

Effectiveness of the Phonics Method in Improving Beginning Reading Skills of Low-Grade Students

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Abstract. Reading is a crucial skill for academic success. This research investigates how effective the phonics method is in enhancing reading skills for first-grade elementary students. We conducted a literature review to analyze previous studies on phonics and compared them to traditional teaching methods. The findings indicate that the phonics method is generally more effective in improving early literacy skills, particularly in recognizing the relationship between letters and sounds and in reading fluency. In addition, the phonics method also helps increase students' motivation to learn. However, this study identified several limitations of previous research, such as the lack of attention to the educational context in Indonesia and obstacles in its application in diverse classrooms. The implications of this study suggest the need to adapt the use of phonics methods in Indonesia more widely, with an emphasis on 21st-century literacy needs. It is hoped that this review can become a basis for further research in elementary education regarding the application of phonics methods and can provide insight for educators in planning more effective learning strategies.

Keywords: Phonics method, Reading ability, Early literacy, Elementary school.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading ability is one of the basic skills that is very important for students to master from an early age, especially at the elementary school level. Reading is not just about getting to know letters and words, but it is also a foundation for students to understand concepts and information that will affect their academic success in the future. As expressed by (Smith, 2020), "strong reading skills at the beginning of education greatly determine academic success at a higher level." However, in grade I of Elementary School, many students face difficulties in recognizing letters, spelling, and stringing letters into words (Salsabila et al., 2022). This inhibits their literacy development, which in turn can have a negative impact on learning achievement later in life. Improving elementary school students' reading and writing literacy skills through the implementation of relevant and innovative learning is an urgent agenda in an effort to optimize students' potential so they can answer the skills challenges of the 21st century (Suparman et al., 2023). One of the practical approaches to improving early reading skills is the phonics method. This method focuses on the skill of connecting letters with sounds, and research shows that the phonics method can help students recognize sound patterns in

words so that they can spell and read more easily (Murray, A. L., 2019). With the development of technology and the need for literacy in the 21st century, the application of phonics methods has become increasingly relevant (Ehri, 2022). However, although this method has proven to be effective, in Indonesia, early reading learning is still dominated by conventional methods such as memorization, which are often not effective enough in improving students' understanding of the relationship between sounds and letters (Sari, D. P., & Widyastuti, 2021).

This method not only focuses on recognizing letter sounds but also improves students' overall motivation and literacy ability. The bound variable in this study is the initial reading ability of grade 1 elementary school students, which includes the skill of recognizing letters, connecting letters with sounds, and forming simple words. By measuring the initial reading ability before and after the application of the phonics method, this study will provide a clear picture of how much the phonics method affects students' reading ability.

The ideal condition is expected that all students are able to read well in the early stages of education (Salsabila & Wahyudin, 2024). However, in reality, many students experience difficulties in reading. This indicates the need for appropriate interventions to improve their reading skills. By applying the phonic method, it is hoped that students can more easily recognize letters and sounds and can read more fluently. In dealing with this problem, the phonic method can be an effective solution. With a systematic approach, students are taught the relationship between letters and sounds so they can recognize words more quickly.

Many previous studies have discussed the effectiveness of the phonics method in teaching early reading. For example, research by (Tiani et al., 2023) shows that students who are taught with the phonics method have a significant improvement in reading ability compared to students who use conventional methods. Research (Novianti, 2021) also shows that the phonics method is efficacious in improving the reading ability of children with mild disabilities. These results show that the phonics method can be a practical approach to improving reading skills in various educational contexts. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on exploring the effectiveness of phonics methods in the local Indonesian context, paying attention to the specific constraints faced by teachers and students. This research is expected to provide new insights for educators and policymakers in designing teaching strategies that are more effective and relevant to the needs of the 21st century. Thus, the results of this study are not only valid for the development of educational theories but can also be implemented practically to improve the initial reading ability of grade 1 elementary school students

LITERATUR REVIEW

Beginning Reading Skills in Lower Elementary Grades

Beginning reading ability is one of the essential aspects in primary education that must be mastered by students, especially in grade 1 of elementary school. At this stage, students begin to know letters, connect letters with sounds, and arrange letters into simple words (Jupri & Drijvers, 2016). This process is crucial, as reading not only serves as an essential skill but also as a foundation for students' future academic abilities. Beginning reading is the initial stage of reading skills taught to students, especially in grades 1 and 2 of Elementary School. According to Sukirno in (Nurani et al., 2021). Beginning reading focuses on students' ability to be literate, namely, to recognize, identify, and string letters into syllables, words, and simple sentences. Yuliana (Nurani et al., 2021) added that this process begins with the recognition of vowels and consonants, then assembled into words and sentences. Research shows that children who have good reading skills early in education tend to be more successful in learning at a higher level (Murray, A. L., 2019). In addition, strong reading skills play a role in children's cognitive development, which supports critical and analytical thinking skills.

