

# Assessing Reading Proficiency In Elementary Schools In Tasikmalaya

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## ABSTRACT

*Reading is a crucial skill and the focal point in the effort to advance education. Learning to read marks the initial step toward reading proficiency. Reading proficiency today encompasses not only the ability to recognize letter symbols but also the capacity to interpret and effectively communicate texts. This study aims to analyze reading issues in Tasikmalaya City's Elementary Schools. This study employed qualitative research method using a phenomenological approach. The research subjects consist of 120 elementary school students. Data was collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, taking into account the individuals and locations under investigation. Data analysis was conducted in both an inductive manner (based on field findings) and deductive manner (based on existing theories). The research findings encompass the researcher's reflections, descriptions, and interpretations of the issues, with a focus on three aspects of the phenomenological approach. These aspects include identifying the existing problems, understanding how they arise, and developing descriptions that encompass the issues pertaining to the researched subject. The results indicate that students' phonological awareness, phonics skills, and vocabulary richness are better in comparison to their reading fluency and comprehension. This conclusion suggests that some schools that have adopted the independent curriculum tend to excel in phonemes, phonics, and vocabulary aspects of reading. However, they struggle with fluency aspect and are poor in comprehension aspect.*

## ABSTRAK

Membaca merupakan keterampilan yang sangat penting dan menjadi pusat perhatian dalam usaha mengembangkan pendidikan. Belajar membaca merupakan langkah awal menuju tahap kemampuan membaca. Kemampuan membaca saat ini tidak hanya meliputi kemampuan mengenal simbol huruf tetapi mampu menginterpretasi sehingga mampu mengomunikasikannya. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis permasalahan membaca di Sekolah Dasar Kota Tasikmalaya. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan fenomenologi. Subyek penelitian ini adalah siswa sekolah dasar yang berjumlah 120 siswa. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi dengan memperhatikan individu dan tempat yang diteliti, serta menganalisis data dengan cara yang bersifat induktif (berdasarkan temuan lapangan) dan deduktif (berdasarkan teori yang ada). Hasil dari penelitian mencakup refleksi peneliti, deskripsi dan interpretasi tentang masalah, serta kontribusi penelitian peneliti memfokuskan tiga aspek pendekatan fenomenologi. Adapun aspek tersebut meliputi; masalah apa yang terjadi, bagaimana masalah itu terjadi, kemudian bagaimana mengembangkan deskripsi-deskripsi yang mencakup permasalahan dari objek yang diteliti. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa aspek kesadaran fonologis, kemampuan fonik, kekayaan kosakata terbukti unggul daripada kemampuan pada aspek kelancaran dan keterampilan membaca. Temuan ini menyimpulkan bahwa beberapa sekolah yang telah menerapkan kurikulum merdeka cenderung menguasai aspek fonem, fonik dan kosakata, namun memiliki aspek fluency yang kurang baik dan pemahaman yang lemah.

## A. INTRODUCTION

In the context of formal education, primary school is an early stage aiming to help students in developing their skills and competencies. Development of language skills is fundamental for the development of other skills. Language is a crucial tool in life because it is a useful means for accessing information and expressing thoughts and ideas to others (Nurzaman et al., 2020). Language is essentially a media for communication. Its four skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing, are important elements an individual needs to master. Mastery of these four language skills will allow someone to communicate effectively.

Mastery of the four language skills can be achieved through continuous repetition, and it is considered successful when the individual has been able to learn knowledge. Everyone needs language skills because they are the basics for cognitive, moral, personal, and interpersonal developments (Munifah et al., 2019). These developments are indicators of future competencies and success. Hence, language learning and optimization of language skills in primary schools are important. With language learning, it is expected that students will develop their language competencies to be able to communicate well, in both spoken and written communication. (Gunawan, et al 2020)

Reading is a crucial skill and the focal point in the effort to advance education. Learning to read marks the initial step toward reading proficiency. Reading proficiency includes reading pace and comprehension. (Tampubolon, 2015). Reading proficiency today encompasses not only the ability to recognize letter symbols but also the capacity to interpret and effectively communicate texts. In other words, reading proficiency is the conscious effort to comprehend the text for communication purpose. It is in line with Damaianti's statement that reading is a combination of knowledge, skills, and strategies developed by an individual through various interactions with different texts (Damaianti, 2021).

