

TEACHING PHONICS TO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN CHINA

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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Wonim Son. School of Education

Although phonics is a hot topic in the elementary English education circles of China, it is the traditional spelling method that is used in most elementary English classes. This paper, by comparing phonics method with International phonetic alphabets method as well as traditional method, aims to prove that the former is more advantageous to English teaching in elementary schools. By conducting literature review on phonetic alphabet teaching method and traditional teaching method in China, as well as review on phonics method in western countries, this paper proves the feasibility and effectiveness of phonics method in English class of Chinese elementary school.

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Chapter I Introduction

In China, most of the public elementary schools do not provide phonics lesson, which makes students feel very difficult to learn English, particularly when they read a new passage or try to memorize some new words. However, for those who have learned phonics in extracurricular training institutions, they feel much easier to read and write English. Based on this, this article explained why phonics can improve students' English.

Phonics is not a new concept for English teachers in Chinese elementary schools, as it helps students to learn the rules of pronunciation and the skills of spelling, which will eventually remove some obstacles for students' reading and writing. In Chinese English training institutions, most teachers teach phonics by combining CVC, CVCe, and sight words. After finishing all the phonics classes, students are supposed to speak out the word when they read and write down the word when they hear. However, in most public elementary schools in China, teachers still use traditional instruction or international English phonetic instruction to teach English. Based on this, this paper first described the application of the international phonetic alphabet teaching method and the traditional teaching method in the English classes of elementary schools in China, as well as their advantages and disadvantages, and then compared these two instructions with phonics instruction in order to prove that phonics instruction can help students learn English better.

In the last part of the article, it concluded the way students learn phonics and the way teachers teach, as well as what strategies they can utilize for phonics instruction.

Statement of the Problem

This article clarified the following issues: What is the current situation of English teaching in elementary schools in China? What is International Phonetic Alphabet teaching method? What is traditional teaching method? What are the advantages and disadvantages of these two methods? What is phonics? Why is phonics instruction better than the other two methods? How should teachers teach phonics?

Definition of Terms

Phonics: A method for teaching reading and writing of the English language by developing learners' phonemic awareness---the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate phonemes---in order to teach the correspondence between these sounds as well as the spelling patterns (graphemes) that represent them. (John, 1570)

International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA): An alphabetic system of phonetic notation based primarily on Latin alphabet. It was devised by the International Phonetic Association in the late 19th century as a standardized representation of the sounds of spoken language. IPA is used by lexicographers, foreign language students and teachers, linguists, speech-language pathologists, singers, actors, constructed language creators as well as translators. (Michael, 1996)

International Phonetic Alphabet Instruction: In China, before 2001, English, as an official curriculum, was taught to junior school students. At that time, students not only needed to learn ABC letters, but International Phonetic Alphabet as well. Teachers had to teach it in class, and let students recite it as a tool to remember English vocabulary. Starting from 2001, they began to provide English education in elementary school, and students did not have to learn International Phonetic Alphabet since then.

CVC syllables, composed of a consonant, a vowel, and a consonant, for example, "cat".

CVCe syllables, composed of a consonant, a vowel, a consonant, and a letter “e”, for example, “made”.

English Training Institution: In China, there are many institutions for students to learn English after class. These institutions provide English teaching either individually or small class setting, which gives more opportunities to students to practice their English speaking, and let teachers focus more on each student.

Purpose of the Study

Phonics is a very efficient way to learn English as a foreign language, especially for the beginner, and more and more English training institutions in China teach young students English by phonics. Thus, I conduct researches to demonstrate that phonics is needed and applicable for elementary schools in China in English learning.

Significance of the Study

Phonics is a popular topic in the Chinese elementary English education field. Teachers and scholars argued about its advantages and disadvantages for years. Nonetheless, even now in the biggest cities, there are no schools using phonics as the major method to teach English or to learn English vocabulary. If this research proves right, I hope it will push a little on the progress of the application of phonics in class. And teachers will learn from this research about how to teach phonics efficiently to young students.

Methodology

This study is a research which qualitative in nature. First of all, a brief review of the literature of the current situation of English teaching in elementary schools in China was conducted. Subsequently, a review of International Phonetic Alphabet teaching method, traditional teaching method, as well as phonics teaching method was carried out. Lastly, a review of the strategies of teaching phonics was conducted. Searches of the literature were conducted in and through Karmann Library, via the internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and JSTOR as the primary sources. The database CNKI also was employed since the study was conducted on English teaching in China. The findings were summarized and synthesized, and recommendations were made.

Chapter II Review of Literature

This research project focused on phonics and solved the following questions: What is phonics? Why is it better than IPA (International Phonetic Alphabets) teaching method and traditional teaching method? How should teachers teach phonics? For these questions, the author collected the data of the current situation of English teaching methods in elementary schools in China from Chinese research, including IPA teaching method and traditional teaching method. Then, it showed the data of phonics teaching method and the strategies of teaching phonics from the US research. Finally, it summarized the advantages of applying phonics in class by the comparison of the three methods.