Many students in grade 1 have difficulty reading, which is caused by various factors. One of the main factors is the lack of letter and sound recognition before entering school. Students who do not have a solid foundation in letter recognition will have difficulty reading and understanding texts in class. Research shows that students who enter schools with low reading skills are more likely to have further difficulties in learning (Sari, D. P., & Widyastuti, 2021). In addition, less effective teaching methods are also an obstacle. Many teachers still use conventional approaches that do not meet the learning needs of students. In this context, it is essential to implement more innovative and engaging teaching methods for students.

Early reading ability is also closely related to students' cognitive development. According to Piaget's theory, children aged 6-7 years are at the concrete operational stage. At this stage, they begin to be able to think logically about natural objects and events but still have difficulty understanding abstract concepts (Piaget, 1952). Therefore, the learning approach should focus on the use of visual aids and authentic experiences in the learning process. Students in grade 1 need to be given a fun and interactive learning experience so that they can understand the concept of reading better. The use of pictures, games, and props can help students understand the relationship between letters and sounds.

The challenges in learning to read in grade 1 come not only from the students themselves but also from the environment and teaching methods applied. Students with different backgrounds

may have varying experiences in recognizing letters and sounds, which affects their ability to read (Kemendikbudristek, 2017). For example, students who come from families that read and discuss books at home often tend to have better reading skills compared to students who do not get similar support (Afifah, Untari, 2022). This gap demonstrates the need for appropriate interventions to improve the reading skills of all students without exception.

Table 1. Summarizes the indicators or aspects measured

No	Research Indicators	Definition
1	Phonological Abilities	Measure students' ability to recognize and distinguish letter sounds.
2	Decoding Capabilities	Measure students' ability to associate sounds with letters to recognize words.
3	Reading Fluency	Measure how quickly and fluently students can read simple words.
4	Pronunciation	Measure students' accuracy in pronouncing words according to phonics rules.
5	Root Word Mastery	Measure how well students can recognize and understand essential words.

Phonic Method

The phonics method has been widely researched and adapted in various educational contexts. This approach focuses on recognizing the sounds of letters and how to combine them to form words. With this method, students are taught to hear and recognize the sounds of each letter they see, making it easier for them to spell and read words. Through the phonic method, students will more easily understand the structure of simple words and sentences, which is crucial for their future reading abilities.

The phonics method is implemented as a strategy to enhance early literacy skills in young children. This method, which emphasizes the relationship between letters and sounds, has proven effective in helping children recognize and understand letters and their corresponding sounds. Phonics instruction is systematically applied to develop children's foundational literacy skills. The implementation of this method has resulted in a significant improvement in literacy recognition abilities, reflecting its success in creating a solid foundation for children's literacy development. Thus, phonics serves as an effective tool in supporting the reading instruction process among children aged 5-6 years. (Diana Natalia dan Lia Kurniawaty, 2022)

The advantage of the phonics method is its ability to provide a systematic understanding to students. Students are gradually introduced to the sound of letters, from vowels to consonants, and then combined into syllables and words. This process not only makes learning more enjoyable but also increases students' motivation to learn to read. Research by (Tiani et al., 2023) showed that the application of the phonics method significantly improved students' reading ability. In his study, students who were taught using the phonics method showed better progress compared to those who used conventional methods.

However, the effectiveness of the phonic method is not always consistent in all contexts. Some students may not respond well to this method, especially those with different learning styles, such as visual or kinesthetic. Therefore, teachers need to understand the learning characteristics of students and adjust the teaching methods used. This adjustment can increase the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process and help students overcome the reading difficulties they face (Budinarsih, 2021). The application of the phonics method in reading learning in grade 1 can be done through various strategies. One effective strategy is the use of games and interactive activities that actively engage students. For example, teachers can use letter cards to help students recognize letter sounds and combine them into words. Activities such as composing words from the letters that have been provided can also improve students' reading skills. Additionally, the use of technology, such as phonics-based reading learning apps, can be an engaging tool for students to learn in a fun way.

