



RESEARCH ARTICLE

LEARN HOW TO READ: THE IMPORTANCE OF PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS AMONG  
KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS IN HONG KONG

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ABSTRACT

This study intended to find out the importance of phonological awareness in improving students' reading ability. The participants were the English teachers and principal in a non-profit making kindergarten, which the medium of instruction is mainly Chinese. Since the English teachers are the ones who teach in the classroom, their responses are valuable for us to understand the improvements or deterioration in students' reading ability. Furthermore, this research was mainly focused on Hong Kong context, so it will be interesting for us to find out how ESL students perform under the instruction of phonological awareness.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, there were a number of studies which focused on the benefit effects of phonological awareness among native speakers (Ehri et al., 2001; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1999). Then, what is phonological awareness? Actually, it refers to the realization of phonemes, which is the smallest unit of speech sound (McBride-Chang and Treiman, 2003). In other words, teachers will teach the phonological elements, such as onset, syllables and phonemes to children, so that they can understand the phonological rules in their early age. In Hong Kong, although the needs of children English learning is demanding, there are no standardize form in teaching kindergarten students' reading ability. Therefore, some educators questioned that those native speakers' findings are useful to explain the situation among ESL children (Yeung, Siegel and Chan, 2012). Children's reading ability is essential in kindergarten, since this may become a benchmark for parents in choosing schools (August and Hakuta, 1997). In Hong Kong, there are different types of preschools, and many of them contain English curriculum for students. However, according to the Education Bureau (2015), there are no restrictions or curriculum for Hong Kong kindergarten in English learning. As a result, children's English abilities are often fluctuated after their graduation in kindergarten. The most common English teaching method in Hong Kong

kindergarten is logographic (McBride-Chang and Treiman, 2003). One of the reasons is that Hong Kong children are weak in phonemic awareness, and therefore they need more activities to assist in English teaching (McBride-Chang & Treiman, 2003).

Research questions

Based on the past research study, there are several research questions that need to be answered in this paper.

- 1) Would children who receive phonological awareness instruction have better reading performance?
- 2) What are the difficulties in using phonological awareness?
- 3) What kinds of assisting methods are necessary in teaching phonological awareness to kindergarten students?

Literature review

There are many scholars who did their research on the effects of phonological awareness among kindergarten student. Most of the results showed that students who received phonological instructions have good reading abilities (Blachman, 1997), whereas for those did not receive any phonological instructions were tended to be "lag behind" (Torgesen, Wagner, & Rashotte, 1997). There were several reasons that showed phonological awareness training is beneficiary for developing children's reading abilities. Some studies claimed that this kind

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of training allowed students to learn how the sound pattern is linked with the spelling pattern, and eventually students may know the syllabic construction of each word (Cunningham, 1990; Lundberg, Frost and Petersen, 1988). Furthermore, in some case studies, they have shown that students enhance their reading abilities from explicit phonological awareness training (Hatcher, Hulme and Ellis, 1994). As a result, some scholars believed that both phonological awareness and letter-sound instruction are important training elements for enhancing students reading effectiveness (Ball and Blachman, 1991). However, these cases were mainly from native speakers. Hence, there are other scholars who argued that this is not the case among ESL learners.

### **ESL children struggle to learn English during their early age**

One of the reasons that ESL learners, such as Hong Kong children, tends to struggle in learning English during their early age is their exposure of English were very limited (Yeung, Siegel & Chan, 2012). This is due to the fact that they learn English as their second language, English has not been widely used in other occasions beside school. Other scholars pointed out that Hong Kong young English learners are weak in recognize English phonological elements because of the insignificant materials (McBride-Chang et al., 2004). It seems that scholars do not encourage ESL learners to use phonological awareness instruction in teaching students' reading.

Another reason that Hong Kong children struggle to learn English is because of their mother tongue (McBride-Chang & Treiman, 2003). Some studies in US claimed that bilingual children were being confused by their mother tongue, and this has limited their learning abilities in second language (Tabors & Snow, 2001). As a result, Hong Kong children may find themselves difficult to read in English during their early stage. There is an example to support that second language learners had difficulties in learning their second language. A study from Wagner (1993), it showed that Berber speaking children had some difficulties in learning Arabic.

