims to investigate the impact of using explicit instructional methods of reading fluency to young learners who are classified as second language learners. This method is Jolly Phonics that aims to teach sounds to help learners decode English words easily. Data was collected from international schools in Benghazi, Libya where English is the medium of instructions. The target population consisted of 1st grade students who are enrolled in one of the international schools in Benghazi, Libya ($n = 51$). DIBELS 8th edition was used as the instrument of measurement. A quasi-experimental research design was used. A pre-test was administered prior to the intervention, followed by a post-test to assess the impact of the explicit instruction on the students. The data was analyzed using independent t-test statistics. The results revealed that there was a positive impact on increasing fluency levels among 1st grade students when they were explicitly taught the sound system of the language ($t(49) = -4.77, p < .001$). The study contributed to the field of teaching English as a second language by highlighting methods of improving reading fluency among young learners.

Key words: *fluency English as a second language, Jolly Phonics, early literacy.*

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1. Introduction

Reading fluency is a critical component of early literacy acquisition, particularly among 1st-grade students who are at an essential stage in their educational journey (Chall, 1996). It requires both the ability to read accurately and with sufficient speed. In international contexts, where students are often multilingual, the acquisition of English language skills becomes even more crucial, necessitating effective and engaging instructional methodologies. However, reading fluency cannot be isolated from the other components of reading ability such as decoding skill. Therefore, effective phonics instruction has emerged as a pivotal factor in facilitating reading fluency, especially in the early stages of education. Phonics, which refers to the method of teaching reading by correlating sounds with letters or groups of letters in an alphabetic writing system, provides learners with the foundational skills necessary to decode words, thus enhancing their reading proficiency and confidence. One notable approach to enhance reading fluency among early learners is the Jolly Phonics method.

1.1. Jolly Phonics

Jolly Phonics utilizes a multi-sensory approach that provides different learning styles, integrating actions, songs, and visuals to teach the 42 letter sounds of the English language letters (Jolly, 2014). This methodology not only encourages phonemic awareness but also enables students to decode words efficiently. Research indicates that the structured implementation of Jolly Phonics can significantly enhance phonics skills

among early learners, and improve their reading fluency (Alkreshedi, 2024; Almansoori et al., 2024).

Implementing Jolly Phonics specifically in the context of Benghazi's international schools provides a unique opportunity to address the diverse language proficiency of students. The use of a comprehensive framework like Jolly Phonics not only enriches phonetic skills but also supports the transition towards reading fluency in a language that is often not their first. Therefore, the integration of Jolly Phonics methodologies represents a promising strategy for enhancing reading fluency among 1st graders at Benghazi's international schools. The emphasis on systematic phonics instruction coupled with a supportive, engaging teaching environment creates an optimal framework for developing essential reading skills in young learners.

1.2. Reading fluency

Reading ability consists of a number of subskills that determine the proficiency of reading in general. Fluency is one of these subskills. Fluency per se does not imply the students' level of reading proficiency, however, it positively correlates with reading comprehension (Chard et al., 2002; Klauda & Guthrie, 2008; Stevens et al., 2017). Fluency is defined as a skill developed by students to read the written text accurately with a sufficient speed. It consists of three components: accuracy, rate, and prosody (Stahl, 2004). Accuracy refers to the ability of students to read text with minimal errors. For first graders achieving a high level of accuracy is critical, especially for second language

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learners. This is primarily due to the cognitive demands placed on young learners; any mispronunciations or misreading of words can disrupt comprehension and hinder the overall reading experience (Torgesen, 2004). Rate is another crucial aspect of reading fluency. An appropriate reading rate enables students to assign cognitive resources not only toward decoding words but also toward understanding the content. In an international school setting, where students may be exposed to multilingual environments and varying instructional methodologies, fostering an optimal reading rate through structured programs like Jolly Phonics becomes vital. Notably, studies indicate that a balanced reading rate, aligned with accuracy, encourages a positive attitude towards reading, which is essential for lifelong literacy (Rasinski, 2012). Prosody encompasses the expressive elements of reading, including intonation, rhythm, and phrasing. This component is often overlooked in traditional literacy instruction; however, its importance should not be underestimated, particularly for young learners. Prosodic reading not only reflects a reader's understanding of punctuation and sentence structure but also conveys emotion and meaning. For first graders, acquiring prosody through their reading practices significantly enriches comprehension and retention (Schreiber, 1980). Jolly Phonics facilitates opportunities for students to practice reading aloud, which is essential for developing the prosodic nuances that contribute to fluent reading.

