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*Article*

## Developing UAE Preschoolers' Emergent Reading Skills through Balanced Literacy Approach

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### Abstract

Balanced Literacy framework is designed to increase positive outcomes of teaching and enable the teachers to initiate a modeled instruction. This research attempted to create a balanced literacy classroom in UAE kindergarten to test its effects on students' early reading skills. The objective was to investigate the effects of the balanced literacy approach on the emergent reading skills of kindergarten students, ages 4-6, in the United Arab Emirates through a comparative study between students (Group-A), who received the balanced literacy intervention, and students (Group-B), who were taught using the traditional method of teaching literacy. Mixed methods research design was followed to analyze the effects of the balanced literacy approach. The concepts of print checklist, letter-sound identification checklist, reading log and artifacts were utilized and collected to measure students' vocabulary growth, ability to recognize names and sound of uppercase and lowercase letters, record and track students' reading activities, and monitor growing linguistic abilities. Results show that the learners in Group-A outperformed learners who received literacy instruction in the traditional methods. The findings from the concepts of print checklist showed dramatic growth in print awareness skills of students in Group-A. Vocabulary checklists showed steady growth in students' vocabulary after the balanced literacy approach intervention. Results from the letter-sound identification assessment exhibited a substantial increase in their ability to identify names and sounds of letters. Implications from this study indicate the positive effects of the balanced literacy approach on mixed-ability students. Therefore, this study could serve as an impetus for further exploration of balanced literacy to support the reading achievement of students with dyslexia.

### Keywords

Balanced Approach, Letter-sound Identification, Phonics, Print Awareness, Concepts of Print

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Many definitions of balanced literacy have been put forth, which causes puzzlement as to what it truly means. To synthesize the diverse interpretations, most researchers agree upon one general definition: "Balanced instruction is a fine blend of a variety of teaching strategies and styles through scaffolding and personalized instruction that best meets the needs of students. It provides a positive, print-rich environment where students' interests and opinions are valued" (Freppon & Dahl, 1998). To reiterate, the approach intends to provide children with systematic training in phonological skills utilizing both authentic and synthetic texts. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) outlined the eight components of balanced literacy as reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, shared writing, interactive writing, guided writing, and independent writing. In addition to the eight components, word work, such as phonics and sight words, is an element of this instructional framework (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

A balanced literacy approach was first implemented in California in 1996. California was first to implement this type of reading framework to increase student's achievement on a national assessment, that had reported low scores (Emmett, 1996). After California implemented a more balanced literacy approach, several states made a slow move towards direct phonics instruction (Smith, 2015). In recent years, balanced literacy is seen as an outcome of the debate between code based or meaning based instruction, particularly for teaching reading and writing skills. Balanced literacy considers both methods and creates a balanced approach to provide a balanced learning opportunity to students. Bingham and Hall-Kenyon (2013) supported the idea of balanced literacy instruction as it promoted the interaction between the skill-based aspects (e.g., phonemic awareness, alphabetic knowledge, letter-sound association) and the semantic aspects (e.g., vocabulary, comprehension)" of reading (p. 15).

The objective behind the use of Balanced Literacy framework is not only to increase positive outcomes of teaching, but also enables the teacher to initiate a modeled instruction. Through guided practice and subsequently moving to independent practice, the teacher transfers the responsibility of learning to students. Fisher (2008) calls this "Gradual Release of Responsibility" and highlights four components: focus lesson, guided instruction, collaborative learning, and independent work. A focus lesson is the teacher directed group lesson aimed at modeling how students should see it. The guided instruction is the facilitating phase when the teacher prompts students to process the learning. The next step of collaborative learning requires small groups to build literacy blocks through partner sharing at both individual and group levels. Finally, in the last step the students are able to practice independently what they learnt in their texts.

His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan has rightly stressed, "Our current generation is suffering from a reading crisis, and we will not flatter ourselves when it comes to developing the future of this generation," (Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2021). Therefore, to alleviate these reading difficulties, the current study explores how to improve students' emergent reading skills through a balanced approach to literacy. The investigation of this topic is motivated by the Ministry of Education's (MOE) vision that aims to develop proficient readers. The purpose of the current research was therefore to investigate the effects of the balanced literacy approach on KG students' early reading skills in the UAE.

There is a gap in the literature with regards to a descriptive study of implementing a balanced literacy approach in the UAE. The findings will indicate how teachers can improve literacy instruction in kindergarten to increase students' literacy achievements. This study would lay the groundwork for future steps, such as the establishment of literacy pedagogies, curriculum development, and further research.

## Literature Review

- *Balanced Literacy Instruction vs. Whole Language Instruction*

During the past several years, a debate has rekindled between explicit phonics instruction and whole-language instruction regarding the best program to teach literacy in the early years (Huata, 2006). The first teaches students how to decode, and the second teaches what print means. The majority of experts asserted that although both are necessary, neither is sufficient alone. Therefore, both approaches should be combined and taught equally to enable pupils to derive meaning from the text while reading accurately (Center, 2020). The text recommends to use a code emphasis approach or a meaning-emphasis approach. The code-emphasis, or skills based instruction, places importance on explicitly teaching phonics skills to children (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013), which is a method that teaches students skills such as: phonics, grammar, spelling, and alphabetic principle, enabling them to understand what they are reading.

Balanced literacy includes components from both Whole Language theories and phonic reading. While whole Language plays a role in Balanced Literacy, it differs because of the phonics instruction used in the Balanced Literacy approach. The similarity between Balanced Literacy instruction and Whole Language instruction is that students model their reading skills like that of adults, construct word meaning in the text itself, and prefer to read authentic texts during independent reading and whole group reading and focus on phonics skills, phonemic awareness, and fluency.

The California Department of Education coined balanced literacy to integrate these two approaches and end the reading wars. Likewise, the National Institute of Child Health and Development in the USA conducted a series of studies over three decades, examining the best way to teach students to read. Their research findings indicate that phonics should be taught explicitly and embedded within broader reading instruction that emphasizes context. Likewise, in 2000, the US National Reading Panel's analysis of scientific literature on teaching children to read stressed that systematic phonics instruction should be integrated with other reading instruction to create a balanced literacy program (Muijs & Reynolds, 2005).

Apparently, dropping test scores on a national examination also indicated that whole-language and phonics approaches would fail to teach students to read proficiently. Since the call for more effective reading instruction, much of the debate has addressed the integration of the valid elements of each approach to guide students from kindergarten to sixth grade toward competent and lifelong reading (Fisher et al., 2020).

