

A Case Study of Phonics among Primary School Students

Liu Xiaojing, Zhang Junying, Huang Jing

School of Foreign Language, China West Normal University, Nanchong, China Correspondence: China West Normal University, Shida Road #1, Shunqing District, Nanchong, Sichuan Province, China.

Abstract

Phonics is a widely implemented teaching approach in primary schools in many English speaking countries. Through a flexural development, the teaching approach has been proved to be an efficient way of improving children's decoding, spelling and general reading ability. This paper reports case study of presenting phonics to 10 students in Grade 3 in China. The study shows that phonics teaching can help the students to form a connection between words and their pronunciation, hence help students to acquire the ability to decode and spell new words in their further reading.

Key words: phonics; decoding; teaching phonics

1.Introduction

1.1 A Brief Introduction of Phonics

Phonics is a method for teaching reading and writing English language by developing learners' phonemic awareness—the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate phonemes—in order to teach the correspondence between these sounds and the spelling patterns (graphemes) that represents them.

The goal of Phonics is to enable beginning readers to decode new written words by sounding them out, or in phonics terms, blending the sound-spelling patterns. Teaching phonics through the 26 letters as a representative of phonemes, alone or by combination of the factors that have a total of 44 phonemes, enables students to master the relationship between the letters or letter combinations and their pronunciation. Thus students may probably form the ability of reading and writing, despite the most dominant income is the improvement of decoding and spelling.

1.2 The Development of Phonics in the United States (Comparison between Phonics and Whole Language)

1.2.1 The Development of Phonics in the United States

In 1960s to 1970s, Phonics was a primary teaching method in the field of reading, especially in the United States. Because of the flourish of the “Whole Language” approach, Phonics faced the criticism to its complicated rules, plenty exceptions and difficult mastery. “In fact, many studies of Phonics and phonemic awareness acknowledge that they are looking at something else. Instead of looking at how well children can put sounds to isolated words, and even to meaningless sequences of letters, to confirm that they use the alphabetic code. This is like tying children's feet together to prove they must jump before walking.”

Nevertheless, after the 10 years implementation of the Whole Language approach, the result was a shock to the whole American. According to national texts in 1992, the reading ability proximately of 40 percent of children is below the basic standards. Meanwhile, California, which is the most active states in implementation whole language, ranked tail ender in state examination in 1994. Therefore, the core of primary reading method was transferred to Phonics again. Even the IRA(International Reading Association), once was a campus of whole language, declared that the teaching of Phonics is an important

aspect of beginning reading instruction.,^[3] quite apart from the component of reading--decoding. Even though those teachers and scholars, whom adhering the ideal of whole language, also affirmed the significance in application of phonics. Having developed to this point, the positive significance of Phonics was widely accepted that not only the scholar but the teacher, parents, students are much more familiar with the advantage of phonics.

1.2.2 Comparison between Phonics and Whole Language

In elementary education, there are two main approaches to teaching young students how to read: Whole Language and Phonics Instruction. Although they are considered somewhat controversial, it is important to understand what Whole Language and Phonics Instruction is, and how these methods can help children read.

Phonics instruction theory showed that children needed to break down a complex skill, such as reading, into its smallest components for easy comprehension. Basically, this means that children need to break up sentences by words, then down to the letters in the words for pronunciation. For instance, a child will look at a word and dissect it into each letter's sound. Next, they pronounce the word. As they continue, they have learned how letters sound when grouped together. As a result, they may pronounce unfamiliar words that look intimidating to them.

Whole Language learning programs focus on less rigid tactics for literacy. Generally, less time is focused on repetition learning. In fact, it focuses on the flow and theme of the text, emphasizing meaning and relating to young students. Students do not sound out words as they do in phonics. However, at times, they use creative writing to make stories. While most of the spelling is completely incorrect, it helps the student learn the process of writing and reading. Students are then encouraged to decode each word through the larger context of the story they wrote.

2. A Case of phonics on Decoding

2.1 Subject

In this case study, my subject is ten students in Grade 3 in a primary school in Nanchong. In English class, the teacher focuses on teaching the word meaning and the related word to the young students. However, the listening, speaking skills and grammar training are ignored in this kind of teaching method. It is the so-called Mute English. Meanwhile, without the proper way of learning English, the subject is only familiar with 26 English letters and sound of some common words.

Grade	Grade 3
English level	English beginning learner; familiar with 26 English letters; can speak simple words, such as apple, window, wall, fan, etc; without grammar training.

