HOW TO TEACH PHONICS TO EFL STUDENTS

IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN CHINA

Approved: _________Dong Isbister__________________ Date: ___April 28, 2019_______

Paper Advisor

Suggested content descriptor keywords:

Phonics
English as a foreign language (EFL)
Primary school
HOW TO TEACH PHONICS TO EFL STUDENTS
IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN CHINA

A Seminar Paper

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

English Education

By
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2019
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Dong Isbister Whenever I encountered any difficulties, she would give me helpful and invaluable suggestions. Without her help, it would have been impossible for me to finish the paper.

I also want to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Yuanyuan Hu, Dr. Melissa Gormley, and Dr. Kory Wein. They not only taught me knowledge but also shared their rich experiences with me.

Last but not least, I would like to give my sincere thanks to my loving and supportive family.
Abstract

HOW TO TEACH PHONICS TO EFL STUDENTS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN CHINA

Shasha Sun

Under the Supervision of Dong Isbister, PhD

Although phonics teaching has been researched by many researchers in China, most primary school teachers do not know how to apply strategies in their classroom. This study mainly aims to identify effective strategies for phonics teaching in primary schools in China. Based on library research and literature review, this study explains and recommends three key strategies: modelled, guided and independent teaching. The study also discusses the limitations of teaching phonics in primary schools in China.
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Chapter I Introduction

Since English became a mandatory foreign language course in primary schools in China in 2001, English teachers have explored and implemented varying strategies to help students to develop their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. However, it is a great challenge for students to develop reading and spelling skills, given their limited exposure to English on a daily basis. Most Chinese primary school students have trouble on spelling English words. However, in most cases, primary school English teachers only focus on teaching students the specific literal meaning and the usage of that word. Teachers always pay too little attention to training students the ability to master some effective spelling rules so that students can recognize words efficiently. That is to say, when students improve their ability to recognize words, they will improve their reading ability at the same time.

Recent research has indicated that teaching phonics is an effective way to improve younger EFL students’ reading skills. “In the early grades, when literacy is being established, phonics activities help children to link symbols (to letters of the alphabet) with sound and to associate words as members of patterned families” (Britsch, 2016, p.71).

Phonics is a necessary skill in the beginning stage of English reading. It can promote the development of phonetic awareness and improve spelling ability. Using the phonics method to do a lot of reading can broaden students’ vocabulary and improve their reading fluency. Native speakers who learn English phonics can easily read the different letter combinations, so long as they read words and sentences. Students in English-speaking countries already get listening ability before they go to primary school. In primary schools, they mainly learn how to use phonics to improve spelling ability (Wang, 2015). “The way native speakers are taught phonics
is very different from the way it is taught to non-native speakers” (Wright & Wright, 2016, p.45). They learn the letters “s” “a” “t” “p” “i” “n” first, because these six letters are related to lots of words. Native speakers of English are familiar with the sound of words before they learn phonics. In China, however, English is a foreign language. This means students do not have a good language environment to learn English in China, as they don’t hear and speak English every day (Wright & Wright, 2016). Teachers in China should teach phonics systematically. For example, at the beginning level in primary school, students learn the alphabet before learning letter sounds. After they learn letter sounds, they begin to learn to blend these letters into simple words, and then learn short vowels and long vowels (Wright & Wright, 2016).

Phonics plays a positive role for students in English learning in China. Xu (2018) conducted an experiment to investigate the application of English phonics teaching in primary schools. Xu selected 78 primary school students and divided them into the experimental group and controlled group. Students in the experimental group received training in phonics instruction. And students in the controlled group were taught by traditional English teaching based on textbooks. After 18 weeks, the results showed that students in the experimental group made great progress in reading and spelling. They learned to better grasp the pronunciation of English words. There is no doubt that learning phonics can really help primary school students in China to improve their reading ability. It is, therefore, necessary for primary school English teachers to teach phonics. This study aims to identify and discuss effective phonics strategies that can be implemented in primary schools in China.
Statement of the Problem

English teaching in primary schools in China usually focuses on listening, speaking, reading and writing. Teachers of English in primary schools in China have used varying teaching resources and methods to teach English, but most of them do not know how to teach phonics effectively. Therefore, this paper will recommend strategies for phonics teaching in primary schools in China.

Definition of Terms

Phonics: Phonics, which is the relationship between letters and their corresponding sounds, is a part of learning how to read (Lapp, 1997). It is a phonetic system for students to learn English reading and spelling. Its core is to establish the correspondence between letter and sound. Students can read a word by looking at the letters that make the word without the aid of phonetic symbols.

