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The Effect of the Phonics Method on the Development of English Reading and Speaking Abilities in Children Aged 4–5 Years

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ABSTRACT

***Objective**: This study aims to examine the influence of the phonics method on the development of English reading and speaking abilities in children aged 4–5 years at Happy Kids Kindergarten. **Method**: This study employed a quantitative approach using a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design. The participants consisted of 20 children, divided into a control group (n = 10) and an experimental group (n = 10). Data were collected using a structured observation checklist that measured eight indicators of reading and speaking abilities. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and an independent samples t-test. **Results**: The results showed that the experimental group achieved a mean score of 27.5 (85.9%), which was categorized as "Developing as Expected" (BSH), higher than that of the control group, which obtained a mean score of 20.4 (63.75%) in the category of "Starting to Develop" (MB). The t-test confirmed a significant difference between the two groups ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the phonics method had a positive effect on children's English reading and speaking abilities. **Novelty:** This study contributes to the simultaneous measurement of reading and speaking abilities within a single research design in the context of Indonesian EFL learners aged 4–5 years. Unlike previous studies, which have mostly focused on reading outcomes in L1 or ESL contexts, this study demonstrates that phonics is also effective in improving pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, and confidence in early EFL learners.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of globalization in the modern era has positioned foreign language skills, particularly English, as a crucial competency that individuals need to possess from an early age (Oliveri & Tannenbaum, 2019; Shiroza, 2023). English is no longer viewed merely as an additional subject, but has become a means of international communication, access to science , technology, and broader educational and career opportunities in the future (Masuram & Sripada, 2020). In this context, mastering English from an early age is seen as strategic because it can provide a stronger linguistic foundation for children in facing global demands. Leona et al., (2021) emphasize that in the modern era, children who lack foreign language skills potentially face limitations in access to education, global communication, and opportunities to compete academically and professionally in the future.

The urgency of introducing English from an early age is supported by the developmental characteristics of early childhood, which is in the golden age phase. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), early childhood, between the ages of 0 and 8, is a crucial developmental period for an individual's future life (Oliveri & Tannenbaum, 2019; Vashchenko et al., 2009). This is because during this period, a child's brain develops rapidly and they have a high capacity to absorb information, imitate, and build the foundation of cognitive and language skills. Yusuf et al., (2023) stated that the developmental momentum during this period forms an important foundation for a child's long-term development. Solfiah et al., (2021) added that parents and educators need to utilize this golden phase to provide optimal

stimulation for all aspects of development, including language skills.

Language is a key developmental aspect in early childhood that requires systematic stimulation (Cecilia, 2021; Pintado et al., 2022). Language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a means for children to think, express emotions, understand their environment, and build social interactions. Otto, (2018) defines language as a system of symbols used by humans to categorize, organize, and clarify thoughts. Accordingly, the 2013 Early Childhood Education Curriculum emphasizes that language development includes the ability to understand receptive language, express language verbally and nonverbally, and recognize early literacy. In fact, Seefeldt & Wasik, (2006) state that five-year-old children generally have a vocabulary of around 5,000 to 8,000 words, demonstrating children's extraordinary capacity for language acquisition at this stage of development.

In the context of early childhood education, language development also includes early reading skills as the foundation for early literacy. The National Reading Panel states that one of the most important skills children need to have before entering formal school is reading readiness. Nicholas & Rouse, (2021) and Suggate et al., (2013) even show that children can begin learning to read as early as four years old. Early reading is the initial stage where children recognize symbols, letters, sounds, and word meanings as a foundation before entering more complex reading skills. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development 2000 emphasizes that early reading and writing skills in early childhood are an important foundation for academic success at subsequent levels of education.

However, the practice of English language learning in early childhood education in Indonesia still faces various obstacles (Huertas-Abril & Haikal, 2023; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020). In many early childhood education institutions, English learning is not the primary focus and is often only provided in the form of simple vocabulary introduction, memorization, or imitating teacher speech without a systematic approach appropriate to children's developmental characteristics. Jon et al., (2021) stated that one of the reasons Indonesian children still face difficulties in mastering foreign language communication is the lack of quality learning opportunities and a lack of adequate learning resources for language practice. This condition results in children lacking an understanding of the relationship between letters and sounds, thus experiencing difficulties in reading, and pronouncing English words correctly.

This problem is also evident in various previous research findings related to children's early reading skills. Based on observations at the Alumna Islamic School Kindergarten in the Harapan Raya Branch, the early English reading skills of children aged 5–6 years are still in the Beginning to Develop (MB) category. Children still experience difficulties in recognizing the shape of the letters of the alphabet, identifying letter sounds, understanding rhyme patterns, and pronouncing letter combinations into English words correctly. Similar findings were also reported in research at the Immanuel Kids Kindergarten in Medan, where children experienced difficulties in distinguishing letter symbols such as "b" and "d", stuttered when reading, had difficulty stringing syllables together into words, and were unable to correctly connect written symbols with their sounds and meanings.

