Arabic and English Language Journal
Volume 1 Issue 2, 2025
P-ISSN: xxxx-xxxx, E-ISSN:xxxx-xxxx
DOI: xxxx

Phonological Awareness and Reading Ability among Early-Grade Learners

Ica Sulistianti[1*], Hikmah[2], Ambo Dalle[3], Abdul Haris Sunubi[4], Mujahidah[5]

[1,2] *Integrated Islamic School of Ummusshabri, Kolaka, Indonesia*
[3,4,5] *IAIN Parepare, Indonesia*

**Corresponding E-mail: icaac185@gmail.com*

Received date: June 25 2025
Accepted date: November 27 2025
Published date: December 04 2025

Abstract

Background: Reading ability is a foundational literacy skill that plays a crucial role in children's academic development. One of the key predictors of early reading success is phonological awareness, which refers to the ability to identify and manipulate sound structures in spoken language. Despite its significance, many early-grade learners still experience difficulties in decoding words due to low sensitivity to phonological components.
Research Objectives: This study aims to examine the influence of phonological awareness on children's reading ability and to identify which aspects of phonological awareness most strongly support word recognition and reading fluency at Ummusshabri School, Kolaka.
Methods: This research employed a qualitative descriptive design involving early-grade students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and document review of students' reading assessments. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns that reflect the relationship between phonological awareness skills and reading performance.
Results: The findings show that students with stronger phonological awareness, particularly in phoneme segmentation, blending, and initial sound discrimination—demonstrated more accurate and fluent word reading. Students with limited phonological awareness exhibited difficulties in decoding, frequent mispronunciations, and slower reading rates. Teachers also reported that targeted phonological activities improved students' reading progress over time.
Conclusions: The study concludes that phonological awareness plays a substantial role in shaping early reading ability. Strengthening this skill through structured and engaging phonological instruction is essential for supporting students' literacy development. Further research may explore intervention models to enhance phonological awareness in diverse classroom contexts.

Keywords: phonological awareness development; early reading ability; literacy instruction; young learners

Introduction

Reading proficiency is widely acknowledged as a fundamental foundation for children's academic progress, particularly during the early stages of schooling when students begin developing essential decoding and word-recognition skills. Early reading success is strongly influenced by students' metalinguistic abilities, among which phonological awareness plays a central role. Phonological awareness refers to the capacity to detect and manipulate sound structures, such as syllables, rhyme, and phonemes, which supports the cognitive processes required for reading development (Anthony & Francis, 2019). Numerous studies confirm that children with strong phonological awareness acquire reading skills more efficiently and show higher fluency in later grades (Lonigan et al., 2021; Snow, 2020).

The need to conduct this research arises from persistent evidence of reading difficulties among early-grade learners in Indonesia. National reports and assessments continue to highlight challenges in decoding accuracy, phonemic sensitivity, and reading fluency among young readers (Kemdikbud, 2022). These literacy gaps are exacerbated by variations in instructional quality, classroom resources, and students' early language exposure. Examining phonological awareness as a key predictor of reading achievement offers an important perspective for developing effective, evidence-based literacy interventions that are feasible for elementary schools with diverse contexts (Hulme & Snowling, 2020).

The broader social and educational environment further strengthens the relevance of this study. In communities where cultural and religious traditions shape educational expectations as in the context of Ummusshabri School Kolaka, reading skills are not only academic competencies but also tools for accessing religious texts, cultivating moral understanding, and participating in literacy-based community activities. Socioeconomic differences additionally influence children's early linguistic experiences, shaping their phonological development and readiness for formal reading instruction (Hart & Risley, 2003). These social factors demonstrate the need for targeted strategies to build foundational literacy skills among young learners.

Within the institutional setting, teachers at Ummusshabri School report notable variations in students' early reading performance, particularly in accuracy and decoding fluency during reading-aloud activities. These observations suggest that limited phonological awareness may be a central factor influencing students' reading challenges. Addressing this issue requires empirical insights derived from real classroom conditions to guide teachers in refining literacy instruction and designing interventions that strengthen phonological skills. Therefore, this research seeks to investigate the influence of phonological awareness on children's reading ability, offering both theoretical contributions and practical recommendations for early literacy development.

Literature Review

Research on early literacy consistently highlights phonological awareness as a major predictor of children's reading development. Extensive evidence shows that phonological awareness, particularly phoneme segmentation, blending, and sound discrimination, forms the foundation for decoding and word recognition (Hulme & Snowling, 2020). Studies in multiple educational contexts demonstrate that children with strong phonological sensitivity tend to acquire reading skills more rapidly and achieve better reading outcomes in subsequent grades (Anthony & Francis, 2019; Lonigan et al., 2021). These findings reinforce

the theoretical consensus that phonological awareness should be prioritized in early reading instruction.