There are two main methods to teach phonics: analytic phonics and synthetic phonics. Analytic phonics is also called implicit phonics. It is a method teaching letter-sound relationships in the context of a word in which it is found. Children learn to identify a word by its shape, the beginning and ending letters, and by how it is used in sentences, often with the aid of pictures. Synthetic phonics is also called explicit phonics. It teaches letter sound relationships by articulating the sound in isolation. Children learn to synthesize pronunciations for unfamiliar words by translating letters into sounds and blending the sounds together. After students become familiar with this set of rules, they can guess the spelling of a word according to its pronunciation. Hong Kong and Taiwan were the first to offer English phonics classes for non-
native speakers of English in China. More and more primary schools in mainland China are now offering phonics classes as well.

**English as a Foreign Language (EFL):** English as a foreign language (EFL) is used in contexts where English is neither widely used for communication nor used as the medium of instruction (David, 2000). In China, English is taught as a foreign language in primary schools, middle schools, high schools, and colleges.

**Purpose of the Study**

Teaching phonics is a more effective way of English teaching in primary schools in China. Effective phonics teaching can not only cultivate students’ reading skills, but also improve their spelling skills. This study attempts to identify effective strategies for teaching phonics and discuss the ways in which they can be implemented.

**Significance of the Study**

With the English curriculum reform in 2017, English teaching in primary schools in China has transformed the “exam-oriented education” into cultivating students’ comprehensive English learning skills. These include learning skills, language skills, critical thinking skills, and cultural awareness. Improving students’ language skills is one of them. The most basic function of language is communication. When primary school students learn English, the most important thing is to learn to read first before they have the skill of communication. With the development of multiple English teaching models, how to improve students’ reading skills has become a hot topic. Effective teaching methods and strategies will help students improve their reading skills. Phonics teaching is one of the teaching methods that serve that purpose.
This study will identify some strategies to teach phonics to lower level primary school students in China. The strategies include using phonics flashcards, videos, games and worksheets. The study will also provide samples of worksheets and games to demonstrate how to use the strategies effectively.

**Methodology**

This seminar paper is based on library research. I will search relevant articles, journals, and papers about phonics teaching for EFL learners. I will also search some relevant resources from reliable websites.
Chapter II Review of Literature

This chapter includes a brief literature review of phonics teaching in China. It discusses the advantages and teaching strategies for teaching phonics in primary schools in China. The focus is on how to teach phonics to EFL in primary schools in China.

Phonics Teaching in China

Many scholars based have conducted research on phonics teaching in China. The first introduction paper on CNKI appeared in 2005 in China (Min, 2017). An increasing number of research papers have been published since then.

Some scholars have discussed the connections of phonics teaching with International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) in English teaching. IPA is another group of written symbols that students need to learn in the process of learning English. Learning IPA is a great help for students’ English learning. However, the study of phonetic symbols tends to create a burden for students to learn English especially for the students at lower grade (Gao, 2005). In the meanwhile, phonics teaching can improve primary school lower grade students’ learning interest and improve their ability to memorize English words (Wang, 2013).

Some scholars also explained pros and cons of using Chinese *pinyin* to teach phonics. Chen (2012) argued that *pinyin* could be used to help with phonics teaching. English teachers can transfer *pinyin* to phonics teaching and use the similarity of the pronunciation between *pinyin* and phonics to memorize the sound of English letters. For Chen, using positive transfer into English phonics teaching is a good way to build students’ phonic awareness. Zang (2014), however, pointed out that phonics learning could make Chinese *pinyin* learning confusing.
Actually, many English words do not fit the phonics spelling rules. Zang also emphasized that phonics learning is not appropriate for learners of all ages in China. Wang (2015) also stated that phonics teaching and learning is only applicable in English-speaking countries.

According to Ding (2015), primary school students taught by phonics make great progress on spelling and reading new words. Zeng (2016) conducted a study to verify if phonics teaching can improve primary school students’ vocabulary reading and spelling ability effectively. Zeng also discussed if phonics teaching can stimulate primary school students’ learning interest in vocabulary learning. Zeng selected 77 third-grade students who were divided into the experimental group and the control group. The experimental group students were taught with phonics teaching. The experiment lasted 18 weeks. Although the results showed that phonics teaching was significantly more effective in primary schools, there are still some limitations.

**The Advantages of Teaching Phonics in Primary Schools in China**

Phonics teaching improves students’ learning interest. It also improves students’ word recognition ability and reading ability. Through decoding the words which fit the spelling rules, students can easily spell and write the words.

