

A Thematic Review of Teaching Phonics and Phonemic Awareness in Early English Literacy

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Abstract

Early literacy is a vital component of children's academic development, especially in ESL, EFL and multilingual process. Phonics and Phonemic awareness both are key elements that support further decoding, word understanding, and reading comprehension. This study aims to review and interpret what has so far been found regarding phonics and phonemic awareness as early development blocks for English literacy, particularly in EFL, ESL, and multilingual learning environments. Although two key concepts, phonics and phonemic awareness, provide a basis for teaching about how letters represent sounds, research into these interlinked areas of study has emerged across a wide range of languages and teaching settings. In addressing the gap, the paper relies on a thematic literature review approach and reviews 44 articles that have appeared in accredited peer-reviewed research journals from 2020 onwards. The reviewed studies were included in a thematic analysis to synthesize common themes about language-based sources of early literacy: instructional efficacy, and classroom practice. The results suggest that phonemic awareness has a vital cognitive and linguistic function in early reading, including enabling the development of phonological processing skills, word recognition, and decoding. Phonics teaching was also seen to be most effective when it was explicit, systematic, and developmentally appropriate, especially when combined with the spoken language. Moreover, research findings show that combined instructional methods such as phonemic awareness and phonics produce more enduring literacy outcomes than stand-alone methods do, particularly among beginning readers and students who are learning in multilingual contexts. The study raises the significance of including linguistically informed literacy instructions in early childhood curricula and teacher education. The current study also highlights the need for longitudinal investigations that explore how long-term literacy outcomes develop amongst different educational situations.

INTRODUCTION

Phonics and its related subcompetency, phonemic awareness, are significant foundational components of early literacy development in EFL (English as a foreign language) and ESL (English as a second language) contexts (Ehri, 2022; Gillon, 2023). Early literacy refers to the set of skills through which young learners start to connect sounds with written symbols, develop decoding

abilities, and gradually engage in reading and writing practices (Gillon, 2023). Phonics embroils the relationship between sounds and their corresponding letter presentation, whereas phonemic awareness refers to the ability to identify and operate individual sounds within spoken words. Together, these skills play a central role in enabling learners to decode, recognize, and comprehend within written language.

Recent studies offer the importance of phonemic awareness and phonics to children's readiness to begin reading and different vital literacy outcomes. Research evidence suggests that the use of phonics-based instruction enhances emergent EFL readers' sight word recognition and decoding accuracy (Alhumsi, 2020; Rendón-Romero et al., 2021). The phonics approach has also been found to improve the early reading skills in mainstream as well as rural early childhood contexts (Audina et al., 2022; Ngura et al., 2025; Widya et al., 2024). Indeed, large-scale trials have also demonstrated that systematic phonics programs significantly improve early reading (Bora et al., 2025; Lane et al., 2025). Outside of decoding, it has been found to support more general language development: phoneme identification is strongly associated with word processing (Rokhman et al., 2020), and L2 listening comprehension is enhanced by phonemic awareness training (Choe et al., 2020; Rahman & Hasan, 2025). Other research reported such significant cross-linguistic associations, where phonological awareness can predict speech perception and reading in young EFL learners (Bi et al., 2025). By contrast, vocabulary instruction integrated into phonics further supports oral vocabulary, nonword reading, and comprehension (Brooks et al., 2025; Campbell et al., 2025; Chow et al., 2021). Also, the use of multisensory learning, decodable texts, and structured literacy programmes such as Jolly Phonics has been found to encourage successful early literacy involvement (Sapi'ee & Tan, 2020; Khair et al., 2025; Shawaqfeh, 2024; Yap & Chin, 2020). Taken together, these findings illustrate the emerging recognition of the influence of phonics and phonemic awareness on young learners' early literacy pathways across diverse international settings.

