

Factors Influencing English Phonological Awareness among Grade 4 English Second Language Learners

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ABSTRACT: Phonological awareness is a critical foundation for the development of reading and writing, yet it poses significant challenges for learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), particularly in contexts where the language of instruction shifts from the mother tongue to English. This study explored the factors influencing phonological awareness among Grade 4 learners at a selected Combined School in northern Namibia, a key transitional stage in the education system. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative exploratory case study design, the study used purposive sampling to select three teachers and 15 learners. Data were collected through interviews and classroom observations and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that phonological awareness is influenced by several interrelated factors, including mother tongue interference, limited exposure to English, socio-economic background, inadequate teaching methods, and a lack of instructional resources. These factors contribute to learners' difficulties in decoding, spelling, pronunciation, and reading fluency. The study further reveals that poor phonological awareness negatively impacts overall English language proficiency and reduces learners' confidence and participation in classroom activities. The study also identifies effective strategies to enhance phonological awareness, such as using rhymes, songs, phonics instruction, and storytelling, as well as syllable segmentation activities like clapping. These approaches promote active engagement and improve learners' ability to recognise and manipulate sounds in English. The study concludes that improving phonological awareness requires early intervention, appropriate teaching strategies, adequate resources, and collaborative support from teachers, parents, and education stakeholders.

KEYWORDS: early literacy development, English as a Second Language, Grade 4 learners, Namibia, phonological awareness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Following Namibia's independence, English was adopted as the official language and medium of instruction to promote national unity and replace Afrikaans. According to the national language policy, learners are taught in their mother tongue from Grades 1 to 3, after which English becomes the sole medium of instruction from Grade 4 onward (MBESC, 2003). This transition places significant linguistic demands on learners, as Grade 4 represents a critical shift from home-language learning to English-medium education (Nghidengwa et al., 2020).

Effective early reading instruction requires foundational skills such as letter knowledge, phonics, and phonological awareness, including the ability to recognise rhymes, segment syllables, and manipulate phonemes (Zeripi, 2018). However, research indicates that insufficient emphasis on these skills in lower primary education may lead to persistent reading difficulties. In particular, limited phonological awareness has been linked to challenges in decoding, word recognition, and overall reading proficiency (Nkurunzina, 2024; Gillon, 2017).

Studies further suggest that instructional practices often prioritise meaning over decoding skills, which may hinder learners' ability to develop a strong foundation in reading (Gillon, 2017; Nkurunzina, 2024). Without early identification and support, deficits in phonological awareness can negatively affect learners' academic progress over time (Paciga & Cassano, 2024; Zeripi, 2018). Observations in classroom contexts similarly reveal that many Grade 4 learners struggle with spelling and sound-letter correspondence, highlighting the need to examine the factors influencing phonological awareness at this level.

Against this background, this study investigated the factors influencing phonological awareness among Grade 4 learners learning English as a second language at a selected school in the Oshigambo circuit.

The study sought to address the following key questions:

- To explore the factors influencing phonological awareness of Grade 4 learners in English as a second language.
- To examine the effects of poor phonological awareness on the English literacy development of Grade 4 learners.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Phonological Awareness and English Literacy Development

Phonological awareness refers to the ability to recognise and manipulate the sound structure of spoken language. It involves awareness of different units of speech, including words, syllables, onset-rime units and phonemes, as well as the ability to identify, segment, blend, delete and manipulate sounds (Anthony & Francis, 2005; Hódi & Tóth, 2024). Phonological awareness develops progressively, generally moving from awareness of larger sound units, such as syllables, towards awareness and manipulation of individual phonemes. This development is particularly important for learners acquiring literacy in alphabetic writing systems because reading requires learners to establish relationships between spoken sounds and written symbols.

Phonological awareness is closely associated with decoding, word recognition and spelling. Learners who can identify and manipulate the sound structure of words are better positioned to establish sound–symbol relationships and decode unfamiliar words (Jansen, 2017; Nkurunziza, 2024). A systematic review by Stekić et al. (2023) similarly demonstrates the relationship between phonological awareness, phonological processing and reading development. These findings suggest that phonological awareness is an important foundation for literacy development rather than an isolated language skill.

