Applying Phonics Instructional Method for Students' Improvement of English Pronunciation

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Abstract

This experimental study aimed to study the application of Phonics Instructional and to investigate its influence towards students' English pronunciation. Pre-test, post-test and class observation were employed in the study as the research's instruments. Samples were secondary students studying in grades 7, 8, and 9 in the total of 25. The researcher, as a teacher trainee, designed the seven-week lesson plan before the intervention period took place, which was within seven weeks within the second semester of 2021 academic year. The data obtained from the pretest and the posttest were analyzed using statistical techniques such as mean (x), standard deviation (S.D.), and dependent t-test. The study reveals that the mean score is .68 and there was a statistical significance at the level of .00.. This indicates that the Phonics Instruction Method was able to improve students' low ability of reading (with emphasis on pronunciation).

Keywords: Phonic Instructional Method; Reading aloud; Pronunciation; Blending sounds

Introduction

Academically, the benefits of reading books are many as a result reading skills are always in need for learners. A child's reading skills are important to his success in school as well as social life. Reading for pleasure improves children's educational performance. In this sense, children who continuously read for enjoyment every day are to perform better in reading tests than those who do not. This is the main reason that theoretically, fostering reading habits among school students is always essential.

Though reading is known as the ability to recognize and decode words which can be defined as a tool for acquiring meaning of written text, there is also an emphasis on reading aloud. This practice focuses more on correct pronunciation than on comprehension with a proclaimed assumption that the practice of correct pronunciation will provide a high possibility for the students to remain more confident to read or speak, being able to recognize the exact sound of each alphabet and its combinational features with vowels. However, some leading figures in teaching reading have realized that it is time-consuming. This is because instead of the students being taught "the top-down theory" to understand the content/text alone, they are taught to identify sounds and correct pronunciation of English words (Nunan, 1991, p.254). Due to the fact that reading with emphasis on pronunciation is one of the key exercises that improve pronunciation, which is one of the hardest skills to be built up among English learners, several educators and academics are trying to apply various methods and approaches. One of which is applying phonics into the teaching method.

Phonics instructional method focuses on the teaching of sound-spelling relationships with the main aim that the readers can come up with an approximate pronunciation of a word and then check it against his or her oral vocabulary. Phonics, as described by Adams (1990), refers to a system of teaching reading that builds on the alphabetic principle, a system of which a central component is the teaching of correspondences between letters or groups of letters and their pronunciations (p. 50). In this method, small units like letters and short words, along with spelling and punctuation rules, are taught in isolation, devoid of meaning. The phonics approach tended to ignore the valuable information, language patterns, and reading strategies children bring to the reading experience, as well as reading and writing simultaneously. The goal of this instruction is to help students develop the alphabetic principle. Students who understand the alphabetic principle know that the sounds of spoken words are mapped onto written words in systematic ways. As students develop understandings of this principle, they become familiar with using letter-sound correspondences to figure out unrecognized words.

It is generally known among English teachers in Thailand that the majority of Thai students (at Secondary level in particular) are still facing difficulties in reading English text. Some of them are not able to read at all, while the others are able to read with a

specific need of major improvement. Read First English (2015) states that the main reason why Thai students are not able to read English text is because of the teaching system that emphasizes on the manner of memorizing the whole word which eventually creates obstacles when they come across with reading new words they have never been taught, feeling insecure, and end up relying on random guesses to get the sound out which no clear principles.

English reading problems found in Thai educational context are specified into four categories: (1) reading pronunciation in the initial consonants; (2) recitation of the diphthong consonants; (3) pronouncing the vowels; and (4) pronouncing the consonants (Surapong Kongsat, 2018). This finding may be similar to what we found during our teaching internship observation of secondary students of grade 7 to 9. The school is owned by a private enterprise located in a suburban area. Our reading assessment of two short passages about daily life in their English book revealed that there was only one student who was able to read and pronounce each word correctly. Some of them tried to read aloud but they always came up with the wrong pronunciation: hi /haɪ/ into /hɪ/, here /hɪr/ into /hɚ/, sandwich /ˈsæn. wɪtʃ/ into /ˈsan. wɪd/, and so on. For the rest which is the largest amount cannot read at all, they could read only easy English words that are really familiar like *cat, dog, good morning, good afternoon, love, like*, and so on. Nevertheless, there were many words that they should know but they could not read at all like *she, my favorite, chair, bed, friend, much, visit, lunch*, and so on. After the reading, an interview was conducted to know their basic level of knowledge. It turned out that they knew the alphabets, they were not able to pronounce when they were combined.

The problems affected the overall quality of the school, especially that of English classes, should students' reading and pronunciation skills were not immediately improved. Moreover, the students struggling with English reading and not knowing the English alphabet can be considered a serious problem as pronunciation is the "beginning" step of reading (Ankrah, et al., 2017). Therefore, to our way of thinking, employing a *Phonics Instructional Method* would reveal the better result of assessment. Taught as beginners, the students should be able to read English accurately, clearly, and confidently.