One factor suspected of contributing to children's low English reading and speaking abilities is learning methods that are not appropriate to the developmental needs of early

childhood. Marbun and Nurhayatun (2023) explain that strategies, methods, learning media, and the quality of teacher interactions significantly influence children's language development. However, in practice, many teachers still use monotonous lectures, question-and-answer methods, or worksheets, which tend to make children passive, bored, and deprived of meaningful language learning experiences. However, Juel and Minden-Cupp state that children's ability to recognize words while reading is greatly influenced by the teaching methods used by teachers.

One approach considered effective in addressing this problem is the phonics method. Phonics is a reading instruction method that emphasizes the systematic relationship between letters and sounds (letter-sound correspondence). According to Ehri, (2020) and Phajane, (2014), phonics instruction teaches children that there is a relationship between letters in written language and individual sounds in spoken language. This method helps children recognize letter sounds, understand how to combine sounds into syllables or words, and gradually develop decoding skills. Seefeldt & Wasik, (2006) explain that phonics teaches children how letter sounds are combined to form words, so that children not only memorize words but also understand the process of their formation.

The effectiveness of the phonics method has been supported by various previous studies. Nishanimut et al., (2013) stated that learning English using phonics instruction is more effective than learning to read without phonics. Johnston and colleagues also showed that systematic synthetic phonics instruction is proven superior to analytic phonics in developing phonemic awareness, word reading skills, spelling, and reading comprehension. Morrison, (2012) and Yap & Lee Chin, (2020) added that phonics makes it easier for children to build automatic connections between words and sounds so that children can read more independently. On the other hand, the synthetic phonics approach is considered most appropriate for early childhood because it begins with the introduction of the smallest phoneme sounds which are then gradually combined into words.

Although various studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of phonics methods in improving early reading skills, studies on the influence of phonics on English speaking skills in early childhood are still relatively limited, especially in the context of Indonesian children whose mother tongue is Indonesian. Yet, reading and speaking are two closely related aspects of language skills. Understanding letter sounds through phonics not only helps children read but also contributes to pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary mastery, and confidence in using English orally.

Based on this description, research is needed that specifically examines the influence of the phonics method on the development of English reading and speaking skills in children aged 4–5 years, especially in the context of early childhood education in Indonesia. This study is important to conduct to provide empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of the phonics method in improving children's early literacy and speaking skills simultaneously. The results of the study are expected to contribute to the development of English learning strategies that are more effective, systematic, and appropriate to the characteristics of early childhood development, particularly at Cheery Kindergarten in Bandung as the research location.

Although various previous studies have proven the effectiveness of the phonics method for improving beginning reading ability in children (Ehri, 2005; Johnston & Watson, 2005; Nishanimut et al., 2013), three major research gaps remain unaddressed.

First, the majority of large-scale phonics studies have been conducted in English as a First Language (L1) contexts, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, or English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, such as India and the Philippines. In contrast, the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context in Indonesia presents a fundamentally different phonological system because children's mother tongue (Indonesian) does not share the same phonemic inventory as English (Leona et al., 2021). Second, phonics research in Indonesia to date has focused exclusively on beginning reading ability and has not integrated the measurement of speaking ability simultaneously within a single research design, even though theoretically these two skills are closely related through phonological awareness (Cameron, 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Third, no studies have specifically investigated the effect of the phonics method on the 4–5 years age range in Indonesia, a stage at which children are in a critical period for phonemic acquisition, whereas the characteristics of children aged 5–6 years and above have been extensively investigated previously.

Accordingly, this study offers novelty as the first study to simultaneously examine the influence of the phonics method on the development of English reading and speaking abilities in children aged 4–5 years within the Indonesian EFL context. Unlike previous studies that have focused only on one aspect of language skills (e.g., reading only or vocabulary only) or used participants from an older age range (5–6 years or 6–8 years), this study employs a quasi-experimental design that measures eight integrated indicators simultaneously, including letter recognition, letter sounds, blending, word recognition, pronunciation, vocabulary mastery, speaking fluency, and self-confidence. The main contribution of this study is to provide empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of the phonics method for early childhood education contexts in Indonesia, while simultaneously bridging the gap between early literacy studies and pronunciation research within a single integrated learning framework. Based on the above description, this study aims to examine the influence of the phonics method on the development of English speaking and reading abilities in children aged 4–5 years at Happy Kids Kindergarten.

