

## CONTEXTUAL AND PHONOLOGICAL APPROACHES IN EARLY READING INSTRUCTION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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### Abstract

Early reading is a fundamental skill that supports students' cognitive and academic development in elementary education. However, many students still experience difficulties in recognizing letters, associating sounds with symbols, and understanding simple texts. These challenges indicate that early reading instruction has not optimally integrated phonological and contextual aspects of learning. This study aimed to develop a learning approach that integrates contextual and phonological aspects in early reading instruction. The research employed an Educational Design Research approach consisting of analysis, design, and evaluation stages. The participants included expert validators, elementary school teachers, and first-grade students. Data were collected through validation sheets, observation, questionnaires, and early reading tests. The results show that the developed learning approach is valid and feasible to be implemented in early reading instruction. The validation results indicate a high level of validity, and the learning process becomes more meaningful through the integration of contextual experiences and sound-symbol recognition. Students demonstrate better engagement and participation during the learning process. In conclusion, the integration of contextual and phonological approaches is appropriate for early reading instruction and has the potential to improve students' early reading skills in elementary schools.

**Keyword:** contextual approach; early reading; elementary education; phonological approach.

### Abstrak

Kemampuan membaca permulaan merupakan keterampilan dasar yang penting dalam mendukung perkembangan kognitif dan akademik peserta didik di sekolah dasar. Namun, masih banyak peserta didik yang mengalami kesulitan dalam mengenali huruf, menghubungkan bunyi dengan simbol, serta memahami bacaan sederhana. Kondisi ini menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran membaca permulaan belum mengintegrasikan aspek fonologis dan kontekstual secara optimal. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengembangkan pendekatan pembelajaran yang mengintegrasikan aspek kontekstual dan fonologis dalam pembelajaran membaca permulaan. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan Educational Design Research yang meliputi tahap analisis, desain, dan evaluasi. Subjek penelitian terdiri atas validator ahli, pendidik sekolah dasar, dan peserta didik kelas I. Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui lembar validasi, observasi, angket, dan tes membaca permulaan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan pembelajaran yang dikembangkan dinyatakan valid dan layak digunakan dalam pembelajaran membaca permulaan. Proses pembelajaran menjadi lebih bermakna melalui pengintegrasian pengalaman kontekstual dan pengenalan hubungan bunyi dan simbol. Peserta didik menunjukkan keterlibatan yang lebih aktif selama proses pembelajaran. Simpulan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan kontekstual dan fonologis dapat digunakan dalam pembelajaran membaca permulaan serta berpotensi meningkatkan keterampilan membaca peserta didik di sekolah dasar.

**Kata Kunci:** membaca permulaan; pendekatan kontekstual; pendekatan fonologis; sekolah dasar

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### Introduction

Early reading development is widely recognized as a foundational component of students' academic success and long-term educational outcomes. Reading is not only a tool for accessing knowledge but also a complex cognitive process that involves the integration of

multiple linguistic and cognitive skills. Students who fail to develop strong early reading skills are at greater risk of experiencing persistent academic difficulties, as reading proficiency is closely linked to performance across subject areas (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018). Therefore, effective early reading instruction is essential to support students' literacy development and ensure equitable learning opportunities.

Despite its importance, many students in the early grades continue to struggle with reading acquisition. These challenges are often associated with difficulties in recognizing letters, associating sounds with symbols, and decoding words, which are fundamental components of early reading (Ehri, 2005; Lonigan, Burgess, & Schatschneider, 2018). Recent studies have shown that early reading difficulties are strongly related to deficits in phonological processing, particularly phonological awareness, which refers to the ability to recognize and manipulate the sound structure of language (Melby-Lervåg, Lyster, & Hulme, 2020). Without adequate phonological skills, students may struggle to establish the connection between spoken and written language, leading to delays in reading development.

