

Using the Power of Phonological Awareness Strategies to Develop Reading Fluency Among EFL Learners at the University Level

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Abstract

The relationship between phonological awareness and developing reading skills is fundamental. So, the current research paper aims to portray the extent to which the level of reading fluency among EFL learners at the university level can be improved through using some phonological awareness strategies. Phonological awareness strategies consist of alliteration, blending, isolation, deletion, and segmentation. The sample of the study is represented by first year students, Department of English / College of Education / University of Misan for the academic year (2025-2026). The number of the students was 26. The research depended on pre-test and post-test techniques. At the beginning, the reading fluency pre-test was administered to first year students without previous teaching of phonological awareness strategies. The results of pre-test indicated that there were many errors in reading fluency. Then the students were taught some phonological awareness strategies. Finally, the post-test was administered to the same group of students. The results showed that phonological

awareness strategies were effective in developing EFL oral reading fluency among EFL learners.

Key Words: Phonological awareness, Phonological awareness strategies, Reading fluency, Oral reading, Iraqi EFL learners

استخدام قوة استراتيجيات الوعي الصوتي لتطوير طلاقة القراءة بين متعلمي اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية على مستوى الجامعة

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المستخلص

تعد العلاقة بين الوعي الصوتي وتطوير مهارات القراءة اساسية. لذلك فان الهدف من البحث الحالي هو توضيح مدى امكانية تحسين مستوى طلاقة القراءة لمتعلمي اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية على مستوى الجامعة من خلال استخدام بعض استراتيجيات الوعي الصوتي . ان استراتيجيات الوعي الصوتي تتضمن القافية والدمج والجناس وغيرها . شملت الدراسة جميع طلبة المرحلة الاولى قسم اللغة الانجليزية \ كلية التربية \ جامعة ميسان سنة 2025 والبالغ عددهم 26 طالب . اعتمد البحث على تقنيات الاختبار القبلي والاختبار البعدي . في البداية تم تطبيق اختبار طلاقة القراءة على طلبة المرحلة الاولى بدون تدريس مسبق لاستراتيجيات الوعي الصوتي وهذا ما يسمى بالاختبار القبلي . حيث ظهرت النتائج التي تدل على وجود اخطاء كثيرة في طلاقة القراءة . ثم تم تدريس طلبة المرحلة الاولى استراتيجيات الوعي الصوتي لفترة معينة . واخيرا تم تطبيق الاختبار البعدي للمجموعة نفسها . قد اظهرت النتائج وجود تحسن في مستوياتهم بشكل ملحوظ . قد نستنتج من هذه الدراسة ان استراتيجيات الوعي الصوتي كانت فعالة في تطوير الطلاقة للقراءة .

1.Preliminaries

1.1. Introduction

Language is an important tool for communication. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are its skills. These skills need to be developed for a better communication. Reading

is a vital skill in language learning. A great number of English lecturers do not realize difficulties in students' learning language without improving this skill. Reading is divided into two types: Oral reading and silent reading. The first is the ability to read text with accuracy, suitable rate, and with meaningful expression of a written passage. While the second can be defined as "an in-classroom reading activity in which students are given an amount of time to read silently, self-selected material for pleasure or information as a way of cultivating a love of reading without assessment and skills work monitoring or instruction from the teacher" (Wilgar, 2008, p. 44).

1.2. The Problem of the Study

Students at the university level especially at their first year do not reach the expected level of reading skill. They have difficulty in facing oral reading challenges such as omitting or adding certain sounds, changing some sounds with another, omitting or adding words, and switching some words. This lack of proficiency is a widespread issue in tertiary education (Smith, 2020). Many studies indicate that many underdeveloped reading and decoding abilities which limits their academic progress (Al-Tamimi and Munir, 2022). This study addresses the critical gap by investigating how the power of awareness strategies can be utilized to overcome these obstacles and develop reading fluency among Iraqi EFL learners at the university level.

1.3. Aim of the Study

The current research aims to investigate the power of using phonological awareness strategies for eliminating delays in developing oral reading fluency among first year students/ College of Education/ Department of English / University of Misan for the academic year 2025-2026.

1.4. Hypothesis of the Study

1. There is no statistically significant difference between participants' pre-test scores in reading fluency and their post-test scores.

2. There is no statistically significant difference in mean score between the experimental group performance in reading fluency and that of the control group .

