



# Comparing International Phonetic Alphabet Method and Natural Spelling Method in English Teaching of China

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**Abstract.** English education has a long history and a great influence in China. However, there are still many shortcomings and limitations in English education in China, a large part of which is due to the two existing mainstream English teaching methods in China. The Main findings of this paper were: 1) introduce the development history of English Teaching in China; 2) extend the description of the introduction and application of the two current English teaching methods: the International Phonetic Alphabet method and the Natural Spelling method; 3) give some suggestions and improvement methods based on a comparison and analyze the existing teaching methods in detail. This paper will inspire future researchers to develop better teaching programs for Chinese English learners with mainstream English teaching methods.

**Keywords:** English teaching · International Phonetic Alphabet Method · Natural Spelling Method · Phonics

## 1 Introduction

English teaching began in China in the Qing Dynasty, and it has been gradually promoted from the coastal areas to the inland. In the 19th century, it was added to one of the compulsory examination items of the national college entrance examination, making China the country with the largest number of English learners.

However, globally, the recognition of China's English level is not high. Even in the reports of *EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI)* for several consecutive years, it ranks only at the middle class. Because of productivity and economic problems, regional development of the English teaching level is extremely uneven (Table1). Therefore, Chinese English education experts have made a lot of effort. Through continuous improvement of teaching methods, they have promoted and applied the international phonetic alphabet and natural spelling to promote the development of the English level of the new generation of young people in China.

## 2 English Teaching in China and Its Teaching Methods

Before studying English teaching methods, understand the development background of English in China and the methods used in this stage, then judging whether this method is suitable for the current teaching level and students are important.

### 2.1 The History and Development of English Teaching in China

With the development of English education in China, it has become more and more popular. China has the largest number of English learners in the world, and as early as the 1970s, English education received the attention of the education departments in China. It can be seen that China has a long history of English education.

The earliest English education in China can be traced back to the Qing Dynasty 140 years ago. In the early stage, the Chinese in coastal cities began to learn English because most of these English teaching schools were conducted sporadically by Christian missionaries from Britain and America. The scope was very narrow, the scale was very small, and there was no formal and systematic education [1].

Students in coastal cities learn English in missionary schools set up by missionaries which were mainly distributed in Shanghai, Ningbo, Fuzhou, Xiamen, Guangzhou and other coastal trade ports. Under the background that social thought was changed from closed to study at that time and foreign affairs, documents and books were introduced in large quantities, the first foreign language school of the Manchu government, the School of Combined Learning, was officially established in 1862, which was also the first English teaching school in Chinese history. After the war, China's education was once destroyed. What's more, the choice of the Communist revolutionary road also made Russia temporarily replace English in an important position in China's education history. Until 1957, after the speech of premier Zhou about the Strategic Deployment of Scientific Development in 1956, English teaching began to return to the normal track. With the development of the world trend, as the first common language, English had more and more learners, and learning English had become the general trend. In 1964, the Ministry of education of China also determined English as the first foreign language and adjusted to the foreign language teaching structure. Under the strong demand for English talents in higher education, in 1984, English was officially written into the examination syllabus as the main subject of China's national college entrance examination, further laying the important position of English education in China [1-3].

According to the preceding content, English teaching has now become an important part of the teaching structure in China. However, according to news reports, in *The Ninth Edition of EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI)* released by EF education in 2019, China ranks only 40th among the 100 non-native English-speaking countries in the world, only at the medium highest reaching. This report exposes the weakness and current situation of English Teaching in China: too much emphasis is placed on the test-oriented, and the learners' application ability is neglected. Even if they can recite words fluently and most youngsters can have simple daily conversations, the environment without English language communication makes it hard for learners to further use English for oral communication, and they lag far behind other countries and regions in reading and writing of higher level. At the same time, the English level of

