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English Pronunciation Development during Phonics-Oriented Instruction: A Classroom Action Research Study with Vietnamese Preschoolers

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ABSTRACT: This article examines changes in selected English pronunciation performances during a Phonics-oriented programme involving 20 children aged four to five at Son Ca Kindergarten, Thanh Hoa Province, Vietnam. A classroom action research design comprised two four-week cycles and sixteen scheduled 45-minute lessons between July and September 2026. The evidence includes paired results from a teacher-rated 25-item oral task, a dated attendance register, programme-level participation and pronunciation ratings, and the teacher's written reflections. Across the class, mean scores increased from 34.4 to 76.0 on a 100-point scale, a gain of 41.6 points; all 20 children recorded higher post-test scores, and 14 reached at least 70 points, compared with none at baseline. Action-stage ratings classified eight children as highly intelligible, nine as partially intelligible and three as low. Following concerns about uneven engagement, limited practice and reliance on imitation, the teacher reported placing greater emphasis on articulatory guidance, revision and group games in Cycle 2. The findings document improved performance on repeated familiar prompts but do not establish an effect uniquely attributable to Phonics, because the study lacked a comparison group, an intermediate cycle assessment, independent scoring and item-level records. Practical implications concern structured oral practice, responsive feedback and stronger documentation in preschool pronunciation research.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is a foundation of intelligible oral communication. In early English as a foreign language (EFL) education, children are not simply learning to remember isolated words; they must also perceive unfamiliar sounds, coordinate speech movements and associate oral forms with meaningful classroom situations. Pronunciation teaching is therefore more than the reproduction of individual consonants or vowels. It provides opportunities for learners to hear, attempt and progressively refine spoken language (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Kelly, 2000). With four- and five-year-olds, these opportunities must be compatible with developing attention, limited metalinguistic awareness and the need for frequent interaction.

Phonics offers one possible structure for such activities by making relationships between written graphemes and speech sounds explicit. Research on systematic Phonics has principally examined early literacy, including word identification and decoding (National Reading Panel, 2000; Ehri, 2005). It is reasonable to explore whether letter-sound activities can also accompany pronunciation practice in a preschool EFL class. Nevertheless, improved reading or decoding in school-age populations does not in itself establish a pronunciation advantage for younger children learning English as an additional language. A locally collected oral-performance measure is required to investigate what learners actually produce.

The present research was carried out at Son Ca Kindergarten in Thanh Hoa Province with 20 children aged four to five. Its two-cycle classroom action research (CAR) plan combined introductory letter-sound lessons with subsequent reviews and teacher reflection. The school timetable specified sixteen 45-minute sessions across eight weeks. The surviving records provide a pre-test and post-test on the same 25 prompts, categorical classroom ratings, an attendance register and the teacher's description of

instructional adjustments. This evidence offers a focused view of classroom progress while also making the boundaries of the evaluation visible.

Previous classroom studies have considered Phonics and pronunciation among older school pupils, including work in Indonesia and other EFL settings (Tiyas et al., 2023; Gumelar & Lestari, 2024; Karuna et al., 2024). Their participants, assessment tasks and sometimes combined teaching techniques differ from those of the present study. Vietnamese research on initial Phonics and language instruction has also largely addressed settings other than preschool English pronunciation (Nguyen, 2025). The contribution here is consequently contextual and methodological: a transparent account of paired classroom outcomes, the difficulties perceived during implementation and the instructional responses reported by the teacher.

Three questions guide the article: (1) How did performance on selected English pronunciation prompts change during the Phonics-oriented programme? (2) What classroom difficulties were identified in the available teacher reflections and rating records? (3) Which instructional responses were reported, and what can be recommended without overstating their independently measured effects? The study does not claim to estimate the causal effectiveness of Phonics relative to alternative approaches.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH METHODS

2.1. Phonics, pronunciation and young learners

Pronunciation encompasses the production of individual sounds and the organisation of spoken language through stress, rhythm and intonation. Although these dimensions interact, they require different forms of assessment (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). In a preschool classroom, sound imitation and familiar-word production are observable starting points, but they cannot represent the entire construct of oral proficiency. Children may produce a known word accurately when shown a picture while still having difficulty with spontaneous speech or unfamiliar sound combinations. The distinction matters when interpreting scores generated by a narrow, teacher-designed task.