Phonological awareness should nevertheless be distinguished from phonics and pronunciation. Phonological awareness involves conscious awareness and manipulation of the sound structure of spoken language, whereas phonics concerns relationships between sounds and written letters or graphemes (Lubis, 2023). Pronunciation, in contrast, concerns the production of speech sounds. Although these areas are related, they represent different dimensions of language and literacy development (Liang & Fryer, 2024). This distinction is important in the present study because difficulties in English pronunciation or sound production cannot, on their own, be taken as direct evidence of poor phonological awareness.

The relationship between phonological awareness and reading is also evident among learners acquiring English as a second language. Odo's (2021) meta-analysis of 46 studies involving 3,841 learners found that phonological-awareness and/or phonics instruction had a moderate effect on English L2 word reading and a substantial effect on pseudoword reading. The findings suggest that explicit attention to the sound structure of English can support learners' ability to decode unfamiliar words. However, the effects varied according to instructional approaches, learner characteristics and instructional contexts, indicating that phonological awareness develops within a wider linguistic and educational environment.

The effects of weak phonological awareness may extend beyond decoding. Learners who have difficulty identifying and manipulating sounds may experience problems with word recognition, reading fluency and spelling. Reading comprehension may also be affected when learners expend considerable cognitive effort decoding individual words, leaving fewer resources available for constructing meaning. However, phonological awareness should not be regarded as the sole determinant of reading comprehension because comprehension also depends on vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, background knowledge, working memory and other linguistic and cognitive processes (Jeon & Yamashita, 2022). Thus, the relationship between phonological awareness and literacy development is best understood as part of an interconnected system of language and literacy skills.

2.2 Factors Influencing Phonological Awareness

The development of phonological awareness is influenced by interacting linguistic, cognitive, developmental and environmental factors. Anthony and Francis (2005) argue that the linguistic complexity of the material presented to learners can influence phonological-awareness performance. Factors such as word structure, phoneme position, articulatory characteristics and the salience of particular speech sounds can make some phonological tasks more difficult than others. Consequently, learners may perform differently depending on the particular sounds or structures they are required to identify and manipulate.

Exposure to oral language is another important factor. Yılmaz et al. (2022) argue that engagement with spoken language provides children with opportunities to attend to and manipulate sounds. Limited exposure to the target language may therefore reduce opportunities to develop awareness of its sound structure. This is particularly relevant to learners of English as a second language who may have substantially greater exposure to their home language than to English outside the classroom. The quantity and quality of English input available to learners may, in turn, influence their opportunities to develop English phonological awareness.

Developmental and cognitive characteristics may also contribute to differences in phonological-awareness performance. Frohlich et al. (2013) identified age, intelligence, language difficulties, and aspects of children's home and environmental backgrounds as factors associated with phonological awareness development. Phonological working memory may be particularly relevant, as learners need to retain and manipulate orally presented sounds when completing phonological tasks. Henderson-Phillips (2024) explains that weaknesses in phonological working memory may make it difficult for learners to retain sounds and syllables while performing another operation, with possible implications for reading and spelling.

Phonological awareness is also connected to broader language knowledge. Krenca et al. (2023), for example, found relationships among vocabulary, lexical specificity, and phonological awareness in emerging English-French bilingual children. These findings suggest that phonological awareness does not develop independently of learners' wider linguistic knowledge. Vocabulary development and knowledge of the language may therefore interact with learners' ability to recognise and manipulate its sound structure.

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Instructional practices constitute another important factor. Although learners bring individual linguistic and cognitive characteristics to the classroom, systematic instruction can provide opportunities to develop phonological awareness skills. Gabriel and Mpofu (2024), in research involving Grade 3 ESL teachers in selected Namibian primary schools, identified activities such as clapping and counting syllables, identifying rhyming words, distinguishing vowel sounds and identifying sounds in different word positions. Similarly, Bdeir et al. (2022) found that a systematic phonological awareness programme improved the phonological awareness skills of children learning English as a second language following a 12-week intervention.

Teacher knowledge and access to instructional resources may also influence the quality of phonological-awareness instruction. Nepolo (2025) identified challenges relating to teachers' knowledge, training and availability of resources for teaching phonological awareness in English as a second language in Namibia. Andreas and Kamati (2024), investigating poor Grade 4 English Second Language performance in the Oshikoto Region, similarly identified factors including language barriers, inadequate resources and insufficient teacher training. These findings suggest that phonological-awareness development should be examined not only in relation to learner characteristics but also within the instructional environment in which English is taught and learned.

