The Efficacy of English Phonics Instruction in Helping EFL Students to Decode Vowel Digraph Letters

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ABSTRACT

The Indonesian foreign language education system lacks sufficient phonics instruction to aid students in grasping the complexities of English spelling. This results in difficulties comprehending reading material and forming accurate speech. While the curriculum focuses on genre-based approaches for reading and writing skills, it neglects speaking skills. Phonics, however, enhances literacy skills and enables effective reading. To address these issues, a quasi-experimental study involving 30 literature students learning English as a foreign language was conducted. The study revealed that phonics instruction significantly improved pronunciation accuracy and the decoding of the vowel digraph <ai>. Students also expressed positive views on phonics learning, considering it crucial for accurate speech and literacy improvement. Therefore, the study emphasizes the importance of prioritizing phonics instruction as a solution to student learning challenges.

ABSTRAK

Sistem pendidikan bahasa asing di Indonesia jarang memberikan pengajaran fonik guna membantu siswa memahami kompleksitas ejaan bahasa Inggris. Hal ini menyebabkan kesulitan dalam memahami bahan bacaan dan ketidakkuratan pengucapan. Meskipun kurikulum berfokus pada pendekatan berbasis genre untuk keterampilan memahami bacaan dan menulis, keterampilan berbicara justru diabaikan. Namun, fonik dapat meningkatkan keterampilan literasi dan memahami bacaan secara efektif. Untuk mengatasi masalah ini, dilakukan sebuah penelitian quasi-eksperimental yang melibatkan 30 mahasiswa sastra yang belajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa pengjaran fonik secara signifikan meningkatkan keakuratan pengucapan dan kemampuan dalam mendekode penggabungan vokal <ai>. Siswa memberikan respon positif terhadap pembelajaran fonik, yang mana dianggap penting dalam memperbaiki pola pengucapan dan peningkatan literasi. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya memberikan prioritas pada pengajaran fonik sebagai solusi dalam maslah pembelajaran siswa.

1. Introduction

Eventually, learners of English as a foreign language have experienced consistent problems in perceiving how English's spelling and phonological systems work. In the context of EFL learning in Indonesia, this is caused by the mother tongue being different from the target language system (English). As a result, it does not facilitate the absorption of language knowledge. To produce utterances appropriate to native speakers is very challenging for Indonesian EFL students. Because various combinations of letters can represent every sound of English pronunciation (Altmiller et al., 2023), for example, the letter <ai> can represent many sounds such as /eɪ/, /eə/ and /e/in words <claim>, <air>, and <again>. This inconsistency creates Indonesian students to experience problems in understanding the English spelling system. The spelling system of the alphabet in Indonesian is more invariant than in English. So, phonetics attempts to use a scientific approach to locate ways that the same sound can be spelled consistently with the same letter (Fromkin et al., 1998). In addition, there are 44 phonemes in English, so the Roman alphabet cannot represent all these sounds without combining symbols (Bizzocchi, 2017).

Moreover, the researcher found that there was still a lack of introduction to phonics in language learning in Indonesia's foreign language education system. Phonics is paramount because it guides students to comprehend the art of decoding the complicated English language spelling system. Understanding the structural patterns of English spelling will make it easier for students to connect symbols with phonetic reality (Woore, 2022). However, the curriculum currently implemented in Indonesia has not been able to facilitate the necessities of foreign language students. It is proven by the infrequent introduction of phonics at the basic level of English learning. Thus, many educational institutions and even language teachers still ignore phonics in the classroom even though phonics is important in improving reading and speaking skills (Sanden et al., 2022).

Phonics learning is often undervalued because it is sometimes considered less effective in helping children learn to read. Moreover, student problems in understanding English spelling also cannot be separated from the role of the teacher, who sometimes has a lack of understanding and concern about phonics learning methods. Many instructors and language learners do not fully understand the phonics learning method, so they tend to be skeptical about its effectiveness. In addition, some teachers may think that phonics learning is only limited to reading letters and perceiving language sounds without considering other aspects such as reading comprehension or writing skills. Phonics instruction is a method of learning to read, decode, and predict the correspondence of alphabet letters and phonemes that has been proven effective and is widely used worldwide. Gozali (2019) developed teaching materials related to phonics in early childhood, significantly impacting reading skills development. In addition, Utami & Musthafa (2022) also use songs to teach the introduction of phonics in early childhood, and from the teacher's perspective, there is a significant change in reading proficiency.