The phonics method has been shown to play an essential role in building students' reading skills in the early grades, especially in introducing the relationship between sounds and letters. Isabel L. Beck and Mark E. Beck, in their book *Making Sense of Phonics: The Hows and Whys* third edition (2024), explain that phonics serves as the foundation in modern literacy programs with approaches such as Word Building, which facilitates the understanding of multi-syllable words through decoding activities (Isabel L. Beck dan Mark E. Beck, 2024). Additional strategies, such as Syllasearch activities, are also developed in the book to help students read complex words more fluently and quickly. This approach demonstrates the effectiveness of the phonics method in supporting early reading skills and ensuring students grasp the essential components of language gradually through effective and developmentally appropriate learning techniques.

In the context of education in Indonesia, the application of the phonics method must also consider the local culture and language. Students who learn in a bilingual or multilingual context may require a different approach to teaching reading. Therefore, educators need to adapt phonics methods to suit the needs of students and their local context. The research conducted by (Abella Saragih, 2020) used a single-case research design to see the

effectiveness of the combination of phonics and proximal self-motivation methods in improving reading skills in children with reading difficulties. The results show that the combination of these two methods is efficacious in improving reading ability, especially in syllable conjugation (KVKV), as well as increasing children's intrinsic motivation to read.

In this study, the phonics method is considered as an independent variable that is expected to improve the initial reading ability of grade 1 students, which is a bound variable. The use of phonics methods in teaching reading is expected to have a positive impact on the development of students' reading skills. By applying this approach, students are expected to be able to recognize letters, connect sounds, and form words more easily. This, in turn, will improve their fluency and reading comprehension, which is crucial for future academic success.

Overall, the existing literature shows that the phonics method can be an effective tool in improving the initial reading ability of grade 1 students. This study aims to explore more deeply the effectiveness of the phonics method in the local Indonesian context, as well as to identify the obstacles that may be faced during the application of this method. Thus, the results of this study are expected to make a significant contribution to the development of more effective reading teaching methods for students in the early grades, as well as provide new insights for educators in improving the quality of reading learning in elementary schools.

The application of appropriate and adaptive phonics methods can help students overcome reading difficulties and build a strong foundation for their literacy skills in the future. Therefore, educators need to continue to develop and evaluate the teaching methods used in order to meet the learning needs of students optimally. With the right approach, it is hoped that students can achieve good reading skills and be ready to face academic challenges at a higher level.

Initial reading learning using the phonics method has structured stages to help 1st-grade elementary school students recognize and master reading skills gradually. Reading development is not a linear process; it involves a series of interrelated stages where children move from recognizing letters and sounds to developing fluency and comprehension. (Adams Jager Marilyn, 1990)

Below are the stages of the phonics method to help students understand the relationship between letters and sounds, according to the guide adapted from the concept of Marilyn Jager Adams :

- a. Letter Sound Recognition: Start by teaching the sound of each letter individually (for example, introducing the sounds a, i, u, e, o first).
- b. Consolidation of Sounds into Syllables: Once students recognize the sounds of letters, teach them how to combine them into simple syllables.

- c. Word Formation: Students are invited to form simple words from syllables that have been learned (for example, ba, bi, bu).
- d. Reading Simple Sentences: Combining the words that have been learned into simple sentences.

Table 2. Steps used for the application of the phonics method :

No.	Step	Description	Purpose	Example Activity
1	Introduction to Letter Sounds	Students are introduced to the sounds of each vowel and consonant letter.	To help students distinguish between different letter sounds.	Letter cards with pictures, e.g., letter "b" with a picture of a "ball."
2	Practice in Sound Identification	Students practice associating letter sounds with letter shapes.	To develop phonemic awareness.	Listening to letter sounds and naming objects.
3	Blending Sounds into Syllables	Combining two letter sounds to form simple syllables (e.g., "ba," "bi").	To understand how letter sounds form syllables.	Singing songs about syllables or using games.
4	Word Formation and Spelling	Spelling simple words such as "b-a-l-l" to form "ball."	To see the relationship between syllables and meaningful words.	Spelling out and saying words aloud.
5	Reading Simple Words as a Whole	Reading words without spelling them out first, recognizing familiar words.	To enhance the ability to read whole words.	Reading word cards with pictures.
6	Reading Simple Sentences	Combining words into short sentences (e.g., "This is Ali's book").	To understand sentences as units of meaning.	Repetition reading with appropriate intonation.
7	Reading Short Paragraphs	Reading simple paragraphs with previously learned words.	To improve reading fluency and contextual understanding.	Reading a short story about "A Holiday."
8	Evaluation and Review of Material	Conducting pre-tests and post-tests to assess students' progress.	To evaluate the effectiveness of the phonics method.	Assessing students' skills in letter recognition and reading.