Nevertheless, although these studies offer vast insight, they have some limitations. While one portion of authors states the importance of phonemic-based approaches, others suggest that results may vary depending on instructional methods, learning characteristics, and contextual factors. In particular, some articles focus on isolated components such as phoneme segmentation or letter-sound correspondence without considering the interaction between these elements within a comprehensive literary framework (Vazeux et al., 2020; Khan & Khan, 2021). Similarly, other articles provide teacher practices without adequately linking them to student learning outcomes or contextual constraints (Shafee et al., 2025). Furthermore, while bilingualism and EFL speakers constitute a global majority, empirical linguistic data on multilingual contact remains scarce. The lack of contextual diversity restricts the applicability of existing findings. Generally, these constraints emphasise the necessity for a theoretically robust and unified examination of phonics and phonemic awareness within varied classroom environments. Current research into the sociocultural dimensions of language acquisition indicates that students engage in varied classroom environments. Consequently, there is a clear demand for flexible, adaptive teaching strategies over rigid, "one size fits all" instructional frameworks (Hasan et al., 2025).

In addition to mapping such perceived gaps, this thematic review explores recent literature (2020-2026) to analyse how phonics and phonemic awareness instruction contribute to English literacy development across different educational contexts. The study focuses on identifying key instructional patterns, contextual influences and their implications for early literacy practices.

How does phonics and phonemic awareness instruction influence early English Literacy development across different language contexts?

METHOD

Article selection process

Articles for this review were obtained through a systematic search in various scholarly databases such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate and ERIC. The search was concentrated using concepts such as phonics, phonemic awareness, emergent literacy, early reading development and EFL early literacy instruction. In order to ensure that the review is up-to-date and remains relevant, only 44 articles published from 2020 to 2025 were included. Four criteria guided the inclusion of studies that focused on phonics and phonemic-awareness-based instruction, within first and second language contexts of schooling in English; empirical data, conceptual arguments, and evidence from classroom settings with their interpretation were presented; they were peer-reviewed in an international journal and could be accessed from print sources or retrieved using a search engine. Studies were not included if they did not describe early literacy teaching or phonological aspects in English learning, if the focus was irrelevant to reading and blending complex skills such as sentence reading comprehension, there was no reference to an empirical or conceptual framework or if they were based on non-English literature. With this selective approach, the review sought only high-quality, methodologically rigorous research that could contribute in a valuable way to a deeper understanding of early literacy development.

Thematic analysis approach

The findings from the selected studies were organized using a thematic analysis framework, guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Uddin et al. (2020). This approach, therefore, provided the systematic approach that was conducive to organizing and interpreting the patterns that emerged across the literature. The intensive reading of each article was initiated in order to understand how phonics and phonemic awareness had been conceptualized and used across different contexts within the perspective of early literacy. The key ideas, teaching practices, student responses, and situational factors were subsequently manually coded for emergent patterns. These initial codes evolved into more abstract thematic categories that captured the key concerns of the field. Themes were the predominant topics within the literature that emerged, which included the efficacy of systematic phonics instruction, the impact of phonemic awareness on decoding development, the contribution of multisensory and play approaches plus classroom and language context upon early literacy learning. The subthemes were synthesized to construct a meta-narrative and facilitate the review of how phonics in practice affects children's emergent reading development in terms of a coherent whole.

Ethical considerations and limitations

To avoid plagiarism, originality was preserved in the review and correct citations were used with minimal text re-use. However, our balanced interpretation is not without some limitations we should concede. Some relevant insights from earlier and/or non-English research outputs may have been disregarded by choosing only English-language publications between 2020 and 2025. Furthermore, a potential publication bias is possible because studies with positive results are more likely to be published in peer-reviewed journals. Alternatively, the thematic analysis method used here presents an organised and transparent means of synthesising available knowledge. The product of this synthesis is a clearer understanding of the effects of phonics and phonemic awareness instruction on early literacy development, which should prove helpful to researchers and practitioners who are interested in bolstering early English reading.

FINDINGS

The following section outlines the key findings from the thematic analysis, focusing on the role of phonics and phonemic awareness in shaping early English literacy development across two terms: educational and linguistic contexts.

Influence in educational contexts

Phonemic awareness serves as the essential cognitive infrastructure for early literacy, providing the necessary foundation for decoding, word recognition, oral fluency. Articles involving children with cochlear implants underscores this necessity; despite atypical auditory input, their phonological development remains a primary predictor of emergent reading success (Majorano et al., 2025). In addition, studies with EFL learners and multilingual populations have shown similar that children's phonemic awareness, in which they can hear, break up, blend, and shift sounds, is a strong predictor of how well or poorly they will learn to read (Rokhman et al., 2020; Yeung et al., 2020). Engel de Abreu et al. (2020) state that targeted phonemic awareness and phonics intervention are critical for linguistically diverse learners, confirming that sound-based instruction effectively bridges the gap across multiple system.