2.2 Teaching Procedures

2.2.1 The Reason to Choose the Materials

With the development of technology, the internet has changed people’s lives and impacted education. The instant worldwide connections changed the way teachers and learners work. Indeed, the use of the internet and the World Wide Web in second language and foreign language instruction has been increasingly recognized. Meanwhile, the internet provides a wealth of information which carries great potential for learners and teachers to obtain some useful resources such as video, audio materials etc. The internet can not only provide a convenient way, but also provide a large quantity of content for us.

In this case study, there are three reasons for why we choose the picture book ---*Hop on Pop* from Dr. Seuss. Firstly, the picture book is mainly focus on teaching Phonics through the correspondence between these sounds and the spelling patterns (graphemes) that represents them. Meanwhile the focus is consistent with the theme of the paper. Secondly, Dr. Seuss's pictures book is a good reading for children to learn English from using as few simple words as possible to telling a complete story which is more easily to arouse students interest in English learning; Thirdly, it's easy for us to download audio resource, which corresponds with the picture book, on the internet. Therefore, students may probably discover and grasp the phonologic rules. Gradually they may form a proper way of learning new words or even cultivate a good habit for learning.

2.2.2 Teaching Procedures

We take the vowel sound /a/ as an example to explain the teaching procedures of phonics. Meanwhile, two video frequencies and an audio source corresponding to Dr. Seuss's picture book --- *Hop on Pop and Dr. Seuss's ABC* are the dispensable resources. And there are two short story about Pat and Mood (see Dr. Seuss's picture book on page 28 to 35). Then it focuses on video frequency in which words are related to the vowel sound /a/. And then there are three separate classes to accomplish this case (target). A solid foundation for individual phonics is laid. The children's listening and oral ability should be given priority and heavily emphasized even after successful phonics application. And later children will find that English is not so difficult to learn.

In the first class, firstly, the teacher shows a visual frequency (Dr. Seuss's ABC) to student to review letter A to Z. Then, the teacher gives sample words and some lovely pictures that represent each letter which can raise students' interest. After that, the teacher should make sure the children are familiar with these letters then present the teaching material, a short story about Pat(see Dr. Seuss's picture book *Hop on Pop* on page 28 to 33). And then we guide the students to watch the video frequency --- *Hop on Pop* twice. And then, the students read the picture book while listening to the video. And there comes the last step, which is the most important step for the students. That is to follow the audio and read the short story out loud to form a phonic awareness.

In the second class, firstly, the teacher let the students review the short story about Pat, and asks the students try to rehearsal the short story by using key words, then turn the teaching focus on the short story about mood(see Dr. Seuss's picture book *Hop on Pop* on page 34 to 35). And let the students watch the video frequency --- *Hop on Pop* twice. And in the third time, let the students look at the picture book while listening. It is important for the students to combine the sound with the letter in order to form a phonic awareness by themselves. After that, the teacher gathers the key words (Pat, sat, cat, bat, dad, etc) together (at the scope of the two short stories) and tries to find the similarities among these words.

In the third class, the teacher guides the students to review the two short stories and asks them to try to rehearsal two short stories by using the gathered key words. Then on the basis of the above mentioned findings, the teacher helps the students to learn and grasp the phonologic rules. And then the teacher gives the students other examples to practice. The students can build a solid foundation of the finding rules. At last, doing class exercise to enhance the knowledge (rules) is necessary for students. Questions like "can you tell me which word has the sound 'a' as in 'hat'?" We try to say the words slowly and clearly, and to repeat them as often as necessary.

Can you tell me which word has the sound "a", as in "hat"?

dog fat bin mug

At the end of this class, the teacher combines the teaching process again, and summarizes the phonologic rules. The most important thing for students is to learn and grasp how to decode rather than how much they can decode the words.

Through the above-mentioned ways, the teacher teaches the rest of the 43 vowel and consonant sounds. After finished the study of 44 phonemes, we have to combine the utility of 45 phonics generalizations. Because the 44 phonemes is not the end of the phonologic study, but the beginning of the decoding and spelling for further reading. And it is also feasible to combine the 44 phonemes with International Phonetic Alphabet. Meanwhile, it is indispensable for students to do some related exercise for enhancement. And students may easily learn and grasp the phonologic rules to decode words by themselves. Later reading may probably be an interesting thing to Chinese primary school students.

3. Results

The teaching results are obtained through the process of combination of video frequency and Dr. Seuss's picture book (*Hop on Pop*) and then are derived. Thus the subjects can decode some simple words which related the sound /a/. And after the training, the subjects investigated even can rehearsal the short story. There is no denying that combining the picture book with audio may gain some surprise. In this way, while they come to another 43 phonemes, decoding and spelling become natural.