Reading issues has to be focused on in Indonesia because PIRLS report showed a concerning rate of students' reading proficiency; in which Indonesia ranked 62<sup>nd</sup> of 65 countries (Suryaman, 2015). Moreover, PISA 2009 reported that Indonesia ranked 57<sup>th</sup> of 65 countries before fell into the 64<sup>th</sup> rank of 65 countries in 2012. In PISA 2018 report, Indonesia reanked 72<sup>nd</sup> of 79 countries. These results clearly indicate that students' reading proficiency in Indonesia over the years was very low (OECD, 2017 ; Tjalla, 2010). In addition, the 2016 INAP reported that Indonesia scored 46.83, which means that reading proficiency level of Indonesian students was poor (Solihin et. al., 2019). Furthermore, Alibaca study in 2019 showed that literacy activities of Indonesian students scored 37.32%, in the low category (Kementrian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2019).

Considering these data, it is essential to optimize students' reading proficiency through reading learning at schools. Spink stated that lower-grade students' reading proficiency needed to be improved because it was concerning, especially that of first graders' (Spink et al., n.d.). First graders' reading skills will be better if they receive good guidance from educators. In lower grades, students' reading proficiency is considered good if students show proficiency in phoneme, phonic, vocabulary, reading fluency and comprehension. As National Reading Panel stated, reading literacy consists of proficiency in phoneme, phonic, vocabulary, reading fluency, and text comprehension (Stahl, n.d., 2000).

Research on reading proficiency have been conducted in various countries, such as Finland, Ethiopia, and the USA. Research focusing on first to third grades in those countries found several problems, including (1) lack of interest in reading, (2) insufficient exploration of teaching methods, (3) low levels of reading accuracy and fluency, (4) lack of parental supports regarding reading, and (5) low level of reading comprehension (Makebo et al., 2022; Kikas et al., 2018 ; Little et al., 2017; Nevo et al., 2020).

In addition, there are challenges in developing students' reading proficiency. It was found that students had difficulties in terms of (1) ability to decode words; Gehesman found that phonemic and phonic awareness are fundamental for students to comprehend texts and to read fluently (Gehsmann & Mesmer, 2023); (2) fluency; (3) lack of practice; and (4) limited vocabulary; and (5) reading comprehension (Nevo et al., 2020; Hebert et al., 2018; Haslum, 2007; Chandra et al., 2021; Sparapani et al., 2018). In addition, Anshori & Damaianti found that many students were unable to combine letters, combine words, and understand sentences (Anshori, Damaianti, 2021).

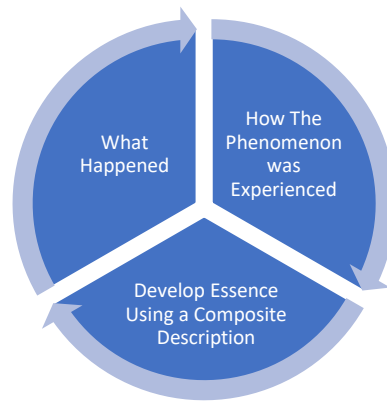
This information is the main consideration for educators to start solving the problem. Moreover, the current curriculum implemented in Indonesia requires students to not only understand the symbols (decoding) but also to comprehend what they read. In the Phase A of Independent Curriculum's learning achievement, it is stated that students should be able to show interest in the text, to read fluently, and to comprehend information from the text they read (Amalia Yunia Rahmawati, 2020).

This problem needs to be studied further. Hence, the present study focuses on how students' reading proficiency level is, especially in Phase A of first grade in Primary Schools that implement Independent Curriculum. This study is expected to provide a recommendation for practitioners and educators regarding what aspects they need to focus on in order to explore reading learning effectively and achieve the target set by the government.

## B. METHODOLOGY

The present study is a qualitative research using phenomenology approach. According to Creswell, qualitative study begins with a theoretical assumption as a framework, followed by data collection which considers the individuals and site being investigated. It finishes with inductive (based on findings) and deductive (based on existing theories) data analysis. Research results are comprised of researcher's reflection, description and interpretation of the issue, and contribution of the research to existing literature or a plea for change. A qualitative study with phenomenology approach requires the researcher to focus on its three aspects, i.e., what issues are occurring, how they occur, and how to develop descriptions that covers the issues from various perspectives to build an in-depth insight regarding the phenomenon (Creswell; Poth, 2017).

