

Implementing Phonics in Elementary Education: An Effective Way to Gain Early English Literacy

Kanuengrat Ngamkiatkhajorn
Faculty of Education, Silpakorn University, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand
Email: pluplearn@hotmail.com

Budsaba Kanoksilapatham
Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand
Email: kanoksib@hotmail.com

Abstract—This present study develops 5 English phonics units and constructs a similar pre-test and post-test to evaluate the effects of the 5 English phonics units on Grade 1 students' early English literacy skills. Each phonics unit comprises 2 lessons and requires 6 hours of implementing. The study was conducted on 26 students in a government school in Samut Sakhon Province for 30 hours. The first lesson of every unit introduces the correspondence between letters and sounds. The second lesson introduces how to blend those letters and sounds to make words and introduces the meanings of those words. Both the pre-test and post-test comprise 3 sections, focusing on the students' abilities to segment, decode, and encode words. Based on the paired t-test analysis, there was a greatly-significant difference in the pre-test and post-test scores. From the findings, implementing phonics at the primary level will be a productive alternative of English fundamental education in Thailand.

Index Terms—phonics, early English literacy, segment, decode, encode

I. INTRODUCTION

Thailand's Ministry of Education (MOE) announced in the latest Basic Education Curriculum that English serves as a main tool for communication, education, and culture. The importance of the English language has been recognized in the country for decades [1]. English is taught in the classroom from primary level [1]. However, the outcomes are still questionable considering that the English proficiency index of the country has been continuously falling behind other countries in the ASEAN community and was ranked the third worst in Southeast Asia after Cambodia and Laos in 2016 [2].

For all learners, strong early literacy is critical to ensure their long-term language development [3]. An effective approach and an appropriate age are the important keys to building such strong early literacy [4]; [5]. Phonics has been advocated by the National Strategy for Primary Schools in England as an effective approach to gain literacy skills on the part of young learners during their early education [5] but it has never been included in the Basic Core Education Curriculum in Thailand before

[1]; [6]-[8]. This study aimed to develop English phonics units to enhance Grade 1 students' early English literacy and to study the effect of the phonics units on grade 1 students' early English literacy.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Phonics and Early Literacy Skills

Educators and researchers have long perceived the correspondence between literacy skills and language learning [9], [10]. Children that have lower language ability and literacy development in the early years of education tend to be less successful in the classroom and are likely to be at a disadvantage in later years [11]. Early literacy is a concurrent set of relationships between emergent reading and writing [12]. Reading helps learners acquire writing, whereas writing itself serves as a tool for them to learn about reading. Most important of all, learners need oral language skills to help them gain both reading and writing [4].

The findings from the studies of many professionals [13] have indicated that early literacy skills are considered a fundamental key to elevate learners' language abilities as the development of literacy and language is interrelated and interdependent. The National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) also found that certain key components, including oral language development, alphabetic code understanding, alphabetic knowledge, phonemic awareness, and phonological awareness, are directly related to the development of good early literacy skills [9]. These key components are represented in the form of the ability to name the letters correctly, to associate the letters with their sounds, to manipulate the sound of the spoken language, to identify small sound units, to recognize words and understand them, to write isolated letters and the simple words that are taught, and to remember and understand the content of spoken language [9]. The more learners acquire these components, the better their early literacy skills are [13].

Phonics is an explicit and systematic instruction in which the principle is to establish alphabetic knowledge by teaching learners about letter (grapheme) and sound (phoneme) correspondence. Learners are taught to

understand the relationships between letters and sounds, to convert letters into sounds and blend them to form recognizable words when reading (decoding), and to segment the sounds in words and then convert them into letters correctly when writing (encoding) [13]-[16]. Sets of letters are carefully and systematically selected. The very first words taught consist of the first set of letters that appears in the form of basic Consonant-Vowel-Consonant (CVC) word patterns. Then the sets of letters and more complex word patterns are added [17], [18]. Regarding the principles of phonics and a great deal of research in many countries [3], [4], [12], [19] that have drawn on experience with young learners and professional educators, phonics is seen as an effective tool for establishing early literacy skills.

B. Phonics: A Pursuit of Success

Various English teaching approaches such as the grammar translation method have been adopted into the Basic Core Education Curriculum in Thailand [1], [6]-[8], [20], [21]. Several researchers have accepted the notion that the current English teaching approaches in Thailand have failed to help learners achieve a good level of English proficiency [20], [22]-[24]. Although English is taught beginning in primary education, the outcome is still unsatisfactory [25], [26]. The research conducted on the English language learning in Thailand has shown that poor English on the part of students is a result of ineffective approaches [22], [27].

