

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the background of the study, operational definitions, and the aims of the research. It explains the context and significance of early English reading skills among young learners, outlines the key concepts used in the study, and states the research objectives.

#### **A. Background of the Study**

Reading is a fundamental skill that is critical to students' academic development and future. Reading proficiency plays a crucial role in academic success and opens pathways to better career opportunities, especially in a globalized world where English serves as the dominant language for communication (Laličić & Dubravac, 2021). In an EFL context, strong reading skills not only support academic success but also facilitate access to diverse learning materials, the acquisition of new vocabulary, and the development of critical thinking abilities (Friedberd et al., 2017). As English becomes a more common language throughout the world, it is essential for Indonesian students to improve their reading skills to stay competitive and take advantage of more opportunities (Andayani, 2022). However, Indonesian students still encounter significant obstacles in developing early reading skills in English, particularly due to differences in phonemic awareness between English and Indonesian (Septianasari, 2019).

One of the most significant obstacles Indonesian students face in developing early reading skills in English is the lack of exposure to English phoneme-grapheme correspondences, as some sounds such as /θ/ and /ʃ/ do not exist in Indonesian (Angkarini, 2023). Early reading skills, which refer to the fundamental abilities needed to decode and comprehend written text, are crucial for young learners to become successful readers (Good & Kaminski, 2002). These abilities include reading fluency, decoding, letter recognition, and phonemic awareness. Strengthening early reading abilities is crucial in the Indonesian EFL context because of the country's limited exposure to English and phonological system

variations. This problem results from the lack of effective teaching strategies, which makes reading English texts more difficult. To address this issue, phonics-based methods have been widely developed and applied in English early reading learning. Among these methods, synthetic phonics offers a systematic approach that emphasizes the relationship between letters and sounds, making it a promising solution to the challenge (Ehri, 2020; Pfohl et al., 2019). In this approach, students are explicitly taught to convert letters or groups of letters into sounds (phonemes) and then combine these sounds to form recognizable words. Synthetic phonics teaching usually starts with teaching the smallest sound units and gradually builds whole words, allowing students to decipher unfamiliar words independently.

Several studies have proven the effectiveness of synthetic phonics in improving reading skills in students. Since 2006, the UK government has strongly supported synthetic phonics as a key approach to early literacy in state-funded primary schools in England, and since 2010 has made it mandatory (Brooks et al., 2019). The research by Jamaludin et al. (2015) explains how synthetic phonics can help early beginning ESL readers who face problems in their initial reading skills. In this quasi-experimental research design, the researcher measured the reading skills of the students through pre-test and post-test procedures. As indicated through statistical analysis, the children who had been trained using synthetic phonics showed a visible increase in comprehension and decoding skills, with the experimental group's post-test results higher than the control group. This further indicated that synthetic phonics teaching was effective to the point where reading comprehension improved and decoding principles were easier to learn. Therefore, these findings do suggest that Synthetic Phonics as a method of teaching is effective in increasing the levels of early reading skills among ESL students, applicable to the very poorly resourced distance learning context.

A study by Agüero and Francioni (2023) examined how effectively a synthetic phonics program helps EFL students in a bilingual school environment to improve their reading skills, as demonstrated by the students' improved decoding ability and their ability to achieve reading fluency comparable to that of native

English speakers. The study used an action research approach to investigate the challenges faced by first-year students. The program was quite useful for them because it strongly enhanced their reading accuracy and fluency, especially in phoneme decoding, which initially they could hardly do. The present study consequently underlines that synthetic phonics training is efficient even outside the strict linguistic educational context and sets a frame for further studies dealing with this method in various situations.