- *Balanced literacy as an instructional scaffold*

In a balanced literacy classroom, literacy components are intertwined and fit together as an instructional scaffold. Scaffolding, a teaching strategy that provides personalized support, works in conjunction with the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a concept created by Vygotsky to show that learners develop and improve skills by interacting with more knowledgeable others. Hence, as in scaffolding, balanced literacy evolves in all types of literacy programs and literacy delivery for students. Balanced literacy uses several texts to engage readers at their level. Students are assessed to determine their reading level.

An example of scaffolding is evident when an instructor uses a leveling kit designed to determine the level of a child's reading comprehension and the child's fluency. This helps in decoding strategies determining the child's reading ability and also teaching strategies using the child's reading level. Fountas and Pinnell (2012) supported this method of balanced literacy framework and suggested to use similar strategies to select the text books as a mark of differentiation. Frey et al. (2005), suggested a few balanced literacy components such as reading aloud, independent reading, shared reading, guided reading, and like.

A four-year study was conducted by Sirinides et al. (2018) on the trajectories of pupils experiencing difficulty reading in a balanced literacy program. Researchers concluded that balanced literacy is an effective intervention that scaffolds struggling readers' abilities. The balanced approach is grounded in the belief that such scaffolding develops ownership of literacy and encourages students to become self-directed learners who persist no matter how challenging reading becomes, which is critical to students' lifelong success (Dobler et al., 2013).

- *Strategies to build effective balance in literacy instruction*

Various strategies and theories have been developed that have led instructors to utilize a balanced literacy approach in teaching literacy. According to Bingham and Hall-Kenyon (2013), for instance, balanced literacy should be seen in a "philosophical perspective that seeks to combine, or balance, skill-based and meaning-based instruction in order to ensure positive reading and writing results in children" (p. 15). There are also a few other recommendations that suggest what types of strategies and skills create the most effective balance in literacy instruction. Frey et al. (2005) suggested to create a balance between teacher-directed instruction and student-centered learning. This strategy helps in creating a balanced between effective learning and teaching.

Further, Stichter et al. (2009) suggested: "Effective instructional practices include strategies that maximize the amount of time spent on instruction, student engagement, and opportunities to respond and those that minimize student negative behavior, transition time, interruptions, and time spent talking about unrelated topics." Smith (2015) added that whole language elements are founded on theories that children and adults use similar strategies to process and comprehend, for instance, components like modeling reading, recognizing words in context, and phonics skills can be acquired only through literature exposure.

## Theoretical framework

The balanced literacy approach relies on the theoretical principles of Vygotsky, who created the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which develops and improves learners' skills by interacting with more knowledgeable others. Learners need meaningful adult guidance to progress to the ZPD, which consequently moves students toward greater independence. Scaffolding, a teaching strategy that provides personalized support, works in conjunction with the ZPD (Chang et al., 2002). The scaffolds by a more knowledgeable other, aid students' capacity to build on existing knowledge and internalize new information. Skills and experiences derived from an individual's prior knowledge serve as the basis of scaffolding for potential development. Responsive scaffolding should acknowledge what learners already know before introducing a new topic or skill (MacGillivray & Rueda, 2003).

This theory is relevant with the balanced literacy approach as the techniques incorporated in this theory are components of the balanced literacy interventions. The methods used to implement the balanced literacy approach are also the ZPD's scaffolding techniques. According to Eskey (1997), one approach to coping with reading difficulties is linking new knowledge or scaffolding with an existing schema and help learners interpret the text. Bliss et al. (1996) too assert that modeling is one of the major mechanisms for cognitively assisting learners through the ZPD, which later become meta-cognitive strategies for learners to control their own learning. The teacher demonstrates skills explicitly, and pupils are encouraged to imitate certain behaviors, such as book handling, sound pronunciation, and phonemes blending. Cognitive processes are modeled and communicated through think-aloud to help learners construct an understanding of the concept.

Following the usage of the offered scaffolds, the teacher is able to engage students in collaborative learning. A flexible grouping strategy is followed, which refers to grouping students in the most advantageous way for delivering instruction (Carol A Tomlinson & Moon, 2014). Students get opportunity to be part of many different groups based on their readiness, interest, or learning style. There are capable learners who provide scaffolds in small group settings, helping the learner through the ZPD, and thus building a theoretical framework.

In subsequent activities under this framework, the amount or type of guidance would be decreased until learners could complete the activity without scaffolds provided by instructors or peers. The teacher would be a mediator of substantial experiences, allowing learners to attain their ZPD. Students' interests would be engaged, and tasks modified to suit diverse abilities. Linking with Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, the tasks' complexity would be slightly higher than the child's present level of mastery.

In 1988, California popularized the whole language theory and initiated a paradigm shift in educating students (Smith, 2015). California was among the first states to adopt direct skills instruction and help students gain reading skills through the Whole Language theory which included scaffolding techniques for phonics instruction in the form of "phonemic awareness, phonic fluency, vocabulary and text comprehension" (Barry, 2008). Additionally, in the balanced literacy classroom, the teacher's role would be gradually reduced over time. Responding to the teacher's prompting, students would take increasing responsibility for their learning. Learning would be a shared endeavor between student and teacher, and their relationship would be reciprocal. This method mirrors Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, whose central tenet is the social, interactional link between teacher and student.

Thus, in the current study, pre-reading activities included scaffolding to build pupils' background information and activate relevant prior knowledge. These discussions bridged the gap between what pupils already knew and what they needed to know. In this framework, differentiation presented an effective means to accommodate diverse learners and avoids the pitfalls of the one-size-fits-all education (Carol Ann Tomlinson, 2003).

## Problem Statement and Research questions

This topic is examined because of the numerous incidents that occurred in United Arab Emirates government schools. Some kindergarten teachers defaulted by adopting the traditional one-size-fits-all educational approach, which obstructed teachers from helping struggling students and challenges thriving ones. The question arises what should be done if students are incapable of reading age-appropriate text? Unsurprisingly, the lack of phonetic and reading comprehension skills affects students' academic performance across all subject areas.

