TEACHING PHONICS AND PHONEMIC AWARENESS IN ENGLISH BEGINNING READING

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ABSTRACT

This is a library research study which investigates the roles of using phonics and phonemic awareness, the suggested stages in implementing them and finally the obstacles to using both phonics or phonemic awareness in a beginning reading classroom. There are some stages in implementing phonics, starting from vowel and consonant sounds in simple, familiar words and continuing on to digraphs, suffixes, diphthongs, letters with dual personalities, schwa sounds, silent letter digraphs and some letters with tricky sounds. Phonemic awareness should chronologically be taught with rhyming, manipulating, blending, segmenting and deleting. Both methods show considerable advantages for early reading learning such as instead of memorizing words, children can acquire decoding skills which can result in leading the children to improve their confidence in reading ESL, thus, they can then focus on the meaning of the reading and reading for enjoyment. Both methods are also able to help children understand that English has variations in spelling and pronunciation. Lastly, irregularity of English spellings, the lack of phonological knowledge of people working with children in early reading, the rising and falling moods of children whilst learning and the need for supportive parents hinder the implementation of either phonics or of phonemic awareness.

Key words: Phonics, Phonemic Awareness, Stages, Roles, Obstacles.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading lessons in Indonesia begin with spelling, the students learn to spell each syllable of the words to get the meanings of the words. Therefore, when it comes to reading in English, these young learners tend to do it the same way. Consequently when they are asked to write a word in English, these young learners will firstly spell and write.

In this way, the spelling will often be incorrect. Luthy and Stevens (2011) have stated that it is important for learners, in this case young learners, to be able to work with small units of word sounds before they start to read in print. It is expected that they are able to recognize phonemes (the smallest parts of sound in a spoken word that makes a difference in a word meaning). Research has showed that knowledge of phonics and phonemic awareness is often neglected but it is actually advantageous, especially for improving early literacy skills such as reading and writing (DiMaio-McCracken, 2004).

Regarding the application of phonics and phonemic awareness, in reality some bilingual schools in Aceh such as Fatih Bilingual School, Matahari School and some Montessori Schools have implemented them with some variations of learning stages and activities. Matahari School has used this approach in pre-school by having the students use it in some spelling classes; they have also created their own phonics materials for teaching. Fatih Bilingual School uses these approaches in three different levels viz: first year, second year and third year elementary classes. Beside having phonics materials in a book they use called My Pals are Here by Ling and Smith, the school also organizes a program called “Spelling Bee” where the students can show their ability in phonics and phonemic knowledge in competitions with other students.

It is interesting to study more comprehensively the matter of teaching of phonics and/or of phonemic awareness in English beginning reading; how either or both can benefit children beginning reading in English; what the stages of teaching phonics and phonemic awareness are when implemented in the classroom and some barriers that children and their teachers need to deal with during teaching-learning phonics and/or phonemic awareness.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The Definition of Reading
Learning to read is believed to be a key foundation to becoming a literate or educated person. Lewis and Ellis (2006) state that reading offers opportunities for enjoyment, for expanding our knowledge of the world and for increasing our creativity and imagination; it is one key to success in life.

Teaching children to read is aimed at helping them to comprehend printed materials based on their comprehension skill levels (Torgesen, 2000). Nevertheless, in line with learning to read which is considered complicated for second language learners, it is a challenging task for teachers to teach English reading as a second or foreign language.

English Spelling, Sounds, and Alphabetic Writing
British spoken English is generally reckoned to use 44 sounds, or ‘phonemes’. Technically, a phoneme is the smallest unit of sound that can make a difference to the meaning of a word. Twenty of these are vowel sounds and 24 are consonant sounds. Many of the sounds (particularly vowel sounds) can vary slightly according to accent, but they are generally consistent within the speech of an individual and recognizable by others who may pronounce them slightly differently. (Primary National Strategy, 2006). Some languages have very simple alphabetic codes where each letter or letter-group always stands for the same sound, and each sound is represented in only one way in writing. English, however, has a complex alphabetic code. Most sounds can be represented in more than one way in writing (e.g. the /s/ sound can be written with the letter ‘s’, as in ‘sit’, with ‘ss’, as in ‘fuss’, and with ‘c’ as in ‘city’). Similarly, most letters and letter-groups can represent more than one sound (e.g. the letter ‘c’ can represent both the /k/ sound, as in ‘cup’, and the /s/ sound, as in ‘city’). The irregular sounds of “c” are caused by the antecedent of the letter after the letter “c”, which are called soft c and hard c.