The term Phonics refers to teaching systematic correspondences between graphemes and phonemes. Ehri (2020) distinguishes the development of printed-word learning from the broader question of how spoken forms are acquired. Synthetic Phonics additionally involves combining separately represented sounds into words, whereas letter identification and echoing a known word do not necessarily demonstrate independent blending (National Reading Panel, 2000; Torgerson et al., 2006). In this classroom, instruction joined displayed letters, familiar picture vocabulary and oral modelling; because independent decoding or blending was not measured, 'Phonics-oriented' is the appropriate description rather than a claim that a complete synthetic Phonics programme was experimentally verified.

For young language learners, instructional scaffolding should make speech practice manageable and purposeful. Cameron (2001) emphasises interaction, repetition and activities matched to children's developmental capacities. Songs, picture cards, audio modelling and games may provide motivating contexts for hearing and producing sounds, but the existence of such activities is not proof of their particular effectiveness. The Council of Europe (2020) treats intelligibility, articulation and prosody as important features of phonological control; its descriptors serve as general conceptual guidance here, not as validated scales for the classroom's 0-100 scores or for four- to five-year-olds.

2.2. Research setting, participants and action cycles

The study used CAR as a reflective framework for planning, acting, observing and reflecting on classroom instruction (Mertler, 2011). Twenty children in one existing preschool class formed a convenience sample and were anonymised as S1-S20. The classroom teacher acted as both instructor and researcher. No separate comparison class was recruited. Supporting school documents include an endorsed research request, a lesson schedule and a dated attendance register; these verify the setting, scheduled content and recorded presence but do not independently verify the delivery of every described classroom activity.

Two instructional cycles were scheduled between 27 July and 18 September 2026, normally twice weekly. The first introduced Units 1-8 of Oxford Phonics World 1; the second revisited these units (Schwermer et al., 2012). The teacher's reflective account reports difficulties during Cycle 1 and increased emphasis on guided sound production, tongue-position explanation, repetition and group games during Cycle 2. Because the signed original timetable already contained the review lessons, the evidence indicates a reported change in teaching emphasis, not a separately documented amendment to the formal schedule.

Table 1. Organisation of the two classroom action research cycles

Phase	Scheduled period	Sessions	Documented instructional focus
Cycle 1	27 July-21 August 2026	8	Introduction of Units 1-8; letter-sound links, familiar words, teacher/audio modelling and picture-supported practice.
Cycle 2	24 August-18 September 2026	8	Review of Units 1-8; reported greater attention to articulation, repeated production, audio and group games.

Source: Compiled from the dated school teaching plan and the teacher's reflective account (2026).

2.3. Assessment instruments and data processing

The same 25-item oral task was reported at baseline and after Cycle 2. Section 1 displayed ten graphemes (b, e, h, k, n, t, a, z, l and d) and requested the corresponding target sound. Section 2 displayed fifteen picture-and-word prompts: ant, bat, car, dog, eat, fan, go, hat, jam, net, pen, sun, van, ox and key. The teacher marked each attempt as 1 if the intended sound or word was recognisable, allowing minor deviations, and 0 if it was absent or unrecognisable. A raw score of 0-25 was multiplied by four to produce a 0-100 result. Item-level judgments and an independently established accepted-response key were not retained.

Because the word items combined written forms and pictures, the test does not distinguish picture naming, memorised production and independent print decoding. Several items also use spelling patterns that do not represent one simple consonant-vowel-consonant sequence. The two administrations repeated the same prompts, creating the possibility of practice or familiarity effects. An undated action-stage record categorised intelligibility (High, Partial, Low) and articulation (Accurate, Partially accurate, Inaccurate). Another programme-level record categorised attendance, activeness and group participation. These ratings were not dated by cycle and were not treated as additional post-test scores.

Descriptive analysis used frequencies, percentages, means, medians, sample standard deviations and paired differences calculated from the twenty scores. Attendance totals were reconciled against the sixteen-session school register. The classroom score bands were retained solely as local descriptive thresholds rather than validated preschool norms. No causal statistical model was used: a single-group pre/post comparison cannot separate effects of Phonics from repeated exposure, maturation or other classroom experiences. Although an interview question guide existed, individual child responses were unavailable; therefore, no interview themes or response percentages are reported.

