



Study on the Popularity of Phonics Among Chinese Elementary Students and Its Implications for EFL Teachers

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Abstract. This paper, based on the previous knowledge, involves phonics's definition, its strengths and weaknesses and its history at home and abroad. Author of this paper summarizes the practice and research about phonics in Chinese elementary schools, and she put her main efforts in the explanation reasons for the popularity of the phonics. The interpretation is conducted from two aspects: one is from linguistics and second language acquisition; and the other is from physiology. Finally paper highlights the teachers' misunderstandings of phonics and gives implications for Chinese EFL teachers in theory and practice of phonics, their academic attitude, responsibility, and awareness of students needs and as well. Some future study topics are mentioned too in the end.

Keywords: Phonics · Popularity · Chinese elementary students · EFL teachers

1 Introduction

This part is the introduction to the some terms or background concerned the whole paper. It consists of the definition of the phonics, comparison between the phonics and English phonetic alphabet, the history of the phonics and the situation of practice on phonics in English-speaking countries and China.

1.1 Definition of the Phonics

The definition of the 'phonics' in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English: a way of teaching reading through understanding the pronunciation of letters and groups of letters. It is a teaching method to conduct reading and spelling through teaching the students the relationship between letter and its sound. (Horris & Hodges, 1995) Phonics is a way of teaching children to read, based on the 44 sounds made by letters or small groups of letters (phonemes) in the English language. It's not just pronunciation; it's an extremely effective way of teaching children to read in English.

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1.2 Comparison Between the Phonics and English Phonetic Alphabet

Here, narrowly speaking, IPA is regarded as English phonetic alphabet (EPA short term). English phonetic alphabet, a system of signaling pronunciation of sound, is used to mark the pronunciation of English in China. It has the similar function as the pinyin in Chinese, through EPA, the new words can be pronounced accurately.

English phonetic alphabet has been proved to have some strengths which includes: firstly, it helps English learners to recognize and pronounce English word, no matter this word has a single syllable or multiple syllables, no matter the syllable(s) is organized according to the rules or not. Secondly, it is helpful to memorize English words for learners. Learners tend to use Chinese characters to mark the pronunciation of an English word before they master English phonetic alphabet, which leaves many difficulties for future English word study. Thirdly, it is good to learners' independent English study. Through English phonetic alphabet, learners not only identify and memorize the words, but also learn new words by themselves. It is a big help to preview and review English words independently for learners. Moreover, they try to read the easy English short stories by means of dictionary to enrich their knowledge. Fourthly, EPA has a sound and complicated system, which benefits English beginners (taking English as foreign language) a lot.

On the other hand, EPA also has its weaknesses. At first, it is only one of subordinate tools and means which are like Chinese pinyin system. It cannot always be helpful for few foreign books, picture books, brochures or readers have marked English phonetic alphabet. So if learners confront this, they fail to read them and lose interest in learning for lack of the alphabet. Then it has another weak point, it causes the detachment of a sound from its relevant symbol directly. The consequences from the alphabet are: learners has got a word's pronunciation with the help of English phonetic alphabet, s/he also needs to memorize each word's spelling letter by letter, which makes his/er English study more difficult and frustrates the learner. Finally, English phonetic alphabet stresses the corrective pronunciation, while in real communication, people don't always pronounce every word clearly and right. This is pervasive in talking with English native speakers and seeing English films, as a result, learners are confused greatly due to teacher's overemphasis on the pronunciation of single word.

Compared with EPA, the phonics has the following five advantages. Firstly, it's an easy, time-saving and efficient teaching method due to its agreement between sound and relative symbol. According to the data, the phenomenon of this agreement occurs in the 97.4% of 500 English words; however, the disagreement situation only occupies 2.6%. This contributes to the learners pronounce the words while meeting them instantly and write them when listening. American scholar Adams (1990) said in *Phonics Instruction for the Nineties* the young learners can utter about 500 most common words through high frequent 37 phonemes. So, we say phonics has significant meaning for learners' future vocabulary and reading.

Secondly, it benefits Chinese English learners a lot from the positive transference of Chinese pinyin¹. For the Chinese lower graders of the elementary school, they have developed the ability to identify pinyin and the habit of Chinese reading. Many sounds in

¹ Chinese pinyin: Chinese phonetic alphabet.