Objectives

    1. To study Phonics Instructional Method and its application.

    2. To investigate the influence of the method towards students' English pronunciation.

Literature Review

The application of Phonics Instructional Method is in relation to recognizing graphemes and phonemes each alphabet represents. The theory behind the phonic approach is based on two assumptions. Most languages have consistent phoneme (sound) to grapheme (letter) correlation. Secondly, once learners have learned the relationships of the letters to the sounds, they can pronounce printed words by blending the sounds together. An analytic method to reading begins with words (preferably nouns that can be easily illustrated), then breaks the words into parts. By the use of [meaningful] words the learner can better see the relationship between reading and their own language (Ankrah, et al., 2017). An alphabetic, phonic approach to teaching reading has been used for centuries and further developed and modified in such a way that it is used today in varying degrees in most methods of teaching reading. Schwartz& Sparks (2022) mentions "a systematic phonics program" which is according to them "beneficial" to students, who may have gaps in their knowledge of pronouncing patterns or words that they have not encountered yet. Such a program reveals that if a student can demonstrate mastery of a sound, then there should be no need to continue practicing that sound (he or she should move on to the next one). Following are previous researchers who conducted the study concerning Phonics instructional method and similarly found that Phonics instructional method is effective for students' improvement of pronunciation.

Ankrah, et. al. (2017) conducted a study using the phonetic method with 35 Techiman Senior High School students. The samples were asked to identify the characters of English alphabets and pronounce simple words. Through the experiment, the students were required to blend sounds of English words which were mentioned in the lesson plans which were used for 5 weeks. A pre-test was used to gather the data baseline while the post-test was used to gather data after the intervention to make it possible for comparison between pre-test and post-test intervention performances.

The method has assisted to reduce the students' inability to blend five (5) or six (6) letters of the alphabet to form a word.

Thaen-nga & Leenam (2016) studied the effects of phonics instructional method in an English course enrolled by 30 students of primary school level of grade 3. The study was designed with 5 lesson plans, pre-test, and post-test as the instrument tool. The finding portrayed that the student's word recognition was significantly improved. Saah (2018) had conducted research with a group of secondary school students with low reading ability. The entire process involves a quasi-experiment which is based on a one-group pre-test post-test. The instruments used in the study were 5 lesson plans, pre-test, post-test, and class observation. The data from the pretest and the posttest were analyzed by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to find mean (x), standard deviation (S.D.), and dependent t-test. The finding revealed that the students enjoyed being taught following the requirements of the method. This chapter has been discussing what the real definition of reading is, and where it should be begun. The phonics instructional method is a method that can be a starter for the students who have the difficulty in improving their reading ability more or less. In addition, activities to improve students' skills and the early intervention in reading have been adapted into proper form for the selected population.

Methodology

The research design was aimed at an experimental study using pre-test, post-test and observation as the main instruments of data collection. Samples of the 219 students in total 25 students were selected who are students studying at grade 7,8, and 9 in Bunyalarp Naruemit School located in Sungai Kolok. The researcher was appointed as an intern English teacher with regular teaching loads similarly assigned to other permanent teachers of the school. The study was conducted in two semesters of the academic year 2021. The intervention period was seven weeks from the fourth week of November until the second week of January 2022 (one hour per once a week in different lesson plans).

Phonics' lesson plan

In order to maintain academic advantages that the samples would be given from other learning activities offered by regular teaching methods required by the school, the researcher was allowed to implement the plan once a week with different determined objectives (to help the students to...) and activities. In sum, some details of which can be shown as follows:

Table 1: The determined objectives and learning activities employed

week	Objective	Activity
1		Pre-test.
2	Lesson 1 To recognize the alphabet and their sounds.	Writing English letters; Self-trial reading; The whole class reading out loud; VDO recording of self-reading practice;
3	Lesson 2 To combine letters to form up simple words in the VDO.	Identifying vowels (5 sounds: /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/, 6 double consonant (/Th/, /Th/, /Sh/, /Ch/, /Ph/) and consonant cluster /L/= bl,cl, fl, gl..... and /R/= br, cr,dr,fr...)
4	Lesson 4 To blend sounds to form meaning words.	Blending of the sound to form meaningful words (sight words), Examples; /g/+/l/+/o/+/v/+/e/ = glove, and etc.
5	Lesson 5 To recognize and pronounce the words from their textbook.	reciting the alphabets one by one, by slowly pronouncing each alphabet and combining it into the pronunciation of the words in the books.
6	Lesson 6 To recognize and pronounce the required words.	choosing 20 words from their favorite song and reciting the alphabets one by one, by slowly pronouncing each alphabet and combining it into the pronunciation of the words.
7		Post-test.

Pre-test and Post-test

Pre-test was employed in the first week of the treatment, and the post-test the seventh. The pre-test and post-test were taken from passages in the students' English textbook *Extra ACCESS 1, 2,* and *3* relying on their different grades: 7, 8, and 9, respectively. The passages used in both tests were the same. *The letter from Fred* was for grade 7; *Mary's Blog* grade 8; and *Matlock the Wise Old Man* grade 9.

