

# Phonological Awareness and Reading Ability: Exploring the Connection Between Phonological Skills and Reading Proficiency

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**Abstract**—This research paper explores the connection between phonological skills and reading proficiency among Arabic-speaking male students at Haql College. Using a qualitative thematic analysis approach. This study investigates the level of phonological awareness and how the phonological awareness relates to reading proficiency among Saudi University students. The participants were 20 first-year students from the Languages and Translation department at Haql College. Semi-structured group interviews were conducted to examine participants' perceptions of phonological skills and their impact on reading ability. The findings reveal a strong connection between phonological skills and reading proficiency through different factors or themes that develop reading proficiency among the students, such as awareness of phonological sounds, reading habits and practices, and perceptions of phonological skills in reading. Based on the findings, recommendations were provided for educators and policymakers to integrate phonological awareness activities into language instruction. It is important to introduce professional development programs to provide educators with the essential skills to integrate phonological awareness education into the curriculum. It is advisable to conduct longitudinal studies to evaluate the lasting impact of phonological awareness interventions on reading achievement in Arabic-speaking university students. In summary, educational institutions may empower students to become proficient readers and lifelong learners by prioritizing phonological instruction.

**Index Terms**—phonological skills, reading ability, phonemic awareness, reading comprehension

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Study Background

Within the field of literacy development, academics and teachers have paid close attention to the complex link between phonological awareness and reading ability. The ability to identify and control language sounds at the phonemic and syllabic levels, or phonological awareness (Anthony & Francis, 2005), is essential to the learning and development of reading. This level of awareness includes phoneme segmentation, blending, manipulation skills that are needed in decoding written language and advancing comprehension and fluency (Ehri et al., 2001).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has undergone significant changes in its educational landscape, notably with a commitment to increase educational excellence and prepare its citizens for the demands of a knowledge-based economy. This can be reflected in an increase in the number of enrollments, program offerings, and services in Saudi universities, which are meaningful to the seriousness of efforts in designing opportunities for enhancing higher education in Saudi Arabia (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020).

In this regard, literacy acquisition has emerged as one of the greatest concerns, specifically concerning reading skills among university students. Much has been done in raising access to education; however, much emphasis needs to be put on literacy acquisition and reading skills. This should be addressed immediately, as the students' failure to develop reading skills may pose a great risk to their success during academic years and indeed after college life (Al-Qahtani & Al-Harhi, 2020). Reading skills have been emphasized to be crucial in achievement, in communication, in thinking, and in becoming socially and politically aware and active among others (Kazmi, 2021).

One of the most important components of reading skills is phonological awareness. The ability to recognize and manipulate speech sounds, including vowels, spelling, and rime initiation (National Reading Council, 2020). Phonology plays an important role in the development of reading skills by facilitating word recognition, and comprehension (Torgesen et al., 2020). Research across language domains has consistently demonstrated the importance of phonological awareness in predicting reading achievement across languages and scripts (Elbro et al., 2021).

In the Saudi context, where Arabic is the main language of instructional communication, the relationship between phonetics and reading skills is even more important if Arabic is known for its phonetic system. Thus, it is complex, characterized by a rich variety of sounds, complex syntax, and orthography. Also, depth of understanding becomes important, especially where there are subtle connections between letters, sounds, and idioms (Taha, 2021).

Despite the importance of phonological awareness in Arabic literacy development, there are few empirical studies examining its role in the context of Saudi university students. Existing research has mainly focused on primary and secondary school populations, providing some gaps in our understanding of how phonological awareness contributes to

reading competence among university students (Al-Seghayer, 2020). Moreover, most of the research in this area is conducted in Western contexts, which means that it may fail to capture the full extent of what it means to acquire literacy in Arabic, including its embedded linguistic and cultural subtexts (Alhassan & Al-Dosari, 2020). Therefore, there is a need for empirical research that sets out to establish the relationship between phonological awareness and reading ability among university students in Saudi Arabia.

### *B. Problem Statement*

Literacy development remains one of the major problems in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. According to studies by academic researchers, despite huge resources poured into academic facilities and the provision of educational opportunities, there remains a gap in information on factors that improve the reading proficiency of university students. There is a dearth of knowledge as regards the acquisition of literacy skills among such students based on the role of phonological awareness. While the acquisition and distinct uses in linguistic contexts have been highly researched, there is a knowledge gap on the peculiarities of phonological awareness in its use by Arabic speakers at a tertiary level (Alhassan & Al-Dosari, 2020).

