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A Tension Between Theory and Practice: Shared Reading Program

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ABSTRACT

This study had two main aims: first, to offer a descriptive account of shared reading program using an evaluative lens and second, to examine whether teachers' perceptions of the importance of phonological awareness, word decoding, and text comprehension in helping young learners develop their reading abilities were indeed emphasized during instruction in the program. Following a semi-structured interview with four teachers, a survey was conducted on twenty primary school teachers. Results from three sampled paired t-tests show that although the teachers placed high importance on phonological awareness, word decoding, and text comprehension, their instruction of shared reading did not place an equivalent emphasis on the three aforementioned variables. This tension between theory and practice of teaching reading was attributed to a lack of synchronization of information between publishers of storybooks and classroom teachers.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of shared book reading was initiated from Holdaway's (1979) bedtime story book reading routines. Holdaway illustrated the idea of share book reading in that caregivers read stories in a big book and use multiple strategies to engage children in the reading process. For example, children are encouraged to join in on repetitive text, practice reading aloud, learn decoding of words, learn to read high frequency words, make prediction of story development, and the like. This approach to reading gained much popularity with the families of New Zealand in the 1970s. Subsequently, the practice of shared book reading was introduced to schools in New Zealand and elsewhere in the United States, Europe, and Asia (Button & Johnson, 1997; Dickinson, Griffith, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2012). Implemented in a classroom context, shared book reading typically involves a teacher narrating a story from a big storybook to a large group of students (see Ediger, 2011).

The shared book reading instruction uses enlarged books so that students could read the print and see the accompanying pictures in the storybooks as a teacher reads the story to a class. A teacher typically reads a story from a big book in one or two lessons of 30-minutes duration. After reading the story, a related activity usually follows. Three main stages characterize shared reading lessons: pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading. During the pre-reading stage, a teacher may ask students what the pictures on the book show. This is carried out as a warm-up

activity. During reading, a teacher may pause and query students on their predictions of how a story develops. After reading, a teacher may ask students questions to assess their understanding of the story.

Reading aloud to children or shared book reading has been closely linked to children's reading achievement, emergent literacy ability, and language development (Dickinson, Griffith, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2012; Durrsma, Augustyn, & Zuckerman, 2008). Dickinson, Griffith, Golinkoff, and Hirsh-Pasek (2012) illustrate how shared book reading instantiates the main principles of language development in pre-school children. First, shared book reading provides children with an opportunity to learn new vocabulary words in varied grammatical sentences. Second, it promotes children's interest and draws their attention to appealing pictures or print. Third, it helps children acquire language skills as they engage in interactions about the word meanings. Durrsma, Augustyn, and Zuckerman (2008) provide further evidence on how shared book reading has been linked to developing children's language development. Research has also shown shared reading yields many positive effects in language learning. For example, Coyne, Simmons, Kame'enui, and Stoolmiller (2004) examined shared book reading instruction on pre-schoolers who were at risk for reading difficulties. They found that explicit instruction on vocabulary during share book reading promoted vocabulary acquisition compared to a control group. Similarly, Biemiller and Boote (2006) examined vocabulary acquisition in reading instruction in primary schools and found that repeated reading of stories and reading of stories with word explanations enhanced students' vocabulary. Blewitt, Rump, Shealy, and Cook (2009) examined whether questions asked during shared book reading help pre-schoolers understand word meanings, and improve comprehension and production of word-referent associations. They found that questions asked about the target words during shared book reading improve children's comprehension and production of associated words.

Recent descriptive accounts with pedagogical suggestions for shared reading instruction have been provided by Ediger (2011), Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2008), Stahl (2012), and Kesler (2010). Ediger (2011), for instance, outlines the procedures used in shared reading lessons. Using classroom observation and interviews with teachers, Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2008) identify four main components of instruction—comprehension, vocabulary, text structure, and text features—modeled by classroom teachers in shared reading program in the United States. Stahl (2012) describes how shared reading instruction supports reading development of young learners and suggests a few instructional strategies teachers could use to scaffold students' reading of difficult texts. Instead of explicitly teaching a single strategy, Stahl suggests that teachers could use think-alouds to teach multiple strategies such as comprehension skills and metacognitive awareness of text structure or text features. Similarly, Kesler (2010) delineates teaching tips used in shared reading instruction to promote vocabulary knowledge and comprehension skills.