A balanced literacy classroom furnishes students with the power to tailor their learning experiences in a way that best suits their unique needs (Parr & Campbell, 2012). In addition, government schools use the traditional phonics approach by teaching sounds in isolation with insufficient decoding exercises for students in the early years. As a result, many students faced difficulties in pronouncing and reading words. Sweet and Snow (2003) discovered that pupils who do not acquire decoding skills during the early years struggle to comprehend the text even in higher grades as the reading materials become more complicated. Reading struggles creates a multifaceted challenge as it causes students to face academic difficulties, socio-emotional stresses, and school failure (Hernandez, 2011). Stories are read by the teacher once a week because their schedules do not offer enough time for extensive reading.

The challenge is that the balanced approach strategically and consistently cannot integrate authentic reading on a daily basis to enable students to utilize the learned literacy strategies (Miller & Gonzalez, 2020). There are also problems with early phonological skills that mitigate against comprehension and develop into widespread linguistic and cognitive deficits. Students who lack phoneme awareness tend to fall into a downward spiral of achievement in which intellectual skills get disturbed due to slow reading development (Ceci, 1991). Last, but not the least, unresolved reading issues in the early years might jeopardize a child's entire education.

In such era of increased emphasis on reading and the challenges evident, this research aimed to develop proficient readers who could experience various opportunities for modeled instruction along with guided, collaborative, and independent practice. Considering the body of literature, and the UAE MOE vision, this study opted to examine the impact of balanced literacy approach on kindergarten students' emergent reading skills. Evans and Shaw (2008) have identified areas of emergent literacy, including letter knowledge, print concepts, and vocabulary. In this light, the researcher chose these skills as the main variables to compare the emergent reading skills between kindergarten students who received the balanced literacy intervention and students who were taught using the traditional methods of teaching literacy.

Based on the problems statement, the following three research questions were framed for this study:

1. How does the balanced literacy approach affect kindergarten students' print awareness?
2. How does the balanced literacy approach affect kindergarten students' letter-sound identification?
3. How does the balanced literacy approach affect kindergarten students' vocabulary?

## Methods

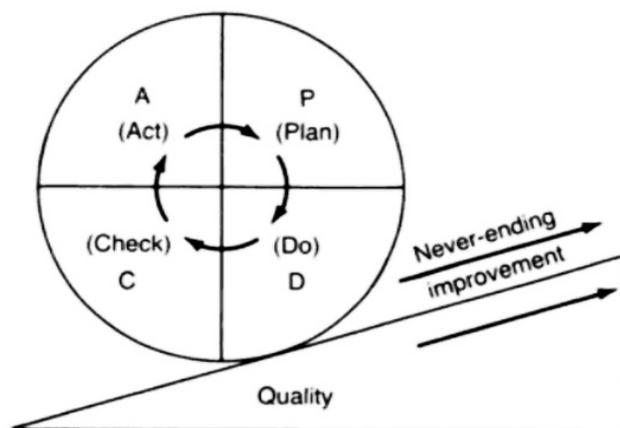
- *Research Design*

This educational action research used analytical investigation methods to improve the quality of teaching and learning. A comparative study was employed to compare instructional approaches. According to Adamson (2019), a comparative study involves selecting two or more comparison groups to offer comparative information about how different interventions affect students' learning.

This comparative study employed a mixed-methods model. Tashakkori and Creswell (2007) define mixed methods as the process of collecting, analyzing, mixing, and drawing inferences in a single study by combining the qualitative and quantitative approaches. Quantitative data is closed-ended information collected for statistical analysis of numerical data. Qualitative data, on the contrary, is open-ended descriptive data that describes characteristics for in-depth analysis. The rationale for this method was that quantitative data analysis supplied the primary emphasis of the results, while qualitative data and analysis justified the quantitative findings (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021). Compared to mono-method approaches, this systematic integration delivers broader insights and more accurate outcomes (Bazeley, 2015). The methodological pluralism allowed the researcher to utilize the data comprehensively and synergistically. The researcher explored and scrutinized how the balanced literacy approach differed from the traditional method used in government schools in developing students' emergent reading skills.

- *Research Procedure*

The researcher sought permission to conduct the study from the school administrator using written consent. Participants in Group-A and Group-B were selected using the purposive sampling technique. The study followed a structured approach by using the PDCA cycle process technique published by Walter Shewhart, as shown in Figure 1 (Gitlow et al., 1989). Plan, Do, Check, and Act are the four sequential stages of an improvement initiative (Walker et al., 2019). This iterative process has been used as a systematic method for tackling problems and finding solutions. The researcher conducted pretests at the beginning of the study to measure students' print awareness, vocabulary, and letter-sound identification.



**Figure 1:** *The Deming PDCA Cycle*

Participants were assigned to two groups. Group-A experienced the treatment, which is the balanced approach intervention. Group-B was not exposed to the same intervention. They received literacy instruction in the traditional methods. Both groups included students with mixed ability and skills. Each member of Group-A had a counterpart in Group-B identical in skills and abilities before implementing the balanced approach intervention. This ensured that the intervention was the only source of potential differences in outcomes between the two groups. All variables apart from the investigated intervention remained constant between the two groups. Both groups were exposed to the same stories, vocabulary, and letters. The timetable was a control variable. Both groups followed it as it was allocated by the Ministry of Education. The duration of English lessons and the number of English lessons in the week were the same for both groups.

These diagnostic assessments were given to both groups to determine the students' emergent reading skills before the onset of the study. Data was collected before interventions to establish a baseline from which posttest improvements could be assessed. Through this process, the researcher gained perspective on the students' familiarity, knowledge, and level of literacy skills. The procedure of collecting data and identifying areas of improvement enabled the researcher to achieve the first phase of the cycle, which was planning interventions. Interventions included explicit phonics activities with extensive reading. Read aloud, shared reading, and choral reading strategies were integrated with phonics, word study, and sight words instruction. Each week, a new sound was introduced through stories, songs, and explicit instruction about the letter-sound relationship.

The next step was implementing the plan by incorporating the gradual release of responsibility model. At the beginning of each week, the teacher implemented interactive read-aloud and phonics instruction. While reading the stories, the instructor revised and focused on the concepts of print. Then, the responsibility seamlessly shifted from the teacher to children through choral reading and independent writing. In between, students received scaffolding through shared reading and writing. Homework assignments included E-books and phonics activities using Raz-kids and Starfall websites. Reading logs were collected from parents regularly. Literacy-rich activities were emphasized in learning centers and small groups on a daily basis. The literacy area integrated activities about reading and writing individual sounds and blending them to form words. The learning centers focused on building vocabulary and comprehension.