The researcher has noticed that most of the students majoring in English at Haql College have low phonological awareness, which could lead to the lowest reading outcomes. The problem at hand is multifaceted. First and foremost, there is a lack of empirical research that specifically investigates the relationship between phonological awareness and reading ability among Saudi university students. While such research studies have indeed been very useful in increasing our understanding of the contribution of phonological skills to reading development in Western orthographies, these findings may not readily generalize to Arabic-speaking populations because of differences between the orthographies (Abu-Rabia & Taha, 2020). It is not clear to what extent findings from Western research can be generalized to a Saudi context. Therefore, there is an imperative requirement to conduct localized studies.

Moreover, research on phonological awareness in Saudi Arabia and its relationship with reading performance has relatively concentrated more on schoolchildren within the primary and secondary school age groups (Al-Seghayer, 2020). Various studies claim that strong phonological skills are foundational for effective decoding, which is important for reading fluency (Kibby, 2020). Without using these skills, students may struggle with recognizing word patterns and sounds, leading to difficulties in reading development. Furthermore, the relationship between phonological awareness and reading proficiency is extremely significant in languages with complex orthographies, such as Arabic. Students with higher phonological awareness tend to have better reading outcomes, as they can more easily map sounds to their corresponding letters and words, thereby enhancing their overall reading proficiency (Alshaboul et al., 2022).

Research has led to advances in the knowledge of early literacy development but has not offered any implications for the university sample, which would be different given the academic requirements and language competencies. Therefore, there is an urgent call to close the gap in the existing literature through much-focused research that explores the link between phonological awareness and reading ability in Saudi university contexts. On the other hand, the effects of the gap in research being noticed transcend theoretical boundaries. Phonological awareness is widely recognized as a key predictor of reading success, with deficits in this skill linked to reading difficulties and learning disabilities (Taha, 2021). Given the central role of reading proficiency in academic achievement and career readiness, the failure to address potential deficiencies in phonological awareness among Saudi university students may have far-reaching consequences for their educational outcomes and prospects (Al-Qahtani & Al-Harhi, 2020).

Overall, this research is going to address the problem by investigating the phonological awareness among Saudi university students and addressing the need to clarify the relationship between phonological skills and reading ability among Haql college students at the University of Tabuk.

### *C. Research Objectives and Questions*

The main aim of this study is to look at the relationship between Saudi university students' phonological awareness and reading ability. To achieve this overarching goal, the following specific objectives and research questions have been formulated:

#### *(a). Objectives*

1. To assess the level of phonological awareness among Saudi university students.
2. To examine the relationship between phonological awareness and reading ability among Saudi university students.

#### *(b). Research Questions*

1. What is the extent of phonological awareness among Saudi university students?
2. How does phonological awareness relate to reading proficiency among Saudi university students?

First-year students in the languages and translation department at Haql College will be interviewed to address the research questions.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This part tries to investigate the connection between phonological awareness and reading ability, provide a summary of pertinent theoretical frameworks and ideas, and concentrate especially on Saudi university students. To add to the

body of current knowledge and highlight possible directions for future research, this review looks at earlier studies and points out research gaps.

Phonological awareness is a term used to describe one of the many linguistic awareness levels that form phonological awareness through the recognition and manipulation of phonemes, syllables, and other phonological units. Melby-Lervåg et al. (2021) and Peterson and Pennington (2020) have proved the importance of phonological awareness in the development of reading and phonological skills as the best predictors of success in reading. Individuals with strong phonological awareness skills tend to exhibit better word recognition, decoding ability, and reading comprehension, while deficits in phonological awareness have been associated with reading difficulties such as dyslexia (Melby-Lervåg et al., 2021).

Several studies have investigated the relationship between phonological awareness and reading skills in different languages and for different types of users. For example, recent research on phonological awareness in English-speaking countries has shown that phonological awareness contributes to reading acquisition (Peterson & Pennington, 2020; Snowling & Hulme, 2020). Other bilingual studies also found that phonological awareness plays an important role in first and second languages in terms of reading acquisition (Bialystok et al., 2017; Duñabeitia et al., 2009).

Understanding this relationship is particularly relevant in the Saudi context, where Arabic is the primary language of instruction and literacy skills are essential for academic achievement. As such, this literature review seeks to bridge the above-mentioned research gap by examining the relationship between phonological awareness and reading proficiency among university students in Saudi Arabia. This review synthesizes the current literature to fill the gaps in the current understanding and tries to offer insights into the uniqueness characterizing the reading development of this special population.

