

From Belief to Practice: Teacher Self-Efficacy in Teaching Phonics to Preschool Students

Ryan Andisky Asrul¹, Sukardi Weda¹, Fitriyani¹

¹Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia

*Correspondence: ryanaasrul@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explores preschool teachers' self-efficacy in teaching phonics to young learners in a bilingual early childhood setting in Makassar, Indonesia. Although phonics is a widely supported approach to early reading, its application across Indonesian preschools remains inconsistent, especially outside English-based programs. This research aims to examine how teachers perceive their self-efficacy in phonics instruction and understand how these beliefs influence classroom implementation. A descriptive qualitative method was employed, involving three preschool teachers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The analysis was guided by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (2001) framework covering instructional strategies, classroom management, and student engagement. Findings revealed that the participants demonstrated high or moderate-to-high self-efficacy in adapting phonics strategies, managing classroom behavior, and engaging students. Classroom observations largely confirmed alignment between teachers' stated beliefs and their instructional practices. The study concludes that teacher self-efficacy significantly affects the quality and consistency of phonics instruction. It recommends that schools support teacher development through reflective practice, peer observation, and accessible teaching resources to improve early literacy outcomes.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Published September 22th 2025



KEYWORDS

Teacher self-efficacy, Phonics, Preschool, Early literacy

ARTICLE LICENCE

© 2025 Universitas Hasanuddin
Under the license CC BY-SA
4.0



1. Introduction

Reading proficiency remains a critical area of focus in early childhood education, as foundational literacy skills play a pivotal role in supporting long-term academic achievement. Among the most effective early reading strategies is phonics instruction, a method that teaches children the relationship between letters and sounds (Bear et al., 2016; Snow et al., 1998). While this method has been widely supported in research (Johnston et al., 2012; Almansoori et al., 2024), its implementation in Indonesia is still uneven and largely confined to schools with international or English-based curricula (Utami & Musthafa, 2023; Rahman, 2018; Weda et al., 2021).

This condition reflects a gap between theoretical developments in phonics instruction and their practical application in early childhood education. Although the benefits of phonics in developing children's literacy skills are well-established (de Graaff et al., 2009; Martínez, 2011), little is known about the teacher-related factors that influence its use in Indonesian classrooms. One such critical factor is teacher self-efficacy—the belief in one's capability to organize and execute teaching practices effectively (Bandura, 1997). Research has shown that teachers with high self-efficacy tend to employ more effective instructional strategies, demonstrate greater persistence, and positively influence student learning (Choi & Lee, 2018; Alibakhshi et al., 2020; Andini et al., 2021).

Although teacher self-efficacy has been widely studied in general EFL settings (Boakye, 2015; Chen, 2020; Fitri et al., 2019; Yaumi et al., 2023), most of these studies focus on secondary or university-level teachers and broader language teaching practices. There is a notable lack of research that specifically examines preschool teachers' self-efficacy in the context of phonics instruction—particularly in Indonesia, where early literacy programs are still developing. This lack of research is problematic because phonics instruction is not merely about technique; it also depends on the teacher's confidence and competence in delivering it. Understanding this connection is essential for improving early literacy instruction.

This study aims to explore how preschool teachers perceive their self-efficacy in using phonics and how it influences their classroom implementation. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, this research draws on data from interviews and classroom observations. The framework guiding this inquiry is based on Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (2001) model of teacher self-efficacy, which includes three dimensions: efficacy in instructional strategies, efficacy in classroom management, and efficacy in student engagement.

The innovation of this research lies in its focus on preschool teachers in Indonesia, an underrepresented group in current literature, and its integration of observational data to bridge the gap between belief and practice. By investigating how teacher self-efficacy translates into real classroom behaviors in phonics instruction, this study contributes both to theory—by contextualizing self-efficacy within EFL phonics teaching—and to practice—by offering insights for professional development in early literacy education.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore preschool teachers' self-efficacy in teaching phonics and how it is reflected in their classroom practices. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the depth and complexity of teachers' beliefs, experiences, and instructional behaviors, which are often not fully conveyed through quantitative measures (Creswell, 2012). The design also addressed the need for richer insight into teacher self-efficacy in Indonesian early childhood contexts, where prior research is limited and often relies on survey-based methods.

