

DEVELOPING LANGUAGE COMPETENCE FOR GRADE 1 STUDENTS THROUGH PHONICS INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the development of language competence in first-grade students through phonics instruction. It explores the key influencing factors and offers practical, classroom-tested solutions. This article outlines students' language capabilities, teaching models, instructional methods and visible signs of progress during early phonics learning. Special attention is given to designing learning tasks at various difficulty levels to help students acquire knowledge, skills and broader competencies. Findings were refined after pilot programs conducted at selected primary schools.

Keywords: Competency Development, Language Competence, Phonics Instruction, First- Grade Students.

1. INTRODUCTION

Grade 1 is a crucial starting point in primary education, laying the groundwork for students' essential skills, especially language competence. At this stage, phonics instruction serves as a gateway, helping students become familiar with the Vietnamese sound and writing systems. Through this process, they gradually build core language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. As Nguyen Minh Thuyet (2018) notes, phonics lessons not only help first graders master Vietnamese phonetics and spelling, but also nurture their ability to think and communicate in their native language.

The 2018 General Education Curriculum emphasizes competency-based teaching, placing Vietnamese language learning at the heart of both communication and cognitive skill development. However, in practice, phonics instruction still faces notable challenges. Many teachers find it difficult to adopt modern, student-centered methods. Students, especially those in ethnic minority or disadvantaged areas, often struggle with clear pronunciation, fluent reading and accurate spelling (Nguyen Thi Hanh, 2020). Le Phuong Lien (2021) suggests that to improve outcomes, teachers should adopt active learning methods, incorporate varied classroom activities and focus on both language and thinking skills. These realities point to an urgent need for research that not only evaluates current teaching practices but also recommends practical, tested strategies to improve language competence among Grade 1 students. These realities point to an urgent need for research that not only evaluates current teaching practices but also recommends practical, tested strategies to improve language competence among Grade 1 students.

Stemming from these practical challenges, this study aims to analyze the role of phonics instruction in developing language competence among Grade 1 students in Vietnam and to propose pedagogical solutions aligned with the ongoing educational reform.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Approach

This study applies a mixed-methods approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative techniques. It gathers empirical data while analyzing real classroom practices in depth. The methodology is aligned with Vietnam's 2018 General Education Curriculum, which emphasizes competency-based teaching and learning.

2.2. Research Subjects and Scope

- + **Focus:** Phonics instruction and the development of language competence in Grade 1 students.
- + **Participants:** Grade 1 teachers and students from selected primary schools in Thái Nguyên Province, with potential comparison to schools in other provinces.
- + **Timeframe:** Conducted in the first semester of the 2024–2025 academic year, when phonics instruction plays a central role in the Grade 1 curriculum.

2.3. Data Collection Methods

To ensure diverse and objective data, the study employed several complementary methods:

- + **Classroom observations:** Researchers used structured checklists to record teaching practices, student participation, and signs of language skill development during Grade 1 phonics lessons.
- + **Teacher interviews:** Semi-structured interviews with 10–15 Grade 1 teachers explored their perspectives, experiences, and challenges in delivering competency-based phonics instruction.
- + **Student surveys:** With teacher assistance, students completed simple surveys assessing their reading, writing, and pronunciation after the phonics phase.
- + **Student work analysis:** Researchers collected and reviewed student notebooks, writing exercises, and reading tasks to assess their language performance.

2.4. Data Analysis Methods

- + Qualitative data from classroom observations and teacher interviews were coded and categorized by key themes, such as language competence indicators, teaching methods, and common challenges.
- + Quantitative data collected from student surveys and work samples were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentages, frequencies, and average scores. Comparisons were made between schools in different settings (urban, rural, and ethnic minority areas) to identify any significant differences.

2.5. Research Reliability and Validity

To enhance the study's reliability, a triangulation approach was used, cross-checking findings from multiple sources: classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student work analysis. All data collection was carried out with the consent of teachers and school administrators, ensuring adherence to ethical standards in educational research.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Theoretical Framework

- Concept of Language Competence:

Language competence refers to the ability to use language flexibly, effectively and appropriately for communication purposes. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), language competence encompasses both receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing), combined with the strategic use of language to achieve communicative goals (Council of Europe, 2001). In primary education, students develop language competence through various Vietnamese language activities. Among these, phonics instruction plays a foundational role by helping students recognize sounds, syllables and words, forming the basis for reading and writing skills in Vietnamese. Nguyen Minh Thuyet (2018) emphasizes that phonics is a critical starting point for students to become familiar with the written language, thereby developing linguistic thinking and early communication skills.