2.4. Documentary evidence and interpretive boundaries

Three types of evidence were distinguished. The twenty paired scores and categorical summaries provide the numeric findings; the lesson schedule and attendance register document planned sessions and presence; and the teacher's reflection describes instructional concerns and responses. These sources should not be conflated: scheduled content does not independently verify its delivery, and broad impressions cannot establish phoneme-level outcomes.

The timetable dates all sixteen planned lessons, but not the two oral assessments. Pronunciation and engagement ratings also lack cycle-specific dates. Thus the action research account describes a two-cycle sequence, while measured improvement can be established only for the eight-week programme as a whole.

III. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1. Changes in teacher-rated oral-task performance

At baseline, the class obtained 172 recognisable responses out of 500 possible child-item attempts, giving a mean score of 34.4 on the 100-point scale. Scores ranged from 12 to 60, with a median of 32 and a sample standard deviation of 13.76. No child attained 70 points, and only one reached at least 60. These results describe limited initial performance on the tested sounds and familiar words, not children's overall English proficiency or age-standardised development.

After the eight-week programme, 380 of the 500 item opportunities were judged recognisable. The mean rose to 76.0, the median to 76 and the range to 48-100; the sample standard deviation was 12.65. Thus the mean increased by 41.6 points. All twenty paired differences were positive, with a median gain of 44 and a range of 12-64 points. The number of children scoring at least 70 rose from zero to fourteen, and the number reaching at least 60 increased from one to nineteen. One child reached 100 in the post-test; another remained below 60. These aggregate changes were calculated from the same prompt set at two points in time.

Table 2. Individual pre-test and post-test scores on the repeated 25-item task

Learner	Pre-test /100	Post-test /100	Gain (points)
S1	20	60	+40
S2	40	68	+28
S3	44	100	+56
S4	20	60	+40
S5	28	80	+52
S6	60	72	+12
S7	28	76	+48
S8	36	80	+44
S9	52	96	+44
S10	16	80	+64
S11	24	72	+48
S12	32	76	+44
S13	40	96	+56

S14	52	84	+32
S15	24	76	+52
S16	32	48	+16
S17	56	80	+24
S18	12	68	+56
S19	28	80	+52
S20	44	68	+24
Mean	34.4	76.0	+41.6

Source: Author's paired classroom score records (2026). Each 25-item score was converted to a 0-100 scale.

The paired totals show that the change was not confined to a few high scorers. However, a higher total on familiar prompts does not reveal which sounds became more accurate, whether gains occurred during the first or second cycle, or whether learners transferred a letter-sound relationship to new words. The original records contain neither item-level answers nor separate subscores for the ten sound prompts and fifteen word prompts. Consequently, it would be inappropriate to interpret the mean difference as a measured improvement in every component of English pronunciation.

3.2. Score distribution and programme-level classroom ratings

The shift in classroom score distribution was substantial. At pre-test, nineteen children were below 60 and one was in the 60-69 band. At post-test, three children were in the 90-100 band, six in 80-89, five in 70-79, five in 60-69 and one below 60. These bands are internal reporting categories. Terms such as 'excellent' or 'inadequate' used in the original classroom summary must not be interpreted as developmental diagnoses, CEFR proficiency judgments or external passing standards.

The separate undated action-stage ratings placed eight children in the High intelligibility category, nine in Partial and three in Low. The articulation ratings contained the identical distribution of eight Accurate, nine Partially accurate and three Inaccurate, and the classifications matched child by child. Therefore, the two rating columns cannot be treated as independent confirmation of pronunciation quality. Because their date was not recorded, they cannot establish improvement between the first and second cycles.

Programme-level observation data described seventeen children as High in attendance, thirteen as High in activeness and fifteen as High in group participation. All remaining children were rated Partial; none were rated Low. The dated register contained 300 attendances among 320 possible child-session opportunities, equivalent to 93.75%. Three children attended fewer than 80% of the scheduled sessions, consistent with the original attendance categories. These descriptive indicators show that the programme was well attended overall; they do not establish a relationship between attendance categories, classroom engagement and individual pronunciation gains.

Table 3. Summary of teacher-rated pronunciation and participation categories

Dimension	Highest category, n (%)	Intermediate category, n (%)	Lowest category, n (%)
Intelligibility	High: 8 (40%)	Partial: 9 (45%)	Low: 3 (15%)
Sound articulation	Accurate: 8 (40%)	Partially accurate: 9 (45%)	Inaccurate: 3 (15%)
Attendance	High: 17 (85%)	Partial: 3 (15%)	Low: 0 (0%)
Activeness	High: 13 (65%)	Partial: 7 (35%)	Low: 0 (0%)
Group participation	High: 15 (75%)	Partial: 5 (25%)	Low: 0 (0%)

Source: Aggregated from the original classroom rating tables (2026). Ratings were not separately dated by cycle.