### **Different perspective towards phonological awareness in ESL context**

Recently, there were some studies showed that there is a connection between phonological awareness and reading ability (Gottardo, Collins, Baciu and Gebotys, 2008). A study that was conducted by Ayres (1998) has shown that literacy games, such as storytelling or word games, can help ESL learners to increase their phonological awareness. This shows that in ESL context, students may need extra assistance, such as games, to help them understand the abstract concept of phonological awareness. This can be further proven by the study from Yeung, Siegel and Chan, (2012). In their study, they found out that phonological awareness can enhance students' reading and spelling. Since Hong Kong students were weak in phonological awareness, the instruction needs to be modified for the needs of current situation (Yeung, Siegel and Chan, 2012). Another approach that suggested by other scholars is logographic. Transferring specific reading techniques from the native language, it may help students to visualize the identification of Chinese characters and English words (McBride-Chang & Treiman, 2003). This is because some studies showed that the logographic approach has been

successful in teaching Chinese children in learning Chinese characters (Huang and Hanley, 1995). As a result, with the help of logographic learning experience in children's native language, they may use a similar processing method to aware of English orthography (McBride-Chang and Treiman, 2003). There is also a longitudinal study to show the relationship between phonological awareness and reading-related knowledge. Studies showed that phonological awareness and reading acquisition contain bidirectional relation (Wagner, Torgesen and Rashotte, 1994). Later, Wagner et al. (1994) found out that there is a strong influence of phonological awareness on word decoding and letter knowledge. A study was conducted by Burgess and Lonigan (1998) further elaborated that phonological awareness was able to increase children's letter knowledge, and this has proven that phonological awareness has some influence in children's reading acquisition during their early stage.

### **Methodology**

This is a qualitative study, which the data collection method is basically interview with teachers and principal. There will be 3 participants in this research and they are the principal and English teachers from Lok Sin Tong Man Ng Wing Yee Kindergarten. The sampling data is homogenous, since it only focused on one kindergarten. However, this may provide an in-depth analysis of the phonological instruction effects on students' reading performance. This school started focusing on English teaching last year, and also their curriculum is based on phonological awareness, which is focusing on teaching phonemes. Because of its unique background, it can allow us to compare and contrast the impact of using phonological awareness instruction before and after. The two English teachers have been teaching English for at least 3 years, and both of them are major in English studies. One of the interviewees is a native speaker of English, so he can provide much more information about the effectiveness of phonological awareness towards students' reading abilities. As for the principal, she has been working in this kindergarten for more than 10 years, and she has seen the changes of English curriculum in this school. Therefore, she is able to compare and contrast students' reading performance. As for the last interviewee, she is a new staff in this kindergarten, and she has only been working here for 3 months. Although she has been teaching English for 3 years, this is the first time for him to teach phonological rules to kindergarten students. Therefore, she is able to provide her impression of phonological awareness in this school and students.

### **Findings**

#### **The use of phonological awareness**

The first part of the interview was intended to find out teachers' and principal's perceptions towards the use of phonological awareness. However, the teachers were confused between phonics and phonological awareness. The local English teacher explained that she only taught phonics in class.

#### *Extract 1: Local teacher's lesson organization*

*"I used phonics concept, such as Letterland in class. However, it took me a long time to motivate students to use them in class."*

As for the principal and the foreign teacher, they do recognize the different between phonological awareness and phonics teaching. They can correctly define the meaning of phonological awareness.

*Extract 2: Principal defines what is phonological awareness*

*"The meaning of phonological awareness is teaching phonological rules. This does not only contain phonics, but also it includes asking students to recognize the phonemes, onset and other phonological elements."*

However, only the principal mentioned that phonological awareness is very important for students. During the interview, the principal has mentioned several times about the importance of teaching phonological awareness in early childhood setting.

*Extract 3: Principal's respond towards phonological awareness*

*"Most of the parents believe that children from age of 3 to 6 are at their best learning stage, so they will encourage the school to provide more knowledge to their children. If the school did not provide enough activities for their children, they may quit school. Furthermore, I believe children can learn a lot better in this age, and their pronunciation will then be enhanced"*

It seems that the head of the school really support the use of phonological awareness, but teachers do not support this kind of teaching method. Both foreign teacher and local teacher expressed their concern towards this kind of method.

*Extract 4: Local English teacher's responds*

*"I was teaching the voiced and voiceless consonants to a group of K3 students. The difference between those two consonants is the vibration of your vocal windpipe. However, it is difficult for K3 students to learn this in class."*

*Extract 5: Foreign teacher's respond to phonological awareness instruction*

*"In the past, there was no need to focus on this aspect (phonological awareness). We just taught with our main text book, and then play some English games, such as, hang man. As a result, students learnt in a fun way, and they can speak a lot of words. However, now they need to pay attention to the consonants. This has further made the English syllabus much more complex, and teachers have been put on a lot of pressure. Furthermore, I cannot tell the result is good or bad, it seems nothing has changed. Students did not really improve, and they feel boring while teaching those phonological rules."*

Furthermore, the outcome of using phonological instruction is the foreign teacher felt that students were not interested in the lesson, and he expressed his uncertainty of using this teaching method during the interview.