Besides these studies, there are also recent ones in the context of the Arab world. For instance, the study carried out by Al Dahhan et al. (2021) examined the role of phonological awareness in the reading acquisition of children speaking Arabic. Similarly, Al-Azri and Shabani (2020) investigated the relationship between phonological awareness and reading ability among Omani students. Other studies of note are by Alqahtani (2021) and Al-Mughales (2020), in which the focus was on phonological awareness interventions and the possible effectiveness of developing reading skills for Arabic-speaking children. A more recent study was conducted by Alrashidi, Ads, and Abou Ghaida (2020) on the development of phonological awareness among young bilingual Arabic-English learners.

However, despite the wealth of research on phonological awareness and reading proficiency, there is a notable gap in the literature concerning Saudi university students. Limited studies have specifically examined the relationship between phonological skills and reading ability within this population. Therefore, this literature review will seek to address this gap by establishing the relationship that exists between phonological awareness and reading proficiency among Saudi university students. The review of the recent literature and the gleaning of gaps in the existing body of knowledge shall give the reader insights into the unique factors that influence the development of reading with this population.

#### *A. Phonological Awareness*

Phonological awareness is a foundational skill in literacy development; it refers to the ability to detect and manipulate the sounds of a language, including phonemes, syllables, and onset-rime units (Adams, 1990). It covers various levels of awareness, from phonemic awareness (awareness of the single phonemes) to syllable awareness, onset-rime awareness, and phonological manipulation. Research reveals that phonological awareness has been seen as the necessary precursor to success in reading, in that it will help children to develop an understanding of the alphabetic principle, that is, the use of the written letter to represent sounds of speech and decode words in print.

In the context of investigating the relationship between phonological skills and reading proficiency among Saudi university students, phonological awareness serves as a central theoretical framework for understanding the cognitive processes underlying reading acquisition. Arabic, as a highly phonologically transparent language, relies heavily on phonological decoding, making phonological awareness particularly salient in Arabic literacy development (Elbro & Arnbak, 1996). In addition, the phonological process displays group differences, which can be deduced from the nature of studies undertaken to measure the phonological awareness skills among Saudi university students.

A substantial corpus of studies across languages and orthographies has also shown a relation between phonological awareness and reading achievement (Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Melby-Lervåg et al., 2021). Strong phonological awareness skills lead to better word recognition, decoding ability, and reading comprehension. For example, a deficit in phonological awareness has been linked to reading difficulties such as dyslexia (Vellutino et al., 2021). Understanding the role of phonological awareness in reading proficiency among Saudi university students would be important in identifying potential risk factors for reading difficulties and, hence, in designing interventions intended to support their literacy development. Furthermore, phonological awareness represents several skills that may be especially relevant to reading proficiency at the university level. While phonemic awareness is fundamental for decoding written words, syllable awareness and phonological manipulation skills contribute to more advanced reading processes, such as recognizing morphologically complex words and understanding sentence structure (Elbro & Arnbak, 1996). The different dimensions of phonological awareness in Saudi university students would help researchers understand how these competencies interact with other cognitive processes that form part of reading comprehension, such as vocabulary and syntactic processing.

Phonological awareness theory focuses specifically on the ability to detect and manipulate the sounds of language, including phonemes, syllables, and onset-rime units. Therefore, this theory directly relates to assessing the phonological awareness skills of individuals, and its relevance in the study of Saudi university students is drawn. The theory on phonological awareness, moreover, focuses on phonological skills as one of the stages in reading development by examining the relationship between phonological awareness and reading ability (Alshaboul et al., 2022; Kibby, 2020). This aligns with the current research objectives of assessing phonological awareness levels and exploring their connection with reading ability among Saudi university students.

#### *B. The Simple View of Reading*

The Simple View of Reading is one of the important supporting theoretical frameworks that posits reading comprehension to be a product of two essentials: decoding (word recognition) and linguistic comprehension (understanding the meaning of text) (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). This concept holds that the interaction between these two elements—which is mathematically expressed as a formula—is what leads to effective reading comprehension.

#### *C. Reading Comprehension = Decoding × Linguistic Comprehension*

Decoding refers to the ability to accurately recognize and pronounce printed words, relying on phonological skills to translate graphemes (letters) into phonemes (speech sounds). Linguistic comprehension is an understanding of what words, sentences, and paragraphs mean; it draws from vocabulary knowledge, syntactic awareness, and background knowledge. Also, language comprehension involves not only decoding but also vocabulary and syntax understanding, among other cognitive processes. A person might be good at decoding but poor at comprehension due to weak linguistic comprehension skills. This means that he will indeed fail to master the appropriate comprehension skills (Perfetti et al., 2005). Therefore, understanding the interplay between phonological skills and linguistic comprehension is essential for comprehensively assessing reading proficiency among Saudi university students.

