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Enhancing Thai EFL Primary Learners' Word Reading Ability through Phonics Instruction

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Abstract

Reading words is essential to vocabulary and receptive and productive word recognition. Traditional English training in Thai elementary schools emphasizes memorization, which limits vocabulary expansion and decoding skills. This study aimed to investigate the effects of phonics instruction on Thai EFL primary learners' English word reading ability and to examine learners' attitudes toward phonics instruction in relation to their word reading development. A quasi-experimental pretest–posttest with a non-equivalent control group was employed. The participants were 23 Thai first-grade EFL learners divided into an experimental group (n = 12), which received phonics instruction, and a control group (n = 11), which received traditional instruction for eight weeks. The research instruments included a Letter–Sound Recognition Task (LSRT), a Word Reading Task (WRT), and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The quantitative results showed that the experimental group significantly improved from pretest to posttest on both the LSRT, $t = 9.93$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.00$, and the WRT, $t = 3.33$, $p = .007$, $d = 2.77$. Comparison of test performance between groups: the experimental group also significantly outperformed the control group on the LSRT, $t = 2.70$, $p = .01$, $d = 2.40$, and the WRT, $t = 2.18$, $p = .04$, $d = 2.10$. These findings indicated that phonics instruction was more effective in producing consistent and statistically significant improvement in learners' word reading ability. The qualitative findings showed that learners developed generally positive emotional engagement toward phonics instruction. They reported increased confidence, enjoyment, and motivation in reading English words, despite some initial challenges related to cognitive load and pronunciation. The study recommends engaging

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phonics instruction for early primary English education to improve reading development and learner engagement for EFL teachers and curriculum designers.

Keywords: phonics instruction, Thai EFL primary learners, word reading ability

Introduction

Learning to read in English presents a significant challenge for beginning learners (Chall, 1996). To read accurately and fluently, students must integrate various cognitive skills, including word recognition, sentence and text construction, and the retention of information they encounter. A fundamental part of this process involves learning the alphabetic system, particularly letter-sound relationships and common spelling patterns, and applying this foundational knowledge while reading (National Reading Panel, 2000; Sitthitikul, 2014). Moreover, reading words is also essential for vocabulary development, a relationship widely acknowledged in the academic literature (Magnussen & Sukying, 2021; Nation, 2022). Vocabulary learning becomes more effective when new words are introduced alongside their spellings, pronunciations, and meanings, as this fosters strong form–sound associations (Ehri, 2014). Strategies that encourage learners to read unfamiliar words aloud further support vocabulary growth by activating spelling–sound mappings, including the synthetic phonics technique, which teaches children to read using a decoding strategy (translate written letters into sounds and blend them: e.g., c-a-t = “k - æ – t” = “cat”) (Lakthong et al., 2025; Mungsanti & Sukying, 2024; Nation, 2022; Webber et al., 2023).

Additionally, vocabulary development plays a crucial role for second or foreign language (L2) learners. Establishing firm connections between a word’s form and its meaning is a key initial stage that enables learners to communicate and interpret messages accurately. Vocabulary knowledge encompasses three interconnected components: form, meaning, and use, each involving both receptive (understanding) and productive (application) dimensions. The form component refers to learners’ ability to recognize and produce spoken and written word forms. The meaning component involves understanding the relationship between a word’s form and what it represents. The use component concerns how a word functions grammatically and how it combines with other words in appropriate collocations (Lakthong et al., 2025; Mungsanti & Sukying, 2024; Nation, 2022).

Despite its importance, research indicates that many young learners experience difficulties in early vocabulary and reading development. Children often struggle with distinguishing rhyming patterns and identifying initial or final sounds in words (Dessemontet et al., 2021; Wichayut & Sitthitikul, 2019). In the beginning stages, primary students tend to read slowly, experience difficulty in matching letters to sounds, and often fail to pronounce or retain new words effectively. When encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, many students resort to guessing because they cannot decode or blend the sounds needed to form the words (Aiyarakarnjanakul & Sitthitikul, 2018; Lakthong et al., 2025; Mungsanti & Sukying, 2024).

To address these issues, previous studies have highlighted that explicit and intentional vocabulary instruction, such as analyzing word parts or using word cards, greatly benefits L2 vocabulary acquisition (Nation, 2022). Research focusing on young learners further supports the effectiveness of intentional vocabulary learning strategies (Lampai & Sukying, 2023; Methapisittikul & Sukying, 2023). In this regard, phonics instruction has emerged as a foundational and highly effective technique for teaching vocabulary, especially for beginning EFL learners. Phonics is based on the alphabetic principle and focuses on teaching letter–sound relationships in a structured, systematic way. It involves instructional practices that highlight how written spellings correspond to spoken sounds through consistent patterns (Sitthitikul, 2014). Studies consistently report gains in letter–sound recognition, decoding, and blending skills, demonstrating its effectiveness in supporting literacy development (Dandee & Pornwiriyakit, 2022; Ehri, 2022; Shenoy et al., 2022). In phonics instruction, students learn the relationship between sounds (phonemes) and the letters or groups of letters (graphemes) that represent those sounds. This learning process is bidirectional: phonemic awareness instruction enhances phonics skills, and conversely, proficiency in phonics can improve phonemic awareness (Ehri, 2022). Summarily, phonemic awareness is the ability to identify, hear, and manipulate the individual sounds in spoken words (Ehri, 2022; Lakthong et al., 2025).

