Teaching Phonics to Chinese L1 EFL Pupils: Pathway to the Future

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ABSTRACT

Despite that converging evidence has led to the mandate of phonics instruction in primary education in the UK, U.S. and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) China and Taiwan, teachers across the board (native or EFL, experienced or novice alike) have been found to lack the knowledge required for delivering high-quality synthetic phonics. While reforms to improve current practices are underway, it is vital that teachers are supported with well-designed educational technology (e.g., interactive synthetic phonics software) to maintain teaching standards and boost learning outcomes. Although well-designed interactive synthetic phonics software is available, it is not suitable for Chinese L1 EFL teachers and pupils. The current article introduces Easy Phonics (interactive synthetic phonics software designed specifically for Chinese L1 EFL teachers and pupils), presents preliminary findings using the software in classroom teaching, and confirms its potential to assist ‘phonics-untrained’ teachers in maintaining teaching standards and boosting learning outcomes. The current article, while supporting the use of educational technology in phonics teaching, does not suggest that educational technology can ‘replace’ teachers in phonics instruction.

Keywords: China, Chinese L1 EFL (English as a Foreign Language), Interactive Synthetic Phonics Software, Phonics, Taiwan

INTRODUCTION

Studies by Marshall and Newcombe (1966, 1973) have revealed that there are two routes to reading alphabetic languages: the phonological route and the lexical route. Subsequent research has theorised that reading via the lexical route comes only after years of reading via the phonological route (Ehri, 1995; Frith, 1985). This claim has been supported by brain imaging research (e.g., Gaillard, Balsamo, Ibrahim, Sachs, & Xu, 2003; Shaywitz et al., 2002). The phonological reading route means reading phonically, and reading phonically requires one to use their phonic knowledge (a.k.a. letter-sound knowledge; in the paper the two terms are used interchangeably) to first segment a word into graphemes (single letter or letter group), attach phonemes (sounds) to these graphemes, synthesise the phonemes to read aloud as a word, and finally reach word meaning. Lexical reading, on the other hand, is achieved by direct access to word meanings.
Comparisons carried out across age-matched children of 13 European languages at the end of first grade prove the orthographic complexity of a language has a major impact on learning (Seymour, Aro, & Erskine, 2003). German children, after only a few months of schooling, can read practically any word, because German spelling is almost perfectly regular. Once the children know how to pronounce each letter of the alphabet, they can read and write any speech sound. Conversely, British and American children need years of schooling before they become fluent decoders. This is because the English orthography is ‘neither transparent nor one-to-one’ (Wydell & Butterworth, 1999).

Following the publication of the National Reading Panel report (U.S., 2000) and the Rose report (UK, 2006) that extensively reviewed all evidence-based reading research, both governments finally concluded that phonetic knowledge is essential to kick start reading development, and that since English orthography is prone to incidence of reading difficulty and is extremely complex, synthetic phonics is the solution to reducing the incidence of reading failure and speeding up the acquisition of phonetic knowledge. Synthetic phonics has since been delivered in some states through the aegis of the federally-funded Reading First (in the U.S.), and is mandatory for primary school children in the UK. Synthetic phonics teaches children grapheme-phoneme (letter-sound) correspondence rules in a clearly defined, incremental sequence so that they can: (a) segment words into their constituent phonemes and (b) blend (synthesise) phonemes, in order, all through a word to read it. However, the reading performance in the US and UK continues to decline as documented in the PISA 2009 report (Bradshaw, Ager, Burge, & Wheater, 2010). This leads to the scrutiny of the practice of synthetic phonics instruction. High-quality synthetic phonics instruction is teacher-directed (Justice, Chow, Capellini, Flanigan, & Colton, 2003), and research has suggested that to deliver high-quality synthetic phonics, teachers must have the following two types of knowledge:

- Good phonetic knowledge to enable them to correctly relate letters to sounds for word reading, and vice versa for spelling, and to be able to deliver high-quality phonics (McCutchen et al., 2009).
- Good pedagogical knowledge to enable them to teach explicitly and systematically to “reveal the logic of the alphabetic system” (Adams, 2002, p. 74).

However, studies have shown that the quality of phonics instruction is lacking in native English primary education. Studies (e.g., Connelly, 2002; Ehri & Soffer, 1999; Stainthorp, 2004) highlighted that novice and veteran native English teachers alike have poor letter-sound knowledge. In addition, teachers are found to lack the pedagogical skills required to deliver teaching ‘explicitly and systematically’ (Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008). ‘Explicitness’ refers to teachers’ use of clear terminology that focuses children’s attention on the concepts being learnt, whereas ‘systematicity’ refers to the teachers’ organisation and sequencing of lessons so that they reveal the logic of the alphabetic system. A recent study by McCutchen, Green, Abbott, and Sanders (2009) confirmed that teachers’ letter-sound knowledge correlates with their pupils’ word reading performance. In the wake of such findings, the UK government has further launched a series of ongoing parallel reforms, including offering existing teachers detailed guidelines on how to teach ‘discrete’ synthetic phonics lessons, funding primary schools to purchase and employ state-approved educational technology (i.e., interactive synthetic phonics software packages) in phonics teaching, ushering existing teachers through state-approved synthetic phonics teaching training programmes (Department for Education, 2011a), making it a statutory requirement for primary schools to administer a Phonics Screening Check to all Year 1 children (starting from June 2012) (Department for Education, 2011b), and making demonstrating good ability to teach synthetic phonics an essential requirement to obtain their qualified teacher status (QTS) (Department for Education, 2011c).
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