




# Impact of Culturally Relevant Phonics Instruction on Early Literacy Acquisition among Grade 1 Learners in a Pacific Island Context

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Articles Information	Abstract
<p><b>Received</b> : 16-10-2025</p> <p><b>Revised R1</b> : 11-12-2025</p> <p><b>Accepted</b> : 25-12-2025</p> <p><b>Published</b> : 31-12-2025</p>	<p>This study investigated the effects of Culturally Relevant Phonics Instruction (CRPI) on early literacy acquisition among Grade 1 learners in a Pacific Island context. Employing a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control design over twelve weeks, the study involved 56 students assigned to an experimental and a control group. The experimental group received phonics instruction integrated with local stories, culturally familiar vocabulary, and visual imagery, while the control group followed the national phonics curriculum. ANCOVA results indicated statistically significant improvements in letter–sound recognition, decoding accuracy, and reading comprehension for students receiving CRPI, with large effect sizes across all measures. Qualitative evidence from classroom observations and teacher interviews corroborated these findings, revealing heightened student engagement, more effective phonological transfer through language bridging, and increased teacher instructional confidence. Overall, the findings demonstrate that embedding phonics instruction within learners’ linguistic and cultural contexts enhances early literacy development and supports inclusive and equitable education aligned with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Culturally Relevant Pedagogy; Phonics Instruction; Early Literacy; Multilingual Education; Inclusive Education; SDG 4</p>

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Literacy is widely recognized as a fundamental component of human development and lifelong learning, serving as the foundation for academic success, civic participation, and social inclusion. Early literacy, in particular, is crucial because it shapes children's later reading comprehension and overall academic achievement (Castles et al., 2018; Ehri et al., 2020). Within early literacy pedagogy, phonics instruction—emphasizing systematic relationships between sounds and letters—has been validated as one of the most effective strategies for improving decoding and word recognition skills across diverse learning contexts (Ehri et al., 2020; Martin, 2024). However, despite its demonstrated efficacy, standardized phonics approaches have been predominantly designed in Western, monolingual, English-speaking contexts, raising concerns about their cultural and linguistic transferability to multilingual and multicultural settings (Kelly et al., 2021; Lyons & Scull, 2023).

In many Pacific Island schools, early grade literacy programs adopt phonics models imported from anglophone systems, using stories, vocabulary, and imagery that do not reflect children's linguistic or cultural backgrounds. This mismatch can reduce student engagement, limit comprehension, and create a disconnection between home and school literacies (Lawson, 2024). Research in culturally responsive teaching has consistently shown that integrating learners' cultural and linguistic experiences into instruction enhances learning motivation, comprehension, and identity affirmation (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021). In early literacy education, culturally relevant instruction not only bridges linguistic gaps but also supports children's socio-emotional connection to reading, as they see their lives and communities represented in classroom materials (Au, 2017; Lee, 2021). This principle aligns closely with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education for all learners, particularly in multilingual and marginalized communities (UNESCO, 2022).

Recent studies have revisited phonics through culturally and linguistically responsive frameworks. Lyons and Scull (2023) found that when teachers contextualized phonics lessons using local stories and familiar vocabulary, students' literacy outcomes and engagement significantly improved. Similarly, a randomized controlled trial in India demonstrated that a localized phonics intervention using the GraphoLearn program significantly enhanced decoding fluency among young bilingual learners (Kashyap et al., 2024). In a Pacific context, initiatives such as Samoa's Systematic Synthetic Phonics Project showed substantial gains in reading accuracy and teacher confidence when phonics instruction was adapted to local contexts (Pacific Community [SPC], 2024a; 2024b). Comparable findings emerged from Indonesia, where phonics contextualized with local content improved reading motivation and accuracy among early grade learners with special needs (Suharto et al., 2025). Martin (2024) further emphasized that learners' first language (L1) orthography and phonological background influence how effectively they acquire English phonics, reinforcing the need to adapt phonics to local linguistic structures.

Beyond isolated case studies, recent literature reviews also highlight a growing consensus on the importance of culturally informed literacy instruction. Kelly et al. (2021) reviewed over 50 studies in PreK–Grade 5 contexts and concluded that while culturally responsive literacy practices are widely endorsed, few

empirical studies have examined how cultural integration affects structured phonics outcomes. Likewise, Lawson (2024) showed that including students' cultural identities and home languages in phonics activities increased motivation and self-efficacy in reading. Meanwhile, studies in Tanzania and East Africa indicated that teacher experience and professional development significantly mediate the success of phonics instruction, suggesting that contextual knowledge and pedagogical adaptation are critical (Mosha & Mwandishi, 2023). Across these studies, a consistent theme emerges: phonics instruction yields stronger literacy outcomes when it resonates with learners' linguistic and cultural realities.