### **The enhancement of students' reading ability**

As mentioned in pervious section, the teachers were concerned about using this kind of method, since they thought it is too difficult for preschool students. One of the English teachers responded that this kind of teaching method is learnt in primary school level.

*Extract 6: Foreign teacher's respond*

*"In my country, we learn those rules in primary school not in preschool level, because we only need to learn how to play in kindergarten."*

Therefore, in foreign teacher's opinion, phonological awareness is far ahead for students in preschool's level. Especially, this is a bit too hard for students who do not have much English resources or exposure in this kindergarten.

Furthermore, the local teacher and foreign teacher expressed that students were more or less the same, and their reading ability did not gain too much improvement. This is due to the fact that the ideas were too abstract for students.

*Extract 7: Local teacher's respond towards teaching phonological awareness*

*"In my K2 class, they were not paying any attention. Also, they cannot provide any respond, since they do not really understand what it is about."*

*Extract 8: Foreign teacher's respond towards teaching phonological awareness*

*"Comparing to the past, I think students know more words then now. I guess because they learnt them unconsciously. However, now, the school makes the curriculum more explicit. As a result, students felt really disinterested"*

However, the principal held a different perspective towards this issue. She mentioned that more students were able to read sentences and words after implementing this kind of instruction in their curriculum. Moreover, she believed that this is an unique strategy to help students to learn their reading and pronunciation. Therefore, she maintained the use of phonological awareness in their English curriculum.

## **RESULTS**

After the interview with the participants, the results have been summarized into several sections. Those sections were mainly focus on how the findings are relevant to the research questions in this research.

### **The impacts on phonological awareness**

The principal mentioned that they have tried to implement this kind of instruction in kindergarten since last year, and students' reading performance has been improved. During her interview, she mentioned several times that students can focus on pronouncing the consonant before each word, for example, "k...k...car". This shows that students realized more rules and knowledge related to the phonological rules of English. Moreover, she further elaborated that since students know the sound of words, and they will still try to pronounce the unfamiliar words. As a result, some of them may eventually pronounce them correctly, and this is a sign of the positive impacts on phonological awareness. The result has somewhat similar with the L1 students in foreign countries. Children who learnt the phonological rules during their early stage, they may have reading performance than those who did not have (Blachman, 1997). However, this may increase teachers' pressure in teaching. Both of the teachers expressed that they were sometimes confused whether the children were able to understand those abstract concepts, and they need to prepare

more activities or increase extra lessons for students to practice. As mentioned in the findings, the foreign teacher explained that in the past students were able to learn the words, but now students were just learning something that they do not necessary need to know in this level. The foreign teacher pointed out that there is no difference of students' performance comparing to the past, which there was no phonological awareness instruction being introduced in the classroom.

### The reasons of implementing phonological awareness

After the interview with the participants, there are some reasons that the school chose this kind of instruction. However, the principal and the teachers have different opinion on implementing phonological awareness. The target school is located in Sau Mau Ping, Kwun Tong, which is a busy and crowded place in Hong Kong. Also, the education standard is comparative low with other Hong Kong districts. The principal expressed that the parents are more demanding nowadays, but they cannot or unable to teach their kids at home. Therefore, they often have high requests from the teachers in school. This is also one of the reasons that the school needed to find new teaching methods to enhance the school's English teaching standard and effectiveness. Moreover, the principal further implied that after introducing the phonological awareness instruction into the curriculum, the parents were pleased and willing to co-operate with the school, such as reading those words with their kids at home. Although they may not understand the things, they believe this is a good strategy to help their kids in learning and reading English.

Secondly, as for nowadays, the preschool syllabus does not only contain nursery rhymes and playing games in English teaching. For example, many schools have adopted some foreign English teaching methods, such as plays, game-based teaching. The principal explained that foreign educational tests, such as Cambridge starters, movers and flyers, are now welcomed by a lot of parents in Hong Kong. Therefore, a lot of preschool and kindergartens have already introduced those curriculums in their school English programme. However, in this target school, the development of English curriculum is only on the starting stage. The principal mentioned that the resources are not enough in their school, and it is hard for them to compete with other kindergarten in Hong Kong.