This study aims at investigating the impact of using Jolly Phonics as an instructional

method to young learners who are classified as second language learners on their reading fluency skill. Due to the lack of official policy issued by the Ministry of Education in Libya, classifying students as second language learners depends on criteria used schools' administrations to evaluate students English proficiency and place them in this category. This study contributes to the field of teaching and learning English as a second language by providing a clear understanding of the use of multi-sensory techniques not only to make learning enjoyable but also to help build confidence in students, encouraging them to fully engage in the reading process with a decent level of reading proficiency. Thus, through the implementation of the Jolly Phonics methodologies, first graders in international schools in Benghazi could potentially benefit from a structured and enjoyable phonics curriculum, fostering an early love for reading while simultaneously building essential foundational skills in literacy.

In summary, the essential components of the Jolly Phonics approach promote effective literacy development among 1st graders. The implications of integrating these methodologies within international school curricula hold promise for enhancing reading fluency in early learning stages in Benghazi.

1.3. Phonemic awareness and instructional strategies

It is vital to consider the specific instructional strategies associated with Jolly Phonics that support phonetic skills. Research highlights the importance of early practice in phonemic understanding and blending

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exercises, which are integral components of the program (Cheesman et al., 2009; Sutfin, 2025; McGee, 2009; Sargiani et al., 2022). Techniques such as guided reading sessions, phonics games, and individualized reading practice align well with the needs of 1st graders, promoting both skill retention and fluency development. One of the key components of Jolly Phonics is the systematic teaching of letter sounds. This approach introduces children to the 42 letter sounds of English, which includes not only the traditional 26 letters of the alphabet but also combinations of letters that produce distinct sounds (Jolly, 2014). By learning these sounds in a systematic way, children can develop a robust understanding of phonemic awareness, which is the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate individual sounds in spoken words. Studies show that phonemic awareness is integral to reading success, as it allows students to decode unfamiliar words and improve their overall reading skills (National Reading Panel, 2000).

1.4. Multi-sensory learning and retention

Jolly Phonics incorporates engaging actions associated with each sound. These actions, which can be physical gestures, songs, or stories, serve to reinforce memory and aid retention. For instance, when teaching the sound /s/, students might make a snake-like movement while saying the sound. This is particularly effective for children at the early stages of literacy, as it caters to various learning styles and can facilitate better recall (Nicolson & Fawcett, 2008).

In addition to sound and action instruction, Jolly Phonics employs a range of resources designed to support diverse learning styles. These include songs, stories, and visual aids that cater to auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners. Classroom materials often include colorful flashcards, storybooks featuring phonics characters, and interactive games that can be utilized to reinforce learning in a playful environment (Jolly, 2014). Such resources are instrumental in creating a rich literacy environment where children can practice their skills in an enjoyable manner, promoting not only fluency but also a positive attitude towards reading.

1.5. Blending and decoding

The framework of Jolly Phonics also emphasizes the importance of blending sounds to form words, which is vital for developing reading fluency. This process enables children to combine individual sounds into recognizable words, thereby facilitating independent reading. Research supports that this explicit instruction in blending can lead to greater reading proficiency among young learners (Gaskins, 2014). Also, Ahmad and Yunus (2019) specifically examined the effectiveness of using Jolly Phonics blending phonemes in a Year 3 classroom, finding that the method significantly aided students in decoding words. This study posits that the explicit teaching of phonemic awareness and phonics not only facilitates decoding skills but also fosters a deeper understanding of text, leading to enhanced reading comprehension.

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1.6. Impact of fluency and comprehension

The implementation of Jolly Phonics methodologies has garnered attention in educational research for its potential to enhance reading fluency and overall literacy outcomes among early learners. Oreagba (2021) systematically examined the impact of phonics instruction on literacy acquisition, revealing that structured phonics programs, such as Jolly Phonics, significantly contribute to improved reading fluency in young learners.

