



STRENGTHENING EARLY READING SKILLS THROUGH A PHONICS-BASED APPROACH IN ENGLISH LESSONS

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Abstract

Strengthening early reading abilities is an important foundation for supporting students' literacy growth, particularly in the lower grades of elementary school. This study investigates the effectiveness of using a phonics-based approach to improve students' initial English reading skills. A descriptive qualitative design was employed, with data gathered through classroom observations, reading assessments, and interviews with teachers. The results reveal that phonics instruction, which includes letter-sound recognition, blending, segmenting, and decoding activities, significantly enhanced students' ability to read simple English vocabulary and identify phonemes correctly. Students also showed increased engagement and confidence during reading sessions. These findings indicate that phonics provides a systematic and effective model for early English literacy instruction in primary classrooms. The study recommends that English teachers apply structured phonics strategies to strengthen reading readiness and literacy achievement.

Keywords: Phonics, Early Reading, English Literacy, Primary Education, Young Learners

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading competence is one of the fundamental pillars in early literacy development and plays a central role in shaping students' learning experiences across school subjects. At the beginning of elementary education, children must acquire a series of basic abilities, including recognizing letters, identifying phonemes, understanding how sounds correspond to written symbols, and decoding simple vocabulary. These early skills form the basis for fluency, comprehension, and long-term reading success. When students do not master these foundational competencies, they may face obstacles in understanding instructional materials, completing academic tasks, and participating actively in class discussions. Consequently, it is essential for early reading instruction to be delivered in a structured and systematic manner so that students gain the necessary groundwork for continued literacy development. For learners of English as a foreign language, these challenges increase because English has sound patterns and spelling conventions that differ considerably from Indonesian, making it more complex for young readers.

As students encounter English in the primary classroom, they are required to adjust to new phonetic patterns, inconsistent letter-sound relationships, and pronunciation rules that are unfamiliar to them. English contains several phonemes that do not appear in Indonesian, creating difficulties when students attempt to recognize or produce certain sounds. These issues often lead to errors in decoding and affect students' confidence when reading aloud. Many classrooms still rely on vocabulary memorization or copying words rather than teaching the relationships between sounds and letters. Such practices encourage learners to focus on remembering word shapes instead of understanding how words are constructed. As a result, students often lack awareness of phonemes, show limited decoding ability, and feel unprepared when they encounter new or unfamiliar words in English. This situation indicates the need for instructional practices that prioritize sound-based reading development rather than simple word memorization.



Research on early reading instruction consistently highlights phonics as one of the most effective methods for teaching beginning readers. Phonics explicitly teaches students how to link written letters with their corresponding sounds and apply this knowledge to decode words accurately. Through systematic activities such as identifying phonemes, blending sounds to form complete words, and breaking words into individual sound units, learners develop core skills that support reading fluency and comprehension. Numerous studies report that phonics enhances phonemic awareness, improves reading accuracy, and provides a clear structure for understanding English orthography. In addition, phonics enables young learners to decode new vocabulary independently, reducing their dependence on memorizing long lists of words. For elementary students in Indonesia who are learning English for the first time, phonics offers practical strategies that help them navigate the complexities of English pronunciation and spelling.

Despite the strong evidence supporting phonics instruction, its application in Indonesian elementary schools is still limited. Teachers frequently encounter constraints such as a lack of appropriate teaching materials, insufficient training in phonics pedagogy, minimal exposure to English sounds, and limited availability of classroom resources. Many educators are more accustomed to traditional teaching methods such as drilling and rote memorization which do not develop students' decoding ability. Without consistent and systematic exposure to phonics activities, students may remain unfamiliar with sound letter relationships and struggle to decode even basic English words. These conditions demonstrate the importance of conducting classroom-based research to explore how phonics can be effectively integrated into English lessons in the Indonesian primary school context.