During the implementation process, changes were recorded and documented. Data was collected using the data collection tools for evaluation. The next step was to check the data collected in the previous phase. Every two weeks, the gathered information was analyzed to evaluate if the plan achieved the intended goals. Students' portfolios were also collected to compare their literacy progress from the beginning to the end of the study. Finally, the last stage of the cycle was to take any action based on the results of the first three phases. Activities were constantly adjusted and enhanced, and interventions were implemented based on students' needs. The balanced literacy instruction was regularly planned, implemented, and evaluated, repeating the cycle. At the end of the study, posttests, including print awareness, vocabulary, and letter-sound identification checklists, were administered to both groups to determine their literacy achievements.

- *Research Site and Participants*

The study was conducted in a government kindergarten located in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. The participants in this study were ten kindergarten students ages from 4 to 6. The criteria for selecting students in both groups were made through the use of purposive sampling. The researcher divided the participants into two groups. Participants in Group-A received the balanced approach interventions. On the contrary, participants in Group-B did not receive the balanced approach interventions and were taught using the traditional approach. The purpose of the research was to investigate the impact of the balanced approach on pupils of varying developmental levels. Therefore, this research included a combination of emerging, developing, and mastery level students. The goal of selecting mixed ability students was to ensure that the sample was representative of a classroom population.

To maintain consistency across the groups, both groups included mixed ability students. To ensure that the groups were as similar as possible, the researcher selected groups in two classes at the same school. This action aimed to increase the internal validity of the study by eliminating confounding variables. Students shared some similar characteristics as they were aged four to six. They were all Emiratis, and their native language was Arabic. The researcher sought assistance from the Mentor School Teacher (MST), a professional kindergarten teacher, and the Mentor College Teacher (MCT), a doctoral degree holder college instructor in selecting participants.

- *Data Collection Tools*

The data collection tools utilized to measure students' early literacy skills in the present study included three types of checklists, reading logs, and artifacts. The check lists tool included Print Checklist, which captured students' print awareness and reading behaviors (Clay, 2019); Vocabulary Checklist, which measured students' vocabulary size in the English language (Joyce, 2011); Letter-Sound Identification checklist, which measured students' sounds and letters recognition skills (Clay, 1985). The reading log tool was used to record students' knowledge about vocabulary, letter-sound identification, and print awareness. The final tool, artifacts included samples of students' work along with anecdotal notes about their performance. Let us examine each of these tools before moving to glancing through the results.

- i. *Print Checklist*

Concepts of print are crucial prerequisites viewed as the foundation to reading and writing that teach children how to orient themselves in terms of reading (Clay, 2001). This assessment informs teachers about students' knowledge of book concepts, directionality, letters, words, and punctuation marks. A grid sheet was prepared and divided into three columns. The first column includes the main concepts of print. The second column was for the teacher to record the score. The third column was for the comments. The grid guided the teacher's instructional decisions by determining what students should master and what they needed to develop. The checklist was utilized with the support from the MST and MCT.

- ii. *Vocabulary Checklist*

A targeted vocabulary checklist, developed by Joyce (2011), was used to measure students' vocabulary growth. The vocabulary test consisted of two columns, a pretest and a posttest with the same list of words. Before exposing the targeted vocabulary to students, the pretest was conducted. The participants were asked to identify vocabulary items represented by pictures. For the posttest, the research asked students to name the same set of pictures after exposing the vocabulary. The words were exposed to Group-A through a balanced literacy approach and instructed to Group-B using the traditional approach. As the study took place over eight weeks, the vocabulary list was updated every two weeks. The new target words were tested based on their inclusion in the unit plan. The percentage was calculated by adding the number of words identified correctly and dividing it by the total number of words in the list.

- iii. *Letter-sound Identification Checklist*

Letter and Sound Identification Assessment, adapted from Clay (1985), provided information about the emerging readers' ability to identify the names and sounds of uppercase and lowercase letters. The researcher used the Letter-Sound Identification Form to record the child's replies. Each child was asked to name each letter and its sound individually. This assessment was conducted at the beginning and the end of the research period to document the growth. It served as a check for the researcher on how well the balanced approach had supported the child's literacy development.

iv. *Reading log*

The reading log used in this study was developed by Good (2017) and adjusted by the researcher to focus on the three research questions. It included letter-sound identification, vocabulary, and print awareness columns. The reading log enabled the researchers to identify strengths and areas of improvement, thus determining the appropriate intervention.

v. *Artifacts*

Artifacts are work products, processes, and performances (Wolsey et al., 2020). In this study, artifacts such as work samples were collected and included within the literacy portfolio. In this study, artifacts were collected to address multiple aspects of literacy learning, such as reading, vocabulary, and letter-sound knowledge. The portfolio collection form was adapted from Gronlund and Linn (1990). It included the date of the observation and the time spent on each activity. The researcher was able to organize materials in a way that highlighted literacy growth over time by including dates for each artifact. The form had an anecdotal note section to describe the child's performance. A photograph of the child's action or work sample that the child produced accompanied the anecdote when appropriate. Including direct quotes from the child in the anecdotal notes served as evidence of the child's growing linguistic abilities. The researcher used the portfolio collection form to note the specific language skills the child demonstrated. The researcher used information gleaned from portfolio analysis to monitor student growth throughout the study, plan developmentally responsive instruction, and compare the work and progress of both groups.

**Results**

**Impact of Balanced Approach on Kindergarten Students' Print Awareness**

The concepts of print checklists, active reading and listening logs and artifacts were intended to answer the first research question of the study: How does the balanced literacy approach affect students' print awareness? Throughout the eight weeks, the print awareness level of the groups was measured three times. Figure 2 presents Group-A scores before and after receiving the balanced approach intervention. Figure 3 presents Group-B scores without receiving the balanced approach intervention.