However, despite growing recognition of the value of culturally relevant pedagogy, significant research gaps persist in its application to phonics instruction within small-island and multilingual settings. First, while several Pacific education initiatives have adopted systematic phonics programs, few have rigorously evaluated the measurable impact of culturally adapted phonics on early literacy outcomes. Most existing reports remain descriptive or programmatic rather than empirical (SPC, 2024a, 2024b). Second, much of the available research has focused primarily on decoding skills, with limited exploration of how culturally relevant phonics affects broader literacy outcomes such as comprehension, engagement, and reading confidence (Kelly et al., 2021; Lawson, 2024). Third, little is known about how teachers' professional preparation and local language knowledge influence the implementation of culturally adapted phonics programs (Lyons & Scull, 2023). Lastly, the lack of assessment tools that capture literacy development within local linguistic frameworks continues to constrain valid measurement of learning gains in such contexts (Lee, 2021).

Given these gaps, the present study aims to investigate the impact of culturally relevant phonics instruction (CRPI) on early literacy acquisition among primary-grade students in a Pacific Island context. By embedding local stories, familiar names, and regional phonemes into structured phonics instruction, this research seeks to determine whether contextualized phonics can yield measurable improvements in letter-sound recognition, decoding, and comprehension skills. Furthermore, it explores how teachers and learners experience culturally relevant phonics in classroom practice, contributing both to the theoretical discourse on culturally responsive pedagogy and the practical pursuit of SDG 4—ensuring inclusive and quality education for all.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Phonics and Early Literacy Development**

Phonics instruction forms the foundation of early literacy development by teaching children the systematic relationships between letters and sounds to decode written words. Through explicit and systematic instruction, phonics helps learners understand the alphabetic principle—how graphemes correspond to phonemes—which is essential for accurate word recognition, fluency, and comprehension (Castles et al., 2018; Ehri et al., 2020). Meta-analyses conducted by Ehri et al. (2020) and the National Reading Panel consistently show that systematic phonics instruction is more effective than non-systematic or incidental methods, particularly during the early stages of reading acquisition. These effects are especially

pronounced in children who are at risk of reading difficulties or who are learning English as an additional language (Kashyap et al., 2024; Torgerson et al., 2019).

Recent studies have further refined our understanding of how phonics functions across linguistic contexts. For example, Martin (2024) demonstrated that first language (L1) orthographic knowledge influences the effectiveness of phonics instruction for adult ESL learners, highlighting the need for instruction that reflects learners' linguistic backgrounds. Similarly, research by Lyons and Scull (2023) in Australian classrooms emphasized that phonics instruction embedded in contextualized reading materials promotes deeper understanding and engagement. Beyond decoding, phonics supports vocabulary development and comprehension by enabling students to connect phonological knowledge with semantic meaning (Hulme et al., 2020; Share, 2021).

However, despite its proven effectiveness, most phonics curricula were originally developed in monolingual, English-dominant environments (Castles et al., 2018; National Early Literacy Panel, 2020). When applied in multilingual or multicultural contexts, these programs may not align with the local phonological systems, orthographic conventions, or oral traditions of learners (Lee, 2021; Moats, 2020). For instance, in Pacific Island nations where English coexists with indigenous languages, learners often encounter challenges distinguishing unfamiliar English phonemes not present in their native languages. This linguistic distance can lead to decoding errors and reduced reading fluency (Pacific Community [SPC], 2024a). Thus, the phonics model, while effective in principle, requires contextual adaptation to ensure it meets the cognitive and linguistic realities of diverse learners.

## **2.2. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Literacy**

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) seeks to make learning more meaningful by integrating students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and community practices into instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018). It promotes three key dimensions: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, which together empower students to connect their learning to their lived realities. In literacy education, CRP provides a framework for designing reading and writing instruction that reflects students' linguistic repertoires and cultural worldviews (Au, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Empirical evidence supports the efficacy of culturally responsive approaches in literacy instruction. Kelly et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review of PreK–Grade 5 research and found that literacy programs incorporating culturally relevant materials improved reading motivation, comprehension, and vocabulary growth. Likewise, Lee (2021) demonstrated that integrating home languages and local cultural references in reading instruction enhanced multilingual learners' confidence and engagement. Lawson (2024) reported that students who participated in phonics lessons using culturally familiar characters and narratives showed greater decoding accuracy and reading self-efficacy than those in standardized phonics programs.