Reading rubric

The form of assessment was adapted from Mallombasi (2012)'s *Accuracy for Pronunciation*. The samples were graded with different scores to indicate their different levels of pronunciation. It can be summed with the followings:

Table 2: The pronunciation rubric

Performances	Scores	Characteristics
Excellent	5	Read aloud every word fluently.
Good	4	unable to read 1-5 words
Average	3	unable to read 6-15 words
Improvement needed	2	unable to read 16-20 words
Unable to read	1	Read incorrectly and slowly almost every word.

Data Analysis

The comparison between the data obtained from pre-test and post-test was analyzed and interpreted through a quantitative analysis approach using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to find mean (x), standard deviation (S.D.), and dependent t-test. The descriptive analysis was employed in the study to analyze the students' behavior during the experiment.

Results and Discussion

The differences between the students' scores before and after the application of Phonics Instructional Method were shown in this following table:

Table 3: The students' scores of pre-tests and post-tests

No.	Pre-test	Post-test	Gained score
1	4	5	1
2	1	2	1
3	1	1	0
4	2	3	1
5	2	2	0
6	1	1	0
7	2	3	1
8	2	3	1
9	3	3	0
10	1	1	0
11	5	5	0
12	2	3	1
13	3	4	1
14	3	3	0
15	2	3	1
16	2	3	1
17	1	1	0
18	1	2	1
19	2	3	1
20	2	3	1
21	3	4	1
22	1	1	1
23	3	5	2
24	1	2	1
25	2	3	1
Total	52	69	18
Average	2.08	2.76	0.72

Table 3 shows that the lowest score of pre-tests was 1 and the highest score was 5. Besides, the lowest score of post-tests was 1 and the highest score was 5. The average of pre-test 2.08 and post-test 2.76. After conducting pre-test and post-test, the average of the gained score was 0.72. The average post-test after the students got treated with the method was higher than that of the pre-test.

Table 4: Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pretest	2.0800	25	1.03763	.20753
	posttest	2.7600	25	1.23423	.24685

The result of the pre-test and post-test statistically paired as shown in table 4 represents the fact that the post-test is better than pre-test (the method had an effect on the students' ability).

Table 5: Paired Differences

Achievement	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1 Pre-Post	0.6800	.55678	.11136	6.107	24	.000

According to Table 3, the t-test presents a statistical significance (sig < .000) indicating that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the two tests in which the different average mean scores is 0.68, and the standard deviation is .55678.

The performance of most students in pronouncing and recognizing English letters after the treatment was better than the beginning period with addition to their capability of blending them. The post-test was significantly higher than the pre-test. The statistical result has revealed the gap of these tests as $\overline{X}$= 1.28000 and S.D. = .97980. These findings confirm the result of the previous researcher. After being treated using Letter Sound Activities (Phonic Instructional Method), the students had improved their ability

(Pierjad, 2004, p. 58). The relation found in previous studies, between letters and sound, can be extended to the improvement of reading ability, to the development stages, and later to proficiency. However, a few numbers of the samples were also facing various problems such as lack of attention and motivation in learning, including poor learning ability. English alphabets not rightly pronounced by some students were V /v/, Z /z/, G /g/, R/r/. Moreover, some of them could not pronounce double letters such as TH /θ/, TH /ð/, SH /ʃ/, CH /tʃ/, PH /f/. These problems causing them to be incapable of blending the letters with vowels directly affected their reading ability. Some students had to put in a lot of effort to learn the lesson, while the others focused not on the lesson until being taught individually. This problem prolonged the duration of the teaching experiment.

Conclusion

The research is concerned at teaching reading with emphasis on pronunciation in a secondary school using the Phonic Instructional Method. Twenty-five students were purposefully taken through a series of activities involving the teaching sounds of each letter, vowels, double letters, consonant clusters, and blending these letters to form words. The students were given a pre-test and a post-test, based on which they were scored. The tests were done individually. The statistical comparison of means, SD, and dependent t-test reveals a significant difference (.05). The t-test was 6.107 and Sig. (2-tailed) was .000. As a result, it can be inferred that the Phonics Instructional Method brings an impact on the students then being able to improve students' pronunciation.

Recommendations

From this research study, the researcher has the following suggestions:

1. Instructional recommendations

The researcher would like to suggest in the following steps:

    1.1 In order to prevent the students from getting bored and be more interested in learning English, teachers should set up the interest, motivation in reading and learning by developing a variety of interesting material.

    1.2 The further teaching should focus on English letters which are difference from Thai separately such as V /v/, Z /z/, G /g/, R/r/, TH /θ/, TH /ð/, SH /ʃ/, CH /tʃ/, PH /f/.

1.3 Rather than post-test which is the type of summative assessment, teachers should have set the formative one. Not only recording VIDEO after each lesson, students should be defined to have a test after they finish leaning in each lesson as well.

2. Suggestion for further study

2.1 The duration of the study should be extended in order to study more deeply and to design more activities in teaching and learning.

2.2 The students' perspective should be studied in the form of a questionnaire or interview.

2.3 The study should be defined into two groups of experiments in order to compare the performance which will be clearer and less mistaken that the phonic instructional method truly has the influence towards students' reading ability.

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