Current Situation of English Teaching in Elementary Schools in China

In 2001, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued an official document *On the development of offering English courses in elementary schools* (2001) which explicitly stipulated that “Starting from 2001, China has gradually set up English learning in elementary schools all over the country. And the starting grade is normally third grade.” According to statistics, by 1999, approximately 7 million elementary school students in China were learning English at school. In fact, a majority of elementary schools in large and medium-sized cities offer English courses, and more than half of the elementary school students in various regions, cities and counties learn English (Wang, Zhao, Zhang, & Xiang, 2002). However, as the Vice Premier, Li Lanqing said, the current English teaching level and teaching methods in China are generally time-consuming and ineffective, which can be mainly reflected in the following aspects:

Lack of unified textbooks.

At present, there are more than one hundred kinds of elementary school English textbooks in China. Moreover, some cities even use more than ten different kinds of textbooks.

According to Wang, Zhao, Zhang, & Xiang (2002), in Hubei province (in China), there is no unified elementary school English textbooks for each district, and there are more than 10 types of textbooks used in local schools, which is applicable to different schools. As the teaching materials are mainly chosen by the school or teachers, it makes the selection of textbook with a certain criteria. For example, in 2002, *Elementary English for China* was one of the mainly used textbooks in Hubei province, however, after several years of teaching practice, it was found that the content of the textbook was too “traditional”. Similar to the structure of the traditional junior-high school English textbooks, the book began with the study of international phonetic symbols and there was no emphasis on listening and speaking training instruction. Secondly, the teaching strategy was too simple that students can only repeat the dialogue day after day, and eventually lose their interest in learning.

Teacher’s qualification.

According to the research conducted by Shu, Li, & Zhang (2003), most students believe that teachers have the greatest influence on their English learning. In fact, the quality of teacher resources directly affects teaching. For example, Shanghai, like other cities in China, has a severe shortage of qualified elementary school English teachers. In Shanghai, the average workload of English teachers is more than 15 classes per week, and the maximum reaches around 24 classes. Thus, teachers in each school all cover cross-grade teaching, and some teachers are even responsible for teaching several grades at a time. Consequently, professional teachers in elementary schools are usually old, their teaching methods are rather out of fashion, and their pronunciation skills are not in standard.

Three Ways of Teaching English in Chinese Elementary School

According to Shu, Li, & Zhang (2003), some teachers with strong abilities are more likely to apply Total Physical Reaction (TPR) in class, and let students conduct role-play and

design various games. Nevertheless, 60% of teachers seem to have no other way in class except reading words or sentences and asking student's questions. Meanwhile, the single way of teaching is also a problem. Many teachers only apply multimedia in class if they have a lesson competition to prepare, but they use only textbooks and PowerPoint in daily classes. Furthermore, the content of the PowerPoint is only from the textbook, and teachers use it only by reading. However, to enrich English teaching, it is better for teachers to use a variety of teaching tools, such as making posters and displaying real objects.

Based on the above findings, the three researches all draw the similar conclusion that if English teaching in elementary schools in China is to be improved, it is necessary to unify textbooks and select them more carefully, train more professional normal university students as well as give them more opportunities. At the same time, teachers need to apply more advanced teaching methods.

Herein, three different teaching methods were discussed in this paper.

1. International Phonetic Alphabet teaching method.

According to Michael (1996), "An alphabetic system of phonetic notation was based primarily on the Latin alphabet. It was devised by the International Phonetic Association in the late 19th century as a standardized representation of the sounds of spoken language. IPA is used by lexicographers, foreign language students and teachers, linguists, speech-language pathologists, singers, actors, constructed language creators as well as translators."

In Chinese English class, teachers usually apply IPA teaching method by teaching phonetic alphabet first, and then combining phonetic alphabet with English letters and words. For example, in Chen's research (2008), when teaching the word "cat", teachers would teach the sounds [k], [æ] and [t] first, let students identify the letters with these sounds, such as "c", "a" and "t", and then have them find the words that contained these sounds, like "cat".

As shown in *English Curriculum Standards* (2011), in China, before 2001, English education was provided to middle school as an official curriculum. At that time, students were not only required to learn ABC letters, but International Phonetic Alphabet as well. Teachers had to teach it in class, and let students recite it as a tool to remember English vocabulary. After 2001, English education was provided to elementary school, and IPA was not mandatory anymore.