Various studies have corroborated the efficacy of Jolly Phonics strategies, noting a direct correlation between the systematic introduction of phonics and improved fluency rates in 1st grade. For instance, Miller and Schwaneflugel (2008) conducted a longitudinal study to examine the development of reading prosody—a component of reading fluency – and found out that acquiring the prosodic oral reading skills in early stages helps students develop better reading comprehension ability. Similarly, Shawaqfeh (2024) highlighted that students receiving phonics instruction via the Jolly Phonics program not only showed improvement in fluency but also achieved higher scores in reading motivation. This suggests that the strategies embedded within Jolly Phonics may effectively intertwine the development of decoding skills with comprehension capabilities.

Moreover, the integration of Jolly Phonics into the curriculum has demonstrated an ability to address the diverse learning needs present in international school settings, such

as those in Benghazi. Another longitudinal study conducted by Kin et al., (2012) highlighted that the structured repetition and reinforcement of phonetic sounds and blending techniques are conducive to building a strong foundation for reading fluency, enabling first graders to transition from emergent literacy stages to competent reading proficiency more effectively. Umezinwa and Udogu (2018) further supported this in their study on Nigerian primary pupils, confirming the positive effect of Jolly Phonics on achievement in reading and spelling skills.

1.7. Regional contexts and challenges

The implementation of Jolly Phonics methodologies in international schools has sparked various discussions regarding educators' perceptions and the challenges they face during the adoption of this phonics program. Ghait (2019) explores teachers' views in Benghazi's international schools, revealing that while many educators acknowledge the effectiveness of Jolly Phonics in enhancing reading fluency in early learners, there are significant concerns regarding the adequacy of training and resources available for proper implementation. Teachers reported that a lack of familiarity with the specific components of the program—such as the use of actions, songs, and letter sounds—hindered their ability to deliver instruction effectively.

Contrastingly, Alazrak (2021) presents findings from a study in New Zealand, where educators reported a more positive experience, largely attributed to comprehensive professional development programs. This contrast highlights the

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significance of contextual factors, such as systemic support and national educational frameworks. In the Middle East, Nasrawi and Al-Jamal (2017) found that Jolly Phonics had a positive effect on Jordanian first-grade pupils' reading, suggesting that the method is adaptable to Arabic-speaking contexts. Similarly, Ekpo et al. (2007) noted the benefits of the strategy for ESL pupils' reading development in a preliminary study, and Gbetey (2024) recently confirmed its influence on literacy development among kindergarten learners. Despite these regional differences, the overarching sentiment indicates a need for continuous professional development. The systematic application of Jolly Phonics in Benghazi demonstrates robust potential for enhancing English reading fluency, provided that educators are supported with the necessary training and resources (Serna Crisol, 2024).

The systematic application of Jolly Phonics methodologies in international schools in Benghazi demonstrates a robust potential for enhancing English reading fluency among 1st graders. Throughout this literature review, evidence suggests that structured phonics instruction is pivotal in cultivating foundational literacy skills. Research consistently affirms that phonics-based approaches, such as those promoted by Jolly Phonics, significantly improve students' ability to decode words, leading to better reading fluency (National Reading Panel, 2000). The multi-sensory strategy inherent in Jolly Phonics, utilizing actions, songs, and visual aids, supports children in distinguishing sounds and corresponding letters, which

accelerates their reading development (Bishop & Adams, 1990). Furthermore, the incorporation of songs and stories into the phonics framework is particularly beneficial for vocabulary acquisition and comprehension. Fayad and Mohammed (2018) underscore that integrating musical and narrative elements not only enhances engagement but also helps solidify phonemic awareness among young learners. The rhythmic and repetitive nature of songs can reinforce sound-letter associations, making learning more enjoyable and effective. Here, it is crucial to explore how these methods can be intricately woven into daily instructional routines within the classroom for maximal impact.