#### *D. Connectionist Model*

The Connectionist Model, a prominent theoretical framework in cognitive psychology, posits reading as an interactive process involving the simultaneous activation of interconnected cognitive units, such as phonological, orthographic, and semantic processing units (Seidenberg & McClelland, 2019). Consequently, this model states that reading proficiency is a product of the dynamic interactivity among those units, wherein bidirectional information processing goes on concurrently. While the model of connectionism has added a lot to the understanding of the processes going on during reading, it is not completely congruent with the objectives of this study, which are to determine the level of phonological awareness in Saudi university students and its relation to reading ability.

First, the Connectionist Model centers much more on the neural and computational mechanisms of reading than on independent cognitive skills, such as phonological awareness, which might be related to the activity underpinning some or other neural areas. Phonological awareness is the ability to consciously perceive and reflect on the sound structure of language, an ability separable from the neural activations and computations modeled by the Connectionist model. As a result, the model does not offer the explicit focus that is necessary to inquire about the phonological awareness skills among Saudi university students.

Furthermore, though the Connectionist Model highlights that the reading processes are interactive in nature, it does not explicitly account for phonological awareness as a stand-alone capacity. Phonological awareness is thus a precursor skill that assists in reading ability because the child can perceive and process phonemes, syllables, and other elements of oral language. However, the Connectionist Model does not provide a framework for assessing or examining the role of phonological awareness in reading ability.

#### *E. The English Phonological Awareness Among Arab Students*

Phonological awareness, a crucial aspect of language acquisition, involves recognizing and manipulating sound structures in spoken language. For Arab students learning English, this skill can be particularly challenging due to the phonological differences between Arabic and English. Recent studies from 2019 to 2024 have explored various aspects of English phonological awareness among Arab students, shedding light on their specific challenges and strategies to enhance their proficiency. A study by Al-Mansouri and Al-Khaldi (2020) found that Arab students often struggle with English phonemes that do not exist in Arabic, such as the /p/ and /v/ sounds. These difficulties stem from the absence of certain sounds in the Arabic phonological inventory, leading to substitution errors and affecting their overall phonological awareness. The researchers emphasized the importance of explicit phonological instruction in helping students differentiate and produce these unfamiliar sounds.

Similarly, Alshaboul et al. (2021) examined the impact of phonological awareness training on Arab students' reading skills in English. Their findings indicated that targeted interventions focusing on phoneme segmentation and blending significantly improved students' reading fluency and accuracy. The study highlighted the need for incorporating phonological awareness activities into the English language curriculum to support Arab learners.

Another significant contribution to the field was made by Zayed and Hamad (2022), who investigated the role of first language (L1) interference in phonological awareness among Arab students. They observed that students often transferred phonological rules from Arabic to English, leading to systematic errors. For instance, the tendency to de-

emphasize short vowels in Arabic influenced their pronunciation of English words, resulting in incorrect stress patterns and syllable structures. The study suggested that raising students' awareness of these L1 influences could help mitigate their negative impact on English phonological awareness.

In addition to instructional strategies, the influence of age and exposure to English was explored by Al-Harbi and Alotaibi (2023). Their research demonstrated that younger students and those with more extensive exposure to English media exhibited higher levels of phonological awareness. This underscores the importance of early and sustained exposure to English in enhancing phonological skills among Arab learners.

Furthermore, a recent meta-analysis by Saleh et al. (2024) synthesized findings from multiple studies on phonological awareness among Arab students. The analysis confirmed that phonological awareness is a strong predictor of reading success in English and emphasized the critical role of early intervention. It also identified best practices for phonological instruction, such as using multimedia resources and interactive activities to engage students and reinforce their learning.

In conclusion, recent studies highlight the significant challenges Arab students face in developing English phonological awareness due to phonological differences between Arabic and English. However, targeted instructional strategies, awareness of L1 interference, and early exposure to English can significantly enhance their phonological skills. Educators should consider these factors to support Arab students in achieving better phonological awareness and overall language proficiency in English.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. *Research Design and Approach*

This study adopts a qualitative thematic analysis design to explore the relationship between phonological awareness and reading proficiency and also to assess the real level of phonological awareness among male students in the first year of the Languages and Translation Department at Haql College. Qualitative thematic analysis offers a systematic approach to identifying patterns, themes, and meanings within qualitative data, allowing for a rich and nuanced understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives.

#### B. *Participants/Sample Selection*

The participants in this study comprise 20 male students enrolled in the first year of the Languages and Translation Department at Haql College. The respondents who were selected were 18 to 20 years old. The purposive sampling technique was used in selecting the respondents based on the relevance of the study's objectives and the viewpoints of the phenomenon under study.

