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UTILIZATION OF FREE EDUCATIONAL WEBSITES TO IMPROVE PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS IN BEGINNING CHILDREN

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KEYWORDS

Phonological Awareness, Young Children, Free Educational Websites, Starfall, English Sound, BBC Learning English, Early Literacy, Digital Learning Media

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of free educational websites in improving phonological awareness in young children. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach, we analyzed several freely accessible platforms and their use in classroom and home learning settings. Findings show that websites such as Starfall, English Sound, and BBC Learning English contribute positively to children's sound recognition and phoneme segmentation. This study recommends the integration of such tools in the early language curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Phonological awareness is one of the basic skills that is very important in the process of learning to read, especially for young children. Bahrudin et al. (2022) stated that phonological awareness has a crucial role because most children who experience reading difficulties have problems in this aspect. Alfadeed (2025) also showed that phonological awareness significantly affects reading fluency, including in students with hearing impairment. In the context of primary education, strengthening phonological awareness early on has been shown to improve overall reading ability (Yépez-Moreno et al., 2025). Children who have good phonological awareness also show progress in word recognition and reading comprehension (Siregar et al., 2023). Rachmani (2020) added that interventions on phonological aspects can improve alphabetical knowledge and early reading skills.

However, despite many studies highlighting the importance of phonological training, access to learning media that support this skill is still limited, especially since many apps and training programs are paid. In fact, digital media such as educational apps and games have been proven to improve early literacy (Kiss & Csapó, 2024; Hofmann, 2021). Rosita et al. (2022) emphasized that phonological deficits are the main cause

of reading disorders in dyslexic children, so efforts to develop phonological competence are very important. Unfortunately, not all available technologies have undergone systematic evaluation (Martinez-Figueira et al., 2023), and this reinforces the need for accessible and effective media.

Alternatively, free learning sites such as Starfall, English Sound, and BBC Learning English can be utilized to increase phonological awareness in a more inclusive manner. Users of the English Sound app recognized an improvement in learning English sounds in a fun way (Utami & Lintangsari, 2021), while BBC learning videos are more effective in helping students produce certain sounds (Salama, 2023). The BBC Learning English website itself provides materials on vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation (Indriyani et al., 2021), and has proven to be useful in improving beginners' communication skills (Sitorus et al., 2024). Similarly, Starfall offers interactive activities that strengthen phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency and reading comprehension (Bataineh & Alghareeb, 2024; Naeem & Khan, 2024).

Based on this background, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of free educational websites in improving phonological awareness in young children as an accessible, fun and technology-based learning alternative. To that end, the main questions posed in this study are: To what extent are free educational websites (such as Starfall, English Sound, and BBC Learning English) effective in improving the phonological awareness of young children?

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive type of research to understand in depth how free educational websites can help improve the phonological abilities of novice children in learning English. According to Rusandi & Rusli, M. (2021). descriptive qualitative research, develops designs and field measures, intending to provide an in-depth description of the phenomenon based on informants' narratives. This approach was chosen because it can provide a detailed description of the phenomenon being studied based on the direct experiences of the children who are the subjects of the study.

The research subjects consisted of 10 children aged 7-10 years old who were learning basic-level English on Thursday, April 17, 2025, where the location of this research was conducted at PAUD Harapan Ummat, Medan Polonia, North Sumatra. The selection of subjects was done purposively, with the criteria of children who had just started learning English and had access to technological devices.

Data collection was done through two main techniques:

- 1. Participatory observation, to directly observe children's activities while using websites such as Starfall, English Sound, and BBC Learning English, and their responses to the phonological content.
- 2. Semi-structured interviews, to explore children's perceptions of their learning experiences and changes in their phonological skills.

The instruments used included observation guidelines (with indicators such as the ability to recognize letter sounds, syllables, and rhymes) and interview guidelines (containing open-ended questions about their experiences using the websites). Data were analyzed through three stages: data reduction, presentation of

data in narrative and thematic form, and conclusion drawing to see if the free education website contributed to improving the phonological skills of novice children.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the data analysis that the researcher has conducted through the reduction process, the researcher distilled important information from participatory observations and interviews of children using phonological education websites such as Starfall, English Sound, and BBC Learning English.