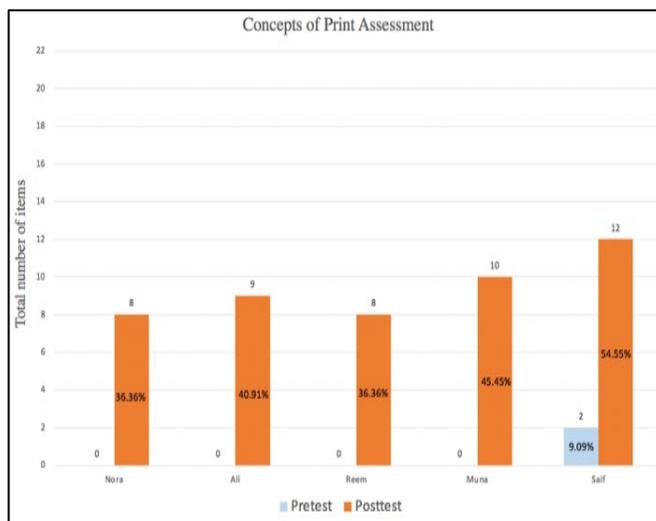


Figure 2: Group-A pretest/ posttest scores

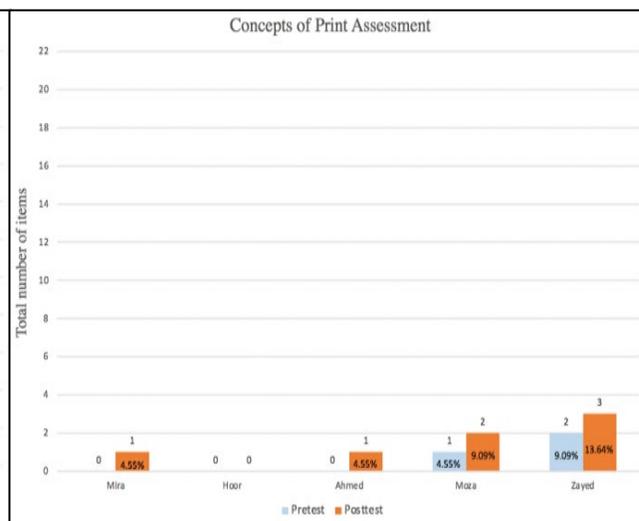


Figure 3: Group-B pretest/ posttest scores

Both groups performed poorly in the diagnostic test. However, Group-A gradually improved as they received the balanced approach intervention, as apparent in Figure 2. Reading skills were explicitly modeled to Group A through read-aloud, shared reading, and choral reading. On the contrary, Group-B listened to only one story during the whole week, which hindered their development of print awareness skills. Such lack of reading and restricted exposure to print would severely impair the development of reading skills (Hagaman & Reid, 2008). Even though the amount of improvement varied among Group-A students, all of them showed a progressive improvement

in all performance measures across the several assessment occasions over the intervention interval. They developed reading directionality and were able to identify parts of the book, such as the front cover, back cover, and title. These skills were demonstrated and recorded in the reading logs and artifacts.

Similarly, the concepts of the print checklist showed that all students' print awareness had seen an improvement compared to their results from the first assessment. The similarity between the qualitative data by the reading logs and artifacts and quantitative data by checklists proved the consistency of the results. The results were consistent with the research of [Elsea \(2001\)](#), who found that the balanced approach intervention increased kindergarten students' knowledge of print concepts. According to [Cappello and Moss \(2010\)](#), the balanced literacy approach provides students with opportunities to master the concept of print by involving reading and writing with appropriate materials in meaningful contexts.

The data were analyzed statistically in order to interpret the mean score of students' print awareness skills, as presented in [Table 1](#). The stages of skill acquisition were adapted from [Rousse and Dreyfus \(2021\)](#).

**Table 1: Mean Score Interpretation**

Mean Score	Interpretation
18.36 – 22.00	Mastery
14.69 – 18.35	Expert
11.02 – 14.68	Proficient
7.35 – 11.01	Competent
3.68 – 7.34	Advanced Beginner
0 – 3.67	Novice

[Table 2](#) presents mean scores of students' print awareness in both pretest and posttest. Both groups had a mean score under 3.67 and they were in the first stage of skill acquisition, which is the novice stage. After eight weeks of the balanced approach, Group-A developed from novice to competent. Group-B who was taught using the traditional approach stayed in the novice stage. While comparing the means, it is evident that pupils in Group-A performed better in print awareness than their counterparts in Group-B.

**Table 2: Mean scores of students' print awareness**

Group	Mean pretest	Standard Deviation	Interpretation	Mean posttest	Standard Deviation	Interpretation	Gain
Group-A	0.4	0.9	Novice	9.6	1.5	Competent	9.2
Group-B	0.6	0.9	Novice	1.4	1.1	Novice	0.8

This result reveals that the traditional approach used in Group-B did not improve students' print awareness skills. It also shows that the treatment used on Group-A dramatically enhanced students' achievement. According to this data, it can be concluded that the applied method positively affected the success of KG students' print awareness skills. The findings of this study confirm previous findings by [Chou et al. \(2012\)](#) that the balanced approach enhanced students' English print knowledge, which confirmed that lecturers had a high level of readiness.

### Impact of Balanced Approach on Kindergarten Students' Letter-sound Identification

To answer the second question, students' letter-sound recognition was assessed using the letter-sound identification checklist. The pretests and posttests formed part of the process of evaluating the effectiveness of the balanced literacy approach in teaching phonics. The pretest was conducted before applying any intervention as a diagnostic assessment. At the conclusion of the study, posttests were administered to both groups to determine any phonemic awareness achievement in pupils. Their progress was monitored over time by analyzing if there was an increase in letters and sounds identified correctly from the pretest to the posttest. [Figure 4](#) presents Group-A scores before and after receiving the balanced approach intervention. [Figure 5](#) presents Group-B scores without implementing the balanced approach.

As shown in [Figure 4](#) and [Figure 5](#), both groups started on a similar basis. Group-A performed better in the posttest. Group-B's abilities in identifying letter sounds did not improve that much despite them learning the same letters and sounds throughout the eight weeks.