Phonics Method in Early Childhood English Learning

The phonics method is an approach to language learning that focuses on recognizing the systematic relationship between letter symbols (graphemes) and language sounds (phonemes). This approach is designed to help children understand that each letter or letter combination represents a specific sound used in word formation (Ehri et al., 2001; Webber et al., 2024). This understanding forms an important foundation in the reading process because children not only memorize the visual form of words but are also able to decipher the sound structure that forms them. According to Ehri, (2005), the application of phonics supports the development of children's phonological awareness and makes it easier for them to recognize language sound patterns in a gradual and structured manner.

In English learning for young children, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the phonics method plays a crucial role (Fernández-Molina, 2024; Fernández-Molina & Cuevas, 2023). English is known for its complex orthography, as the relationship between spelling and pronunciation is not always consistent. A single letter can produce several variations of sound, while a single sound can be represented by different letter combinations. This often creates difficulties for early learners when

attempting to read or pronounce English words. Applying the phonics method helps children understand these sound patterns more systematically, making the process of learning to read and pronounce more focused and easier to understand.

Research conducted by Johnston & Watson, (2005) shows that explicit phonics instruction has a positive effect on improving children's decoding skills. Decoding refers to the ability to connect written symbols with their corresponding sounds, which are then combined into meaningful words. Children who receive structured phonics instruction tend to recognize new words more quickly, gain greater reading confidence, and have better pronunciation accuracy than children who do not receive a similar approach (Nickerson et al., 2025; Wahyuni, 2022). These findings demonstrate that phonics not only supports technical reading skills but also builds a strong early literacy foundation for children's later language development (Blair, 2024; Martínez-Figueira et al., 2023).

Findings from *the National Reading Panel* (2000) further strengthen the effectiveness of the phonics method in early reading instruction. The report confirms that phonics instruction contributes significantly to the development of children's early literacy skills, particularly in mastering letter recognition, identifying the beginning and ending sounds of words, and the ability to combine individual sounds into a complete word (blending). Blending skills are crucial because they provide the initial stage that allows children to read words independently without having to rely on teacher assistance. With good phonics mastery, children gain a solid foundation for developing advanced reading skills, expanding their vocabulary, and improving their overall language comprehension.

Early Childhood Reading Skills

Reading ability in early childhood is a fundamental component in the development of early literacy. At this stage, reading is not yet understood as the ability to comprehend complex texts, but rather as the child's initial process of recognizing written symbols and connecting them to specific sounds and meanings. Whitehurst & Lonigan, (1998) explain that early literacy encompasses a set of basic skills that serve as the foundation for reading development at subsequent levels. These skills involve letter recognition, understanding language sounds, and gradually developing the ability to read simple words (Bunayyah et al., 2025; Wackerle-Hollman et al., 2024).

Children's reading development doesn't happen instantly, but rather through a gradual process that progresses according to their cognitive and language development. During this process, children require consistent stimulation to understand that written language has specific systems and patterns. Griffin et al., (1998) suggest that early childhood reading development occurs through several interconnected stages, with each stage laying the foundation for the next, building comprehensive reading skills.

The stages of development of reading skills in early childhood include: 1.) Letter recognition is a child's ability to recognize the visual forms of letters and distinguish them from each other. At this stage, children begin to understand that each letter has a specific identity and name, which are part of the writing system; 2.) Phonological awareness is a child's ability to recognize and manipulate sounds in spoken language, such as recognizing syllables, rhymes, and the beginning and ending sounds of words. This skill is crucial because it helps children understand the sound structure of language before they can read complete words; 3.) Sound blending, which is the ability to combine individual sounds into a complete word. At this stage, children begin to learn to connect

the sounds /c/, /a/, /t/ to form the word "cat" in a coherent and meaningful way.

Word recognition, which is a child's ability to recognize words quickly and automatically without having to spell them out individually. This stage indicates that children are gradually developing reading fluency.

Each of these stages plays a crucial role in developing a child's overall reading readiness. Children who have mastered letter recognition will more easily enter the phonological awareness stage because they begin to understand the connection between visual symbols and language sounds. Blending skills then strengthen the decoding process, enabling children to read simple words independently. Mastery of all these stages reflects optimal early literacy development and is an indicator of a child's readiness to enter more complex reading learning.

In learning English, reading ability isn't simply about memorizing vocabulary (Geva, 2017; Langprayoon & Ruangsart, 2024). Children need to understand the relationship between letters and sounds to be able to read new words they've never encountered before. This understanding is crucial because English has a spelling system that isn't always consistent between written and spoken words. This requires children to have strong decoding skills so they can not only memorize word forms but also understand the phonological mechanisms of their formation.

The link between reading skills and the phonics method is clearly evident in the English language learning process for early childhood (Ndijuye et al., 2025; Rendón-Romero et al., 2021). The phonics method provides a systematic foundation for children to understand the relationship between letters and sounds, enabling them to develop reading skills more effectively. Through this approach, children not only learn to read mechanically but also develop a deeper understanding of the language structure they are learning. Thus, the application of phonics is a relevant strategy to support the development of early childhood reading skills in the context of learning English as a foreign language.

