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Improving Early Reading Skills Through The Phonetic Method Among First-Grade Elementary School Students

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ABSTRACT

Beginning reading is a fundamental literacy skill, yet some Grade 1 students still experience difficulties in recognizing letters, connecting letters with sounds, and reading words fluently. This study aimed to investigate the improvement of Grade 1 students' beginning reading achievement through the phonetic method and to examine teacher and student activities and students' responses during the learning process. This Classroom Action Research was conducted in two cycles, each consisting of planning, action, observation, and reflection, involving 22 Grade 1 students SD. Data were collected through achievement tests, observations, and interviews and analyzed descriptively using percentages. The results showed that students' learning achievement improved from Cycle I to Cycle II. Classical mastery increased from 45.45% to 90.90%, while the mean score increased from 65.00 to 76.97. Teacher activity increased from 87.69% to 94.61%, and student activity increased from 86.92% to 92.30%. Students also demonstrated positive responses to the learning process. The study concludes that the phonetic method can improve beginning reading achievement and promote active student participation in Grade 1 learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning reading is a fundamental literacy skill that enables children to access written information and participate effectively in subsequent learning. In the early grades of primary school, particularly Grade 1, students are expected to develop basic reading abilities, including recognizing letters, relating letters to speech sounds, reading syllables and words, and gradually reading simple sentences. Difficulties in acquiring these foundational skills may interfere with students' ability to understand learning materials across subjects. Therefore, strengthening beginning reading skills at the early stage of primary education is

essential for supporting students' subsequent literacy development (Efendi & Subayani, 2025; Muslih, Mutia Alista & Hasan, 2022).

Beginning reading involves more than recognizing written symbols. Students need to establish accurate connections between graphemes and speech sounds and apply these connections when decoding words. This process requires systematic guidance and repeated opportunities to hear, identify, articulate, and combine sounds into meaningful words (Ulfa & Negara, 2023). From this perspective, phonetic or phonics-based instruction is relevant because it explicitly emphasizes the relationship between written letters and their corresponding sounds. Previous studies have indicated that systematic phonics instruction can support children's decoding, word recognition, and early reading development (Hidayah & Nurlina, 2022; Nini & Junaidi, 2025; Jia & Hew, 2021; Vousden et al., 2022). Thus, an instructional approach that systematically connects sounds, letters, syllables, and words provides an important pedagogical basis for beginning reading instruction.

Despite the importance of these skills, difficulties in beginning reading remain evident in primary school classrooms. Preliminary observations in a Grade 1 classroom at SD Negeri 28 Peusangan showed that some students were not yet able to read fluently, while others had limited vocabulary and experienced difficulties when encountering unfamiliar words. Students tended to recognize words frequently encountered in their daily lives but struggled with less familiar vocabulary. These difficulties were also reflected in students' learning outcomes, particularly in relation to the established Learning Objective Achievement Criterion (KKTP) of 70. The initial classroom condition therefore indicated the need for an instructional approach that could provide systematic practice with sounds, letters, syllables, and words while simultaneously encouraging active student participation.

The phonetic method offers a relevant instructional alternative because it allows students to practice the relationship between speech sounds and written symbols through structured and repeated learning activities. In the present study, its implementation involved vocabulary introduction, identification and blending of letters, pronunciation practice, arranging letter cards to form words, completing learning tasks, and providing direct assistance to students who experienced difficulties. Such activities provide opportunities for students to interact directly with the basic components of beginning reading. Previous studies have reported positive effects of phonetic or phonics-based approaches on students' early reading abilities (Khotimah et al., 2023; Marwah & Hamid, 2024; Tiani et al., 2023). More recent classroom action research has likewise indicated improvements in reading performance following the implementation of phonics-based instruction (Khairunnisa Salsabila et al., 2026) (Niis et al., 2026).