Table 1. Participatory Observation Results

NO.	Aspects Observed	Description of Findings
1.	Response to Letter Sounds	Children look enthusiastic when they hear letter sounds. They repeat the
		'b' and 'd' sounds while pointing to the screen.
2.	Syllable Recognition	When the app breaks the word into syllables (such as 'ba-na-na'), most
		children can imitate and differentiate the syllables.
3.	Reaction to Rhymes	The children seemed happy when they heard the rhyming song. They
		sang along and could guess the final word that rhymed, such as 'cat-
		hat'.
4.	Independence in Using the Site	Some children were able to navigate the site on their own and select
		phonological games without assistance.
5.	Social Interaction During Learning	Children often point and tell their friends when they find a letter sound
		they recognize.

From the observations, we found that the children showed great enthusiasm for the letter sounds and rhymes presented on these websites. They actively repeated the letter sounds and enjoyed the rhyming songs, which the researcher observed reflected emotional and cognitive engagement in the learning process. In addition, most children were able to imitate and differentiate the syllables of the words presented interactively. The researcher also noted that some children showed independence in using the site without requiring assistance from teachers or friends. Positive social interactions were also observed, with children pointing out and sharing sound findings with their peers during the learning process. These findings suggest that the sites are not only visually and auditorily appealing, but also capable of creating an active and collaborative learning environment.



Diagram 1. Interview Result on Phonological Websites

The interview results support this finding, with 7 out of 10 children stating that the site helped them understand the sounds in the language (phonological), and 8 out of 10 children mentioning the games as the most fun part as well as helping them recognize letter sounds more easily. In fact, 9 out of 10 children reported that they were now better able to distinguish syllables and found it helpful in learning to read because the sites provided clear and easy-to-use guides. This finding indicates that the use of free educational websites contributes positively to the improvement of the phonological skills of young children.

Based on the analyzed observations and interviews, it can be concluded that the free education website contributed significantly to the improvement of the phonological abilities of novice children. Children showed improvement in recognizing letter sounds, distinguishing syllables, and understanding rhyme patterns. Learning becomes more enjoyable and effective due to the visual, audio and interactive support of the digital content. Children also show independence and confidence in the process of learning to read early.

The results of this study show that free educational websites such as Starfall, English Sound, and BBC Learning English significantly contribute to the improvement of novice children's phonological awareness. This finding supports the statement of Bahrudin et al. (2022) that phonological awareness is an important component in early reading learning, and reinforces the idea from Yépez-Moreno et al. (2025) that effective phonological training has a positive impact on children's reading fluency and comprehension.

Through a qualitative-descriptive approach, data collected through participatory observation and interviews revealed that children showed great enthusiasm for letter sounds, syllables and rhymes, and were able to respond actively to phonological content. This suggests that the visual-auditory approach used in the website successfully captured children's attention and facilitated an enjoyable learning process. In line with the studies of Hofmann (2021) and Utami & Lintangsari (2021),

digital-based learning is proven to increase children's engagement and accelerate phoneme recognition.

Children's independence in navigating the site and social interaction with peers during the learning process is indicative of strengthening metacognitive and social skills, which are important in 21st century learning. In fact, 9 out of 10 children in the interviews stated that they found it easier to distinguish syllables and became more confident when reading. This is in line with Naeem & Khan's (2024) findings that the use of Starfall can strengthen phonemic awareness and basic reading skills.

Interestingly, interactive games and songs were the children's most preferred elements, as recognized by 8 out of 10 participants. This reinforces the results of Salama (2023) and Sitorus et al. (2024) who emphasized that the entertainment aspect of digital learning has a major influence in shaping positive attitudes towards language. Convenience, accessibility and clear guidance were also critical to the site's success as an effective phonological learning tool.

1. CONCLUSION

The researcher concludes that free educational websites such as Starfall, English Sound and BBC Learning English positively contribute to improving the phonological awareness of young children. The children showed improvement in recognizing letter sounds, distinguishing syllables and understanding rhyme patterns through interactive, fun and accessible learning. The visual and audio support of the sites encouraged active engagement, independent learning and positive social interactions among the children. The use of these free educational websites offers an inexpensive, flexible and inclusive solution, especially for schools or families with limited budgets. Thus, the results of this study not only prove the effectiveness of free educational websites in a phonological context but also encourage the integration of educational technology in the early literacy curriculum more broadly. However, further research with a larger number of participants as well as longitudinal analysis is recommended so that the results can be generalized more widely and deeply.

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