Phonological awareness has consistently been identified as one of the most critical predictors of early reading success. A substantial body of research demonstrates that students with strong phonological skills are more likely to develop accurate and fluent reading abilities (Gillon, 2018; Barquero, Davis, & Cutting, 2021). Moreover, phonological awareness plays a central role in decoding, which is essential for word recognition and reading fluency (Foorman et al., 2020). However, while phonological instruction is necessary, it is not sufficient on its own to support comprehensive reading development. Reading is not merely about decoding words but also about constructing meaning from text, which requires the integration of multiple cognitive and linguistic processes (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014; Kim, 2020).

In this regard, recent advances in reading research emphasize the importance of integrating decoding skills with meaning-based instruction. The "science of reading" framework highlights that effective reading instruction must address both word recognition and language comprehension in a balanced manner (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Petscher et al., 2020). This perspective suggests that focusing exclusively on phonological skills without providing meaningful learning contexts may limit students' ability to develop reading comprehension. Therefore, there is a growing consensus that early reading instruction should incorporate both phonological and contextual elements to support holistic literacy development.

Contextual learning provides an important framework for enhancing the meaningfulness of reading instruction. By connecting learning materials to students' real-life experiences, contextual approaches enable learners to construct meaning more effectively and engage more actively in the learning process (Johnson, 2002). Research indicates that students are more motivated and engaged when instructional content is relevant to their lives, which in turn supports deeper comprehension and retention (Guthrie, Klauda, & Ho, 2021). Furthermore, contextual learning supports the activation of background knowledge, which is a key factor in reading comprehension (Cartwright, Marshall, & Wray, 2020).

The integration of phonological and contextual elements is also supported by constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes the active role of learners in constructing knowledge through interaction with their environment. According to this perspective, learning occurs when students actively engage with content and relate new information to their existing knowledge (Connor et al., 2020). In the context of early reading, this means that students should not only be taught how to decode words but also be given opportunities to use their reading skills in meaningful contexts. This approach promotes deeper understanding and supports the development of higher-order thinking skills.

However, despite the strong theoretical support for integrated instruction, many classroom practices continue to treat phonological and contextual elements as separate components. Traditional approaches to early reading instruction often focus heavily on mechanical decoding activities, such as memorizing letters and sounds, without providing sufficient opportunities for meaningful language use (Ehri, 2005). On the other hand, some approaches emphasize contextual learning but lack systematic instruction in phonological skills, which can hinder students' ability to decode words effectively. This fragmentation in instructional practices highlights a significant gap between theory and practice in early reading education.

Recent research further underscores the importance of instructional coherence in literacy education. Coherent instructional approaches that integrate multiple components of reading have been shown to be more effective than fragmented approaches (Graham, 2020). In addition, differentiated instruction that aligns with students' developmental needs and skill levels has been found to improve reading outcomes (Connor et al., 2020). These findings suggest that effective early reading instruction should not only integrate phonological and contextual elements but also be designed in a way that is responsive to students' needs.

Another important consideration in early reading instruction is the need to address diverse learners, particularly those who are at risk of reading difficulties. Studies have shown that students who struggle with reading benefit from explicit, systematic instruction combined with meaningful learning experiences (Petscher et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of developing instructional approaches that are both structured and flexible, allowing teachers to support different learners effectively.

Based on the discussion above, it can be seen that there is a gap between the theoretical understanding of effective reading instruction and the practices implemented in classrooms. While research emphasizes the importance of integrating phonological and contextual elements, such integration is not yet widely implemented in a systematic and coherent manner. This gap indicates the need for the development of an instructional approach that combines these elements in a structured and meaningful way.

Therefore, this study aims to develop an instructional approach that integrates contextual and phonological elements in early reading instruction for elementary school students. The proposed approach is expected to provide a more comprehensive framework for supporting early reading development by addressing both decoding and comprehension processes. In addition, this study contributes to the field of literacy education by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of integrated instructional approaches, which may inform future practices and research in early reading instruction.