- The Role of Phonics in Language Competence Development

Phonics instruction is an essential component of the Grade 1 Vietnamese curriculum. It enables students to grasp the sound-syllable structure of Vietnamese and accurately read and write simple syllables, words, and sentences. This stage is crucial for building foundational language knowledge and basic skills-key prerequisites for learning other subjects and developing logical thinking. According to Tran Thi Tuyet (2020), phonics not only helps students identify sounds and letters but also supports decoding, phonemic memory, and early reading comprehension. A competency-based approach to phonics instruction enhances students' ability to self-learn and think critically about syllables, while also expanding their vocabulary and expression skills.

- Competency-Based Teaching in the National Curriculum

Vietnam's 2018 General Education Curriculum sets out the goal of developing students' qualities and competencies, with language competence identified as a core focus. Vietnamese language instruction, especially in Grade 1, is designed to be integrated, learner-centered and practice-oriented, promoting language use in meaningful contexts. Phonics instruction aligns with these goals by equipping students with the knowledge and skills needed to recognize, understand and apply sound-letter patterns. It enables them to practice reading and writing syllables, words and basic sentences, as well as listening and speaking using target sounds. This phase shifts away from rote memorization and instead encourages natural language development through age-appropriate images, situations, poems, and short stories.

Phonics lessons promote communication and language interaction. Students are encouraged to exchange ideas, express opinions, read with emotion and retell stories using related images—all of which help develop their thinking and language expression. The lessons also emphasize real-world application. After learning a syllable, students engage in tasks such as writing example

sentences, naming pictures or reading short passages that incorporate the target sound. This reflects the goal of developing Vietnamese language skills as tools for communication and learning. Active teaching methods such as analysis-synthesis, language games, situational learning and project-based activities are used to ensure students don't just "know" but can actually "do"—the core of competency development under the new educational paradigm. Nguyen Thi Hanh (2021) highlights that true language competence is developed through meaningful, communicative activities in phonics instruction—not through mechanical drills.

- Modern Models and Approaches to Phonics Instruction:

+ Learning Through Play Model:

This model integrates phonics instruction with playful activities to increase student engagement and support natural language acquisition. According to UNICEF Vietnam (2020), learning through play enhances memory, language development and linguistic thinking in primary students, especially those in disadvantaged areas. For example, in the game "Fishing for Words," teachers prepare letter cards placed in a mock "fish pond." Students "fish" for the correct cards as directed by the teacher, then read the letters and combine them into syllables.

+ Multisensory Approach:

This method engages multiple senses (hearing, sight, touch, and movement) to teach phonics more effectively. It helps students build stronger, more lasting reading and writing skills. Research by France's National Institute for Advanced Studies in Special Education (INSHEA) shows that first-grade students using multisensory methods improved their ability to recognize sounds and syllables by 30% compared to those taught with traditional methods. In practice, students hear the sound, see the letter, and write it using their fingers on sand, magnetic boards or clay. They may also use hand gestures or visual cues to diacritical tone marks (e.g., flat, falling, rising, curve, or heavy tones).

+ Synthetic Phonics Approach (Sound–Syllable–Word–Sentence):

This method teaches students to analyze and construct syllables step by step: from individual sounds → syllables → complete words → full sentences. Widely used in the UK and Australia, this method has been introduced in Vietnam through international education projects. The revised Grade 1 Vietnamese curriculum (2020) incorporates this approach into phonics instruction, emphasizing practice through the sequence of sound - syllable - word - sentence to strengthen reading comprehension.

Example:

Phonemes: b – a – n

Syllables: b–an → ban

Words: ban, bạn, bàn

Sentence: Bạn An có cái bàn.