Figure 1 stages of qualitative research using phenomenology approach



The research object in this study is reading proficiency of first grade students in Tasikmalaya City. Participants were selected using purposive sampling technique, which considered the purpose of the study (Sugiyono, 2016). Five primary schools were involved in this study, with participants of 120 students. Data was gathered through observation, interviews, and documentation. Field observation involves the object directly. In the present study, field observation was conducted to gather data regarding first grade students' reading proficiency in the four primary schools. Table 1 shows the indicators of students' reading proficiency, adapted from (Stahl, n.d.; Badan Standar, Kurikulum, 2022; Sparapani et al., 2018; Nevo et al., 2020).

Table 1. Field observation note on students' reading proficiency

Aspect	Indicator
Phoneme	Students are able to pronounce the sounds of A-Z accurately and clearly
	Students are able to pronounce the sounds of A-Z accurately and quite clearly
	Students are able to pronounce the sounds of A-Z inaccurately but clearly
Phonic	Students are able to identify letter sounds in syllables and words and combine them to read correctly.
	Students have minimum ability to identify letter sounds in syllables and words and combine them to read correctly.

	Students are unable to identify letter sounds in syllables and words and combine them to read correctly.
Vocabulary	Students comprehend >30 vocabularies used in the text
	Students comprehend <25 vocabularies used in the text
	Students comprehend <20 vocabularies used in the text
Fluency	Students read words and sentences fluently with accurate intonation, pause, and expressions
	Students read words and sentences quite fluently with some inaccuracies in intonation, pause, and expressions
	Students are not fluent in reading words and sentences, their intonation, pause, and expressions are inaccurate
Comprehension	Students can show reading comprehension by retelling the content of the text completely
	Students can demonstrate some comprehension by retelling parts of the text
	Students cannot retell the content of the text

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Interviews were conducted with five teachers. The questions included: (1) the highest level of reading proficiency aspect that students show; (2) the lowest level of reading proficiency aspect that students show; (3) difficulties teachers faced in handling that lowest aspect; and (4) their solution to overcome the difficulties. Meanwhile, documentation was comprised of anecdotal notes gathered during the lessons. The first field note was that most of the students had mastered phoneme and phonic quite well, but some students had difficulties pronouncing the diphthong ‘ny’ and ‘ng’. The second field note showed that in general, students showed good proficiency in phoneme and phonic aspects, but some students had difficulties pronouncing consonant sound at the end of a word, causing the sound/letter to disappear. For instance, the sound ‘b’ in the word ‘*Ajaib*’ was not clearly articulated. Overall, students’ phoneme, phonic, and vocabulary aspects were good. However, their fluency and comprehension aspects urgently needed improvement.

### C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on proficiency aspects and indicators in Table 1, first grade students' reading proficiency in primary schools in Tasikmalaya City is summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2. First Grade Students' Reading Proficiency