Despite agreement regarding the benefits of phonics instruction and good intentions, many children continue to struggle even after participating in such programs (Leelman, 2021). In Thai primary schools, however, many students continue to face challenges with word-reading ability. These challenges often stem from limited exposure to phonics instruction, insufficient practice with varied vocabulary, and a lack of level-appropriate reading materials. Consequently, learners struggle to decode words, which negatively impacts reading fluency and comprehension (Dandee & Pornwiriyakit, 2022; Lakthong et al., 2025; Mungsanti & Sukying, 2024; Wichayut & Sitthitikul, 2019).

In this context, the present study investigates the effects of phonics instruction in Thai primary school on students' word reading ability. It is hypothesized that systematic phonics instruction will significantly improve students' ability to pronounce and spell words, leading to greater vocabulary acquisition. Additionally, this study examines students' attitudes toward using phonics to support vocabulary learning and reading development. It is expected that Thai primary school learners will express positive attitudes toward phonics instruction and perceive it as beneficial for enhancing their word reading and recognition abilities. Specifically, it investigates two research questions:

1. To what extent does phonics instruction affect Thai EFL primary learners' word reading ability?

2. What are Thai EFL primary learners' attitudes toward phonics instruction in relation to their word reading ability?

Literature Review

1. Defining Vocabulary Knowledge

Vocabulary knowledge includes not only comprehension and word usage but also an understanding of concrete and abstract concepts (Nation, 2022). Furthermore, recent research by Webb and Nation (2017) emphasizes the significance of vocabulary depth and breadth in gaining language proficiency. Knowing a word entails at least nine different dimensions of knowledge, including form, meaning, and use, with each including both receptive and productive knowledge (Nation, 2022). This knowledge can be acquired through language usage (meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, and fluency development), as well as deliberate teaching and learning, and it is preferable to have a balanced combination of these learning possibilities. Some knowledge of words is gained by fitting new words into existing frameworks of knowledge and from commonsense understanding of the world (González-Fernández & Schmitt, 2020; Lakthong et al., 2025; Mungsanti & Sukying, 2024; Nation, 2022; Nontasee & Sukying, 2021; Teemueangsai et al., 2025).

Vocabulary knowledge involves both receptive (recognizing and understanding) and productive (accurately using) abilities across three dimensions: form, meaning, and use. In terms of form, learners recognize how words sound, look, and are structured (e.g., prefixes and suffixes) receptively and can pronounce, spell, and construct them productively. For meaning, receptive knowledge includes understanding the meaning a word form conveys, what concepts or objects it refers to, and how it relates to other words, while productive knowledge involves selecting and using the correct word to express meanings, refer to ideas, and employ related terms accurately. Regarding use, learners comprehend grammatical patterns, typical collocations, and contextual limitations receptively, whereas productive knowledge requires applying these patterns correctly, using natural collocations, and choosing appropriate contexts, registers, and frequencies for the word (Nation, 2022; Teemueangsai et al., 2025).

Table 1

Nation's Vocabulary Knowledge Framework

Aspect	Dimension	Receptive (R)	Productive (P)
Form	Spoken	What does the word sound like?	How is the word pronounced?
	Written	What does the word look like?	How is the word written and spelled?
	Word parts	What parts are recognizable?	What parts express this meaning?
Meaning	Form and meaning	What meaning does this word signal?	What word form expresses this meaning?
	Concepts and referents	What is included in the concept?	What items can the concept refer to?
	Associations	What other words does this word make us think of?	What other words could we use instead of this one?

Table 1 (Continued)

Aspect	Dimension	Receptive (R)	Productive (P)
Use	Grammatical functions	In what patterns does the word occur?	In what patterns must we use this word?
	Collocations	What words or types of words occur with this one?	What words or types of words must we use with this one?
	Constraints on use	Where, when, and how often would we meet this word?	Where, when, and how often can we use this word?

2. Word Knowledge as a Foundation for Word Reading Development

Word knowledge plays a crucial role in developing word reading ability, with both receptive and productive knowledge of spoken and written forms contributing to students' letter-sound blending and accurate word recognition (Dandee & Pornwiriyakit, 2022; Lakthong et al., 2025; Mungsanti & Sukying, 2024). Orthographic knowledge, such as understanding letter–sound relationships and spelling patterns, is fundamental to fluent decoding (Ehri, 2022), while morphological awareness and vocabulary breadth strongly predict decoding, listening comprehension, and reading comprehension (Xie et al., 2022). Research consistently shows strong correlations between vocabulary knowledge and L2 reading and listening comprehension (Zhang & Zhang, 2022), and early language abilities, including vocabulary depth and phonological awareness, significantly influence early reading development (Dickinson et al., 2019). In contrast, deliberate vocabulary instruction, such as songs, TPR activities, digital flashcards, drawing games, or word-part strategies, and phonics instruction, has been shown to yield substantial vocabulary gains among Thai EFL learners (Bubchaiya & Sukying, 2022; Magnussen & Sukying, 2021; Mungsanti & Sukying, 2024; Teemueangsai et al., 2025; Yowaboot & Sukying, 2022). These findings align with information processing theory and Schmidt's noticing hypothesis, which emphasize the need for learners to consciously attend to linguistic input for successful acquisition. Collectively, this body of research affirms that vocabulary knowledge, including orthographic, phonological, and morphological components, is central to word reading development in L2 learners.