3.3. Reported difficulties and instructional responses

In the Cycle 1 reflection, the teacher described considerable variation in classroom responsiveness. Some children participated actively, whereas others were less attentive or appeared uncertain when encountering new English words. The teacher also judged individual oral practice time insufficient for some learners and observed a tendency to imitate teacher or recorded speech without deliberate consideration of mouth and tongue position. These concerns explain the direction of subsequent teaching decisions, but the reflections were not supported by dated, pupil-by-pupil observation sheets or a sound-by-sound error inventory.

The teacher's reflection also mentioned possible difficulties with word stress. The fifteen tested word prompts were monosyllabic, however, and did not assess stress placement in multisyllabic speech. Neither the assessment totals nor the undated categories can confirm a word-stress problem. Similarly, the existing records cannot determine which particular vowels, consonants or letter-sound correspondences were difficult for specific children. The most defensible finding is that the teacher perceived a need for more practice, clearer modelling and more active engagement.

During Cycle 2, the teacher reported placing greater emphasis on repeated production of familiar target words, listening to coursebook audio and providing explicit guidance about sound formation. Two games illustrated this emphasis. In 'Listen and

Touch', twenty picture-and-word cards were displayed while four groups of five children took turns recognising the heard word, touching the matching card and pronouncing it. In 'Pass the Picture', twelve illustrated cards moved around a circle to music; when the music stopped, the card holder attempted the relevant letter sounds and word. Both formats connected attention, recall and oral production to playful participation.

These are documented teaching responses, not experimentally isolated interventions. The teacher did not retain the number or accuracy of individual game turns, and twelve cards in the second game do not guarantee an equal number of turns for twenty children. In addition, the programme had no mid-cycle pronunciation test and no delayed assessment of retention. Consequently, the observed overall score increase cannot be allocated to additional articulation cues, a specific game or one of the two instructional cycles.

3.4. Alignment between instructional materials and the test

The supplementary letter-sound list contained twelve of the fifteen assessment words; bat, eat and go were not listed. This does not show that those three words were absent from teaching, as the list is not a complete lesson record. It does, however, underline the importance of documenting alignment between instructional materials and assessment prompts.

The supplementary material also proposed target sounds for the ten displayed letters, but it was not an original scoring key. Binary recognisability judgments are practical in a busy classroom, yet they omit the phonetic detail needed to identify particular articulatory changes. Future assessment should specify the target sound, acceptable variants and response examples for each item.

IV. DISCUSSION

4.1. Interpreting the observed pronunciation gains

The central finding is a pronounced improvement in children's recognisable production of the selected letter sounds and familiar words after an eight-week Phonics-oriented programme. A mean change of 41.6 points and positive gains among all twenty children indicate that the final task was performed much more successfully than the initial task. This result is pedagogically relevant because early EFL instruction often relies on repeated, meaningful opportunities to hear and produce unfamiliar sounds (Cameron, 2001; Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). The increase is consistent with the instructional emphasis described by the teacher, but consistency is not causal identification.

Interpretive restraint is especially important because systematic Phonics evidence has been developed mainly in relation to printed-word recognition and reading development (National Reading Panel, 2000; Ehri, 2020). Studies reporting pronunciation-related improvements in other EFL classrooms are useful comparators, but their generally older learners and different oral-reading measures limit direct generalisation to this preschool task (Gumelar & Lestari, 2024; Karuna et al., 2024; Tiyas et al., 2023). The repeated picture-and-word prompts in this study permit a narrower inference: children became more successful at producing targets they had already encountered. Whether a similar pattern would appear on unfamiliar words or in spontaneous conversation remains unknown.

An additional issue is the teacher's dual role as instructor and sole scorer. The identical prompt set helped keep the two administrations comparable but also increased familiarity. Without audio recordings, item-level judgments or an independent rater, the observed score differences cannot be independently checked for changes in scoring thresholds. The findings should therefore be presented as teacher-rated descriptive gains rather than a standardised estimate of pronunciation competence.