However, the research above still needs to explore the impact of phonics on late acquirers or adult learners, especially in Indonesia; there are more Indonesian language learners at the

upper level of education compared to early childhood. In addition, the researcher assumes that phonics helps students' reading skills but also helps them produce utterances that are close to native speakers. To find answers to the problems above, the researcher applied a phonics pattern recognition treatment to 30 students learning English as a foreign language. Phonics instruction material is quite straightforward, namely how students can predict the pattern of decoding vowel digraph <ai>. After getting the treatment in 8 meetings, the researcher will see how the students uttered different prediction patterns of vowel digraphs during the pre-test and post-test. After the differences have been found, the researcher scrutinizes further by giving a questionnaire to determine how students perceive phonics learning at the basic level.

1.1 Phonics Instruction in High Education

Phonics in English refers to reading and writing learning methods focusing on the relationship between sounds and letters in English (Strickland, 1998). This method assists children and beginners in understanding how English sounds are represented by letters and letter combinations (Mesmer & Griffith, 2005). In phonics learning, reading, and spelling exercises are usually carried out based on the sounds represented by the letters. This method is very prevalent in learning English for children in primary schools and adults learning English as a second or foreign language. In teaching phonics, there is a teaching method called Phonics instruction.

Phonics instruction is a method of teaching reading and writing that focuses on predicting spelling patterns and improving student literacy (Tunmer & Arrow, 2012). In learning phonics instruction, the teacher or instructor will teach students about the English sounds represented by letters and how to combine these letters into words that can be read and written correctly. This method usually involves activities such as reading books with easy-to-understand and practice words. These spelling words contain certain sound patterns and combine these sounds into more complex words. In learning phonics instruction, students are also introduced to the concepts of grammar and vocabulary related to these sounds and letters. The phonics instruction method aims to help students become better and more confident readers and writers in communicating in English.

Several methods are suitable for teaching phonics: synthetic phonics, analytical phonics, analogy phonics, and embedded phonics (Manullang et al., 2022). The synthetic phonics method teaches the sounds (phonemes) found in English and how to incorporate these sounds into words that can be read and written correctly. This method starts with the simplest sounds and gradually expands to more complex sounds. The analytic phonics method emphasizes learning through understanding the word as a whole (whole words) and studying how the words' sounds are represented by the letters in it. The analogy phonics method teaches an understanding of how familiar sounds in words can be utilized to assist in understanding and reading new words. This method leverages students' ability to recognize sound and letter patterns to help them recognize new words more quickly. The embedded phonics method teaches reading and writing skills in an integrated manner with broader English learning. This method introduces new sounds and letters through reading materials and activities related to certain topics or themes (Ehri et al., 2001). The suitable method for teaching phonics depends

on the student's preference and learning style. Teachers need to observe students, adapt teaching methods to suit students' needs, and speed up the learning process. In this study, the researcher applied synthetic and analytic phonics so that students could find out how the sound patterns represented by the vowel digraph <ai> in certain words.

1.2. Vowel Digraph Complexity

Digraphs in English are two letters combined to represent a single sound. Some examples of digraphs include <th>, <ch>, <sh>, etc. Digraphs are used in English to represent sounds that cannot be represented by a single letter. Digraphs are considered complicated because several rules for decoding digraphs must be learned in English. Some digraphs can represent more than one sound, and in some cases, the sound represented by the digraph can alter depending on its position in the word. For example, the sound <th> can represent two different sounds, namely /θ/ as in the word "think" and /ð/ as in the word "this." In addition, digraphs can also be complicated because digraphs may occur in words pronounced differently in American and British English. Digraphs are divided into two types, namely consonant digraphs and vocal digraphs. A vowel digraph is two vowels combined to represent one vowel sound. Examples of vowel digraphs include <ai> in "rain" which stands for /ei/, <ee> in "meet," and which stands for /i/. A vowel digraph always represents a single vowel sound. A digraph's consonants are two consonants that combine to represent a single consonant sound. Examples of digraph consonants include <th> in the word "thin," which represents the sound /θ/, <sh> in the word "shop," which represents the sound /ʃ/, and <ch> in the word "chip" which represents the sound /tʃ/. Like a vowel digraph, a consonant digraph always represents a single consonant sound.

