

ENHANCING YOUNG LEARNERS' PRONUNCIATION THROUGH PHONICS-BASED STRUCTURED ACTIVITIES IN AN EXTRACURRICULAR EFL SETTING

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effectiveness of phonics-based structured activities in enhancing young learners' pronunciation in an extracurricular EFL setting. Pronunciation remains a challenging aspect of English learning, particularly for young learners in EFL contexts where exposure to authentic spoken English is often limited. To address this issue, this study implemented a series of phonics-based structured activities designed to improve learners' pronunciation accuracy, clarity, and word stress. A pre-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design was employed. The participants were 18 elementary students in Grades two and three enrolled in an extracurricular English program at SDN 24 Palu. The intervention was conducted over eight meetings, including one pre-test session, six treatment sessions, and one post-test session, with each session lasting 60 minutes. Data were collected through an oral pronunciation assessment consisting of 12 vocabulary items evaluated across three pronunciation dimensions: accuracy, clarity, and stress. The findings indicated a substantial improvement in students' pronunciation performance. The mean pre-test score was 62.69, while the post-test mean increased to 85.69. Statistical analysis using a paired-sample t-test revealed that the improvement was significant, $t(17) = 8.39$, $p < .001$. These findings suggest that phonics-based structured activities can effectively support pronunciation development among young learners in extracurricular EFL contexts. The study offers practical implications for English educators seeking developmentally appropriate pronunciation instruction for young learners.

Keywords: young learners; pronunciation; phonics; extracurricular EFL; pronunciation instruction

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INTRODUCTION

English pronunciation remains a challenging aspect of language learning, particularly for young learners in EFL contexts where exposure to spoken English is relatively limited ([Derwing & Munro, 2015](#); [Gilakjani, 2016](#)). While young learners are often introduced to basic English vocabulary at an early age, the ability to recognize the meaning of words does not always correspond to the ability to pronounce them accurately. In many learning contexts, students may understand familiar vocabulary but still struggle to articulate words clearly in spoken communication. This issue is especially relevant in early English learning, where inaccurate pronunciation patterns may become habitual if not addressed through appropriate instructional support ([Levis, 2020](#)).

This study emerged from classroom observations in an extracurricular English program for elementary students at SDN 24 Palu. During the learning process, it was observed that many students in grades two and three were able to identify the meanings of familiar English words such as fruits, colours, numbers, animals, and days of the week, yet they experienced noticeable difficulty in pronouncing those words accurately. Mispronunciations were particularly evident in words containing unfamiliar English sounds, suggesting that learners' receptive vocabulary knowledge was not yet matched by productive pronunciation ability. This situation indicates the need for instructional strategies that explicitly support pronunciation development in young learners.

Pronunciation instruction for young learners should not be oriented toward achieving native-like speech, but rather toward developing intelligible and comprehensible spoken English ([Levis, 2020](#); [Saito, 2021](#)). At an early stage of language learning, young learners benefit from repeated exposure to target sounds, guided imitation, and structured opportunities to practice oral production because phonological awareness develops progressively through meaningful sound interaction ([Pinter, 2017](#); [Nation & Newton, 2020](#)). Instruction that emphasizes sound recognition and articulation may therefore play an important role in shaping more accurate pronunciation habits.

One instructional approach that may support this development is phonics-based instruction. Phonics helps learners understand the relationship between letters and sounds, making pronunciation learning more systematic and accessible ([Ehri, 2020](#)). Although phonics has traditionally been associated with literacy instruction, its principles are increasingly recognized as relevant to pronunciation development, particularly among young learners who benefit from explicit sound-focused learning. Previous studies have reported that phonics-based instruction can positively contribute to learners' pronunciation development by strengthening phonological awareness, articulation accuracy, and oral confidence ([Alghazo, 2021](#); [Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2016](#)).

In addition to phonics, structured learning activities may further support pronunciation improvement. Young learners generally learn more effectively when instructional activities are organized progressively, beginning with guided recognition and moving toward controlled and communicative production ([Shin & Crandall, 2014](#)). Structured activities such as listening tasks, repetition drills, guided pronunciation practice, and communicative games may help learners internalize pronunciation patterns through repetition and active engagement.