#### C. *Data Collection Methods and Instruments*

The data collection for this study will be carried out using the semi-structured group interview method with several participants from the languages and translations department at Haql College. In this study, the researcher considered 4 groups; each group contains 5 students, therefore making the participants relatively represented in the department. Group interviewing creates an interactive environment within which discussants can argue, perceive things, and build on each other's ideas. In a way, the depth and breadth of the data obtained are enriched. The semi-structured nature of the interviews will allow flexibility in questioning while ensuring that key topics relevant to the research objectives are covered. The interview protocol will be based on predetermined questions meant to explore the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of the participants toward phonological awareness and its relation to their reading proficiency. This may involve questions such as inquiry of the awareness of the subjects about phonological sounds; inquiry of their reading habits; possible problems in reading, and their perceptions about the importance of awareness of phonological sounds in reading.

Conducting group interviews with five participants in each group offers several advantages. It will enhance peer-to-peer communication and collaboration, which can eventually unlock new views and thoughts. It will also delve into the interactions and shared experiences within the group so that collective perceptions that may be in the department can be pinpointed.

#### D. *Data Analysis*

Data analysis will pass through a rigorous process informed by the principles of thematic analysis. The following six phases are proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), as guidance in the analysis:

1. Familiarization with the data: The interview transcripts will be read and re-read so that the data may be known, and initial impressions noted.
2. Generating initial codes: The data and the relevant segments therein will be systematically coded in a way that identifies the principal concepts, ideas, or patterns.
3. Searching for themes: By linking related codes to one theme and exploring relationships among codes, the codes will be put into potential themes.
4. Review themes: The researcher reviews the themes making sure that they really do arise from the primary data, an iterative process of matching themes to the primary data.

5. Defining and naming themes: Clearly define what themes are there and name them in a way that the naming definition captures the content of the themes.
6. Report write-up: The final report write-up will be done with illustrative quotations from participants to support the themes and help in interpretation.

By following this systematic approach, the study aims to derive meaningful insights into the relationship between phonological awareness and reading proficiency among male students in the Languages and Translation Department at Haql College.

#### IV. FINDINGS

This section involves the presentation of findings from group interviews with male first-year students from the Languages and Translation Department at Haql College and an analysis of it. The research focused on how the participants perceived phonological sounds, reading habits and practices, and how they viewed phonological skills concerning reading ability.

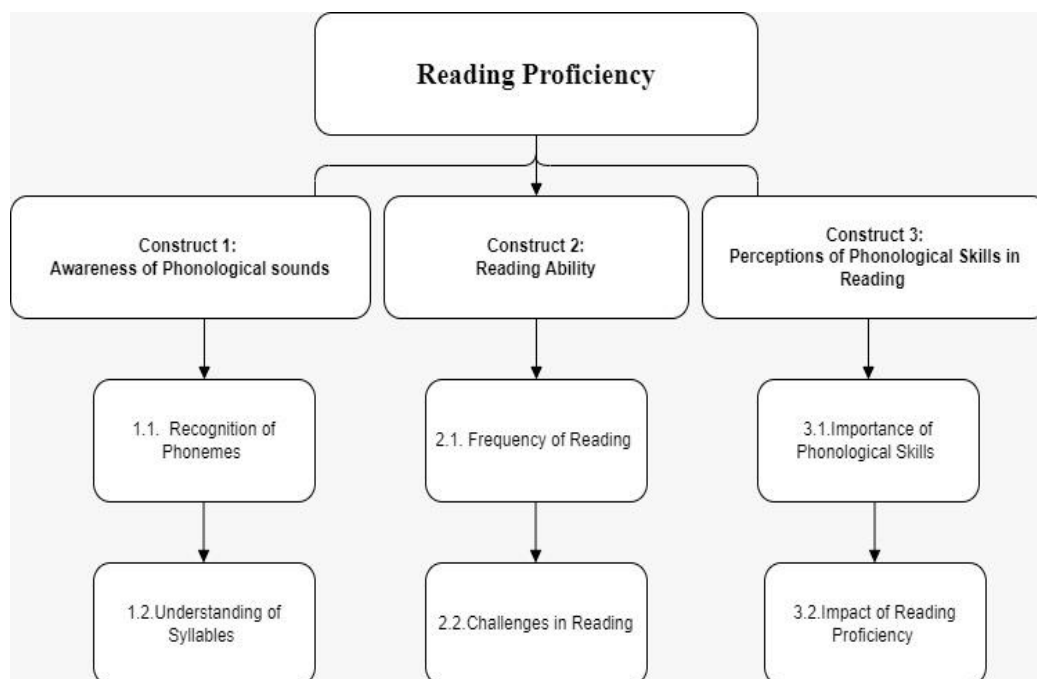


Figure 1. Main Themes and Sub-Themes for Students' Interview

#### Theme 1: Awareness of Phonological Sounds

##### Subtheme 1.1: Recognition of Phonemes

From the group discussions, it was evident that some of the respondents couldn't distinguish and identify the phonological sounds, especially with the difficulty with specific sounds. For instance, Group 1 Participant 3 stated, "I find it challenging to pronounce words with the /p/ sound because we don't have this sound in Arabic." Participant 1 stated, "The /v/ sound is difficult for me. I often confuse it with the /f/ sound because they seem very similar.