Existing literature has introduced several instructional models aimed at strengthening phonological skills. These include structured phonics programs, multisensory phonological activities, and explicit instruction in sound manipulation (Ehri, 2014). Many programs have shown positive effects on children's early reading performance, especially when implemented systematically in the first years of schooling (National Reading Panel, 2000). The strongest evidence emphasizes that phonological training is most effective when integrated with reading tasks and delivered consistently over time (Snow, 2020). These existing solutions demonstrate promising practices that can be adapted to various school contexts.

Despite these advancements, several limitations in prior research remain evident. Many studies have been conducted in large, urban schools with abundant resources, leaving gaps in understanding how phonological awareness develops in smaller or religious-based institutions where linguistic exposure and instructional practices may differ. Other studies rely heavily on quantitative test scores without documenting classroom interactions, making it difficult to capture the real nuances of how teachers support phonological growth (Hulme et al., 2019). Additionally, limited research has examined phonological awareness specifically in Indonesian or multilingual educational settings, where children's early language experiences vary widely (Susanto, 2017). These gaps indicate the need for school-based, context-specific analyses that combine observation and teacher perspectives.

Based on these limitations, the purpose of this research is to examine how phonological awareness influences children's reading ability at Ummusshabri School Kolaka. The study aims to identify which components of phonological awareness contribute most significantly to decoding skills and reading fluency. More specifically, this research seeks to understand the relationship between sound-manipulation abilities and students' performance during reading-aloud tasks, as well as how teachers perceive and respond to phonological challenges in the classroom. By establishing this focus, the study intends to address the specific problem of low decoding accuracy observed in early-grade learners.

Drawing from the reviewed literature, the research advances the argument that stronger phonological awareness leads to more accurate and fluent reading in early-grade students. Based on prior studies, the working hypothesis is that students who demonstrate higher levels of phoneme segmentation, blending, and initial sound identification will exhibit better reading performance than those with weaker phonological skills. This hypothesis is grounded in established literacy theories and aligns with evidence from previous research showing that phonological processing is a core mechanism in early reading acquisition (Ehri & Roberts, 2006; Snowling & Hulme, 2021).

The significance of this research lies in its potential contribution to both theory and instructional practice. By situating the study within a specific school environment, it addresses the contextual limitations of earlier research and provides insights applicable to educators in similar religious-based or resource-limited settings. The findings are expected to offer practical recommendations for improving literacy instruction and developing targeted interventions that strengthen phonological awareness. Furthermore, this research contributes to the academic field by expanding empirical evidence from Indonesian elementary schools, thereby offering novel insights into early literacy development in multilingual and culturally rich learning environments.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the influence of phonological awareness on students' reading ability within an authentic classroom setting. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of literacy-related phenomena and provides a holistic understanding of the interactions, behaviors, and instructional practices that shape early reading development. The case study design further allows the researcher to examine the issue within its natural context, ensuring that findings reflect real classroom conditions.

The participants of this research consisted of early-grade students at Ummusshabri School in Kolaka, along with their classroom teachers. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their observed reading proficiency and phonological awareness levels, ensuring representation across varying skill levels. This sampling strategy supports the study's goal of capturing diverse literacy experiences and examining how phonological skills manifest among students with different learning needs.

The research procedures were carried out in three major phases. The preparatory phase involved obtaining institutional permissions, coordinating with school personnel, selecting participants, and developing research instruments. The data collection phase included classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and individual phonological awareness assessments administered to students. The final phase encompassed data analysis and validation, during which findings were reviewed through member checking to ensure accuracy and credibility.

Multiple instruments were deployed to gather rich and triangulated data. Table 1 summarizes the instruments used in this study, their purposes, and the type of data collected.

Table 1. *Research Instruments*

Instrument Type	Purpose of Use	Description / Components	Data Collected
Phonological Awareness Assessment	To measure students' phonological skills	Tasks include phoneme segmentation, rhyme recognition, blending, and initial/final sound identification	Student scores and observed difficulties in phonological tasks
Classroom Observation Checklist	To document literacy instruction and student engagement	Covers teaching strategies, reading activities, teacher–student interaction, and student responses	Observational notes, teaching patterns, student participation
Semi-Structured Interview Guide (Teachers)	To explore teachers' perceptions and instructional approaches	Questions address teaching methods, challenges in literacy instruction, and students' phonological development	Teacher narratives, instructional insights, classroom challenges
Field Notes	To capture contextual information	Free descriptive notes during classroom visits	Contextual descriptions supporting triangulation
Document Review Sheet	To examine supporting documents	Includes review of lesson plans, learning materials, and student progress notes	Supplemental information on instructional planning

Data collection was conducted over several weeks to ensure the stability of observed behavior and to capture authentic classroom interactions. Classroom observations documented daily literacy practices and how phonological awareness was incorporated into instruction. Semi-structured interviews with teachers provided deeper insights into pedagogical decisions and challenges faced during early reading instruction. Meanwhile, the phonological awareness assessments offered concrete indicators of students' skill levels, complementing qualitative insights from observations and interviews.