Apart from the descriptive studies on shared reading instruction cited above, a longitudinal and evaluative study on shared reading instruction in Singapore primary schools has been conducted by Ng and Sullivan (2001) between 1985 and 1987. During that time, share book reading instruction was implemented under a program called the REAP (The Reading and English Acquisition Program). The program was a nationwide one and was commissioned by the Singapore Ministry of Education (English Language Syllabus, Ministry of Education, 1991). The REAP program used elements of shared book and language experience approaches to teach reading which were aimed at improving learners' language performance and fostering their positive attitudes toward reading and language learning. A total of 512 participants, equally distributed in the REAP program and the non-REAP program, formed the participants of the

study. A comprehensive battery of language assessment tests involving reading accuracy, comprehension, phonics knowledge, vocabulary, and oral language was implemented. The study found that students in the REAP program outperformed those in the non-REAP program on measures of comprehension and ability in oral re-telling of stories.

More recently, Curdt-Christiansen and Silver (2013) investigated how teachers conducted the STELLAR program (The Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading) in which the shared reading instruction is incorporated into. A total of twenty primary one and two English lessons were observed in ten primary schools in Singapore. Their study focused on the physical arrangement of the students in the reading lessons, the participation patterns, the interactional patterns, and the teachers' goals. They found that the deep changes (i.e., the teaching approaches and the manner in which the STELLAR materials are used) were less evident than the surface ones (i.e., the use of the STELLAR materials and the classroom seating arrangement). They also found that there was a lack of interactional opportunities for students during the reading lessons, even though, one of the STELLAR program goals is to promote meaningful classroom interaction.

To achieve successful outcomes of any reading programs, teachers play a critical role in delivering the instruction. Effective instruction is partly dependent on teachers' perceptions of reading and their instructional goals which are influenced by their past experiences of learning to read and their preparation or training programs (Clark, Jones, Reutzel, & Andreasen, 2013; Perkins, 2013). Clark et al. (2013), for instance, examined preservice teachers' perceived ability to teach reading using interviews and observations. Their study found that teachers' preparation programs influence their perceptions and abilities to teach reading and, further, that teachers were well-informed by the theoretical knowledge of reading; however, applications of theories in situated contexts were lacking in their preparation programs. Their study underscores the importance of teachers' perceptions of teaching of reading. Similarly, the central concern of the present study is to understand the teachers' perceptions of the main variables in developing learners' reading abilities and the value placed on these variables in their actual instruction.

The National Reading Panel (2000, 2006) in the United States has identified five basic factors of effective reading instruction: phonemic awareness, decoding, comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary. Similarly, Gough and Tunmer's (1986) simple view of reading suggests that decoding and comprehension are key essentials to developing reading ability. For the purposes of my study, I focused on the three variables deemed most critical by the above researchers to developing successful reading skills among young readers: (1) phonological awareness (students' ability to recognize and manipulate phonemes, which are the smallest units of sound), (2) word decoding (students' ability to recognize and read words very rapidly and fluently), and (3) text comprehension (students' ability to understand the meaning of the stories told).

Aims of the Study

In this study, I provide a descriptive account of the shared reading program conducted in four primary schools in Singapore. I first explore the perceptions of quantity, variety, and readability of big storybooks of twenty teachers used in the shared reading program and their knowledge of the program's objectives. Teachers' knowledge of the objectives of any reading program is imperative because the effectiveness of instruction in reading is partly dependent on how clear the teachers are about the objectives of the program (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2008; Macalister, 2010). I then investigate these teachers' perceptions of how important the three

variables—phonological awareness, word decoding, and text comprehension—are in helping young readers develop their reading abilities, and how much emphasis is actually given to each of these variables in the shared reading program.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Context

There are a few reading programs conducted in the primary schools in Singapore. They are commonly known as buddy reading, uninterrupted silent reading, and shared reading (see Curdt-Christiansen & Silver, 2013; Low, 2009; Koh & Paris, 2011; Shegar, 2009). In the buddy reading program, teachers select good readers from the upper primary level to read to the weak readers in the lower primary level (Shegar, 2009). In the uninterrupted silent reading program, students select their favourite books to read silently for a period of time either during the English Language lessons or before the school curriculum hours (Low, 2009).

