

## MASTER'S PROGRAM

### Curricula for M.Ed.

#### ENG064 TEXT ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH ESSAY PROGRAM

This is required reading for all M.Ed. students. Read through the reports and highlight key points in **yellow** as you analyze the strategies of teaching. *(Alternatively, you can copy the key points and paste them into a separate file.)* Draw on the findings of applied neuroscience and reflect on how this can be projected into a classroom or teaching/learning setting. After reading each thesis and highlighting key points, send the highlighted thesis (or separate file with the points you gathered) to your tutor by email. Additionally, you will need to write an 80-page (double space, size 12 font) thesis using the key points that support the theme of your thesis.

**Note:** ENG064 reflects personal quality thinking and excellent research skills; this serves as a foundation course before you complete your 80 page analytical thesis. Your thesis will be evaluated and graded by an assigned university mentor.

By – Prof. Gwendolyn N. So

## Phonics for Chinese EFL Learners

## **1. PREFACE**

### **1.1 SUBJECT OF INVESTIGATION:**

This thesis will focus on why Phonics must be the foundation for learning English in Mainland China and Taiwan and how to go about it.

### **NEEDS, INTERESTS AND PROBLEMS DETECTED**

Teaching English to EFL learners by beginning with Phonics has not been given the proper exposure. Phonics affects every aspect of English learning – pronunciation, spelling, reading, even grammar. People are not fully informed of the benefits of teaching Phonics especially to children. Also, there are many misconceptions about Phonics that need to be addressed. Many teachers seem to think Phonics is only about letters and sounds, but it is actually more than that.

### **1.2 JUSTIFICATION OF THE THESIS THEME:**

The purpose of this thesis is to make clear in people's minds the importance of Phonics especially in ESL/EFL situations. This is for anyone who cares about their children's education and wants to get their money's worth sending their kids to English language centers. It is also for the EFL students who more often than not get discouraged and ultimately give up trying to master

English. It is also for frustrated teachers who seeking a better method that produces results.

### **3. OBJECTIVE**

The main objective of this thesis is to provide an in-depth understanding of why teaching EFL must begin with Phonics.

#### **3.1 GENERAL INFORMATION**

People in Mainland China and Taiwan are hungry for English. So many years of learning English and yet there is not much improvement. One only has to look at street signs and ads or talk to people. English teachers are often frustrated, some even expressing derision and labeling their students dumb.

English with all its irregularities and exceptions to the rules make it a not so easy language to learn – even for native speakers! What more the EFL learner? People who want to learn English as a foreign language need a clear systematic approach and Phonics is it.

#### **3.2 SPECIFIC INFORMATION**

In the United States, the pendulum has swung back to Phonics as a way to educate Americans on their own language. For many years though, learning through sight words has dominated the American educational system. This,

many say, has contributed to the decline of literacy in the U.S. Mainland China and Taiwan are using the sight word method, learning English like they would Chinese. They memorize how to read “play” by its appearance. Add *er* at the end to make *player* and they cannot read it anymore. I will show clearly this is why despite all the effort, little progress has been made to master English.

What is Phonics and what role does it play in the EFL scene? Why Phonics when we have the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet)? Aren't they the same? Isn't it dead boring to ask students to repeat sounds and letters over and over? Will the students enjoy learning the learning experience? If Phonics is so good, does it mean we can do without other methodologies?

### **3.3 GOALS**

Every parent is concerned about his child's education. In this case, Chinese parents want their children to learn English as they believe it would help them lead better lives. My primary goal is to prove that a child who is trained in Phonics first will have a better chance at mastering English.

A secondary goal would be to help English teachers gain a much better understanding of what Phonics is and how it is related to all aspects of learning the English language.

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## INTRODUCTION

I had been teaching English for a long time, but my frustration reached an all-time high when I found myself in a Beijing University teaching English to college students whose English I cannot decipher. They understood me only when I spoke very slowly and they could hardly verbally express themselves in intelligible English. During my conversation classes, I have had students literally bolt out of their seats and run out the door like their pants were on fire. I was all the more shocked to find out most of them had been studying English for an average of 5 years! Something was definitely wrong here.

I decided to throw in some pronunciation exercises in my conversation classes. I emphasized to my students that for effective negotiation of meaning to take place, they must be understood by the listener. The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is very popular in China. All students are familiar with it so I figured it would be a cinch teaching pronunciation through this system. However, to my dismay I found out they were not pronouncing the sounds of the IPA symbols the way they ought to be. The IPA symbol /æ/ is pronounced as short e. The sound /zh/ is pronounced like a hard /t/. So, they say “epple” for “apple” and “yooruhly for “usually.” Where did that come from? 5 years of English and THIS? What a waste of time, money and effort.

After a semester teaching in this university, I was hired by an Australian company specializing in Phonics. They opened a franchise in Beijing. Even before I joined this company the concept of Phonics was not unknown to me. I found out it was very similar to how I had been teaching pronunciation in the Philippines in one of the popular speech centers. I used both Webster's and IPA symbols. The students were having a bit of trouble with the strange symbols, so I made a list of what is called "alternative spellings" of a certain sound. For example, /eI/ can be spelled *ay*, *ai*, *eigh*, *ei*, *ae* etc. The symbol /i/ which represents the long e sound can be spelled *ee*, *ea*, *ei*, *ie*, *oe*, etc. The students found it easier to deal with actual letters of the alphabet than the hieroglyphic symbols I was told to use on them.

My job in that Australian company was to train adults how to teach Phonics to children. It was not easy. In adults, some bad habits have set in and some students have what I call *atony* of the tongue. However, it produced satisfying results in that at the end of the semester, these students managed to make themselves better understood compared to my students from a Beijing university. I was impressed and it started me on the journey towards learning more about Phonics.

In Taiwan where I am now based, I had the opportunity to teach children directly and the results were even more amazing. Taiwan has vast resources on Phonics and the more I learned about Phonics, the more I believed in it. The more I used it in the classroom, the more convinced I became that this is the way to teach English.

# Chapter 1: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

## 1.1 A Look at the English Language

There are many varieties of English. English as spoken by Americans, Brits, New Zealanders, and Aussies has differences not just in pronunciation but in meaning too. Even within the United States, English is not spoken the same way. Somehow everybody manages to understand each other though. I have come to define Standard English as the English one hears in good quality movies and on the news – whether American English, British English, Australian English, etc. A speech teacher I once had said the best English speakers to listen to and emulate are newscasters and actors.

English is an alphabetic language in that the way words are spelled usually provides clues to their pronunciation. English, however, is far from being a perfectly phonetic language because a letter symbol can stand for more than one sound. There are 26 letters in the English alphabet but out of these 26 are 44 possible sounds. The letter *s*, for example, has 4 sounds – /s/ as in *sorry*, /sh/ as in *sugar*, /zh/ as in *television*, and /z/ as in *busy*. A sound is also represented by more than one letter. The sound of long *a* can be written as *ay* (*day*), *ai* (*mail*), *eigh* (*eight*), *ea* (*steak*), *a-e* (*lake*), *ae* (*aerobic*), *et* (*ballet*), *ey* (*they*). Native speakers have no need for consciously analyzing the pronunciation of these words. They say it the way they hear it. Note, however, that without proper instruction, even a native speaker of English cannot read or write in his own language.

Some books say 85% of English words are phonetically regular and is enough to justify teaching sounds and symbols. Some say that number is actually lower, around 50%. From experience, I tend to agree with the former. The majority of English words have spelling patterns and spelling rules. It is true there are exceptions to the rules which can drive one crazy but still there is enough to go by to establish a baseline rule. English may not be an easy language to learn, but it is definitely “learnable.”

In his book, “Why Johnny Can’t Read,” Rudolf Flesch brings out the flaws in the American educational system resulting in a nation with a declining literacy in its own language. I understand his concerns through some experiences of my own.