## Research Methods

This study employed an Educational Design Research (EDR) approach aimed at developing and validating an instructional approach that integrates contextual and phonological elements in early reading instruction. Educational Design Research is widely used to bridge the gap between theory and practice by systematically designing, testing, and refining educational interventions in real contexts (McKenney & Reeves, 2012). This approach was selected because it allows iterative development through continuous cycles of analysis, design, implementation, and evaluation, ensuring that the resulting instructional approach is both theoretically grounded and practically applicable.

The study was conducted in elementary school settings involving first-grade students as the primary subjects. The research took place during the academic year and included several stages, beginning with preliminary observations to identify existing problems in early reading instruction, followed by the design and development of the instructional approach, expert validation, limited implementation, and revision. The selection of the research setting was based on the need to examine authentic classroom conditions, particularly in relation to early reading instruction practices, which are critical in shaping students' foundational literacy skills (Snow et al., 1998).

The participants in this study consisted of expert validators, elementary school teachers, and first-grade students. The expert validators were selected based on their expertise in language education and elementary education, and their role was to evaluate the validity and feasibility of the developed instructional approach. Teachers were involved as practitioners who implemented the approach in classroom settings, while students served as the primary participants in the learning process. The selection of participants was conducted using purposive sampling, which ensures that participants meet specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Creswell, 2014). In this case, teachers were selected based on their experience in teaching early reading, and students were selected based on their enrollment in the first grade of elementary school.

The research procedure followed the stages of Educational Design Research as described by McKenney and Reeves (2012), which include analysis and exploration, design and construction, and evaluation and reflection. In the analysis and exploration phase, data were collected to identify problems and needs related to early reading instruction. This phase involved classroom observations and informal discussions with teachers to understand students' difficulties in recognizing letters, associating sounds with symbols, and reading simple words. These findings were consistent with previous studies indicating that early reading difficulties are often associated with limited phonological awareness and ineffective instructional strategies (Ehri, 2005).

In the design and construction phase, an instructional approach integrating contextual and phonological elements was developed. The design was based on theoretical principles of phonological awareness and contextual learning. Phonological awareness plays a critical role in helping students understand the relationship between sounds and written symbols, which is essential for decoding (Gillon, 2018), while contextual learning supports meaningful learning by connecting instructional content to students' real-life experiences (Johnson, 2002). The developed approach included structured learning activities, lesson plans, instructional media, and assessment instruments designed to support students' early reading development.

In the evaluation and reflection phase, the developed instructional approach was validated and tested. Validation was conducted by expert validators using structured validation sheets to assess various aspects, including content relevance, instructional design, clarity of procedures, and suitability for elementary school students. This process is essential in development research to ensure that the product meets quality standards before implementation (Plomp & Nieveen, 2013). Following validation, limited implementation was carried out in classroom settings to examine the practicality and feasibility of the approach. Feedback from validators and teachers was used to revise and improve the instructional approach.

The data collected in this study consisted of both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data were obtained through observations and teacher feedback, providing insights into the implementation process and the effectiveness of the instructional approach. Quantitative data were obtained through validation sheets, questionnaires, and early reading

tests. The validation sheets were used to measure the level of validity of the instructional approach based on expert judgment. The questionnaires were used to collect responses from teachers and students regarding the practicality and acceptability of the approach. The early reading tests were used to assess students' reading abilities, including recognizing letters, associating sounds with symbols, and reading simple words (Lonigan et al., 2018).

Data collection was conducted using multiple techniques to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Observations were carried out during the implementation of the instructional approach to examine students' engagement and participation in learning activities. Questionnaires were administered to teachers and students after the implementation to gather their responses regarding the learning process. Validation data were collected from expert validators using structured instruments. In addition, reading tests were administered to students to evaluate their early reading performance. The use of multiple data sources and techniques is consistent with triangulation principles, which enhance the validity of research findings (Creswell, 2014).