DISCUSSION

One approach that can be used to overcome reading difficulties is the phonics method. This method focuses on recognizing the relationship between letters and sounds, which allows students to spell and read words more easily. By using the phonic method, students not only learn to recognize letters but also understand how sounds are produced and connected to

form words. This is very important, given that good reading skills require a strong understanding of the structure of the language (Ehri, 2022).

The phonics method is an approach that systematically teaches the relationship between letters and sounds, thus assisting students in developing word decoding skills that are essential for early reading (Ehri, 2022). The phonics method is also considered effective in improving early reading ability through the recognition of structured sounds and letters. This method shows significant progress in students with reading difficulties (Murray, A. L., 2019). The phonics method not only helps students recognize sounds and letters but also improves their ability to understand the structure of simple words and sentences, which is essential in the development of early literacy (Sari, D. P., & Widyastuti, 2021)

Based on the definition outlined above, the phonics method is one of the effective ways of teaching reading, where students are taught to understand the relationship between letters and sounds. With this method, students learn to read by recognizing the sound of each letter they see, making it easier for them to spell and read words. This method has been shown to help improve early reading skills in students in early grades, as they are taught systematically and gradually. In this study, the effectiveness of the phonics method in improving the initial reading ability of grade 1 elementary school students has been analyzed in depth. The findings show that the phonics method has a significant positive impact on developing students' reading skills. This discussion will outline the implications of the findings, compare them with previous research, and make suggestions for further implementation and research.

The implications of these findings are critical to teaching practices in the lower grades. By using the phonic method, teachers can help students overcome the reading difficulties they often experience. The consistent application of phonics methods in the learning curriculum can provide a strong foundation for the development of student literacy. The study also shows that phonological and decoding skills acquired through phonics methods are beneficial not only for reading but also for broader academic development. Students who are proficient in reading at the beginning of their education will be better prepared to face academic challenges later in life.

Good reading skills have been shown to be positively associated with academic achievement in other areas, such as math and science (Murray, A. L., 2019). Therefore, educators need to integrate phonics methods as part of their teaching strategies. In this context, training for teachers on the application of phonics methods is also the key to successful implementation. This training should include effective teaching techniques, as well as how to evaluate student progress periodically.

This research is in line with many previous studies that have shown the effectiveness of the phonics method in improving reading ability. For example, research (Budiningsih, 2021) states that 1st-grade students who are taught using the phonics method have a significant improvement in their reading skills. This shows consistency in the results of the study that supports the use of the phonics method as an effective tool in teaching early reading. However, it is essential to note that each class has unique student dynamics and characteristics. Therefore, even if the phonics method proves to be effective, teachers must remain flexible and be prepared to adapt their approach based on the specific needs of students.

Based on the findings and discussion above, here are some suggestions for the implementation of the phonics method in teaching reading in the lower grades :

1. **Teacher Training:** Provide adequate training for teachers on the phonics method and its teaching strategies. This training should include an introduction to various techniques and tools that can be used in phonics instruction.
2. **Use of Visual Aids:** Use visual aids, such as letter cards, images, and multimedia materials, to make learning more engaging and interactive. These tools can help students better understand the relationship between letters and sounds.
3. **Technology Integration:** Leverage technology, such as phonics-based reading learning apps, to provide students with a richer learning experience. These apps can provide interactive exercises that allow students to practice outside of the classroom.
4. **Differentiation Approach:** Given the different characteristics of each student, it is essential to apply a differentiation approach in teaching. Teachers must be able to identify the learning needs of each student and adjust the teaching methods used.
5. **Parent Involvement:** Involve parents in the learning process by providing them with information and resources on how they can support children's reading skills at home. This can include providing books, word games, or reading activities together.

Continuous evaluation and monitoring are essential to assess the effectiveness of the phonics method. This study uses indicators to measure phonological ability, decoding ability, reading fluency, pronunciation, and mastery of essential words. By measuring these aspects, teachers can get a clear picture of student progress and areas where they may need additional support.

The use of varied evaluation instruments, including tests, classroom observations, and interviews with students and teachers, provides complete data on the effectiveness of phonics methods. This data will also be helpful for reflection and improvement in teaching practices in the future.

In the context of reading instruction, Piaget's cognitive development theory as cited in (Saul, 2024) provides a solid basis for understanding the characteristics of 1st-grade students. In the

concrete operational stage, 6-7-year-old students begin to be able to think logically about natural objects and events, although they still have difficulty understanding abstract concepts. Therefore, a concrete and visual learning approach is fundamental in this class. (Susanto, 2014) emphasizes that students at this level are building a foundation of literacy and numeracy skills, so it is essential to design learning activities that stimulate their curiosity and motivation.