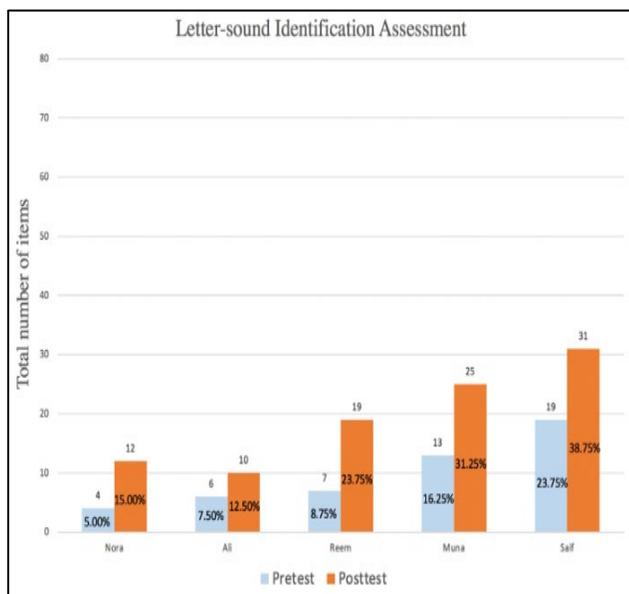


Figure 4: Group-A pretest/ posttest scores

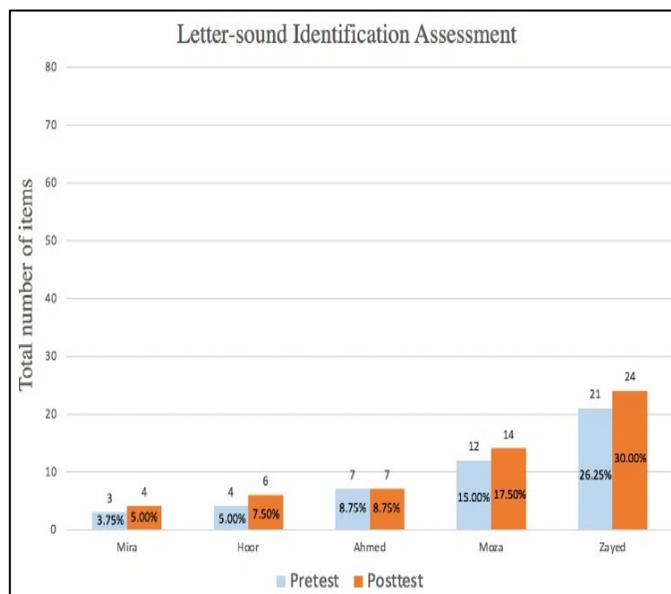


Figure 5: Group-B pretest/ posttest scores

During the qualitative phase, artifacts and reading logs were used as an instrument for collecting qualitative data. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data accomplishes triangulation to validate findings. It was apparent from artifacts that all of the students in Group-A experienced an increase in letter-sound identification after utilizing the balanced approach. The effect occurred in students with moderate and high levels as well as low levels of phonemic awareness. The results were consistent with a previous study by Elsea (2001), who found that the balanced approach improved kindergarten students' letter recognition abilities.

Letter-sound identification competency levels were determined based on the mean score interpretation in Table 3. The average performance of both groups on the letter-sound identification assessment is shown in Table 4.

Table 3: Mean Score Interpretation (Rousse & Dreyfus, 2021)

Mean Score	Interpretation
66.66 – 80.00	Mastery
53.33 – 66.65	Expert
40.00 – 53.32	Proficient
26.67 – 39.99	Competent
13.34 – 26.66	Advanced Beginner
0 – 13.33	Novice

Table 4: Mean scores of students' letter-sound identification

Group	Mean pretest	Standard Deviation	Interpretation	Mean posttest	Standard Deviation	Interpretation	Gain
Group-A	9.8	6.1	Novice	19.4	8.8	Advanced Beginner	9.6
Group-B	9.4	7.4	Novice	11	8.2	Novice	1.6

In the pretest, both groups were in the novice stage, as their mean scores were under 13.33. In the posttest, the mean scores of the pupils in Group-A became higher than Group-B. The rise of the mean indicates that Group-A showed a large gain in achievement. Although Group-B also gained, the gains did not match with those of Group-A. These findings, therefore, suggest that the use of the balanced literacy approach was effective for teaching letter-sound identification to kindergarteners. Results confirm previous findings by Uzuner et al. (2011) that a variety of activities based on the balanced literacy approach effectively increased phonemic awareness in mixed ability children.

### Impact of Balanced Approach on Kindergarten Students' Vocabulary Acquisition

To answer the third question, the vocabulary checklist, artifacts, and reading logs were utilized. The pretest was given to kindergarten students before implementing the intervention. At the end of each unit, a posttest was administered to both groups of participants to measure any students' gains in vocabulary as a result of the intervention. The list was updated every two weeks with new vocabulary based on the unit and the theme. The performances of both groups on the vocabulary assessment are shown in the Figures 6 to 11.

Students' vocabulary test scores for weeks 2 and 3.

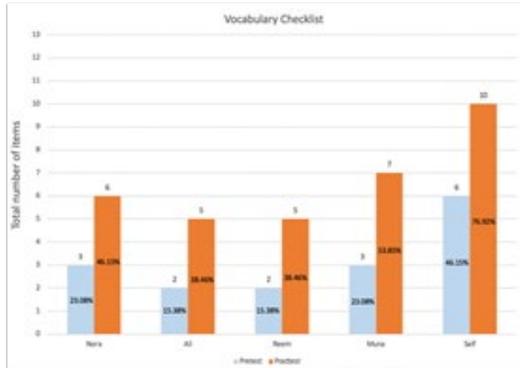


Figure 6: Group-A pretest & posttest scores.

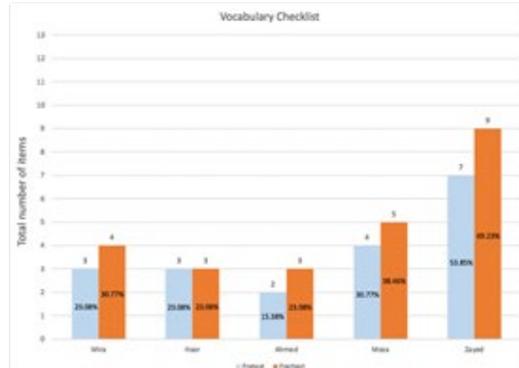


Figure 7: Group-B pretest & posttest scores.

Students' vocabulary test scores for weeks 5 and 6.

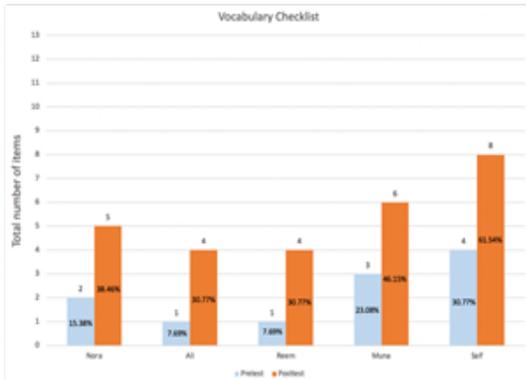


Figure 8: Group-A pretest & posttest scores.

