

On Cultivating Phonetic Competence of Primary School Students

Cong Li^{1 a}

¹Foreign Languages School of Dalian Jiaotong University, Dalian, Liaoning, China

^a amyxianrou@aliyun.com

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Abstract: This paper explains and demonstrates the importance to teach young Chinese English learners phonetics in order to improve their lexical competence. Based on literature reviews, phonetics served as an important indicator of future reading ability can influence learners' lexical ability directly so that poor phonetic knowledge hinders the learners from effectively improving their English competence. By discussing current problems in primary school English teaching and analyzing usual spelling mistakes of young English learners, some suggestions are presented to primary English teachers and textbook writers in order to improve the phonetics teaching.

Introduction

With the rapid development of China, there are increasing international interactions between China and other countries. Language now has been considered as a very important media and tool to support China's internationalization. Foreign language education has always been the important strategy for Chinese elementary and secondary education. In most regions of China, English is the only foreign language taught at primary and middle schools. Among these regions, there are differences in the beginning grade. Primary students at A-Level regions which cover the most tech-advanced and developed first-tier cities begin their English learning at the first Grade, at their seven around. During the latest decade, more and more parents who were born around from 1980s to 1990s care more about the children's foreign language competence. They pay much more attention to extensive reading, listening and speaking. These efforts cause increasing online English teaching platforms emerging in China's markets. But although many parents try to spend more time on improving their kids' reading, writing, listening and speaking, they still find it hard to let young learners master the necessary vocabulary, not mention the proper usages of the large vocabulary. Stubbs ever said 'when people think of a language, they think almost invariably of words'(1986,99). The words are the bases of using a language which guarantee the basic communication. So it is especially meaningful for the language learners to lay great attention and efforts on the words learning.

There are some researchers who have proved that the earlier learners begin to learn language, the better they acquire the competence of the target language.(Cheng Yahua, 2018). The concern of the age problem naturally leads to more researches on young language learners. Many researches studied how the L2 learners acquired their L2 language. But there are less researches done to study the young learners which learn foreign language at their very young age.

Due to the popularity of English learning among young kids in China, it is significantly important to do more researches to explore the process in which Chinese young English learners learn English and find out more effective and efficient teaching method to improve the English teaching for the young English learners. For young English learners, words acquisition serves as beginning of learning and exerts special influence to later learning. Therefore, it is vital to know more about lexical acquisition features of English young learners which are varied from the L1 and L2 young learners.

English Lexical Phonetics Acquisition of Primary Students

Different from the L1 and L2 language learners, English is a foreign language in China and children who learn English can reach English only by formal English teaching both at homes and in the classrooms. Through the formal learning, young learners know about the rules of English. There is no natural environment for the learners to listen, speak and use English in their daily. Therefore study on their lexical acquisition should focus more on the formal English teaching context.

Lexical competence should basically cover the knowledge of phonetics, meaning, grammar and pragmatics. Especially for the lower grades primary school students, phonetics knowledge exert greater impacts on those young learners' language learning. Therefore there is necessity to explore the unique features in phonetics acquisition of young learners (primary school students at the age between 7 to 9).

Lexical Phonetics Teaching Problems at the Primary School. Many researchers have found young learners' phonetics awareness is significantly meaningful to later development of reading ability. If learners are lack of the ability to store proper phonetic information in the memory system and extract phoneme from the words, this poor ability will cause the reading problems in the later phase. (Stanovich, 1998) when primary students at low grade begin to learn English, at first they should establish the awareness of difference between Chinese Characters and English words. When realizing the orthographic characteristics of English, young learners begin to have intention to read or pronounce the words. At this age, students are still lack of the abilities to differentiate the words into different lexeme which identifies comparatively stable pronunciation. They still recognize the words as a whole no matter the spelling or the pronunciation. If teachers don't intentionally point out some letters or combinations consistently pronounce the same sounds, the students are hard to notice the identification and correspondence of forms and sounds. In many primary school classroom teaching, teachers who have the awareness of the importance of the listening usually create many classroom situations to let students repeat the words orally many times in order to let students familiar to the pronunciation and improve their awareness of English phonetic features. However when it is done, words as a whole segment are recycled, memorized and stored in the memory system. When students speak up and read the learned words, they extract them as a whole too. If the words change their forms and even change the collocations, the students find it hard to recognize them or fail to read or speak up properly. This is a great hindering for students to output words in their speaking and interpret the words in their reading. Although oral repetition can not achieve expected effect, it is not the required content and teaching plans to teach students phonetics systematically and formally in the primary school classrooms.