This study aims at helping students to form the capability of decoding. Practice shows that after mastering the 44 phonemes and 45 phonics generalizations students can successfully decode some new words. Reading becomes easier for second/foreign language students. When Chinese students encounter a new word, they not only can decode but also can predict the meaning of it as the English speaking countries' children do. The most significant benefit from phonics is the enhancement of decoding and spelling ability for further study.

From the feedback, these students now can read and spell the simple words through the mastery of the correspondence between letters and sounds. Especially combining the audio with the picture book, they may probably know how to decode a new word and the meaning of it. Evidently, it is feasible that teaching phonics may help primary school students to form phonic awareness and inspire their interest in learning English.

However there are also some shortcomings to be improved in this case study. For example, lack of time, lack of reading resources, overlook of the word difficulty, etc. But from the improvement of the students, we can surely affirm the significance of application of phonics.

4. Implications and Conclusion

4.1 Implications

By using the Phonics in teaching English, the primary students may benefit a lot from it, especially the ability of decoding and spelling. But the existence of weak points needed to be improved among the practice of Phonics. Of course, the following perspectives are not the comprehensive disadvantages that needed to be improved. Therefore the further study is also necessary on teaching Phonics.

First, it is hard to predict that when Chinese students encounter a new word that they not only can decode but know the meaning of it just as the English speaking countries' children do. In the United States, Phonics belongs to the preschool education category. But in China, Phonics has been implemented in elementary school for teaching English letters and vocabularies. The experience in teaching Phonics abroad was based on their mother language teaching. Thus, applying Phonics in English teaching, we have to consider the actual situation of Chinese elementary education rather than borrow in the

experience abroad directly. Then according to the situation, the teacher should have an appropriate adjustment to the teaching method of Phonics for second and foreign language which students learn in an easier way. And the teacher should combine the conditions of students to innovate the teaching methods and the design of classroom activities.

Secondly, the cooperation between teacher and parents is necessary. Learning phonics through grasping the phonological rules between 26 letters and 44 phonemes needs a lot of practice. And it is known that practice is an indispensable part for teaching Phonics. Because of the lack of school time, it is necessary for parents to monitor the students at home, especially the after class practice. So that, the students not only can improve the learning efficiency, but enhance the learned rules through practice.

Thirdly, there is some neglect of sight words. There is an example that uses 'above' to illustrate. There are some words do not conform to the natural rules of decoding while explored the teaching procedures of Phonics. And which neglected an important part in teaching Phonics that is sight words teaching. There are many words that do not conform to the rules of pronunciation in English, which is a common sense. The teaching process of Phonics in America shows that Sight words are a group of common words with a high-frequency of using that readers must know on sight, instantly, and automatically, such as: a, is, the, of, and, in, you, to etc. At present, this kind of misunderstanding, neglect the sight words during the English teaching procedures of Phonics reminds us, teachers should dedicate themselves to in-depth study of Phonics in natural decoding system and the scientific teaching methods.

4.2 Conclusion

In reality, the teaching method of China emphasizes that children should focus on meaning and strategy instruction, which is similar to the whole language instruction. It is often contrasted with phonics-based methods of teaching reading and writing which emphasizes instruction for decoding and spelling.

Phonics is widely used in English speaking countries and it is an effectively way to improve the children's decoding and spelling ability. Studies show that foreign language learning and mother tongue learning is not the same. In English speaking countries, a child will look at a word and dissect it into each letter's sound after they master the rules of decoding and spelling. While the Chinese students, even if they know the pronunciation, may also do not know the meaning of the word. Does this mean that phonics is not suitable for second language or foreign language teaching? Even though, some scholars consider that phonics is feasible for students to lay a foundation of decoding new words. In 2006, Timothy Shanahan and Isabel Beck found five systematic phonics study effects on second language students, and the study shows that the students reading ability can benefit from phonics a lot. For foreign language learners, especially the great difference in writing system of China, does phonics work? Koda points out that because of a huge difference in mother tongue and target language, it is necessary to have sufficient knowledge of decoding the target language and point out that the phonics should apply in Chinese primary school teaching methods. Some research in China prove that phonics play a positive role in Chinese students' decoding and reading ability. Phonics is widely used in many famous children's English training institutions. In some areas, phonics had already passed the first ten years. The study, both in junior middle school students and primary school students, showed that phonics plays a positive role to cultivate phoneme awareness and decoding, spelling ability of second language or foreign language learners.

Through a flexural development, finally Phonics is widely implemented not only in English speaking countries but also in these countries where English as a second language or foreign language. Although it is hard to implement the teaching method in primary school during a short time, practice shows that Phonics is a feasible method in primary school teaching. In the future, the implement of scientific and

systematic phonics may help children to lay a solid language foundation which means phonics is worthy to second language of foreign language teacher do some in-depth study in the future.

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