As a child growing up in the Philippines, and then later as I frequently went to the US or had American colleagues at work, I could not help but notice many Americans are bad spellers. During the pre-internet days of my childhood, there were pen pal associations that encouraged young people of different nations to write to each other. For some reason, I have always had American pen pals. I remember all the mail I got had a certain pattern. Lynn Truss, author of that wonderful punctuation book “Eats, Shoots, and Leaves” sums up my experience (and hers) in the most hilarious way.

*When her [Ms. Truss’ pen pal] first letter arrived, I was absolutely appalled. It was in*

*huge handwriting, like an infant's. It was on pink paper, with carefree spelling errors – and where the dots over I's ought to be, there were bubbles.*

My American pen pals had big, wide, round handwriting and their letters were full of spelling mistakes which are too many to be considered a slip of the hand. I was in elementary school then and found this more as a source of puzzlement than amusement. I, like most Asians perhaps, thought Americans should have no problem with English.

One time I was corrected by an American friend as to how “vinaigrette” is pronounced. He said he has always pronounced it “vinegarette” because his mom says it that way. An image of a baby vinegar formed in my mind. Pig-piglet, towel-towelette, vinegar-vinegarette! One time he asked if I wanted to play “bad mitten” which I immediately figured out to be “badminton.” Someone once emailed me, “I hope it is not series,” which in context I found meant “I hope it is not serious.”

In that university in Beijing I mentioned before, I was the only non-Caucasian English teacher in our department. The head foreigner teacher was an Australian and he was fond of writing down announcements on the staff message board. His notes were riddled with spelling errors. I really should leave it well enough alone and avoid embarrassing anyone, but I had to correct them. The compulsion to edit was too strong for me to resist! It was an affront to the English language to let the errors

just lie there in full view. Fortunately, this guy is mature enough and secure about himself to admit he is not a very good speller.

To a certain degree, I can understand the difficulty because English is inherently an inconsistent language. Why are *comb*, *tomb* and *bomb* pronounced differently? The same question goes for the following: *bear/pear/wear* but *dear/near/gear*, and then there is *singer* but *linger*. Consider the following which happens to be my all-time favorite student-mind-numbing pronunciation exercise: *thought*, *bough*, *through*, *dough*, *cough*, and *tough*. What's up with the silent letters in *sword*, *Wednesday*, *beautiful*, and *aisle*, to name a few? Why don't we write *muzic*, *eazy*, *reazon* and *roze* as their pronunciation suggests? Then there is the word "ghoti" popularized by George Bernard Shaw as he demonstrates how erratic English spelling is. An alternative spelling to "fish" is "ghoti" since "gh" has the sound /f/ in *laugh*, "o" has the short i sound in *women*, and "ti" has the sound "sh" in *nation*.

Getting away from spelling, let us take a look at grammar. *One mouse, two mice* so why not *one house* and *two hice*? If the plural of man is *men*, why isn't the plural of van *ven*? If the plural of tooth is *teeth*, and foot is *feet*, why not *beet* for boot?

How about word meaning? There is no egg in an eggplant, no butter in butterfly, nor apple in pineapple. Why is a blackboard green? At least a whiteboard is white. A Guinea Pig is not even remotely like a pig and recently I found out it is not from

New Guinea either. A ladybug is not a bug at all but a beetle. Wouldn't it be more appropriate to call a boxing ring a boxing square considering it is shaped like a square? In English, a nose can run and feet can smell. When the lights are *out* they're off, but when the stars are *out* they are visible. *Inappropriate* is the opposite of *appropriate* so why are *flammable* and *inflammable* the same? The English language is also ambiguous. "The king's picture" can mean either a picture that belongs to the king or a picture of the king. I have taken these phenomena for granted, accepting English the way it is because I grew up with it. It wasn't something I needed to question. However, when at an airport in China I excitedly ordered a hamburger and was served a bun with a piece of ham inside, I had to pause and reflect on this experience. Wires were getting crossed so how does one go about untangling this mess? I can understand English being misused in non-English speaking countries like in the following signs:

*In a Paris hotel elevator:* Please leave you values at the front desk.

*In an ad by a Hong Kong dentist:* Teeth extracted by the last Methodists.

But for English to be extensively misused in English-speaking nations is a bit too much. One does not have to look any further than the United States. The following sentences were taken from student science papers in a school in good ol' US of A, compiled by Richard Lederer, author of "Anguished English."

*"Water is composed of two gins, Oxygin and Hydrogin. Oxygin is pure gin. Hydrogin is gin and water."*

*"Three kinds of blood vessels are arteries, vanes and caterpillars."*

*"Vacuum: A large, empty space where the pope lives."*

*"To prevent contraception, wear a condominium."*

*"A triangle which has an angle of 135 degrees is called an obscene triangle."*

What is going on here? Isn't it a natural occurrence to automatically absorb one's own native language and be well versed with all its aspects – speaking, reading and writing? Rudolf Flesch, author of "Why Johnny Can't Read." provides an explanation.

## 1.2 Americans Learn English “The Chinese Way”

Rudolf Flesch lamented the fact that Americans are learning English like it was Chinese. By this he meant children are being taught to memorize words by sight, the way Chinese children do for Chinese characters. Maybe this can work for three or four letter words, but what happens with longer words? How does one distinguish between *weeding* and *wedding*, *beloved* and *believed*, *brasserie* and *brassiere* by looking at them as whole units?

Instead of analyzing the elements that make up the words, they are taught to look at a word in its entirety and remember its shape. There are just too many words to remember. With this method it follows then that if a child wants to learn how to read 50 new words, he has to memorize those 50. If he cannot remember he resorts to guessing, not true reading. Some educators show words with graphics. However, when the words appear without their corresponding pictures, the children are at a loss.

When one learns how to play the piano, he is first taught the notes representing the sounds. Following the above-mentioned logic of starting from the whole or a top-down approach, this means I would have to first memorize how to play an entire song, and when I see another music sheet, I have to start all over again memorizing where to place my hands for this particular piece of music instead of just reading the notes.

There are millions of words in the English language but only 44 sounds to master. Which is more logical to memorize? There is no way even for a native speaker to know every single word that occurs in English. If one learns the rule of silent e changing a short vowel sound into the long vowel sound, even with the exceptions one can already read thousands of words where this rule is applicable.

Rudolf Flesch advocates the Phonics system of teaching children how to read – really read. Once a child can read, he can focus more effort on meaning rather than being burdened with both pronunciation and meaning. Mr. Flesch laments the fact that American children are now unable to read classics like “Little Women,” “Oliver Twist,” and Shakespeare’s works, but instead are given what he calls “diluted readers.” These readers have limited words, repeated over and over again throughout the story to make certain the child sees them often enough to commit them to memory. This seems to work well in the beginning but most research I have read say that the critical period is when a child enters the third grade. By this time, because of a very weak Phonics foundation, the child cannot make the transition to independent reading and learning becomes a tedious, frustrating chore.

It seems ironic that the only time educators would deign to use Phonics is with kids in remedial classes or those with reading disabilities. Apparently, Phonics was considered a last resort and it was able to improve reading. Would it not be logical then to teach Phonics right from the start so there would be no remedial classes to

Speak of?

Rudolf Flesch mentions politicking as one of the reasons why Phonics is being kicked out of the American educational system. A lot of money is made selling what is called "basal readers" (the "diluted readers" mentioned above) which are backed by prominent figures in the educational field. Each reader has several levels where carefully controlled texts in carefully controlled context ensure that parents have to buy the whole set. A Phonics trained child who has learned how to really read can start with some simple stories and later proceed to any available reading material he is interested in. There is no limit to what he can read.

Most of Rudolf Flesch's comments were about reading, but I have come to the conclusion that because the Americans have kicked Phonics out of their educational system, it has greatly affected spelling and pronunciation. Because they have not been trained to analyze or decode for sound-symbol relationship, they get mixed up about pronunciation and spelling. Here are more of my favorite student blunders from "Anguished English."

The Great Wall of China was built to keep out the mongrels.

Julius Caesar was renowned for his great strength. He threw a bridge across the Rhine. His dying words were, "And you too - you brute!"

