CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the relevant literature and theoretical framework underpinning the study. It discusses the challenges of learning to read English for young learners, the stages of early reading development, the concept and practice of synthetic phonics, the components of early English reading skills assessed in this study, the conceptual framework, previous related research, and the research hypothesis.

A. Challenges in Learning to Read English Early for Young Learners

Reading is a complex process that involves recognizing written symbols and understanding the meaning of those symbols. For young learners, especially in Indonesia where English is a foreign language, mastering early reading skills is a crucial foundation for their future literacy development (Good & Kaminski, 2002). Early reading skills include phonemic awareness, letter recognition, decoding, and reading fluency. These are the basic abilities that help children decode and comprehend written texts. In the Indonesian EFL context, developing early reading skills is even more challenging. This is because English exposure is very limited both inside and outside the classroom, and the phonological system of English is quite different from Bahasa Indonesia. As a result, many students find it difficult to connect English letters with their sounds, and often struggle with decoding new words. Learning to read in a foreign language like English is not just about being able to recognize words visually. It also requires students to develop decoding skills, understand how sounds work in English, and make sense of what they read as a whole. This process can be confusing and sometimes frustrating for young learners, especially when they are used to the sound system of their first language.

Reading in English is one of the basic skills that is very important for young learners in Indonesia, especially in EFL environments. However, the process of learning to read English is not easy and involves various obstacles, such as difficulty in matching letters to sounds, limited vocabulary, and lack of confidence in reading

aloud. In this section, the researcher will thoroughly discuss the characteristics of young learners in EFL contexts, the stages of early reading development according to Chall's (1983) theory, as well as the main factors that influence reading success, such as decoding ability, language comprehension in Simple View of Reading developed by Gough & Tunmer (1986), and reading automation processes in Orthographic Mapping theory by Ehri (2005). It will also outline how these challenges emerge in classroom practice and how key theories such as Stages of Reading Development (Chall), Simple View of Reading (SVR), and Orthographic Mapping (OM) can help understand and overcome the obstacles students face in learning to read English early.

1. Characteristics of Young Learners in EFL Contexts

In this study, young learners are grade 4 elementary school students who are around 9-10 years old. Students at this age belong to the middle young learners group, which is children who are starting to be able to think more systematically, but still really need real learning experiences and meaningful activities in their daily lives (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2009). At this age, children usually find it easier to understand lessons if they are directly involved, for example, through songs, games, or activities that involve body movements. This way of learning not only makes them more active but can also increase their motivation and curiosity in the classroom (Harmer, 2007).

In Indonesia, English lessons have been given since elementary school and even in kindergarten. However, the practice in the field shows that there are still many challenges, especially in teaching reading skills. In the context of this research, reading skills refer specifically to early English reading skills, which include letter recognition, phonemic awareness, decoding (reading simple words by sounding out), and reading fluency. Studies by Damrah et al. (2024) found that learning to read in elementary schools often only focuses on visual vocabulary recognition, students are taught to recognize and memorize words by sight. Meanwhile, other important aspects such as the development of phonological