In the Pacific context, localized approaches to literacy have been implemented with promising results. For example, Samoa's Systematic Synthetic Phonics Project adapted instructional materials to include indigenous names and cultural imagery, resulting in improved literacy outcomes and teacher

confidence (SPC, 2024a; 2024b). Similar culturally contextualized phonics programs in Indonesia (Suharto et al., 2025) and East Africa (Mosha & Mwandihhi, 2023) have shown that integrating community narratives and local linguistic structures can bridge home-school literacy gaps and enhance learner participation.

The theoretical foundation of CRP aligns closely with sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which posits that learning occurs through social interaction and cultural mediation. Within literacy instruction, this means children make sense of text by relating it to familiar experiences, symbols, and oral traditions (Gee, 2020). When literacy instruction disconnects from learners' cultural backgrounds, it risks alienating them from the learning process, particularly in postcolonial or multilingual education systems (Paris & Alim, 2017). Therefore, culturally relevant literacy pedagogy serves not merely as a pedagogical innovation but as an ethical imperative for achieving equitable education outcomes and advancing SDG 4 on quality and inclusive education (UNESCO, 2022).

### **2.3. Research Gap**

Despite increasing global advocacy for culturally responsive pedagogy, empirical research examining its intersection with systematic phonics instruction remains limited. Most phonics studies continue to focus on English-dominant or urban multilingual contexts, while research in small-island or indigenous education systems remains sparse (Kelly et al., 2021; Lyons & Scull, 2023). Moreover, the few Pacific literacy initiatives that have implemented phonics programs—such as those in Samoa or Fiji—are largely descriptive reports rather than rigorously evaluated studies (SPC, 2024a).

Second, existing studies primarily assess decoding and letter-sound recognition, with less attention given to higher-order literacy skills such as comprehension, motivation, or reading confidence within culturally grounded instruction (Lawson, 2024). Third, teacher professional knowledge and training in culturally relevant phonics remain underexplored. Research has shown that teacher beliefs and cultural competence strongly influence instructional quality (Mosha & Mwandihhi, 2023), yet few studies have examined how teacher preparation mediates culturally contextualized phonics effectiveness. Finally, there is a notable lack of validated literacy assessment tools tailored to the linguistic and cultural contexts of Pacific learners, limiting the comparability of research findings (Lee, 2021).

This study seeks to address these gaps by empirically examining the effects of culturally relevant phonics instruction on early literacy acquisition among young learners in a Pacific Island context. By integrating local stories, familiar names, and regional phonemes into phonics lessons, the study aims to contribute both theoretically—to the discourse on culturally responsive literacy—and practically—to the advancement of inclusive, quality education aligned with SDG 4.

## **3. METHOD**

### **3.1. Research Design**

This study employed a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design to examine the effects of culturally relevant phonics instruction (CRPI) on early literacy acquisition among Grade 1

learners. The quasi-experimental design was selected because full randomization was not feasible within the natural classroom settings of the participating school (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Two intact Grade 1 classes with comparable demographic and academic profiles were assigned as the experimental and control groups, comprising a total of 56 students. The intervention was implemented over a period of 12 weeks, allowing sufficient time for systematic phonics instruction and observable literacy development. The design enabled the researchers to measure literacy gains attributable to the culturally relevant instructional approach, while controlling for initial differences through pretest covariates.

### **3.2. Participants**

Participants were 56 students aged six to seven years, enrolled in a public primary school located in a coastal rural area. All participants were native speakers of an Austronesian language and were learning English as a second language (L2). The selection of this demographic was intentional, as the learners represented a linguistically homogeneous group with limited exposure to English outside school, which aligns with the broader linguistic ecology of Pacific Island education systems (Kelly et al., 2021; SPC, 2024a). Parental consent and school approval were obtained prior to participation, following ethical protocols for research with children (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018). The two participating classes were taught by experienced Grade 1 teachers with comparable qualifications and years of teaching experience. To minimize teacher-related variability, both teachers received orientation sessions on the instructional framework and data collection procedures before the intervention began.