In the Middle Ages knights fought on horses. This was called jesting.

The death of Queen Elizabeth 1 ended an error.

In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century all the morons moved to Utah.

The two kinds of books printed are friction and non-friction.

The two major religions of Ireland are Catholic and Prostitute.

Chaucer was the father of English pottery.

I like the story *The Last of the Moccasins*.

The novels of Charles Dickens are mellow dramatic and full of truth and sediment.

The pelvis protects the gentiles.

Solomon had 200 wives and 700 cucumbers.

Jesus was born because Mary had an immaculate contraption.

A Christian can have only one wife. This is called monotony.

William Henry Harrison did not wear a coat and hat when he was sworn in as president and soon died of ammonia.

They are fighting a civil war in Serbia because the Bostonians, Crates, and Hertzgodivas want to get rid of the Serves.

Arabs were turbines on their heads.

The girl tumbled down the stairs and lay prostitute at the bottom.

I would like to point out that someone who has been trained in Phonics can very clearly distinguish *Mongols* and *mongrels*, *turbans* and *turbines*, *Protestant*, *prostate*, *prostitute* and *prostrate*, *genitals* and *gentiles*.

### 1.3 How I learned English

I was born in a country that had been under the rule of the Spaniards, the Japanese and the Americans. These foreign influences contributed to making the Philippines a multicultural and therefore multilingual nation. The issue of a national language is still under heated debate because just like China, the Philippines has several dialects with two major ones vying for the position of the national language – Tagalog in Metro Manila and Cebuano in Metro Cebu. For now, people who speak different dialects communicate in English which is also the medium of instruction in schools and the language of business and finance, science and technology. When asked, I say Tagalog is the mother tongue but English is the national language in the Philippines. It is very common for most Filipinos to speak at least three languages, English, Tagalog and their provincial dialect if they are not from Metro Manila. For the Filipino-Chinese, throw in some Mandarin and Fookienese into the language stew. The Philippines is very westernized and to learn English is easy because the environment provides a rich exposure to the English language. Great Filipino literary figures wrote in English and in my opinion the quality of their work is at par with their English counterparts.

But the quality of English has taken a turn for the worse now. English has become “mongrelized.” Just like Singlish in Singapore, we have Taglish, which although okay for conversational purposes, is unacceptable in formal speech and writing. Pronunciation is getting worse. What I think is at the root of it all is English is not

being taught properly anymore.

Just recently, my cousin was in a state of shock when she discovered that after preschool and then nursery school, her daughter could not read when she entered first grade. Some of her daughter's classmates had no such problem so she asked what school these children transferred from. The teacher said they were from O.B. Montessori and they had been taught Phonics.

To understand why my generation has good English skills, I had to look back at how I was taught English. I didn't know about Phonics as we know it today but I was taught Webster's phonetics. I was taught short vowel sounds represented by vowels with a smiley thing on top which I later learned was called a breve. Long vowels have a line on top called the macron. I remember spelling not by letter names but by their sounds -- "cat" was not *see-ay-tee* but /k/ /a/ /t/. I was taught soft th and hard th. I remember Sesame Street teaching Phonics as exemplified by the following song I have never forgotten:

You take a C that's a /k/, and an ay-tee /at/

Put them all together and they spell CAT

You take a B that's a /b/, and an ay-tee /at/

Put them all together and they spell BAT.

While all this was taking place, I was also being taught Tagalog and the same

procedure was being followed. I was learning the sounds and the letters they correspond to. Simultaneously, I also had lessons in the Chinese phonetic alphabet which has always been taught with the sounds and symbols first before anything else. Characters are gradually introduced much, much later.

I never heard of the International Phonetic Alphabet until much later. When I first saw it I remember thinking it was like another language. The symbols looked strange, like Egyptian hieroglyphics or Klingon. I basically taught myself the IPA. It was easy because I knew the sounds of the English language and all I had to do was remember which symbol represented which sound. It was the same thing I did when I went to Beijing to study Chinese. The Philippines uses Taiwan's zhuyin symbols so all I did was match the Chinese pinyin symbol to the sounds I already knew in Mandarin. The Chinese characters are another story. These require a lot of memorization but they are not without patterns to serve as a guide to pronunciation and comprehension, be it the simplified or traditional characters.

I was fortunate to have gone to a Christian school for my primary and secondary education. During that time, there were two American missionaries, the wife being the one who handled the English classes. She put a lot of emphasis on pronunciation and spelling, I remember. Christian schools want to get children reading the Bible as early as possible and looking back now I realize I had been taught Phonics from the very beginning as a tool or strategy to tackle the task of reading. Then the wind

shifted. The school brought in a reader entitled “Dick and Jane.” I always get excited when we get new reading material until I took a look at the contents. It was not exactly stimulating reading material.

Look, Jane, look!

See Spot run.

Run, Spot, run.

See Spot run.

It is only now while researching for this thesis that I found out the “Dick and Jane” books were created to promote the sight word method – words used repeatedly for familiarization. It did not have much effect on me because by the time this book came out, I already knew how to read. I was bored with it.

One factor which I believe led to the decline of English in the Philippines was some so-called nationalists were up in arms over the Filipino’s colonial mentality – a love for everything American. So at some point the “Dick and Jane” readers were replaced with “Pedro and Nita” and Spot became “Bantay.” These names are very Filipino and even though the story was still in English, some terms had to be pronounced with Filipino pronunciation. For example, in English “ay” has a long *a* sound but in Filipino it is a long *i* sound. The “a” in apple does not exist in Tagalog so what should be pronounced /bænteI/ if it were English is pronounced /bantaI/.

In terms of the English language, my being a good speller I attribute to good articulation because I was taught to look at a word through its parts. As the word became more familiar I could look at it as a whole and yet retain the image of the combination of letters and sounds that comprise it. Tagalog and Mandarin phonetics are easy to read and spell because unlike English, they are perfectly phonetic. I can spell out anything in these two languages. I also had two semesters of Spanish in high school and the way it was taught was sound-symbol relationship first.

So what happens now to the students in countries where English is a foreign language? In Mainland China and Taiwan, they are following what the Americans are doing – sight reading and guessing words, not paying attention to sound-symbol relationship. It isn't working for the Americans and I don't see it working for EFL.

## Chapter 2: THE EFL SITUATION IN MAINLAND CHINA AND TAIWAN

### 2.1. The Chinese Educational System

The Chinese language referred to here is Mandarin -- what the overseas Chinese call “hua yu”, the Mainlanders call “putonghua,” and the Taiwanese call “guo yu.” Mandarin and Chinese will be used interchangeably in this thesis although I am aware that the Chinese language is actually a variety of dialects that include Cantonese, Min, etc.

Mandarin is not an alphabetic language. Instead, there is a Chinese phonetic spelling system which Mainland China calls *pinyin* and Taiwan *zhu yin*. Recently, Taiwan has been trying to adopt its own Romanized phonetic system but pinyin is more popular with the international community. The Chinese do not read or write in pinyin/zhuyin. This is only for beginners as a learning tool. Instead, the Chinese “draw characters.” Each character is a picture composed of a series of sequenced strokes and pinyin/zhuyin is the means by which a character can be read/pronounced. Mandarin has a perfect phonetic system, meaning the symbols represent only one sound. The same holds true for Tagalog. A language like this is easy to sound out when put together to form syllables and words.

Chinese children learn their first language by starting with its phonetic system. They begin with the individual sounds and then these are combined in various ways

and read with four tones. At this point, with focus being on pronunciation, the children may not understand everything they are pronouncing or spelling and this is perfectly all right. After the children have familiarized themselves with phonetics, they are now taught the character that represents a certain combination of sounds. Character recognition and writing require a great deal of memorization because they are ideograms. Chinese children are given a tremendous amount of writing as homework. This method is mostly used to get them to remember the appearance of the characters – “motor memory” some call it. This is very much a sight-word approach because the characters are pictures/drawings. Some characters provide a clue to their pronunciation and meaning through the radicals. The radical 口 means “mouth” and a character with this radical is related to speaking. The radical 马 (ma), when combined with another character may indicate that character is also pronounced “ma” with a different tone.