The success of the shared reading program in improving students' language learning has led to its continuation of the instruction (see, for example, Ng & Sullivan, 2001). However, this instruction is incorporated into a new program, known as the STELLAR program (The Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading) in Singapore primary schools (English Language Syllabus, Singapore Ministry of Education, 2010). The shared reading instruction in the STELLAR program aims to develop students' decoding skills and comprehension skills (English Language Syllabus, Singapore Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 119).

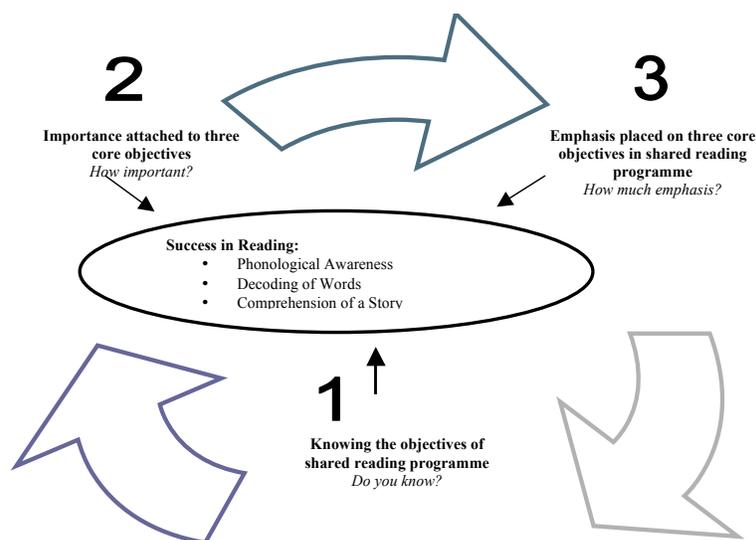
Methodology

I conducted a semi-structured interview (see Appendix A) with four teachers from four different primary schools to gain insights into the shared reading program before the construction and implementation of a questionnaire (see Appendix B). Each interview session, lasting 15-minutes, was informed by the data obtained during the semi-structured interview. The questionnaire data constituted the core information for this exploratory study. Data was collected from a total of twenty primary one and two English language teachers who had taught in four separate schools. The questionnaire queried these teachers on the level of importance they place on text comprehension, word decoding, and phonological awareness to help young learners develop their reading abilities and the degree of emphasis placed on the above variables in the shared reading program.

Data Analysis

Three paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare the mean rating of the importance of phonological awareness in helping young readers develop reading abilities and the mean rating of the emphasis placed on this variable in the shared reading program. Similarly, two other paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted on word decoding and text comprehension. Figure 1 shows the study's schematic diagram.

Figure 1. A Schematic Diagram of this Study



RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Quantity, Variety, and Readability of Big Storybooks

The teachers were required to read a total of seven big storybooks to a class in a 12-week semester. Regarding the question of whether the quantity of big storybooks read to the class in a semester was sufficient, 21% of the teachers surveyed indicated that the quantity of big storybooks read to a class was very sufficient; 58% of them indicated that the quantity of books read was sufficient; and 21% said that the quantity of books read was not sufficient.

Respecting the variety of big storybooks for students, 38% of the teachers stated that there was plenty variety of big storybooks for their students; 54% of them stated that there was enough variety of big books; and only 8% of them said that there was no variety of big books.