### **3.3. Intervention**

The experimental group received Culturally Relevant Phonics Instruction (CRPI), which integrated local linguistic and cultural elements into the standard phonics framework. Lessons followed a synthetic phonics sequence (from simple to complex grapheme–phoneme correspondences) but incorporated familiar local names, places, folktales, and visual imagery within word lists and reading passages. For example, instead of generic English words (e.g., cat, dog), the CRPI materials included culturally embedded examples such as local animal names or community terms reflective of the learners' environment. Teachers also used story-based reading activities derived from indigenous narratives to contextualize target phonemes. The instructional materials were co-developed with local educators and linguists to ensure cultural and linguistic accuracy, in line with recommendations by Ladson-Billings (2021) and Paris and Alim (2017) for culturally sustaining pedagogy.

The control group, by contrast, followed the standard national phonics curriculum, which utilized commercially published English reading texts developed for global use. This curriculum emphasized phoneme blending, decoding drills, and standardized vocabulary lists without contextual adaptation. Both groups received four 40-minute phonics sessions per week over 12 weeks, delivered by their respective classroom teachers. Classroom fidelity was monitored weekly through lesson observations using a structured checklist to ensure consistency in instructional time, pacing, and teaching approach.



### **3.4. Instruments**

Three main instruments were used to collect data: (1) an Early Literacy Assessment, (2) an Observation Checklist, and (3) a Teacher Interview Protocol.

The Early Literacy Assessment measured three domains: (a) letter–sound recognition, (b) decoding accuracy, and (c) reading comprehension. The instrument was adapted from the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS; Good et al., 2019) and localized through expert review to ensure cultural and linguistic appropriateness. The test comprised 40 items, administered individually before and after the 12-week intervention. Reliability analysis yielded Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ , indicating high internal consistency.

The Observation Checklist was designed to document classroom engagement, participation, and affective responses during phonics lessons. It included behavioral indicators such as attentiveness, verbal participation, peer collaboration, and enjoyment. Two trained observers independently coded classroom sessions every two weeks, and inter-rater reliability reached  $\kappa = .83$ , reflecting strong agreement.

Lastly, the Teacher Interview Protocol gathered qualitative insights into the instructional process and teachers' perceptions of student engagement and learning outcomes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the intervention, lasting approximately 45 minutes each. Questions focused on challenges, perceived impacts of cultural integration, and reflections on teaching phonics in multilingual contexts. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent thematic analysis.

### **3.5. Data Analysis**

A mixed-methods analytical approach was used to triangulate quantitative and qualitative findings. Quantitative data from the Early Literacy Assessment were analyzed using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA), with pretest scores entered as covariates to control for initial differences between groups (Field, 2020). The dependent variables were posttest scores in letter–sound recognition, decoding, and reading comprehension. ANCOVA assumptions—linearity, homogeneity of regression slopes, and normality—were tested prior to analysis. Effect sizes were calculated using partial eta squared ( $\eta^2$ ) to determine the magnitude of differences.

Qualitative data from classroom observations and teacher interviews were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase approach: familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting. Thematic patterns were identified to capture teachers' perspectives on cultural relevance, student engagement, and instructional challenges. Findings from both data strands were integrated during interpretation to provide a holistic understanding of how culturally relevant phonics instruction influenced early literacy acquisition. This concurrent triangulation ensured methodological rigor and enhanced the validity of the findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

## 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Quantitative Results

A one-way Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in posttest literacy outcomes between students who received Culturally Relevant Phonics Instruction (CRPI) and those taught with the Standard Phonics Program (SPP), while controlling for pretest performance. The analysis aimed to assess the extent to which culturally embedded materials influenced gains in letter–sound recognition, decoding accuracy, and reading comprehension.

Prior to running ANCOVA, the data were screened for outliers and missing values; no extreme scores were detected. The assumptions of normality, linearity, and homogeneity of regression slopes were met. Shapiro–Wilk tests ( $p > .05$ ) confirmed normal distribution of residuals, and Levene’s test for equality of error variances was nonsignificant ( $p > .05$ ). Internal consistency of the Early Literacy Assessment instrument was high (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .89$ ), indicating good reliability across subtests (Field, 2020; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for both groups on pretest and posttest measures. Across all literacy components, the CRPI group demonstrated greater gains compared to the control group.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for Early Literacy Scores (n = 56)