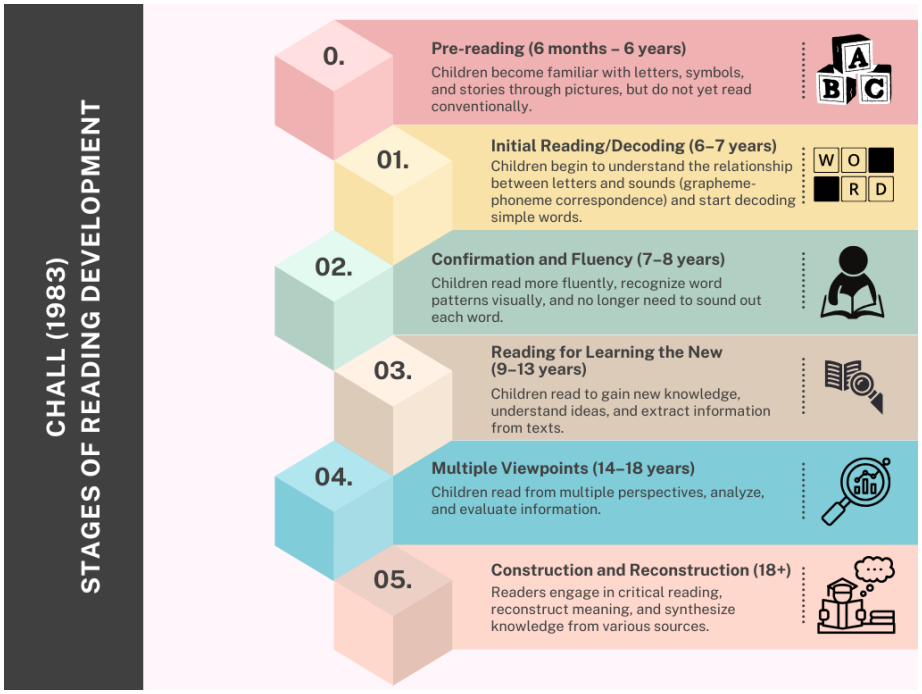
awareness (the ability to recognize and manipulate sounds in words) actually receive less attention, even though this ability is very important to build a strong reading foundation (Nuraini et al., 2025). This challenge is even more pronounced because English, as a foreign language in Indonesia, has a fairly complicated orthography (Sundari, 2018). Unlike languages where the relationship between letters and sounds is always consistent, in English, one letter can have many sounds, or vice versa, one sound can be written with several different letters (Ehri, 2005). As a result, students often feel confused and struggle when learning to read new words. In addition, according to Meisani (2022), limited learning time, minimal opportunities for exposure to English outside the classroom, and a lack of teacher training in teaching phonetic reading widen the gap between students' reading ability and learning demands. Given these conditions, it is important to understand how young learners typically develop early English reading skills. Therefore, the following section presents the main models that explain how children progress from recognizing letters to becoming fluent readers.

2. Stages of Early Reading Development in Children

Chall (1983) suggests six stages of reading development in children, ranging from the pre-reading stage to the construction and reconstruction stage. These stages provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how children acquire reading skills over time. Stage 0 (Pre-reading) typically occurs from birth to age six, when children become familiar with letters, symbols, and the sounds of spoken language through exposure to print and stories. Stage 1 (Initial Reading or Alphabetic Decoding) is when children learn to connect letters with sounds and begin to decode simple words. Stage 2 (Confirmation and Fluency) is characterized by increased reading fluency and automaticity as children recognize word patterns and read familiar texts more easily. Stage 3 (Reading for Learning the New) is when students use reading to acquire new knowledge and expand their vocabulary. Stage d4 (Multiple Viewpoints) involves reading and understanding texts from different perspectives and dealing with more complex material. Finally, Stage 5 (Construction and Reconstruction) is marked by the ability to synthesize

information from multiple sources, critically analyze texts, and construct new knowledge. These stages illustrate the gradual and cumulative nature of reading development from early childhood through adulthood. Here's Figure 1 and a brief explanation of each stage:

Figure 1. Stages of Reading Development by Chall 1983



According to the Indonesian Kurikulum Merdeka, students are expected to have mastered basic early English reading skills, such as letter naming, phonemic awareness, and decoding, before or at the beginning of Fase B (typically Grade 3–4). These foundational skills are essential for students to achieve the Fase B target: reading and understanding simple words, phrases, and sentences with the help of illustrations (Kemdikbud, 2022).

However, the findings of this study reveal a significant gap between these curriculum expectations and the actual abilities of students in the classroom. Pre-test results show that many fourth-grade students have not yet mastered letter naming (Stage 0), phonemic awareness, or decoding (Stage 1). This means that, although the curriculum expects students to be developing reading fluency and

comprehension at this stage, in reality, many are still struggling with the most basic early English reading skills.