In this study, the researchers focused on the vowel digraph <ai> pattern, which generally represents the sound /ei/. The following is the prediction pattern of the vowel digraph <ai>:

1. it will represent sound [eɪ] if the sound [r] does not come after letter <ai> and located instressed position.
2. if <ai> comes before sound [r], it represents sound /eə/.
3. if <ai> occurs in unstressed position, it represents sound /ɪ/.

In addition, if words do not follow the pattern above, it can be ascertained that the word is a loan word. For example, the word in the word "aisle", the digraph <ai>, which appears at the beginning of the syllable, represents the sound <ai>. After investigation, the word is a borrowed word from French. While digraphs can be tricky to use, they can also help clarify English sounds and help readers and listeners understand spoken words correctly. Therefore, English learners need to understand the use of digraphs in English to develop good reading, writing, and speaking skills in English.

2. Method

The researcher utilized a quasi-experimental method to assess the impact of implementing embedded phonics learning in general English courses. In its application, the researcher provided a pre-test before giving phonics instruction teaching treatment which would be given

during eight face-to-face meetings to students of the Faculty of Letters from a private university in Palu. Then the researcher delivered a post-test to measure again whether there is a difference in learning achievement in predicting vowel digraph <ai> patterns. Here it would be clear whether phonics can help students or not. Students who were participants in this observation were selected using a purposive sampling model because the researcher applied specific criteria. These criteria are that the participant must be a student who studies English as a foreign language, know English as a foreign language, and has never learned and received phonics learning before.

2.1. Instruments

To witness the difference in learning achievement, the researcher prepared a pre-test and post-test consisting of a short text and ten-word lists containing the <ai> digraph. The prediction of the digraph pattern possesses the <ai> digraph, which can represent the phonemes /eɪ/, /eə/ and /e/. The test was given to all participants, and then the researcher transcribed it to notice the accuracy of the prediction results of the vowel digraph. Besides that, the researcher gave seven questionnaire items to understand how students perceive phonics learning in class. The questionnaire was deliberately made short to preserve time because the researcher believed a complicated questionnaire bored the participants. When bored, participants will tend to fill in the questionnaire inaccurately so that the process can be completed quickly. The questionnaire was arranged on a Likert scale with the options strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. The results of the series of observations above will provide an overview of how phonics learning impacts adult learners.

2.2. Analysis

The data obtained from the pre-test and post-test results after the treatment for eight meetings was measured statistically using the t-test analysis. If the p-value is <0.05, there is a very significant difference between the initial and final variables. The researcher used the t-test to compare the mean score of the two data groups to witness the difference between before and after treatment. The t-test can detect slight differences between the two groups so that it can be used to determine whether the treatment given to different groups has a significant effect on learning outcomes. In learning achievement research, many factors can influence learning outcomes. Using the t-test, we can control these factors so that the results are relatively accurate. In addition, the researcher calculated the mean score from the questionnaire to see the participants' perceptions of phonics learning in class. If the mean score results are between the intervals of 3.0 – 4, it can be concluded that the participants have a favourable view of learning phonics vowel digraph <ai>.

3.   Results and Discussion

In this section, the researcher exemplifies the outcomes of the investigation related to the results of the pre-test and post-interviews and the questionnaire results. It relates to how learning phonics can help students predict vowel digraphs, which are quite complicated.

Table 1. Paired Sample T-Test

	Mean	Std Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test * Post-test	-19,367	1,564	,286	-67,809	29	,000

Table 1 shows the results of calculating the pre-test and post-test using the paired sample t-test. This calculation aims to see if there is a difference between the pre-test and post-test. If the significance value is less than 0.05, it can be concluded that there are differences in the pre-test and post-test results. It proves that learning the phonics digraph pattern <ai> significantly influences the decoding process and pronouncing words that contain vowel digraph <ai>. It is also reinforced by the pre-test results, which have the highest score of 70, while the post-test has the highest score of 88. So, there is significant progress in learning outcomes.