#### *Extract 9: Principal's explanation towards implements new teaching method*

*"As you can see, nowadays in Hong Kong parents are really demanding the English standard in kindergarten. Our organization does not really focus too much on this, since our policy is to help students to develop their self-autonomy. Therefore, we do not have many resources in expanding or improving our English curriculum. In these few years, luckily our organization has received some funding for the school education development. Hence, we have a chance to start our English curriculum."*

From the teacher's perspective, they argued that the change has made them feel more pressure. Since the funding was not enough, there was not enough professional training and support for both English teachers in the school.

#### *Extract 10: The local teacher's explanation about the phonological awareness instruction*

*"I am an English major undergraduate student, but I never thought I have to teach those phonological rules to K3 students. Moreover, I thought the school would provide training sections or workshops for us."*

This is the first time for this local teacher to teach phonological awareness in a kindergarten setting, but it seems that she is really puzzled and confused about the ways to teach. Actually, this shows that mainly the teachers were not used to teach in this method, but the organization did not provide any training for new teachers. As for the foreign teacher, although he has been working here for three years, he expressed his concern in changing the style of teaching. The NET teacher expressed that he never thought he needed to teach kindergarten students those serious rules. Comparing with the past experience in this school, students do not really need this way to enhance students' reading abilities.

Another point, the foreign teacher mentioned that phonological awareness has decreased the interaction between teachers and students. Since a lot of students were being bored for a long time, they were not motivated in participating reading those phonemes. Also, the teacher expressed that a lot of students were not pay any attention to the lesson, and this may deteriorate their reading ability. This is a bit connected with Ayres's study (1998), since it is related to use teaching aids or activities to implement phonological awareness implicitly. This may solve the problem of students feel disinterest in phonological awareness learning.

Phonological awareness instruction should be taught implicitly. In Ayres's study (1998), it showed that students can learn those phonological rules through storytelling or word games. Therefore, this comes down to the ways of presenting the knowledge in the classroom setting. Based on the interviews with the local teacher and foreign teacher, it seems that they tried to teach those rules explicitly through drills and memorization. As a result, the students were not able to understand those abstract concepts.

Since most of the kindergarten students cannot concentrate for a long time, activities are needed to keep them focus. For example, word games can be used to help students to recognize and match the correct phoneme. So that students will be enjoying the lesson, and they can also learn the rules of phonology. Therefore, in this study, both of those teachers were trying to do something that is contradicting the suggestion from Ayres's study. However, the result was not very convincing.

Moreover, ESL young learners do not have enough exposure of phonological rules. In Yeung, Siegel and Chan's study (2012), they have mentioned that the exposure of English for early childhood learners is very limited. This is because most of the time children are been exposed in their native language, there are not enough used of their second language in real life. Therefore, ESL children's phonological awareness is quite low. Since their second language exposure is low, it is difficult for them to understand those complex concepts without the help of other materials. In previous paragraph, Ayres (1998) suggested that the use of activities, such as word games, can assist students in adopting phonological awareness. There was another study which introduced the use of logographic teaching in phonological awareness. Hence, it is essential to

make the adjustments in teaching phonological awareness to ESL young learners.

## Conclusion

To sum up, phonological awareness may help ESL students in enhancing their reading abilities. In this study, the principal has provided some evidence that showed students were able to try reading those unfamiliar words. However, this kind of instruction needs to be further developed. Since the supporting resources are not enough for the teachers, they are being put under serious pressure. Both of the teachers has mentioned that they need more training sections or workshops to help them, and also the school should develop a more systematic approach in teaching phonological awareness in kindergarten level. Furthermore, there should be more research studies in discussing the effects of phonological awareness had on kindergarten students. Since at the age of 2 to 6 some scholars believed that it is the “critical period” for students in learning (Chomsky, 1959), it is essential for educators to find out the effective ways to teach English to ESL learners in early stage. Therefore, in the future, there should be more longitudinal studies to show the learning progression of early learning in reading abilities or other aspects.

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### Appendix

Area	Questions	Remark
General	1)How long have you taught young learners? 2)How long have you taught English in kindergarten setting?	
Phonological awareness	3)Do you think phonics and phonological awareness are the same? 4)Do you think phonological awareness is an important aspect for students? 5)How do you organize your lessons? 6)What are the outcomes? 7)Is it difficult to use/change the curriculum instruction? 8)Why do you want to focus on phonological awareness instruction?	Q5: For teachers only Q7: the word "use" is for teachers, whereas "change" is for the principal Q8: For principal
Reading ability	9)Do you think students gain any improvement in reading? 10)Are the students able to understand the sound of the phonemes and enhance their reading ability? 11)Any difficulties?	Q11: follow-up question

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