Although pronunciation has received increasing attention in English language teaching research, much of the existing literature has focused on formal classroom instruction, technology-assisted pronunciation learning, or adolescent and adult learners ([Saito, 2021](#); [Szyszk, 2017](#)). Studies in local EFL contexts have also highlighted the persistent challenges learners face in oral English performance, particularly in speaking-related skills ([Basri et al., 2022](#)). Research examining pronunciation development among young learners in extracurricular EFL contexts remains limited, particularly in educational settings outside major metropolitan areas in Indonesia. Extracurricular programs differ from formal classroom instruction in that they often provide smaller learning groups, more flexible interaction, and increased opportunities for oral participation ([Harmer, 2015](#)). These characteristics may create favourable conditions for pronunciation-focused intervention, yet empirical evidence in such contexts remains insufficient.

Based on this gap, this study investigates the implementation of phonics-based structured activities in an extracurricular English learning setting involving young learners. Specifically, this study aims to examine whether phonics-based structured activities significantly improve students' pronunciation performance in terms of accuracy, clarity, and word stress.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative approach using a pre-experimental design with a one-group pretest–posttest model. This design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to examine the effectiveness of an instructional intervention by measuring students' performance before

and after the treatment within a single group ([Creswell & Creswell, 2018](#)). Pre-experimental designs are commonly used in educational settings where comparison groups are not feasible but intervention effectiveness remains the primary focus ([Ary et al., 2019](#)).

The study was conducted in an extracurricular English program at SDN 24 Palu in October 2025. The participants consisted of 18 elementary students from grades two and three who regularly attended the extracurricular English program. The participants were selected based on their active participation in the program during the research period. To ensure confidentiality, students' identities were anonymized in the presentation of the findings.

The intervention was implemented over eight meetings within one month, from October 2nd to 24th 2025. The implementation included one pre-test session, six treatment sessions, and one post-test session, with each meeting lasting approximately 60 minutes.

The treatment consisted of phonics-based structured activities designed to improve students' pronunciation through systematic instructional stages appropriate for young learners. The instructional sequence included sound awareness, repetition and imitation, guided pronunciation practice, and communicative reinforcement. During the sound awareness stage, students were introduced to target English sounds through teacher modeling and listening activities. The target phonemes included sounds commonly challenging for Indonesian young EFL learners, such as /æ/ (apple, banana, cat), /r/ (red), /i:/ (green), /θ/ (three), /v/ (five), /t/ (ten), /tʃ/ (chicken), /d/ (dog), and /n/ (Monday, Sunday). In the repetition stage, students practiced imitating target sounds and words through guided drilling. Guided practice involved pronunciation exercises using familiar vocabulary supported by visual prompts, while communicative reinforcement encouraged students to use target vocabulary in simple speaking activities and pronunciation games.

The instructional materials focused on familiar vocabulary themes commonly introduced to young learners, including fruits, colours, numbers, animals, and days of the week. These vocabulary items were selected because they matched the learners' language level and provided opportunities to practice English sounds that are commonly challenging for Indonesian EFL learners.

Data were collected through an oral pronunciation test administered in both the pre-test and post-test sessions. The assessment consisted of 12 vocabulary items: *apple, banana, cat, red, green, three, five, ten, chicken, dog, Monday, and Sunday*. Students' pronunciation performance was evaluated using three criteria: accuracy, clarity, and stress. Accuracy referred to the correctness of sound production, clarity referred to the intelligibility of the spoken word, and stress referred to the appropriateness of word-level stress placement. Each criterion was scored using a four-point scale, ranging from 1 (lowest performance) to 4 (highest performance). Students' pronunciation performance was assessed using a brief scoring rubric for each criterion. A score of 4 indicated accurate and clear pronunciation with appropriate word stress, 3 indicated minor pronunciation inaccuracies that did not significantly affect intelligibility, 2 indicated noticeable pronunciation errors that partially affected clarity or stress placement, and 1 indicated frequent pronunciation difficulties that made the word difficult to understand. The maximum total score for each participant was 144, which was subsequently converted into a 100-point scale.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive analysis was used to calculate students' pre-test and post-test mean scores to identify changes in pronunciation performance. To determine whether the improvement was statistically significant, a paired-sample t-test was conducted to compare students' scores before and after the intervention ([Field, 2018](#); [Pallant, 2020](#)).