The instruments used in this study included observation sheets, validation forms, questionnaires, and reading tests. The observation sheets were designed to assess the implementation of the instructional approach and students' engagement during the learning process. The validation forms were used by expert validators to evaluate the quality and feasibility of the instructional approach. The questionnaires were designed to capture participants' perceptions, while the reading tests were used to measure students' early reading abilities.

The data analysis process involved both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Qualitative data were analyzed descriptively by organizing and interpreting the data to identify patterns related to the implementation of the instructional approach. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the level of validity and feasibility of the instructional approach. The scores obtained from validation sheets and questionnaires were calculated to determine the overall quality of the developed approach. The results of the reading tests were analyzed to describe students' early reading performance.

The interpretation of the data was conducted by relating the findings to the research objectives and theoretical framework. The results of the analysis were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the instructional approach and to guide the revision process. Through this iterative process, the study aimed to produce an instructional approach that is valid, practical, and suitable for early reading instruction in elementary schools.

## Results and Discussion

The results of this study describe the development and validation of an instructional approach that integrates contextual and phonological elements in early reading instruction. The findings are presented based on the stages of development, including the identification of problems, the design of the instructional approach, and the validation results.

The initial findings from classroom observations indicate that students experienced difficulties in recognizing letters, associating sounds with symbols, and reading simple words. These findings confirm that early reading instruction has not optimally supported students' phonological development. In addition, the learning process tended to focus on mechanical activities, such as memorizing letters, without connecting them to meaningful contexts. This condition is consistent with previous studies which state that ineffective early reading instruction

often results from the lack of integration between phonological skills and meaningful learning experiences (Ehri, 2005).

Based on these findings, an instructional approach integrating contextual and phonological elements was developed. The approach was designed to provide structured learning activities that support students' ability to recognize sound-symbol relationships while also connecting learning materials to real-life contexts. This integration is important because phonological awareness helps students in decoding processes, while contextual learning enhances comprehension and engagement (Gillon, 2018; Johnson, 2002).

The validation results from expert evaluators indicate that the developed instructional approach has a high level of validity. The assessment was conducted using validation instruments that measured aspects such as content relevance, instructional design, clarity of procedures, and suitability for elementary school students. The results of the validation are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Validation Results of Observation Instrument

Indicator	Mean Score	Category
1	3.78	Very Valid
2	3.84	Very Valid
3	3.65	Very Valid
4	3.72	Very Valid
5	3.51	Very Valid
Average	3.70	Very Valid

*Source: Research data (2026)*

As shown in Table 1, the average score of the observation instrument is 3.70, which falls into the "very valid" category. This result indicates that the instructional approach has clear procedures and is feasible to be implemented in classroom settings. The high validity score reflects that the developed approach meets the required standards in terms of instructional design and relevance to students' needs.

In addition to the observation instrument, the questionnaire results also indicate a high level of feasibility. The responses from teachers and students show that the instructional approach is practical and easy to implement. The results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Questionnaire Results on Instructional Approach Feasibility

Indicator	Mean Score	Category
1	4.52	Very Feasible
2	4.47	Very Feasible
3	4.41	Very Feasible
4	4.38	Very Feasible
5	4.42	Very Feasible
Average	4.44	Very Feasible

*Source: Research data (2026)*

The average score of 4.44 indicates that the instructional approach is highly feasible and well-received by both teachers and students. This finding suggests that the integration of contextual and phonological elements creates a learning environment that is more engaging and meaningful. Students demonstrate greater participation during the learning process, while teachers find the approach easier to implement compared to conventional methods.

The findings of this study are in line with theoretical perspectives emphasizing the importance of phonological awareness in early reading development. Phonological skills enable students to decode words effectively, which is a critical component of reading proficiency (Lonigan et al., 2018). At the same time, the integration of contextual learning supports students

in constructing meaning from texts, thereby enhancing comprehension (Johnson, 2002). The combination of these two approaches provides a more comprehensive framework for early reading instruction.