However, despite the proven effectiveness in ESL settings, there is a lack of research examining the application of Synthetic Phonics to young EFL learners in Indonesian schools, where students have not been introduced to the Synthetic Phonics Method for learning to read a foreign language. This study aims to fill the gap by examining the effectiveness of Synthetic Phonics in improving decoding ability and English reading fluency among fourth-grade students in Indonesian primary schools. Phonemic awareness is highlighted as a foundational skill that supports the development of decoding ability. By conducting a pre-experimental study with pre- and post-test using the DIBELS 8<sup>th</sup> Edition Instrument, this research aims to provide evidence of the method's effectiveness in a new and underexplored context, offering practical implications for EFL teaching strategies in Indonesia. DIBELS 8th Edition was chosen because it is internationally recognized and specifically designed to assess beginning reading skills, including phonemic awareness, decoding, and fluency, in elementary school students.

## **B. Formulation of the Problem**

Based on the background of the study above, the formulation of the problem in this study is “Is the Synthetic Phonics method effective in improving early English reading skills in young learners in Indonesian primary schools?”

## **C. Operational Definitions**

### **1. Synthetic Phonics**

Synthetic phonics is a methodical and explicit teaching approach that emphasizes the correspondence between letters (graphemes) and sounds (phonemes). This method enables learners to decode unfamiliar words by blending individual phonemes into whole words. It emphasizes the segmentation of words into their phonetic components, providing a foundational skill for reading comprehension, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners.

### **2. Jolly Phonics**

Jolly Phonics is a synthetic phonics learning program for children, teaching 42 basic letter sounds through five key skills: letter sound recognition, letter formation, blending, segmenting, and tricky word recognition.

### **3. Early Reading Skills**

Early reading skills refer to the fundamental literacy abilities that allow young learners to decode and comprehend written text. These skills are operationalized in this study using the following measurable components: Letter Naming Fluency (LNF), Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF), Phoneme Segmentation Fluency (PSF), Word Reading Fluency (WRF), and Oral Reading Fluency (ORF). These components are assessed using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), 8th Edition, ensuring standardized measurement of progress.

### **4. EFL Young Learners**

Young Learners here are children aged 9-10 years old in the fourth grade of primary school, who are learning English as a foreign language. The way of learning that young learners need is fun learning. In this context, EFL students generally use Indonesian or the local language (Basa Sunda) in their

daily life, they rarely use English. This lack of English use poses challenges in mastering the phonological aspects of English, such as phoneme-grapheme correspondence, which is very important for early English reading skills.

#### **D. Aims of the Study**

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of the Synthetic Phonics (Jolly Phonics) approach in improving early English reading skills among fourth-grade EFL students. Specifically, the study seeks to determine whether synthetic phonics instruction can significantly enhance students' phonemic awareness, decoding, and reading fluency. The findings are expected to provide empirical evidence on the impact of synthetic phonics in supporting the development of foundational English reading skills in Indonesian primary classrooms.

#### **E. Significance(s) of the Study**

The writer hopes that the result of this research can give some benefits as follows:

##### **1. Theoretical Use**

This research contributes to the development of theoretical knowledge in reading acquisition by providing evidence on the effectiveness of the Synthetic Phonics method in EFL contexts. This research explores its application in a primary school in Indonesia, where students have limited exposure to English outside of school. By investigating how synthetic phonics significantly impact early English reading skills in this context, the study enhances a deeper understanding adaptability of the phonics method and extends the literature on phonics teaching in EFL environments in Indonesia.

##### **2. Practical Use**

This research offers practical benefits for teachers by demonstrating that the Synthetic Phonics method is an effective strategy for teaching early English reading skills in Indonesian primary schools. It provides teachers with concrete teaching techniques such as multisensory activities of sound

identification, blending, and segmentation, which can be integrated into early childhood English classrooms to improve student reading outcomes.

### **3. Empirical Use**

This study provides empirical evidence to demonstrate whether the Synthetic Phonics method significantly improves early English reading skills among young EFL learners in Indonesia. The findings will support educators and policymakers in considering synthetic phonics as a main instructional approach for developing foundational reading abilities in English as a foreign language at the primary school level.