In the context of this study, the most relevant stages are Stage 0 (Pre-reading) and Stage 1 (Initial Reading/Alphabetic Decoding). While the Indonesian curriculum expects fourth-grade students to have mastered letter naming, phonemic awareness, and decoding (thus progressing toward Stage 2: Confirmation and Fluency), the pre-test results reveal that many students are still struggling with foundational skills at Stage 0 and Stage 1. Some students have not yet mastered letter naming, while the majority still face difficulties with phonemic awareness and decoding. This stage is closely related to synthetic phonics, because in this approach, students are explicitly taught to recognize and combine letter sounds to read words. Research from Mcarthur et al. (2018) also proved that synthetic phonics really helps children in the early decoding stage to build strong reading skills and move on to a more fluent reading stage.

Therefore, this study focuses on strengthening early English reading skills at Stage 0 and Stage 1 through the implementation of synthetic phonics, which is designed to build a solid foundation in letter-sound correspondence and decoding. The use of the DIBELS 8th Edition Benchmark 1 instrument is justified, as it accurately measures the skills that students are currently developing, regardless of their grade level. While Stage 2 (Confirmation and Fluency) remains an important goal for future reading development, the immediate priority in this context is to ensure that all students have mastered the essential skills of Stage 0 and Stage 1 before moving forward.

In summary, although the participants are fourth graders and should theoretically be at Stage 2 or 3, the empirical data show that their actual reading development is at Stage 0 and Stage 1. Therefore, this research focuses on improving early English reading skills at these foundational stages, using an appropriate instrument and treatment for this context. Torgerson et al. (2019) emphasize that synthetic phonics in the early stages of reading is very important to

build efficient decoding skills, which will impact reading fluency and comprehension in the later stages.

Understanding Chall's stages of reading development helps clarify both the expectations set by the curriculum and the actual needs of students in the classroom. This study highlights the importance of targeted treatment at Stage 0 and Stage 1 to ensure that all students build a strong foundation in early English reading skills before moving on to more complex reading tasks. The next section will discuss how decoding and language comprehension interact in the reading process, as explained by the Simple View of Reading framework.

3. The Reading Process: The Role of Decoding and Comprehension

This part of the discussion is grounded in The Simple View of Reading (SVR), developed by Gough & Tunmer (1986), which is one of the most influential theoretical frameworks in the literacy field. This theory tries to explain what the important components are that determine whether someone can understand reading well. According to SVR, reading comprehension (RC) is the result of two main abilities, namely decoding (D) and language comprehension (LC). In simple terms, this relationship can be written in the form of a formula $RC = D \times LC$.

Decoding is the ability to translate written symbols (letters or graphemes) into corresponding sounds (phonemes). This ability is usually acquired through phonics practice, as taught in synthetic phonics. Research by Lee et al. (2022) and Hoover and Tunmer (2020) with EFL students also supports this view, showing that decoding has a very important role in successful second language reading. Meanwhile, language comprehension is the ability to understand spoken language, including vocabulary, sentence structure, and background knowledge. What is interesting about this model is its "multiplicative" nature. That is, if one of the components (decoding or language comprehension) is very weak, then reading comprehension will also be low. For example, a student who can read fluently word by word but has poor vocabulary or does not understand sentence structure will still have difficulty understanding the content of the reading. Conversely, students who

understand spoken language but cannot read words correctly will also experience the same obstacles. Therefore, these two aspects must be developed simultaneously so that students can read well and understand the content of the text.

In the context of early English reading learning for Indonesian children, SVR is a very useful tool to see where students' difficulties lie. Many students in Indonesia are quite good at decoding because they are accustomed to memorization exercises, but they often struggle to understand the content of reading due to limited exposure to spoken English. This is where synthetic phonics can help strengthen the decoding aspect, while listening and speaking activities in English can help improve their language comprehension.

In addition, SVR has been supported by many follow-up studies and is still an important reference in curriculum design and reading interventions in many countries. The framework is often used as a basis for designing reading improvement programs that target both decoding and language comprehension skills.

4. From Decoding to Fluency: Automaticity and Orthographic Mapping

Orthographic Mapping (OM) is a cognitive process that enables readers to store written words in long-term memory so as to recognize words automatically and fluently while reading. This concept was introduced by Ehri (2005), who emphasized that the development of sight vocabulary is highly dependent on the ability to connect the spelling (orthography), sound (phonology), and meaning (semantics) of words. Orthographic Mapping can be effective when the reader must be able to process words automatically. According to Perfetti’s Lexical Quality Hypothesis, reading fluency and comprehension depend on the efficiency of automatic word recognition (Perfetti, 2007). When decoding becomes automatic, working memory resources are freed up for comprehension.