According to the Reports of the Subgroups from National Reading Panel of the United States of America (NICHD), introducing and applying phonics in kindergarten or the first grade before children have become fully immersed in reading have a great positive impact on the growth of early literacy skills [4]. Acquiring early literacy skills might be a difficult task for beginners, where they must learn to apply their alphabetic knowledge and spelling patterns in order to read, write, and understand the meaning of words. Nevertheless, effective and systematic phonics will help them to overcome these difficulties [4]. By learning phonics, children acquire literacy faster than without learning phonics considering the ability to read and write the words that they already have in their vocabularies at a faster rate [29], [30].

The government of Thailand has also long noticed the non-fulfillment of English teaching and has continuously made a great effort to solve the problem by adopting new strategies and implementing them in primary education [25], [26], [28]. As English and Thai are both categorized as alphabetic languages, in which the letters represent the sound of the spoken language, phonics could be one of the ways to elevate young Thai learners' English language competency, as specified in English Education Policy Thailand 2014 [1], [22], [31], [32].

III. METHODOLOGY

This study is a quasi-experimental research design that attempts to evaluate the effects of the 5 English

phonics units on Grade 1 students' early English literacy skills.

A. Participants

Twenty-six Grade 1 students from a government school in Samut Sakhon Province (15 boys and 11 girls aged between 6-7 years) were the sample group in this study. The students were studying in the first semester of academic year 2017 at the time of the data collection.

B. Materials

The materials comprised 5 English phonics units with exercises at the end of each unit and a similar phonics pre-test and phonics post-test.

The 5 English phonics units were specifically designed for Thai learners. The content in the 5 English phonics units was developed based on phonics teaching frameworks in the national curriculum of 6 countries (England, United States, Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia) and 2 commercial phonics programs (Jolly Phonics and Primary Phonics) Fig. 1, Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 shows the sample of the 5 English phonics units.

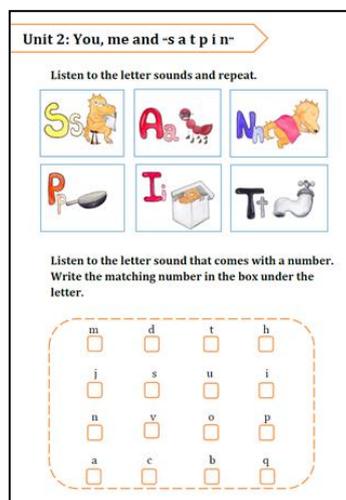


Figure 1. Phonics unit sample

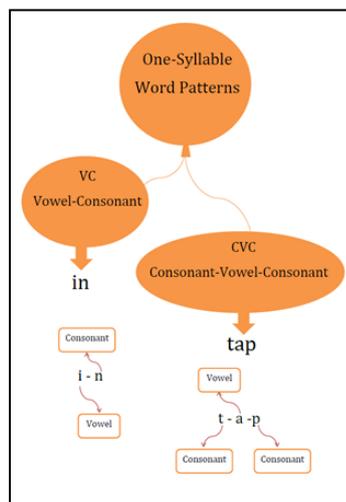


Figure 2. Phonics unit sample

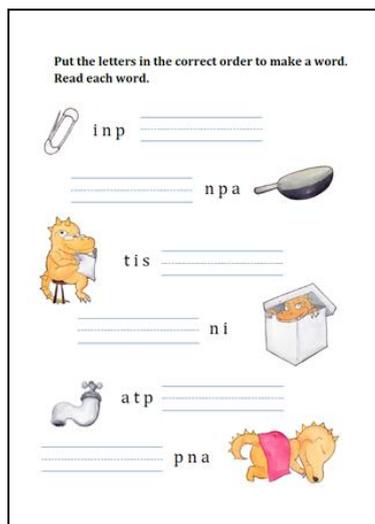


Figure 3. Phonics unit sample

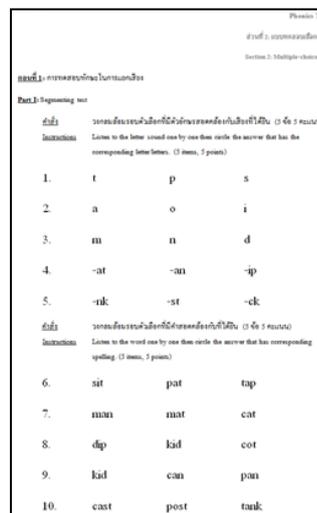


Figure 5. Phonics test

The 6 national curricula provide systematic phonics teaching frameworks which suggest definite guidelines for scheduling letter-sound correspondences and the rate of introducing them [5], [18], [33]-[36]. Each unit comprises 2 lessons, where each lesson requires 3 sessions to complete. One session lasts 1 hour. The first lesson of every unit introduces the correspondence between letters and their sounds. The second lesson introduces how to blend the letter sounds taught in the first lesson to make words. Pictures are used to represent the meanings of those words made from the letters in each unit. There are exercises at the end of every unit, and the sounds of the letters in every unit are presented using the audio clips of a native speaker.