However, existing studies have generally emphasized changes in students' reading achievement or reading ability, while less attention has been

given to how the implementation of the method develops through a reflective classroom action research process involving changes in teacher activity, student activity, and student responses. This aspect is important because the effectiveness of an instructional method in a real classroom cannot be understood solely from changes in test scores. In classroom action research, instructional improvement is also reflected in how teachers adapt their practices, how actively students participate, and how students perceive the learning experience. Therefore, the present study positions the phonetic method not simply as a teaching technique but as an iterative instructional intervention that can be adjusted based on weaknesses identified during the learning process.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the implementation of the phonetic method to improve the beginning reading achievement of Grade 1 students at SD Negeri 28 Peusangan, while also examining changes in teacher and student activities and students' responses during the learning process. By integrating learning outcomes with process indicators, this study seeks to provide classroom-based empirical evidence on how systematic phonetic instruction, supported by reflection and instructional adjustment across cycles, can contribute to more effective beginning reading instruction in primary school.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed Classroom Action Research (CAR) to improve the beginning reading skills of Grade 1 students through the phonetic method. The research was conducted during the odd semester of the 2024/2025 academic year in Grade 1 at SD Negeri 28 Peusangan and involved 22 students as research participants. The researcher acted as the main instrument and implemented the instructional intervention, while two collaborators served as observers during the learning process. The CAR was conducted in two cycles, and each cycle consisted of four stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection (Norlaila, 2025). During the planning stage, lesson plans, learning materials, student worksheets, observation instruments, and assessment instruments were prepared. The action stage involved the implementation of phonetic learning through vocabulary introduction, pronunciation practice, letter identification and blending, arranging letter cards into words, completing learning tasks, and providing assistance to students who experienced difficulties. During the observation stage, teacher and student activities were monitored, while the reflection stage was used to identify weaknesses in the completed cycle and determine instructional improvements for the subsequent cycle.

Data were collected through achievement tests, classroom observations, and student interviews. The achievement tests were administered at the end of each cycle to measure students' beginning reading learning outcomes.

Observations were conducted by two collaborators using structured observation sheets to record teacher and student activities during the learning process. Student interviews were conducted after the learning activities to identify students' responses to the implementation of the phonetic method. The data therefore represented three complementary dimensions of the intervention: students' learning outcomes, classroom activities, and students' perceptions of the learning process. The quantitative data from the achievement tests and observation sheets were analyzed descriptively by calculating percentages and comparing the results between Cycle I and Cycle II. Learning mastery was determined based on the established Learning Objective Achievement Criterion (KKTP) of 70, while class-wide mastery was considered achieved when at least 65% of students reached the criterion. Teacher and student activity scores were calculated by comparing the obtained scores with the maximum possible scores and multiplying the result by 100%. The activity percentages were interpreted using the following categories: 90–100% very good, 81–90% good, 70–80% fair, 61–70% poor, and 0–60% very poor.

The success of the intervention was evaluated by comparing changes in students' beginning reading achievement, teacher activity, student activity, and student responses across the two cycles. The reflection stage served as the basis for modifying instructional practices when the expected outcomes were not yet achieved in the previous cycle. Data trustworthiness was addressed through theoretical triangulation by comparing the empirical findings with the theoretical perspectives used to interpret the implementation and outcomes of the phonetic method (Rahayu et al., 2025). The use of achievement tests, observations, and interviews also enabled the findings to be examined from different data sources. In terms of research ethics, the study was conducted in the Grade 1 classroom as part of an instructional improvement process, with the identities of individual students kept confidential in reporting the findings. The study did not report any intervention beyond the regular learning activities implemented through the classroom action research process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Implementation and Initial Learning Outcomes

Cycle I was conducted in the first-grade class of SD Negeri 28 Peusangan and consisted of planning, action, observation, and reflection stages. The learning activities applied the phonetic method through vocabulary introduction, presentation of relevant pictures, pronunciation practice, writing words on the board, arranging letter cards to form words, completing student worksheets, and providing direct assistance to students who experienced difficulties. The learning process was observed by two observers to record teacher and student activities during instruction. The observation results

showed that teacher activity reached 87.69%, while student activity reached 86.92%. Both indicators were categorized as good.