3. Approach to Phonics Instruction

Phonics instruction refers to teaching learners the relationships between phonemes and graphemes to support decoding and early reading development (Lakthong et al., 2025; Mungsanti & Sukying, 2024). Two major approaches are widely recognized: analytic phonics and synthetic phonics. Analytic phonics, previously common in the UK, introduces letter sounds after children begin reading whole words, emphasizing initial consonants and word families before shifting to blending late in the first year. In contrast, synthetic phonics adopts a bottom-up approach in which children learn letter–sound correspondences early and explicitly and begin sounding and blending from the outset. These approaches exist on a continuum, with UK classrooms often using an analytic, then synthetic progression in which blending occurs only after initial sound instruction. Beyond this distinction, phonics instruction can also be classified as explicit or implicit: explicit phonics teaches letter-sound

correspondences directly (e.g., /b/–/a/–/t/ → bat), whereas implicit phonics encourages learners to infer letter sounds from whole words and contextual cues. Research strongly supports explicit, systematic phonics instruction for beginning readers and those with learning difficulties, as it enables them to apply learned correspondences to decode simple and unfamiliar words efficiently (Dandee & Pornwiriyakit, 2022; Ehri, 2022; Lakthong et al., 2025; Mungsanti & Sukying, 2024; National Reading Panel, 2000; Shenoy et al., 2022).

A substantial body of evidence demonstrates the effectiveness of synthetic and explicit phonics approaches. Large-scale studies in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada show that early, systematic phonics instruction significantly improves decoding, phonological awareness, and the reading of unfamiliar and nonwords (National Reading Panel, 2000). These effects are most pronounced in kindergarten and first grade and among struggling readers, although the impact decreases for older learners with persistent reading difficulties. Research further highlights the importance of phonological development, noting that children's awareness of the speech units within words is a key predictor of reading and spelling success. For learners with special needs, effective phonics instruction involves breaking down complex tasks into manageable components, sequencing skills carefully, and providing explicit modeling and practice. A systematic teaching sequence typically includes introduction, review, instruction, practice, application, and assessment to help learners build, connect, and apply their phonics knowledge. This structured approach enables children to blend consonant–vowel–consonant (CVC) patterns, decode new or nonwords, and progressively read with greater independence. Collectively, the literature affirms that well-designed phonics instruction, explicit, systematic, and developmentally sequenced, is essential for the successful acquisition of early reading skills (Dandee & Pornwiriyakit, 2022; Ehri, 2022; Shenoy et al., 2022).

Research Objectives

This study aimed to investigate the effects of phonics instruction on enhancing English word reading ability among Thai EFL primary learners. The research was guided by the following objectives:

1. To investigate the effects of phonics instruction on Thai EFL primary learners' English word reading ability.
2. To examine Thai EFL primary learners' attitudes toward phonics instruction in relation to their English word reading ability.

Hypotheses of the Study

1. Phonics instruction will significantly improve Thai EFL primary learners' English word reading ability compared to their pre-instruction performance.
2. Learners receiving phonics instruction will demonstrate greater improvement in English word reading ability than those receiving traditional instruction.
3. Thai EFL primary learners will report positive attitudes toward phonics instruction, which will be associated with enhanced word reading ability.

Methodology

1. Research Design

A quasi-experimental design was implemented because the study was conducted in a real school setting where the researcher could not randomly assign individual students to groups. Instead, intact classes were used in this study. Pretests and posttests were administered to measure English word reading ability, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the students' attitudes toward phonics instruction.

2. Population and Samples

The population of this study consisted of primary school students at a public school in northeastern Thailand. The sample included 23 first-grade students in public school who were learning English as a foreign language. The participants were divided into two groups based on their existing classroom arrangements. The experimental group consisted of 12 students who received phonics instruction, while the control group consisted of 11 students who received traditional English instruction. Both groups studied in 8-week learning program. To ensure ethical compliance, parental consent, student assent, and school approval were obtained prior to data collection.

3. Instrument(s) and Procedures

This study employed three research instruments: a Letter–Sound Recognition Task (LSRT) and a Word Reading Task (WRT) adapted from Mungsanti and Sukying (2024) and a semi-structured interview. The LSRT was developed to assess learners' receptive knowledge of spoken word forms and consisted of 20 items. For each item, a target word was pronounced three times through an audio recording prepared by the researcher, with a five-second interval between each pronunciation and a ten-second pause for learners to respond. The audio was played through a wireless speaker positioned at the center of the classroom to ensure equal audibility, and all pronunciations were generated using Google Translate to maintain consistency. Vocabulary items were selected from the Smile 1 textbooks and limited to words within the first 1,000 items of the General Service List (GSL), ensuring suitability for young learners and alignment with phonics principles. Each correct response was awarded one point, yielding a maximum score of 20 points. The LSRT was reviewed by three experts for content validity and piloted with a comparable group of learners to refine item clarity. Its reliability was established with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.87.