1.5. Limits of the Study

The present study is limited to :

1. Iraqi EFL first year students, Department of English / College of Education / University of Misan.
2. Oral reading fluency.
3. The academic year (2025-2026)

1.6. Procedures of the Study

The study follows the following procedures:

1. Organizing one experiment in the form of a test. The test consists of two parts (pre-test and post-test). The pre-test was administered to first year students without previous teaching of phonological awareness strategies. On the contrary, the post-test was administered to the same group of students after teaching the students phonological awareness strategies.
2. The test consists of one passage which is given for the students to read in order to measure their ability in oral reading fluency.
3. The passage is written on paper so that the students could see and read it.
4. The students' readings were recorded.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. The concept of phonological awareness

Due to the connection between phonological awareness and developing oral reading, distinct attentions have been paid recently to phonological awareness. Li (2010, p.29) shows that phonological awareness is the ability to recognize spoken words as sequences of sound segments in relation to the written units and manipulate those segments in words. It is a type of mental linguistic ability that requires a clear knowledge to understand the levels of phonological awareness .

Gillon (2004, p.4) manifests that phonological awareness can be defined as a multi-level skill that involves breaking down words into smaller units. A word can be described according to syllable structure, onset-time structure, and phoneme structure. She explains further that phonological awareness can be described according to syllable awareness, onset rime awareness, and segmental awareness. For example, the word

(basket) is divided to two syllables as shown in the following diagram.

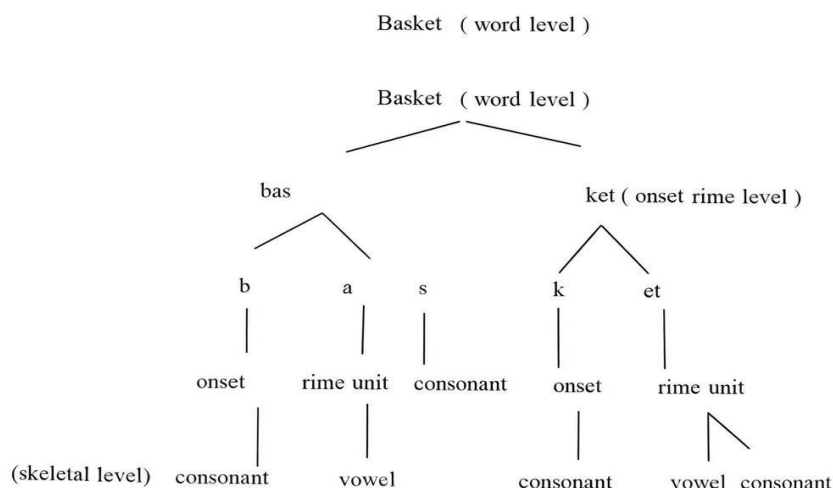


Figure (1) : word level

Phonological awareness plays a significant role in the development of students' reading skills. The first characteristic of phonological awareness is phonemic awareness which refers to the ability to identify and manipulate individual sounds , or phonemes , in spoken words. Phonemic awareness is a good predictor of reading success. It also enables students to understand the alphabetic principle. The idea that letters represent sounds in written language. Students who struggle with phonemic awareness face difficulty with word recognition , spelling , and reading comprehension. Developing phonemic awareness is an important step in learning to read (and moreover, it is a perfect support for reading development.

Students who demonstrate good phonemic awareness skills tend to be more successful in learning to read than those with weaker phonological awareness abilities. This shows the importance of teaching and reinforcing phonological recognition skills in early literacy instruction. Consequently, there is a strong relationship between phonological awareness skills and reading ability (Wagner , 1997 ,p.34).

2.2.Levels of Phonological awareness

An individual's knowledge can be evaluated in terms of three different levels of phonological awareness .

2.2.1.Syllable awareness

Words can be divided into syllables, for example, the word (number) can be divided into two syllables (num) and (ber). There are three principles of syllable division :

a-Each syllable in a word has a vowel sound. For instance , the word (baby) has two vowels: one in the middle of the word / eɪ / , and the other is at the end of the word / ɪ / .

b-Syllable division follows the stress patterns of a word. For example , the word (patrol) is divided as pa-trol and not pat-rol .

c-The importance of syllable division is to ensure that consonants that cannot be clustered together in English do not begin or end a syllable .For instance , the word (only) is divided to on-ly , not onl-y because nt is not a legal cluster in English .