Since the standards no longer required the schools to teach IPA, there was a huge debate among the English teachers in China: “Should or should not teach International Phonetic Alphabet in elementary school.” According to the research conducted by Chen (2008), the results showed that the main reasons for supporting the teaching of phonetic alphabet are: 1) to build a solid foundation of pronunciation and intonation for the beginner; 2) to improve students' reading skills and the ability of listening and distinguishing sounds; 3) to help students learn to spell independently; 4) to help students remember words; 5) to help students gain independent learning abilities, such as looking up the dictionary, previewing and reviewing by using the phonetic alphabet as a tool. These propositions are based on the general rules of language teaching.

And the main reasons against phonetic alphabet teaching are: 1) it may increase children's learning burden; 2) it may cause mutual interference among Chinese Pinyin (the official romanization system for standard Chinese. It is often used to teach standard mandarin Chinese, which includes four diacritics denoting tones), English letters and the phonetic alphabet system; 3) it may rise the difficulties and loss of interest in children; 4) there are other methods that are more consistent with children's cognitive characteristics, such as phonics method. According to the conclusion of Chen (2008), the debate on phonetic alphabet teaching ultimately is about the ways of phonetic teaching. As the basic component of a language,

teachers have no objection about teaching phonetics. No matter supporting phonetic alphabet teaching or being against it, they are seldom against phonetic teaching. Therefore, the debate does not focus on “should or should not to teach phonetic alphabet,” but on “whether it is necessary to use phonetic alphabet as a tool in the English phonetic teaching of elementary school.” After all, there are many ways of phonetic teaching, including direct imitation and other auxiliary tools, like songs, ballads, phonics and so on and phonetic alphabet is just one of them.

In 1978, there was a famous article posted in *Guangming Daily* in China, with the title of “Can you learn English without International Phonetic Alphabet?” Once it was posted, the author Cheng Musheng received over one thousand correspondences to support him, including the famous linguist, Lv Shuxiang. Through this article, Cheng convinced many people that it is better not using phonetic alphabet to learn English. After 14 years, in 2001, Cheng rewrote this article especially for elementary school students. According to Cheng (2001), it is easy to create two illusions while learning English by phonetic alphabet: 1. “I know phonetic alphabet, so there is no mistake of my pronunciation.” 2. Students think that only phonetic alphabet can show the pronunciation, and the spelling of words is not regular; thus, they have to remember the words in two forms, one in letter, and the other in phonetic alphabet. He also pointed out that teachers should cultivate students' ability to read new words when they see them, instead of asking them to memorize various pronunciation rules at the beginning. Teachers should lead students to conclude the rules from the words they have learned, which confirms to the concepts of phonics.

2. Traditional teaching method.

As in *English Curriculum Standards* (2011), IPA was not mandatory in public school anymore. What have been the main teaching method in elementary school English since then?

Shu, Li, & Zhang's (2003) research indicated that 60% of English teachers in elementary schools seemed to have no other way in class except reading the words or sentences and asking students questions. According to Li (2013), "pupils learn vocabulary mainly by imitation, that is, by reading after them."

However, if students only rely on the 40 minutes in class to imitate and memorize without mastering the rules of the words is far from enough. As Wang (1996) said, for Chinese English learners, there are not many opportunities to get in touch with English. Except for listening and speaking English in class, being out of the classroom means being out of touch. This will inevitably increase the difficulty of mastering this language. Especially for elementary school students, the number of English class hours arranged by the school is not enough. There are basically three hours per week for elementary school English class. Hence, elementary students have to learn English after school.

According to the conclusion by Li & Bian (2013), traditional teaching methods encourage students to learn by rote and drill, which makes students lose the ability of sustainable development in learning. As students are not familiar with the pronunciation rules of the words, they would find it very difficult in memorizing them, which has become the biggest bottleneck for students to learn English. In the long run, students' interests in learning declines and their learning efforts and efficiency decreases.

3. Phonics teaching method.

According to John (1570), phonics is a method for teaching reading and writing of the 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 represent them.

In 1970, Wylie and Durrell concluded 37 common rimes in their book, for example, -

ack, -ail, and -ain, and they are also called “37 word families”. These rimes can mainly classify English words into CVC, CVCe and sight words: CVC syllables, or CVC word composed of a consonant, a vowel, and a consonant. Take “cat” for an example. CVCe syllables are composed of a consonant, a vowel, a consonant, and a letter “e”. Take “made” for an example. According to Birky (1955), a sight word is the word which is basically taught by the “look and say” instruction, that is, showing the written symbol of the word to the child, telling him or her the meaning of the symbol, and asking the child to repeat the symbol. It is usually presented in a meaningful way. Such recognition can be based on what it means when the child sees it again, for instance, “the”. These three kinds of words are the basis of phonics.