**Table 1.** China's English levels by region (By EF EPI) [Owner-draw]

Region	Rank	EF EPI	Location
HongKong	1	545	Coastal
Shanghai	2	543	Coastal
Beijing	3	523	Inland
Tianjin	4	520	Coastal
Taiwan	5	519	Coastal
Zhejiang	6	510	Coastal
Sichuan	7	506	Inland
Shandong	8	505	Coastal
Guangdong	9	504	Coastal
Macau	10	504	Coastal
Jiangsu	11	503	Coastal
Hubei	12	502	Inland
Fujian	13	498	Coastal
Anhui	14	489	Inland
Liaoning	15	482	Coastal
Jilin	16	476	Inland
Chongqing	17	473	Inland
Hunan	18	473	Inland
Hainan	19	472	Coastal
Jiangxi	20	472	Inland
Henan	21	465	Inland
Shanxi	22	460	Inland

Chinese learners is extremely uneven. In Table 1, most of the high-level learners are distributed in the coastal areas, while the English level of the mainland is far behind.

The reasons behind this include transportation, economy, policy, history and education, among which education is the most intuitive and easy to analyze and explain. Therefore, the next three sections of this essay will focus on the differences in English learning methods and their application to education.

## 2.2 Introduction of the International Phonetic Alphabet and Its Application in English Teaching in China

The International Phonetic Alphabet (hereinafter collectively referred to as IPA), also known as the “Universal Phonetic Alphabet” in the early days, is a system for phonetic transcription. It is based on the Latin alphabet and designed by the International Phonetics society as a standardized marking method for spoken sounds. According to the design

of the IPA, it can only distinguish the following phonetic components in the export language: phoneme, intonation and the separation of words and syllables, which is also known as its greatest advantage: that it conforms to the principle of “one symbol corresponding one phoneme, one phoneme corresponding one symbol”, which reduces the number of phonetic symbols to the minimum. Therefore, it is a scientific and concise phonetic symbol system [4]. IPA is now used in the Indo-European language system, an African language, Chinese and other languages, but the IPA discussed in this paper only applies to English IPA.

The birth of IPA is due to the development of phonetics science. In English teaching and research, there is an urgent need for a more scientific set of phonetic symbols that can better represent the actual pronunciation in spoken English. Therefore, the British phonetist Sweet (Henry Sweet, 1845–1912) and some European phonetists of the International Phonetic Association published IPA in 1888 according to the actual number of vowels and consonants in spoken English [4]. According to traditional phonetics, there are 48 phonemes in the English international phonetic alphabet, one phoneme corresponding to one phonetic alphabet, which makes it accurate.

Just as some American phoneticians considered: with a consideration of the International Phonetic Alphabet, it is proposed that it should be made completely explicit that the symbols denote certain combinations of the features [5]. IPA has been released for over a century and has been widely used in English teaching worldwide. As early as the 1930s, it was proposed by Chinese educators to apply it to English teaching. After research and comparison, they said IPA is the simplest, the most orderly, and the easiest to learn and use. Until the 1950s, the international phonetic alphabet has been widely used in English Teaching in China. However, in the 1970s, some opponents objected to its complexity and confusion. However, it is still used today and is widely used in language research, writing foreign language textbooks and practical English Teaching in China [4].

IPA was a teaching method for beginners to learn English in China in the early stage. However, due to its complexity, some regions with relatively fast updating teaching methods chose to transfer it to junior high school for teaching. However, IPA is still used as a teaching method for English beginners in many regions. This situation mostly exists in the inland areas.