2.3 First-Language Influence and Phonological Awareness in Multilingual Contexts

First-language influence is particularly important when examining English phonological awareness among second-language learners. Multilingual learners approach English with existing knowledge of their first language, including its phonological, lexical and orthographic systems. This prior knowledge may influence how learners perceive, categorise and process the sounds of English. Research on bilingualism suggests that phonological and metalinguistic skills can transfer across languages. Silva et al. (2020), in an integrative review of bilingualism and phonological awareness, found evidence of relationships between bilingualism and phonological-awareness development, although findings across studies were not entirely consistent. Age and timing of language exposure were also identified as potentially important factors. Krenca et al. (2022) similarly found relationships between lexical knowledge in the stronger language and the development of phonological awareness in the second language. These findings are consistent with the possibility that knowledge and metalinguistic skills developed in one language may support learning in another. However, cross-linguistic transfer is not necessarily facilitative. Differences between the phonological and orthographic systems of a learner's first language and English may create difficulties. Nepando (2018), for example, highlights differences between Oshikwanyama and English in sound–letter correspondences, while Hamakali and Mbenzi (2016) discuss differences between Oshiwambo and English that may contribute to difficulties in English pronunciation. Such differences are relevant to phonological awareness because learners may initially interpret unfamiliar English sounds and sound–symbol relationships through categories and expectations established through their first language.

The orthographic complexity of English may further complicate the development of English literacy. English has a relatively complex relationship between letters and sounds, with some sounds represented by different letter combinations and some letters representing different sounds depending on context. Odo (2021) notes that learners' first-language writing-system backgrounds may influence their development of English word reading. Learners whose first language has different sound–symbol correspondences may therefore require explicit support in developing English phonological and orthographic knowledge.

These issues are particularly relevant in multilingual African educational contexts, where the language used for instruction may differ from learners' home languages. Eslick et al. (2020), for example, found that Grade 1 English second-language learners in South Africa demonstrated lower phonological awareness performance than their English first-language counterparts across the phonological awareness subtests examined. The authors emphasised the importance of explicit instruction in skills such as rhyming, segmentation, sound isolation, deletion, substitution and blending. Schaffler et al. (2021) similarly identified gaps in teachers' knowledge and preparation for phonological-awareness instruction in multilingual South African classrooms.

The Namibian context presents comparable issues, as learners develop English in linguistically diverse environments. The relationship among learners' home languages, exposure to English, classroom practices, and differences between English and indigenous languages may therefore be important for understanding the development of English phonological awareness.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was guided by the interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand participants' experiences and the meanings they attach to them within their social and educational contexts. A qualitative research approach was adopted to explore the factors influencing phonological awareness among Grade 4 learners learning English as a Second Language.

An exploratory case study design was employed at a selected Combined School in the Oshigambo Circuit, Oshikoto Region, Namibia. This design enabled an in-depth understanding of phonological awareness within its real-life educational context. Purposive sampling was used to select three Grade 4 English teachers and 15 Grade 4 learners. The learner sample included six boys and nine girls, representing varying levels of phonological awareness to capture diverse experiences and perspectives.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers, non-participant classroom observations, and open-ended learner questionnaires. The use of multiple data sources enabled methodological triangulation and generated rich, contextualised

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data. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, whereby transcripts and responses were coded, organised into themes, and interpreted in relation to the research objectives.

Ethical principles were observed throughout the study. Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Oshigambo circuit inspector and the principal of the participating school; informed consent was secured from teachers and parents or guardians of participating learners, and learner assent was obtained. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

4. FINDINGS

The analysis of the data generated themes aligned with the key objectives of the study. The themes are presented and discussed in the following sections, beginning with factors influencing phonological awareness among Grade 4 ESL learners, followed by the effects of poor phonological awareness on the English literacy development of Grade 4 learners and strategies for enhancing phonological awareness among Grade 4 ESL learners.