Ehri (2005) also explains that proficient readers no longer spell letter by letter, but rather build mental representations of words through repeated exposure

and the Orthographic Mapping process. This process requires a strong foundation of phonemic awareness and understanding of grapheme-phoneme relationships, which are at the core of synthetic phonics. In other words, Orthographic Mapping and Perfetti's theory complement each other: Orthographic Mapping explains how words become part of the sight vocabulary through the integration of sound, writing, and meaning, while Perfetti emphasizes the importance of automation for fluent reading and improved text comprehension.

In the context of early reading learning in Indonesia, Synthetic phonics explicitly teaches the relationship between letters and sounds (Rokhman et al., 2020), which directly supports the development of decoding and orthographic mapping. Students who are taught decoding explicitly through phonics are better prepared for Orthographic Mapping, thus moving from stammering to fluent and automatic reading. This is in line with Perfetti's idea that decoding automation is key for optimal development of reading comprehension. To provide a clearer understanding of how these theoretical concepts are applied in practice, the following section introduces the synthetic phonics method in greater detail and explores its implementation through the Jolly Phonics program in early reading instruction.

B. Synthetic Phonics as an Approach to Early Reading Instruction

1. Synthetic Phonics in Practice: The Jolly Phonics Approach

Synthetic phonics is an explicit and systematic approach to teaching reading to beginners, where students are taught the relationship between letters (or groups of letters) and sounds (phonemes) in a gradual and structured manner. The learning process starts with the introduction of letter sounds one by one, followed by practice combining these sounds (blending) into whole words, and then proceeds to segmenting skills and recognizing “tricky words” such as words “island”, “was”, “the” that do not follow the usual phonics patterns (Johnston & Watson, 2005). This approach emphasizes the importance of students understanding phoneme-grapheme relationships first, and then using blending skills to read new words. In this way,

synthetic phonics equips students with strong decoding strategies, which form the basis for orthographic mapping and automatic word recognition (Ehri, 2014). The effectiveness of synthetic phonics is based on logical steps in teaching the relationship between letters and sounds, starting from teaching them to recognize phonemes and graphemes, and progressing to more complex levels (Vadasy & Sanders, 2021)

One of the most widely adopted programs that applies the principles of synthetic phonics is Jolly Phonics. The program teaches 42 letter sounds in seven groups sequentially, and each sound is introduced with engaging actions, songs, and pictures. This multisensory approach helps students learn through multiple channels - hearing, sight, and movement - making the learning experience more enjoyable and memorable (Lloyd et al., 1998). In practice, students are invited to combine sounds, such as /c/ + /a/ + /t/ into “cat”, and break down words such as “stop” into /s/-/t/-/o/-/p/, which helps students recognize patterns in new words (Torgerson et al., 2019). After that, they are also introduced to tricky words such as “said” or “knight” that cannot be read with just basic phonics rules.

Research shows that Jolly Phonics significantly accelerates the development of phonemic awareness and decoding skills in young learners, including in EFL contexts such as Indonesia, where exposure to English is still limited (Wahyuni, 2022). Synthetic phonics, including programs like Jolly Phonics, is effective in improving EFL students' phonemic awareness, decoding, word recognition, and reading fluency (Ariati et al., 2018; Attia, 2020; Listyarini et al., 2022). With a structured multisensory approach such as Jolly Phonics, teachers can provide learning that is clear, gradual, and directly targets the core processes of reading acquisition, namely, decoding and fluency. As a result, students tend to make faster and longer-lasting progress in their early English reading skills.

2. Components of Early Reading Skills in This Study

Early English Reading Skills are understood as a set of basic abilities that enable young EFL students to read English texts appropriately and increasingly

automatically. These skills are measured using selected subtests from the DIBELS 8th Edition (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills), a widely recognized assessment tool designed to evaluate the components of early literacy development (Good et al., 2004).