To assess the suitability of big storybooks selected for the shared reading program, I looked at the readability of the books. I elicited from the teachers a rough percentage of words their students could read in a big storybook. Fifty-four percent of the teachers indicated that their students could read 81% to 100% of the words; 42% of them stated that their students could read 61% to 80% of the words; and only 4% of them said that their students could read 41% to 60% of the words.

Knowing the Objectives of Big Storybooks

The study presented here also explored the teachers' knowledge of the objectives of the shared reading program. Sixty-seven percent of the teachers indicated that they knew the objectives of the shared reading program. Interview data show that the listed objectives were numerous (see Table 1). The listed objectives were very similar to those identified by the National Reading Panel (2000, 2006). For example, the objectives of the shared reading program are to teach phonological awareness, word decoding, and comprehension skills; stimulate interest

in reading; and teach vocabulary and grammar. However, it is quite surprisingly that 33% of the teachers indicated that they either did not know the objectives or they were not certain about the objectives of the shared reading program in the follow-up survey. These teachers further reported that the learning objectives of the shared reading curriculum were not explicitly stated. The objectives were based on the choice of the big storybooks selected for the program by the individual schools or the classroom teachers; and different storybooks had different objectives.

Table 1. Teachers' Listed Objectives of Shared Reading Program

Listed Objectives	
1.	To teach phonological awareness
2.	To teach decoding of words
3.	To teach comprehension
4.	To stimulate interest in reading
5.	To teach vocabulary and grammar
6.	To cultivate reading for enjoyment
7.	To expose pupils to more text types
8.	To activate students' schema
9.	To teach stories sequencing
10.	To teach predictability of stories
11.	To teach phonics
12.	To identify and produce rhyming words
13.	To match print to pictures
14.	To teach spelling of difficult words
15.	To teach reading
16.	To give students a chance to share their ideas and opinions
17.	To develop social skills such as listening and accepting others' view-points
18.	To provide a chance for students to read with the teacher
19.	To provide opportunities for choral reading
20.	To help weak readers to read along with peers
21.	To listen for information
22.	To allow students opportunities for acting
23.	To stimulate interest before starting a new topic

Preliminary Evaluation

In this section, I looked at the teachers' perceptions of the success of the shared reading program. Eight percent of the teachers indicated that the objectives of the shared reading program were very successfully achieved; 30% of them indicated that the objectives were successfully achieved, and 50% of them indicated that the objectives were achieved. Taken together, I found that a high percentage of the teachers (88%) felt that the objectives of shared reading program were achieved. The success of the shared reading program was also evaluated by the teachers' perceptions of how interested their students were in the shared reading lessons. This was also one of the identified objectives of shared reading. Seventy-five percent of the teachers indicated that their students were very interested in the shared reading lessons; and 25% of them indicated that their students were moderately interested in the shared reading lessons.

‘Importance’ vs. ‘Emphasis’

Among the list of objectives identified by the teachers from the semi-structured interview, I focused on three variables—phonological awareness, word decoding, and text comprehension—because reading research identified these three variables as critical for young readers to possess in order to read successfully (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; National Reading Panel, 2000, 2006). In the survey, 20 teachers were asked to rate how important phonological awareness, words decoding, and text comprehension were in helping young readers develop their reading abilities and how much emphasis was actually placed on each of the aforementioned variables in the shared reading program, using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = lowest importance or emphasis and 5 = highest importance or emphasis.

Table 2 shows mean ratings and standard deviations of the teachers’ perceptions of the importance of the three variables in helping young learners develop their reading abilities and the emphasis they felt the shared reading program placed on these variables. The mean ratings of the importance of text comprehension, word decoding, and phonological awareness in helping young readers acquire reading ability were 4.40, 4.85, and 4.60 respectively. Evidently, these three variables were adhered to very high importance in helping young readers acquire reading competence by the classroom teachers. However, the mean ratings of the amount of emphasis placed on text comprehension, word decoding, and phonological awareness in the shared reading program were comparatively lower, 3.80, 3.40, and 3.15 respectively.