In summary, the effective implementation of Jolly Phonics methodologies, paired with supplemental strategies such as songs, creative activities, and parental involvement, presents a multi-faceted approach to enhancing reading fluency among 1st graders in Benghazi's international schools. By continuing to build on these findings, educators can craft a tailored, comprehensive reading program that supports linguistic development in a manner that is both enriching and enjoyable for young learners.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

A quasi-experimental research design was employed to investigate the impact of Jolly Phonics instruction on reading fluency. The study utilized a pre-test/post-test control group design. Since the experiment took place in a real school setting, it was hard to randomly assign the students to the groups.

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Therefore, the division was based on classrooms previously assigned by the school administration.

2.2. Participants

The sample of this study consisted of 51 1st grade students who were enrolled in an international school in Benghazi, Libya. It was presented through a convenience sample of one international school. All the participants in this study were Libyan students whose first language was Arabic. Their average age was 6.3. Approximately 56% of them were female students. Since there are no clear criteria in Libyan schools to identify second language learners, the researcher considered all the participants in this study as English language learners. Students were divided into a control group ($N = 25$) and an experimental group ($N = 26$). Because Jolly Phonics was a part from an intervention adopted by the school administration to improve students' English proficiency, therefore; Parental consents for all participants were obtained through the school administration.

2.3. Research Procedures

To assess the participants' reading fluency, the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) 8th Edition was employed. This standardized instrument is designed to measure and monitor literacy proficiency across all grade levels. Specifically, participants were asked to read a grade-level passage aloud for one minute, and their fluency scores were determined by the number of words read correctly within that timeframe. The participants were divided into two groups: a control group and an

experimental group. The experimental group received Jolly Phonics instruction three times per week for a duration of 12 weeks. Each instructional session lasted one hour, resulting in a total of 36 hours of the whole intervention time. Upon the completion of the intervention period, a post-test was administered to both groups to evaluate the impact of the instruction.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the control group and the experimental group. The results presented the sample size, the mean and the standard deviation of both groups. As shown in Table 1, on the pre-test the average word read per minute was about 56 words, while the experimental group read at an average of 53. On the other hand, the experimental group word average increased after the intervention ($M = 59.9$, $SD = 0.4$) compared to the control group ($M = 56.1$, $SD = 4.0$). Also, the reliability of the measure was calculated using Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha = .60$), which indicates a moderate consistency among the scale items.

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics of control group and experimental group

	N	Pre-test		Post-test	
		M	SD	M	SD
Control group	25	56	4.3	56.1	4.0
Experimental group	26	55	4.0	59.9	0.4

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To assess the mean difference between both groups, independent t-test was applied. Table 2 illustrated the results of the independent t-test. SPSS 20 software was used to analyze the data in this study.

Table 2.

Independent t-test

	<i>N</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>P</i>
Pre-test	51	.900	49	0.372
Post-test	51	-4.77	49	.000*

* $p < .000$

The analysis revealed no statistically significant difference between the groups on the pre-test ($t(49) = 0.90, p = .372$), indicating that the groups were comparable before the intervention. However, the post-test results showed a statistically significant difference ($t(49) = -4.77, p < .001$), suggesting that the experimental group outperformed the control group following the intervention.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that explicit instruction using the Jolly Phonics method has a positive impact on the reading fluency of 1st-grade students in an international school setting. The significant improvement in the experimental group's post-test scores supports the hypothesis that a multi-sensory, systematic phonics approach facilitates word decoding and fluency. These results align with previous research by Miller and Schwaneflugel (2008) and Shawaqfeh (2024) who found out that structured phonics programs significantly contribute to literacy acquisition. The noticeable increase in words per minute for the experimental group (from

55 to 59.9) compared to the control group (56 to 56.1) demonstrates that Jolly Phonics provided students with the necessary tools to decode words more efficiently. The multi-sensory nature of the program—incorporating actions, songs, and visuals—likely contributed to higher engagement and better retention of letter-sound correspondences, as suggested by Nicolson and Fawcett (2008).