2.2. Participants

The participants consisted of three preschool teachers from a private bilingual preschool in Makassar, Indonesia. They were selected through purposeful sampling, based on their involvement in teaching phonics to young learners. Each teacher taught in a different classroom level (Nursery 1, Nursery 2, and Preparatory 1), and all had experience implementing phonics instruction in daily literacy lessons.

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through two methods: semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The interviews were conducted in March 2025 to explore the participants' perceptions of self-efficacy and its sources. Each session lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. Subsequently, non-participant classroom observations were carried out in April 2025 across three separate days to examine how teacher self-efficacy was manifested in phonics instruction.

2.4. Instruments

The interview guide was adapted from the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001) and the Sources of Teacher Efficacy Questionnaire (Hoi et al., 2017), and included open-ended prompts designed to elicit detailed responses. The observation checklist was developed based on indicators of phonics instruction, including types of phonics approaches used and strategies for classroom management, student engagement, and instructional delivery. Instruments were reviewed by experts to ensure content validity, and data triangulation was used to cross-verify findings.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts and observation notes were coded to identify recurring patterns related to teacher self-efficacy, its sources, and instructional practices. Codes were then grouped into broader themes aligned with the theoretical framework: efficacy in instructional strategies, classroom management, and student engagement (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001), and the four sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995). Member checking was used to enhance credibility, and triangulation ensured consistency across data sources.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Findings

This study aimed to explore preschool teachers' self-efficacy in teaching phonics and how it was reflected in their classroom practices. Thematic analysis of interview and observation data revealed two main findings: (1) teachers perceived self-efficacy in teaching phonics and (2) how teacher self-efficacy shaped the implementation of phonics instruction.

a. Teacher Self-Efficacy in Teaching Phonics

The analysis of the interviews of the three teachers brought up three themes: efficacy in instructional strategies, classroom management, and student engagement.

1) Instructional Strategies

All three teachers demonstrated high confidence in their instructional capabilities, particularly in adapting phonics instruction to suit developmental needs. For example, Miss Anna described using familiar vocabulary to reinforce sound recognition:

“I will take examples that are more familiar to them, such as blue and black, because they already know colors.” (Miss Anna, P1)

Miss Bella highlighted her strategy of maintaining engagement through variety:

“I use phonics tones or gestures or do interesting things so that the children do not feel bored.” (Miss Bella, N2)

In addition to instructional flexibility, participants actively assessed student understanding. Miss Bella explained her differentiated assessment method:

“I start with showing pictures... then they circle the first sound... and for those who are already quite good, I give them a word, and they write the word themselves.” (Miss Bella, N2)

These examples reflect the teachers' self-assurance in choosing, modifying, and evaluating phonics instruction to optimize learning outcomes.

Besides adapting phonics instruction, several aspects identified were assessing students, activating prior knowledge, providing extra time, repeating phonics, and supporting struggling students.

2) Classroom Management

The participants demonstrated moderate to high confidence in their ability to manage classroom behavior during phonics instruction. Common strategies included establishing routines, reminding rules, and reprimanding students. For instance, Miss Bella emphasized the use of structured routines:

“There is a time for learning, a time for playing, and a time for eating. So, I discipline the children according to the time we have set.” (Miss Bella, N2)

Miss Chloe underscored the importance of peer modeling to develop routines:

“In the first one or two weeks, they're still adapting. But when they see their friends listening and staying calm, they'll usually follow along too.” (Miss Chloe, N1)

Moreover, Miss Anna described using gentle reprimands to refocus attention:

“If they still do not pay attention... I will reprimand or redirect their attention so that they can focus more on the lesson.” (Miss Anna, P1)

These practices indicate a shared belief in the importance of maintaining order as a prerequisite for effective phonics instruction.