The learning outcomes at the end of Cycle I showed that 10 of 22 students (45.45%) achieved the mastery criterion of 70, while 12 students (54.55%) did not reach the criterion. The class mean score was 65.00. These results were below the predetermined classical mastery criterion of 65%. Observation and reflection during Cycle I also identified several learning difficulties. Some students had difficulty maintaining attention, participation in reading activities was not yet evenly distributed, and several students experienced difficulties in reading syllables, words, and simple sentences fluently. Pronunciation errors and hesitation during reading were also observed. These findings were used as the basis for improving the learning activities in Cycle II.

Improved Implementation and Learning Outcomes

Table. Comparison of Teacher and Student Activities

No.	Observation Aspect	Cycle I	Category	Cycle II	Category
1	Teacher activities	87.69%	Good	94.61%	Very Good
2	Student activities	86.92%	Good	92.30%	Very Good

Based on the reflection from Cycle I, the learning activities in Cycle II were revised to provide more structured guidance and greater opportunities for students to participate in reading activities. The implementation involved vocabulary identification, pronunciation practice, letter arrangement, worksheet completion, and guided reading activities. Observations by the two collaborators showed that teacher activity increased to 94.61%, categorized as Very Good, while student activity increased to 92.30%, also categorized as Very Good. These results show an improvement compared with Cycle I, in which teacher activity was 87.69% and student activity was 86.92%.

The learning outcomes in Cycle II also showed an increase. Of the 22 students, 20 students (90.90%) achieved the minimum score of 70, while 2 students (9.10%) did not reach the criterion. The class average increased to 76.97, compared with 65.00 in Cycle I. Thus, the classical mastery criterion of at least 65% was achieved in Cycle II. Based on the achievement of the predetermined success criterion, the classroom action research was concluded after Cycle II.

Table. Improvement in Students' Early Reading Achievement

No.	Achievement Indicator	Cycle I	Cycle II	Improvement
1	Average score	65.00	76.97	+11.97
2	Students achieving a score of ≥70	10 students	20 students	+10 students

No.	Achievement Indicator	Cycle I	Cycle II	Improvement
3	Class mastery	45.45%	90.90%	+45,45 point persentase
4	Students not achieving a score of ≥70	12 students	2 students	−10 students

Students' Responses to the Phonetic Method

Students' responses to the implementation of the phonetic method were obtained through interviews conducted after the learning activities. Interviews with three students focused on their interest in learning, perceived reading ability, understanding of the learning material, learning difficulties, and adequacy of the time allocated for the activities. The interview results are presented in Table 3.

Table. Students' Responses to the Phonetic Method

No	Response Indicator	Student Response
1	Interest in learning Indonesian	The students expressed that they enjoyed learning Indonesian.
2	Reading ability	The students stated that they were able to read after participating in the learning activities.
3	Understanding of material	Students reported that the learning material was easier to understand.
4	Learning difficulties	Students reported that they did not experience any significant difficulties.
5	Time allocation	The students considered the time provided sufficient to complete the tasks.

The interview results showed that the three students reported positive experiences during the learning activities. They expressed enjoyment of Indonesian language learning and stated that they were able to read after participating in the activities. They also reported that the material was easier to understand, that they did not experience significant difficulties, and that the time provided was sufficient to complete the assigned tasks.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the phonetic method can support the development of early reading skills when it is implemented through systematic and guided classroom activities. The improvement in students' reading achievement across the two cycles is consistent with the theoretical view that early reading requires students to establish accurate connections between graphemes and speech sounds and to use these connections in decoding words (Ulfa & Negara, 2023). In the context of beginning reading, students need

repeated opportunities to hear, identify, articulate, and combine sounds into meaningful words. The phonetic activities implemented in this study, including identifying vocabulary, recognizing and blending letters, arranging letters into words, and guided reading practice, provided such opportunities. This interpretation is also consistent with previous studies showing that phonics-based instruction supports decoding and word-reading development (Hidayah & Nurlina, 2022; Nini & Junaidi, 2025). Thus, the improvement observed in this study may be understood not simply as the effect of introducing a new method, but as the result of providing students with structured opportunities to connect written symbols with their corresponding sounds.