Table 2. The result of the questionnaire regarding Student Perspective on Phonics

No	Statements	Mean Score (n=30)
1	Do you believe that phonics learning is important for your English proficiency?	3.33
2	Do you agree that learning phonics in elementary English class is important?	3.63
3	Do you agree that learning phonics helps you master English?	3.43
4	After learning phonics, it is easier for me to predict complex words in English.	3.67
5	I want to learn phonics further	3.53
6	I believe phonics is important in the development of my speaking and reading skills	3.50
7	I felt that there are improvements before and after learning phonics	3.60
	Perspective based on item means	3.53

a. Mean Score 1.00 – 1.75 = "Very Unfavorable"; 1.76 – 2.5 = "Unfavorable"
1.6 -3.25 = "Favorable"; 3.26 – 4.00 = "Very Favorable"

Table 2 shows a positive attitude of students learning English as a foreign language towards learning phonics digraph <ai>. It is evidenced by the results of the questionnaires, with a mean score of 3.53, which suggests that the participants welcome phonics learners and hope to be taught on an ongoing basis. This questionnaire was previously given to 30 students who had taken online phonics instruction lessons. The researcher notices that there is enthusiasm among students in learning phonics, mainly since this is unexplored for them and this is the first time, they have had it.

3.1. Student Perspective on Instructional Phonics and Their Learning Problem

The findings below relate to how students of the Department of Literature view phonics learning in English classes—data obtained from interviews with five students. This interview aims to get more information concerning their perceptions and experience while learning phonics instructions related to vowel digraphs. In excerpts, A refers to students.

"To be honest, we never had phonics instruction in high school. So, it wasn't easy for us to read and predict the speech forms of certain words. Phonics helps up to see to patterns" - A1.

"I did not think that there was a learning model like this. I believe it is fairly important for us" - A2

> "This is new knowledge for me. I hope it can be provided on an ongoing basis, especially since this is my first time learning a foreign language" - A3.

Students have a positive response to learning phonics instructions. They admit that phonics is essential in helping them read and predict English speech patterns and spelling. Some students suppose that phonics is something foreign and new to them. It confirms that phonics had never been introduced at the high school level.

> "Sometimes lecturers concentrate too much on material that is too text-based. Without considering whether we experience problems reading complex words" - A2.

> "Not all lecturers introduce the spelling system at the beginning of the meeting. They assume that we should already know it" - A3.

> "The material offered at lesson plan is too grammar oriented, even though I also want to know how to speak English well" - A4.

> "The lecturers demanded that I be able to read and speak accurately. But they never taught me how" - A5.

In this section, students talk about their obstacles in learning English before getting phonics instruction. Lecturers are sometimes still fixated on text-based teaching patterns where this approach may only sometimes be able to meet the needs of students. This learning model also can only overcome some student learning problems, so teachers should be able to integrate and adapt teaching methods to the needs of students. Phonics instruction can be combined with various teaching methods and media so that a lecturer's creativity and inventiveness are needed to make it happen.

3.2. Discussion

Phonics learning still needs to be introduced into the education system in Indonesia. Moreover, Indonesia is implementing genre-based learning (GBA). This approach focuses on teaching English contextually and provides a better understanding of the social and cultural context in which the language is used (Dirgeyasa, 2016). GBA also provides a more meaningful context for students to learn English because students learn English through text models or genres that show structure, grammar, and words often used in specific contexts. In addition, this approach can also put more emphasis on developing better reading and writing skills as they learn to imitate appropriate language models in specific genres. Students are also taught how to interpret different texts and read with a better understanding.