Other aspects found from the analysis were adapting management, giving rewards and punishments, supporting emotional state, and sharing tasks.

3) Student Engagement

Teachers expressed strong beliefs in their ability to engage students in phonics instruction. Strategies included explaining phonics importance, sparking curiosity, and using visual aids. Miss Anna illustrated this with a practical example. She encouraged her students by saying:

“If you know phonics, you can read anything in this classroom, and you will definitely be proud.” (Miss Anna, P1)

Miss Bella described her efforts to spark curiosity through playful methods:

“I put some flashcards in a box, then I shake the box... and the children will definitely be curious.” (Miss Bella, N2)

Teachers also used visual aids and theme-based activities to sustain attention, particularly for younger learners. Miss Chloe explained:

“Since I teach 3-year-olds, motivating them requires a lot of pictures. So here, we introduce characters.” (Miss Chloe, N1)

These accounts reveal how the participants’ self-efficacy is manifested through child-centered engagement strategies that accommodate developmental differences and promote motivation.

Other aspects of student’s engagements that the teachers said they did were building confidence, capturing attention, and involving parents.

4) Summary of Overall Self-Efficacy

The findings suggest that teacher self-efficacy in phonics instruction is rooted not only in professional competence but also in the ability to adapt, connect, and respond empathetically to young learners’ needs.

Table 1. Summary Table of The Teachers’ Self-Efficacy

Teacher	Instructional Strategies	Classroom Management	Student Engagement	Overall TSE
Miss Anna	High	High	High	High
Miss Bella	High	High	High	High
Miss Chloe	Moderate to High	Moderate	High	Moderate to High

All participants exhibited high self-efficacy in at least two dimensions. Miss Anna and Miss Bella consistently displayed strong efficacy across all three areas, while Miss Chloe showed more varied strengths. Miss Chloe, for instance, relied more heavily on collaborative and visual supports, which may reflect differences in teaching experience or student age group.

b. The Influence of Teacher Self-Efficacy on Classroom Implementation

This study explored how teacher self-efficacy affects the implementation of phonics instruction. Three teachers were interviewed and observed to identify the alignment between their beliefs and classroom practices.

1) Miss Anna

Miss Anna employed analytic and analogy phonics, with occasional elements of synthetic and embedded phonics. Her instructional choices were guided by the school’s flexible lesson guide, requiring her to adapt creatively. There was a strong match between her beliefs and classroom behaviour, particularly in classroom management—using stamps as rewards and redirecting misbehaviour confidently. Her phonics assessment methods, encouragement, and parent communication practices aligned well with her stated beliefs. However, some strategies she mentioned, like songs and flashcards, were not observed, possibly due to situational factors.

2) Miss Bella

Miss Bella used analytic and embedded phonics, supporting instruction with word families and reading activities. She demonstrated consistent time management and student discipline, aligning with her belief in structured routines. Non-

verbal management techniques and emotional support matched her interview responses. Some activities she claimed to use, such as gestures and competitive games, were not observed, likely due to time or content focus. Her interaction with parents and supportive approach toward struggling students reflected her stated values.

3) Miss Chloe

Miss Chloe emphasized synthetic phonics, integrating multi-sensory tools like flashcards, realia, and wall charts. Embedded phonics was also used during shared reading. Her structured lesson design and collaborative management with teaching assistants reflected high self-efficacy. She consistently applied creative and engaging phonics strategies and aligned assessments with her beliefs. Her use of visual aids, music, and parent communication confirmed a strong alignment between her beliefs and practices.

3.2. Discussion

a. Teachers' Perceptions of Self-Efficacy in Teaching Phonics

This study found that all three participating teachers demonstrated high levels of self-efficacy across the domains of classroom management, instructional strategies, and student engagement, as conceptualized by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001). Miss Bella and Miss Anna showed particularly strong self-efficacy in all domains, while Miss Chloe exhibited moderate to high confidence.