Early Childhood Speaking Skills

Speaking ability is one aspect of productive language skills that demonstrates an individual's ability to express ideas, thoughts, feelings, and information through spoken language. In the context of early childhood language development, speaking skills are an important indicator because they reflect the extent to which a child is able to use language as an effective means of communication (Skelley & Crnic, 2011; Westrupp et al., 2022). Brown, (2001) explains that speaking skills encompass various interrelated linguistic elements, such as pronunciation accuracy, vocabulary mastery, fluency in speech, and self-confidence when communicating.

In early childhood, speaking skills develop gradually along with cognitive maturity, social development, and the language experiences children gain from their environment (Blaži, 2023). This development is influenced not only by internal factors but also depends heavily on the quality of language stimulation they receive in everyday life. The richer the linguistic experiences a child has, the greater their chances of optimally developing speaking skills. Factors that influence the development of speaking skills in early childhood include: 1.) Language exposure refers to the intensity and quality of language a child hears from the family, school, and learning media. Children who are frequently exposed to language have a greater opportunity to imitate and understand correct speech

patterns; 2.) Social interaction, namely two-way communication experiences between children and adults or peers. Active interaction provides space for children to practice language in real-life contexts; 3.) Self-confidence, namely the child's psychological readiness to dare to speak, try to say new words, and express themselves without fear of making mistakes.

Cameron, (2001) emphasized that language learning for children is more effective when presented through a communicative and contextual approach. Early childhood learns language more optimally when they are directly involved in meaningful activities, such as role-playing, singing, telling stories, or interacting in situations that resemble real life. Communicative learning enables children to understand the function of language as a means of communication, not simply as a collection of vocabulary to be memorized.

In this process, mastery of language sounds, or phonological awareness, plays a crucial role in the development of speech skills, particularly pronunciation. Phonological awareness helps children recognize the differences in sounds in a language, understand word stress patterns, and imitate pronunciation more accurately (Kkese, 2022; Stekić et al., 2023). Children with good phonological awareness tend to adapt their articulation more easily to the sounds of the target language, resulting in clearer and more understandable pronunciation.

The Relationship between the Phonics Method and Reading and Speaking Skills

The phonics method is closely linked to the development of reading and speaking skills in early childhood (Kusumaningsih et al., 2021; Sampa et al., 2018). This approach not only helps children understand the relationship between letters and sounds for reading purposes but also contributes to their oral language production skills. As children learn to identify and produce language sounds correctly, they simultaneously develop articulation skills that support speech. Thus, the benefits of phonics extend beyond reading and contribute to strengthening children's verbal communication development.

The ability to accurately recognize and produce language sounds offers a double advantage in learning English. Children not only find it easier to read words based on the learned sound patterns, but they are also able to pronounce them with articulation closer to that of native speakers. This process demonstrates that phonics serves as a bridge between receptive and productive skills in language acquisition.

Research findings by Ehri, (2005) show that phonics instruction significantly improves children's reading skills. This impact is evident in improved decoding skills, word recognition, and reading fluency. Mastery of language sounds acquired through phonics learning also indirectly contributes to the development of speaking skills because children become more familiar with correct pronunciation patterns in the target language.

Based on this description, it can be understood that the phonics method is a learning approach that supports the development of reading and speaking skills in an integrated manner. Through practice in sound recognition, phoneme integration, and word pronunciation, children gain a strong linguistic foundation for fluent reading and speaking with improved pronunciation. This integration of reading and speaking skills is what makes the phonics method relevant for English learning for early childhood.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a quantitative approach with a quasi-experimental design in the form of a nonequivalent control group design, which aims to determine the effect of the phonics method on the development of speaking and reading skills in English in children aged 4–5 years at Happy Kids Kindergarten.

Participants

The study involved two groups of participants: a control group that received English instruction using conventional methods, and an experimental group that received treatment using the phonics method throughout the learning process. This design was chosen based on pre-existing classroom conditions; therefore, the researchers did not conduct full random assignment of participants. The participants consisted of children aged 4–5 years, divided into two groups of ten children each.

The participants in this study were children aged 4–5 years enrolled at Happy Kids Kindergarten during the odd semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The research site was selected purposively based on the consideration that the kindergarten has two parallel classes for the 4–5 years age group, which allowed the researcher to conduct the study using a control group and an experimental group design.

The sampling technique used in this study was total sampling, whereby all children aged 4–5 years at Happy Kids Kindergarten who met the inclusion criteria were selected as research samples. The total number of samples was 20 children, who were divided non-randomly into two pre-existing classes (intact groups). Class A was assigned as the experimental group (n = 10) and received instruction using the phonics method, whereas Class B was assigned as the control group (n = 10) and received instruction using the conventional method. The determination of which class served as the experimental group and which as the control group was conducted through simple random assignment (e.g., lottery) applied to the two classes.