The original teaching purpose of the international phonetic alphabet method was originally to enable beginners to master the pronunciation rules and phonetic alphabet application rules of words because spelling alone cannot completely cover all English words because about 20% of English words are beyond the scope of spelling rules. However, after consulting a primary school English teacher who has worked for nearly 20 years, we also found the disadvantages of the IPA teaching method in English. The first is the problem with pronunciation and intonation. IPA teaching only has pronunciation methods, but the intonation depends on the individual teacher, so it will cause the accent problem of multiple intonations of a word. Chinese education experts say that English phonetics teaching has been marginalized in Chinese English classes, which has also led to pronunciation becoming a major obstacle for Chinese people to talk with foreigners [6]. It is difficult to correct in the future after being influenced by the wrong accent at the beginner stage. The second problem is that the IPA method and the Chinese phonetic

alphabet method are easily confusing. In China, the Chinese phonetic alphabet method and the IPA method are taught almost at the same time (for primary school beginners). Therefore, a large number of students will confuse the two phonetic teaching methods. Finally, beginners, due to the unclear classification of phonetic symbols, it is difficult for young beginners to understand. Many college students also say that the English phonetic course set up by the school based on IPA has not had too much impact on improving English.

The international phonetic alphabet method is indeed the most widely used English teaching method, but it is still lacking in China and have some obvious disadvantages. Therefore, some parts of China introduced a new teaching method for beginners in the English education reform, and it will be referred to in Sect. 2.3 below.

### 2.3 Introduction of Natural Spelling Method and Its Application in English Teaching in China

Natural spelling is also known as “phonics”, and it will be referred to as phonics in this paper below. It is not only a teaching method for children in English-speaking countries to learn English pronunciation and spelling and improve their reading ability and understanding but also a teaching method for English beginners who take English as a second language to learn pronunciation rules and spelling skills. In the past 50 years, phonics has been widely used in English-speaking countries and countries that use English as a second language. It has also been highly praised by contemporary educators.

Before the mid-19th century, this method did not appear in the United States until Mann (Horace·Mann) challenged the dominant teaching method and decided to change the English teaching method. Compared with the traditional basic method of learning letters and sounds first, Mann believes that the order should be changed to learn the words first. This method has gradually been accepted by schools and teachers in many parts of the United States and has occupied a dominant position. This is the embryonic form of phonics. In 1967, Jeanne Chall, Professor of Harvard University, published the book Learning to Read: The Great Debate, which compiled much research to support natural spelling. Jeanne believed that children aged six to seven find it difficult to read, and realize that they do not have the ability to read the text, so they refuse to read the text. Therefore, phonics is a quick way to help children build self-confidence and become familiar with the words. Children need to learn to use all of the world's recognition skills. Because they will need different skills for different situations, they must also learn to use them appropriately [7]. It can be seen that the purpose of natural spelling is actually to improve the reading level of beginners and train their ability to draw inferences from one instance. Therefore, it is only necessary to learn the spelling method, and there is no need to deliberately remember the relationship between the meaning and the word. Finally, in 2000, a report issued by the national reading Council of the United States affirmed that the natural spelling teaching method is the best way to teach children to read. Therefore, the natural spelling teaching method has occupied a dominant position in English education in the United States and has been gradually extended to other countries.

As early as 2000, Taiwan and Hong Kong introduced natural spelling teaching and large-scale promotion. At that time, learners thought it was a simple and efficient method

because it not only conforms to the law of human language learning but also can read a large number of texts in a short time without the help of the international phonetic alphabet. The natural spelling method of English is to directly learn the pronunciation rules of 26 letters and letter combinations in words, establish the perception of letters, letter combinations and pronunciation, and let students master the rules of English spelling to achieve the learning purpose of reading words when they see them and spelling words when they hear them. Searfoss and Readence point out that phonics, context clues and structural analysis are the skills of reading. For beginners of reading, context speculation and structural analysis are still difficult, so they rely more on natural spelling to identify vocabulary [8].

In the following ten years, phonics gradually spread to the coastal and developed areas of China, which changed the structure of English education in China. In the research experiment on Phonics Teaching Method in a school in Guangdong Province in 2019, the researchers believe that phonics cannot only solve vocabulary learning difficulties but, more importantly, it can cultivate students' phoneme awareness and enlighten early English reading so that students can have reading awareness and have passion in English [9]. However, after knowing the English learning situation of some parents and primary school students, it can be found that the phonics teaching method still has limitations in China. Phonics has a certain learning threshold, that is, vocabulary accumulation. This is not difficult for students from native English-speaking countries and regions, but for Chinese students, a large part of them cannot have English education resources before primary school. Therefore, it will be extremely difficult and laborious to contact phonics initially, and it may even conflict with English learning.