The early reading skills assessed in this study include three key components:

a. Phonemic Awareness

   Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, recognize, and manipulate the smallest sounds (phonemes) in spoken words. This skill is auditory and is an important foundation before children learn to read or write in an alphabetical system such as English. Children who have phonemic awareness are able to break words into separate sounds (segmenting), combine sounds into words (blending), or replace one sound with another to form a new word. Phonemic awareness is one of the strongest predictors of future reading success (Brady, 2020; Ehri & McCormick, 1998), as it helps children establish relationships between sounds and letters that are critical in the orthographic mapping process (Jamie L. Metsala & Linnea C. Ehri, 2021).

   In this study, Phoneme Segmentation Fluency (PSF) from DIBELS is used to measure this component. In the PSF subtest, students are asked to listen to spoken words and break them down into their individual phonemes as quickly and accurately as possible, reflecting their ability to segment sounds in real time.

b. Decoding

   Decoding is the process of translating written symbols (graphemes) into their corresponding sounds (phonemes) and blending those sounds to form recognizable words (Nation, 2019). This skill reflects mastery of letter-sound relationships and the ability to combine sounds, which are at the core of synthetic phonics instruction.

   In this study, decoding ability is assessed using two DIBELS subtests: Letter Naming Fluency (LNF) and Nonsense Word Fluency

(NWF). The LNF subtest measures how quickly and accurately students can name random letters, indicating familiarity with the alphabet and letter-sound correspondence. The NWF subtest requires students to read aloud invented (nonsense) words, which can only be read correctly by applying decoding skills, thus providing a direct measure of their ability to blend sounds and decode unfamiliar words.

c. Fluency

Fluency is the ability to read text smoothly, not only with accuracy but also with appropriate speed and expression (Pikulski & Chard, 2005). Fluency demonstrates the automation of word recognition that develops after decoding skills are established, allowing students to focus more on comprehension.

In this study, fluency is measured using the Word Reading Fluency (WRF) and Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) subtests from DIBELS. The WRF subtest assesses how many isolated real words a student can read correctly within a given time. The ORF subtest evaluates the number of words a student can read accurately from a connected text passage within one minute, reflecting both speed and accuracy in context.

By assessing these three components with the relevant DIBELS subtests, this study provides a comprehensive measure of early English reading skills. The composite results serve as the dependent variable to evaluate the effectiveness of synthetic phonics instruction on decoding accuracy and reading fluency among young EFL learners.

C. Conceptual Framework: How Phonics Supports Early Reading Skills

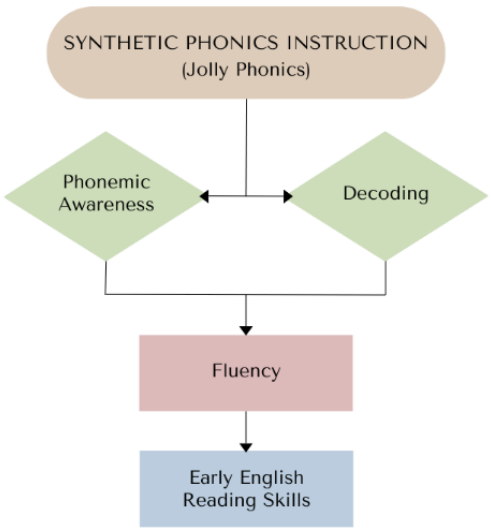
The conceptual framework of this study explains the theoretical and operational relationship between synthetic phonics instruction and the development of early English reading skills among young EFL learners. Grounded in the Simple View of Reading Gough and Tunmer, (1986) and supported by research on phonemic awareness and orthographic mapping Ehri (2005), the framework

identifies synthetic phonics as a fundamental instructional approach that targets the essential components of early reading.

In this study, synthetic phonics, implemented through the Jolly Phonics program, serves as the independent variable. The program is designed to strengthen three core components of early English reading skills: phonemic awareness, decoding, and fluency. Synthetic phonics instruction builds students' phonemic awareness, which in turn supports their ability to decode words accurately. As decoding becomes more automatic, students develop reading fluency, enabling them to read with greater speed and comprehension. These interconnected skills form the basis of early English reading proficiency and are measured using composite scores from DIBELS subtests.