The inclusion criteria for participants in this study were as follows: 1.) aged between 4 years 0 months and 5 years 11 months at the time the pretest was administered; 2.) registered as active students at Happy Kids Kindergarten; 3.) had written permission from parents/guardians to participate in the research (informed consent); 4.) had no diagnosed medical history of hearing impairment, speech impairment, or language delay; and 5.) had a minimum attendance rate of 80% during the treatment period. The exclusion criteria for this study were children who moved to another school or were absent for more than three consecutive meetings without explanation. The demographic characteristics of the participants are concisely presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Characteristics	Control Group (n=10)	Experimental Group (n=10)
Average age (months)	54.2 (SD=3.4)	53.8 (SD=3.1)
Gender		
- Boys	5 (50%)	5 (50%)
- Girls	5 (50%)	5 (50%)
English exposure at home (yes/no)	2 (20%)	3 (30%)
Mother's highest education (high school/bachelor's degree)	6/4	7/3

The initial equality of the two groups (baseline equivalence) was tested by comparing the pretest scores of English reading and speaking ability between the control and experimental groups before the treatment was administered. The results of the independent samples t-test showed that there was no significant difference between the pretest scores of the control group ($M = 19.8$; $SD = 2.1$) and the experimental group ($M = 20.1$; $SD = 2.3$), with $t(18) = 0.31$, $p = 0.762$ ($p > 0.05$). This indicates that the two groups had equivalent initial abilities before the treatment was administered, so that any differences in post-test results can be attributed to the effect of the treatment (the phonics method) rather than to differences in initial ability.

The research procedure consisted of a pretest to measure the children's initial abilities before the treatment, phonics instruction delivered to the experimental group over several sessions, and a posttest to measure changes in reading and speaking skills after the treatment. The pretest and posttest data were then compared to determine the effectiveness of the phonics method on the children's language development.

Instrument

The research instrument used was a structured observation checklist with a rating scale of 1–4, designed to assess the development of early literacy and English-speaking skills in individual children. This instrument contains reading ability indicators including letter recognition, letter sound identification, sound blending, simple word reading, word comprehension, reading consistency, and reading confidence, as well as speaking ability indicators including pronunciation, vocabulary use, sound imitation ability, speaking fluency, verbal response, speaking initiative, and intonation. Assessments were conducted naturally during the learning activities through individual observations of 3–5 meetings to obtain gradual and continuous development data. The observation score was calculated based on the total score of each child, then averaged and converted into a percentage to determine the development category, namely Not Yet Developing (BB), Starting to Develop (MB), Developing According to Expectations (BSH), and Developing Very Well (BSB). Data analysis was carried out descriptively quantitatively through calculations of averages, percentages, and inferential statistical analysis using the t-test to determine the significance of differences in learning outcomes between the control and the experimental group after treatment was given.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on the results of research conducted on children aged 4–5 years in, the data obtained showed differences in English reading and speaking abilities between the control group that was not given phonics method treatment and the experimental group that was given learning using phonics method. These differences were seen in all assessment indicators, including letter recognition, letter sounds, blending, word recognition, pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and confidence. In general, the experimental group showed higher performance than the control group on each indicator measured. The results of the control and experimental groups that have been tested at Happy Kids Kindergarten can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Test Results for the Control Group and Experimental Group for Happy Kids Kindergarten Students

No	Indicator	Control Group	Experimental Group
1	Recognizing Letters	2.6	3.5
2	Letter Sounds	2.3	3.4
3	Blending	2.1	3.3
4	Word Recognition	2.4	3.4
5	Pronunciation	2.5	3.5
6	Vocabulary	2.6	3.3
7	Fluency	2.2	3.2
8	Confidence	2.7	3.6