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

This study aimed to examine whether phonics-based structured activities could significantly enhance young learners' pronunciation performance in an extracurricular EFL setting. Students' pronunciation performance was assessed through oral pronunciation tests administered before and after the intervention. The pronunciation scores were calculated using the following formula:

$$Score = \frac{Total\ Score}{Maximum\ Score} \times 100$$

The maximum score was 144, derived from 12 vocabulary items assessed across three pronunciation dimensions: accuracy, clarity, and stress, with a maximum score of 4 for each criterion.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Pronunciation Performance

Test	N	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Pre-test	18	62.69	6.22	50.00	70.83
Post-test	18	85.69	12.05	69.44	100.00

Table 1 shows that the mean pronunciation score increased from **62.69** in the pre-test to **85.69** in the post-test, indicating an average improvement of **23.00 points**. The increase in the minimum score from **50.00** to **69.44** suggests that improvement occurred across different performance levels.

Figure 1 illustrates the comparison between the mean pre-test and post-test scores.

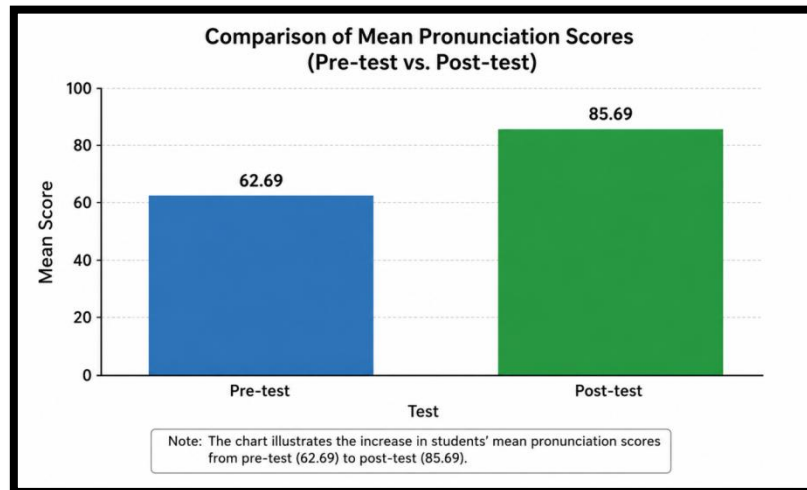


Figure 1. Comparison of Mean Pronunciation Scores Before and After the Intervention

As illustrated in Figure 1, students' pronunciation performance improved substantially following the intervention.

To determine whether the observed improvement was statistically significant, a paired-sample t-test was conducted.

Table 2. Paired-Sample t-test Result

Comparison	Mean Difference	t-value	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Post-test – Pre-test	23.00	8.39	17	< .001

As shown in Table 2, the difference between students' pre-test and post-test scores was statistically significant, $t(17) = 8.39$, $p < .001$. Since the significance value was below 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected. This indicates that phonics-based structured activities significantly improved students' pronunciation performance.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that phonics-based structured activities effectively enhanced young learners' pronunciation performance in an extracurricular EFL setting. The statistically significant increase in students' post-test scores suggests that systematic pronunciation-focused instruction can positively support oral language development among young learners. This finding supports the view that pronunciation development can be facilitated through explicit pedagogical intervention rather than relying solely on incidental language exposure (Levis, 2020).

One possible explanation for this improvement lies in the explicit emphasis on sound awareness throughout the intervention. Students were repeatedly exposed to target English sounds through teacher modeling, listening activities, and guided repetition. Such repeated exposure is particularly beneficial for young learners, whose phonological awareness is still developing and who

rely heavily on auditory imitation in language learning ([Ehri, 2020](#); [Pinter, 2017](#)). In EFL contexts where learners have limited access to authentic spoken English, explicit pronunciation exposure becomes even more important.