3.2. Current Practices in Phonics Instruction in Primary Schools

Observations of 12 phonics lessons across four primary schools in urban, rural, and mountainous areas revealed that most teachers followed the phonics teaching sequence outlined in the Grade 1 Vietnamese textbooks *Cánh Diều* and *Chân Trời Sáng Tạo*. However, the use of active teaching methods remained limited. In some classrooms, instruction was still largely teacher-centered, focusing on choral reading and board writing, with minimal emphasis on individual activities or language games.

From 15 teacher interviews, 80% of respondents reported that the current phonics curriculum is overly dense, especially given its short duration of only 16 weeks. They noted that many first-grade students, particularly those in disadvantaged areas, struggle to keep up. Additionally, around 60% of teachers said they faced challenges in designing language development activities due to a lack of supporting materials and specific teaching guides.

- Indicators of Students' Language Competence After Phonics Instruction:

A survey of 120 first-grade students revealed the following:

- + Oral Reading Skills: Approximately 75% of students were able to read short passages aloud with moderate to good speed and accuracy. However, roughly 20% still mispronounced complex syllables such as *oang*, *uyên*, and *iêu*, especially among ethnic minority students.
- + Spelling and Writing Skills: Approximately 68% of students were able to correctly write simple sentences of 5–7 words. Common errors included missing tone marks and confusing similar-sounding syllables (e.g., “tr/ch”, “d/gi”). Teachers noted that reduced writing practice time may have contributed to weaker spelling skills.
- + Listening and Speaking Skills: speaking practice was occasionally integrated. Only 45% of students were confident in expressing simple sentences about themselves or familiar objects (e.g., “Con mèo màu trắng”, “Tôi tên là Mai”). Many others were hesitant or struggled to speak clearly.
- + Language Application Skills: Grade 1 students demonstrated limited ability to use language in situational communication or emotional expression, largely due to the lack of real-life practice opportunities during phonics lessons.

- Key Factors Affecting Language Competence in Grade 1 Phonics Instruction:

Analysis of classroom observations and teacher interviews highlighted several key factors influencing students' language development:

- + Teachers' pedagogical competence and their ability to design effective language-focused activities.
- + Students' initial language proficiency, particularly among those from ethnic minority backgrounds.
- + Classroom conditions, including class size, teaching tools, and language environment
- + Supplementary materials and the allocated instructional time for phonics lessons.

3.3. Strategies for Developing Language Competency in Grade 1 students through Phonics Instruction Innovating Phonics Teaching Methods

- *Defining Learning Outcomes and Designing Competency-Developing Tasks*

For example: Teaching the "AT, ÂT, ÂT" vowel patterns to Grade 1 students

Competency/Learning Outcome	Expected Outcome (Level of Difficulty)	Learning Task to Build Knowledge and Skills
Oral reading	- Students correctly pronounce phonemes, syllables, words and sentences (with minor errors in uncommon or complex syllables) - Students read passages/texts clearly and fluently at a speed of 40–60 words per minute. Proper pausing at punctuation marks (commas, periods, and line breaks), demonstrating appropriate prosody and comprehension.	- Students observe and imitate the teacher's mouth movements-including tongue placement, mouth opening, and airflow-when pronouncing syllables such as a-t-at, ă-t-ăt, and â-t-ât (low level of difficulty). - Students practice reading individually, in pairs and in chorus under the teacher's guidance, focusing on syllables (moderate difficulty). - Students practice reading aloud individually, in groups and in chorus a variety of linguistic units including syllables, words, sentences, and short paragraphs as directed by the teacher (higher level of difficulty).