2.2.2.Onset-Rime awareness

The term onset-rime means the division of a syllable into two parts: The first part is the onset and the second part is the rime. The onset refers to the initial consonant sound of a word. The rime is the following vowel and all subsequent sounds in the syllable (Roach,2009,p.57). For example , the word (start) , (st) is the onset of the syllable , and (art) is the rime of the syllable .This level of awareness is measured through rhyming tasks. Different measures of onst-rime awareness include the followings :

a.Spoken rhyme detection, for instance , Do these words rhyme : cake-lake ?

b.Which word does not rhyme: fish, dish , book ?

c.Spoken rhyme generation , for instance , I am going to say a word and I want you to tell me a word that rhymes with it .Tell me a word that rhymes with (bat) .

2.2.3.Phoneme awareness

The term phoneme can be defined as the smallest segment of a word .For example, the word (tree) consists of three phonemes /t/ , /r/ , and /i:/. If one of these phonemes changed, the word will be changed too. If the phoneme /t/ is changed to /f/ , the

new word will be (free). If the last phoneme /i:/ is changed to /ei/ , the word (tray) will be heard . Phonemes are abstract units. When words are spoken, the listeners do not hear the separated phonemes into syllables within the sound stream. Individuals must learn to perceive phonemes in speech. Phonological awareness can be measured with the following tasks:

- 1.Alliteration
- 2.Phoneme matching
- 3.Phoneme isolation
- 4.Phoneme blending
- 5.Phoneme deletion
- 6.Phoneme segmentation
- 7.Rhyming

2.3. Phonological awareness strategies

2.3.1. Alliteration

Alliteration can be defined as the repetition of sounds that is used to emphasize importance. It is used to express and draw attention to something important within a sentence. It is usually used in poetry in order to create rhythm. This helps the poem to be more musical. For example, Eat wisely –A poem by Alan Loren

Franks and fries, and French fondue
Beans and Burgers and biscuits too
Chicken, chili , and cheddar cheese
When I much too much, I always sneeze

2.3.2. Rhyming

This term can be defined as "phoneme substitution tasks". It changes a certain phoneme in a word to a new word. For example, the word (gate). If the students are asked to say the word (gate), but instead of using /g/ at the beginning, put /l/ phoneme, the new word would be (late). Rhyming helps the students to explore the rhythm of language. This kind of strategy develops thinking levels. There are four levels. The first level is remembering and understanding. The students could recognize what a rhyming word is. The second level is applying. In which the students could draw what rhymes with. The third one is analyzing. In this level, the students could know how these two

words are the same in this level. The last level is evaluating and creating. In this level, the students could form a sentence which includes words used as a rhyming (Ellery, 2017, p.39).

2.3.3. Phoneme segmentation

It displays the student's ability to break apart the structure within words. The most important skill of segmentation is to break words into syllables. Onset is the first sound before the vowel, and rime is the vowel sound. For example, the word (look) can be broken into (l) and (ook).

2.3.4. Phoneme deletion

This form tries to separate the sounds in words and pronounce the word while leaving out a certain sound. The students are asked to delete the first, second, or last sound they hear and pronounce what is left. For example, the word (farm) would become (arm), (fm), or (far) (Scott, 2009, p.6).

2.3.5. Phoneme Blending

This kind requires the students to blend phonemes into words. The students are asked to blend the phonemes into a word. For example, the phonemes /c/, /a/ and /t/ would be combined into the word (cat) (Wagstaff, 2001, p.17).

2.3.6. Phoneme matching

This type requires the students to sort objects into categories by matching their beginning sounds with the beginning sounds in the pictures of the sound board. For example, Lilly /l/, Purse /p/, snake /s /.

2.4. Reading Fluency

Reading fluency can be defined as" the ability to read with expression, intonation, and a natural flow that sounds like talking". It is not the speed at which someone reads. That is the reading rate. An individual or a student may read quickly but may not be fluent. Sometimes students who read so quickly skip over pronunciation. This inhibits pronunciation because pronunciation helps convey meaning. Fluent readers focus on understanding the message rather than decoding the text. Reading is decoding with comprehension. Fluent readers can read without thinking about how they are reading, and they understand what they are reading (Firth, 1945, p.28).