The phonics pre-test and post-test, as shown in Fig. 4 and Fig. 5, are the same test, which comprises 3 sections with 35 items. The content of the test, which was carefully selected from the 5 English phonics units, were chosen to evaluate the participants' phonics skills. Section 1 is an individual oral test that aims to evaluate letter-sound correspondence and decoding skills. Section 2 is a multiple-choice test that aims to evaluate letter-sound correspondence, segmenting, and encoding skills. Section 3 is a dictation test that aims to evaluate the encoding skill.



Figure 4. Phonics test

C. Procedure

The study began at the beginning of the first semester of academic year 2017. The phonics pre-test was administered one day prior to the implementation of the 5 English phonics units. The implementation of the 5 English phonics units took 30 hours during a period of 10 weeks. A researcher, a classroom teacher, and 2 classroom assistants participated in each session. The phonics post-test was administered after ending the implementation of the 5 English phonics units.

D. Data Collection

For Section 1 of the phonics pre-test and post-test, the participants took the test individually. It took one and a half hours for all participants to finish this section. There were 2 parts with 10 items. The participants earned 1 point when they produced the sound corresponding to the letter in each item or read the word correctly in each item.

For Section 2 and Section 3, all of the participants took the test in their classroom, which took 30 minutes to finish. There were 2 parts with 20 items in Section 2. The participants earned 1 point when they chose the correct answer for each item. There were 5 items in Section 3 and the participants earned 1 point when the word in each item was written correctly.

E. Data Analysis

Both the pre-test and post-test scores were recorded by the researcher. One correct item equaled 1 point, resulting in a total of 35 points. A paired t-test was carried out in order to determine the significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores before and after implementing the 5 English phonics units.

IV. RESULTS

Every participant scored zero on the English phonics pre-test. After implementing the 5 English phonics units, the English phonics post-test score of every participant greatly increased. Out of 35 points for the post-test, the lowest score was 11 and the highest was 33.

The participants' post-test scores (mean score of 20.54 and SD value of 1.23) were higher than their pre-test scores (mean score of 0 and SD value of 0). There was a significant difference between the English phonics pre-test and post-test scores. That is, the 5 English phonics units were seen to be effective in improving early English literacy skills: $t(25)=16.71$, $p=.000$.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Both the pre-test and post-test were designed to evaluate the knowledge of letter and sound correspondences, the decoding skill, the segmenting skill, and the encoding skill, which are considered important skills in terms of indicating early literacy development. Before implementing the 5 English phonics units, all of participants had very poor letter-sound knowledge and phonemic awareness, as can be seen with their pre-test scores; they could not do the test. After implementing the 5 English phonics units, all of participants could do the post-test. According to the significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores, the participants significantly developed their early English literacy skills after implementing the 5 English phonics units.

Although the findings were satisfactory, there were some limitations. First, the study was conducted at only one school with a small number of participants. It could be argued that the results of the study might not be generalizable to different school settings. In order to overcome this limitation, study should be conducted in schools of different sizes, for instance, one small-sized school, one medium-sized school, and one large-sized school.

Secondly, this study was also limited in that only 5 phonics units were implemented, and their content might not have been sufficient to accurately evaluate the impact of phonics on the participants' early English literacy. In order to overcome this limitation, the content of the English phonics units and the number of English units need to be developed to cover a teaching period of at least 1 semester.

Lastly, the help and support that the classroom assistants provided might have impacted the outcome of the study. They helped the participants when they struggled in class so that the classroom teacher could focus on delivering the content rather than spending more teaching time replaying the same content to the struggling participants. In the real-life classroom context in Thailand, the classroom teacher is the sole instructor and there is no teacher's assistant. In order to overcome this limitation, the English phonics units should include more games and tasks related to the content that has been taught which would allow the participants with to practice more and understand better.

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a special instructor at Nakhon Pathom Vocational College since 2015.



Budsaba Kanoksilapatham, Ph.D. Prof., completed the bachelor's degree in English (Hons.) at the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. She received the master's degree in linguistics and EFL from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale and the PhD degree in linguistics with a concentration in applied linguistics from Georgetown University, USA. Her research interests include discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, phonetics, and language teaching. She is currently a full professor with the English Department, Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University. Her most recent books in 2016 are *Pronunciation in Action* and *English Sociolinguistics at Work*. A number of her research articles were published in international journals including *English for Specific Purposes* and the *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*.