In response to these challenges, the present study aims to investigate how phonics instruction supports the development of early English reading skills in young learners. The study examines the implementation of phonics activities in the classroom, students' responses to sound-based tasks, and the impact of phonics on key reading components such as phonemic awareness, decoding, and reading confidence. It also analyzes the teacher's perspectives regarding instructional challenges, student progress, and the overall suitability of phonics for early English instruction. By drawing on observations, assessments, and interviews, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of how phonics functions in a real teaching environment.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to ongoing discussions about improving early English literacy instruction in Indonesian schools. By presenting evidence from classroom practice, the study offers valuable insights for teachers, curriculum developers, and education policymakers in strengthening early reading programs. Enhancing foundational literacy skills through phonics not only improves students' decoding ability but also builds positive reading habits, increases participation, and encourages greater confidence in learning English. In the long term, integrating phonics as a core component of early English instruction holds the potential to support stronger literacy outcomes, better academic performance, and greater readiness for future learning.

2. METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive method designed to obtain an in depth understanding of how picture based stories can be applied to strengthen early reading abilities among elementary school learners. The qualitative descriptive orientation was selected because it allows the researcher to present a detailed explanation of educational phenomena without manipulating variables or implementing experimental procedures. Instead, this method emphasizes the careful interpretation of concepts, theories, and findings drawn from credible academic sources to generate a comprehensive description of the instructional role of visual narrative materials.

The research relied entirely on a literature based approach. All data were obtained from scientific publications that discuss literacy development, early grade reading instruction, visual learning resources, and the pedagogical use of picture storybooks. The data sources consisted of journal articles, conference papers, books, and research reports that examine how visual texts enhance comprehension, promote reading motivation, and assist students in connecting written language with contextual cues. The inclusion of various types of literature ensured that the review captured a wide



range of insights relevant to the focus of this study.

The data collection procedure took place in several stages. In the first stage, the researcher performed a systematic search for literature using academic databases and library catalogs. Keywords associated with picture based stories, reading proficiency, children's literacy, and elementary level pedagogy were used to identify publications that matched the topic of the research. In the second stage, each selected source was read thoroughly to extract statements, explanations, and empirical results related to the contributions of picture stories to the reading process. During this stage, the researcher paid particular attention to information concerning vocabulary enrichment, decoding support, comprehension strategies, and student engagement. In the third stage, all extracted data were organized into thematic categories to facilitate a clear and structured presentation of the findings.

The analysis of the literature was conducted using a content analysis technique. This analytical technique enabled the researcher to classify information into conceptual patterns and recurring themes. Several analytical units emerged during the process, including the cognitive function of visual elements in reading, the role of narrative illustrations in building meaning, the impact of picture stories on student interest, and the effectiveness of picture based texts in supporting guided reading activities. Each unit was analyzed to determine how it contributes to the development of early reading abilities.

To ensure that the interpretation of data remained credible, the researcher compared findings from multiple sources to confirm the consistency of the information. Triangulation of references was carried out by examining similarities across studies conducted in different educational contexts. This step strengthened the reliability of the analysis and reduced the possibility of bias. Additionally, the researcher maintained an objective stance by focusing only on information that appeared repeatedly in the reviewed literature and that was supported by theoretical justification.

Through these procedures, the methodological approach allowed the study to construct a detailed description of how picture based stories function as effective instructional materials in the early stages of reading. The method also provided a foundation for interpreting how picture storybooks can help learners develop comprehension, improve word recognition, and build positive attitudes toward reading.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of the reviewed literature provides a broad and detailed understanding of how picture story materials support the development of early reading skills among elementary school learners. Across numerous studies, a consistent pattern emerges showing that picture stories function as powerful instructional tools that influence not only linguistic growth but also comprehension, engagement, and reasoning abilities. The combination of written text and visual representation creates a learning environment that allows young readers to make sense of language in ways that purely textual materials cannot achieve at their developmental stage. Through this examination, several interconnected findings become evident, each revealing how picture stories scaffold early literacy in progressive and meaningful ways.