The Word Reading Task (WRT) was used to assess learners' productive word reading ability based on Nation's (2022) framework of spoken-form productive vocabulary knowledge. The task required participants to read aloud 20 words presented individually in a randomized order. The words were selected using the same criteria as the LSRT and were administered three days after the instructional intervention in a controlled, one-on-one setting. Scoring followed a three-level rubric: two points for correct pronunciation, one point for partially correct pronunciation, and zero points for incorrect or unreadable responses. Words that could not be read within one minute were scored as zero, resulting in a maximum possible score of 40 points. The WRT was

reviewed by three experts to establish content validity and was piloted with a comparable group of learners to improve item clarity and scoring consistency. The instrument also demonstrated a reliability with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82.

To explore learners' attitudes toward phonics instruction, semi-structured interviews were conducted after the completion of the Word Reading Task (WRT). Participants were divided into high-performing and low-performing groups based on their WRT scores to ensure a balanced range of perspectives. The discussions were guided by three open-ended questions focusing on learners' feelings and experiences when learning word reading through phonics instruction, their perceived disadvantages of the instructional approach, and their perceived advantages of phonics instruction. Each interview lasted approximately 15–20 minutes. To ensure comprehension, all questions were simplified and translated into the learners' first language. The interviews were audio-recorded using a mobile phone.

4. Data Collection

Data collection in this study was conducted in three sequential phases to systematically examine the effects of phonics instruction on learners' English word reading ability. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to provide a comprehensive understanding of learners' performance and perceptions. All procedures were implemented in accordance with ethical standards, and parental consent, student assent, and school approval were obtained prior to the commencement of the study.

Phase I: Pre-intervention Phase

Before the intervention, participants in both the experimental and control groups completed the Word Reading Task (WRT) individually to assess word reading ability performance. Following this, the Letter–Sound Recognition Task (LSRT) was administered in a group setting using standardized audio playback. This phase aimed to establish comparable baseline data on learners' word reading ability and letter–sound recognition prior to instruction.

Phase II: Intervention Phase

During the intervention phase, the experimental group received phonics instruction, while the control group received traditional English instruction. Both groups studied in an 8-week learning program. Both groups were taught for the same duration and used the same instructional materials, with the instructional approach being the primary difference between the two groups. Each instructional session lasted approximately 50 minutes, with sufficient breaks provided to minimize learner fatigue and ensure effective participation.

Phase III: Post-intervention Phase

After the completion of the instructional intervention, participants completed the same WRT and LSRT as post-tests to measure learning achievement and instructional effects. Quantitative data were obtained from the post-test scores, while semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data on learners' attitudes toward phonics instruction.

5. Data Analysis

This study employed descriptive and inferential statistical methods to examine the effects of phonics instruction on Thai EFL primary learners' English word reading ability. Quantitative data from the Word Reading Task (WRT) and Letter–Sound Recognition Task (LSRT) were analyzed using SPSS (Version 29). Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated, and independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare word reading performance between the experimental and control groups. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis with MAXQDA (Version 26). The data were transcribed and coded through open, axial, and selective coding to identify recurring themes related to learners' perceptions and experiences with phonics instruction. The integration of quantitative and qualitative analyses enabled a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of phonics instruction and learners' attitudes toward its implementation.

Results

1. The Effects of Phonics Instruction on Word Reading Ability

This study investigated the effects of phonics instruction on Thai EFL primary learners' English word reading ability, based on comparisons of pretest and posttest performance as well as differences between the experimental and control groups.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of English Word Reading Ability

Group		**Experimental (n=12)**			**Control (n=11)**		
Test		**Mean**	**%**	**S.D.**	**Mean**	**%**	**S.D.**
Pretest	LSRT	7.33	36.66	2.50	6.09	30.45	1.51
	WRT	7.25	36.25	2.22	6.36	31.81	1.56
Posttest	LSRT	13.08	65.41	2.57	10.36	51.81	2.20
	WRT	9.91	49.58	2.02	8.00	40.00	2.19

Table 2, "Descriptive Statistics," presents the mean scores, percentages, and standard deviations of English word reading ability for the experimental and control groups in the pretest and posttest.

In the pretest, the Letter–Sound Recognition Task (LSRT), the experimental group obtained a mean score of 7.33 (36.66%, S.D. = 2.50), while the control group scored 6.09 (30.45%, S.D. = 1.51). Similarly, in the Word Reading Task (WRT), the experimental group achieved a mean score of 7.25 (36.25%, S.D. = 2.22), compared to 6.36 (31.81%, S.D. = 1.56) for the control group. In the posttest of LSRT, the experimental group obtained a mean score of 13.08 (65.41%, S.D. = 2.57), whereas the control group scored 10.36 (51.81%, S.D. = 2.20). Likewise, for the WRT, the experimental group achieved a mean score of 9.91 (49.58%, S.D. = 2.02), exceeding the control group's mean score of 8.00 (40.00%, S.D. = 2.19). Overall, the experimental group showed greater gains than the control group.