Whereas word decoding received the highest importance in helping young readers develop their reading abilities (Mean = 4.85), the shared reading lessons did not correspondingly emphasize this importance (Mean = 3.40). Similarly, whereas the teachers indicated that text comprehension (Mean = 4.40) was the least important variable in helping young readers develop their reading abilities, the shared reading lessons emphasized this the most (Mean = 3.80).

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Teachers’ Perceptions of ‘Importance’ and ‘Emphasis’

Factors	Mean Rating (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Importance of variables in helping young learners develop their reading abilities		
Phonological Awareness	4.60	.68
Word Decoding	4.85	.37
Text Comprehension	4.40	.75
Emphasis of variables in shared reading program		
Phonological Awareness	3.15	1.00
Word Decoding	3.40	1.05
Text Comprehension	3.80	1.01

Note. 1 represents the lowest and 5 the highest importance or emphasis.

Three lines of results were obtained. First, there was a significantly higher mean rating of the importance of phonological awareness in helping learners read ($M = 4.60$, $SD = .68$) than the emphasis placed on this variable in the shared reading program ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.00$), $t(19) = 6.18$, $p < .001$. Second, there was a significantly higher mean rating of the importance of word decoding in helping learners read ($M = 4.85$, $SD = .37$) than the emphasis placed on this variable in the shared reading program ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.05$), $t(19) = 6.50$, $p < .001$. Third, there was a significantly higher mean rating of the importance of comprehension in helping learners read ($M = 4.40$, $SD = .75$) than the emphasis placed on this variable in the shared reading program ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.05$), $t(19) = 2.45$, $p = .02$.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that (1) 58% of the surveyed teachers indicated that the quantity of big storybooks read to a class in a 12-week semester was sufficient and (2) 54% of the teachers perceived that there was enough variety of big books. More English language curriculum time could be devoted to the shared reading instruction or reading in general for primary 1 and 2 students, given the high importance of reading in developing student' reading achievement and language development (Dickinson, Griffith, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2012; Durrsma, Augustyn, & Zuckerman, 2008). To prevent reading failures in elementary schools in the United States, a similar suggestion has been proposed by Kragler and Martin (2012) in their evaluation of the first-grade reading programs. It is equally important to increase the quantity of big storybooks in schools. This will provide teachers with a greater selection of books that align with their teaching goals for the reading instruction they implement.

Second, it is surprisingly that 33% of the teachers indicated that they either did not know the objectives or they were not certain about the objectives of the shared reading program. However, they were able to list a wide range of objectives of the shared reading program when interviewed. This list is congruent to the essential elements of reading acquisition (Gough & Tunmer 1986; National Panel of Reading, 2000; 2006). A plausible reason to explain for the above finding is that the objectives of the shared reading program are largely driven by the objectives of storybooks which the teachers select for their shared book reading lessons. Although the teachers have the discretion to re-define the objectives of their shared reading lessons, this discretion is paradoxically bounded by the stated objectives of these storybooks. Consequently, some teachers were uncertain of the objectives of the program.

Third, despite the high importance placed upon phonological awareness, word decoding, and text comprehension by the classroom teachers in helping young learners develop their reading abilities, these variables did not receive equal importance in the shared reading program. Knowing the objectives of a language program does not result in ascribing them high importance just as placing a high value of importance on the objectives does not necessarily mean that said objectives would be emphasized in the program or during instructional practices.

Although this study represents only a small effort in identifying the tension between theory and practice in the context of the shared reading program, a myriad of tensions exists between theory and practice in the world of teacher education (Calderhead & Sharrock, 1997). For example, the previous study conducted by Curdt-Christiansen and Silver (2013) pointed to a tension between the teachers' assumptions about teaching reading and the wider English language curriculum goals. The researchers found that the shared reading instruction conducted in the STELLAR program failed to achieve a greater student interaction, which is one of the goals of the curriculum. They attributed this failure to the misalignment of the teachers' assumptions about language learning with the goals of the curriculum. Nevertheless, it is important to note here that teachers have consistently expressed the need to bridge theory with practice (Bainbridge & Macy, 2008; Beck, Kosnick, & Roswell, 2007; Clark, Jones, Reutzler, & Andreasen, 2013; Maloch, Flint, Eldridge, et. al., 2003). Ideally, there should be a synchronization of what is needed to help young learners read well among the writers of storybooks, classroom teachers, language learners, English Language curriculum developers, and policymakers; and all of the above parties share converging goals. Where tensions arise between the objectives of the big books and the shared reading instruction and between the teachers' perceptions in reading acquisition and the instructional practice, as in the case of this present