Phonics
Teaching phonics is aimed at developing the correspondences between these sounds and the spelling patterns (graphemes) that represent them. According to Serna (2006), there are four basic approaches in teaching phonics, namely implicit, embedded, explicit and analogic.
**Vowels**

Figure 1 shows vowel phonemes in English based on the English vowel quadrant, along with key words to show the pronunciation of each.

![English Vowel Chart](image)

**Figure 1.** The English Vowel Chart.

**Consonants**

Table 1 presents place and manner of articulation as well as voicing consonants adapted from Blake (2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manner of articulation</th>
<th>Voicing</th>
<th>Place of articulation</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Bilabial</td>
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<td>Stop/plosive</td>
<td>Voiceless</td>
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<td>Rhotic/Trill</td>
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<td>Glide</td>
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**Table1.** Manner of Articulation.

**Digraphs**

Sounds or phonemes written with two letters are called *digraphs*. The sound /sh/ is only one sound or phoneme but we use two letters to write it, *s* and *h*. 
Diphthongs

According to Greeve (2007, p.139), “a diphthong is a blend of two vowel sounds in one syllable that is pronounced as one speech sound”.

Syllables

Vowels and consonants are the main types of phonemes, and the larger units of phonemes are called syllables.

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is practically defined in various ways by experts. Ball and Blachman (1991, as cited in Hempenstall, 2011, p.1) describe, “Phonemic awareness is the ability to recognize that a spoken word consists of a sequence of individual sounds”. Teaching phonemic awareness skills during learning reading for young learners, the teacher could help them manipulate the smallest sounds of a particular language, in this case English.

Guidelines for Teaching Phonics and Phonemic Awareness

There is some instructive advice from Richgels (2001) for determining what is good phonemic awareness teaching. First, the instructions should include clear definitions of each phoneme, should show how phonemes are used in spoken language and how each phoneme differs from other phonemes, for example how slight difference in pronunciation of two different words which are only slightly different in pronunciation can be totally dissimilar in meaning like duck and tuck. Moreover, the instructions should also pay close attention to the definition of awareness that emphasizes conscious attention.

METHOD OF STUDY

This study was conducted in the form of library research. The data was obtained from secondary sources such as from previous studies which correspond to the topic of this research. The related resources were collected and studied to compare the findings, opinions and assumptions of different experts for the teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness for English beginning readers.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding phonics skills, there are some stages that the experts propose should be implemented in beginning reading. Bald (2007) proposes four stages that the students need to go through; learning the sounds of simple and familiar words, delving into groups of words which have similar sound patterns, exploring digraphs and double letters.

Meanwhile, Paul (2003) suggests 8 stages in implementing effective phonics learning, starting from vowel sounds and consonant sounds in simple words, the combination of vowel and consonant sounds. Then they practice adding another consonant to the previous combination. Next, the consonants which produce one sound are practiced at this stage, either beginning or ending (drag or black). In the last three stages, the children are introduced to diphthongs, and the pattern consonant-vowel-vowel-consonant (cvvc), and special rules in words containing silent e sound (split vowel digraphs).

Another functional scheme was proposed by Greeve (2007) who has compiled them in a book, called Phonics for Dummies. There are more than ten schemes which can be implemented during phonics learning and each is tagged along with various activities such as poems, short stories or tongue twisters. Starting with simple consonants and a vowel, the stages begin with familiar and common words. The rest of the short vowel sounds i, e, u and o are explored followed by recognizing consonant-vowel-consonant patterns (cvc) which explains that if a vowel appears in a word, it often comes between two consonants. According to Farmer, Lewis and Ellis (2006, p.38), “When practitioners teach cvc words, they are often teaching children to hear and identify all the individual phonemes in the word, in sequence”. This kind of stage tends to engage the children in activities such as blending and segmenting, which is making a whole word or separating a whole word into its basic sounds.

