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UTILIZATION OF FREE EDUCATIONAL WEBSITES TO INCREASE PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS IN YOUNG LEARNERS

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KEYWORDS

phonological awareness, early literacy, free educational websites, digital learning, young learners, Starfall, English Sound, BBC Learning English

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ABSTRACT

Phonological awareness is an important foundation in early literacy development, especially for young learners. This study aims to explore the effectiveness of free educational websites-such as Starfall, English Sound, and BBC Learning English-in improving the phonological skills of early learners. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data was collected through participatory observation and semi-structured interviews with 10 young learners aged 7-10 years old at PAUD Harapan Ummat, Medan. The results showed that the use of a free educational website significantly improved students' ability to recognize letter sounds, differentiate syllables, and understand rhyme patterns. Students showed high enthusiasm, active engagement and independence in the learning process, supported by an interactive and fun visual-auditory approach. The findings reinforce the view that evidence-based digital media can be an inclusive, effective and accessible alternative to phonological learning. This study also encourages the integration of educational technology in the early literacy curriculum. Follow-up studies with a wider scope are recommended to generalize the results in more depth.

1. INTRODUCTION

Phonological awareness is a foundational skill that plays a critical role in the process of learning to read, particularly among young learners. As Bahrudin et al. (2022) emphasize, phonological awareness is essential because many children who experience reading difficulties often struggle with this particular aspect of literacy. Similarly, Alfadeed (2025) highlights its significant influence on reading fluency, even among students with hearing impairments.

In the context of primary education, early reinforcement of phonological awareness has been shown to enhance overall reading ability (Yépez-Moreno et al., 2025), with young learners demonstrating greater progress in word recognition and reading comprehension when they possess strong phonological skills (Siregar et al., 2023). Moreover, Rachmani (2020) notes that phonological interventions can improve

alphabet knowledge and early reading skills. Supporting this, Listyarini, Lintangari, and Emaliana (2022) found that phonemic awareness in English contributes positively to reading comprehension, reinforcing the essential role of phonological skills in early literacy.

Rokhman, Lintangari, and Perdhani (2020) also observed that students with higher phoneme recognition skills exhibit better blending and segmentation abilities. Additionally, Vazeu et al. (2023) stress that a syllable-focused approach may serve as an effective strategy for promoting phonological development and early literacy, while Rosita et al. (2022) affirm that onset-rime awareness significantly enhances phonological awareness in learners.

Despite growing evidence on the importance of phonological training, access to effective learning media remains limited, especially since many applications and training programs are fee-based. This is concerning, given that digital media such as educational apps and games have demonstrated their potential in improving early literacy outcomes (Kiss & Csapó, 2024; Hofmann, 2021). According to Rosita et al. (2022), phonological deficits are among the leading causes of reading difficulties in children with dyslexia, making the development of phonological competence all the more critical. However, not all available technologies have undergone systematic evaluation (Martinez-Figueira et al., 2023), highlighting the urgent need for accessible and evidence-based learning tools.

As a promising alternative, free educational websites such as Starfall, English Sound, and BBC Learning English have emerged as accessible platforms to enhance phonological awareness in a more inclusive and engaging manner. For instance, users of English Sound report enjoyable experiences in learning English phonemes (Utami & Lintangari, 2021), and BBC Learning videos have proven effective in helping learners produce specific sounds (Salama, 2023). BBC Learning English also offers comprehensive materials on vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation (Indriyani et al., 2021), which have been shown to support beginners' communication skills (Sitorus et al., 2024). Similarly, Starfall provides interactive activities that support the development of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and reading comprehension (Bataineh & Alghareeb, 2024; Naeem & Khan, 2024).

Given this background, the present study aims to examine the effectiveness of free educational websites in improving phonological awareness among young beginner learners. This research seeks to explore these platforms as accessible, engaging, and technology-based alternatives for phonological instruction. Accordingly, the central research question is: To what extent are free educational websites (such as Starfall, English Sound, and BBC Learning English) effective in enhancing phonological awareness among young learners?

2. METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive research type to understand in depth how free educational websites can help improve young learners' phonological abilities in learning English. According to Rusandi, & Rusli, M. (2021). descriptive qualitative research, develops designs and field measures with the aim of providing 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 students 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. Subject selection was purposive, with the criteria being that the learners had just started learning English and had access to technological devices.

Data collection was conducted 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, as well as their responses to the phonological content.
2. Semi-structured interviews, to explore learners' perceptions of their learning experience and changes in 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 website). Data were analyzed through three stages: data reduction, presentation of data in narrative and thematic form, and conclusion drawing to see if free educational websites contribute to improving young learners' phonological skills.

3. 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.