Knowledge	- Recognition: + Able to identify the constituent phonemes of a syllable (low level of difficulty). + Able to recognize syllables within words (moderate difficulty). + Able to identify syllables embedded in words within sentences and short paragraphs (high level of difficulty) - Understanding: + Understands the structure of the syllables “at, ät, ât” (low level of difficulty). + Can distinguish structural differences between these syllables (moderate difficulty). + Understands the position and function of syllables within a word (high level of difficulty). - Application: + Combines letter cards to form the syllables “at”, “ät”, and “ât” (low level of difficulty). + Constructs new words using the syllables “at, ät, ât” by combining appropriate letter cards (moderate difficulty). + Independently creates new words containing the syllables “at, ät, ât”, in accordance with	- Students observe syllables presented on flashcards or the board. - Students identify and underline syllables containing “at,” “ät,” “ât” in given words. - Students identify and underline syllables containing “at,” “ät,” “ât” in sentences and short paragraphs. - Students analyze the internal structure of the syllable “at”, recognizing that it consists of two phonemes: the vowel “a” followed by the consonant “t”; they apply the same analysis to “ät” and “ât”. - Students compare and contrast the structure of the syllables “at,” “ät,” “ât”, noting similarities and differences. - Students locate the position of the syllable within a word and discuss its function in forming meaning. - Students use letter cards to construct the syllable “at” following the teacher’s model. - Students create the syllables “ät” and “ât” by retaining the final consonant “t” and substituting the initial vowel with “ä” or “â”.
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	Vietnamese orthographic rules (excluding incompatible initial consonants such as ngh, k, gh, etc., and inappropriate tonal marks such as ngang, huyền, hỏi, ngã where not allowed) (high level of difficulty).	-Students form new words containing “at,” “ăt,” “ât” by combining them with designated or self-chosen initial consonants-either assigned by the teacher to groups or selected by students to cover a broad range of possibilities. + Approach 1: The teacher reads aloud commonly confused words such as “cát” (which students may mistakenly spell as “kats”) or “ngắt” (potentially confused with “nghắt”), prompting students to listen and correct. +Approach 2: Students detect and correct errors in sentences by assembling correct letter combinations and displaying their cards. For example, in the sentence “Bạn Nam ghật gù ngồi nghe,” students identify “ghật” as incorrect, then reconstruct and display the correct word “gật.” The teacher consolidates common spelling errors by creating a matrix chart: placing initial consonants along one axis and syllables along the other, filling in possible combinations and marking those that are invalid.
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Skill	-Recognition: +Recognizes and imitates the articulatory features- such as tongue position, mouth opening, and airflow-when pronouncing the syllables a-t-at, ă-t-ăt, and â-t-ât (low level of difficulty). + Independently pronounces the target syllables correctly (moderate difficulty). + Pronounces words and vocabulary items containing the target syllables with accuracy (high level of difficulty). -Understanding: + Distinguishes differences in mouth articulation (e.g., tongue position, mouth shape, airflow) when pronouncing the target syllables with teacher guidance (low level of difficulty). + Identifies and accurately pronounces the syllables as required (moderate difficulty). + Recognizes and correctly articulates words and syllables within full sentences or short paragraphs (high level of difficulty). -Application: + Fluently reads the sample syllables and words	-Students observe and imitate the teacher's articulation. - Students practice reading individually, in pairs, and in chorus under the teacher's guidance. - Students identify the differences in pronunciation between the syllables "at," "ăt," and "ât." - Students pronounce the syllables individually, in groups, and in chorus. - Students pronounce words, sentences, and short paragraphs containing the target syllables in various formats (individual, group, choral reading). - Students listen to and fluently read example words and syllables from the textbook. - Students fluently read words and syllables they have previously built or identified. -Students read words, sentences, and reading passages from the textbook fluently, paying attention to proper pausing and intonation.
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	provided in the textbook (low level of difficulty). + Fluently reads syllables and words that students have independently constructed or discovered (moderate difficulty). + Fluently reads syllables and words containing “at, ăt, ât” in reading passages; reads full sentences and paragraphs with correct pausing and intonation, following punctuation marks (high level of difficulty).	
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+ Enhancing Interactive Activities: Integrate language games, group discussions and role-play activities into phonics lessons to help students practice sounds and syllables in communicative contexts. For example, when teaching the syllable “an”, students can observe pictures of objects such as *bàn* (table), *đàn* (instrument), and *lan* (orchid), and then engage in small group discussions with questions like: “*What do you see in the picture?*” or “*Which object do you like and why?*” Or teachers can organize competitive games like “Who’s Faster?”, where students race to form words containing the target syllable. These interactive methods not only reinforce phonics knowledge but also foster language use in authentic and engaging ways.

+ Applying the Analytical–Synthetic Method with Visual Support: Use educational software, letter cards, and illustrated visuals to help students identify and understand syllables more effectively. For instance, syllables like “ân” and “ăn” can be taught using engaging videos that provide clear, visual representations of how each is pronounced and used.