In the beginning, children read books that contain both the phonetic spelling and the character until they reach a certain stage when the pinyin/zhuyin symbols are removed. There is a complex task of linking pronunciation (sound), character (writing) and meaning. Two different characters with two different meanings may be combined and represent a single linguistic element. Basically, learning Chinese involves a lot of repeated and continuous exposure and memory work. Learning to speak Chinese occurs naturally because of the environment, but a Chinese person who does not go to school cannot automatically acquire the knowledge of reading and

writing in Chinese. It is all too common even for educated Chinese adults to forget Chinese characters they hardly encounter in print.

## **2.2 How the Chinese are Learning English**

It is unfair to compare English in the Philippines and China for obvious reasons. English is a second language in the Philippines and it has not reached this status in China. In terms of media, Taiwan people have an advantage over Mainland China because cable TV is readily available and more people can afford it. Some movie theaters do not dub English movies (but there always subtitles). Foreign teachers abound in Mainland China and Taiwan but the ratio of teacher to student is better in Taiwan. Therefore, in terms of an English environment, the Taiwanese have more exposure. However, much improvement is still needed in both places.

Why do the Chinese want to learn English anyway? These are several reasons given by my students:

1. to pass a test
2. to be able to converse with foreigners
3. to study abroad (the US, England and Australia are top choices)
4. to please parents
5. for fun
6. to get a better-paying job

So how do they learn English? Whether in the regular school or in cram schools/language centers, the usual scenario is the foreigner instructor handles conversation while the local teacher focuses on the rest – grammar, writing, reading.

Teaching methods are teacher-oriented. The teacher talks and talks and the children are expected to listen and absorb and transfer of knowledge takes place. The teacher reads and the children parrot. The teacher explains and it is understood the children have learned.

### **How is pronunciation taught?**

For young children, pronunciation is taught by imitating the teacher – the follow-after-me approach. Older kids are taught the IPA (Mainland) or KK (Taiwan) system. The problem is the local teacher mispronounces the symbols and it is carried down generation to generation. Students recognize the phonetic symbols and can read it but the resulting word does not sound remotely like what an English speaker would say. Pronunciation is not taught well at all and later I have true stories of how mangled pronunciation can lead to misinterpretation.

I found several CDs and videos where an English speaker demonstrates pronunciation and most are not accurate and downright misleading. It irritates me how they could overlook the fact that the sounds of P, K and T are unvoiced. This must be emphasized to the Chinese student because otherwise you will hear words like “catuh” for “cat” and “kickuh” for “kick.” In the worst case scenario, pronunciation is not even worth paying attention to. As long as a child can produce some sort of mumbled English and the listener can more or less guess what it is, it is considered successful language acquisition by some educators.

## How are children taught English, for starters?

Parents are very excited, anxious actually, for their child to start speaking English immediately. The alphabet is learned by singing the ABC song and looking at some books with pictures that begin with what letter. There is no emphasis on the sound-symbol factor. Children are taught conversation, giving rigid answers to certain questions.

A: Hello. How are you?  
B: I'm fine, thank you. And you?  
A: I'm fine too.

Children are programmed to answer like robots, giving set answers to set questions. When the question is rephrased, it causes a breakdown in their processing. I would say "I'm okay" instead of "I'm fine, thank you. And you?" and they are stumped how to respond to this.

There is a group of educators who believe having fun is the primary purpose for young Chinese children to learn English, so foreign teachers make fools of themselves dancing and prancing about. It is not unheard of that the school administration puts a great amount of pressure on foreign teachers to make sure the children are happy. They play games, sing and parrot in garbled English and it is perfectly okay. I believe learning should be fun and play for children but not without an educational purpose.

### **What is the main approach to vocabulary building?**

The answer: Rote memorization of isolated words. Chinese students are assigned some 50 (some do 100) words a week to memorize for spelling and meaning. I am impressed by the ability of Chinese people to memorize, a habit brought over from how they learn their own language. In fact, I have met quite a few who have actually learned the dictionary by heart. The problem? They could not throw together a decent sentence if their life depended on it! I taught a writing class in a Beijing University and I could not make heads or tails of what I was reading. Correcting their papers involved a lot of brainpower on my part – guesswork and translating the broken English into Chinese in an attempt to understand.

I do not believe in learning words in isolation. Vocabulary must be learned through the context. Proper usage of words is as important as the words themselves. Speaking, listening, reading all help build vocabulary but I think reading pulls the greatest weight here. Someone who cannot or does not want to read for whatever reason will find it hard to advance to higher vocabulary.

Another thing worth mentioning is I found it a bit strange some students could be so good at writing in English and yet their utterances do not match their ability in print. I cannot imagine writing down something in English, Tagalog or Spanish without “saying” it in my mind. This has always baffled me but now I think I know why. Sometimes I can reproduce on paper a Chinese character whose meaning I

know but may forget how to read. I was able to remember what the character looked like. So this could mean the Chinese are learning English words the way they do Chinese characters – by committing to memory everything from appearance of words to whole sentences.

I admire the tenacity with which the Chinese people carry on the daunting task of learning a complex but nevertheless challenging language that is English. But after all the time, money and effort, the evidence is strong that something is still not quite right.

## Chapter 3: WHAT IS PHONICS?

So what is the difference between Phonics and Phonetics? Dictionary.com has the following entries:

### *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*

Phonics	Phonetics
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A method of teaching elementary reading and spelling based on the phonetic interpretation of ordinary spelling.</li> <li>2. Phonetics.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The branch of linguistics that deals with the sounds of speech and their production, combination, description, and representation by written symbols.</li> <li>2. The system of sounds of a particular language.</li> </ol>

### *Merriam-Webster Medical Dictionary*

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. the science of sound: Acoustics</li> <li>2 a method of teaching beginners to read and pronounce words by learning the phonetic value of letters, letter groups, and especially syllables</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>a.</b> the study and systematic classification of the sounds made in spoken utterance <b>b :</b> the practical application of this science to language study</li> <li>2. the system of speech sounds of a language or group of languages</li> </ol>
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### *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*

See Phonetics	1. The doctrine or science of sounds; especially
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	<p>those of the human voice; phonology</p> <p>2. The art of representing vocal sounds by signs and written characters.</p>
--	--

*WordNet* ® 2.0, © 2003 Princeton University

<p>teaching reading by training beginners to associate letters with their sound values</p>	<p>n : the branch of acoustics concerned with speech processes including its production and perception and acoustic analysis</p>
--	--

*The American Heritage Stedman's Medical Dictionary*

	<p>The branch of linguistics that deals with the sounds of speech and their production, combination, description, and representation by written symbols.</p>
--	--

The clearest, no-nonsense distinction between Phonics and Phonetics comes from Rudolf Flesch:

Phonetics is the science of dealing with speech sounds. It is a technical subject. Studying phonetics means studying a phonetic alphabet, diacritical marks, technical terms and many other scientific tools and techniques.

Phonetics is definitely not the thing to use if you want to teach small children to read and write. Therefore, 50 years ago, someone invented a way of doing it without using any special symbols or special terminology. They called this Phonics. According to the dictionary, Phonics is simplified phonetics for teaching reading.

There is no way you can teach the IPA system (or KK as they call it in Taiwan) to little children, especially to ESL learners. They are still not very familiar with the alphabet and introducing the symbols will only cause confusion. Factor in the diacritical markings and terms like “sibilants,” “resonators,” “affricates,” and “lingua-alveolar manner of articulation,” – you might as well give them sleeping pills. Phonics is simply showing them the letters of the alphabet and teaching the sounds they make. It is a shortcut, a more direct way to read rather than having to consult a dictionary for the IPA symbols each time an unfamiliar word is encountered. This process is tedious and wastes time. Through Phonics, if one can sound out and read *banter* then he can easily read *canter*, *planter*, and *granter* without having to check the dictionary every time. Just sounding out words is not a 100% thing because there are some oddball words like *Arkansas*, *coyote*, *victual*, *forecastle*. However, I maintain that most words are “soundable” and one well versed with Phonics will first try to analyze the sounds made by individual or combined letters. After making an educated guess, he can check the dictionary for confirmation.