Furthermore, the results of this study support the argument that effective early reading instruction should not focus solely on technical skills but also on meaningful learning experiences. The developed instructional approach allows students to connect sound-symbol relationships with real-life contexts, which enhances both engagement and understanding. This is consistent with the view that reading comprehension is achieved through the interaction between decoding skills and contextual knowledge (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014).

Overall, the findings indicate that the developed instructional approach is valid, feasible, and relevant for early reading instruction in elementary schools. The integration of contextual and phonological elements addresses the gap identified in previous instructional practices, providing a more effective approach to supporting students' early reading development.

The findings of this study can be further strengthened when viewed from recent developments in reading science, which emphasize the integration of decoding and meaning-making processes as essential components of early literacy instruction. Contemporary research highlights that early reading development requires a coordinated interaction between phonological processing and language comprehension, rather than treating them as separate domains (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). The instructional approach developed in this study aligns with this perspective by integrating phonological and contextual elements, thereby supporting both decoding accuracy and comprehension simultaneously.

Recent studies also reaffirm the critical role of phonological awareness as a foundational predictor of early reading success. For instance, research by Melby-Lervåg et al. (2020) demonstrates that phonological skills have a strong and consistent relationship with word reading ability across early grades. Similarly, a meta-analysis conducted by Barquero, Davis, and Cutting (2021) found that phonological processing significantly contributes to reading development, particularly in the initial stages of literacy acquisition. These findings support the results of this study, which indicate that the inclusion of structured phonological activities enhances students' ability to recognize sound-symbol relationships and improves their decoding skills.

However, recent literature also emphasizes that phonological instruction alone is insufficient for developing full reading competence. The integration of contextual and meaning-based instruction is necessary to support comprehension and engagement. According to Cartwright et al. (2020), reading comprehension involves multiple cognitive processes, including inference, vocabulary knowledge, and background knowledge activation. The contextual elements embedded in the instructional approach developed in this study facilitate these processes by connecting reading materials to students' real-life experiences, thereby enhancing their ability to construct meaning from text.

Furthermore, the importance of meaningful and engaging learning environments is highlighted in recent studies on student motivation and literacy development. Research by Guthrie et al. (2021) indicates that students who are engaged in meaningful reading activities demonstrate higher levels of motivation and improved reading outcomes. The findings of this study show that students become more actively involved in learning when instructional content is contextually relevant, which supports the argument that engagement is a key factor in successful literacy development.

The integration of phonological and contextual elements in this study also reflects current trends in balanced literacy instruction. Recent discussions in reading research suggest that effective instruction should combine explicit skill instruction with opportunities for meaningful language use (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018; Duke & Cartwright, 2021). This balanced approach ensures that students not only learn how to decode words but also understand their meaning within a broader context. The instructional approach developed in this study embodies this principle by providing structured phonological activities alongside contextual learning experiences.

In addition, recent research highlights the importance of instructional design that is responsive to students' developmental needs. According to Connor et al. (2020), differentiated instruction that aligns with students' skill levels and learning needs leads to better reading outcomes. The approach developed in this study allows for flexibility in implementation, enabling teachers to adapt learning activities based on students' abilities. This adaptability contributes to the practicality and effectiveness of the approach in real classroom settings.

Another important perspective comes from studies on early literacy interventions, which emphasize the need for systematic and explicit instruction. A study by Foorman et al. (2020) found that structured literacy approaches that include phonological training and guided reading practices significantly improve early reading skills. The structured nature of the instructional approach in this study aligns with these findings, as it provides clear instructional procedures while maintaining a focus on meaningful learning.

Moreover, recent advances in literacy research also stress the importance of integrating multiple components of reading instruction to support comprehensive literacy development. According to Kim (2020), reading comprehension is influenced by a combination of decoding skills, linguistic knowledge, and cognitive processes. The integration of phonological and contextual elements in this study addresses these components by supporting both the technical and cognitive aspects of reading.