4.1 Factors influencing phonological awareness among Grade 4 ESL learners

The findings revealed that phonological awareness among Grade 4 learners is influenced by several interrelated linguistic, instructional and environmental factors. Across all teacher interviews, mother tongue influence emerged as the most significant factor affecting learners' acquisition of English phonological awareness. Teachers explained that differences between the Oshiwambo and English phonological systems created challenges for learners in distinguishing and producing certain English phonemes. Although some Oshiwambo sounds may resemble certain English dental phonemes, learners often have difficulty accurately perceiving and producing these sounds in English words and contexts. Teachers also reported that learners frequently transferred Oshiwambo pronunciation patterns and syllable stress into English, resulting in inaccurate pronunciation and reduced reading fluency.

T1 explained:

"Most of my learners speak Oshiwambo at home, and this language does not have some of the sounds that English has... learners replace them with the closest sound from their mother tongue, which affects their phonological awareness."

Another prominent factor was limited exposure to English. Teachers indicated that learners are primarily exposed to English during school hours, as Oshiwambo remains the dominant language at home and in the community. Since Grade 4 marks the transition from mother tongue instruction to English as the medium of instruction, learners often have insufficient opportunities to practise English sounds, rhymes, syllable segmentation and blending outside the classroom. This finding is supported by the participants' views.

Teacher 3 highlighted this by stating that: "some parents cannot afford books; hence learners have little practice outside the classroom" (T3). Similarly, Teacher 1 said, "learners only get to learn English properly once they are at school, which may also contribute to having poor phonological awareness" (T1).

The findings further identified socioeconomic background as an important contributor. Teachers observed that learners from households with educated parents and greater access to books received more support in developing English literacy skills than learners from disadvantaged homes, who relied almost exclusively on classroom instruction.

Teacher 1 explained

"Learners from homes with educated parents or better resources often get more support with English, but learners from poor households usually depend only on what we teach at school."

Participants also highlighted instructional factors, particularly teaching methods and the availability of learning resources. Teachers reported that learner-centred activities such as songs, rhymes, games and phonics activities promoted phonological awareness, whereas shortages of storybooks, phonics materials and other instructional resources limited opportunities for effective practice. This view was echoed by teacher 3, who explained: "For me, the methods of teaching and the availability of resources really matter. If we use songs, rhymes and games, the learners will enjoy learning and quickly pick up sound patterns. But sometimes we do not have enough storybooks or phonics materials, so we just teach from the chalkboard, which makes it harder for learners to develop phonological awareness. Some parents cannot afford books; hence, learners have little practice outside the classroom." Teacher 3 further noted that learner attitude and motivation influenced phonological awareness, explaining that learners who fear making mistakes often participate less in activities such as clapping syllables and rhyming, thereby slowing their progress.

In addition, teachers identified learner motivation and attitudes as factors influencing the development of phonological awareness. Learners who actively practised English and participated confidently in classroom activities demonstrated stronger phonological skills than those who feared making mistakes or regarded English as difficult.

Learner responses largely supported the teachers' views. Most learners reported speaking Oshiwambo at home and experiencing difficulties recognising and producing English sounds. Several learners indicated that they often thought in Oshiwambo before speaking English, confused English vowel sounds, mixed up sounds in their pronunciation, and struggled to identify rhyming words. For example, Learner 2 explained in his written response that "I do not speak English at home; I speak Oshindonga. Home language

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makes it hard for me to understand English. If I want to say 'walking' and I do not know the English word, I say '*endaling*', and the teacher corrects me. English sounds are very hard, and I struggle to hear the differences in words." Similarly, Learner 1 stated, "I speak English a little and Oshindonga at home. I think in Oshiwambo first and then say English wrong. The English sounds are hard, and I mix up the long and short vowels. These responses indicate that learners often think in Oshiwambo before speaking English, confuse English vowel sounds, mix up sounds in their pronunciation, and struggle to recognise rhyming words. Conversely, learners who reported greater use of English at home described fewer pronunciation difficulties and greater confidence in recognising English sounds.

Classroom observations further confirmed these findings. Many learners experienced difficulty distinguishing similar English sounds, confusing the /r/ and /l/ sounds, pronouncing unfamiliar phonemes accurately, identifying rhyming words, and reading fluently. These observations reinforced the influence of first-language transfer and limited exposure to English on learners' phonological awareness.

The above findings indicate that phonological awareness is shaped by the interaction of linguistic background, English language exposure, socioeconomic circumstances, instructional practices, resource availability and learner motivation, with mother tongue influence emerging as the dominant factor.