I have had some students in China who insisted that the IPA is better than Phonics since all they had to do was look up the symbol and they can read the word. My challenge to them was through Phonics they did not even have to turn to the dictionary to know how to read the words – most of the time, that is. One can still sound out the word and give an approximate pronunciation before consulting the dictionary for verification. It saves time, there is better memory retention of pronunciation, and one can put more effort into deciphering meaning.

Teaching the sounds is a simple matter of demonstration, getting the kids to imitate the sounds preferably with a mirror so they can see for themselves the position of their tongue, the shape of their mouth, the movement of their lips. This is far more effective than having to deal with a cross-section of the oral cavity and using out-of-this-world terminology.

Many Phonetics and Linguistics books talk about allophones where sounds change in the rhythm of speech. For example, the letter t in the word “top” and the word “letter” may not be pronounced the same way. In “letter” it can sound like a light “d.” “Water” is pronounced with the letter t making a light d sound. This is no big deal for the native speaker, but I find this inappropriate to teach in an EFL setting especially to young children. Spelling is very much compromised. I see nothing wrong in pronouncing “water” or “letter” with a strong t sound. It is still clearly understood and provides a clue for correct spelling. The sad state of

pronunciation and articulation in the United States may have contributed to the deteriorating state of their spelling skills. Americans like to slur words. A Mr. Wycherley aptly labeled this new language SLURVIAN. **Impure Slurvian** produces nonsense words while **pure Slurvian** totally changes the word.

Impure Slurvian: *guvmint* for government

*assesories* for accessories

*hafta* for have to

*gonna* for going to

Pure Slurvian: *Less* go to the supermarket.

It's a cold *winner* this year.

May I *bar* your pen?

*Lays* and *genmen*, please welcome our guest speaker.

Is this what we want to teach EFL learners? Wouldn't one be better off pronouncing words clearly and be understood? Until a non-native English speaker reaches a certain level of fluency, I discourage deliberately teaching English as heard in the normal rhythm of speech. Recently I came across this impressive-looking tome about linguistics. There was a chapter talking about how in normal speech the letter n at the end of a word becomes an /m/ sound when followed by a word beginning with /p/. "I can play" sounds like "I cam play." This kind of information is for documentation purposes or for making a detailed analysis of the English language for academic reasons but certainly not something that an EFL learner needs

to know! Phonics does not have to deal with this.

Phonics starts with teaching children the relationship between sounds and their spelling. In fact, it is preferable to hold off until later teaching the names of the alphabet as this may cause confusion. For example, letter n is read as “en” but its sound is /n/. It is common for children to confuse the name of letter e and the sound of the short i. (Most Asian EFL learners have problems distinguishing between long and short vowel sounds.) A letter, being a symbol of a sound, is not supposed to make the students think of anything else but its sound. When the students see the letter b, they must be stimulated to produce its sound /b/, and not to think about a banana or a ball.

Though opinions may differ, it would be safe to say that out of 26 letters in the English alphabet, we can derive 44 sounds. This means one letter can have more than one sound. An imperfect system, but nevertheless this is how English is and we work with what we’ve got. The 44 sounds of English:

Consonant Sounds:

/b/ ball	/n/ nest	/sh/ ship
/d/ dog	/p/ pig	/ch/ chair
/f/ fish	/r/ rabbit	/th/ thank
/g/ gum	/s/ sun	/th/ the
/h/ horse	/t/ toy	/hw/ whale

/j/	jump	/v/	vase	/zh/	television
/k/	kite, cat	/w/	water	/ng/	sing
/l/	lion	/y/	yoyo		
/m/	man	/z/	zoo		

- Letter c is either /s/ or /k/; letter x is /ks/ or /gz/; letter q is always with u and is actually two sounds - /kw/.
- The two sounds of th may be defined as “hard th” (this) and “soft th” (thin).

#### Vowel Sounds:

/ā/	ant	/ī/	ice	/ā/	car
/ē/	egg	/ō/	boat	/û/	girl
/ī/	ink	/yoo/	cute	/ô/	ball
/ô/	dog	/oo/	book	/ā/	hair
/û/	duck	/oo/	moon	/ə/	about
/ā/	cake	/ou/	out, cow		
/ē/	eat	/oi/	boy, coin		

Each long vowel sound may be represented by a series of spellings.

a	e	i	o	u
a-e	e-e	i-e	o-e	u-e
ai	ee	ie	oe	ue
ay	ea	igh	oa	ew

ei/eigh	e at end of short one syllable words (me, we)	y	ow	ui
		ie		oo

Aside from the above individual sounds, Phonics lessons also include the following:

**Consonant clusters** – these are two or three consonants that occur at the beginning or at the end. Each consonant retains its individual sound. The combination of sounds a cluster makes is called a **consonant blend**.

***Final consonant clusters:***

st nt ft lt mp lk lm lp lt nd pt sk sp nk ck ct ld  
sts sps sks

***Initial consonant clusters:***

br bl cl cr dr fl fr gl gr pl pr sc sk sl sm sn sp st sw  
tr tw

***Three letter initial consonant blends:***

scr spl spr str squ

**Digraphs** – two consonants combined whose sound is different from the sound of each individual consonant.

sh th wh ch ng ph (may include shr, chr, thr later)

**Trigraphs** – three consonants that stand for a sound different from the consonants that make it up.

tch dge

**Diphthongs** – a sound produced by changing the mouth position from one place to

another.

oi oy ou ow

### **Other vowel sounds and special combinations**

R controlled vowels

ar er ir or ur wor war ear

wa, qua, swa, wha

The schwa sound

Y as a vowel

all, alk, alt, old, olt, oll, ild, ind word families

air and oar sounds

ough

The other sounds of “ea” like “bread” and “steak.”

le endings

ie, ei, ci, si, ti, su, tu

kn, wr, pn, gh, rh and the concept of silent letters

### **Rules:**

Pronunciation Rules:

- an “s” at the end of a word can have the /s/ or /z/ sound depending on the preceding consonant.
- Double consonants in the middle of a word are read only once
- Letter c says /s/ if followed by “e”, “i” and “y.”
- An “mb” at the end of a word always has a silent letter b

- Three pronunciations of “ed” as past tense ending depending on the preceding consonant or vowel sound.

#### Spelling Rules:

- one syllable words with one vowel and one consonant after the vowel have the consonant doubled before adding a suffix like “ed” and “ing.”
- the combination “ay” and “oy” are used at the end of the word not “ai” nor “oi.”
- changing y to i and adding a suffix.

#### Syllabication Rules:

- Every syllable must have a vowel.
- When 2 or more consonants come between 2 vowels in a word, the word is usually divided between the first 2 consonants.

Ex: pic-ture and pen-cil

- When a vowel is sounded alone in a word, it forms a syllable by itself.

Advanced phonics also deals with word parts – base words, suffixes and prefixes.

Multisyllabic words come in with more complex patterns. Syllable stress and the neutral schwa sound are discussed. From here on, reading shifts from just sounding words into building vocabulary. The students can devote more time to discovering meaning.

## Chapter 4: PHONICS VERSUS LOOK-SAY

The Reading Wars – this is how they call the raging battle between Phonics and the look-say method which also goes by the names whole word and sight word. It treats English as if it were a picture language, like Chinese. For example, the teacher shows the students a picture of a train with the letters t-r-a-i-n. The children are asked to look at it and then say the word, repeating after the teacher. The teacher can draw some lines around the word *train* into the shape of a train as a memory aid. Children are being asked not to recognize words through their components but their configuration. I wonder though that by drawing the outline of a train around the word “train,” how will a child be able to distinguish *train*, *brain* and *drain* when all these words have a tall letter at the beginning and the shape as you trace around each one is exactly the same?