What's more, there is still a lack of core phonics teaching materials in China, which leads to the extremely uneven development of teaching levels in various regions and changes due to the level gap among teaching teachers, and there is no unity and stability. We need to understand the kinds of information about words that the spelling system represents, and we need to understand the developmental course that children follow as they learn the spelling system [10]. This is also a very important reason why phonics teaching can play a good role.

Although phonics still has many limitations and development space, we still can not deny that it is very friendly to English beginners. Once it is skillfully used, it will make learners' English levels rapidly improve in a short time.

### 3 Comparison and Suggestions of the Two Teaching Methods

The above two English teaching methods are the two most mainstream teaching methods in English education in China. However, their respective advantages and disadvantages also need to be weighed by the teachers themselves.

For learners, phonics is the best way to improve their interest in the early stage of learning English. It is simple and fast to establish the connection between the pronunciation and writing of words through spelling and increasing their vocabulary. However, learners need to accumulate a lot of listening and reading simultaneously. The advantage of this all-English environment is that it is difficult for most Chinese English beginners. They can only make up for it by relying on English teachers for a short time in school.

Compared with phonics, the IPA teaching method can improve learners' autonomous learning ability and help learners to read correctly. This has a great effect on enhancing learners' vocabulary accumulation and vocabulary memory [11]. However, the IPA method is very difficult for beginners. First of all, the international phonetic alphabet is divided into two different systems, the British and the American phonetic alphabet. In addition to learning the phonetic alphabet, you have to recognize the surprise of the British phonetic alphabet and the American phonetic alphabet, which greatly increases the amount of learners' learning [12]. Secondly, besides word books and textbooks, there are almost no other books marked with phonetic symbols in English books. Therefore, when encountering new words, still need to look them up, which will interrupt the reading fluency of the learner [13].

For teachers, the IPA method has a long history and has its system for teaching. Moreover, research shows that many college students have great problems in English listening, speaking, reading and writing because they do not learn the IPA well, which also confirms its long-term and profound influence of it. However, the phonics teaching method still lacks standard and unified teaching materials, and there is still a blank in the teaching resources in China. It has not even been popularized in every region. Moreover, phonics also has advantages for countries with large regional differences, such as China. It can be taught according to local conditions. Even in technologically backward mountainous areas, learners can master this method without relying on advanced equipment [14].

Even though the two teaching methods are still unable to determine the advantages and disadvantages accurately, this does not prevent educators from integrating them into teaching. For pre-school children who have mastered a certain level of English through interest classes and family environment before going to primary school, teachers can use phonics teaching in primary school and supplement IPA to help learners consolidate their memory and understanding of English words. For beginners without English learning experience, teachers should establish their familiarity with English through a large number of English listening and reading materials before teaching phonics. However, they should not supplement the relevant knowledge of IPA too early to avoid confusion. In the middle stage of English learning, that is, the junior middle school in China, teachers can carry out systematic teaching of the international phonetic alphabet, further improve the accuracy of learners' memory of words, and cultivate learners' autonomous learning ability.

In the future, the phonics teaching method should also unify teaching standards in the country, compile materials suitable for Chinese students, and actively promote it to make up for the gap in this teaching method in China.

## 4 Conclusion

To sum up, the importance of English education in China cannot be underestimated, and it will continue to expand its influence in the future. Therefore, it is the duty of English teachers to find teaching methods suitable for Chinese students and use them reasonably at the right stage. It is also a test of English teachers' teaching standards. Hence, it is necessary to have a deep and correct understanding of the advantages and disadvantages

of the two teaching methods and adjust them according to the English learning background of different students. In the future, these two methods have shortcomings and room for development, and they are also worthy of further research by educators.

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