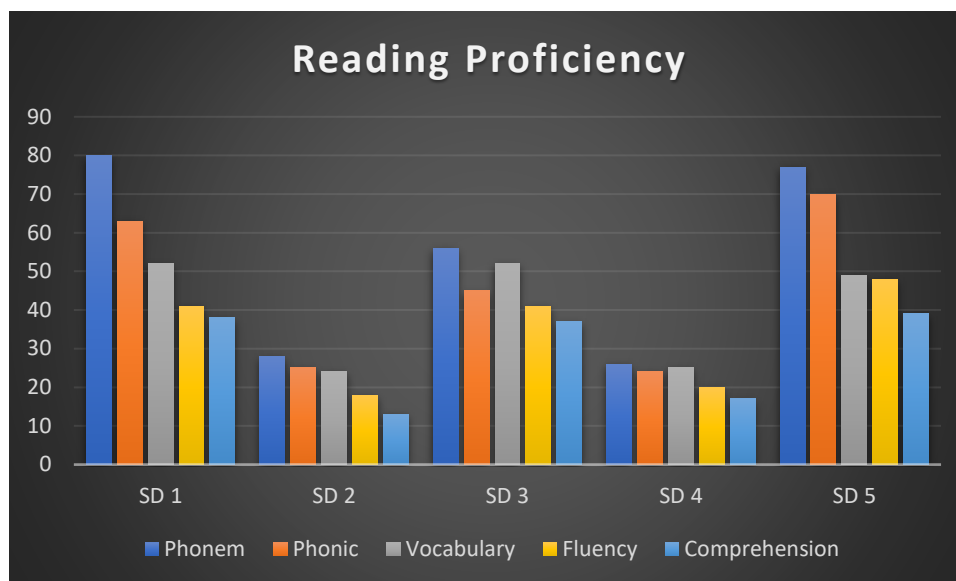


Figure 2 shows that students' reading proficiency in the first primary school (SD 1) scored 80% (29 students) on the phoneme aspect. It means that, on average, students were able to master phoneme aspect in SD 1. On phonic aspect, students' proficiency was 63%. This indicates that only a few students were unable to identify letter sounds. In terms of vocabulary and fluency, the result showed reading proficiency of 52% and 41%, respectively. Meanwhile, students' reading comprehension was the lowest, only 38%, indicating that students' comprehension level was poor.

In the second primary school (SD 2), the highest proficiency was in the phoneme aspect (28% or 11 students). Meanwhile, for phonic and vocabulary aspects, students' proficiency was 25% and 24%, respectively. Students' fluency was low, only 18% students showed good fluency. Similarly, students' comprehension in SD 2 was also low. The result shows that only 13% demonstrated good comprehension. Overall, comprehension aspect of these students needs to be improved.

21 students (56%) in the third primary school (SD 3) were able to pronounce A-Z sound accurately and clearly. In other words, students in SD 3 were in the 'able' category in terms of phoneme. Although only 45% students showed good phonic proficiency, 52% students demonstrated good vocabulary proficiency. It indicates that students have better vocabulary than they do phonic proficiency. Meanwhile, only 41% and 37% students showed good proficiency in fluency and comprehension aspects, respectively. Like students in SD 2, students in SD 3 also showed poor comprehension.

At SD 4, 26% (11 students) showed good proficiency in phoneme aspect, while 24% showed good proficiency in phonic aspects. Only few students were struggling with phonic. In terms of vocabulary, students showed better proficiency (25%). Congruent with other schools, students' fluency and comprehension were low in SD 4, only 20% and 17%, respectively.

Meanwhile, at SD 5, 77% students (30 students) demonstrated good proficiency in phoneme aspect. A little lower than that, students' phonic proficiency was 70%. Students' vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension was 49%, 48%, and 39%, respectively, indicating that students comprehension in SD 5 was the lowest compared to other aspects.

Figure 3 Documentation of reading activity



Interviews with five teachers disclosed some problems regarding students' comprehension. (1) Some students had to re-read the text several times to gather and remember information; (2) when teacher asked students to re-tell the content of the text, they tell their personal experience, instead; (3) adding video pertaining to the text being read can be a solution for comprehension problem because it will facilitate students to better understand what they read. The first field note was that most of the students had mastered phoneme and phonic quite well, but some students had difficulties pronouncing the diphthong 'ny' and 'ng'. The second field note showed that in general, students showed good proficiency in phoneme and phonic aspects, but some students had difficulties pronouncing consonant sound at the end of a word, causing the sound/letter to disappear. For instance, the sound 'b' in the word '*Ajaib*' was not clearly articulated. Overall, students' phoneme, phonic, and vocabulary aspects were good. However, their fluency and comprehension aspects urgently needed improvement.

## Discussion

Reading is a communication process that allows readers to gather information from the text. Through reading, one can improve their knowledge, get useful information, and broaden their understanding. To be successful at school, at work, and in their daily life, students have to be able to read. Reading is crucial because it can help solving various problems and overcome difficulties (Juhaeni et al., 2022; Masroah et al., 2020). Mr. Hatta, the first Vice President of Indonesia, was a figure who loved reading. Even when he was sent to isolation, he still brought his books. It shows how important reading is. Reading should be a continuous activity. This is also an example that the commitment to read reflects one's intelligence and problem-solving ability. Teaching reading to students is the crucial foundation to instill in them that we can gain knowledge through reading. Therefore, teaching reading requires continuous practice until reading becomes an unshakable habit for students.