If a child has been trained to see words as a whole, how can he tell apart *Venusian*, *venison* and *Venetian* or *silver* and *sliver* in a system that relies on overloading the brain with so much data to remember? So it is all too easy to resort to guesswork, perhaps by looking at the first and last consonants. I have students who, upon seeing the word “politician” read it as “policeman.” They are guessing, not really reading.

So what does someone trained by the look-say system do when he encounters a new word? A word he has never memorized? He will never achieve independent reading since he will always need someone to teach him how to read the word first.

Sight word method enthusiasts counter by emphasizing the existence of non-phonetic words like one, two, done, said, says, shoes, etc. I agree there are certain words which I require EFL learners to especially remember but certainly not ALL existing English words. Besides, many of the so-called non-phonetic words are not 100% non-phonetic. In *come* the /k/ and /m/ sounds are clearly heard. In *said*, the /s/ and /d/ may be distinguished making this word 66.6% phonetic.

There is a test called the Sight Word Proficiency and Automaticity Assessment.

It lists 150 words which include the following:

each	write	they	but	long
why	things	make	around	good

I hope the author put these words down for the “automaticity” part of the test because every single one of them follows phonics principles and it is not justified to teach them by sight.

What accounts for the emergence of the look-say method? One reason could be some educators got carried away with phonetics. They started making use of too many diacritical markings that it was deemed simpler to just read the word as a whole in itself. Another is some psychologists started thinking people do not talk or read by spelling or sounding out words but in whole units. So they proposed doing away with the teaching of Phonics and go directly to the words. Experiments were done with adults and they showed words are read in a time too short for taking in letters

one by one. Consider the following:

*Aoccdrnig to a rscheearch at an Elingsh uinervtisy, it deosn't mtttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer is at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a toatl mse and you can sitll raed it wouthit porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae we do not raed ervey lteter by istlef but the wrod as a wlohe.*

If you were able to make sense of this mish mash of words, it is not surprising. I had no problem reading it either. I am an adult and I have read many words and encountered enough different combinations to be able to decipher the above paragraph. I can identify words at a glance without much effort out of habit. Does this mean a child can do it? Especially an EFL learner?

Another source of the look-say reading method was a man named Thomas Gallaudet. He created a system to teach deaf mutes, who for obvious reasons cannot hear sounds, how to read focusing entirely on visual cues. For some reason, this method was applied to non-deaf mutes.

The whole word method believes that during the process of reading, as long as comprehension has been achieved, it does not matter if a child misreads or skips a word. He has derived meaning from the text and therefore real reading has taken place. For example if the sentence "The frog hops" is read as "The frog jumps," it is

acceptable. If a child reads the written text “The cat chased after the mouse” and says “The cat chased the mouse,” it is not big deal that he skipped the word “after.” Some also say that in reading, a child is free to construct his own meaning and interpret the text based on his previous experiences and knowledge. As long as a child has enjoyed the meaningful reading experience, then actual reading has taken place. This sounds more to me like he is engaging in guesswork – guessing the pronunciation of the words and predicting meanings.

Let’s take a look at some look-say readers. The language center I am currently working at has a program where the children write book reports and are given corresponding points. They accumulate the points and at the end of the semester exchange them for items that range from school supplies to bikes and Gameboys. One book report is entitled “We have fun” written by Tina, a grade 4 student which struck me as strange. Here are some sentences from it.

*Jane says look, look, Peter. Have a look. Come and look. Peter looks.*

*Jane sees a fish. Peter sees a fish. Peter says it is a fish. Look, look. The dog wants the fish, Jane. He wants the fish. No, no, no says Jane. No, no, no, says Peter.*

I asked for the book she read. It was one of those Key Words with Ladybird, The Original Key Words Reading Scheme series. It makes use of what was deemed the most frequently used words in the English language as the starting point to read

effectively. This type of reading stresses the following:

1. Once words are introduced, they are repeated to aid word recognition.
2. New vocabulary is introduced with old vocabulary for review.

This Ladybird reader has three levels. The 'a' series introduces new words and repeats them in many ways. The 'b' series provides further practice using different contexts and illustrations. The 'c' series uses the previously learned words to teach Phonics so that the children can read more complex words and provide a link with writing. All the three series make use of the same carefully controlled vocabulary. It is interesting to note that there are those who advocate Phonics within the whole word method – incidental Phonics is what they call it. Do not make Phonics teaching obvious but let it be one of the reading cues. In the word method the following are priorities:

1. general configuration of the word
2. some special features of the word's appearance
3. similarity to known words
4. pick out familiar parts in longer words
5. using pictures as cues
6. using context as cues

The child is trained to look, guess, predict, memorize and as a last resort, if all else fails, teach Phonics.

Going back to the book report, our students were told not to copy but to summarize and reword. Tina did not copy. What she did was follow the pattern of repeating words in her book report. Here are the actual texts. Note there are no quotation marks to distinguish direct speech.

*Look, look, says Jane.*

*Look, Peter, look.*

*Have a look.*

*Come and look.*

*Peter has a look.*

*Peter looks.*

*A fish, says Jane.*

*It is a fish, says Peter.*

*It is a fish, he says.*

*Look, says Peter,.*

*The dog wants the fish.*

*He wants the fish, Jane.*

*Pat (the dog) wants the fish.*

*No, no, no, says Jane.*

*you come here.*

*Come here, Pat, come here.*

*No, no, no.*

This is not English as far as I am concerned. It is not even simplified English. It is what Rudolf Flesch calls “diluted English.” If someone spoke or wrote like this he would be thought of as retarded. There is, however, one aspect of English where this kind of reader is useful – grammar. For example, there is a series entitled “Have a go” and the contents go like this:

*I like the dog.*

*You like the dog.*

*You and I like the dog.*

*We like the dog.*

-o-

*You want toys.*

*I want toys.*

*You and I want toys.*

-o-

*This is Pat.*

*I like Pat.*

*Pat likes fun.*

*We like this dog.*

A child well versed in Phonics can easily read the above and focus his attention on the grammar rules of subject-verb agreement. These sentences can be used as grammar exercises or fluency exercises. I looked through the higher levels of this Ladybird series and it is the same stilted attempt at repeating words and creating

stories that seem to have no continuity at all. The stories are the same except that the higher levels have more words, but the contents do not change. It always starts with a family who does household chores, go to the beach, go to a farm, go to town to buy some food, ride a bus, draw pictures, etc.

There are those who criticize that Phonics readers are contrived and silly. For example:

*The cat sat on the mat. The rat sat on the cat. The rat and the cap nap.*

*Ten red hens sit on the nests in the hen pen.*

*The bat is mad at the pet dog. The dog had his ham.*

It is precisely this “silliness” of beginner’s Phonics readers that makes the initial reading experience fun! Phonics readers do not depend on number of words learned but the sounds. Once a child has been taught some sounds, it is possible to read ALL combinations of those sounds. I have a kindergarten 2 class (Taiwanese)) who has so far learned short vowel sounds, all single consonants, consonant clusters, ch, th, sh, ar, the concept of silent letters and that some sounds change (like the ‘a’ in “quack” and “squat”). I gave them a short story with some pictures to aid comprehension.

*Fran is a swan. She can swim fast. Fran stops to rest. A big black dog wants to sniff Fran. Fran runs and jumps into the water. Splash! The dog runs and jumps into the water. Splash! Fran can swim but the dog can not swim. Fran*

*spreads her wings. She splashes the dog. The dog runs and runs.*

The kids did all the reading themselves. The only time I stepped in was to say the *a* in *spread* is silent and I did not read the word for them. They can figure it out. I NEVER read for them even for modeling purposes. I had already taught them the sounds and how to blend so now it is up to them to apply what they have learned. There is no need for them to parrot after me. At first, they could be slow as they sound out new words but after a few rounds of practice, they speed up the blending process and can read faster.