Students can develop their reading fluency reading and rereading the same piece of writing several times. Teachers also can be the students to develop the process of reading fluency by modeling the text and providing guidance and feedback enhance their fluency development. By using this method, students become better readers (Calpelfa, 2019, p. 4).

Fluent readers are able to read words accurately. They can recognize words and phrases instantly. Phonological awareness lays the foundation for phonemic awareness and phonics instruction (Donegan, 1985, p. 64). The term phonics can be defined as the relationship between sounds and written letters. It teaches students to connect letters to their corresponding sounds, allowing them to decode words. Through phonics instruction, students learn to sound out words by blending individual sounds together. This process is important to develop reading skills and is an essential feature of phonological awareness (Firth, 1945, p.28).

Phonological awareness plays an important role in reading development. Individuals who struggle with phonological awareness often have difficulty learning to read. Without a strong foundation in phonological recognition, individual may struggle to sound out words leading to reading difficulties and lower reading comprehension (Gilbers, 1998, p.45).

Phonemic awareness is a good predictor of reading success. Children who had strong phonemic awareness skills in kindergarten were proficient readers by the end of first grade. This indicates the importance of phonological recognition skills in reading development (Adams, 1990, p.43)

2.5. Ways to Build Reading fluency

2.5.1. Model Good Oral Reading

When teachers read orally to students in a natural way, they model fluent reading. Particularly when teachers draw attention to how they are reading, they help students see the meaning in reading not only the words, but also the way words are expressed.

2.5.2. Provide oral support for readers

Another method to develop fluency is through oral support for a student's own reading. When a student reads and hears a fluent passage, his/her reading fluency improves. There are many forms of supported reading such as choral reading, paired reading, and using recorded materials

2.5.3. Offer plenty of practice opportunities

Practice is significant for fluency. When first learning to read, many students focus their attention on decoding the words that they confront. With practice, the reader achieves fluency and direct his/her attention on making sense of the reading away from the mechanics of decoding.

2.5.4. Encourage fluency through phrasing

Fluent readers parse text into phrases. This is important because meaning lies in a text's phrases. The ability to separate a passage into phrases aids comprehension. One of the most principal features of a diffident reader is word-by-word reading. When a reader reads in this way, chunking, a passage becomes more difficult and finding meaning in that passage become more difficult too (Rasinski, 1974, p.30).

Fluency is the ability to read the words and text quickly and accurately. There are three levels of fluency: Fluency at the word level, fluency at the syntactic level and fluency at the passage level. Klaude and Guthrie (2008, p.28) reveal the relationship between the levels of fluency and comprehension. They explain that the first level is associated with comprehension, at primary school whereas the third level is associated with comprehension at intermediate and college students.

3. Methodology

The experiment has been made in the form of a test. The test consists of one passage to measure the student's ability in oral reading fluency. The passage is taken from second year / comprehension. The passage is written on paper so that the students could read them. The sample of this current research is the first-year students / Department of English / College of Education / University of Misan of the academic year 2025. The

total number of the students is 26. The student's readings for the passage were recorded.

3.1. Participants

The participants were 26 students (13 males and 13 females) from the Department of English / College of Education / University of Misan). Their age was between 18-22 years old. They were divided into two groups. The first group is the control group consists of 13 students. The students were received regular reading instruction following the traditional way of teaching. The second group is the experimental group. The participant in the current group was received instruction based on phonological awareness strategies. All the subjects were at intermediate level of English proficiency.

3.2. Instruments

The following instruments are used in the current research:

3.2.1. Reading Fluency Test

The test was designed by the researcher to measure the student's ability to read accurately.

3.2.2. Phonological awareness strategies

A group of strategies are developed to train the students to identify and manipulate the sounds of English words. The strategies include alliteration, phoneme segmentation, phoneme blending, phoneme deletion, and phoneme matching.

3.2.3. Record

It is used to record the students' participation during reading sessions.

3.2.4. Pre-test and post test

Both tests are similar in structure and content. They are used to measure the ability of students in reading fluency before and after teaching strategies to show their development progress.

3.3. Procedures

The experiment lasted two months. The procedures were divided as follows:

1.Pre-Test

All the subjects participated in reading fluency pre-test. The researcher explained to the students the aims of the study, the procedures, and how the sessions would be conducted.