This study found that reading proficiency could only be achieved once students had mastered the aspects of phoneme, phonic, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Students were considered able to read (had reading proficiency) if they mastered these indicators. It is in line with national reading panel's statement that reading literacy has five components, i.e., phonemic awareness, phonic capability, vocabulary richness, reading fluency, and reading comprehension.

The first indicator or aspect of reading proficiency is phoneme. Phonemic awareness is the basic skill of recognizing and combining sounds of syllables or words and pronounce them correctly. In short, it shows an individual's skill to connect the sounds with the written text. Students' phonemic proficiency is indicated by their ability to connect the text they see with the sound they make. Phonemic awareness is a good predictor of reading proficiency (Stahl, n.d.2000). Furthermore, Chitoran & Cohn (2009) noted that there is a strong correlation between phonemic awareness and reading proficiency. Phonemic awareness is the deciding factor whether an individual is a good or a poor reader. Similarly, Muammar stated that symbol recognition, word recognition, and comprehension are important components that affect reading proficiency (Muammar, 2020).

Phonic awareness is the second aspect of reading proficiency. Students are able to read if they can connect and recognize the connection between sound (phoneme) and letter symbol (grapheme). Ahmad and Schmidgall stated that phonic reading is the skill to connect letter and sound and to decode words. Phonic reading includes recognizing phonic, syllables, and words (Ahmad et al., 2018). Phonic awareness is critical in early reading program (Schmidgall & Joseph, 2007).

The third aspect is vocabulary. It is an ability to understand vocabulary when the word



appears in a text (receptive vocabulary). Students are considered able to read when they can understand vocabularies with a certain number of words according to the curriculum development and book levels office. Of course, vocabulary comprehension is directly related to reading comprehension. If students do not know many words, it will be difficult to understand the text. If they do, they will find it easier to comprehend what they read (Toth, 2013). In short, if an individual does not know many vocabularies in a text, it will be difficult to understand it. In other words, limited vocabulary will also limit reading comprehension in general. The number and complexity of words one knows greatly affects their reading proficiency (Ciancio et al., 2015). In line with that, Warner noted that there is a strong correlation between students' vocabulary comprehension and reading proficiency and that vocabulary is a good predictor of students' reading comprehension (Warner et al., 2017).

According to National Reading Panel, fluency is the ability to read text quickly, accurately, and with good expressions. Accuracy in reading means one reads the text correctly in accordance with the writing or letters that form the word (Cockerill et al., 2023). For instance, for the word 'Bola', students who can read fluently will be able to read the word quickly without having to separate it into its syllables or letter sounds. Meanwhile, expression means the ability to pay attention to intonation and pauses while reading (Schreiber, 1991, Schrauben, 2010). These components of fluency also determine how good one's reading proficiency is. The more fluent one reads, the better their reading proficiency is, which in turn will improve their reading comprehension (Little et al., 2017).

The fifth aspect, comprehension, is defined by National Reading Panel as the ability to comprehend or understand what they read, understand its meaning, and understand it based on their previous knowledge and experience, so that the reader can use the understanding to communicate the information to other people (Cockerill et al., 2023). In other words, students are considered a proficient reader when they can demonstrate the meaning of the text they read, can summarize the essence of the text, or can answer questions pertaining to the text. In terms of comprehension, students are expected to be able to communicate the content of what they read. In line with this, Zuchdi stated that comprehension is the result of obtaining meaning from wider written units (Zuchdi, 2007).

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

We conclude that reading comprehension, and in turn reading proficiency, can be developed once students have mastered the phonemic awareness, phonic ability, vocabulary, and fluency in reading. Students who cannot understand the text tend to have difficulties in phonemic, phonic, vocabulary, and fluency aspects. The results of this study shows that primary schools that have adopted the independent curriculum tend to excel in phonemes,

phonic, and vocabulary aspects of reading. However, they struggle with fluency and comprehension aspects. Future studies need to optimize reading learning so practitioners can optimally develop students' reading comprehension and proficiency, in line with the target set by the government.

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