The data analysis process employed thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns within interview transcripts, observation notes, and field notes. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize students' phonological assessment results, providing an overview of general trends and variations. Triangulation across data sources enhanced the validity and reliability of the findings. This combination of qualitative interpretation and descriptive data allowed the researcher to form a comprehensive understanding of how phonological awareness influences reading ability in early-grade students.

Results

1. Teacher's Perspective on Phonological Awareness

The teacher highlighted that phonological awareness plays a foundational role in shaping students' early reading development. She observed that students who demonstrate stronger skills in identifying and manipulating sounds—such as recognizing initial phonemes or blending simple syllables—tend to decode words more accurately and progress more quickly in reading activities. According to her, early-grade literacy improvement becomes significantly more attainable when phonological skills are consistently reinforced in the classroom.

In addition, the teacher explained that several challenges persist among young learners, especially those who struggle to differentiate similar sounds or identify the position of sounds within words. These difficulties often lead to frequent mispronunciations and slower reading fluency. To address these issues, she regularly incorporates phonological activities such as rhyme-based games, sound-discrimination exercises, and multisensory tasks like clapping syllables. She believes that these strategies help sustain student engagement while strengthening their awareness of sound patterns.

Table 1. Summary of Teacher Interview Findings

Theme	Description of Findings	Example Teacher Quote
Importance of phonological awareness	Teacher views phonological skills as the core foundation of early reading	"Students who are strong in sound recognition usually read faster."
Student challenges	Learners struggle with similar sounds and sound-position identification	"Many still confuse /b/ and /p/ in simple words."
Instructional strategies	Teacher uses rhyme games, sound exercises, and multisensory activities	"I often use rhyme games and clapping syllables in my lessons."

2. Classroom Observation Findings

Classroom observations revealed clear variations in students' phonological awareness skills during reading activities. Several students demonstrated adequate ability to identify initial sounds and decode simple CVC words, while others displayed hesitation when encountering unfamiliar phonemes. The overall learning environment showed that phonological tasks—such as identifying sounds, blending syllables, and segmenting words—were consistently integrated into daily literacy routines, although the level of student participation varied.

More specific behaviors emerged during structured phonological activities. Students with stronger awareness were able to respond quickly during sound recognition exercises and blended simple words with minimal support. In contrast, students with lower phonological sensitivity often paused, misidentified sounds, or required repeated prompts from the teacher. However, multisensory activities such as clapping syllables or sorting words by beginning sounds noticeably increased engagement across the classroom, suggesting that interactive approaches helped sustain attention and support learning.

Table 2. Summary of Classroom Observation Findings

Observation Theme	Description of Behavior	Example Classroom Evidence
Initial sound recognition	Some students identify initial phonemes confidently, while others hesitate	"Several students immediately identified /m/, while a few looked unsure before answering."
Blending skills	Students blend simple CVC words easily but struggle with longer or unfamiliar words	"Most students read 'sun' smoothly, but paused when blending 'slide.'"
Reading fluency	Varies widely; less proficient students read slowly with frequent decoding stops	"Two students read word by word and paused at new sounds."
Engagement in phonological tasks	Interactive activities increase participation and accuracy	"Clapping syllables encouraged nearly all students to participate actively."

3. Phonological Assessment Findings

The phonological assessment revealed distinct patterns in students' sound-awareness abilities, with notable variation across different phonological components. Several students demonstrated solid performance in basic skills such as identifying initial phonemes and blending simple CVC words, indicating adequate foundational awareness. These students also showed more accurate word recognition during reading tasks, suggesting a strong link between phonological awareness and decoding ability.

However, the assessment also identified specific areas of difficulty, particularly in skills requiring more refined phonological sensitivity. Many students struggled to segment words containing consonant blends, differentiate between similar phonemes such as /r/–/l/ or /b/–/p/, and blend words with digraphs or complex clusters. These challenges were consistent with the decoding errors observed during reading, where mispronunciations and slowed reading pace commonly occurred. Students with weaker phonological awareness also tended to rely on guessing strategies rather than applying sound–symbol knowledge.