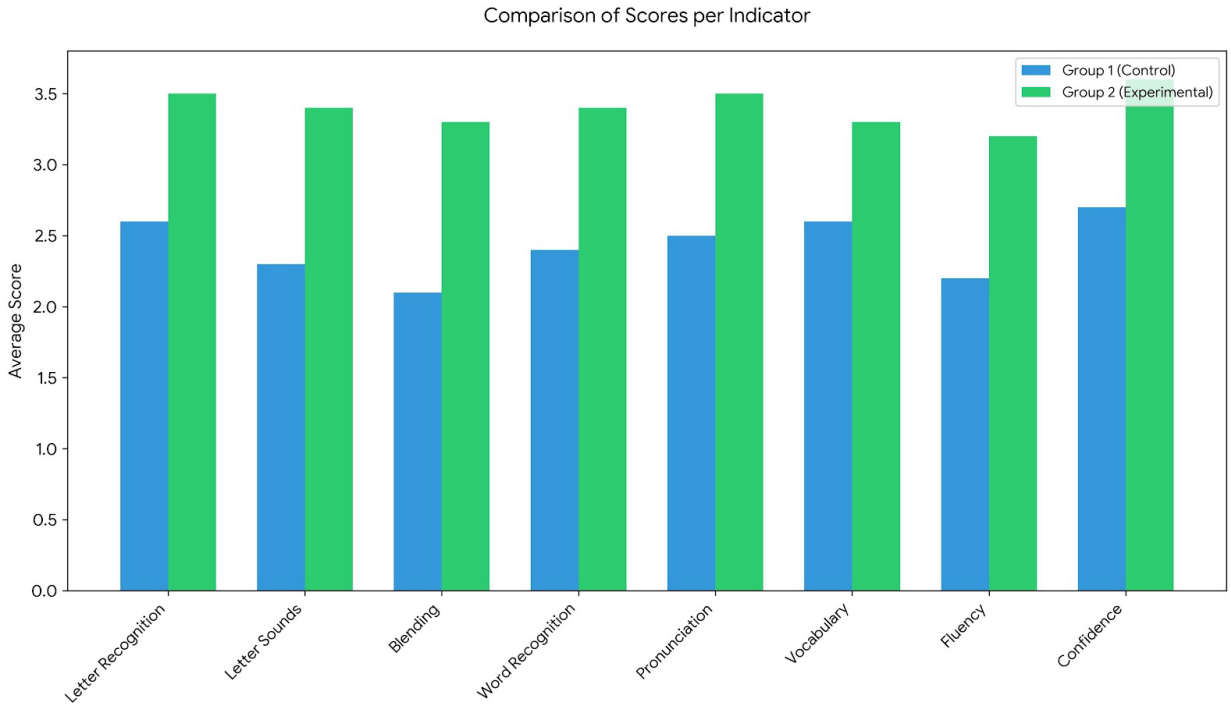

Figure 1. Comparison Chart of Scores per Indicator

The average score for the control group was 20.4 out of a maximum of 32, with a 63.75% achievement rate, which falls into the Beginning to Develop (MB) category. This indicates that the English reading and speaking skills of the children in the control group are still developing at an early stage. They have begun to demonstrate basic letter recognition and some simple vocabulary, but still require significant teacher assistance in the learning process.

The experimental group achieved a mean score of 27.5 out of a maximum of 32, with an achievement percentage of 85.9%, which falls into the Developing as Expected (BSH) category. These data indicate that the use of the phonics method has a significant positive effect on the development of early childhood English reading and speaking skills. Children in the experimental group consistently performed better across all observed indicators.

On the letter recognition indicator, the control group achieved an average score of 2.6, while the experimental group achieved 3.5. This difference indicates that the phonics method helps children recognize letter symbols more effectively because learning focuses

not only on the visual form of letters but also on the sounds they produce. This makes the letter recognition process more meaningful and easier for children to remember.

In the letter sound indicator, the difference in scores between the control (2.3) and experimental (3.4) groups shows that the phonics method is very effective in improving children's ability to understand the relationship between letters and sounds. Children in the experimental group appeared to be quicker to associate letter symbols with their phonetic sounds, while in the control group, many errors were still found in pronouncing basic English letter sounds.

The ability to blend, or combine, letter sounds into simple words showed a significant difference between the control (2.1) and experimental (3.3) groups. This finding indicates that the phonics method plays a significant role in helping children understand the word decoding process. Children who learn using the phonics approach find it easier to combine sounds into meaningful words than children who learn without this approach.

On the word recognition indicator, the experimental group scored 3.4, compared to 2.4 for the control group. This indicates that children learning through phonics recognize simple English words more quickly. This ability develops as children understand the relationship between letters and sounds, enabling them to read analytically rather than simply memorize word forms.

The experimental group also scored higher in pronunciation, at 3.5, compared to the control group's 2.5. These results demonstrate that the phonics method helps children produce English word sounds more accurately because they are accustomed to systematically and repeatedly practicing pronouncing phonemes from the start.

The experimental group scored an average of 3.3 on the vocabulary indicator, while the control group only scored 2.6. This indicates that children's vocabulary mastery improves along with their decoding and pronunciation skills. When children can read and pronounce words correctly, they more easily understand and remember new vocabulary introduced during learning.

Fluency, or speaking fluency, also improved in the experimental group, with a score of 3.2 compared to 2.2 in the control group. Children who understand sounds and word structure through phonics tend to be more fluent in pronouncing simple words and phrases because the decoding process becomes more automatic. This directly impacts their verbal fluency when speaking English.

On the confidence indicator, the experimental group achieved the highest score of 3.6, while the control group only scored 2.7. This data indicates that children's success in reading and pronouncing words correctly positively affects their confidence when speaking in front of teachers and peers. Children who feel capable are more likely to try using English actively.