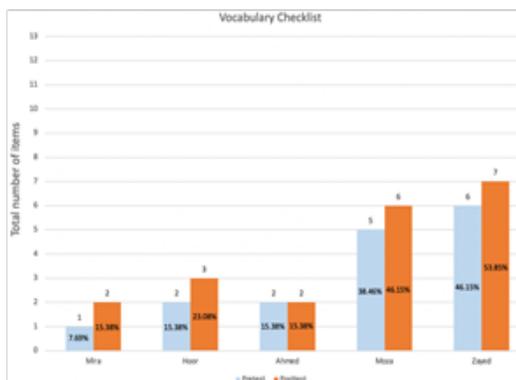


Figure 9: pretest & posttest Group-B scores.

Students' vocabulary test scores for weeks 7 and 8.

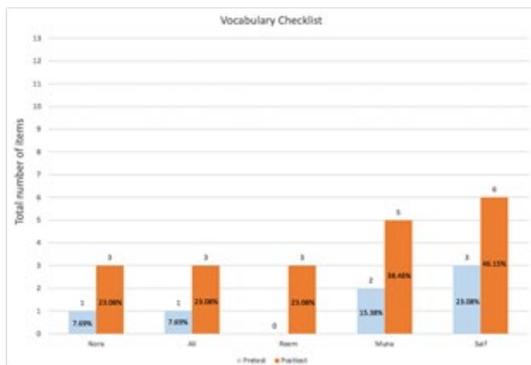


Figure 10: Group-A pretest & posttest scores.

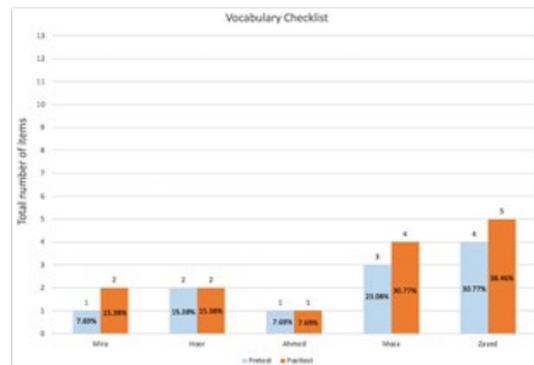


Figure 11: Group-B pretest & posttest scores.

The pretest provided a benchmark that was used at the end of the posttest. As shown in the graphs (Figure 6 to 11), the pretests revealed that Group-B's scores were slightly higher than Group-A. However, the posttest data indicated that pupils in Group-A acquired more vocabulary than Group-B. Likewise, the artifacts indicated that pupils responded very well to the activities that were presented to them and were able to identify the vocabulary.

The vocabulary was introduced to Group-A through different reading methods, including read-aloud, shared reading, and choral reading, which increased the likelihood of students' ability to remember them. They were able to identify new vocabulary words after reading sessions as they offered words in the context of interesting stories. This result was consistent with a study about students' vocabulary acquisition by Brett et al. (1996). Their study revealed that students who listened to stories learned significantly more new words and remembered them better six weeks later than students who had no exposure to stories or vocabulary. Besides, the similarity between the qualitative and quantitative data ensured the consistency of the findings. The results obtained suggest that the balanced literacy approach increased the vocabulary acquisition of kindergarten students who received the balanced approach intervention. A study by Robbins and Ehri (1994) measured kindergartners' understanding of a set of unfamiliar words, half of which had appeared in the story. These findings show that children recognized the meanings of significantly more words from the story than words not in the story.

**Table 5: Mean Score Interpretation (Rousse & Dreyfus, 2021)**

Mean Score	Interpretation
10.86 – 13.00	Mastery
8.69 – 10.85	Expert
6.52 – 8.68	Proficient
4.34 – 6.51	Competent
2.18 – 4.33	Advanced Beginner
0 – 2.17	Novice

**Table 6: Week 2 and 3 mean scores of students' vocabulary**

Group	Mean pretest	Standard Deviation	Interpretation	Mean posttest	Standard Deviation	Interpretation	Gain
Group-A	3.2	1.6	Advanced Beginner	6.6	2.1	Proficient	3.4
Group-B	3.8	1.9	Advanced Beginner	4.8	2.5	Competent	1

**Table 7: Week 4 and 5 mean scores of students' vocabulary**

Group	Mean pretest	Standard Deviation	Interpretation	Mean posttest	Standard Deviation	Interpretation	Gain
Group-A	2.2	1.3	Advanced Beginner	5.4	1.7	Competent	3.2
Group-B	3.2	2.2	Advanced Beginner	4	2.3	Advanced Beginner	0.8

**Table 8: Week 6 and 7 mean scores of students' vocabulary**

Group	Mean pretest	Standard Deviation	Interpretation	Mean posttest	Standard Deviation	Interpretation	Gain
Group-A	1.4	1.1	Novice	4	1.4	Advanced Beginner	2.6
Group-B	2.2	1.3	Advanced Beginner	2.8	1.6	Advanced Beginner	0.6

As presented in Table 5, 6, 7 and 8, the data were analyzed statistically in order to interpret the mean score of students' vocabulary acquisition. In week 2, the pretest was conducted. Both groups were advanced beginners. In the posttest, Group-A became proficient learners, and Group-B became competent learners based on the mean score interpretation table. For the second vocabulary list, both groups were advanced beginners in the pretest that was conducted in week 4. The level of Group-A developed from advanced beginners to competent in weeks 4 and 5 and from novice to advanced beginners in weeks 6 and 7. Group-B remained in the advanced beginner stage. Results suggest that the use of the balanced literacy approach was effective in improving kindergarten students' vocabulary. Findings support the results of researchers Mlakar-Hillig et al. (2002), who discovered that the balanced approach improved students' vocabulary development.

## Discussion

This study substantiated the use of phonics instruction in conjunction with the authentic text to enhance kindergarten students' print awareness, letter-sound identification, and vocabulary. The analysis of results revealed significant implications for the balanced approach. The findings revealed that after eight weeks of a balanced approach, pupils' emergent reading abilities improved. The findings support those of other researchers (Cappello & Moss, 2010; Elsea, 2001; Mlakar-Hillig et al., 2002; O'Day, 2009; Uzuner et al., 2011) who supported the use of the balanced approach to improving reading performance.