Table 3

Comparisons between Pre-test and Post-test

Group/test	Pre-test	Post-test	*t*- value	*p*-value	Cohen's *d*
Experimental	LSRT	LSRT	9.93	0.001***	2.00
	WRT	WRT	3.33	0.007**	2.77
Control	LSRT	LSRT	9.97	0.001***	1.42
	WRT	WRT	1.71	0.11	0.52

Notes. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3 presents the results of the paired-samples t-tests comparing the pretest and posttest scores within groups. In the experimental group, learners' performance on the Letter–Sound Recognition Task (LSRT) improved significantly from pretest to posttest, $t = 9.93$, $p < .001$, with a very strong effect size ($d = 2.00$), indicating very strong practical significance. A similar pattern was observed for the Word Reading Task (WRT), in which learners' scores also increased significantly, $t = 3.33$, $p = .007$, with a very strong effect size ($d = 2.77$), also indicating very strong practical significance. These results indicate a substantial effect of phonics instruction on enhancing learners' English word reading ability.

In contrast, the control group also demonstrated improvement, though the pattern was less consistent. Learners' scores on the LSRT increased significantly from pretest to posttest, $t = 9.97$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size ($d = 1.42$). However, improvement in the WRT was not statistically significant, $t = 1.71$, $p = .11$, with a medium effect size ($d = 0.52$). This suggests that the observed improvement was modest and not statistically reliable.

Table 4

Comparison of Test Performance between the Experimental and Control Groups

Test	Group	*t*- value	*p*-value	Cohen's *d*
LSRT Pretest	Experimental / Control	1.42	0.17	0.59
LSRT Posttest	Experimental / Control	2.70	0.01**	2.40
WRT Pretest	Experimental / Control	1.09	0.28	0.45
WRT Posttest	Experimental / Control	2.18	0.04*	2.10

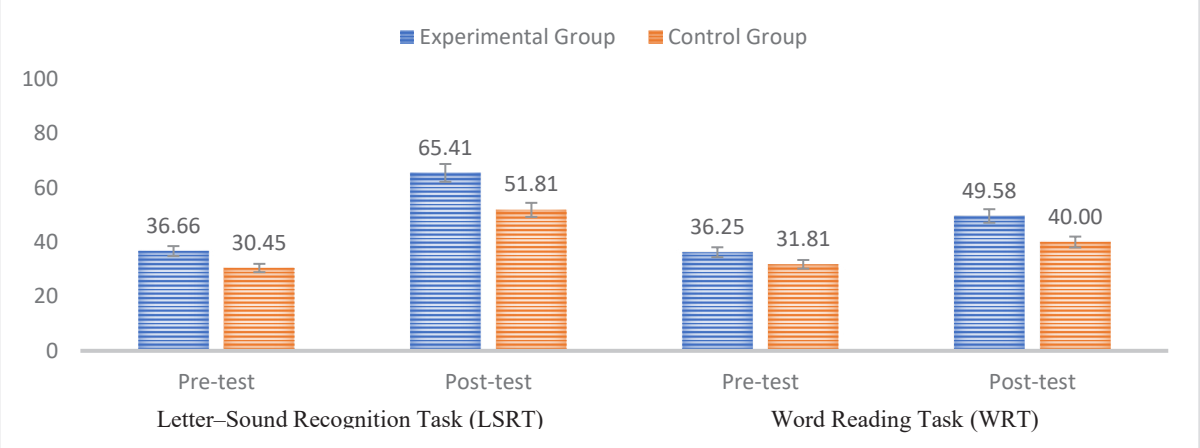
Notes. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table 4 presents the results of the independent-samples t-tests comparing English word reading performance between the experimental and control groups before and after the intervention. The results indicate that there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups in the pretest. For the Letter–Sound Recognition Task (LSRT) pretest, the difference between the experimental and control groups was not significant, $t = 1.42$, $p = 0.17$, with a medium effect size ($d = 0.59$). Similarly, for the Word Reading Task (WRT) pretest, no significant difference was found between the two groups, $t = 1.09$, $p = 0.28$, with a small effect size ($d = 0.45$). These findings suggest that both groups had comparable levels of English word reading ability prior to the intervention.

However, after the intervention, statistically significant differences emerged in favor of the experimental group. In the posttest, the experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group on the LSRT, $t = 2.70$, $p = 0.01$, with a large effect size ($d = 2.40$). Likewise, the experimental group also outperformed the control group on the WRT, $t = 2.18$, $p = 0.04$, with a large effect size ($d = 2.10$). These results indicate that phonics instruction had a positive and substantial effect on learners' English word reading ability.

Figure 1

Summary of Test Performance



As shown in figure 1, both groups demonstrated improvement from pretest to posttest; however, the experimental group consistently achieved higher scores than the control group across both tasks. In the LSRT, the experimental group's mean score increased from 36.66% in the pretest to 65.41% in the posttest, while the control group improved from 30.45% to 51.81%. This indicates a greater gain in letter–sound recognition for learners who received phonics instruction. A similar pattern was observed for the WRT. The experimental group's mean score rose from 36.25% in the pretest to 49.58% in the posttest, whereas the control group improved from 31.81% to 40.00%. Although both groups showed progress, the experimental group demonstrated larger gains and higher overall performance after the intervention.