Overall, the assessment indicated that stronger phonological skills corresponded with higher reading fluency and accuracy, reinforcing the essential role of phonological awareness in early literacy development. The patterns found in the assessment support the themes emerging from teacher interviews and classroom observations, showing that targeted

phonological instruction is needed to address specific gaps in segmentation, blending, and sound discrimination.

Table 3. Detailed Summary of Phonological Assessment Findings

Assessment Area	Indicators Assessed	Student Performance Pattern	Common Difficulties Observed	Example Evidence From Assessment
Phoneme Segmentation	Ability to break words into individual sounds	Some students segment simple CVC words successfully; others need prompts	Difficulty segmenting words with consonant blends	"Student segmented *cat* correctly as /c/-/a/-/t/ but hesitated with *frog*."
Phoneme Blending	Ability to combine sounds into whole words	Accurate blending for simple words; inconsistent performance for complex words	Struggles with digraphs and blends such as /sh/, /st/, /br/	"Student blended *sun* easily but paused when blending *street*."
Sound Discrimination	Distinguishing similar phonemes	Adequate for simple contrasts; weak for similar articulatory sounds	Confusion between /r/–/l/, /b/–/p/, /s/–/sh/	"Student read *rice* as *lice* and misheard *ship* as *sip*."
Rhyme Recognition	Identifying rhyming words	Moderate skill; some students respond quickly	Difficulty with unfamiliar or multisyllabic pairs	"Student matched *cat–hat*, but struggled with *fly–cry*."
Syllable Awareness	Clapping or counting syllables	Generally stronger than phoneme-level skills	Errors with longer, multisyllabic words	"Student clapped 3 syllables for *banana* but miscounted *elephant*."
Onset–Rime Blending	Combining onset with rime to form words	Good performance on common patterns	Slow response to unfamiliar or complex patterns	"Student blended *c–at* easily but hesitated with *fl–ag*."
Word Recognition (Reading)	Reading familiar and unfamiliar words	Strong phonological skills correspond to higher accuracy	Weak phonological awareness leads to slow, error-prone reading	"Students who mastered blending read the word list faster with fewer errors."

Discussion

The findings of this study reaffirm that phonological awareness plays a crucial role in shaping early reading development among young learners at Ummusshabri School. Across interviews, observations, and assessments, students who demonstrated stronger phonological skills consistently exhibited better decoding ability, smoother reading fluency, and fewer pronunciation errors. These results highlight the importance of strengthening phonological foundations for improving early literacy outcomes. Patterns from the teacher interview and classroom observations reveal strong alignment regarding students' phonological strengths and weaknesses. The teacher reported that students who could identify initial sounds or manipulate phonemes performed better in reading tasks, and this was supported by observational data showing that such students responded more confidently during literacy activities. Conversely, students who had difficulty discriminating similar sounds or segmenting words were observed hesitating, misidentifying phonemes, and relying on repetition or teacher cues.

The phonological assessment strengthened these findings by quantitatively and qualitatively confirming gaps in segmentation, blending, and sound discrimination—especially with consonant blends and phonetically similar pairs such as /b/–/p/ or /r/–/l/. These difficulties directly paralleled the decoding errors observed in class, indicating a clear relationship between phonological processing and reading performance. The triangulation of all three data sources demonstrates a consistent and meaningful connection between the depth of phonological awareness and students' reading proficiency.

These findings align closely with previous research that identifies phonological awareness as one of the strongest predictors of early reading ability. Studies by Ehri (2005) and Snowling & Hulme (2012) emphasize that children who master phoneme recognition and manipulation are more capable of developing accurate word-reading skills. The high reading accuracy observed among students with stronger phonological awareness in this study reflects these established theoretical frameworks.

The specific difficulties found—particularly segmentation of consonant blends and discrimination of similar phonemes—also mirror earlier research. For example, Anthony and Francis note that complex phoneme manipulation tasks typically emerge later in children's literacy development and require explicit instructional support (Francis [2022]). Similarly, Carroll et al. found that children often confuse similar speech sounds until they receive structured phonological training, which aligns with the confusion patterns seen in the present study (Carroll et al [2015]).

However, some studies have reported that multilingual learners progress differently depending on their exposure to multiple sound systems, which can either enhance or complicate phonological development (Oller & Eilers, 2002). In the context of this study, the variation in students' phonological scores may reflect linguistic diversity within the school environment. Although this research did not focus on multilingual factors, the differences observed suggest that individual language backgrounds may also influence phonological outcomes.