Literacy Measure	Group	Pretest M (SD)	Posttest M (SD)	Mean Gain
Letter–Sound Recognition (max 40)	CRPI (n = 28)	18.32 (3.21)	33.54 (4.08)	+15.22
	Control (n = 28)	18.07 (3.47)	27.18 (4.26)	+9.11
Decoding Accuracy (max 40)	CRPI	15.61 (4.02)	31.36 (5.01)	+15.75
	Control	15.25 (3.89)	25.44 (4.72)	+10.19
Reading Comprehension (max 20)	CRPI	8.18 (1.83)	15.61 (2.34)	+7.43
	Control	8.29 (1.77)	12.21 (2.12)	+3.92

After adjusting for pretest scores, the ANCOVA results revealed significant group differences across all literacy domains in favor of the CRPI group. Effect sizes were calculated using partial eta squared ( $\eta^2$ ), following Cohen’s (1988) benchmarks: .01 = small, .06 = medium, .14 = large.

**Table 2.** ANCOVA Results for Early Literacy Outcomes

Literacy Measure	F(1,53)	p-value	Partial $\eta^2$	Interpretation
Letter–Sound Recognition	18.74	< .001	.26	Large effect
Decoding Accuracy	15.42	< .001	.23	Large effect
Reading Comprehension	21.08	< .001	.28	Large effect

The results indicate that students exposed to Culturally Relevant Phonics Instruction significantly outperformed their peers across all three literacy measures. The largest effect was observed for reading comprehension ( $\eta^2 = .28$ ), followed by letter–sound recognition and decoding accuracy. This pattern suggests that embedding local linguistic features, familiar character names, and cultural narratives not only



supported phonological decoding but also strengthened comprehension by enhancing text relevance and semantic connection.

These findings corroborate earlier studies showing that culturally grounded literacy materials increase learner engagement and reading achievement (Lee, 2021; Lyons & Scull, 2023; Lawson, 2024). The results further align with sociocultural theories of reading which posit that comprehension develops most effectively when literacy instruction connects to children's lived experiences and language systems (Au, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2017). Furthermore, the cognitive mechanisms observed here may be explained by dual coding and schema activation—learners more readily internalize grapheme–phoneme correspondences when symbols and words evoke culturally meaningful concepts (Ehri, 2020; Halliday, 2019).

## 4.2. Qualitative Findings

Qualitative data obtained from periodic classroom observations and semi-structured teacher interviews after the intervention provided deeper insights into the mechanisms underlying the significant improvements observed in quantitative literacy scores. Three dominant themes emerged from thematic analysis: (1) Cultural Familiarity Enhances Engagement, (2) Language Bridges Improve Phonological Transfer, and (3) Teacher Empowerment through Contextualization. Each theme is detailed below with illustrative quotations and connections to recent literature.

### Theme 1: Cultural Familiarity Enhances Engagement

Teachers reported that when phonics materials included local names, folktales, or characters familiar to their students, their enthusiasm and attention increased significantly. For example, one teacher stated:

*"When they see the name of their village or a character in a story they know, they immediately want to read and repeat the words."*

Observations showed increased voluntary participation—for example, students who were usually passive began asking questions or reading aloud—as well as increased peer collaboration during reading activities. Positive emotional responses, such as smiling or laughing when recognizing something from their culture, were also recorded. This theme is consistent with findings from Teaching Phonics in Context: Stories of teachers' practice and students' outcomes (Lyons & Scull, 2024), where the use of local context in phonics literacy increased student motivation and satisfaction. Also supported by the Culturally Responsive Instruction and Literacy Learning study in Hawaiian-focused charter schools, which found that connections to the local community and language increased literacy satisfaction and engagement (Keehne, Sarsona, Kawakami, Au, et al., 2018).

### Theme 2: Language Bridges Improve Phonological Transfer

Teachers also reported that the use of language bridging—associating English phonemes with

sounds in the student's home language—helped students recognize and produce previously unfamiliar phonemes. For example, teachers explained the sounds /θ/ or /f/ in English by contrasting them with similar sounds in the local language or using local terms as analogs. With this approach, students appeared to master sound segmentation and phonemic blending more quickly than when phonics materials only used common English words/vocabulary.

This finding aligns with research in *\*Lexical Restructuring Stimulates Phonological Awareness among Emerging English–French Bilingual Children's Literacy\** (Krenca, Segers, Verhoeven, Steele, et al., 2022), which showed that increased vocabulary and lexical clarity in both languages strengthen phonological awareness. In addition, the study *Bringing a Culturally Sustaining Lens to Reading Intervention* by Wissman (2021) also reported that students' use of literature that reflects their home culture and language improves listening and sound identification skills in bilingual/ENL (English as New Language) settings, making students more confident when learning phonics.