2. Learners' Attitudes towards Phonics Instruction

This study explored Thai EFL primary learners' attitudes toward phonics instruction in relation to their English word reading ability using semi-structured interviews. After the intervention, 6 learners were classified by word reading proficiency into a low-proficiency (n = 3) and a high-proficiency group (n = 3). The data were transcribed and coded through coding steps: open, axial, and selective coding to identify recurring themes related to learners' perceptions and experiences with phonics instruction.

Positive Affective Engagement: From Not Confident to More Confident

The findings indicated that phonics instruction contributed to a noticeable shift in learners' self-confidence and emotional engagement with English word reading. At the beginning of instruction, several learners expressed uncertainty about their ability to read words accurately, particularly when encountering unfamiliar sounds or complex pronunciations. As English as a foreign language learners, they often felt unsure and depended on repeated practice and teacher support. However, as instruction progressed, learners reported increased confidence, clearer recognition of letter–sound relationships, and greater willingness to read aloud. The opportunity to practice phonics through structured activities and games allowed learners to gradually feel more comfortable and confident when reading words.

> Some words are hard to pronounce. I read slowly and need to read many times. (Pos. 6-i, L1).
>
> I feel more confident when the teacher asks me to read. (Pos. 7-i, M1).
>
> I can remember letter sounds better and read words more correctly. (Pos. 3-i, H1).

One learner explained, "Some words are hard to pronounce. I read slowly and need to read many times," reflecting early hesitation and uncertainty. Another learner shared, "I feel more confident when the teacher asks me to read," indicating growing confidence over time. Learners also highlighted improvements in their reading ability, with one stating, "I can remember letter sounds better and read words more correctly." These responses illustrate how phonics instruction supported learners in moving from initial insecurity toward greater confidence and self-belief in their word reading ability.

Emotional Challenges: From Confusion to Enjoyment

Although learners generally expressed positive attitudes toward phonics instruction, the findings also revealed emotional challenges during the early stages of learning. Some learners reported confusion, difficulty listening to sounds quickly, and trouble remembering letter shapes and sounds. These difficulties occasionally caused frustration and required additional teacher support. However, these challenges did not lead to negative attitudes toward phonics instruction itself. Instead, learners often described the learning process as enjoyable and motivating, especially when phonics activities were presented through games and interactive tasks. Enjoyment and positive emotions appeared to coexist with learning difficulties, suggesting that phonics instruction created a supportive environment where challenges were seen as part of learning.

Sometimes I cannot listen fast enough, so I feel confused and need the teacher's help. (Pos. 9-i, L1).

Learning is fun. I like playing games, and I can read more words than before. (Pos. 8-i, M1).

I feel happy and enjoy this way of learning. The teacher explains clearly, which makes reading words easier. (Pos. 9-i, H1).

One learner noted, "Sometimes I cannot listen fast enough, so I feel confused and need the teacher's help," highlighting the emotional and cognitive demands of phonics learning. In contrast, another learner emphasized enjoyment by stating, "Learning is fun. I like playing games, and I can read more words than before." Similarly, a learner shared, "I feel happy and enjoy this way of learning. The teacher explains clearly, which makes reading words easier." These accounts demonstrate that while phonics instruction initially posed challenges, it also fostered positive emotional engagement, helping learners remain motivated and develop favorable attitudes toward English word reading.

Discussion

1. Effects of Phonics Instruction on English Word Reading Ability of Thai EFL Primary Learners

This study found that phonics instruction improved Thai EFL primary learners' word reading ability. Compared with traditional instruction, phonics led to greater gains in both letter–sound recognition and word reading. In the posttests, the experimental group outperformed the control group on the Letter–Sound Recognition Task (LSRT) and the Word Reading Task (WRT), with substantial effect sizes. These findings suggest that phonics instruction helped learners develop the decoding skills needed to read English words more effectively. Similar patterns have been reported in other EFL contexts. For example, Chinese EFL learners who participated in an intensive phonics program outperformed their classmates in decoding and vocabulary learning (Li & Woore, 2021), showing that grapheme–phoneme instruction can support literacy development beyond first language settings. The present findings therefore reinforce previous research highlighting the importance of explicit phonics instruction for young EFL learners with limited English exposure outside the classroom.

The score gains further support for this conclusion. In the experimental group, letter–sound recognition scores increased from 36.66% to 65.41%, while word reading scores rose from 36.25% to 49.58%. By comparison, the control group showed smaller gains, and its improvement in productive word reading was not statistically significant. This suggests that traditional instruction alone was not sufficient to strengthen word reading performance to the same extent. In the Thai context, where young learners often have limited access to phonics-focused materials, vocabulary support, and level-appropriate reading resources, such instructional gaps may contribute to weak decoding ability and slow reading development. The phonics intervention addressed these needs by providing explicit practice in letter–sound mapping and blending. This is consistent with earlier Thai studies showing that phonics-based

instruction can strengthen decoding and blending skills among primary learners (Lakthong et al., 2025; Mungsanti & Sukying, 2024; Wichayut & Sitthitikul, 2019).