Discussion

The Mechanism of Phonics' Influence on Reading and Speaking Ability

The findings of this study indicate that the application of the phonics method has a positive effect on improving English speaking and reading skills in children aged 4–5 years. Cognitively, the effectiveness of this method can be explained through the framework of phonological awareness, namely the child's ability to recognize, manipulate, and produce language sounds (Ehri, 2005; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Learning that emphasizes the relationship between letter symbols and phonetic sounds can help children understand the reading process more systematically from an early age. This process involves what is known as neuronal recycling, where areas of the brain

originally used for face and object recognition are gradually "recycled" into specialized areas that respond to letters and sounds.

When children are introduced to a clear relationship between letters and their sounds, they not only memorize the visual forms of words, but also understand how to construct and pronounce words correctly. The fundamental difference between the phonics approach and conventional methods lies in the emphasis on decoding (the ability to break down words into their constituent sounds) versus rote memorization (visual memorization) (Buckingham, 2020; Yıldız et al., 2024). Children who only memorize word forms will have difficulty when faced with new words they have never seen before, while children who master decoding skills can read words independently (Ehri, 2005). This process makes reading activities easier to understand and more meaningful for children.

Phonics and Phonological Awareness Development in the Indonesian EFL Context

The results of this study align with the concept of language learning in early childhood, which places phonological awareness as one of the main foundations in the development of early literacy (Atlar-Yildirim & Uzuner, 2024; Balikci, 2020). These findings reinforce the theory put forward by the National Reading Panel (2000) that systematic and explicit phonics instruction is more effective than non-phonics or implicit phonics approaches. A well-developed phonological understanding enables children to recognize sound patterns in language, distinguish phonemes, and associate these sounds with the appropriate letter symbols.

In the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Indonesia, this ability is crucial because the English sound system has fundamentally different characteristics from children's native languages (Leona et al., 2021). For example, the phonemes /θ/ (as in think) and /ð/ (as in this) are not recognized in the Indonesian phoneme inventory, so children require intensive articulatory practice to produce these sounds accurately. Phonics provides systematic practice for these unfamiliar sounds through structured auditory and articulatory repetition (Cameron, 2001).

Through the phonics method, children have the opportunity to repeatedly practice listening, imitating, and pronouncing language sounds in a structured learning environment, allowing their phonological skills to develop gradually but consistently (Fresch, 2025; Lindsey et al., 2020). This foundation then supports early reading and speaking skills simultaneously.

Phonics' contribution to Speaking Ability (Pronunciation and Fluency)

One of the novel contributions of this study is empirical evidence that phonics not only improves reading skills but also speaking skills. This finding extends previous research (Johnston & Watson, 2005; Nishanimut et al., 2013), which largely focused on reading outcomes. Why does phonics improve speaking? The explanation lies in the auditory-articulatory feedback loop. When children learn phonics, they not only see letters but also hear sounds and pronounce them repeatedly. This process strengthens the connection between auditory representations (how sounds should sound) and articulatory representations (how the mouth and tongue move to produce those sounds).

According to Levelt's (1989) speech production model, accurate pronunciation requires good phonological encoding, namely the ability to access sound representations of vocabulary stored in the mental lexicon. Phonics systematically trains phonological encoding, so that children can not only read but also pronounce words more accurately.

The link between reading and speaking through phonological awareness has been explained by Perfetti and Hart (2002) in the lexical quality hypothesis, which states that high-quality word representations (including orthography, phonology, and semantics) will support both reading and speaking skills.

Phonics and Self Confidence Speak English

Another important finding of this study is the improvement in children's self-confidence when learning through the phonics method. According to Krashen's (1982) affective filter theory, anxiety and low self-confidence may hinder language acquisition because children may become afraid of making mistakes and therefore hesitate to speak. The phonics method helps reduce the affective filter through two mechanisms. First, phonics provides clear and predictable reading rules, so children do not feel that they are merely guessing how to read or pronounce words. Second, children's success in reading simple words provides positive learning experiences that help build self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

When the child capable understand connection between letters, sounds and words together gradually, they become more believe self in explore Language new without feel burdened. Condition this different with learning conventional which is often make child depend on the teacher because they only copy without understand system sound Language.

Comparison with Previous Research and Research Novelty

Based on the overall research results, it can be understood that the phonics method shows higher effectiveness compared to conventional learning approaches. This finding is consistent with the meta-analysis conducted by the National Reading Panel (2000) and the research of Ehri, (2005). However, this study has two novelties that distinguish it from previous studies.