"Sometimes, I use Arabic phonemes when speaking English, like saying /b/ instead of /p/." (P2/G5). While another student stated, "In Arabic, we don't have the /ŋ/ sound, so I struggle with words like 'sing' and 'song.'" (P3/G3).

These responses from different students align with a study by Zayed and Hamad (2022), where L1 interference also plays a crucial role, with students transferring phonological rules from Arabic to English, resulting in systematic errors such as the de-emphasis of short vowels.

Due to the challenges of differentiation in some English sounds, some of the participants claimed, "When I hear words like 'ship' and 'sheep,' they sound very similar to me." (P1/G4). Also, one student added, "I often confuse the /i/ and /i:/ sounds, like in 'bit' and 'beat.'" (P4/G4)

Group 3 participant 1 stated, "We face difficulties in our reading skills, and we can't consider ourselves proficient readers because we have low awareness of English phonological sounds, which makes us fail to combine sounds or phonemes together".

Most of the participants in this research have clear challenges and low awareness of phonological sound due to multiple reasons, such as difficulty with specific sounds, challenges in differentiation, L1 interference, and recognition of phonological patterns. Previous studies have shown that Arabic-speaking students often struggle with specific English phonemes absent in Arabic, such as /p/ and /v/, leading to substitution errors and pronunciation difficulties (Al-

Mansouri & Al-Khaldi, 2020). Additionally, they face challenges in differentiating between sounds like /ɪ/ and /i:/, a difficulty stemming from the limited vowel distinctions in Arabic compared to English (Alshaboul et al., 2021).

#### *Subtheme 1.2: Understanding of Syllables*

Most of the participants in this research have clear challenges and low awareness of phonological sound due to their low knowledge and skills of understanding English syllables through some factors such as misunderstanding of the basic syllables, difficulty with syllable division, recognition of syllable stress, and the impact of L1 interference. This aligns with the participant responses, such as when (P3/G4) says, "I know that syllables are the beats in a word, but sometimes I struggle to count them in English words.

"While (P1/G3) claimed, I often have trouble dividing long English words into syllables. For example, I'm not sure where to split 'comfortable' or 'different.'"

In terms of multisyllabic words, some of the participants face challenges in breaking them into different syllables and recognizing syllable stress, like:

(P4/G5), who claimed, "Breaking down words into syllables is hard for me, especially when there are many letters.

"(P4/G4) claimed, "It's challenging to know which syllable to stress in a word. I get confused with words like 'present' and 'present,' depending on if it's a noun or a verb."

### **Theme 2: Reading Habits and Practices**

#### *Subtheme 2.1: Frequency of Reading*

In terms of reading habits, their responses varied: some students appeared to have a steady reading habit, while others said they did not read so often. However, they all agreed to the idea of the importance attributed to reading, often for increasing reading proficiency, both academically and recreationally.

(P1/G4) added, "We try to incorporate reading into our daily routines, whether it's reading newspapers for current events or novels for enjoyment." In contrast, participants from group one claimed, "We don't read as much as we'd like to because it takes a lot of time and effort to understand the pronunciation and meaning of new words."

Increasing the reading habit among the students could improve their reading skills, but still, due to their low awareness of phonological sound and recognition of English phonemes, they don't read frequently.

Hence, **all the participants from Group 2 stated**, "We want to read more frequently, but sometimes we find it hard to understand the text and combine the sounds in multisyllabic words, and our poor reading skills make us read less frequently."

Frequent reading enhances reading proficiency among students by expanding vocabulary, improving comprehension, and reinforcing phonological skills (Sonnenschein, Stapleton, & Benson, 2020). Regular exposure to diverse texts helps learners grasp language nuances and develop fluency, ultimately boosting overall reading competence. In this regard, participants from different groups added, "Reading regularly has improved my pronunciation and helped me recognize different phonological patterns in English. **While participants from Group 2 claimed**, "When we read more frequently, we notice that our understanding of English sounds and syllable patterns gets better."