However, the need for more focus on teaching phonetic and phonemic skills can affect students' ability to pronounce and understand words correctly. In addition, some people argue that teaching GBA primarily focuses on reading and writing skills, and it is not appropriate to improve listening and speaking skills which are equally important in teaching English. Foreign language learners, especially at the tertiary level, tend to get bored quickly and experience decreased learning motivation Daniarti et al. (2020), so the application of GBA needs to be reviewed in the Indonesian educational system because several components of language skills cannot be covered by GBA such as the ability to decode and pronounce a word like a native. In addition, phonics has remained a minor concern in learning foreign languages in Indonesia. Many students still need assistance learning foreign languages because they need to familiarize

themselves with the phonics system of the target language (Indrayadi et al., 2021). Moreover, students have a positive perspective on phonetic and phonics learning, and it helps them comprehend how the spelling and sound systems operate in English (Savitri & Andrianto, 2021). Besides being able to understand the grammatical system, the ultimate goal of language learning is that students can also produce accurate utterances that are at least close to native speakers. In addition, the accuracy of the target language's speech production is also one of the main benchmarks for the success of foreign language learning.

One of the reasons phonetics and phonics may not be included in the curriculum of Indonesia is that the main priority of education in Indonesia is strengthening students' abilities in Bahasa Indonesia. In addition, the national curriculum also has many subjects that must be taught, making it challenging to include all relevant topics in the curriculum. In addition, there still needs to be a lot of phonetic and phonics learning modules at the high school level because it is problematic for students to get learning resources. Phonetics and phonics are also not a concern. However, teachers and educational institutions still need to understand the impact of phonics on student learning achievement, especially in speaking and reading elements. Connelly et al. (2001) found that early childhood students not introduced to phonics tended to experience problems in the decoding process of segmenting speech sounds. It will also hinder the reading process in the reading-aloud model because students need help sounding out the words they are reading.

In addition, phonics instruction also improves reading comprehension so students more efficiently understand information and access knowledge. In general, phonics helps students improve their literacy skills to spend time effectively accessing reading material (Martínez, 2011). In the reading aspect, reading aloud has a close relationship with phonics aspects, where phonics will help students to be able to read well (Ehri, 2022). In addition, reading aloud makes it easier for students to understand the new vocabulary they hear so that they can understand in what context the word is used. Besides that, reading aloud is also related to listening skills. Once again, with good phonics understanding, students can accurately distinguish and map the sounds they hear to understand the meaning of the words or sentences they hear.

In addition, there is a necessity for a teacher who is knowledgeable about phonics and phonetic learning instructions to improve student learning outcomes, especially in aspects of speech production. In China, Kang & Liang (2018) stated that phonics learning is taught to teachers specially trained to teach young EFL students. It is done because the national curriculum has yet to meet students' learning needs, and educational equity is still minimal. It has been proven that phonics-oriented professional support systems can sustain teachers and students to achieve better learning outcomes after implementing the program. In line with previous findings, Li (2019) discovered that phonics learning could improve students' L2 decoding abilities, which positively impacts vocabulary mastery. Although there is some debate regarding the insignificant impact of phonics on adult learners (Brooks, 2022), in this study, the researcher witnessed that phonics not only has a positive impact on early childhood learners but can also be introduced to adult learners.

4. Conclusion

After observing 30 students of the Department of Literature, the researcher discovered that phonics instruction focused on recognizing the prediction pattern of vowel digraph <ai> helped students pronounce words or predict words containing vowel digraph <ai> more accurately. It is proven by the results of the t-test on the pre-test and post-test results of students taking phonics lessons in English courses. In which the results of the t-test prove that the significance value obtained from the calculation is 0.000, which is less than 0.05, it can be concluded that there are differences in the pre-test and post-test results. So, there is progress in student learning outcomes before and after being given phonics instruction. Then after giving the questionnaire, the researcher found that the mean score of each item was 3.53. So, the learners have a positive response to learning phonics. With the current condition of the curriculum that has not paid attention to the importance of phonics in foreign languages, the researcher expects that the results of this study can provide evidence and illustration that phonics instruction is an essential element in introducing foreign language systems to EFL learners. Then the teacher is also expected to be aware of the importance of phonics in second language acquisition to facilitate students in recognizing foreign language systems more optimally. Even so, the researcher notices that the data presented in this study still needs to involve a larger sample. Hence, the researcher strongly recommends that future researchers look at the impact of phonics through a more comprehensive perspective.

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