Comprehension is not a problem because during the previous sounding exercises and conversation classes they already knew what is *swan, dog, fast, swim, run, jump, stop*, etc. Previously learned words are repeated for review of pronunciation and meaning, not to remember how to read it like a beginner. One group says that Phonics and look-say are not really two separate methods but that Phonics is **part of** whole word method. They say that reading is an indivisible process and several cueing systems are needed to aid the child in making sense of it and Phonics is one of the cues. So they say teaching through the whole word method automatically makes the child grasp Phonics. Phonics then is a component of the whole word method.

I say it is the other way around. Look-say is incorporated into Phonics because when we come across words with unusual spellings like *colonel, does, blood, busy* their pronunciation and spelling must be memorized. But again, Phonics principles

apply in that one should remember the change in the spelling pattern or the sound made by a symbol, not the entire word's appearance. For example, one just has to remember the double o in *blood* takes a short u sound.

Recently we held a Christmas program in our school. Here are some words children mispronounced during rehearsals.

the boy who played Joseph:

*"Behold! A savior is burn!"* (born)

the innkeeper to Mary and Joseph

*"I have a bar for my animals. You can stay there."* (barn)

the Christmas tree seller's wife:

*"Husband, give him the ass."* (axe)

The Chinese language has no consonant clusters and rarely ends a syllable with a consonant. There is also no "or" sound so they sometimes replace it with an "er" sound. I do not correct them by telling them the correct pronunciation. I review the sound made by the symbol they mispronounced, have them say it, tell them to insert it in the word, and say the word again. Sure, it is easier to tell them but the memory retention is better if they self-correct. All I did in this case was remind them not to drop sounds at the end, that "x" has the sound "ks", and review /or/.

In the book "The Learning Revolution" the authors say there is no need for a

“war” between the two major methods. A combination of both is the best method.

I agree. However, it ought to be whole word WITHIN Phonics (not the other way around) and Phonics FIRST.

## Chapter 5: HOW TO TEACH PHONICS

Generally speaking, there are two schools of thought on teaching Phonics:

### 1. **Synthetic approach** a.k.a. **direct** or **explicit Phonics**

This is a bottom-up system that starts with letters and their sounds, how to blend them into syllables and words, and then put words together to form texts. A lesson using direct Phonics would be something like the following:

*The teacher writes the letter b on the board. She tells the children the sound it makes. The children imitate. She orally gives examples of words beginning with b. In an EFL situation, she uses words which children are most likely to be familiar with like “boy,” “ball.” She can ask children to identify where the /b/ sound is – beginning middle or end. She writes down the words and asks the children to circle b. She could ask the children to orally give some more words starting with b. She can start teaching them how to write letter b.*

### 2. **Analytic approach** a.k.a. **indirect** or **implicit Phonics**

This method is a top-down system which starts with words and from these words the sounds of letters are deduced. A sample lesson teaching b goes something like this:

*The teacher writes the words “boy,” “box” and “bed” on the board. She asks the children to analyze and see what is common in all three words. She could read the words for them and have them listen for the common sound. The children make the generalization as to what sound the letter b stands for. Once they make this self-discovery, then other spellings for that sound may be discussed like double bb.*

Logically, like learning to drive, to type, or master another language, it makes sense to start from the basic elements, and what could be more basic in English learning than to start with the letters? So how did indirect Phonics come about? Some believe this makes more sense because English speakers do not talk by segmenting sounds. Therefore, we should start from words as they are naturally spoken and from there hone in on the specifics like which letter represents which sound.

There is one huge flaw in all this. The above refers to speaking but it hardly applies to reading or spelling. In the first place, children who have no idea of the sound-spelling relationship may not know how to segment words to make an accurate decoding. Where does one sound end and another begin especially when in normal speech sounds blend? What will they look like in print? Maybe it can work to some degree with native English speakers but definitely not for the EFL/ESL learner.

The sequencing of Phonics lessons has been a source of debate among educators. Here are some suggestions they offer and my comments about them in terms of teaching English as a foreign language.

1. Consonants should be taught first before vowels.

This is a good idea because consonant sounds are easier to teach especially for beginners. Majority have a one-to-one ratio of sound and symbol.

2. Teach long vowels first before short vowels.

Some believe since long vowel sounds say their names, it is easier to teach this first. The problem is long vowel sounds are represented by several spelling combinations and could be confusing to someone who has not learned single letter sounds yet.

3. Teach more common consonants first.

Some Phonics books I've seen on the market focus first on high frequency letters like m, t, s, p as opposed to x and v. I've found this works for those who are not pure beginners. But for those who barely know the alphabet, I have found it caused confusion among my beginner students who expect ABC to be taught in sequence.

4. Teach single letters first before combined letters.

It is logical to go from simple to complex.

5. Teach long vowels immediately after short vowels.

These simple short sounds we take for granted are not easy for the Chinese. They need as much practice as they can get. So after the short vowel sounds I go to consonant clusters and digraphs to provide more practice. A solid foundation in the short vowel sounds is required before attempting to go on to long vowel sounds.

6. Teach small letters before capital letters.

I agree that small letters should be emphasized first for writing because they are used more often. Most Chinese children know the capital letters but not the small letters so they need to have more practice with this. However, my visual aids – posters and flashcards have both the “mommy” and the “baby” letters for reading and sounding.

Through my experience teaching Phonics, I have come up with what I deem a suitable sequence for my kindergarten students and grade one students who have little English background. Phonics is best taught to those who have not formed bad speaking and reading habits yet. I follow the sequence of ABC and rarely focus on letter names. Most of the time, the children know them already through the song. I usually start by asking them how many letters there are in the alphabet. Then I tell them the letters are divided into two – consonants and vowels. Consonants are further divided into voiced (I draw a mouth) and unvoiced (a mouth with an X over it). Vowels are divided into long and short and that all vowels are voiced.

We identify the letters by the sounds they make. I start with the letter *a* telling them it is a vowel. Speaking, listening, reading and writing all come into play and must be synchronized. I say the short sound of letter *a* which the kids imitate as they look at their mouths in the mirror. Listening exercises are done by having them identify whether they hear the short *a* sound or not. Then they are asked to identify where the *a* is, whether at the beginning or in the middle. This can be turned into a game where they can run around or do some physical action to signal where the sound is. Then they are taught how to write the small *a*. I model on the board several times, and then we write in the air. Next is to get their books and do some tracing and writing on their own.

Next is letter *b* which I say is a consonant. I sound it and the children tell me if

it is voiced or unvoiced. I have them look in the mirror to see the shape of their mouth as they say /b/ and touch their throats to check for vibration. The children enjoy doing this. Then they do some listening and writing. This is pretty much the sequence until letter z. I use a Phonics textbook with lots of pictures so there is meaning associated with the words.

Blending exercises start as soon as they know more than one sound. Combinations are made to make words, real or invented. For example, I usually begin making combinations after I teach letter c. A, B, and C can be combined to make cab, bab, bac, ab, ac, cab. Many teachers make assumptions about blending – that it comes naturally. It is true for the native speaker but is not for the EFL learner, with the exception of some kids who have good phonemic awareness. Blending requires specific instruction for the majority. The first language, in this case Chinese, exerts influence on speech. For example, the sound /k/ is voiced in Mandarin so the Chinese usually say “sickuh” instead of “sick.” They also have to be told that consonants at the end of words are not articulated as much compared to when they occur at the beginning. For example, the b in “boy” is pronounced more emphatically than “cab.” The children have to be made aware not to drag the “b” and say “cabuh.” I tell them their mouth should assume the position for /b/ but they must cut off the sound.

I require the children use their finger or a pencil, sliding from one letter to the

next as they blend. This gets them blending and reading right away with their eyes taking in each symbol as they put them together. More words are generated as they go through the alphabet. A lot of dictation is also done to reinforce listening and spelling and writing. As much as possible, words are used in sentences to give them context. I turn dictation into a fun thing by making it playtime. Actually, ALL activities in Phonics can be presented in a game format with just a bit of creativity from the teacher.