Chen (2013) used pre-tests, post-tests, questionnaires and an interview method to investigate whether the phonics teaching method is better than traditional vocabulary learning method. She conducted this experiment with two parallel classes which were divided into the experimental group and the control group. There were 74 second-grade students in two groups. This study lasted a whole semester. The results showed that students in the experimental group performed better than those in the control group on vocabulary spelling and learning interest.
Cao (2017) pointed out that phonics teaching is better than the traditional letter teaching method in the aspect of learning English reading. Wang (2018) argued similarly that phonics teaching was the fundamental of learning English reading. Wang also stated that phonics teaching can not only improve students’ English reading and spelling ability, but also stimulate students learning interest and confidence.

Liu (2012) illustrated that phonics teaching is an effective vocabulary teaching strategy in primary schools English teaching in China. He (2018) did a research that phonics teaching is conductive to primary school students. He selected 50 primary school students, half of them were the experimental group, and the other half were the control group. His experiment for all the classes combined lasted 120 hours. He proved that phonics teaching can help primary school students read and write English words.

Through many experimental studies and research, students in primary schools were taught by phonics learned more knowledge than students without phonics learning. Phonics learning can improve students’ English reading and spelling ability. Phonics teaching is a good method for primary school students learning English.

**Strategies for Teaching Phonics to EFL in Primary Schools in China**

English phonics teaching method mainly teaches students to know the letters’ sound and words’ spelling, so as to improve students’ reading ability and spelling ability. High quality phonics teaching involves the use of appropriate activities to teach reading and spelling systematically.
English has 44 phonemes that are represented by 26 letters of the alphabet in multiple combinations. The suggested strategies for teaching phonics -- modelled, guided, and independent teaching-- draw more on the use of synthetic phonics. They can be more appropriate for the lower level students in primary schools.

The first strategy is modelled teaching. Fletcher (2009) stated:

In modelled teaching, the teacher explicitly and directly teaches new phonics skills and concepts based on a planned, systematic sequence for teaching phonics. The teacher leads, demonstrates, models and explains the phonics skill to be learned and thinks aloud the learning processes involved. The teacher activates prior phonics knowledge, introduces new phonics terminology, builds on known understandings about phonics, and scaffolds students in concrete and visible ways. (p. 25).

A teacher uses this strategy to teach new phonics skills and concepts, such as identifying the single letter-sound and their relationships in phonics. This strategy is more on teacher-led. Students learn new phonetic knowledge under the guidance of the teacher. For example, a teacher may teach the letter dance, an activity that appeals to lower-grade students. The letter dance can let students get the 26 letters’ basic sound quickly. For example, letter “A” makes the short vowel sound /æ/ and letter “B” makes the sound /b/.

After students get the letter sound, a teacher teaches how to use the letter sound to read and spell. Students may work with the segmenting CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words. In this step, the teacher can use flip cards to teach students how to spell and read. Students should be able to say the sounds for letters and read CVC words.
For example, a teacher can use word frames to model. The word “cat” should break it into individual sounds, e.g. /k / /æ / /t /. In the meantime, the teacher provides students with the flip cards and write the base short vowel letter on chalkboard. Students can be divided into pairs or small groups and take turns saying each letter sound and say the word. Students can make more CVC words from flipping the cards. If students can write the words, they can take notes on papers. When students write some words, the teacher should pay attention to each word the students write. Sometimes, students may say some words that are not real words. The teacher should also pay attention to the word pronunciation because some words do not fit the rules of phonics.

In the next step, a teacher can teach letter combination through modelling. The teacher can select some words that contain sounds which students already knew before, and then teach the letter combinations and words which students do not know. The teacher can lead students to make a word form. The teacher writes the focus word in the center circle. Students write similar letter combination words and fill in as many circles as possible. The word web can help students make different kinds of associations, such as sack, back, pack. At the same time, teacher can teach students CCVC words here.

The second strategy is guided teaching. Fletcher (2009) described:

In guided teaching, the teacher still operates in a planned and systematic way but allows students more control. The literacy interactions are focused on the new phonics learning introduced during modelled teaching. Informed by student assessment information and knowledge of the phonics learning sequence, the teacher knows exactly what he or she expects students to be able to do. As needed,
the teacher provides explicit explanation, scaffolds students with just enough support to succeed, corrects errors and provides feedback. The students are more actively involved and hands on with their phonics learning, talking about, demonstrating, organising, practising and applying what they know and can do. (p. 25).