4.2 Effects of poor phonological awareness on the English literacy development of Grade 4 learners.

The findings revealed that poor phonological awareness negatively affected several aspects of learners' English language proficiency, particularly reading, spelling, pronunciation, listening comprehension and classroom participation. Teachers consistently reported that learners with weak phonological awareness experienced difficulty decoding unfamiliar words, blending sounds and recognising sound patterns, resulting in slow and inaccurate reading. According to the teachers, these difficulties reduced reading fluency and comprehension because learners focused on decoding individual words rather than constructing meaning.

One teacher explained:

"When learners have poor phonological awareness, it shows immediately in their reading. They cannot sound out new words or blend sounds correctly, so they end up guessing words (T3)."

Teachers further reported that poor phonological awareness contributed to persistent spelling difficulties, as learners struggled to distinguish between similar English sounds and represent them accurately in writing. Confusion between words such as ship and sheep, or pen and pan, was frequently observed. These spelling errors often reduced learners' confidence and discouraged them from participating in writing activities.

Pronunciation was identified as another area adversely affected. Teachers observed that learners frequently substituted English sounds with those from their first language, particularly confusing /r/ and /l/ and failing to apply appropriate word stress. Such pronunciation difficulties limited learners' participation in oral classroom activities and slowed vocabulary development, as many learners avoided unfamiliar words.

In addition, Teacher 2 highlighted the impact of poor phonological awareness on listening comprehension, explaining that learners who struggled to discriminate between similar sounds often misunderstood classroom instructions and spoken texts. This challenge affected learning across subjects taught in English, not only English language lessons.

Learner responses corroborated the teachers' observations. Most learners who reported limited exposure to English also described difficulties with reading, pronunciation, and identifying rhyming words. Several learners acknowledged confusing similar sounds, including /r/ and /l/, /b/ and /d/, and /s/ and /z/, which affected both reading and oral communication (L5,9,15). Learners who demonstrated weaker phonological awareness also performed less successfully in rhyming tasks. This was evident in Learner 12's written response, where she stated, "I have problems with English sounds, and they make it hard for me to understand what I read and write. I struggle with reading because I did not master the sounds. I mix the English sounds when reading, especially /r/ and /l/." During the phonological awareness assessment, Learner 1 was unable to identify all the rhyming words. Similarly, Learner 11 wrote, "English sounds make it hard for me to read. Sometimes I mispronounce words and leave out letters when I read because I do not know the sounds very well and I do not speak English very often. I mix sounds like /d/ and /b/, /s/ and /z/, and /r/ and /l/." Learner 14 was also able to identify only a few rhyming words. These written responses, together with the assessment results, demonstrate that learners with weaker phonological awareness experienced greater difficulty distinguishing similar sounds, which negatively affected both reading accuracy and oral communication.

Conversely, learners who reported frequent use of English at home displayed stronger phonological awareness. They indicated fewer difficulties with pronunciation and reading and correctly identified most or all rhyming words presented during the assessment. These findings suggest that stronger phonological awareness is associated with improved English language proficiency, particularly in reading accuracy, spelling, pronunciation and listening comprehension.

4.3 Strategies for enhancing phonological awareness among Grade 4 ESL learners

The findings identified several instructional strategies that teachers and learners perceived as effective in enhancing phonological awareness among Grade 4 ESL learners. Teachers consistently emphasised the importance of engaging, learner-centred and multisensory approaches that actively develop learners' awareness of English sounds.

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The most frequently recommended strategy was the use of songs, rhymes and poems, which teachers believed helped learners recognise sound patterns, rhyming words and syllables while increasing learner engagement. One teacher noted:

"Using rhymes, songs and poems really helps. When learners repeat rhymes or sing songs in English, they become more aware of how sounds are used and repeated (T3)."

Teachers also highlighted the value of interactive games, storytelling, clapping syllables, pair and group work, and explicit phonics instruction. These activities encouraged active learner participation, provided repeated practice, and created meaningful opportunities for learners to discriminate between English sounds. Furthermore, teachers emphasised the importance of multisensory teaching, systematic instruction, and integrating phonological awareness activities with reading, speaking, writing and vocabulary development.