This foundational skill is apparently very universal, and this is supported by the fact that the findings from the research study conducted in South Africa, China, and India, and rural Indonesia demonstrate that phonemic awareness is an important skill that can help children learn literacy skills in spite of extreme dissimilarities in the children's initial language and socio-linguistic context (Manten et al., 2020; Bi et al., 2025; Bora et al., 2025; Ngura et al., 2025; Rendón-Romero et al., 2021). In addition, beyond formal instruction, home-based activities like sound play and print-rich interactions provide vital mediators for developing phonemic awareness, illustrating that literacy emerges from the synergy between home environments and classroom learning (Bigozzi et al., 2023).

One of the dominant trends in recent literature is that phonemic awareness instruction has the greatest impact when explicitly taught alongside systematic phonics. This dual approach significantly boosts word recognition, spelling. And reading fluency particularly for EFL learners and students in marginalized communities (Adewale, 2025; Widya et al., 2024, Yap & Chin, 2020). The accuracy of sound manipulation is also reinforced by explicit strategies and skills to manipulate, articulate placement movement, phoneme-grapheme mapping procedures, and multisensory learning activities when these are implemented in well-managed classroom environments (Becker & Sylvan, 2021; Sapi'ee & Tan, 2020; Ehri, 2022). Similarly, digital tools are providing just as effective as traditional methods, with computer-based grapho-phonological training driving significant gains in literacy and vocabulary for second language learners (Hasan et al., 2026; Konerding et al., 2020).

There is also evidence from Jordan, Malaysia and Nigeria that systematic programs such as Jolly Phonics, incorporating decodable texts and guided reading do not only promote better decoding skills but also enhance the development of reading motivation and learner autonomy through effective teacher organisation and teaching clarification (Shawaqfeh, 2024; Shafee et al., 2025; Adewale, 2025). Furthermore, studies of rural and indigenous populations indicate that contextualized phonics in local narratives and children's literature promote deep engagement with reading and fluency (Campbell et al., 2025; Khair et al., 2025; Ngura et al., 2025). Crosslinguistically, phonological awareness is also found to be involved in connected speech perception, which can help illuminate the broader language-processing advantages of EFL learners (Bi et al., 2025). Related approaches, for example, vocabulary teaching and dialogic teaching, indirectly foster phonemic awareness by promoting skills in listening and oral language to support reading development, especially when those implementations are systematic (Brooks et al., 2025; Chow et al., 2021).

Influence in linguistics context

Phonemic awareness and phonics are linguistically critical in the early literacy because they make connections between oral language structures and written language. Such a foundation is consistent with the findings of large reviews of early literacy research that demonstrate phonemic awareness and phonics to be linguistic factors that provide strong predictions for early reading development across various instructional contexts (Teale et al., 2020). Similarly, for multilingual learners, mastering sound-based mechanics is the bridge that allows them to map the sounds of a new language onto its written symbols with precision (Rokhman et al., 2020; Yeung et al., 2020). In addition, the empirical evidence also emphasizes the direct and significant impact of phonological awareness on the early development of literacy among children, especially in the development of children's decoding and word-recognition abilities (Siregar et al., 2023). Evidence of research outcomes in South African, Chinese, and Indian communities show that a strong positive correlation exists between phonemic awareness and emergent literacy skills irrespective of the linguistic typological differences of the learner's dominant language and English, proving the universality of its base (Manten et al., 2020; Bi et al., 2025; Bora et al., 2025). Cross-linguistic evidence also shows the role of phonological awareness in the perception of connected speech beyond the skills of decoding for EFL learners (Bi et al., 2025).

Nonetheless, the common thread is that phonics connects phonemic awareness to functional reading through the relationship between sounds (phonemes) and letter representations (graphemes). Phonics instruction is so powerful that it illustrates a universal equalizer, driving significant gains in word recognition, spelling and fluency for children in the most disadvantaged contexts, including those with disabilities, those in remote rural areas and English Language Learners (Adewale, 2025; Widya et al., 2024; Yap & Chin, 2020). Indriani et al., (2025) state that classroom-based studies in preschool settings further indicate that the systemic application of phonics methods significantly supports early literacy development by strengthening children's letter-sound knowledge and decoding readiness. The possibility of bringing articulation along with visual cues and grapheme-phoneme correspondence is said to enhance the capability of students to discriminate and generate phoneme-level language skills (Becker & Sylvan, 2021; Ehri, 2022; Sapi'ee & Tan, 2020). Also observed in the studies conducted in Malaysia, Jordan, and Nigeria is the effectiveness of structured phonics instruction like Jolly Phonics on the learner's reading accuracy and interest due to the predictable language patterns (Shawaqfeh, 2024; Shafee et al., 2025; Adewale, 2025).