+ Designing Flexible Lesson Plans: Design lessons that integrate silent reading, oral reading and spelling practice. Incorporate simple listening and speaking tasks to encourage students to tell short stories or create sentences related to the target syllables. For example, after a lesson on the syllables “at, ăt, ât”, the teacher may ask students to form sentences containing at least two of the syllables they have just learned.

- Strengthening Teachers’ Professional Capacity:

+ Organize professional training through classroom observations and peer learning between experienced and less experienced teachers. Invite Vietnamese language education experts to conduct workshops on active teaching methods and the integration of technology into phonics instruction. Develop and share supplemental materials such as: A teaching handbook with step-by-step guides for language competence activities for each phonics lesson; A bank of language games; Instructional videos demonstrating standard pronunciation techniques

+ Adjusting Instruction Time for Disadvantaged Areas: Consider extending the duration of

phonics instruction in underprivileged and remote regions to allow students sufficient time for practice and reinforcement.

+ Improving Textbooks and Teaching Guides: Enhance textbooks by including a wider variety of practical exercises and sample communication situations. Provide clearer guidance on how to organize lessons that support competency development. Teacher manuals should offer more detailed suggestions for integrating listening and speaking activities, including illustrated examples and classroom strategies tailored to first-grade learners

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reaffirm that phonics instruction in Grade 1 plays a crucial role in building students' foundational language competence. This aligns with Nguyen Minh Thuyet's (2018) assertion that phonics is an essential starting point for familiarizing young learners with phonology, orthography and linguistic thinking. However, current teaching practices still reveal significant limitations, which hinder the effective development of students' language abilities.

Compared to the research by Tran Thi Tuyet (2020), which found that Grade 1 students can develop strong reading and writing skills when active teaching methods are applied, our study shows that many teachers, especially in rural and ethnic minority areas, continue to rely on traditional, teacher-centered approaches with limited innovation in classroom activities. This directly impacts learning outcomes and slows students' language development. As a result, there is a noticeable gap between the intended objectives of the curriculum and its actual implementation in schools.

Furthermore, Nguyen Thi Hanh (2021) emphasized that language competence truly develops when students are engaged in interactive, communicative activities with regular feedback during phonics instruction. However, data from this study reveal that opportunities for language practice remain limited: few students get the chance to speak, tell stories, or form sentences during lessons. Many are still hesitant to communicate or unfamiliar with using language in meaningful contexts. This highlights the need to intentionally integrate listening and speaking into phonics lessons, even if they are not the primary focus, in order to ensure well-rounded language development.

In comparison to the Ministry of Education and Training's 2022 report on Vietnamese language instruction in Grade 1 after three years of implementing the 2018 General Education Curriculum, this study also notes that the current 16-week timeframe for phonics instruction is insufficient for students with weaker language foundations, particularly when no appropriate supplementary materials are provided. Teachers also reported a lack of specific guidance on how to organize competency-based activities, making it difficult to design flexible and engaging lessons. Therefore, the findings underscore that without a pedagogical shift toward competency-based phonics instruction, Grade 1 students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, will continue to face substantial barriers in acquiring basic language skills. This could negatively affect their long-term academic progress across other subjects.

4. CONCLUSION

Phonics instruction in Grade 1 plays a pivotal role in shaping and developing students' foundational language competence, including basic reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. However, practical implementation, particularly in rural and ethnic minority areas, still faces several limitations. Teachers often rely on traditional methods, with minimal incorporation of interactive activities, language games or real-life communication contexts. The current instructional duration of approximately 16 weeks, along with the lack of supplementary materials, has proven insufficient to meet the reinforcement and practice needs of students, especially those with weaker language foundations. Many students continue to struggle with complex syllables, make frequent spelling errors and omit tonal marks. Moreover, their speaking skills and ability to apply language in real-life contexts remain underdeveloped. To truly foster comprehensive language competence among first-grade students, a systemic transformation is required—ranging from teaching methods, lesson design, and instructional resources, to broader support policies from educational authorities. Only through such coordinated efforts can phonics instruction become more effective and equitable across diverse learning environments.

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