Learner responses supported these findings. Most learners expressed a preference for enjoyable and interactive learning activities, including alphabet games, songs, clapping activities, storytelling and educational videos. They believed these activities made learning English sounds easier and more enjoyable while improving their reading and pronunciation skills. This was reflected in Learner 6's written response, in which he indicated that learning alphabetical letter sounds helped him learn English sounds. He further wrote that he wanted the teacher to help him improve his reading and writing skills and to introduce new words for learners to repeat individually so that everyone could learn the correct pronunciation. Similarly, Learner 4 indicated in her written response that clapping activities were a fun way to learn English sounds. She also noted that they sometimes watched television during lessons to support their learning and expressed a preference for learning English sounds through songs, games and dancing. These responses suggest that learners believed interactive and engaging activities made learning English sounds easier and more enjoyable while improving their reading and pronunciation skills.

Learners also emphasised the importance of regular reading practice, spelling exercises, homework, teacher guidance and collaborative learning through pair and group work. Several learners suggested that additional opportunities to practise English through reading aloud, phonics activities, educational games and audiovisual resources would further strengthen their phonological awareness and overall English language proficiency. This was reflected in Learner 2's written response, in which he indicated that spelling activities helped him learn English sounds. He further wrote that he wanted the teacher to help him learn how to spell words and to include him in the afternoon class so that he could improve his English and become a better reader. Several learners also suggested that additional opportunities to practise English through reading aloud, phonics activities, educational games and audiovisual resources would further strengthen their phonological awareness and overall English language proficiency.

The above findings suggest that effective development of phonological awareness requires explicit phonics instruction supported by engaging, interactive and multisensory teaching strategies, together with increased opportunities for learners to practise English both inside and outside the classroom. These approaches were perceived by both teachers and learners as essential for improving reading, spelling, pronunciation and overall English language proficiency among Grade 4 ESL learners.

4.4 Discussion

This study investigated the factors influencing phonological awareness among Grade 4 English second-language learners, examined the effects of poor phonological awareness on English language proficiency, and identified strategies to enhance phonological awareness. The discussion interprets these findings in relation to previous research.

The findings suggest that phonological awareness among Grade 4 learners is influenced by multiple interacting linguistic, instructional and environmental factors. Among these, mother tongue influence emerged as the most significant factor. Teachers consistently reported that differences between the Oshiwambo and English phonological systems hinder learners' ability to distinguish English sounds, particularly phonemes absent in Oshiwambo. Learners therefore tended to transfer pronunciation patterns from their first language when speaking and reading English. These findings support those of Lubis (2023), who argues that first-language phonological structures often interfere with second-language sound acquisition, particularly where the two languages differ substantially in their phonetic inventories. Likewise, Nepando (2018) found that weaknesses in first-language phonological processing may negatively affect English literacy development among Namibian learners.

The study further found that limited exposure to English outside the classroom contributes to weak phonological awareness. Because most learners communicate primarily in Oshiwambo at home and only encounter English during school hours, opportunities to practise English sounds are limited. This finding reinforces Nkurunziza's (2024) argument that insufficient exposure to spoken English reduces learners' ability to decode unfamiliar words, ultimately affecting reading fluency and comprehension.

Another important finding was the influence of socioeconomic circumstances and the availability of instructional resources. Teachers reported that learners from resource-rich homes generally received greater support with English literacy, while many learners depended solely on classroom instruction. Limited access to storybooks, phonics materials and other literacy resources further constrained opportunities to develop phonological awareness. This finding concurs with Lubis (2023), who argues that learners acquiring English as a second language often experience literacy challenges due to limited exposure to English and inadequate opportunities to develop phonological awareness. Similarly, Nkurunziza (2024) emphasises that early phonological awareness is essential for accurate word decoding, reading fluency and spelling development, highlighting the importance of

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providing learners with sufficient literacy support and learning resources. The finding is further supported by Jansen (2017), who stresses that effective phonological awareness instruction requires appropriate teaching resources and well-prepared teachers. Therefore, these findings suggest that effective phonological awareness instruction requires not only appropriate teaching strategies but also adequate learning resources and supportive home literacy environments.

The findings demonstrate that poor phonological awareness negatively affects several dimensions of English language proficiency, including reading, spelling, pronunciation and listening comprehension. Teachers observed that learners with weak phonological awareness struggled to decode unfamiliar words, blend sounds accurately and recognise sound patterns, resulting in slow and inaccurate reading.