This framework illustrates both the direct and indirect pathways through which synthetic phonics instruction can significantly affect early reading outcomes for Indonesian EFL students. Empirical studies have shown that synthetic phonics instruction can improve students' understanding of letter-sound relationships and decoding skills, which are critical for overcoming low initial reading proficiency, a challenge widely documented in Indonesia and other EFL contexts.

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework



The empirical basis for this framework provides the significance of synthetic phonics as a practical intervention to address foundational reading challenges for young learners in the Indonesian EFL context.

D. Study of the Relevant Research

The research by Agüero and Francioni (2023) conducted an action research. This study examines whether the Synthetic Phonics intervention program can improve EFL learners' reading fluency and accuracy. This was carried out over three weeks with 11 students from year 1 in a bilingual school, using a structured approach to phonics that emphasizes the breakdown of the sound-letter link. It clearly showed that there was a remarkable rise in students' decoding and reading fluency to levels of proficiency equal to that of a native English speaker. This again brings into view the importance of synthetic phonics as an effective methodology of teaching in non-native settings and reiterates the search for new programs on reading to support EFL learners in developing crucial skills of literacy, as discussed in the Simple View of Reading, in enhancing the foundational skills required for fluent reading.

Meanwhile, research by Wahyuni, (2022) An experiment was conducted, which included 33 students in a pre-and-post experimental design where the experimental group was exposed to phonics first, followed by storybook reading, while the control group received traditional reading instruction with an emphasis on comprehension. It obtained results where the integration of synthetic phonics within the reading instruction methods made definite enhancements to pronunciation and comprehension skills for the experimental group, proving this treatment effective in improving the students' reading competence. These results align with theoretical frameworks on blending skills and word recognition, as synthetic phonics lays the foundation for better decoding, which underpins reading comprehension. This study highlights how phonics instruction supports early literacy by bridging the gap between basic reading skills and advanced comprehension strategies.

In addition, the research by Al-Sukaiti, (2024) conducted a descriptive quantitative study to assess the impact of teaching synthetic phonics, specifically the Jolly Phonics program, on the reading accuracy and fluency skills of third-grade students in Oman. The sample consisted of 117 students, and data were collected using the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) Test. The results showed that, on average, students did not reach the targets set by the Jolly Phonics program in terms of accuracy and fluency in reading connected text. This finding indicates the need for further development in synthetic phonics teaching methods to be more effective in the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL). This study fills an important gap related to the lack of a systematic evaluation based on quantitative data on the effectiveness of the Jolly Phonics program that has been implemented nationally in Oman since 2014. It also emphasizes the importance of basic literacy skills such as phonemic awareness, understanding of the alphabetic principle, as well as decoding and blending abilities, as key foundations for achieving reading fluency. In addition, the study underlines the close relationship between decoding ability and fluency with reading comprehension, in line with the automaticity theory of reading, which states that a lack of fluency in reading can hinder text comprehension.

Finally, the research by N. P. P. Ariati et al. (2018) was conducted to know how the use of the Jolly Phonics technique in a bilingual kindergarten in Denpasar, Bali is, and how it affects the students' ability in English literacy. This present study followed a qualitative descriptive research design in which research was conducted through observation, documentation, and interviews with a very experienced teacher who has been teaching Jolly Phonics for three years. The findings have pointed out that this utilizes and integrates all five essential skills of Jolly Phonics letter sounds learning, letter writing, blending for reading, identifying sounds in words for writing, and tricky words, suggesting activities that should be interactive and interesting. It shows how Jolly Phonics succeeds in upgrading children's early reading skills.

E. Research Hypothesis

The hypothesis in this study is as follows:

H_0: There is no significant difference in the early English reading skills of young EFL learners before and after being taught using the synthetic phonics method.

Ha: There is a significant difference in the early English reading skills of young EFL learners after being taught using the synthetic phonics method.