#### *Subtheme 2.2: Challenges in Reading*

Arabic-speaking students encounter various challenges in acquiring proficiency in English reading skills, including limited awareness of English phonology, infrequent engagement in reading practices, and difficulties in comprehending and parsing multisyllabic words in the English language (Al-Mansouri & Al-Khaldi, 2020; Alshaboul et al., 2021). These obstacles hinder their ability to effectively decode and comprehend English texts, impacting their overall reading competence. Despite the fact that they read, they struggle with reading, especially when dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary or complex texts. In academics, most participants find it hard to understand and define what the terminologies used in their major fields mean.

P4/G5 added opined, "Reading academic articles can be daunting, especially with technical jargon. We often need to pause and look up unfamiliar words to grasp the content fully."

P1/G1 added, "I find it hard to pronounce some English words correctly, especially those with sounds that don't exist in Arabic, like /θ/ and /ð/.

Also, P1/G2 added claimed, "Incorrect pronunciation makes it difficult to understand the meaning of sentences and paragraphs." Phonological awareness is fundamental for enhancing reading abilities among Arab students, impacting their capacity to decode words and recognize pronunciation patterns in English (Alshaboul et al., 2021). This awareness plays a pivotal role in their overall reading skill development and comprehension.

P2/G1 added, "Recognizing syllables and stress patterns in English words is challenging for me." In the same line, participant 5 from group 4 added,

### **Theme 3: Perceptions of Phonological Skills in Reading**

#### *Subtheme 3.1: Importance of Phonological Skills*

The participants in this research realized that phonological skills are the greatest help in recognizing what is written and that phonology helps in reading smoothly and understanding any written text. They cited the relationship that exists between phonological skills and pronunciation accuracy, which is important for reading ability.

P5/G4 remarked, "Having strong phonological skills that aid in proper pronunciation will enhance our overall reading ability." All the participants in **group 4 agreed** on the importance of phonological skills and their impact on their reading ability.

**P1/G3 added**, "*Understanding phonological skills helps me recognize how to pronounce unfamiliar words in English.*" Also, all the participants in Group 1 added, "*Phonological skills are important because they help us sound more natural when speaking and improve our reading and listening comprehension.*"

Phonological skills are essential for decoding words during reading, enabling individuals to break down words into their component sounds and recognize familiar patterns, which enhances overall reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). These skills are crucial for accurately pronouncing and understanding words encountered in written text. In this regard, all **the participants in Group 2** added, "*Phonological skills are essential for decoding words while reading.*"

**P5/G1 added**, "*Mastering phonological skills helps us break down complex words into smaller parts, making it easier to understand and read texts.*"

#### *Subtheme 3.2: Impact on Reading Proficiency*

Besides, participants reported that they do have less or poor phonological awareness, but mastering and knowing this skill could help them improve their reading ability, which could be through knowing word recognition, enhancing reading fluency, increasing vocabulary understanding, and improving their pronunciation. The participants in this research shared examples to show how phonological awareness or skills would help them in the various tasks of reading or understanding a language text.

**P2/G1 said**, "*Knowing phonological sounds will make decoding of words easy, so I will understand what I'm reading and can memorize better the material I read.*" **All the participants in Group 1** added, "*Developing phonological awareness has made us faster readers.*"

**Another participant in group 5** added, "*Developing phonological awareness will make us faster readers.*" **While all the participants in group 4** added, "*Knowing phonological patterns will help us to read and spell words correctly.*"

It is evident from participant responses that there is a clear relationship between awareness of phonological skills and reading ability among the participants in this research. Understanding phonological skills enables more accurate word recognition and pronunciation, significantly enhancing overall reading proficiency among Arabic-speaking students majoring in English.

## V. DISCUSSION

This part discusses the findings reported in Part Four to answer the research questions. In general, low awareness of phonological sounds affected students' reading ability and proficiency. The analysis determined that students in the university college of Haql who major in English have clear challenges and low awareness of phonological sound due to multiple reasons such as difficulty with specific sounds, challenges in differentiation, L1 interference, and recognition of phonological patterns.

The research questions sought to assess the level of phonological awareness and examine the relationship between phonological awareness among Saudi university students. These questions are as follows:

1. What is the extent of phonological awareness among Saudi university students?
2. How does phonological awareness relate to reading proficiency among Saudi university students?

Phonological awareness is considered a critical skill in predicting the development of reading across diverse linguistic settings. Participants in this research exhibit a significant lack of phonological awareness, specifically in their ability to recognize and articulate phonemes, which has a substantial impact on their reading proficiency. For example, participants in Group 1 struggle with phonemes like /p/ and /v/, which are absent or conflated with similar Arabic sounds (/b/ and /f/, respectively). Similarly, some participants acknowledge using Arabic phonemes inadvertently when speaking English, such as substituting /b/ for /p/.