study, teachers could set their own teaching goals, in accordance to the language needs of their students and the research evidence, instead of being constrained or driven by the objectives of the big books. In a similar vein, Macalister (2010) suggested that teachers should have clear teaching goals in mind, albeit in the context of using comprehension questions to monitor students' understanding of texts.

Finally, whether it is one of the perceived goals in developing learners' reading abilities or one of the goals emphasized in the shared reading program, text comprehension received the lowest value among the teachers surveyed in this study. Text comprehension is weakly emphasized in the shared reading program in the United States, as the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) report shows. In extending the report, Schickedanz and McGee (2010) called for a greater emphasis in developing learners' comprehension through the program. Although comprehension and word recognition might be viewed as two separate reading components, according to the simple view of reading (Hoover & Tunmer, 1993), it is one that might have accumulated effects on reading achievement and language development, as Stanovich's (1986) Matthew effect illustrates. The ability to recognize and read words, without comprehension of stories, simply takes away young children's joy in reading and may demotivate them to read.

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Appendix A. A Semi-structured Interview

- 1a. Are there any reading programs in your school?
- 1b. If there are, what are the reading programs?
2. Can you describe the reading programs?
3. What are the objectives of the shared reading program?
4. How is the big storybook selected for the shared reading program?
5. Are there any follow-up activities/tasks after a teacher tells a story from a big book?
6. How much time is allocated to reading a big book?
- 7a. Is shared reading program evaluated?
- 7b. If it is evaluated, what is evaluated, and how is it evaluated?

Appendix B. A Survey on Shared Reading Program

1. Is shared reading program a core reading curriculum in your school?
 Yes [] No [] Not Sure []

If no, please state the core reading curriculum or program.

2. Is quantity of big storybooks read to a class in a term sufficient?
 - (a) Far too sufficient []
 - (b) Very sufficient []
 - (c) Sufficient []
 - (d) Not sufficient []
 - (e) Not sufficient at all []
3. What is the variety of big books used in shared reading program?
 - (a) Far too much variety []
 - (b) Plenty of variety []
 - (c) Enough variety []
 - (d) No variety []
 - (e) No variety at all []
4. What is the estimated percentage of words your students can read in a big storybook?
 - (a) 81% to 100% []
 - (b) 61% to 80% []
 - (c) 41% to 60% []
 - (d) 21% to 40% []
 - (e) 0% to 20% []

5. Do you know the objectives of shared reading program?

Yes [] No [] Not Sure []

If yes, please write the objectives of the shared reading program.

- (a) _____
 (b) _____
 (c) _____
 (d) _____
 (e) _____

6. Are the objectives of shared reading program achieved?

- (a) Very successfully achieved []
 (b) Successfully achieved []
 (c) Achieved []
 (d) Not achieved []
 (e) Not achieved at all []

7. How interested are your students when you read from a big book?

- (a) Far too interested []
 (b) Very interested []
 (c) Moderately interested []
 (d) Not interested []
 (e) Not interested at all []

8. Is shared reading program evaluated in your school?

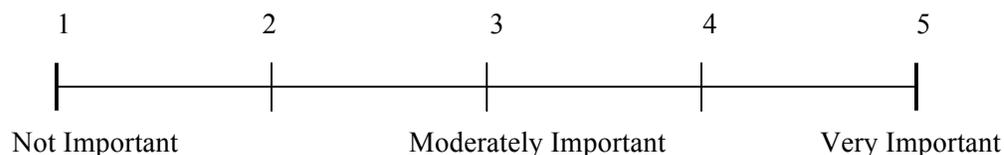
Yes [] No [] Not Sure []

If yes, please describe how the programme is evaluated.