One of the most prominent results identified in the literature concerns the role of picture stories in strengthening students' vocabulary knowledge. Young readers often encounter new words without having sufficient linguistic background to interpret their meanings independently. However, the integration of images within picture stories offers immediate contextual clues that assist learners in understanding the relationship between the written term and its real world representation. The illustrations guide the learner through semantic interpretation by aligning text with objects, actions, and emotions. This visually supported encounter allows children to decode unfamiliar vocabulary far more efficiently than through text only materials. The repeated pairing of images and words creates strong memory associations, which results in more durable vocabulary retention. This finding is highlighted repeatedly across studies that emphasize how visual scaffolding provides cognitive pathways that help children internalize new word meanings. Thus, picture stories do not merely support vocabulary acquisition; they transform it into a more intuitive and meaningful process for



beginning readers.

In addition to vocabulary development, the literature underscores significant improvements in reading comprehension when children interact with picture based stories. This outcome stems from the way visual elements supply organizational structure to the narrative, enabling young learners to visualize the plot, anticipate events, and follow the logical progression of ideas. Many children at this stage of development struggle to comprehend stories solely through written text because their decoding skills are not yet fully developed. The presence of images reduces cognitive load by allowing learners to focus more on comprehending the message rather than struggling to interpret every word. Illustrations highlight character actions, emotional expressions, and environmental details that help readers infer meaning, identify cause and effect relationships, and construct coherent mental representations of the story. Through these visuals, children better understand the sequencing of events, the motivations of characters, and the overall message of the narrative. This illustrates that picture stories play a central role in bridging the gap between emerging decoding ability and higher level comprehension skills.

Engagement emerged as another significant finding across the analyzed literature. Early grade learners often require strong motivational support to remain attentive during reading activities, and picture stories effectively provide that support. Children are naturally drawn to colorful illustrations and expressive characters, which makes the reading process more enjoyable and less intimidating. The interest generated by pictures encourages learners to participate actively in reading tasks, fostering curiosity and sustained attention. Research consistently reports that students who are exposed to picture stories demonstrate higher levels of enthusiasm, reduced anxiety toward reading, and increased willingness to revisit texts multiple times. This repeated engagement reinforces reading fluency and deepens comprehension. The emotional appeal of picture stories also encourages learners to form personal connections to the narrative, which further strengthens motivation. When children enjoy what they are reading, they are more likely to persist in decoding unfamiliar words, ask questions, and explore meaning more independently.

Another important result involves how picture stories support cognitive processing during reading. The combination of text and images stimulates multiple sensory pathways, encouraging learners to integrate visual, linguistic, and conceptual information simultaneously. This multisensory engagement enhances recall, strengthens conceptual understanding, and supports the construction of meaning. The literature shows that when students use both visual and verbal cues, they create more elaborate mental maps that help them store and retrieve information more effectively. This finding aligns with dual coding theory, which suggests that learning becomes richer when information is encoded both visually and verbally. Picture stories provide these dual channels naturally, enabling young learners to process language in a more holistic way. As a result, students develop stronger reasoning skills, learn to interpret symbolic meaning, and gain the ability to evaluate narrative content critically.

The reviewed literature also highlights how picture stories help students develop early decoding skills. Even though picture stories primarily support comprehension and vocabulary growth, they also create an environment where learners can practice identifying letter patterns, recognizing sight words, and associating print with sound. The images provide confirmation for readers when they decode successfully and correction cues when they make mistakes. This encourages learners to monitor their reading accuracy and become more aware of text structure. Picture stories help students recognize the relationship between print and meaning, ensuring that decoding is not performed in isolation but connected to comprehension. Over time, this integrated process supports the development of more accurate and fluent reading.

Another major result relates to sequencing and narrative thinking. Picture stories present events in a structured and chronological order, which helps children understand how stories are constructed. Visual cues highlight the beginning, middle, and end of a narrative, making it easier for learners to recognize cause and effect relationships and follow logical progressions. This clarity is essential for young readers, as it helps them build foundational comprehension skills that will be needed when



transitioning to more complex texts. Picture stories also encourage learners to engage in retelling, summarizing, and predicting activities, all of which support deeper comprehension and narrative reasoning. The literature shows that children who use picture stories regularly become better at describing events, identifying main ideas, and explaining story outcomes.