Another linguistic trend to emerge from contemporary literature is the importance of context-sensitive phonics teaching. Merging phonics with whole- language approaches allows students apply sound letter mapping to real-world-reading, using a strategic mix of decodable texts for accuracy and authentic literature for context (Ndijuye et al., 2025, Campbell et al., 2025; Khair et al., 2025; Ngura et al., 2025). Vocabulary instruction and dialogic teaching methods also facilitate the development of phonemic awareness by strengthening semantic and phonological connections that aid in more efficient sound-symbol mapping (Brooks et al., 2025; Chow et al., 2021).

These meta-analyses show that schooling phonemic awareness is highly effective for generating large linguistic gains across segmentation, manipulation, and phoneme isolation, but blending yields somewhat weaker effect sizes, suggesting differential levels of linguistic difficulty among the set of phonemic skills (Rice et al., 2022; Choe et al., 2020). Overall, studies across all languages come to this conclusion: Early literacy development is built upon phonemic awareness and systematic phonics.

Variables	Key Findings	Author(s)
Foundational literacy infrastructure	PA is the essential cognitive foundation for decoding, word recognition, and oral fluency across diverse educational settings.	Majorano et al. (2025); Rokhman et al. (2020); Yeung et al. (2020); Teale et al. (2020)
Atypical Auditory Input	For children with cochlear implants, phonological development remains the primary predictor of emergent reading success despite auditory differences.	Majorano et al. (2025)
Linguistically diverse and EFL learners	Targeted sound-based interventions effectively bridge literacy gaps for multilingual learners, navigating multiple linguistic systems with high universality.	Engel de Abreu et al. (2020); Manten et al. (2020); Bi et al. (2025); Bora et al. (2025)
Home literacy environment	Literacy emerges through a synergy between school instruction and home-based sound play and print rich interaction.	Bigozzi et al. (2023)
Explicit and systematic phonics	A dual approach (Phonics and phonemic awareness) significantly boosts spelling and reading fluency, particularly in marginalized or EFL communities.	Adewale (2025); Widya et al. (2024); Yap & Chin (2020)
Multisensory and articulatory tools	Visual cues, articulatory movement, and phoneme-grapheme mapping enhance students' ability to discriminate and generate sounds.	Bcker & Sylvan (2021); Sapi'ee & Tan (2020); Ehri (2020)
Computer-based training	Grapho-phonological digital tools are as effective as traditional methods for vocabulary growth and literacy acquisition in second-language learners.	Hasan et al. (2026); Konerding et al. (2020)
Instructional programs like Jolly Phonics	Systemic programs using decodable texts foster decoding skills, reading motivation, and learner autonomy.	Shawaqfeh (2024); Shafee et al. (2025); Adewale (2025)
Contextualized and balanced literacy	Native speakers and children's literature present deeper engagement and authentic application.	Ndijuye et al. (2025); Campbell et al. (2025); Khair et al. (2025); Ngura et al. (2025)

DISCUSSION

While the review of the literature is impressively consistent in its emphasis on the significance of phonemic awareness and phonics to young English learners, the harmony between the sources is more than confirmatory – it reflects a wider theoretical consonance with the topic of beginning reading. In particular, phonemic awareness is considered by several scholars (Rokhman et al., 2020; Yeung et al., 2020; Manten et al., 2020) to be a reliable predictor of decoding proficiency and beginning reading. Another way to support this view is through the arguments of Ehri (2022), Adewale (2025), and Widya et al. (2024), who argue that phonics instruction addresses this awareness

by establishing systematic correspondences between sound and print, which is referred to as orthographic processing. Together, these studies point to functional interdependence, not hierarchy: phonemic awareness as the cognitive substrate and phonics as the translation of that into literacy practice.