2.Training Course: Implementation of phonological awareness strategies

During several weeks, the students of the experimental group were trained by using phonological awareness strategies. The students practiced how to identify the first and the last sounds in words, segmenting words into individual sounds, and matching their similar sounds. They also were taught to blend separate sounds into complete words (e.g., /p/, /e/, /n / ----- pen) and to segment spoken words into phonemes.

The researcher gave the students information about rhyme and created their own rhyming words, which improved their auditory discrimination. Students also trapped out syllables in words to strengthen rhythm awareness in reading. At the end of each session, short passages were read aloud by students' focusing on speed, accuracy, and expression. On the other hand, the control group continued to receive traditional reading instruction, focusing on vocabulary and comprehension without training about phonological awareness strategies.

3.Post-Test

All the students took the post-test by reading the same passage in order to recognize their development of. The results were compared to measure the effectiveness of the intervention.

3.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were compared and analyzed by using SPSS software. The researcher calculated Means scores, Standard deviations, and T-test values to determine if the difference was statistically significant or not. The findings showed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in reading fluency test. This exhibited that phonological awareness strategies had a positive impact on developing reading fluency among students. See table (1)

The results in Table 1 are related to the pre-test, which means before the application of the experiment. Besides, it shows that the control group performance is better since their mean score (73.1) is higher than that of the experimental group.

Group	N	Mean	SD
Experimental group	13	72.4	5.8
Control group	13	73.1	6.1

Table (1) : Pre-Test Results

The following table shows the results of the post-test . see table (2)

Group	N	Mean	SD
Experimental Group	13	92.3	5.2
Control Group	13	75.0	6.0

Table (2) : Post-Test Results

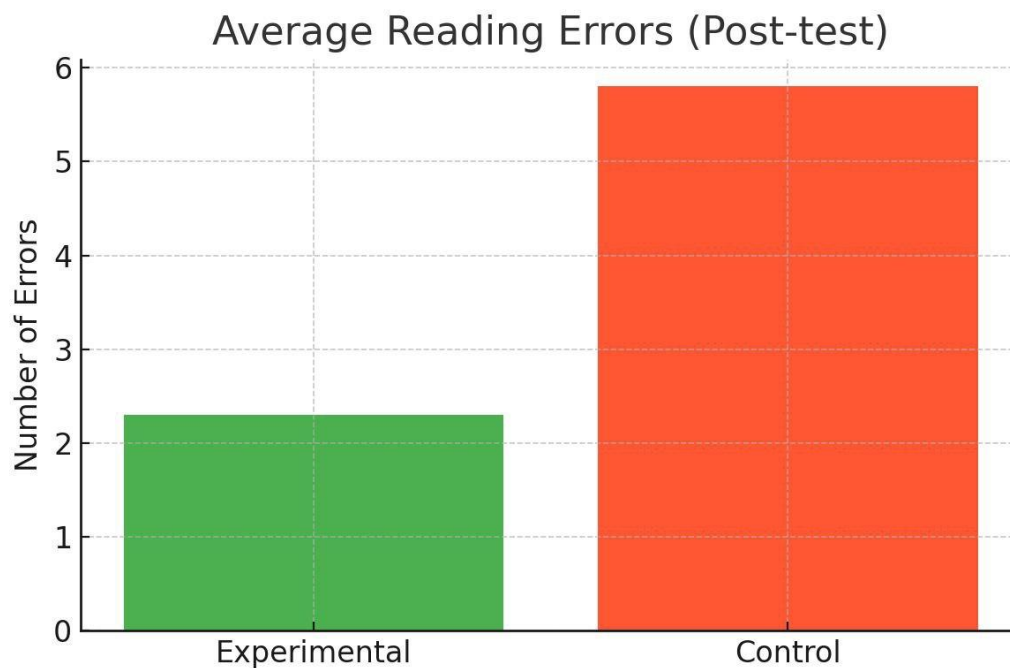


Figure (2) : Pre-Test Result

After the training course, the experimental group showed a noticeable improvement in reading speed compared to the controlled group. The researcher needed to measure Paired Samples T-Test and Independent Samples T-Test. Paired sample T-test compared between the experimental group and controlled group before training course. Independent sample T-test was used to notice the students' progress or development in reading fluency after the training course.

