



## ANALYSIS OF THE DIFFICULTIES OF PHONEME-GRAPHEME CORRESPONDENCE IN READING ENGLISH FOR GRADE VI STUDENTS AT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL 106166 MARINDAL 2

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### Abstract

Mastering reading skills is a crucial foundation in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly at the elementary school level. At SDN 106166 Marindal 2, sixth-grade students are challenged to master vocabulary and pronunciation as a foundation. However, this learning process faces specific obstacles directly related to the linguistic systems of the two languages being studied. This research is urgently needed to comprehensively analyze the difficulties in phoneme-grapheme correspondence and formulate pedagogical recommendations that focus on the methodological transition (from repetition to phonics) and a student-centered approach, which has been proven effective in addressing reading and pronunciation difficulties in sixth-grade students at SDN 106166 Marindal 2.

**Keywords:** Difficulties of phoneme-grapheme, Correspondence, Reading English

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The biggest challenge identified in sixth-grade English learning is the mismatch between spelling (graphemes) and pronunciation (phonemes). This difficulty stems from the differences in English orthography, which is classified as deep orthography, and Indonesian, which is relatively phonemic. Putra (2023) asserts that this orthographic challenge is a common obstacle for Indonesian EFL learners, causing students to frequently decode and pronounce words based on Indonesian spelling rules. Teachers acknowledge that students experience reading errors or mispronunciations due to this influence. In an effort to address spelling and pronunciation discrepancies, the primary strategy employed by teachers is intensive vocabulary repetition. While repetition is a valid method for strengthening phonological memory, research shows that this strategy is not optimal if it is not supported by systematic phonics instruction. Studies by Chen et al. (2024) and Algamal (2024) quasi-experimentally demonstrated that synthetic phonics instruction was significantly more effective in improving decoding, pronunciation, and vocabulary retention. In the Indonesian context, Putri (2024) also demonstrated that systematic phonics implementation improved elementary school students' early reading skills. Therefore, there is a significant gap between the teaching strategies used and the methodological approaches proven effective in addressing phoneme-grapheme correspondence difficulties.

Research also shows that classroom teaching patterns tend to be linear and teacher-centered. This approach, according to Oyshi (2025), narrows the space for student interaction and limits the active development of understanding. This situation creates polarization in the classroom, where students struggling to read tend to be passive and avoid interaction. This polarization is reinforced by Krashen's Affective Filter theory, where anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence increase the affective filter and inhibit absorption language input



(Guo, 2023; Bhanu & Selvaraj, 2023; Al-Mutairi, 2024). Thus, a teacher-centered approach has the potential to exacerbate the affective state of students already experiencing linguistic difficulties.

In addition to methodological factors, the limitations of learning media, which tend to be static (infocus and cardboard), also contribute to this problem. Sunarti et al. (2025) found that multisensory media are essential not only to aid comprehension but also to reduce affective barriers in elementary school students. Static media fail to facilitate students with auditory or kinesthetic learning styles, thus making them less engaged and reinforcing a passive atmosphere in the classroom.

## 2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive research type. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study seeks to understand the phenomenon of phoneme-grapheme correspondence difficulties in depth through observation and interviews. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research is used to explore the meaning behind students' experiences in a natural context. The descriptive research type was chosen because this study aims to describe the real conditions related to students' abilities in matching sounds and letters when reading English, without performing any particular treatment on the research object, as explained by Sukmadinata (2019) that descriptive research focuses on the systematic and factual presentation of phenomena.

The research was conducted at SD 106166 Marindal 2, located on Jalan Balai Desa Pasar XII, Patumbak District, Deli Serdang Regency. This location was chosen because based on initial observations, it was found that sixth-grade students still had difficulty reading English, especially in matching phonemes and graphemes. This is in line with the findings of Fitriana and Fadhilah (2019) who stated that many elementary school students in Indonesia have not been able to connect English sounds and letters correctly. The research was conducted on November 8, 2025, coinciding with the English learning schedule, thus providing the researchers with the opportunity to observe the learning process directly. The research subjects consisted of 28 sixth-grade students as learning participants and one homeroom teacher as the primary informant. Total sampling was used because the student population was not too large, allowing all students to be observed. Teachers were chosen as informants because they have a deep understanding of students' reading development, as explained by Haryanto (2020) who states that teachers are a key source of information in reading research at the elementary school level.