Nonetheless, there is more to the research on this topic, particularly regarding disagreements over how such skills can be acquired. There is another set of research that emphasises the need for an integrated approach towards teaching children these reading skills (Becker & Sylvan, 2021; Sapi'ee & Tan, 2020; Yap & Chin, 2020). On the other hand, structured approaches such as those proposed by Shawaqfeh (2024) and Yap and Chin (2020) advocate for sequenced phonics programmes, especially for at-risk learners or in resource-poor settings. Such divergence is characterised by a large and popular pedagogical tension between standardisation and flexibility that illustrates the possibilities of contextual fit as a consideration for effectiveness rather than a method type.

Linguistically, Bi et al. (2025), Yeung et al. (2020), and Brooks et al. (2025) focus on cross-linguistic transfer from phonology as an important reason why children can better acquire an additional language after developing their phonological skills in a first language. Accordingly, these authors also cautioned that such transfer is neither inherent nor universal; it is moderated by phonological similarity and instructional quality. Supporting this perspective, Chow et al. (2021) and Brooks et al., Becker and Sylvan (2021) move beyond code-based skills and systematically show how enriched vocabulary-level skills in dialogic academic English contexts indirectly increase phonemic awareness through changes in phonological representations and semantic networks. These works question contextually constrained skills-based models of phonics and phonemic awareness through reframing their use in richer linguistic ecologies.

Despite agreement on their importance, major inconsistencies in outcomes are also revealed by the literature. Hasan et al. (2026) explain this inconsistency in their findings as a result of the variety among learners in a classroom and socio-culturally influenced context, thus calling for adaptive, context-responsive pedagogy. In a similar vein, meta-analytic trends indicate that effects can depend on the component; for example, pre- and post-test differences in segmenting and manipulating items were larger than for blending, which might imply that greater cognitive load is reflected across subskills. A further area in which they differ relates to how success in literacy is defined. Although many studies document significant decoding effects from phonics-based instruction (Ehri, 2022; Becker & Sylvan, 2021), comparatively few move their analysis out to long-term comprehension outcomes. This shows a hidden bias in literature toward smaller, short-term skills, hinting that what teachers teach and how they instruct may not align with deeper literacy development.

Thus, the findings support the case for explicit and systematic instruction in classroom practice, especially in EFL contexts, where teachers model correct pronunciation and make identifiable connections between phonemes and graphemes by linking pure articulation to letter-pair representations. In parallel, multisensory and dialogic practices promote linguistic engagement (Sapi'ee & Tan, 2020; Chow et al., 2021) in diverse classrooms, suggesting that effective instruction mediates the pursuit of structured learning through meaningful interaction. Nevertheless, the evidence base is constrained by a reliance on short-term interventions and context-specific designs, limiting inferences about long-term literacy development and generalisability (Ventriglia-Navarrette & Moylan, 2032).

Therefore, Phonemic awareness and phonics are not simple skills that can be taught in isolation or magically applied to learning any language; using these isolated skills across various

contexts of literacy development is far from easy. The literature clarifies that their effectiveness is contingent on the degree to which they are tightly integrated into linguistically grounded, culturally appropriate, and pedagogically flexible reform models.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to conduct a review and synthesis of studies exploring phonemic awareness and phonics as essential elements in beginning literacy instruction, primarily in EFL, multilingualism, and various linguistic backgrounds. On the basis of findings from studies worldwide, the report concludes that phonemic awareness is a core cognitive–linguistic skill underlying early word-level decoding and fluency skills among English readers, and systematic phonics instruction uses this to its advantage by modelling for children how grapheme–phoneme correspondences work systematically in consistent ways that generalise. Collectively, the studies bear strong indications that more explicit, systematic interaction involving phonemic awareness and phonic components lead to superior literacy outcomes than indirect instruction applied across literacies for at-risk and emergent readers.

Nonetheless, the literature is not without limitations. Most investigations are based on short-lived instructional interventions and context-bound samples, which inhibit the generalization of results and the description of long-term reading development. The implications are potentially profound for the field: with implications for early literacy curriculum that should include explicit, systematic attention to the development of these constructs and a teacher training program that should provide increased levels of linguistic preparation in reading foundations. Further research could move beyond decoding and examine comprehension, motivation, and transfer of the two languages to help facilitate text-based validity of early literacy assessments in many writing systems around the world.

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