The context of Ummusshabri School may further explain the observed patterns. Classrooms contain students with varying levels of early literacy exposure before entering school, leading to noticeable gaps in phonological preparedness. The teacher regularly incorporates rhyme games, sound-based activities, and multisensory techniques, yet the large class size and mixed proficiency levels make evenly paced progress challenging. Limited

resources for individualized phonological instruction may also contribute to the persistence of difficulties in segmentation and discrimination.

These findings have important implications for both practice and theory. Practically, the school could benefit from implementing systematic, targeted phonological interventions—especially for students struggling with segmentation and similar-sound discrimination. Teachers may also need structured training on early literacy instruction to strengthen classroom strategies. Theoretically, the results reinforce frameworks that position phonological awareness as a foundational component of reading, suggesting that future literacy programs should prioritize explicit, consistent phoneme-level instruction.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The sample size was small and limited to one school, reducing generalizability. The data relied heavily on qualitative methods, which provide depth but may lack measurement precision. Additionally, interviews were conducted with a single teacher, limiting perspectives. Future research should include larger samples, multiple grade levels, and mixed-method designs to better understand the multifaceted relationship between phonological awareness and reading ability. Longitudinal studies may also help examine how these skills develop over time.

Conclusion

This study confirms that phonological awareness is a key determinant of early reading ability among young learners at Ummusshabri School, Kolaka. Students who demonstrated stronger skills in phoneme recognition, blending, segmentation, and sound discrimination showed higher reading accuracy and fluency. In contrast, learners with weaker phonological awareness experienced persistent decoding difficulties, frequent mispronunciations, and slower reading progression. The triangulated data, from teacher interviews, classroom observations, and phonological assessments, consistently showed that students' reading performance is closely tied to their level of phonological sensitivity. While basic skills such as initial sound identification were relatively well developed among several students, more complex tasks involving consonant blends, digraphs, and similar phoneme contrasts remained challenging for many. These specific gaps suggest that early-grade instruction should emphasize explicit and systematic phonological teaching. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of integrating structured, interactive, and multisensory phonological activities into daily literacy routines. Strengthening these practices may significantly support students' decoding ability and enhance their overall reading fluency. Future research is encouraged to explore broader samples, longer-term interventions, and comparative models of phonological instruction to further deepen understanding of how phonological awareness can best be supported in diverse classroom contexts.

References

Synergetic effects of phonological awareness, vocabulary, and word reading on bilingual children's reading comprehension: A three-year study. (2023, January). *contempory educational phonology journal, 73*.

Anthony, J. L. (2019). Development of Phonological Awareness. *Sage journal, 14*(5).

Bree, E. D. (2022). Phonology and literacy: follow-up results of the Utrecht dyslexia and specific language impairment project. *journal digital academic*.

Bus, A. G. (2020). Phonological awareness and early reading: A meta-analysis of experimental training studies. *Journal of educational psychology*.

Chen, H. (2023, January). Effects of phonological awareness and morphological awareness on blind students' reading comprehension. *BPS journal, 114*(2), 415-429.

Hismanoglu, M. (n.d.). An investigation of phonological awareness of prospective EFL teachers. *Procedia journal, 31*, 639-645.

Hogan, T. P. (2019). The Relationship Between Phonological Awareness and Reading: Implications for the Assessment of Phonological Awareness. *American journal of speech, 36*, 285-293.

J.M, E. (2020). The Effectiveness of Professional Development on the Phonological Awareness Outcomes of Preschool Children: A Systematic Review. *literacy research instruction*, 121-147.

Khasawneh, M. A., & Alkhawaldeh, M. A. (2020). The Effectiveness of Phonological Awareness Training in Treating Deficiencies in Auditory Processing among Children with Learning Disabilities among Elementary Cycle Students in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Language Education*, 11.

Lee, J. w. (2022). The Relations of Morphological Awareness with Language and Literacy Skills Vary Depending on Orthographic Depth and Nature of Morphological Awareness. *journal educational research, 93*(4).

Lin, J. (2021, december). Cross-linguistic influence of phonological awareness and phonological recoding skills in Chinese reading acquisition among early adolescent students. *the journal of general psychology*, 120-141.

Nagy, W. (2021). Contributions of morphology beyond phonology to literacy outcomes of upper elementary and middle-school students. *journal of educational phonology*, 134-147.

Passenger, T. (2022). Phonological processing and early literacy. *Journal of research in reading, 23*, 55-66. Vandermosten, M. (2021). Longitudinal relations between auditory processing, speech perception,

phonology and literacy development in children at risk for dyslexia. *4*.