These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that teachers with high self-efficacy tend to manage classrooms effectively, apply varied instructional strategies, and maintain high levels of student engagement (Choi & Lee, 2018; Değirmencioğlu, 2021). The participants' use of games, songs, and visual aids in phonics instruction aligns with Lailiyah and Cahyono (2017), who observed that confident teachers often implement creative methods to support literacy development. Their persistence in using scaffolding and repetition further supports Bandura's (1997) view that high self-efficacy promotes resilience in the face of instructional challenges.

b. The Influence of Self-Efficacy on Phonics Implementation

Classroom observations confirmed that self-efficacy had a direct impact on how phonics instruction was implemented. Teachers with higher self-efficacy, notably Miss Anna and Miss Bella, demonstrated greater flexibility, structure, and creativity in their approach. They employed a variety of phonics methods (e.g., analytic, analogy, and embedded), adapting strategies to student needs—a practice supported by Değirmencioğlu (2021), who found that highly efficacious teachers are more likely to experiment with diverse techniques.

Although Miss Chloe reported slightly lower self-efficacy, her instruction remained effective and consistent. Her structured, resource-supported approach—particularly through synthetic phonics—illustrates that moderate levels of efficacy, when paired with collaboration and support, can still yield effective practice. However, minor inconsistencies between stated beliefs and observed behaviours suggest that contextual constraints, such as time limits or student behaviour, may mediate the expression of self-efficacy. This supports Choi and Lee's (2018) conclusion that instructional beliefs do not always translate fully into practice due to situational factors.

4. Conclusion

This study investigated teacher self-efficacy in teaching phonics to young learners, focusing on teachers' perceptions and the ways in which it shaped their classroom practices. Through a qualitative descriptive approach, the findings revealed that the participating teachers generally exhibited high levels of self-efficacy across three core domains: instructional strategies, classroom management, and student engagement. Teachers demonstrated confidence in adapting phonics instruction to suit children's developmental needs. They also showed skill in managing classroom behaviour effectively. In addition, they created engaging and supportive learning environments. Their instructional strategies often involved multimodal tools such as songs, games, flashcards, and visual aids to foster literacy development.

Classroom observations reinforced the link between self-efficacy and instructional practice. Teachers with stronger self-efficacy implemented varied and responsive phonics strategies, demonstrated adaptability, and fostered positive classroom climates. While minor inconsistencies emerged between self-reported efficacy and observed behaviour, overall alignment was strong. An important contribution of this study is the identification of informal yet effective strategies that supported phonics instruction. Daily verbal phonics updates to parents during pickup time served as a meaningful home–

school bridge, reinforcing literacy learning. Additionally, teachers provided informal, individualized phonics support during transitional moments, such as after meals or during playtime—opportunities that allowed for low-pressure, targeted intervention.

The findings affirm that teacher self-efficacy plays a critical role in effective phonics instruction in early childhood education. To build on these findings, it is recommended that teachers regularly reflect on their practices to ensure alignment between their perceived efficacy and actual instructional behaviour, while also incorporating diverse phonics approaches to meet varied learner needs. School administrators should provide ongoing professional development, along with access to quality instructional materials that support phonics instruction. Future research could explore the impact of home–school communication on at-home literacy practices. The effectiveness of informal one-on-one phonics sessions during transitional periods in supporting early reading development needs to be investigated further.