An important finding is that the improvement in reading achievement occurred alongside changes in the implementation of classroom instruction. The increase in teacher and student activity from Cycle I to Cycle II suggests that the effectiveness of the phonetic method was supported by the teacher's adjustment of instructional practices in response to the difficulties identified during the first cycle. This is important because early reading instruction requires more than the presentation of letter–sound relationships; students also need active participation, repeated practice, motivation, and direct assistance when difficulties arise. Previous research has similarly emphasized the importance of systematic phonics activities in developing early reading skills (Ayuningtyas et al., 2025; Khotimah et al., 2023), while Marwah & Hamid (2024) et al. (2024) reported improved reading skills through a phonics-based classroom action research approach. The present study extends these findings by showing that iterative reflection within the classroom action research process can strengthen the implementation of the method. In other words, the phonetic method appeared to be more effective when weaknesses identified in the initial cycle were used as a basis for improving subsequent instructional practices.

The students' responses also provide an important perspective for understanding the implementation of the phonetic method. The three interviewed students expressed positive experiences with Indonesian language learning, reported that they were able to read after participating in the learning activities, and considered the learning materials easier to understand. They also reported no significant difficulties and considered the allocated learning time sufficient. These responses suggest that the structured phonetic activities were acceptable and manageable from the students' perspective. This finding is in line with previous studies that emphasize the importance of systematic, engaging, and repeated phonics activities in supporting students' early reading d. The positive responses may also indicate that learning activities involving direct practice and guided reading can help reduce students' hesitation when dealing with letters, syllables, and simple words. However, because these responses were obtained from only three students, they should be interpreted as supporting evidence of students' learning experiences rather than as a representation of all students in the class.

The findings further indicate that the implementation of the phonetic method should be understood as an instructional process that requires adaptation to students' learning conditions. The difficulties identified in Cycle I, particularly students' limited attention, uneven participation, hesitation in reading syllables and words, and pronunciation errors, provided a basis for modifying the learning activities in Cycle II. This iterative process is consistent with the reflective nature of classroom action research, in which instructional practices are continuously improved based on evidence obtained from classroom implementation. Previous studies have shown that phonics instruction can contribute to early reading development, but the present findings emphasize that its classroom effectiveness also depends on how teachers organize practice, provide guidance, and respond to students' difficulties (Danita & Wirman, 2023; Marwah & Hamid, 2024). Therefore, the phonetic method should not be treated as a rigid instructional technique; rather, it can be adjusted through structured practice, teacher assistance, and reflection on students' learning progress.

From a pedagogical perspective, this study contributes classroom-based evidence that the phonetic method can be implemented through an iterative cycle linking instructional practice, student participation, and learning outcomes. While previous studies have generally focused on the improvement of students' early reading achievement through phonics-based instruction (Ayuningtyas et al., 2025; Khotimah et al., 2023; L. Hidayah, 2019), this study considers the implementation process by examining teacher activity, student activity, learning achievement, and students' responses within a classroom action research framework. The findings therefore suggest that improving early reading is not only related to the instructional method itself but also to the teacher's capacity to reflect on classroom difficulties and refine subsequent instruction. This provides a practical implication for Grade 1 teachers: phonetic instruction can be strengthened when letter sound activities are accompanied by repeated guided practice, active student participation, and continuous reflection on learning needs.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the phonetic method improved the early reading skills of first-grade students at SD Negeri 28 Peusangan. The improvement was reflected in students' learning achievement, which increased from Cycle I to Cycle II and exceeded the predetermined criterion of class mastery. The implementation process was also accompanied by higher teacher and student activity, indicating that the method could be implemented through more structured, guided, and participatory learning activities. Students' responses further indicated positive experiences with the learning process, including greater confidence in reading and easier understanding of the learning materials.

These findings suggest that the phonetic method can serve as a practical approach to supporting early reading instruction when combined with systematic practice, teacher guidance, active student participation, and reflection across learning cycles. The study also highlights that the improvement of early reading skills depends not only on the instructional method but also on teachers' ability to identify classroom difficulties and adjust subsequent instruction. Further research may examine the application of the phonetic method across different grade levels, classroom contexts, and student characteristics to provide broader evidence of its applicability.

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