Please circle the score on the scale which best indicates your perception. 1 = the lowest rating and 5 = the highest rating.

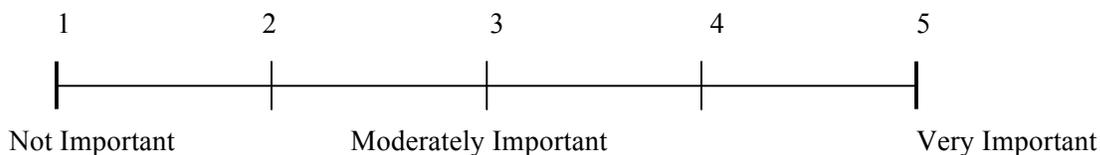
9. How **important** do you think phonological awareness is in helping young learners develop their reading abilities?

Phonological awareness refers to students' ability to recognize and manipulate phonemes which are the smallest units of sound.



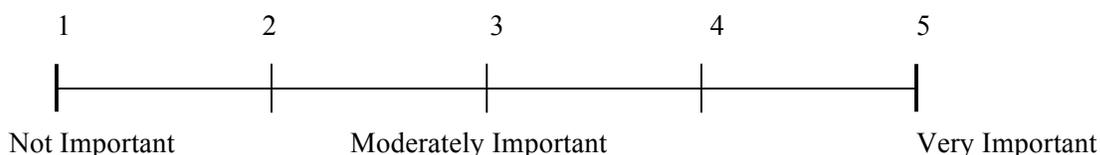
10. How **important** do you think decoding is in helping young learners develop their reading abilities?

Decoding refers to students' ability to recognize and read words very rapidly and fluently.

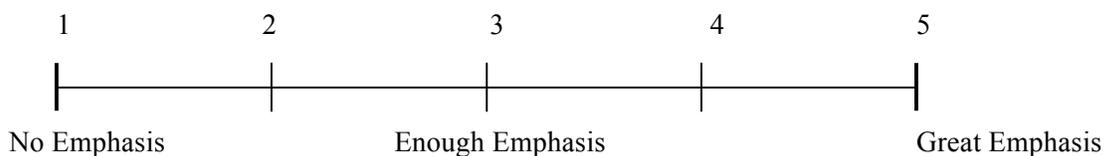


11. How **important** do you think comprehension is in helping young learners develop their reading abilities?

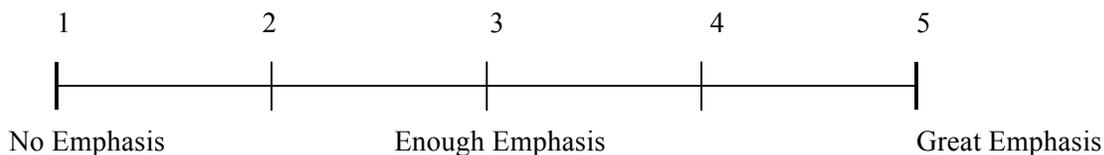
Comprehension refers to students' ability to understand the meaning of the stories.



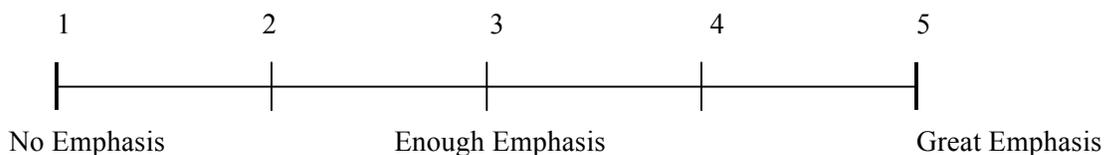
12. How much **emphasis** is placed on developing phonological awareness of the young learners in shared reading program?



13. How much **emphasis** is placed on helping the young learners decode words in shared reading program?



14. How much **emphasis** is placed on helping the young learners comprehend the meaning of a story in shared reading program?



Thank you.