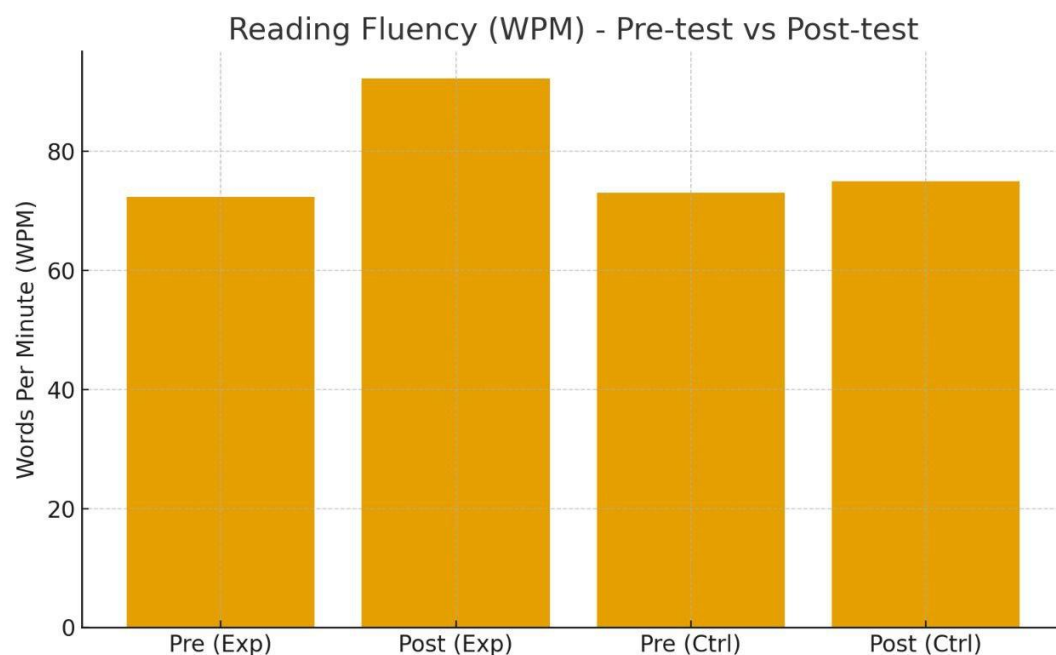


Figure 3 : (Pre-Test Vs. Post test Results)

4.Results

Before the training course, both groups had the same reading fluency level. The P-value ($0.74 > 0.05$) showed no significant difference. After using phonological awareness strategies, the mean of the experimental group increased from 72.4 to 92.3 while the controlled group remained the same. Since $P = 0.00001 < 0.05$, the difference is significant. See the following table:

Comparison	Mean (Pre-Test)	Mean (Post-Test)	Mean Difference	T-Value	df	P-value	Result
Experimental group	72.4	92.3	19.9	9.52	12	0.00001	High significant

Table (3): Result of Experimental group

The above table suggested that students improved by 20 words per minute, which signified strong evidence that strategies developed reading fluency.

Group	Mean Errors	SD	T-Value	P-value	significance		
Experimental Group	2.3	1.1	5.21	0.0002	significant		
Control Group	5.8	1.4					

Eventually, the results obtained proved that the hypotheses of the study were correct. The findings of the current study revealed that Iraqi university EFL learners demonstrated a significant improvement in reading fluency and a notable reduction in oral reading errors (such as sound omissions, substitutions, and word switching) after implementing awareness strategies. This result indicates that explicit training in cognitive and metacognitive strategies effectively equips first-year students with the tools to manage cognitive load and bridge the gap in their reading proficiency.

This finding is consistent with previous research conducted by (Al-Tamimi & Munir, 2022), which emphasized that structured awareness interventions play a crucial role in enhancing tertiary-level students' reading performance and decoding accuracy. Furthermore, these results align with (Smith, 2020), who argued that active engagement with reading strategies improves both automaticity and text comprehension among language learners.

5. Conclusion

This study showed that the implementation of phonological awareness strategies plays an important role in enhancing oral reading fluency and reducing decoding errors among Iraqi university learners. These findings underscore the necessity of integrating targeted phonological instruction into the English language curriculum to help learners achieve greater proficiency in their reading skills. Furthermore, curriculum designers and instructors should incorporate explicit metacognitive and phonological awareness activities into daily classroom practices, moving away from passive reading approaches to foster better automaticity, accurate word-level

decoding, and overall reading comprehension in tertiary education.

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