### Theme 3: Teacher Empowerment through Contextualization

Teachers participating in the intervention felt they gained ownership of the teaching materials when given the opportunity to contextualize phonics with local input. They noted that phonics instruction no longer simply followed standard worksheets or textbooks but became more creative and meaningful, as the teaching materials, stories, and visuals were based on the students' culture and experiences. One teacher said:

*"I feel more confident teaching because the materials are about our environment – the children can see their house, their friends' names, the animals they know; I don't have to force something unfamiliar."*

Participation in the development of these materials also improved teachers' ability to identify which parts of the phonics curriculum could be adapted and which should be retained to maintain phonetically accurate content. This reinforces the literature on the role of teacher professionalism and training in culturally relevant pedagogy, as reported in *Teaching Phonics in Context* (Lyons & Scull, 2024), which shows that teachers trained in contextualized and culturally relevant phonics practices are more effective.

Additionally, the study *What Is Culturally Informed Literacy Instruction? A Review of Research in P-5 Contexts* (Kelly, Wakefield, Caires-Hurley, Watanabe Kganetso, et al., 2021) found that teachers who understood their students' cultural backgrounds and were given the freedom to choose culturally appropriate materials, reading materials, or literacy texts reported a higher sense of professional accomplishment and more meaningful interactions with students.

### 4.3. Discussion

This study aimed to evaluate the efficacy of Culturally Relevant Phonics Instruction (CRPI) in enhancing early literacy skills among young learners. The findings indicate that CRPI significantly outperformed traditional phonics instruction across all measured literacy domains, including letter–sound recognition, decoding accuracy, and reading comprehension. These quantitative results are further elucidated by qualitative insights, which collectively underscore the importance of cultural relevance in literacy education.

#### 4.3.1. Cultural Familiarity

The substantial gains observed in the CRPI group can be attributed, in part, to the incorporation of culturally familiar content into phonics instruction. Teachers reported heightened student engagement when lessons featured local names, stories, and characters. This aligns with research by Kelly et al. (2021), who found that culturally informed literacy instruction fosters a sense of belonging and motivation among students. Similarly, Lyons and Scull (2024) observed that embedding local context in phonics instruction enhances student engagement and satisfaction.

#### 4.3.2. Leveraging Language Bridges for Phonological Awareness

The qualitative data revealed that teachers employed language bridging strategies, connecting English phonemes to those in students' home languages, which facilitated phonemic awareness and decoding skills. This approach is supported by Krenca et al. (2022), who demonstrated that lexical restructuring can stimulate phonological awareness in bilingual children. Wissman (2021) also highlighted the effectiveness of culturally sustaining practices in improving phonological awareness among emergent bilinguals.

#### 4.3.3. Empowering Educators through Contextualized Instruction

Teachers expressed increased confidence and a sense of ownership over their instructional materials when they were allowed to contextualize phonics lessons with local content. This empowerment is consistent with findings by Kelly et al. (2021), who reported that teachers who understand students' cultural backgrounds and are empowered to select culturally appropriate literacy materials experience greater professional satisfaction and more meaningful student-teacher interactions.

#### 4.3.4. Implications for Literacy Instruction

The integration of culturally relevant content in phonics instruction not only enhances student engagement and phonological awareness but also empowers educators to deliver more meaningful and effective literacy instruction. These findings suggest that incorporating cultural context into literacy curricula can bridge the gap between students' home and school experiences, leading to improved literacy outcomes.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Culturally Relevant Phonics Instruction (CRPI) significantly improves early literacy acquisition among young learners. Students who received CRPI showed greater gains in letter–sound recognition, decoding accuracy, and reading comprehension compared to those taught with standard phonics instruction. The incorporation of local linguistic features, familiar character names, and culturally meaningful narratives enhanced both phonological skills and comprehension by making learning more relevant and engaging.

Qualitative findings further revealed that cultural familiarity increased student motivation and participation, language bridging supported phonological transfer from the home language to English, and contextualized teaching empowered educators to deliver more meaningful instruction. Collectively, these results highlight the importance of connecting literacy instruction to students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, fostering both cognitive and socio-emotional development.

In conclusion, integrating culturally relevant content into phonics instruction can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment, bridging the gap between students' home experiences and school-based literacy learning. Future research could explore long-term effects and the scalability of culturally relevant phonics programs in diverse educational settings.

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