In addition, participants in Group 3 face challenges with English sounds like /ŋ/, which are not present in Arabic phonology, affecting their pronunciation of words like 'sing' and 'song'. These findings are consistent with existing literature that underscores how deficiencies in phonological awareness among Arabic-speaking learners can hinder their acquisition of English language skills (Al-Mansouri & Al-Khaldi, 2020; Alshaboul et al., 2021). Such observations underscore the necessity for targeted educational strategies aimed at bolstering phonological proficiency to enhance overall English reading competence.

On the other hand, understanding syllables is crucial for developing robust phonological awareness, which significantly influences students' reading proficiency. However, this study reveals that many participants face considerable challenges and demonstrate low awareness of phonological sounds due to difficulties with English syllables. These challenges include struggles with basic syllable concepts, accurate division of complex words into syllables, recognizing syllable stress patterns, and dealing with interference from their native language (L1). For example, Group 3 participant 4 acknowledges understanding syllables as the rhythmic beats in words but struggles with counting them accurately in English. Similarly, participant 1 mentions difficulty in dividing long English words such as 'comfortable' or 'different' into syllables.

These findings align with broader research indicating that deficiencies in syllable awareness among learners can significantly hinder their phonological and reading skills (Al-Mansouri & Al-Khaldi, 2020; Alshaboul et al., 2021). Studies consistently emphasize the pivotal role of syllabic knowledge in enhancing phonological processing abilities, which are critical for effective decoding and comprehension in reading (Ehri, 2004; Wagner & Torgesen, 1987).

Therefore, addressing these challenges through targeted instructional strategies is essential for improving overall language proficiency and reading competence among Arabic-speaking English learners.

These insights are corroborated by numerous studies emphasizing the critical link between phonological skills and reading proficiency. For example, research by Ehri (2004) highlights how phonological awareness supports word decoding and comprehension. Similarly, studies by Wagner and Torgesen (1987) underscore the foundational role of phonological processing abilities in reading acquisition. Therefore, fostering robust phonological skills through targeted educational strategies is essential for enhancing language proficiency and overall reading competence among students. This also augments the current corpus of evidence and establishes the importance of the prediction of reading by various phonological skills, such as phonemic awareness and syllable activity recognition. Indubitably, such support from the previous body of research on phonological awareness provides a basis for asserting that the current findings are consistent with existing theoretical and empirical work. This makes it possible to eventually delve into a richer discussion of the applicability of phonological awareness theory in the explanation of the reading development of Saudi university students.

Several recent studies have therefore continued to explore the link between phonological awareness and reading competence in university-level Arabic-speaking students. For instance, Al-Kharusi et al. (2021) presented a study that showed that Omani University students have a similar trend in the development of phonological awareness and orthographic awareness. The current study also has findings like the study conducted by Al-Kharusi et al. (2021) that phonological awareness is pivotal in the reading development of students who use Arabic. In addition, Al-Harthy et al. (2022) further studied the effect of an intervention for phonology on the attainment of reading in Saudi university students, and they found that phonological awareness had a positive impact after the intervention in relation to the reading skills by significantly boosting the decoding and recognition of words among the learners. The findings of this study support the effectiveness of using phonological awareness for improving reading skills, supporting the findings of Al-Harthy and colleagues (2022).

By comparing recent studies, the present findings contribute to our understanding of phonological awareness and its implications for reading instruction in Arabic contexts. The phonological awareness theory in the data analysis provided a proper framework for the conclusion of the relationship between phonological awareness and reading competence among Saudi male students. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, this study contributes to our understanding of phonological awareness and its implications for reading ability.

The professional development programs must focus on the implementation of phonological awareness in the curriculum. After proper training and orientation through these programs, the teachers will be able to offer quality reading instruction to the students by enhancing their phonological awareness.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study has provided valuable insights into the relationship between phonological awareness and reading ability among Saudi male students at Haql College. The results extracted from the qualitative thematic analysis evidenced that participants presented robust knowledge of phonology, reinforcing the significance of phonological awareness in reading development. Again, these findings emphasized that the theory of phonological awareness is useful worldwide. Going further, the role of phonological awareness should be recognized by both the teacher and the policymaker with a keen interest. Educational institutions, therefore, need to instill activities of phonological awareness into the curricula of language teaching in their institutions as one way of advancing the reading development among the Arabic-speaking students. These activities should focus on phonological awareness, letter recognition, and other phonological skills that are important for developing proficiency in reading.

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