Chinese pinyin share the similar sounds in English, for example, the pronunciation of the consonants of the English is alike that of Chinese sheng mu². So, phonics coincidentally cooperates with pinyin which help Chinese English learners greatly.

Thirdly, it avoids the trouble from learning the EPA. Both of phonics and alphabet belong to phonemic teaching, however, the difference lies in alphabet needs learners to master 48 phonemes in another new symbol form and phonics concerns 44 ones in the form of letter or letter combination. Phonics is convenient for learners that they do not necessarily learn another set of symbol like EPA, which removes much burden and puzzles for them.

Fourthly, there is little limit in applying phonics. Phonics learning does not need language lab, computers, projectors and other expensive teaching equipment, which can be operated anywhere even in poor areas.

Fifthly, it fosters learners' independent learning ability. It is a shortcut to utter English word and provides a good foundation to aspirate the new English word and form self-taught habit for learners.

Like the EPA, the phonics has its disadvantages too. It doesn't work on the irregular (multi-syllable) words. Many training organizations make more principles to handle this problem, which causes much memory burden on learners. Besides this, it connects the sound and its symbol, but it is weak in connection with the meaning of the word. Because this method comes from English-speaking countries, their learners have known the link between the sound and its meaning before they learn phonics. However, for Chinese children, it brings another task to connect the meaning aspect with phonics.

1.3 History of the Phonics

At the beginning of 19th century, phonics was originated from the history of American reading teaching. During the 1960s, it appeared in the reading teaching field as a definite concept. It became a most popular term used by reading teaching researchers at the end of 20th century. In 2000, it was Hongkong and Tai wan district that introduced phonics earliest in China. Phonics spread very rapidly in China after 2000. There are some practicing examples about phonics in mainland of China, for example, it has been adapted and practiced in Guangzhou province for over ten years. Meanwhile, it had turned to be the research focus of elementary English teaching quite soon and attracted the attention of certain well-known English training organizations and researchers in colleges and universities. Most of the subjects of the research, at the outset, are English beginners of infants and elementary students. Nowadays, the subjects are spreading wider to the English learners in colleges and universities.

2 Previous Researches on Phonics in Elementary Schools from China

Dong Haiyun, the English teaching and researching team leader of the 3rd Center Elementary School in Hongkou District of Shanghai City, says that English learners of

² sheng mu: initial consonant of a Chinese syllable.

grade one and grade two in China study English mainly by means of games, combining the teaching and pleasure. Compared with alphabet learning, the phonics is easier to be accepted by elementary learners.

In mainland, some experts and English teachers have conducted research about the phonics especially its functions in elementary English teaching and teaching strategies. Luo Rihong found that phonics has a positive influence in the students' vocabulary learning and their English reading comprehension through his experiment [5]. Gao Min regards that phonics is a good method to save the English learners from the heavy burden – rote learning Based on the empirical study of phonics [2], Yang Qiuzhi says that teachers do teach English learners phonetics knowledge and skills without the conventional letter teaching method [6]. Liang Yankui and other researchers think that phonics is helpful in kids' word recognition, spelling and improving reading comprehension [3]. It avoids the troubles from the English Phonetic Alphabet and helps foster learners' independent ability due to its agreement between sound and its symbol. Lin Yuan and others hold that the phonics raises the learners' phonetic awareness through improving their sound listening and sound recognizing to know the links between the sound and the symbol [4].

All the above researches prove that phonics helps the English beginners effectively master the pronunciation of the letter and letter group by borrowing the positive transference from Chinese pinyin. A prerequisite here emphasized is that the learners have learned the Chinese pinyin. This is due to the similar utterances between the English consonants and sheng mu of Chinese pinyin. On the other hand, we see from the above studies that few researchers are involved in the theory behind the phonics, or explain the reasons why phonics is popular in China from academic aspect. The author of this paper tries to solve this question in the following.

3 Reasons for the Popularity of Phonics in China

Any teaching method, if it has a long-lasting positive effect on learners' English learning at home and abroad, there must be some hidden reasons behind it which supports it functions smoothly and effectively. From above, we dare, undoubtedly say phonics belong to this kind of teaching method. The following, authors try to probe underlying reasons why phonics is hot from two aspects, one is linguistics & second-language acquisition and the other is psychology.