Interestingly, the standard deviation for the experimental group in the post-test was remarkably low (0.4), suggesting a high level of consistency among the students in that group. This could imply that the Jolly Phonics intervention was particularly effective at bringing all students to a similar level of proficiency, reducing the variability often seen in early literacy classrooms. The evidence presented in this study underscores the merit of Jolly Phonics as an effective intervention for improving reading fluency in 1st graders. The combination of systematic phonics instruction, engaging pedagogical approaches, and culturally relevant content fosters an enriched learning experience that caters to the needs of young learners in an international context. Ultimately, the findings advocate for the continued and expanded use of phonics-based methodologies as a foundation for literacy development in diverse classrooms, particularly in regions such as Benghazi where unique cultural and educational dynamics are at play.

5. Limitations

While the findings of this study provide promising evidence for the efficacy of Jolly Phonics in an ESL context, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study was

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confined to a single international school in Benghazi, Libya. The specific demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of students in this setting may not be fully representative of students in public schools or other regions of Libya. Consequently, the generalizability of the results to the broader population of young English learners in the country may be limited. Second, the sample size ($N = 51$) was relatively small. Although the statistical analysis revealed significant differences, a larger sample size would provide greater statistical power and allow for more detailed subgroup analyses, such as examining potential gender differences in response to the intervention. Third, the intervention period was limited to 12 weeks. While this duration was sufficient to produce statistically significant gains in reading fluency, the long-term sustainability of these gains remains unknown. It is unclear whether the students in the experimental group will maintain their fluency advantage over time without continued explicit phonics instruction. Furthermore, the assessment instrument used (DIBELS) primarily measured reading rate and accuracy. While these are key components of fluency, the study did not deeply assess prosody (expressive reading) or reading comprehension, which are critical end goals of literacy instruction.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Future research should aim to replicate this study on a larger scale, incorporating multiple schools across different regions of Libya to enhance the external validity of the findings. Additionally, longitudinal studies are recommended to track the progress of students

exposed to Jolly Phonics over several academic years to determine if early fluency increases reading comprehension and academic success in later grades. Researchers should also investigate the impact of Jolly Phonics on other literacy dimensions, specifically writing and spelling, to provide a more holistic view of the program's effectiveness. Finally, given the challenges highlighted by Ghait (2019) regarding teacher training, future studies should examine the specific impact of teacher professional development on the successful implementation of Jolly Phonics methodologies.

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Conflict of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Declaration of AI Use

The authors declare that they used Grammarly AI tool solely for language editing and spelling. The authors also confirm that no AI tools were used for data collection, analysis, discussion, or conclusions.

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أثر استخدام تعليمات جولي فونيكس لزيادة طلاقة القراءة لدى طلاب الصف الأول في المدارس الدولية في بنغازي، ليبيا

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ملخص البحث:

تُعدُّ الطلاقة في القراءة مؤشراً حاسماً لإتقان مهارات القراءة في المراحل المبكرة من اكتساب اللغة الثانية. وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى دراسة أثر استخدام أساليب تعليمية واضحة لتعزيز الطلاقة في القراءة لدى المتعلمين الصغار المصنفين كمتعلمين اللغة الثانية. تعتمد هذه الأساليب على طريقة "جولي فونيكس" التي تهدف إلى تعليم الأصوات لمساعدة المتعلمين على فك رموز الكلمات الإنجليزية بسهولة. تُجمعت البيانات من مدارس دولية في بنغازي، ليبيا، حيث تُعتمد اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة تدريس. تكون مجتمع الدراسة من طلاب الصف الأول الابتدائي المسجلين في إحدى المدارس الدولية في بنغازي، ليبيا (ن = 51). استخدم مقياس DIBELS، الإصدار الثامن، كأداة قياس. استخدم تصميم بحث شبه تجريبي. أُجري اختبار قبل خضوع الطلبة للعملية التدريس، تلاه اختبار بعدي لتقييم أثر التعليم الصريح على الطلاب. حُللت البيانات باستخدام اختبار t الإحصائي. أظهرت النتائج أثاراً إيجابياً على زيادة مستويات الطلاقة لدى طلاب الصف الأول الابتدائي عند تعليمهم نظام الأصوات في اللغة بشكل صريح. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى المساهمة في مجال تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية من خلال تسليط الضوء على أساليب تحسين طلاقة القراءة لدى المتعلمين الصغار.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الطلاقة اللغوية؛ اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية؛ جولي فونيكس؛ نحو الأمية المبكر.