Data collection was conducted through observation and semi-structured interviews. Observations were conducted throughout the learning process to record how students read words, identify letters, and pronounce certain words. The researcher recorded students' responses to words considered difficult, including common errors such as pronouncing vowels based on Indonesian language rules. This observation method aligns with the view of Muthmainnah (2021), who stated that observation allows researchers to capture reading difficulties directly and naturally.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with homeroom teachers to obtain information about the types of difficulties experienced by students and the strategies used by teachers in teaching. The semi-structured interview technique provided researchers with the flexibility to explore more in-depth information, as explained by Yuliana and Lestari (2022), who stated that this interview format allowed researchers to ask follow-up questions based on field findings.

Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman analysis model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, researchers selected and simplified information from observations and interviews to focus on aspects of phoneme-grapheme correspondence. In the data presentation stage, the results of observations and interviews were organized into descriptive form for ease of understanding. In the conclusion drawing stage, researchers formulated findings regarding the types of difficulties, contributing factors, and teachers' strategies for addressing these problems. This model aligns with the opinion of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) that qualitative analysis must be



conducted continuously from the beginning of data collection. Data accuracy was verified through source triangulation by comparing observation and interview findings. The use of triangulation helps ensure the reliability of the data obtained, as stated by Sugiyono (2020), who stated that triangulation is the most commonly used data verification technique in qualitative research to increase the credibility of research results.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In-depth interviews with the sixth-grade English teacher at SDN 106166 Marindal 2 provided not only a general overview of the teaching and learning process but also revealed classroom interaction dynamics, student learning behavior tendencies, and structural limitations that affect the effectiveness of English language teaching at the elementary school level.

In general, the ongoing learning process showed a consistent pattern but was not yet fully adaptive to the individual needs of students. The detailed description is elaborated as follows:

#### 1. Linear and Teacher-Centered Teaching Patterns

The teacher explained that learning was carried out systematically through relatively fixed stages: material delivery, explanation, and assignment. This pattern reflects a deductive approach, where concepts are delivered first before students are given the opportunity to practice or apply them.

In practice, the teacher became the main actor controlling the flow of learning, ranging from material selection to evaluation. Students tended to follow the predetermined path without much room for exploration or initiative. This condition caused classroom interactions to be one-way, with communication dominated by the teacher to the students.

Furthermore, this pattern also indicates that learning has not fully accommodated a differentiated approach, despite the significant variation in students' abilities within a single classroom. Consequently, high-ability students tended to comprehend the material faster, while low-ability students were left behind without any specific intervention.

#### 2. Limitations of Learning Media

The media used by the teacher was limited to projectors (\*infokus\*) and posters/cardboards containing the material. Both media functioned primarily as static visual aids, thereby failing to provide a varied learning experience for students.

The teacher also revealed that this limitation was influenced by several factors, such as the lack of school facilities, limited time to prepare innovative learning media, and a lack of training regarding the utilization of technology-based media.

As a result, the learning process has not been able to accommodate various student learning styles, such as auditory and kinesthetic. Students who required physical activity or direct interaction in learning tended to be less engaged, which consequently resulted in low participation and comprehension of the material being taught.

#### 3. Polarization of Student Participation in Class

The teacher identified a clear gap between active and passive students. Active students generally exhibited traits such as being brave enough to ask questions, quick to respond to questions, and capable of completing tasks well.

Conversely, passive students tended to display behaviors such as remaining silent, avoiding interaction, and experiencing difficulties in understanding instructions as well as learning materials. In some cases, passive students also required more time to complete the assignments given.

This phenomenon demonstrates that the classroom is not homogeneous in terms of learning readiness. Differences in background, basic abilities, and confidence levels became factors influencing student participation rates. Without appropriate strategies, this gap has the potential to widen further.

#### 4. Main Challenge: Differences in Spelling and Pronunciation

The teacher emphasized that one of the main difficulties in learning English is the mismatch between writing (spelling) and pronunciation. This often causes confusion among students when reading or pronouncing words in English.



The influence of Indonesian, which has a phonemic orthography system, is a major factor in this difficulty. Students are accustomed to reading words according to their spelling; thus, when facing English—which is inconsistent between letters and sounds—they tend to make mistakes.