When teachers are at the second step of phonics teaching, they can use guided teaching to help students who need guided support to practice and apply new phonics skills and concepts. If needed, teachers can help students learn and correct errors and provide feedback. For instance, when students practice reading new words in groups, they should work with each other firstly. If students need help, a teacher should give them support. In this step, the teacher can let students play word bingo game to practice. Word bingo game is making some sets of bingo word grids using words with different combinations of the known sounds. Each student has a card and a teacher calls out words with different combinations of the known sounds. Students listen to the teacher’s calling and put a counter on the word if it is on their card. The first student to cover all words on their card is the winner. The winner becomes the caller. And then students can select a new word grid for a new game. When students play this game, some of them may not know how to play it and need to be guided step by step.

Another interesting game for primary school students is “guess the word”. A teacher writes a word on the chalkboard and using vowel digraph “ai” ask the students to make new words using this digraph (e.g. tail, mail, nail, and snail).
When teachers guide students to read, they should encourage students to use their knowledge of blending when reading. Students need to make cross-check with other sources of information as they are reading.

The third strategy is independent teaching. Independent teaching is an active construction process for students to self-design, self-management, self-regulation, self-examination, self-evaluation and self-transformation in the aspects of applying their phonics learning. Teachers just need to provide variety activities for students to self-monitoring. Through participating in class activities, students demonstrate how they can apply phonics to different aspects of English learning (Fletcher, 2009).

Teachers use this strategy when students need minimal support to apply and demonstrate new phonics skills. In this stage, students already know how to use phonics skill and when and where they need to use it. This strategy is often applied in the reading class.

In primary schools, picture books are popular for teaching. When students already master phonics skills, they can apply the skills in reading text. As need, a teacher should provide differentiated tasks and increased opportunities for student self-direction and self-monitoring. Students can take more control by demonstrating, practicing, applying, and reflecting on their phonics learning. Students show they can transfer their phonics learning to other situations and contexts.

A teacher should make sure that students really use phonics skills to read or write. For example, students can be divided into several groups and required to read a picture book. They can read the book by themselves. If they see the words that they cannot read, they should try to
seek the help of their partners or classmates. Teachers’ help is minimal when this strategy is used.

**Summary**

Phonics teaching has a short history in China. Although there are many different views on phonics teaching, phonics teaching is a way to teach primary school students to develop and improve their reading and writing skills. Modelled, guided and independent teaching are effective teaching strategies for primary school English teachers.
Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter draws conclusions about how to teach phonics in primary schools in China. It also provides recommendations for teaching phonics to EFL primary school students in China.

Conclusions

Through the library research, the paper has discussed that phonics can improve primary school students’ English reading and writing ability. Many primary school students face difficulties in reading and spelling words especially the lower grade students. Teachers can use a variety of phonics teaching strategies to deal with those difficulties. Modelled, guided and independent teaching are three key strategies. These strategies are appropriate for most primary school students in China.

Recommendations

The findings of library research have shown that phonics teaching can improve primary school students’ reading and writing ability in China. Teaching phonics to EFL primary school students is a good way of teaching. While there are many useful strategies for primary school English teachers, challenges are inevitable in phonics teaching. In terms of writing form, Chinese pinyin and English letters are similar or even the same in some forms, but different in pronunciation. Most primary school students are always confused about Chinese pinyin and English letters. For example, the letter combination “ai” in English words is similar to the Chinese diphthong (fùyùnmù) “ai.” In English, the long vowel “ai” sounds like /ei/. In Chinese pinyin, however, “ai” has four tones. Chinese students may make errors when they read the words mail, rain, sail, tail, or fail.
The other thing is there are many English letter combinations with the same sound, such as long vowel combinations “ea, ee, e-e”. Most primary school students in China are confused about how to write the correct words from dictation. Students can read the words fluently, but often make errors when they write those words. For example, most students cannot tell “tea” from “tee” when doing dictation exercises.

Furthermore, many English words have the same pronunciation but are different in spelling. Those words also have different meanings. Most primary school students are often confused about how to write or how to understand those words from listening. For instance, the words see and sea, meat and meet, here and hear, there and their.

In conclusion, phonics teaching is a good method for primary school students to improve their reading and writing skills. English phonics teaching is a long-term and complex project. And there are still many influencing factors in English phonics teaching. Many Chinese primary school students still have many problems with their Chinese pinyin and Chinese writing. What’s more, they also have lots of challenges on the acquisition of English phonics. It’s important that teachers should focus on how to solve the existing challenges in future English teaching. Teachers could use the three key strategies recommended in this paper to teach phonics more effectively.
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