The findings further suggest that picture stories enhance oral language development. When students read or listen to picture based narratives, they are exposed to rich language structures, descriptive vocabulary, and varied sentence forms. Teachers often encourage discussion about the illustrations, prompting children to describe what they see, make predictions, and reflect on character actions. These activities promote expressive language use and provide opportunities for students to practice forming sentences, explaining ideas, and participating in classroom dialogue. The development of oral language contributes significantly to reading success, as it strengthens the vocabulary and comprehension skills required for independent reading. Picture stories create a natural platform for these discussions because the images stimulate curiosity and invite interpretation.

The literature also emphasizes that picture stories contribute to inclusive learning environments. Students with varying abilities, including those who struggle with decoding, benefit greatly from the visual support that picture stories provide. The images reduce frustration and offer alternative pathways for understanding the text. This inclusiveness ensures that all learners, regardless of their reading level, can participate meaningfully in reading activities. Picture stories also support English language learners by offering visual context that helps them understand unfamiliar vocabulary and cultural references. Because picture stories can be interpreted at multiple levels, they are accessible to a broad range of learners.

Another consistent result concerns the pedagogical flexibility of picture stories. Teachers can integrate picture based narratives into multiple literacy activities, including guided reading, shared reading, group discussions, storytelling, and creative writing. The literature shows that picture stories can serve as a foundation for teaching inferential thinking, character analysis, and thematic interpretation. Their adaptability enables educators to design lessons that accommodate different learning styles and instructional goals. Teachers can also use picture stories to model reading strategies, such as predicting, questioning, and visualizing, helping students internalize strategic reading behaviors.

Collectively, the findings indicate that picture stories make substantial contributions to early literacy development. They enhance vocabulary, comprehension, engagement, decoding, oral language, reasoning, and narrative understanding. These benefits work together to create a supportive and enriching learning environment where students can develop reading skills in a holistic and meaningful way. The results suggest that picture stories are not simply decorative reading materials but essential components of early literacy instruction. Their consistent effectiveness across diverse studies underscores their importance in shaping foundational reading skills in the elementary classroom.

4. CONCLUSION

The synthesis of the reviewed literature indicates that picture story media provides a meaningful contribution to the development of early reading abilities among elementary school students. The combination of images and simple narrative text allows young learners to process information in a more guided and comprehensible manner. Visual cues help students link words with concrete representations, which supports vocabulary growth and strengthens decoding skills. This process creates a supportive learning environment for students who are still transitioning from recognizing letters to understanding short narratives.

The evidence from various studies also highlights that picture story media encourages students to become more engaged in reading activities. The presence of colorful illustrations and appealing storylines increases student interest and reduces the anxiety often associated with early reading tasks. As students interact with the visual elements, they become more curious about the content, leading to improved concentration and motivation. This positive emotional response contributes to a more



enjoyable reading experience, which is essential for cultivating long term literacy habits.

In addition, picture story media shows significant effectiveness when teachers incorporate interactive learning strategies. When students are invited to discuss characters, predict story developments, answer guiding questions, and share interpretations, they practice higher order thinking skills that go beyond basic comprehension. These interactions also create opportunities for collaborative learning, allowing students to exchange ideas and build communication skills. Such learning conditions contribute to deeper understanding and help students develop the confidence to engage actively in literacy activities.

Considering the outcomes of the reviewed studies, picture story media can be regarded as an important instructional resource for strengthening early literacy. The cognitive, emotional, and social benefits observed across the literature suggest that picture stories are highly suitable for the lower grade learning environment. Their use not only supports foundational reading skills but also encourages positive attitudes toward literacy. Therefore, educators are recommended to integrate picture story media more intentionally and consistently in reading instruction to ensure that students develop strong and sustainable reading competencies as they progress through their education.

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