First , this study demonstrates that phonics remains effective in a pure EFL context like Indonesia, where children have no natural exposure to English sounds outside the classroom. Most previous studies were conducted in L1 (native speaker) or ESL contexts (like India where English is the second language). Second, this study measured reading and speaking skills simultaneously, while previous studies focused on only one aspect. The finding that phonics also improves pronunciation, fluency, and confidence provides empirical evidence that phonological awareness is cross-modal.

Pedagogical Implications for Early Childhood Education in Indonesia

Given these achievements, the phonics method is worthy of consideration as a primary approach to English learning in early childhood education. Using this method not only supports early literacy development but also creates a more active, enjoyable, and meaningful learning experience for children. Practically, this study recommends the following for early childhood teachers: 1.) Phonics instruction should begin with the introduction of consonant and short vowel sounds before moving on to more complex sound patterns; 2.) Blending (combining sounds into words) and segmentation (breaking words into sounds) should be practiced regularly through games such as sound boxes (Elkonin boxes) or phonetic songs; 3.) Teachers should receive adequate phonics training because teacher errors in pronouncing phonemes (e.g., pronouncing /k/ as "kay") can harm the development of children's phonological awareness; 4.) Children's self-

confidence needs to be built through specific praise for blending and pronunciation efforts, not just for correct results.

Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the relatively small sample size (20 children) limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Future research using larger, geographically diverse samples is recommended. Second, the quasi-experimental design without full randomization makes this study susceptible to selection bias, although initial equivalence testing was conducted. Third, the short duration of the intervention did not allow for measurement of long-term effects. Longitudinal research is needed to see whether the benefits of phonics persist over time. Fourth, this study did not measure phonological awareness separately as a mediating variable. Future research could use a mediation analysis design to test whether increased phonological awareness mediates the relationship between phonics and reading/speaking ability. Nevertheless, this study provides an important initial contribution to the development of English language learning strategies in Indonesian PAUD, especially for institutions that want to optimize the development of English reading and speaking skills from the early stages of child development.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: This study proves that the phonics method has a positive and significant effect on the development of English reading and speaking abilities in children aged 4–5 years at Happy Kids Kindergarten. The experimental group that received phonics instruction achieved the "Developing as Expected" category with a percentage achievement of 85.9%, while the control group that received conventional methods only reached the "Starting to Develop" (MB) category with a percentage of 63.75%. The significant improvement in the experimental group occurred across all measured indicators, including letter recognition, letter sounds, blending, word recognition, pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and confidence. These findings confirm that the systematic relationship between letters and sounds in the phonics method helps children understand the structure of the English language in a more concrete and meaningful way compared to conventional approaches based on vocabulary memorization. **Implication**: Theoretically, these findings strengthen phonological awareness theory as the main foundation of early literacy development (Ehri et al., 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) and extend empirical evidence that the benefits of phonics are not limited to reading ability but also include speaking ability through phonological encoding mechanisms (Levelt, 1989) and the auditory-articulatory feedback loop. Practically, this study recommends that the phonics method should be systematically integrated into the English curriculum in Early Childhood Education (PAUD) in Indonesia. Teachers should begin instruction by introducing consonant and short vowel letter sounds, practice blending and segmentation through phonetic games, and build children's self-confidence through early success experiences in reading and pronouncing words. The success of the phonics method in the Indonesian EFL context indicates that this approach is worthy of broader implementation in PAUD institutions that aim to optimize the development of early literacy skills and English speaking abilities in children. **Limitation**: This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the small sample size (n = 20) limits the generalizability of the findings to a larger population. Second, the quasi-experimental design without full randomization makes this study prone to selection bias,

although the baseline equality test showed no significant differences between the control and experimental groups on the pretest. Third, the relatively short intervention duration, which was not explicitly stated in the manuscript, does not allow for the measurement of the long-term effects of the phonics method. Fourth, this study was conducted in only one kindergarten with specific participant characteristics; therefore, the results may not fully represent the population of children aged 4–5 years in Indonesia in general. Fifth, this study did not measure phonological awareness separately as a mediating variable, so it cannot yet be determined whether the improvement in reading and speaking abilities was fully mediated by increased phonological awareness. **Future Research**: Based on the limitations described above, future research is recommended to: 1.) employ a randomized controlled trial (RCT) design with a larger and more geographically diverse sample to increase the generalizability of the findings; 2.) include a longer intervention duration (e.g., one semester or one academic year) and be equipped with follow-up tests to measure long-term effects; 3.) use mediation analysis to test whether phonological awareness plays a role as a mediator between the phonics method and improvements in reading and speaking abilities; 4.) compare the effectiveness of various types of phonics (e.g., synthetic phonics vs. analytic phonics) in the Indonesian EFL context; 5.) investigate moderating factors such as parental support at home or exposure to English outside school that may influence the effectiveness of the phonics method; and 6.) replicate this study across different age ranges (e.g., 3–4 years or 5–6 years) to examine whether the effectiveness of phonics varies according to children's developmental stage.

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