These findings are consistent with Lorimor-Easley (2022), who argues that weaknesses in phonological processing reduce learners' ability to manipulate speech sounds, making reading acquisition considerably more difficult. Similarly, Nkurunziza (2024) emphasises early that phonological awareness is a key determinant of a child's ability to decode words accurately and efficiently, thereby facilitating fluent reading.

The study also found that poor phonological awareness contributes to spelling difficulties because learners cannot accurately distinguish or represent English sounds in writing. Consequently, learners frequently confuse similar sounds, resulting in spelling errors that reduce their confidence and willingness to participate in written activities. This finding supports Lubis (2023), who reported that phonological deficits are associated with poor spelling, weak sight-word recognition and reduced reading comprehension.

Pronunciation and oral communication were also affected. Learners frequently substituted unfamiliar English sounds with sounds from their first language, making oral communication less intelligible and reducing participation during classroom discussions. Moreover, difficulties in distinguishing similar sounds affected learners' listening comprehension, causing them to misunderstand spoken instructions and classroom discourse. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that phonological awareness underpins multiple aspects of English language learning rather than reading alone.

These results underscore the importance of developing phonological awareness during the early primary years to prevent long-term literacy difficulties.

The findings indicate that teachers and learners favour interactive, learner-centred approaches for developing phonological awareness. Teachers consistently identified songs, rhymes, storytelling, games, clapping activities and explicit phonics instruction as effective strategies because they actively engage learners in recognising, manipulating and practising English sounds.

These findings support previous research showing that rhyming activities strengthen learners' awareness of sound patterns and improve phonological processing. Similarly, North Shore Pediatric Therapy (2024) recommends using explicit phonological awareness activities that gradually develop learners' ability to recognise and manipulate sounds, thus strengthening early literacy skills.

Learners also valued alphabet games, songs, reading practice, spelling activities and teacher support. Their responses suggest that enjoyable, collaborative and multisensory learning experiences increase motivation while simultaneously strengthening phonological awareness. These findings are consistent with Nepando (2018), who argues that systematic instruction in alphabet knowledge and phonemic awareness is essential for successful reading development. Similarly, Jansen (2017) states that learners must develop phonological awareness and phonics knowledge to learn to read and write effectively, highlighting the importance of understanding the relationship between speech sounds and letters.

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the factors influencing phonological awareness among Grade 4 English second language learners at a participating school. The findings indicate that phonological awareness is shaped by a combination of linguistic, environmental, and instructional factors, with mother-tongue influence and limited exposure to English emerging as the most prominent challenges. Learners who had fewer opportunities to use English outside the classroom experienced greater difficulty distinguishing English sounds, identifying rhymes and reading unfamiliar words.

The study further demonstrates that weak phonological awareness negatively affects reading accuracy, spelling, pronunciation and listening comprehension, thereby limiting overall English language proficiency. Conversely, learners who reported more frequent English use and greater engagement in phonics-related activities showed stronger phonological awareness and better reading performance.

Finally, the findings suggest that phonological awareness can be strengthened through explicit, systematic and engaging instruction that incorporates rhymes, songs, storytelling, games, syllable-clapping activities and regular reading practice. The study therefore highlights the need for targeted phonological awareness support during the transition to English-medium instruction in Grade 4, particularly in rural ESL contexts where learners have limited exposure to English beyond the classroom.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

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- The Grade 4 English teachers should incorporate daily phonological awareness activities such as rhymes, songs, syllable clapping, phonics games and oral blending exercises to improve learners' sound discrimination and decoding skills.
- Increase access to literacy resources: Schools and education authorities should provide phonics materials, picture books, graded readers and audio-visual resources that support early reading development and regular practice with English sounds.
- Teachers should receive ongoing training in phonics instruction, phonological awareness development and strategies for teaching English as a second language in multilingual classrooms.
- Schools should create additional opportunities for learners to use English through reading clubs, storytelling sessions, pair work and after-school literacy programs, particularly for learners who have limited English exposure at home.
- Parents and caregivers should be encouraged to support English learning by reading simple English stories, listening to educational songs and practising basic pronunciation activities with their children, even when Oshiwambo remains the primary home language.
- Schools should identify learners with persistent phonological difficulties early and provide targeted support through small-group instruction, peer tutoring or remedial reading programs.

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