To overcome this, the teacher utilized repetition as the primary method. Students were asked to repeat vocabulary repeatedly to become familiar with the form and sound of the words. Although effective in the short term, this strategy still has limitations in building deep understanding.

#### 5. Teacher's Strategies in Motivating Students

In an effort to increase student engagement, the teacher implemented several motivational strategies, such as giving rewards, using educational games, and conducting ice-breaking activities.

The provision of rewards was carried out to appreciate students who were active or able to answer correctly. This aimed to increase enthusiasm and foster positive competition within the classroom.

In addition, the use of games in learning proved capable of creating a more relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere. Ice breaking was also used to reduce boredom and help students refocus on the lesson.

However, the teacher realized that these strategies were more effective in the short term and had not fully succeeded in building intrinsic learning motivation within the students.

## DISCUSSION

### 1) Analysis of Teaching Patterns and the Root of Participation Polarization

The findings regarding the dominance of the teacher-centered approach indicate that learning is still oriented toward knowledge transfer rather than knowledge construction by the students. This aligns with the opinion of Oyshi (2025), who states that this approach limits students' interaction and active participation in learning.

In this context, students who already possess good initial abilities tend to follow the lesson with greater ease. Conversely, students with limitations are left further behind due to the lack of interactive support that would allow them to understand the material gradually.

This phenomenon can be explained through the Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Krashen. Based on research by Guo (2023), Bhanu & Selvaraj (2023), and Al-Mutairi (2024), emotional factors such as anxiety, fear, and low self-confidence can act as major barriers in the language acquisition process.

In a learning environment dominated by lectures, students tend to feel pressured and afraid of making mistakes, thus choosing to remain silent. This leads to low participation and reinforces the polarization between active and passive students.

Furthermore, the limitations of learning media also contribute to this condition. Sunarti et al. (2025) emphasize that the use of multisensory media can increase student engagement and help lower affective barriers. Accordingly, the lack of media variation becomes one of the factors widening the gap in student participation.

### 2) Analysis of Vocabulary Mastery Strategies and Orthographic Challenges

Difficulty in understanding the relationship between spelling and pronunciation is a common challenge in learning English as a foreign language. Putra (2023) explains that the complex orthographic characteristics of English cause students to struggle with reading and pronouncing words accurately.

The repetition strategy used by the teacher indeed has a theoretical basis for strengthening short-term memory, particularly in phonological aspects. However, without a systematic approach, this strategy tends to result in mechanical learning.

Research by Chen et al. (2024) shows that the use of synthetic phonics can significantly improve students' decoding skills and vocabulary retention. This is reinforced by Algamal (2024), who states that phonics instruction helps students understand the relationship between letters and sounds more systematically.

In Indonesia, Putri (2024) also found that the application of phonics was able to improve the



reading and pronunciation skills of elementary school students. Therefore, integrating the phonics method into learning is a strategic step to overcome the difficulties students have been facing.

Thus, vocabulary teaching should not only focus on repetition but must also be accompanied by deep phonological awareness so that students are able to generalize the knowledge obtained into a broader context.

### 3) Evaluation of Teacher's Motivation Strategies and Methodological Implications

The motivational strategies applied by the teacher, such as rewards, games, and ice-breaking, proved effective in increasing student engagement in the short term. This is consistent with the findings of Unnes (2023), which state that game-based learning can increase motivation and reduce students' anxiety in learning English.

Nonetheless, extrinsic motivation has limitations in sustaining long-term student engagement. Ugli (2025) emphasizes that intrinsic motivation is more effective in the long run because it originates from within the students themselves.

To build intrinsic motivation, a shift in teaching approach toward student-centered learning is required. In this approach, students are given opportunities to participate actively, collaborate with peers, and explore materials independently.

This approach not only increases engagement but also helps students build self-confidence and reduce anxiety. Consequently, students who were previously passive have a greater opportunity to develop and become more active in the learning process.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Teachers are aware of this problem, but their approach to addressing it is still inadequate, often requiring students to repeat or memorize words. The most effective approach is to teach "phonics," a systematic way of connecting letters with their sounds, similar to Indonesian. Furthermore, overly teacher-centered teaching makes children who are already struggling even more anxious and embarrassed to participate, leading them to fall further behind. The media used is also less engaging, being static, so it doesn't appeal to all learning styles.

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