One important strength of phonics instruction is its systematic focus on letter–sound correspondences. Learners were taught how to connect sounds with letters and blend them to form words. For example, to read "cat," learners combined the sounds /c/, /a/, and /t/. This process supports phonological awareness, which is central to word identification and reading fluency. Through explicit phoneme–grapheme instruction, learners were better able to decode unfamiliar words and rely less on memorization alone. The findings also showed that improvement in the LSRT was greater than improvement in the WRT, suggesting that receptive skills developed faster than productive word reading ability. A likely explanation lies in the different cognitive demands of the two tasks. Letter–sound recognition requires learners to identify and match sounds, whereas reading words aloud involves phonological decoding, memory retrieval, and accurate articulation. Because productive word reading requires more cognitive effort, its development may be slower and may require longer practice and stronger scaffolding. These findings highlight the importance of providing continued support to help learners move from recognizing letter–sound relationships to producing words accurately and confidently (Lakthong et al., 2025; Mungsanti & Sukying, 2024; Li & Woore, 2021). Overall, the quantitative results indicate that an eight-week phonics program can make a meaningful contribution to young EFL learners' early reading development, both statistically and educationally.

2. Thai EFL Primary Learners' Attitudes toward Phonics Instruction

The qualitative findings revealed learners' opinions and attitudes, highlighting phonics instruction's educational value. Semi-structured interviews showed overwhelming favorable reactions to phonics courses. Phonics exercises were often described as "*fun*" and "*enjoyable*" by students, who felt happier and more excited about learning English. One kid said, "*I feel more confident when the teacher asks me to read*," demonstrating a growing confidence in word reading. Others reported gains in letter sound retention and word pronunciation ("*I can remember letter sounds better and read words more correctly*"). Self-reported gains support test findings and demonstrate that phonics education improves technical reading abilities, confidence, and drive. Positive emotional outcomes are crucial in EFL, because anxiety or lack of confidence can hinder language acquisition. After understanding phonics through interactive games and disciplined repetition, this study's students found English reading doable and even pleasant. These findings reflect prior studies indicating engaging and organized learning settings improve vocabulary retention and student motivation (Lakthong et al., 2025; Mungsanti & Sukying, 2024; Li & Woore, 2021).

Also, the study found certain problems in learners' experiences. Some kids had trouble hearing sounds at native-speaker speed or remembering letter forms and sounds early in the phonics intervention. One student said, "*Sometimes I cannot listen fast enough, so I feel confused and need the teacher's help*". However, these early obstacles did not lead to long-term phonological dislike. Learners perceived challenges as part of the learning process and remained motivated

through supportive scaffolding. Although tough, the teacher's detailed explanations, regular repetition, and game-like exercises made studying "*easier*", "*interesting*", and "*motivating*". This implies that phonics pedagogy is vital because diversity, fun, and supporting scaffolding may keep students engaged even when the topic is difficult. In this research, students expressly valued the participatory component of the courses (e.g., "*I like playing games, and I can read more words than before*"), demonstrating that phonics training may be both rigorous and fun. This implies that diverse instruction benefits young EFL learners. The qualitative findings support the quantitative increases by indicating that EFL phonics instruction may boost success and develop a positive, confident reading mentality. Phonics can address technical reading difficulties (decoding skills) and foster emotional circumstances (motivation, confidence) that enable youngsters to practice and improve their English literacy.

In light of prior research, these findings have substantial implications for early foreign language literacy instruction. They confirm that phonics, long established in L1 circumstances (e.g. by the National Reading Panel, 2000), is good for L2 learners. Phonics has shown promise in Thai learners, such as improvement in Grade 3 decoding after letter–sound training (Mungsanti & Sukying, 2024), but this study strengthens this evidence with a controlled comparative design and quantitative and qualitative data. Positive attitudes are also consistent with research showing that young learners' enjoyment and active involvement can improve EFL learning results. By teaching systematic phonics, teachers provide pupils the capacity to decode, allowing them to read new words and enhance their English vocabulary (Li & Woore, 2021). This empowerment is especially important in Thai EFL, where restricted classroom hours and resources have limited English exposure. We found that even within the current curricular framework, teaching phonics in an interesting way may enhance literacy in a semester. The research describes phonics training as a "catalyst" for early English literacy, accelerating the acquisition of basic reading abilities and instilling a love of reading, establishing the groundwork for future language development. Evidence of better test scores, high impact sizes, and passionate learner feedback emphasizes these results. It supports the emerging agreement in applied linguistics that L2 learners must decode to become good readers (Ehri, 2022). Phonics education improves Thai EFL primary learners' word reading skills and fosters fun, confidence, and engagement. In EFL environments, low English exposure might hamper motivation and self-efficacy, making these attitudinal outcomes crucial. The findings confirm prior studies showing that good phonics training can improve cognitive decoding and emotional learning. Thus, phonics training in early English schooling may boost reading performance and student attitudes toward English literacy.