3.1 Interpretation from Linguistics and Second-Language Acquisition Perspectives

From the linguistics point view, language is a set of system. Under this system, there is a set of subsystems such as phonetics system, grammar system, vocabulary system and so on. It gives the English teachers most implication which always reminds them of the utmost importance of helping build the varied systems for their learners anytime, anywhere.

Phonics itself, it stresses the connection between sound and its symbol, authors think this is the first and most significant step to help the teachers to set up the later system

for their students. Why this connection is so important for us? From the conventional learning method of Chinese English beginners, they memorize every English word's pronunciation by rote-learning. It gets worse when they consult Chinese characters to mark the word's pronunciation especially before mastering the EPA. This method is completely wrong in its rational, because Chinese characters and the English symbols are totally different concepts. It's an unscientific and helpless method to rote the English sound by the help of Chinese characters. One of the consequences from this doing is that they cannot utter correct or acceptable English pronunciations of most words. Endless new English words taught latter force them to bear more memory burden, cause unwanted ambiguity and finally undermine the learners' interest in English little by little. The vicious circle is that they fail to understand others and be understood. Quite a few learners might stop English's growth when they study further in grade two at their secondary schools. To be exact, it means that there is an obvious cutting line between good learners and bad learners in most of Chinese rural secondary classes. This situation is a little bit better in the urban secondary classes. The above fact strongly proves that the lack of founding connection between sound and its symbol in English word does much harm to English study efficiency and learners' self-esteem and confidence.

We can say the system of English language is hard to build without the previous step—sound and symbol link for elementary learners. Some could ask whether the phenomenon of dividing line is totally caused by the lack of sound and symbol connection. The author dare not say this phenomenon is 100% due to the lack of link. However, we can say the detachment sound from its symbol is at least an important cause among the other various causes. As we all know the process of acquiring a language is listening, mimicking, speaking, reading and writing. From the linguistics, the speaking is primary, the writing, symbol of symbol, is the secondarily important compared with the spoken language. It says there is no corrective production of speech sound without right perception of it. Some other people could ask why many learners learn English well without getting the teaching of phonics. There might be some various proposals or assumptions that these learners are born with the language talent, or they have developed well connecting thinking and logical thinking in spite of their young age, or they have so intense interest in English that they are willing to devote much time and energy accomplishing the assignment and activity from their teachers. All of these need further relative research in the future. The author here merely discusses and analyzes the scientific nature of the phonics from the linguistics aspect.

3.2 Interpretation from Physiological Perspective

Why we say phonics functions best among elementary English learners? It matches their physiological characteristics very well and meets the specific needs of this particular group. The learners' ages are varied from 6 to 11. The biggest characteristic is that these learners share mechanic thinking. It means that they learn something new mainly by rotting, memorizing something without thinking. Of course, it is a time-consuming task for learners to memorize the knowledge by continuous practice. The result is that they can speak out the word simultaneously as soon as they meet upon it. They get automaticity in pronouncing any English word inquired by teachers through a little

complicated process (listening, watching, observing, discriminating and memorizing), but this process is suitable to their age and their cognitive level.

Some people would ask this repeated work may make learners lose interest in the phonics or even give up it halfway. This worry is worthy thinking. Thanks to the efficient and capable English teachers, they try every means to sustain their learners' energy, attention, and engagement. These means can be seen from the varied and interesting design of learning environment, teaching aids, activities, games and so on. The learners are hard to get boring among the endless interesting tasks. They maybe forget everything when they are engaged in the happy class time. Moreover, for young learners, they tend to like the things repeated again and again, for example, they like reading the same story or watching the same TV program many times which seem like the first time for them.

Here, for Chinese young English learner, they benefit a lot from sheng mu. This is also a subordinate reason for the popularity of phonics.

At last, we cannot avoid another point, that is to say, some learners and EFL teachers blindly follow the phonics without second thought. Maybe this is another reason for its popularity. About this, it needs to be stressed in the following 4.

4 Suggestions for Teaching Children Phonics in China

Author has discussed about the advantages and disadvantages of phonics as well as compared them with EPA's strengths and weaknesses (see 1.2.). She, moreover, remind EFL teachers of four misunderstandings on the phonics.

Firstly, phonics can be used in various age groups. Generally speaking, English beginners would benefit most from phonics. It isn't suitable for the preschool kids because they are incapable of distinguishing 26 English letters and remembering each sound of every letter in an English word. If we teach them phonics during this age range, it would only bring about chaos and disorders and affect the learners' pinyin study. It does no good to the English learners beyond age of 11 either. It might bore or annoy these learners for the enduring and repeating practice.