In response to the first research question, kindergarteners were assessed using artifacts, reading logs, and concepts of print checklist to measure their print awareness skills. During the implementation of the balanced approach, Group-A was exposed to extensive reading sessions and concepts of print instruction. At the end of the eight weeks, it was evident that pupils in Group-A performed better in print awareness than their counterparts in Group-B. All students in Group-A showed a significant gain in print awareness, corroborating the findings of academics who advocate for a balanced approach to improving children's print awareness (Cappello & Moss, 2010; Elsea, 2001; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

Regarding the second research question, based on artifacts, reading logs, and letter-sound identification checklists, the letter-sound identification ability of students in Group-A grew across the four phases of the research. Although Group-B also gained, the gains do not match those of Group-A. Phonics instruction was one of the balanced literacy components that solidified students' phonemic awareness. This conclusion affirms the findings of research by O'Day (2009), suggesting the balanced literacy approach proved to be effective in improving phonemic awareness for learners. In addition, researchers Elsea (2001) and Uzuner et al. (2011) made similar discoveries that confirm one of the conclusions of this study regarding increasing pupils' letter-sound recognition through the balanced approach.

Concerning the final research question, artifacts revealed that the vocabulary of Group-A who received the balanced approach intervention expanded more than Group-B during the study. Findings from the current research indicate that extensive reading was effective for building vocabulary. The similarity between the qualitative data by reading log and quantitative data by the checklist proved the consistency across the assessment instruments. Findings from the vocabulary checklist showed that the vocabulary development of Group-A was at a consistent increase throughout the research, confirming the findings of another study that found that kindergarten students' vocabulary growth improved after participating in balanced approach activities (Mlakar-Hillig et al., 2002).

## Conclusion

A balanced literacy approach has no historical precedence as it is evident in research that there has been no "balanced era in American literary history" (Duffy et al., 2002), with a few exceptions when some schools emphasized on combination of skills. In the current times, the objective behind the use of Balanced Literacy framework is not only to increase positive outcomes of teaching, but also to enable the teacher to initiate a modeled instruction. Through guided practice and subsequently moving to independent practice, the teacher transfers the responsibility of learning to students. Such a balanced literacy approach intervenes in students' reading instruction before their academic potential gets hampered. It aspires to lift pupils performing at the lowest proficiency level up to age-appropriate reading and writing skills (Gunning, 2020).

A balanced literacy framework chosen for this study required to study how educators and administrators could effectively create a balance of learning; how teachers could design and deliver instructional activities to meet the students' needs. It also requires to determine whether the school administration would support the teachers and facilitate them to express all their literacy abilities with balanced instruction. The balance of instruction here meant providing opportunities for both teachers and students to meet the demands of learning how to read through multiple learning opportunities.

The study revealed several benefits of using a balanced literacy framework namely: differentiation in instruction, gradual release of responsibility, and balanced instruction. A balanced literacy instructional approach allows for multiple activities to occur to increase student success and to create differentiation in teacher instruction. The students spends time working independently, in small groups, and one-on-one with the teacher. Students who are working independently can work on a variety of literacy based activities.

As with a majority of studies, the design of the current study was subjected to limitations. First, due to the pandemic, several problems had arisen including inconsistent attendance. Oghuvbu (2010) stated that through regular school attendance, learners access consistent educational support for their academic attainment. School attendance therefore is an important factor that influences the academic performance of pupils and helps them achieve academic excellence. Excessive absenteeism affects student performance as they are unable to engage in classroom activities (Sekiwu et al., 2020). Stanca (2006) examined the effects of attendance on academic performance.

Results indicate that attendance has a statistically significant and quantitatively relevant effect on student learning. Secondly, due to the pandemic again, some lessons were done online. There were connection problems where the text took time to load and the audio was lagging, which caused a hindrance during critical moments that involved reading and phonics instruction. Pandian et al. (2021) found that students' online learning experiences are adversely affected by poor internet connectivity. Furthermore, English lessons are short in government schools. Students do not have sufficient time to practice reading skills. Lack of sufficient time for extensive literacy experiences affects implementing the balanced approach appropriately (Duncan & Murnane, 2014).

A common practice in the UAE is that kindergarten teachers default to the traditional one-size-fits-all educational approach. According to Diamond et al. (2015) curricular requirements must be adapted to the needs of individual students rather than generalized for all students. The study recommends that classrooms should furnish students with the power to tailor their learning experiences in a way that best suits their unique needs (Parr & Campbell, 2012). Modeling should also be utilized as an instructional scaffold since students need guidance to gain new skills, according to Vygotsky (Soderman et al., 2005). While teachers teach literacy, it is recommended to follow the Gradual Release of Responsibility model (GRR) proposed by Fisher and Frey (2013). It moves students towards independence as they practice and master skills gradually. Rather than reading a story once a week, it is recommended that teachers should reread it throughout the week using different reading strategies.

Reading a book repeatedly is a systematic approach to develop children's understanding of vocabulary, deepen their comprehension, and enhance their print awareness skills. Additionally, it helps children develop a deeper understanding of phonemic awareness, including manipulating individual sounds in words (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). Moreover, rereading stories enables the teachers to implement all of the GRR components. According to Maynes et al. (2010) the GRR framework increases students' independence and enables them to mobilize learning strategies.

There is a gap in the literature with regards to a descriptive study of implementing a balanced literacy approach in a hybrid classroom. Therefore, it is recommended to investigate effective strategies to implement the balanced approach in a hybrid classroom. Moreover, this study investigated the impact of the balanced approach on students' vocabulary, letter-sound identification, and print awareness. Further research is encouraged to explore the impact of the balanced approach on other reading skills, such as comprehension. Schumm (2006) defines comprehension strategies as a set of procedures that help readers become active processors. It combines reading with thinking and reasoning. Without comprehension, children will be unable to gain meaning from text. Therefore, the effectiveness of balanced approach strategies on children's understanding of texts is encouraged and should be further investigated and monitored.

Additionally, future research is recommended to investigate the effects of the balanced approach on the reading performance of students with dyslexia who experience difficulties in language skills such as reading. Effective approaches and interventions are needed to support dyslexic students. Everatt et al. (2013) indicate a need for more dyslexia-focused pedagogies that supports literacy acquisition among dyslexic students.

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