Conclusion

This study provides strong evidence that explicit phonics instruction can significantly improve the English word reading ability of Thai EFL primary learners. After an eight-week phonics program, students in the experimental group demonstrated greater gains than those in the control group, particularly in letter–sound recognition and word reading performance. These findings indicate that systematic phonics instruction helps young learners develop essential

decoding skills that support early English literacy. In addition to these measurable gains, the learners also expressed positive attitudes toward phonics instruction, reporting greater confidence, enjoyment, and motivation when learning to read English words. Taken together, these findings suggest that phonics instruction supports not only the technical aspects of reading development but also the emotional and motivational conditions that encourage learners to engage with English more positively.

The findings are particularly relevant in the Thai EFL context, where many young learners have limited exposure to English outside the classroom and often struggle with pronunciation and word recognition. In such contexts, systematic phonics instruction can serve as an effective foundation for early reading development by helping learners understand letter–sound relationships, decode unfamiliar words, and build confidence in reading. Therefore, phonics-based instruction should be considered an important component of early English language teaching in primary education.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest several important implications. First, English teachers at the primary level should incorporate systematic and explicit phonics instruction into regular classroom practice, especially in the early stages of literacy development. Second, phonics lessons should include repeated practice in letter–sound correspondence, blending, and word reading so that learners can gradually move from recognition to accurate production. Third, phonics instruction should be delivered through engaging and age-appropriate activities, such as games, repetition, guided oral reading, and teacher scaffolding, in order to maintain learners' motivation and reduce anxiety. Finally, curriculum developers and schools should provide greater access to phonics-based materials and teacher support so that phonics instruction can be implemented more effectively and consistently in Thai primary classrooms.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that phonics instruction is an effective approach for improving both English words reading ability and learner attitudes in early EFL literacy. Through systematic phonics instruction, young learners developed stronger foundational decoding skills while also gaining greater confidence, enjoyment, and motivation in reading English. These combined benefits suggest that phonics instruction supports not only reading performance but also the positive learning dispositions needed for continued literacy development. In primary education, especially in EFL contexts where exposure to English is limited, phonics-focused pedagogy can provide learners with the essential skills and confidence to engage more successfully with English texts both inside and beyond the classroom.

Recommendations

1. Implications

Phonics should be taught in early primary English curriculum, according to this study. Phonics education helped young EFL learners make considerable progress, suggesting that clear letter–sound correlations and decoding skills are advantageous. Thai primary students often struggle with decoding and reading; thus, starting English education with phonics might assist. Phonics

courses, such as brief daily tasks on sound–symbol correspondence and blending, can help students acquire reading and vocabulary.

Teacher training and assistance are also needed for phonics instruction. Teachers must be trained in phonics, teaching methods, and ways to help students with issues like sound misunderstandings. Professional development programs and workshops should improve instructors' phonics instruction skills. Schools could also include age-appropriate audio resources for pronunciation, flashcards, decodable texts, and interactive exercises. For instructors switching from traditional techniques, ongoing instructional assistance and monitoring may help maintain phonics integrity.

This study's excellent student responses emphasize the necessity of engaging and diverse education. To motivate students and accommodate varied learning styles, phonics training should include games, music, chants, gestures, and narrative. Alternating focused phonics instruction with lighter, game-based reinforcement activities may help early reading development students maintain positive attitudes and resilience. Finally, phonics skills require consistent practice and reinforcement. Teachers and curriculum designers should allow enough time for blending and word reading practice in class and through guided reading activities with decodable materials. Level-appropriate reading resources at school and home can help students learn phonics and improve reading fluency. Continuous exposure helps letter–sound understanding develop beyond short-term evaluation results and into long-term reading.

2. Further Studies

Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings. The present study was limited to a small number of participants from a single school, which restricts broader interpretation. Studies involving multiple schools across different regions, as well as learners from varied socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of phonics instruction. Employing randomized controlled designs where possible would further strengthen causal interpretations.

In addition, future studies could examine the long-term effects of phonics instruction by extending the duration of the intervention and including delayed post-tests. While this study demonstrated significant gains over a relatively short period, longitudinal research could investigate whether these improvements are sustained over time and whether early phonics instruction contributes to later reading comprehension and overall language proficiency. Such studies would help clarify the long-term educational value of phonics-based instruction.

Further research should also expand the range of outcome measures. Beyond letter–sound recognition and word reading tasks, future studies could include assessments of spelling, reading comprehension, and writing to examine how phonics instruction transfers to broader literacy skills. Incorporating attitudinal or motivational scales alongside qualitative data would

also allow for a more comprehensive evaluation of learners' cognitive and affective development.

Finally, comparative and contextual studies would provide valuable insights into the relative effectiveness of different instructional approaches. Comparing phonics instruction with other reading interventions, such as whole-word or multimedia-based approaches, could help identify optimal instructional combinations for EFL learners. Research could also explore how phonics instruction can be adapted for learners of different ages or proficiency levels, including older students who did not receive phonics training in earlier grades. Addressing challenges identified in this study such as cognitive load and listening difficulties through refined instructional strategies or technological support would further enhance phonics instruction on word reading ability.

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