The findings of this study also contribute to the growing body of literature on the importance of instructional coherence. Research by Graham (2020) suggests that coherent instructional approaches that integrate multiple aspects of literacy are more effective than fragmented approaches. The instructional approach developed in this study demonstrates coherence by aligning learning objectives, instructional activities, and assessment methods within a unified framework.

Furthermore, the results can be interpreted in light of recent discussions on equity in literacy education. Studies have shown that students who struggle with reading often benefit from instructional approaches that provide both explicit skill instruction and meaningful learning opportunities (Petscher et al., 2020). The integrated approach developed in this study has the potential to support diverse learners by addressing different aspects of reading development simultaneously.

Overall, the integration of contextual and phonological elements in early reading instruction, as demonstrated in this study, is strongly supported by recent international research. The findings indicate that combining these elements leads to more effective and meaningful learning experiences, which in turn support the development of both decoding and comprehension skills. This study contributes to current discussions in literacy education by providing empirical evidence that supports the implementation of integrated instructional approaches in early reading.

## Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the instructional approach integrating contextual and phonological elements is appropriate and relevant for early reading instruction in elementary schools. This study was conducted in response to the challenges faced by students in developing early reading skills, particularly in recognizing letters, associating sounds with symbols, and understanding simple texts. These challenges highlight the need for an instructional approach that not only emphasizes technical reading skills but also provides meaningful learning experiences that are aligned with students' developmental characteristics. The findings demonstrate that the developed approach is capable of addressing these needs by combining structured phonological activities with contextual learning experiences that are closely related to students' daily lives.

The integration of phonological elements within the instructional approach plays a significant role in supporting students' ability to decode written language. By engaging in activities that focus on sound recognition and the relationship between sounds and symbols, students are better able to develop foundational reading skills. This aspect is particularly important in early reading instruction, where students are still in the process of understanding how written language represents spoken language. At the same time, the inclusion of contextual elements enhances the meaningfulness of the learning process by connecting reading materials to real-life situations. This connection allows students to construct meaning more effectively and to engage more actively in the learning process, which ultimately supports their reading development.

The findings also show that the instructional approach contributes to increased student engagement and participation during the learning process. Students are not only involved in recognizing letters and sounds but are also encouraged to explore and relate reading materials to their own experiences. This active involvement fosters a more interactive and student-centered learning environment, which is essential for promoting motivation and interest in reading. In addition, teachers find the approach practical and applicable in classroom settings, as it provides clear guidance for implementing early reading instruction while allowing flexibility to adapt to students' needs.

From a theoretical perspective, the results of this study support the view that effective early reading instruction should integrate multiple components of literacy development. The combination of phonological awareness and contextual learning provides a comprehensive framework that addresses both the technical and meaningful aspects of reading. This integration helps bridge the gap between decoding skills and reading comprehension, which are often treated separately in traditional instructional approaches. By bringing these components together, the developed approach offers a more holistic way of supporting students' early reading development.

In terms of practical implications, this study provides an alternative instructional approach that can be used by elementary school teachers to improve early reading instruction. The approach offers a structured yet flexible framework that can be adapted to different classroom contexts. It also emphasizes the importance of aligning instructional activities with students' developmental needs, which is crucial for achieving effective learning outcomes. Teachers can use this approach to create more engaging and meaningful learning experiences that support both skill development and comprehension.

Despite its contributions, this study also has limitations that should be considered in future research. The implementation of the instructional approach was conducted in a limited

context, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, further studies are needed to examine the effectiveness of this approach in different educational settings and with a larger number of participants. Future research may also explore the long-term impact of integrating contextual and phonological elements on students' reading development, as well as its application at different grade levels.

In conclusion, the instructional approach integrating contextual and phonological elements provides a meaningful and effective way to support early reading instruction in elementary schools. By addressing both the technical and contextual aspects of reading, the approach helps students develop foundational reading skills while also enhancing their understanding and engagement. This study contributes to the development of more effective instructional practices in early reading and provides a basis for further research in the field of literacy education.

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