4.2. Classroom challenges and the action-research response

The observed difficulties were related not only to sound production but also to the organisation of practice. Limited individual turns, uneven participation and early dependence on imitation are plausible challenges when teaching preschool groups. The teacher's response of combining modelled pronunciation, visible articulatory cues and short games fits the reflective logic of CAR: teaching is adjusted in response to problems encountered in a specific classroom (Mertler, 2011). Nonetheless, an action-research cycle becomes more persuasive when the observation, decision and subsequent response are documented contemporaneously.

The second cycle had already been scheduled for review, and the teacher's additional emphases appeared in an undated reflection. It would therefore be too strong to credit a newly introduced activity with causing gains. The two games are better regarded as possible ways to offer repeated oral turns, not as independently evaluated interventions. In a different domain, participatory storytelling and digital interaction have been linked with engaging heritage experiences in Vietnam (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2026). This comparison concerns interaction design only and is not evidence about Phonics or preschool pronunciation.

Teachers could increase short individual responses, rotate group representatives, pair oral models with simple articulatory cues and revisit familiar pictures and words. A Vietnamese study of technical-skill teaching likewise highlights the importance of instruction oriented toward the skills to be developed (Tran, 2024), although its university-level vocational context does not establish any effect for preschool language learners. The proposed classroom measures remain pedagogical suggestions rather than separately tested outcomes.

4.3. Assessment quality, implications and limitations

The study also suggests several priorities for designing stronger preschool pronunciation research. A clear item-level scoring key would indicate which pronunciation variants count as recognisable. Audio records, collected with appropriate permission, and a

second trained assessor would permit reliability checks and more specific analysis of sound errors. Separate scores for displayed graphemes and picture-and-word items would distinguish two different performance demands. A comparable but nonidentical test form and a delayed post-test could help examine transfer and retention rather than familiarity with the original prompts.

An end-of-Cycle-1 assessment could show progress before review begins. Dated reflections could connect each observed difficulty with an instructional decision and later response. Feedback-sensitive evaluation has also been examined in Vietnamese heritage communication (Phuong & Lam, 2025); this provides a cross-sector methodological parallel, not evidence of language-teaching effectiveness. Comparison groups or additional time points would strengthen inference. School records document institutional endorsement, but the supplied materials do not establish whether parental consent or an ethics review was obtained.

The small convenience sample, absence of a control group, use of repeated items, teacher-only assessment and incomplete process records restrict generalisability. Importantly, the lack of child-level interview responses prevents the study from establishing learners' own explanations of difficulty. Ratings of intelligibility and articulation were made at an unspecified time and used identical classifications. These limitations do not erase the descriptive improvement in the paired totals; rather, they define the precise level at which the evidence can support an academic conclusion.

4.4. A feasible monitoring sequence for future preschool lessons

A practical monitoring routine would begin with target sounds and an explicit scoring rubric. Each lesson could then combine brief modelling, individual attempts in rotating groups and notes indicating which children need more listening or articulatory support. Such a record would allow the teacher to connect instructional decisions with observable responses without producing lengthy administrative forms.

A parallel check after Cycle 1, followed by new but comparable prompts at the final assessment, would help distinguish memorisation from transfer. A delayed check could examine retention. This is a proposed improvement to the research design, not a procedure tested in the current study.

V. CONCLUSION

This classroom action research study examined English pronunciation performance during sixteen scheduled Phonics-oriented lessons with twenty four- to five-year-old children at Son Ca Kindergarten in Thanh Hoa Province. Across a repeated 25-item teacher-rated oral task, the mean increased from 34.4 to 76.0 points and all learners showed positive paired differences. Fourteen children scored at least 70 points after the programme, compared with none before it. Attendance and classroom ratings, together with the teacher's reflections, provide a fuller description of the instructional context.

The teacher identified uneven engagement, limited individual oral practice and heavy reliance on imitation during initial lessons, then reported stronger emphasis on guided articulation, revision and group games in the review cycle. These are useful classroom observations and responses, but the available records cannot establish their separate effects or a causal advantage of Phonics. The study's main contribution is therefore a documented account of improvement on selected familiar prompts, coupled with transparent boundaries on what those scores can demonstrate. Future classroom research should retain the practical responsiveness of action research while strengthening item-level recording, independent assessment, intermediate testing and evidence of transfer to new spoken contexts.

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