

Teaching Literacy through Phonics to YLs in an FL Context

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Introduction

A variety of textbooks have been prepared in different parts of the world for teaching English to YLs. However, still whenever there is a language class held for the young beginners, in countries where English is considered a foreign language, the people in charge encounter certain difficulties among which is finding an appropriate book suitable to the needs of this group. They usually have to put an array of materials together to fulfill the need.

It is hoped that through the points put forth in this poster which mainly deal with the use of phonics in teaching literacy in an SL/FL context to YLs, teachers and textbook writers will be able to help their pupils even more.

What is phonics?

"Phonics instruction is a way of teaching reading and stresses the acquisition of sound-letter correspondences and their use in reading and spelling. The primary focus of phonics instruction is to help beginning readers understand how letters are linked to sounds (phonemes) to form letter- sound correspondences and spelling patterns and to help them learn how to apply this knowledge in their reading." (Phonics Instruction, the Phonics Bulletin May 2004, Vol. 2)

According to Phonics Instruction report (2000), there are two kinds of phonics: 1) synthetic, and 2) analytical.

"In synthetic phonics approaches, students are taught to link an individual letter or letter combination with its appropriate sound and then blend the sounds to form words. In analytic phonics, students are first taught whole word units followed by systematic instruction linking the specific letters in the word with their respective sounds."

What is reading? How is it related to phonics?

"Reading is a set of skills that involves making sense and deriving meaning from the printed word. In order to read, we must be able to decode (sound out) the printed words and also comprehend what we read. . . . Some individuals equate decoding with reading. Just because a learner knows how to pronounce written words correctly, doesn't mean that he can read." (Linsag, 2005, pp.69-71)

Obviously, the aim of reading is comprehension but as Chew (2006) puts it, "What is clear is that although decoding does not guarantee comprehension, comprehension is impossible without decoding."

What is Literacy?

In this poster literacy is used in the general sense of the word which is the ability to read and write.

In addition, it may be worth quoting the suggested framework for the first stage literacy teaching (notionally the first year) based on the final Rose Report (March 2006).

Word recognition/decoding

- * Beginners should be taught grapheme-phoneme correspondences from simple to complex and 'in a clearly defined, incremental sequence'.
- * The reversibility of reading (decoding) and spelling (encoding) should be emphasised.
- * This teaching should be 'time-limited' taking months not years.
- * In the early stages, teachers should put more emphasis than many currently do on all-through-the-word blending.
- * Children should be taught to check that they have understood what they have decoded.
- * Children's mastery of the decoding and encoding skills taught up to any given point (grapheme-phoneme correspondences, blending and segmenting) should be frequently assessed and appropriate teaching should be provided for those who need it.
- * The use of decodable texts should be considered.
- * There should be no guessing at words from pictures or initial letters.

What other options are there available besides phonics?

"With regard to those words that are irregular, another strategy is used in teaching reading in schools. Often called the whole word method, it encourages the rote learning of some 'site vocabulary' that children can immediately recognize when reading. This method helps children to see and remember words as visual images. The idea is that these words will be recognized immediately and no further decoding is needed." (Pinter, 2006, p. 68)

What are some arguments against phonics?

There are some arguments against the use of phonics for literacy teaching. For the start there is a widespread belief that beginners naturally start by recognizing words as wholes. And the other reason is that an early emphasis on phonics is suspected of making children think that reading stops with decoding, and that understanding what they read is not important.

In this respect, there are a group of experts who support the Comprehension Hypothesis versus Skill- Building Hypothesis. "Reading pedagogy, according to the Comprehension Hypothesis, focuses on providing students with interesting, comprehensible texts, and the job of the teacher is to help children read these texts, that is, help make them comprehensible. The direct teaching of "skills" is helpful only when it makes texts more comprehensible."

The Comprehension Hypothesis also claims, "Reading is the source of much of our vocabulary knowledge, writing style, advanced grammatical competence, and spelling. It is also the source of most of our knowledge of phonics. . . . In terms of the process of literacy development, however, the Comprehension Hypothesis is a central part of whole language." (Krashen, 2002)

The supporters of the Comprehension Hypothesis are against Skill-Building Hypothesis because they believe that phonics instructions are very complex, have many exceptions and are, therefore, not teachable.

What researches have been done in support of synthetic phonics?

There have been many researches done, the results of which are in favor of using synthetic phonics in teaching reading and writing at early stages. For instance, Chew (2006) reports a research done in Clackmannanshire, where all the local authority primary schools participated in a project and the conclusion reached indicated that the synthetic-phonics approach enabled children to make excellent progress."

The National Child Health and Human Development (2000)report states that, "The meta-analysis revealed that systematic phonics instruction produces significant benefits for students in kindergarten through 6th grade and for children having difficulty learning to read. The ability to read and spell words was enhanced in kindergartners who received systematic beginning phonics instruction. First graders who were taught phonics systematically were better able to decode and spell, and they showed significant improvement in their ability to comprehend text. Older children receiving phonics instruction were better able to decode and spell words and to read text orally, but their comprehension of text was not significantly improved."

Why am I a supporter of using basic synthetic phonics in teaching reading and writing to beginners?

Firstly, it has been argued that there are many irregularities and exceptions in the phonics rules in the English language, which is true, but I believe this does not contradict with teaching of the basic regulanties at least at the beginning phases (and especially for those who are learning a second language). This will be a starting point and later on the irregularities and exceptions can be introduced and inserted in the syllabi.

Secondly, if done properly, learning reading and writing through phonics can be a form of game and therefore be fun. Therefore, the teaching method does play a crucial role in making it interesting.

Also, through years, I have witnessed a large number of YLs who began learning reading and writing English as a foreign language with the help of phonics. I dare say, the result has always been amazing. In informal talks I have had with almost 40 of the students who are now either adolescents or young adults, they all believed that learning through phonics was effective and fun. In fact many of these people read quite a lot both in their first and second languages.

Persian is taught through phonics. In less than 6 months the first graders are expected to read certain passages, which then in less than 2 school years, leads to reading almost anything they can comprehend.

It can also be argued that at least for those languages that follow an alphabetical system and as Bialysok, et al (2005) have put it are based on correspondences between phonemes and graphemes, the basis for teaching literacy can be graphemes and not whole words. This can be of particular importance when dealing with bilingual children.

Finally, gradually, many of the words that are learned through phonics are stored in the minds of the learners and after a while become visual. In other words, after a period of time, those words that are at first decoded through the help of phonics are stored in the minds of the learners and later on there would be no need for synthesizing them every time they encounter these words. (Maybe this is an area that needs more research to see how long it takes on average before the words that are read through the help of phonics become visual and be treated as whole words by the learners.)

Conclusion

If done properly, the teaching of reading and writing through the use of basic synthetic phonics is recommended, and therefore, textbook writers, teachers and authorities are encouraged to consider it when planning.

Sample Lesson

Sam is a cat. Sam is fat. Sam can sit. Sam can stand. Sam cannot run. Sam is sad.



As can be seen, this is a story about a cat named Sam. All the learners who have mastered the sounds (/s/, /æ/, /m/, /i/, /d/, /t/, /k/, /l/, /r/, /z/, /n/, /d/) and have learned how to combine them, will be able to read it. The two things that should be explained by the teacher are the way to read article a and also the sound of s in is which can be viewed as deviation from what the learners have learned and be memorized as whole words. For helping the learners with comprehension pictures can be used. Also the whole story can be easily acted, which is probably fun, too.