Overall, this study shows that the phonics method is a practical approach to teaching beginning reading. By providing a clear understanding of the relationship between letters and sounds, this method helps students overcome reading difficulties and build strong literacy skills. These findings have important implications for educational practice in grade 1, pointing to the need for the integration of phonics methods in the curriculum as well as appropriate training for teachers.

Through consistent application and adaptation in accordance with the needs of students, it is hoped that the phonics method can make a significant contribution to improving the initial reading ability of grade 1 elementary school students. Further research is needed to explore the long-term impact of the phonics method and how it can be integrated with other approaches in teaching reading.

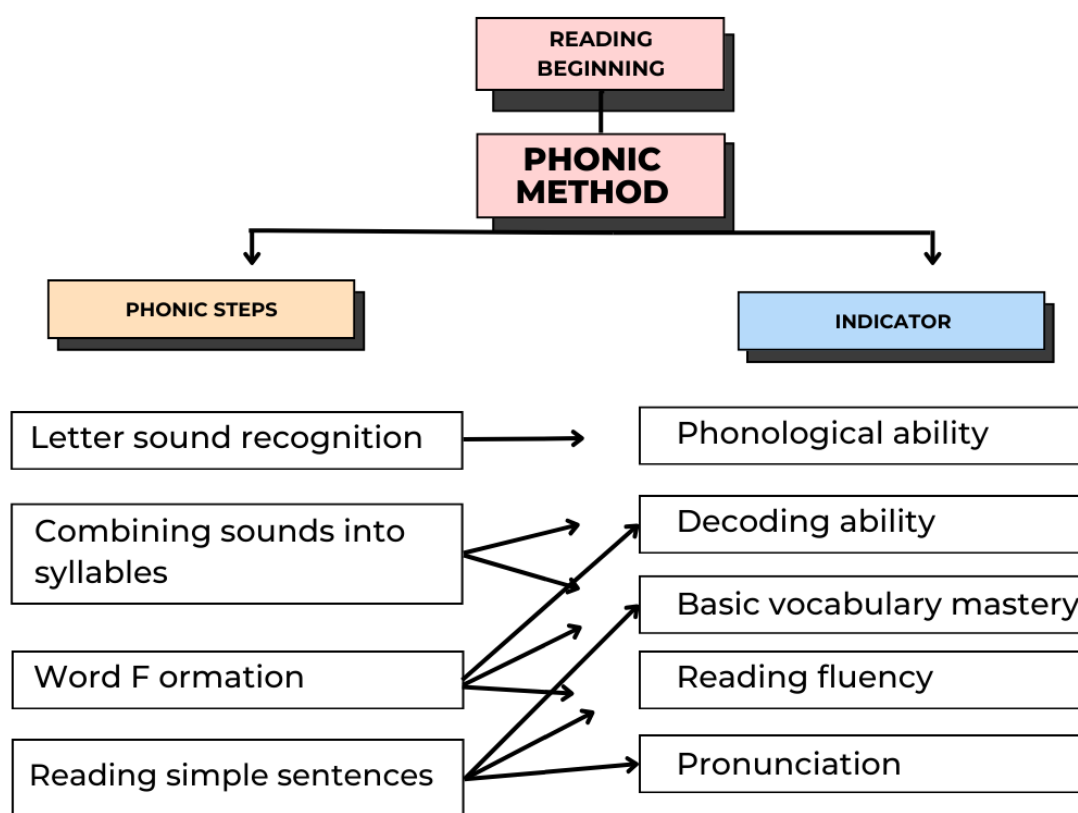


Figure 1. The phonics method steps that influence beginning reading indicators

CONCLUSION

The phonics method improves the student's initial reading ability indicators through several interrelated vital steps. First, this approach builds students' phonological abilities by training them to recognize and distinguish the sounds of letters, which is an essential foundation in reading. Furthermore, students' decoding abilities improve as they learn to associate sounds with letters to recognize words. This process contributes to reading fluency, where students can read simple words quickly and fluently. Additionally, the phonics method helps improve students' pronunciation, ensuring they can pronounce words according to the correct phonics rules. Finally, with systematic teaching, students can achieve essential word mastery, which means they are able to recognize and understand many essential words in the context of reading. With the support of adequate teacher training and parental involvement, phonics methods can be effectively integrated into the curriculum, thus building a solid foundation for further literacy mastery.

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