References

- Almansoori, N., Ogdol, R., & Alteneiji, A. (2024). The Impact of Integrating Jolly Phonics Lessons Application into English Literacy Lessons on UAE Preschoolers' Phonics Skills. *Journal of Childhood, Education and Society*, 5(1), 41–60. <https://doi.org/10.37291/2717638X.202451299>
- Alibakhshi, G., Nikdel, F., & Labbafi, A. (2020). Exploring the consequences of teachers' self-efficacy: a case of teachers of English as a foreign language. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-020-00102-1>
- Andini, C., Yassi, A. H., Sukmawaty. (2021). The use of honorifics in English and Buginese with special reference to bone language: A comparative study. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 6(7), 873-877.
- Bandura, A. (1995). Exercise of personal and collective efficacy in changing societies. In A. Bandura (Ed.), *Self-Efficacy in Changing Societies* (pp. 1–45). Cambridge University Press. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247480203>
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. W. H. Freeman and Company.
- Bear, D. R., Invernizzi, M., Templeton, S., & Johnston, F. (2016). *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary and Spelling Instruction* (6th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Boakye, N. A. N. Y. (2015). The relationship between self-efficacy and reading proficiency of first-year students: An exploratory study. *Reading & Writing*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/rw.v6i1.52>
- Chen, Y. (2020). Correlation between self-efficacy and english performance. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning*, 15(8), 223–234. <https://doi.org/10.3991/IJET.V15I08.13697>
- Choi, E., & Lee, J. (2018). EFL teachers' self-efficacy and teaching practices. *ELT Journal*, 72(2), 175–186. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccx046>
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research* (P. A. Smith, C. Robb, & K. Mason, Eds.; 4th ed.). Pearson Education, Inc.
- de Graaff, S., Bosman, A. M. T., Hasselman, F., & Verhoeven, L. (2009). Benefits of systematic phonics instruction. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 13(4), 318–333. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888430903001308>
- Değirmencioğlu, Ü. L. (2021). THE IMPACT OF TEACHER SELF-EFFICACY ON TEACHING TECHNIQUES: TRADITIONAL OR CONTEMPORARY? *European Journal of English Language Teaching*, 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.46827/ejel.v6i3.3662>
- Fitri, D. R., Sofyan, D., & Jayanti, F. G. (2019). The Correlation between Reading Self-Efficacy and Reading Comprehension. *Journal of English Education and Teaching*, 3(1).

- Hoi, C. K. W., Zhou, M., Teo, T., & Nie, Y. (2017). Measuring efficacy sources: Development and validation of the Sources of Teacher Efficacy Questionnaire (STEQ) for Chinese teachers. *Psychology in the Schools*, 54(7), 756–769. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22025>
- Johnston, R. S., McGeown, S., & Watson, J. E. (2012). Long-term effects of synthetic versus analytic phonics teaching on the reading and spelling ability of 10 year old boys and girls. *Reading and Writing*, 25.
- Lailiyah, M., & Cahyono, B. Y. (2017). Indonesian EFL Teachers' Self-Efficacy towards Technology Integration (SETI) and Their Use of Technology in EFL Teaching. *Studies in English Language Teaching*, 5(2), 344–357. <https://doi.org/10.22158/selt.v5n2p344>
- Martínez, A. M. M. (2011). Explicit and Differentiated Phonics Instruction as a Tool to Improve Literacy Skills for Children Learning English as a Foreign Language. *GIST Education and Learning Research Journal*, 5, 25–49.
- Rahman, F. (2018). The constraints of foreign learners in reading English literary works: A case study at Hasanuddin University. *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 7(2), 01-12.
- Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. National Academy Press.
- Tschannen-Moran, M., & Hoy, A. W. (2001). Teacher efficacy: Capturing an elusive construct. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17(7), 783–805. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X\(01\)00036-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X(01)00036-1)
- Utami, S., & Musthafa, B. (2023). The Utilization of Phonics Songs in Phonics Reading Classes in Indonesia: Teachers' Perspectives. *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Dan Sastra*, 22(2), 201–208. https://doi.org/10.17509/bs_jpbs.v22i2.55911
- Weda, S., Atmowardoyo, H., Rahman, F., Said, M. M., & Sakti, A. E. F. (2021). Factors Affecting Students' Willingness to Communicate in EFL Classroom at Higher Institution in Indonesia. *International Journal of Instruction*, 14(2), 719-734.
- Yaumi, M. T. A. H., Rahman, F., & Sahib, H. (2023). Exploring WhatsApp as Teaching and Learning Activities during Covid-19/New Normal era: A Semiotic Technology Analysis. *International Journal of Current Science Research and Review*, 6(12), 7627-7634.