It is not the required teaching plan to teach the primary students phonetics at their first grade. According to the official textbook used in most primary schools, the first year textbooks include daily simple conversation English in which topics vary from the greeting, inquiry of age, family members to school things and so on. But until the second year, the alphabet appears and each alphabet letter will be taught in writing, pronunciation and the textbooks adopt some words to help students learn the letters better by demonstrating the related words which begin with the taught letter. But still phonetics are not the required content in the formal school teaching. The assessment for the low-grade students covers the spelling from the the second term of the second school year. It is causing many spelling troubles for the younger learners. They read the words between the lines and repeat the words as a whole and input them as a whole. Many children found it very hard to memorize so many words especially coming to the spelling. They can read the words when they come to their familiar sentences but if the words appear in the unfamiliar context, they can't easily read them up and recognize them. If they are given some orally clues such as reading the words by teachers, they can quickly realize the meaning and recognize the words. This shows the lack of the phonetic knowledge are causing the reading problems and interfering the improvement of language competence.

A small scale survey conducted by the researcher which interviewed 50 parents of first and second grade students from the 6 primary schools in some second-tier city of the northeast shows only 4% of all English teachers taught phonetics beyond the 26 alphabet letters and most students have to learn related knowledge outside the schools. Most of the parents have some awareness of the necessity to

learn phonetics and only less than half parents send their children to learn related courses through diverse ways. Since there are some evidences to show the phonetic knowledge of first and second grade students can predict their later reading abilities so that it is time to lay more attention to the phonetic teaching in primary schools especially at the beginning grades. (Bradley&Bryant 1983, Caravolas&Bruck ,1993)

Some Problems for Phonetics Acquisition Based on Analysis of Spelling Mistakes When Chinese young learner begin their English learning, phonetic awareness is vital. Phonetic awareness refers to the perception, recognition operation and transfer competence of phonetic units such syllables, phonemes, onset and rimes, grapheme-phoneme conversion and etc. For Chinese young learners, it is not difficult to identify syllables because Chinese also have identification of syllables and meaning units.(Jiang Yuzhen,& Xie Weiyl, 2015) But there are no correspondence between grapheme and phoneme in Chinese. So it is comparatively harder for Chinese young learners to build up the ability of grapheme-phoneme conversion which will cause the spelling and reading difficulty. The usual mistakes can be classified into four types. First, it is the mistake that the letters are arbitrarily written completely unaware of the correspondence between phoneme and grapheme. This kind of the mistakes demonstrates the lack of the grapheme-phoneme conversation awareness. Second, some learners can spell some words with part correct letters but in wrong places. These learners have some degree awareness of phonetics but at really low level so that they memorize the sound of words and keep some visual information into their memory but lack of preciseness such as spelling black into balk. Third, this kind of mistakes is usually found among the young beginners. Chinese Character and Pinyin system don't have the stress of vowels so many beginners usually have a weak awareness of vowels and there are always missing letters or letter combination sounding vowels. For examples, some learners may spell 'build' into 'bld', etc. The fourth, some learners have some knowledge of phonetics but they find it hard to distinguish the correct sound of the letter and letter combination. For examples, they may read courage as c-o-u-r-ei-ge instead of considering ou as a combination. The mistakes demonstrate different phonetic acquisition stages and teachers should design some teaching activities to help students gradually set up phonetic knowledge.

Suggestions on Primary School English Teaching

Since it may be an indicator for future reading competence, it is necessary to begin systematic phonetics teaching at the beginning grade at primary schools. Beyond the 26 alphabet, in the beginning grade textbook should contain systematic phonetic contents. Young language learners tend to visual and audio input so the textbook writers should include more visual information of phonetics such as graphic differences to mark the phonemes distinctively in order to draw attentions. Besides daily conversations, each unit should contain some rhythms, twisters and simple sentences with some phonemes to build up the awareness of onset and rime of phonemes. In the latter stage, classroom teaching can even contain some stories with carefully selected words which include the target phonetic knowledge. This can help students improve phonetic knowledge in the context of interpreting meaning in which their lexical ability can be improved greatly. Classroom teaching should contain specific operations to teach students phonetics. From simple letter to letter combinations, teachers should follow the process of teaching some letters in each lesson, reviewing taught letters in the previous class and further practicing on the target phonemes through various class activities and materials. Analyzing the phoneme-grapheme conversion rules , large visual and audio input and repeating exercises of words containing the target phonemes all can contribute to phonetic acquisition .

In short, phonetic teaching in the primary school is significantly necessary in the current situation. Chinese young learner have their unique cognitive characteristics when they acquire English due to the great difference in the two languages. Therefore it is especially meaningful for the Chinese researchers and educators to study in depth the English acquisition in Chinese language environment. More findings related to the phonetic acquisition are expected to help improve current school teaching.

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