The structured nature of the intervention also likely contributed to the positive outcomes. The instructional activities followed a clear progression from sound awareness to imitation, guided practice, and communicative reinforcement. This scaffolded sequence aligns with established principles of young learner pedagogy, which emphasize repetition, modeling, and gradual progression toward independent language production ([Shin & Crandall, 2014](#)). Pronunciation teaching also benefits from explicit classroom techniques such as modeling, drilling, and guided correction ([Kelly, 2016](#); [Yates & Zielinski, 2015](#)). Rather than placing immediate performance pressure on learners, the structured activities created a supportive learning environment for pronunciation development.

Another factor that may explain the improvement was the use of familiar vocabulary. The instructional materials focused on words already known to the learners, such as fruits, colours, animals, numbers, and days of the week. Because learners were not simultaneously processing unfamiliar meanings, they could allocate more cognitive attention to pronunciation production. This supports arguments that manageable linguistic input enhances oral learning effectiveness among beginner EFL learners ([Nation & Newton, 2020](#)).

The extracurricular learning context may also have strengthened the intervention's effectiveness. Compared with formal classroom settings, extracurricular programs often provide more flexible interactional environments, smaller participant groups, and greater speaking opportunities ([Harmer, 2015](#)). These conditions can be especially beneficial for young learners, who often require low-pressure speaking environments to develop confidence and oral participation.

These findings are consistent with previous studies suggesting that explicit phonics-based instruction can support pronunciation development by improving phonological awareness and articulation accuracy ([Alghazo, 2021](#); [Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2016](#)). Similar evidence has also been reported in Indonesian EFL contexts, where structured oral language activities were found to contribute positively to learners' speaking development ([Faraby & Kamaruddin, 2021](#)). [Saito \(2021\)](#) emphasizes that intelligible pronunciation can be improved through systematic instruction. However, unlike many previous studies that focus on formal classroom instruction or older learners, this study contributes evidence from an extracurricular setting involving elementary-level young learners in an Indonesian EFL context.

Despite the positive findings, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the relatively small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the absence of a control group means that the improvement should be interpreted cautiously, as external factors may also have influenced the students' progress. Third, the study was conducted in a single extracurricular learning context, which may not fully represent broader educational settings. Future research may consider larger participant groups, experimental comparison designs, or multiple educational settings to strengthen the evidence base.

Overall, the findings suggest that phonics-based structured activities provide a practical and developmentally appropriate approach for enhancing pronunciation among young EFL learners.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that phonics-based structured activities can effectively support pronunciation development among young learners in an extracurricular EFL setting. The significant improvement in students' pronunciation performance suggests that young learners benefit from systematic pronunciation instruction that combines explicit sound awareness, guided repetition, structured practice, and communicative reinforcement. Rather than viewing pronunciation development as dependent on extensive exposure alone, the findings indicate that carefully designed instructional intervention can meaningfully improve learners' oral production even within a relatively short period.

The findings also highlight the pedagogical value of extracurricular English programs as supportive environments for pronunciation-focused learning. Compared with more formal classroom settings, extracurricular contexts may provide greater flexibility, more interactive learning opportunities, and reduced speaking pressure, which can be particularly beneficial for young learners developing oral confidence. This suggests that extracurricular English programs should not be viewed merely as supplementary enrichment activities, but also as meaningful spaces for targeted language skill development.

From a practical perspective, this study offers implications for English teachers, particularly those working with young EFL learners in contexts where authentic English exposure remains limited. Phonics-based structured activities may serve as an accessible and developmentally appropriate instructional approach for improving pronunciation, especially when integrated through familiar vocabulary and engaging speaking activities. For educational practitioners, the findings reinforce the importance of introducing explicit pronunciation support at early stages of language learning to help prevent the formation of persistent inaccurate pronunciation habits.

However, this study was limited by its relatively small sample size, the absence of a control group, and its focus on a single extracurricular learning context. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within these limitations. Future research may explore similar interventions using larger participant groups, experimental comparison designs, or different educational contexts to provide broader evidence regarding effective pronunciation instruction for young learners.

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