As for the advantages of phonics, Witty (1953) said that the ability to pronounce words is essential so that children gain independence in word learning and become able to make additions to their reading vocabulary by themselves. A study cited by Witty showed that “phonics was an aid to better pronunciation and that oral reading was improved.” Davis wrote in her article *The advantage of teaching phonics* that by teaching phonics, students’ sound and symbol recognition is stronger; sounding out unfamiliar words is easier; knowing spelling patterns makes reading multi-syllabic words easier and becoming familiar with syllable structure. Educational psychologist Marlynne Grant conducted a study from 2011 to 2013, putting forward the idea of phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is the ability to enable students to know how words are formed, and automatically know the sounds. In this study, the classes who began a phonics program “were ahead other students by an average of 28 months for reading and 21 months for spelling.” (Grant, 2014)

Strategies of Teaching Phonics

With so many advantages, Witty (1953) said, teachers should be prepared to help their students develop skills in phonics. In this case, the author collected the strategies of teaching

phonics from various researches.

Word building.

According to Gunning (1995), word building is a system that uses students' natural tendency to find out the pronounceable parts of a word. To begin with the core of a word pattern, teacher and students can build a train of words by adding beginners (the start sound) to rimes. For example, in teaching the -e pattern, teachers can ask students what letter will be needed to form the word "me", and so as the word "he", "she" and "we". It also works in teaching CVC word. For instance, while teaching the -at pattern, the teacher can ask students what letter will be needed to form the word "sat", then form the word "hat", "mat", "cat", "rat" in the same way, and ask students what the similarities of all these words are.

Working with the poem.

As Daniel, Eaton, & Osterink (1999) pointed out in their book, teachers can present a phonics poem, and read it aloud to students so that they can work with it in varieties of ways: 1) Echo reading means asking students to echo the words you read. 2) Rhyming words means letting students find the words that rhyme in each line. 3) Visual discrimination means asking students to circle the consonants, vowels or words the teacher just pronounced. 4) Innovation refers to asking students to write down their own phonics poems. There are many poems that each focuses on certain sound patterns. For instance, in the book *Perfect Poems for Teaching Phonics* (Ellermeyer & Hechtman, 1999), *Big, Bright Circus* focuses on the -b,-br and -bl sounds, *Wonderful Weather* emphasizes on the -w sound and *The More It Snows* focuses on the -o sound.

Working with games.

Just like many teaching methods, there are plenty of games that can be designed for phonics. In *Phonics Make-and-Take* (Novelli, 1998), three games were introduced: 1) Mini

puzzles. Teachers write down the word on a paper, cut it according to the sound into puzzles, mix the puzzles and have students put their puzzles together. 2) Word wheels. Teachers cut a paper into a circle, write down different parts of words, such as “-agon”, “-aw” and “-ag” along the circle, leave the circle’s center to the students and have them fill in a sound that can make each part a complete word (such as filling the sound “-dr”, for each part “-agon”, “-aw”, “-ag” and making up the words “dragon, draw, drag”). 3) Word dominoes. Teachers design the game card with words and pictures, then give the cards to students and guide them to connect the cards end to end or side to side that has a word with the same sound.

Summary

In the review of literature, firstly, the current situation of English teaching in elementary schools in China was introduced. It is found that the teaching methods in China are generally time-consuming and ineffective due to the lack of unified textbooks, qualified teachers, as well as efficient teaching methods. Subsequently, the application of the international phonetic alphabet teaching method and the traditional teaching method in the English classes of elementary schools in China were presented. Furthermore, the disadvantages of applying these two methods were discussed. Lastly, the phonics teaching method was defined. When compared with the other two methods, its effectiveness and efficiency in teaching English was demonstrated.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

Through the introduction and brief analysis of the International Phonetic Alphabet method, Chinese traditional teaching method and phonics teaching method, the shortcomings of the first two methods are discussed.

For the International Phonetic Alphabet method, it is a large and complex system that is difficult for students to master, and therefore it is difficult for teachers to teach. The amount it requires students to remember is huge, and the learning method is inefficient.

For the traditional teaching method, as students do not understand the pronunciation rules and do not have the ability to spell independently, they cannot rely on the 40-minute class to remember all the knowledge, and can only spend their spare time to make up for it. Also, learning by imitation and rote is very inefficient.

By comparing the first two methods, phonics has its own advantages in teaching English. It uses letters and letter combinations to represent phonemes. Hence, students only have to memorize one set of symbols (26 English alphabet letters) which greatly reduces their memory burden. Students know the pronunciation rules of letters. While learning new words, they no longer need to rely on imitation and rote to remember the words, and they can read it by their own. In addition, they can understand the relationship between spelling and pronunciation. When hearing a word, they can write it down by the sound, which greatly improves the efficiency of learning.

More importantly, phonics has been applied in the class of US elementary schools for many years, and there are many exemplary class materials and instructional activities that Chinese elementary schools can apply for reference. The author hopes that this paper facilitates the progress of the application of phonics in the English class in China and inspire Chinese teachers to utilize phonics for elementary school students. For further research, the author

recommends that it is vital to study how to adapt phonics to the Chinese educational environments.

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