The following stage is joining two consonants to make more new sounds which is called a digraph. There are exactly seven basic digraphs that are being focused on at this stage, they are ch, sh, wh, th, th, ng, and nk. The stage continues to the silent e at the end of a word which can either change the sound or the meaning of a word, for examples cut and cute, bit and bite. Bald (2007) states that the letter e at the end of a word frequently makes the preceding vowel in the word “say its name”, and it is referred to as a spilt digraph. Delving into
diphthongs is the next scheme, in which the children learn two different mouth movements, but are not necessarily two sounds. Some of the sounds are /oi/, /oy/, /ow/, /ou/, /ur/, /er/, /ar/, /ir/, and /or/. Adding a suffix to a word will also change its meaning, sound and use, thus in the following stage the children will explore how to pronounce and spell words with an additional –ed, -ing, -er such as in worked, working, and worker. The scheme goes on to learning the dual personalities of s, c, and g. This stage starts by reviewing how the letter s makes the z sound. Then it focuses on the sounds for letter c which doesn’t have its own sound, but instead sometimes sounds like k and sometimes like s. The children will also discover the hard and soft g sound. Both the letter c and the letter g will be softened by e, i, and y following either c or g such as in face, city, emergency, genius, giant and gym. The hard c and hard g are spoken when they precede a, o, and u such as in came, coffee, cut, game, got, and gut. However, according to Bald (2007), the teacher should always remind the students that these patterns will often work, but there are always exceptions such as get, give or girl. Likewise, when either c or g is followed by the consonant l and r, it is spoken hard, for example clap, crush, glass and grass. However, when either c or g appears at the end of a word, the former is hard while the other is softened such as fantastic, plastic and age and large.

The more advanced stage is discovering the schwa sound and some exceptions in English such as silent digraph sounds. The teachers should make sure that the children understand that the schwa sound is not the same as the short u, it basically means “there is no vowel sound”, such as in words sentence, important, bridal or towel. The children should also learn the symbol of the schwa sound, which is an upside-down and backward e. In addition, learning seems to be more challenging in which the children are looking into silent letters. There are numerous silent-letter digraphs listed by Greeve (2007), for examples silent l in folk or calf, silent h in honest or hour, silent u in guess or guide, silent k in knife or knee, silent t in often or whistle and many more. Greeve outlined that even though some words have no guidelines, it makes them stick in the children’s memory which makes them easier to remember.

At the same time, phonemic awareness also use some stages in its implementation. Experts such as Hempenstall (2011), Griffith and Olson (2004), and Konza (2011) support about five stages in practicing phonemic awareness; rhyming, manipulating, blending, segmenting and
deleting phonemes. According to Konza (2011), starting with the matching stage or rhyming is a good way to make sure the children demonstrate early phonemic awareness. As the children can recognize and produce words with similar sounds such as king, sing, and wing, they can see that those words also share similar spelling patterns. A further stage of phonemic awareness is blending phonemes; according to Chapman (1996), segmenting and blending phonemes has received a lot of focus in the research because they are most closely related to reading and spelling. The stage then goes to segmenting phonemes of a word in which the children are asked to break down the words into sounds. Konza (2011) outlines that phoneme segmentation requires the children to count out the separate phonemes in a word, saying each sound when they count it. This stage enables the children to acquire spelling skills. The next higher stage is deleting phoneme in which the children are learning to delete any letters in words, which can change either its meaning or the sound, for example how do we say cup if we delete the first letter c?

According to Cheesman, et al. (2009), in order to develop the children’s ability to identify words accurately and fluently, there are three aspects that the children need to be stimulated, phonemic awareness, systematic phonetic teaching and reading fluency. Children with phonemic awareness and phonic skills will likely have an easier time learning to read and decode unfamiliar or new words that will absolutely lead them to be better readers. As they gain their confidence in reading, they can focus on the meaning of the texts and reading for pleasure (Bald, 2007). Both skills can also develop the ability of children to write the words. In addition, by learning the phonics system and phonemic awareness the children can more easily understand the inconsistencies and variations of spelling in English; by giving the reasons for odd spellings. By boosting their confidence in learning to read by exposing them to the phonics system and to phonemic awareness, it is expected will help the students to memorize the spelling of words (particularly unfamiliar words).