Secondly, phonics can be used by any level of EFL teachers. Maybe this is the biggest misunderstanding for the blind followers. Phonics is a challenging method for it requires EFL teachers with high level especially in phonetics. Besides this, these teachers need to receive professional training and guiding. Before taking this method, the teachers had better think over their own qualities and training conditions. Without one's own qualification and preparation, it's better not to begin this method. Otherwise, the EFL learners might be misled and cause consequences.

Thirdly, target of phonics is to ask learners pronounce the word once reading it and write the word while listening to it. It is undoubtedly right for English native young speakers or learners taking English as a second language, while it is not necessarily corrective for Chinese young learners who take English as a foreign language. They are not like the former learners who have developed the link between the sound and its meaning before they learn phonics (see 1.2.). This target misleads some parents and teachers to over exaggerate the functions of the phonics in reality. It would make them neglect semantics aspect of the word while strongly engaging in rote-learning the definite pronouncing rules. Insufficient well-matched reading materials combined with phonics

gets the reality worse in China, which severely limits the learners' English practice and performance.

Last but not least, phonics can finally develop learners' reading comprehension. Authors must declare that reading is a quite complex process. It is not so easy as some ones thought. It embraces three stages which are pre-reading, while reading and post-reading. It concerns a wide range of complicated physical and psychological activities, such as eye shift, imagination, decoding and comment. Here, authors take the word recognition as an example to illustrate the position and function of phonics in reading. There are many strategies to help readers to realize word recognition which is one of the significant steps in reading. Generally speaking, contexts, affixes, combination, synonyms, antonyms, schema, guessing, punctuation, phonics and so on each of them help reader to recognize the word especially new word immediately during reading. Teachers should tell their learners all of them in two reasons. One reason is one or several strategies are not enough when learners meet difficulties in real reading and the other reason is some learners are audio readers, some are sight readers and some are tactus readers. We can see phonics that is only one of strategies in word recognition, caters the taste of the audio readers. A correct conclusion is single phonics is hard to develop learners reading without the cooperation of many other strategies.

All the above chapters supply much implication for English teachers. They help teachers form a whole and multi-dimension picture of phonics, which is useful to direct them to take action objectively and flexibly. The implications elicited from them: to link the sound and its symbol all the time, to keep the long-lasting awareness of language system and help learners build the system purposely as well, to bring life to class by creating and organizing various and interesting methods, activities and games; to combine phonics and EPA; to take advantage of sheng mu cautiously; to develop teachers themselves in language knowledge and skills constantly and so on; to educate them especially pre-service EFL teachers to view a popular teaching method rationally.

There are still more questions which need further study. The first question is phonics is convenient to be used without the modern teaching apprentices, however, it has high requirements for English teachers in their pronunciation, teaching methods, games and activities. These high-qualified teachers are very common in developed cities, how to train the English teachers from the underdeveloped places such as rural or poor areas, where phonics is hardly seen in English class. The second question is we cannot neglect the Chinese sheng mu's negative transference in phonics although we only discuss its positive influence in phonics (see 1.2.). That they are similar doesn't mean they are totally the same. How to conquer sheng mu's side-effect is another further study. The last question is how to add the semantics into the phonics teaching to make the phonics serve English learners better in the future.

5 Conclusion

In the world, there is no best teaching method. Every method has its advantages and disadvantages. English teaching in China mainly depend on English native-speakers' countries. Because Chinese EFL teachers learned and learn teaching theories, teaching methods and even teaching practice from these countries. English in China is always

taught by Chinese EFL teachers. However, any teaching method from abroad needs to adapt to Chinese environment and reality. This paper tries to let English teachers including pre-service English teachers maintain a cold head facing the phonics through exhibiting relative knowledge, practices and theory. Author also wants to call on the educators/teachers of pre-service English teachers to form a right academic attitude to think over the heated phenomenon on English teaching and analyse it through dichotomous approach. This is college teachers, especially EFL teachers (from normal universities) responsibility and sense of awareness. They need to remember that they cannot develop without meeting professional needs, especially students needs.

Author's Contribution. This article is independently completed by Xiaojuan Liu.

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