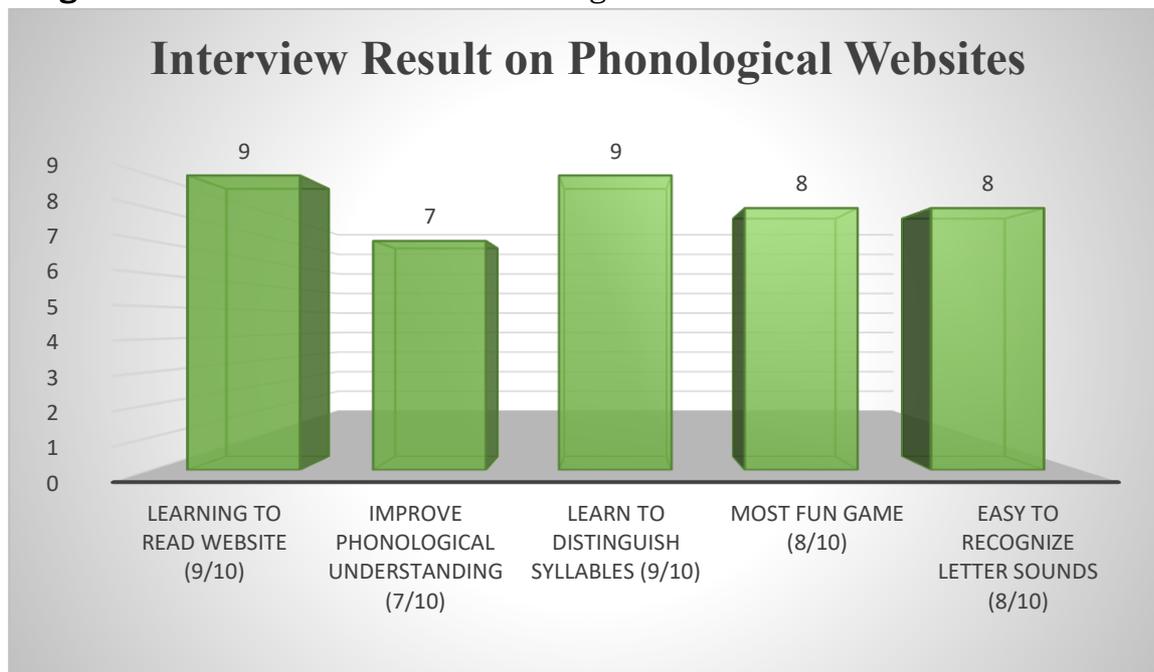
Table 1. Participatory Observation Results

NO.	Aspects Observed	Description of Findings
1.	Response to Letter Sounds	Young Learners 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 young learners can imitate and differentiate the syllables.
3.	Reaction to Rhymes	The young learners 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 learners were able to navigate the site on their own and select phonological games without assistance.
5.	Social Interaction During Learning	Learners often point and tell their friends when they find a letter sound they recognize.

From the observations, the researcher found that the learners showed great enthusiasm for the letter sounds and rhymes presented on the website. Young learners were actively repeating letter sounds and enjoying rhyming songs, which the researcher observed reflected emotional and cognitive engagement in the learning process. In addition, most of the young learners were able to imitate and differentiate the syllables of the words presented interactively. The researcher also noted that some young learners demonstrated independence in using the site without requiring assistance from teachers or friends. Positive social interactions were also observed, with learners pointing out and sharing sound findings with their peers during the learning process. These findings suggest that the sites are not only visually and

auditory engaging, 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 young learners 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. These findings indicate that the use of free educational websites makes a positive contribution to improving young learners' phonological skills.

Based on the analyzed observations and interviews, it can be concluded that free educational websites contribute significantly to the improvement of young learners' phonological skills. Learners show 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. Learners also show independence and confidence in the process of learning early reading.

The results of this study show that free educational websites such as Starfall, English Sound, and BBC Learning English significantly contribute to improving young learners' phonological awareness. This finding reinforces the view of Bahrudin et al. (2022) that phonological awareness is a crucial component in early reading learning, and supports Yépez-Moreno et al.'s (2025) notion of the positive impact of phonological training. (2025) regarding the positive impact of phonological training on reading fluency and comprehension. Through a qualitative-descriptive approach involving participatory observation and interviews, it was found that learners showed high enthusiasm for letter sounds, syllables and rhymes, and were able to actively respond to phonological content. This is in line with the findings of Hofmann (2021) and Utami & Lintang Sari (2021), who stated that digital-based learning not only increases children's engagement but also accelerates phoneme recognition. The

visual-auditory approach used in these sites proved effective in attracting learners' attention and creating a fun learning atmosphere, as Salama (2023) and Sitorus et al. (2024) also mentioned the importance of entertainment elements. (2024) on the importance of entertainment elements in language learning.

Furthermore, children's independence in navigating the site and social interactions with friends during the learning process indicate the strengthening of metacognitive and social skills. These findings extend Rachmani's (2020) view, which emphasizes that phonological interventions not only improve early reading skills but also support more holistic literacy development. In interviews, most children stated that they found it easier to distinguish syllables and became more confident in reading, reinforcing Naeem & Khan's (2024) findings on the effectiveness of Starfall in strengthening phonemic awareness and basic reading skills.

Interestingly, interactive games and songs were the most favored elements by participants, reflecting Maria Vazeu et al.'s (2023) findings that a focus on syllables is a key element of Starfall. (2023) that a focus on syllables and interactive learning formats can be effective strategies in early literacy development. The factors of convenience, accessibility and systematic presentation of materials make these sites inclusive and efficient phonological learning aids, as also highlighted by Martinez-Figueira et al. (2023) that convenience, accessibility and clear guidance are also critical to the success of these sites as effective phonological learning tools.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the research results and literature review, the researcher concludes that phonological awareness is a fundamental aspect in early literacy development, especially in young learners. This study shows that free educational websites such as Starfall, English Sound and BBC Learning English are effective in improving the phonological awareness of beginning students through an engaging and interactive visual-auditory approach. Students' active participation in learning activities, improved ability to distinguish sounds, as well as strengthened confidence in reading show that well-designed digital media can be an inclusive and fun alternative to phonological learning.

These findings support the views of previous researchers who emphasize the importance of phonological training from an early age (Bahrudin et al., 2022; Yépez-Moreno et al., 2025; Naeem & Khan, 2024), and reinforce the urgency of utilizing technology that is easily accessible and has been proven effective. Thus, the results of this study not only prove the effectiveness of free educational websites in phonological contexts but also encourage the integration of educational technology in early literacy curricula 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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