Nevertheless, some teachers will find barriers to implementing these two approaches in beginning reading classes. Some experts argue that teaching phonics and phonemic awareness may not work the best in tackling the irregularities of the English language. Bald (2007) suggests that teachers do not rely too much on both, especially for trying to provide for every exception at each stage of learning. Thus students can fail with some non-phonetic words such as one, said,
ocean or sugar. These kinds of words are not spelled phonetically as they are not spelled the way they sound. As a result, beginning readers must learn to memorize some of these exceptional words so that they can easily recognize the words when they find them in reading. Furthermore, learning phonics and phonemic awareness is not the only way to become proficient in English reading and writing. According to Gibbons (2002, p. 135), letters and sounds in isolation are very abstract concepts, even for native speakers, and introducing individual letters, letter clusters, or blends out of a meaningful context is an even more abstract task for students who are unfamiliar with the language and the sounds of the language. Gibbons based her ideas for teaching ESL to children on the notion of language in context; context of culture and context of situation. She believes that ESL learners will more easily learn and comprehend language in context, not by merely providing them with phonics. With regard to what Gibbon believes, the phonetic approach is considered to fail in promoting comprehension. It may help the children read words on a page, however it does not help the children to comprehend the use of the words. This means that children may read an entire sentence without understanding it. Likewise, the teachers will probably struggle with the children’s mood in learning, since phonics requires such long stages to learn, particularly when the activity is repeated. Another obstacle is the lack of teachers, and principles who are really proficient in the phonics system and in phonemic awareness. Finally, the support of parents regarding phonics and phonemic awareness during learning time at home is unlikely, particularly in Aceh. This will happen due to the lack of knowledge of phonics and of phonemic awareness amongst the parents.

CONCLUSION

After doing the data analysis, the writer has some brief conclusions. Generally, experts such as Paul, Greeve and Bald agree that several stages are needed in order to expose children to phonics, they are introducing the children to basic vowel and consonant sounds in words that the children are familiar with. Basic vowel and consonant sounds are basically learnt in simple form, which is consonant-vowel-consonant. The stages are then varied such as learning about digraphs, the magic e which can change both the meaning and the sound of a word; diphthongs; suffixes; the dual personalities of s, c, and g, the schwa sound and then even go further to some tricky words. Basically,
each can start with the most uncomplicated words and progress to the more complicated ones. Based on Griffith and Olson, Serna and Hampenstall, the simplest phonemic stage is rhyming or alliteration with some variations, then it goes to manipulating, blending, segmenting and deleting.

Secondly, experts have affirmed that phonics and phonemic awareness are good predictors for beginning reading. By exposure to the phonics system children can develop their letter-sound correspondences. The children can recognize both the names of the letters (spelling) and their sounds. Since letting the children learn phonics skills can help them to read correctly, effectively as well as fluently, they can focus on comprehending the meaning of the particular texts. Equally important, the child with phonemic awareness can consciously isolate those individual sounds in the context of the other sounds in the word. While children without phonemic awareness may be able to memorize isolated letter-sound correspondences by memorization, they will not understand how to actually coordinate letter-sound relationships to read or write unusual words.

The last is the constraints of using phonics and phonemic awareness in reading which has also been asserted by scholars. The English language is inconsistent especially with the connection between sounds and spellings, both phonics and phonemic awareness are merely beneficial in some areas. The development of both phonics and phonemic awareness consistently links with the roles of parents and the teacher either for their assistance and their encouragement which depends on their background knowledge of literacy, especially about phonics and phonemic awareness in particular.

**SUGGESTIONS**

In implementing these ways of teaching reading, teachers should not make rules, because it would confuse the children when they meet irregular words such as *one* and *on*. Regarding unfamiliar words, children most of the time will hesitate over a new or unfamiliar word, so their teachers should remind them to say each phoneme in turn and blend them together to say the whole word. Teaching phonics is better when explicitly implemented. In addition, the school principal should get the teachers with phonics and phonemic background knowledge to prepare a successful program. Time and class management are also
significant factors to consider in order to accomplish the aims of the program.

Meanwhile, it may be worthwhile to conduct further research on the use of phonetics and phonemic awareness in beginning reading classes. Since this research is merely to collect and analyze the related sources on the usefulness of phonetic and phonemic awareness in the reading classroom, the writer hopes that there will be further research on this issue either more descriptive studies or experimental studies to make the results much stronger. Thus, they will be able to provide more references and ideas for teaching-learning beginning reading.

REFERENCES