I would like to emphasize again that children must **sound and say**. They do not at any time spell with letter names.

ant      1    NOT    ay-en-tee                      BUT    /a/ /n/ /t/

bark            NOT    bee-ay-ar-kay                BUT    /b/ /ar/ /k/

An important tool is the use of “invented” words or “nonsense” words. For example once the sounds of *a* to *g* have been taught, the kids are given a vocabulary list which includes real words like *bed, bad, cad, dab, fad, beg, bag, gab* and nonsense combinations like *cag, daf, dac, feg, gaf, ged, gad* and the like. The second group of words may not be words in themselves but some could be a syllable within a multi-syllabic word. “Dag” is part of *dagger*, “dac” is in *pterodactyl*, “gad” in *gadfly* and *gadget*, “daf” in *daffodil*, etc. Besides, the real words might as well be nonsense words to the ESL learner if he doesn’t know the meaning. With real words, I incorporate pictures as early as possible to make the reading experience meaningful.

However, one must not lose sight of the primary goal of sounding with text comprehension secondary.

After going through the alphabet in sequence, I summarize by presenting the following chart:

Short Vowels: /a/      /e/      /i/      /o/      /u/

Consonants:

Voiced Consonants		Unvoiced Consonants	
b	*qu	c	p
d	r	f	s
g	v	h	t
j	w	k	x
l	y		
m	z		
n			

\*In the English language, “q” is always followed by the vowel “u.” Unless the “u” is silent like in *queue or unique*, “qu” will be classified as a voiced consonant (*quiet, sequins, quiver*).

At this point, I do extensive review for short vowels. It is very, very difficult for Asian EFL students to distinguish between short a and e, and short a and u, sometimes even with short e and i. It takes time and a lot of practice. It is also during this

phase that stories are introduced. There are Phonics readers available in the market beginning with consonants and short vowels. Here is a sample: *Tab is a cat. Mac is a rat. Tab has a nap on the mat. Mac has a nap on Tab.* It is best to introduce vocabulary words with accompanying pictures. Then these words are woven together into a short story the children can read which reinforces retention of word meaning. I often recycle words and put them in different settings. In the above example, the word “nap” is used again in another story. *Tim is in the mud. He has a nap.*

Contrastive pronunciation is vital at this stage. Many Phonics textbooks do not cover this so I turn to pronunciation books for exercises with minimal pairs.

**Short a vs. short e:** pan – pen, mat – met, bad – bed, frat – fret

**L vs. R:** clam – cram (pray – play, clay – cray, flee – free; after long vowels have been taught)

**Short a vs. short u:** bat – but, cat – cut

cat	ket	kit	cot	cut
bad	bed	bid	bod	bud
bag	beg	Big	bog	bug

I’ve turned minimal pairs into a skit, coming up with situations to show children the importance of correct pronunciation. I wrote a play called “Phonics Police” whose job it is to catch people who mispronounce words and causes confusion in others. These skits were performed by my Kinder 2 kids as part of their graduation

program:

*Andy is writing and his pen runs out of ink. He says, “Aaargh! no ink! Cindy, please give me a pan.” Cindy, who is cooking in the kitchen, opens a box and grabs a pan and gives it to Andy. “What’s this? I said please give me a pan (when he means pen) and Cindy looks irritated and says, “Yes! This IS a pan!” Enter the Phonics Police who explain the offense, cuff Andy, and throw him in jail.*

*Frank, wielding a baseball bat, calls out to Sunny and says, “Sunny, let’s pray!” Sunny look strangely at Frank and says, “Pray???” Frank says, “Yes! Let’s pray!” So Sunny gets down on his knees in prayer. “What are you doing?” Frank says in wonder. “You said pray!” Sunny replies. The Phonics Police enter, give the charges and take Frank to jail.*

As early as possible, I make the children aware that mispronouncing words change the intended meaning so they would understand the importance of proper pronunciation.

Next in line are consonant clusters combined with short vowels. It is not easy for the Chinese to blend consonant sounds as this does not occur in Mandarin. I teach final consonant clusters first because it is easier compared to the initial consonant clusters. What needed special attention was the **sks**, **sps**, **sts** combination.

desk – **desks**

gasp – **gasps**

test – **tests**

For initial consonant clusters, it must be stressed that the pronunciation is quick. Otherwise, because they are trying their best to sound both consonants clearly, this is what happens: blue becomes “buhloo” and crib becomes “kuhrib.” This is a common pronunciation problem among Chinese students but through constant practice and reminding it can be corrected. This is not a problem for the native speaker who just naturally knows how to blend.

Another very interesting consonant cluster problem was with the combinations *sk*, *st*, and *sp*. In Mainland China, this is how the Chinese spelled *stop*, *school* and *spoon* – *sdop*, *sgool*, *sboon*. The people I worked for could not explain this phenomenon other than saying it could be a bad habit, but I knew there had to be a perfectly good reason. When I ran some diagnostics, the students correctly pronounced the letters and they knew /d/, /b/ and /g/ were voiced and /t/, /k/ and /p/ were unvoiced. It was only when an *s* is added in front of /k/, /p/ and /t/ that the switch to voiced consonants happened. As English speakers we automatically assume things about our own language which EFL learners are not equipped to do so. Putting myself in their shoes and conditioning my mind to think of English as something foreign, I went back and sounded all the symbols and read the words and listened for any difference. What I “discovered” was it all came down to a puff of air.

I had taught them /k/, /p/ and /t/ are exploded sounds (articulated with a puff of

air). However, when these sounds are in the medial or final positions, they are not exploded as much when we say them. The sound /t/ in *stop* sounds more like an unexploded unvoiced sound which is almost like a light /d/ sound. The /k/ in *sky* sounds like a light /g/ and /p/ in *spin* sounds like a light /b/. The EFL learner interprets the absence of air by substituting the voiced consonant counterparts. The native English speaker just naturally knows the change and needs no explanation. The EFL student does.

After the consonant blends I teach 5 r-controlled vowels (ar, er, ir, or, ur). Because there are three /er/ sounds, a degree of memorization is necessary as to which /er/ to use during spelling. Then I go to digraphs like ch, sh, th, and so on combined with short vowels and the r-controlled vowels. By this time, the students have had extensive review of the short vowel sounds and the next step is to introduce the long vowel sounds.

The hardest long sound for the Chinese is /ay/. It requires much effort on their part to get the sound out right. The long *a* is often pronounced as a short *e*. One often hears “My nem (name) is \_\_\_\_\_.” The funny thing is “pepper” is usually pronounced “paper” and “letter” as “later” meaning they can articulate the sound but not in the proper word. The children find long vowels amusing to learn because I require them to make exaggerated mouth movements. They must grimace, contort their faces, do whatever it takes to get the sound out right. Later, as they are

internalized, there is less conscious effort as sounding becomes more natural. I found that many Chinese people do not open their mouth much when they talk and this habit gets in the way of learning pronunciation properly.

After getting the long vowel sounds down pat orally, I start with words with silent e that make short vowels long. Then the other combinations are discussed, e.g. *ay*, *ee*, *igh*, *oa*, etc. Telling them about homophones is also appropriate at this stage.

meet – meat      sight – site      rein – rain      pain – pane

It is also at this point that y as a vowel is introduced. I explain how y is considered half a vowel and half a consonant and teach its three sounds.

Contrastive pronunciation exercises are constantly practiced with the children involving long sounds versus short sounds this time.

long e	short i	short e	long a
seal	sill	sell	sale
dean	din	den	Dane
heel	hill	hell	hail

Phrases and sentences work as well for contrastive pronunciation to provide more meaning. For older kids I do tongue twisters.

*The seal sat by the window sill.*

*He has a bad bed.*

*He begs to carry her bag.*

*She sells seashells by the seashore.*

*six sick sheep*

*yellow ruler*

Other vowel sounds (*oi, au*, etc.) are next and then word families, e.g. *-old, -all, alk, alt*, etc. Rules also come in although some may already be tackled earlier depending on the situation. For example, I may teach soft and hard c and g either during the short vowel stage or long vowel stage. Usually when a smart kid notices the sound of c is different in “city” compared to “cat,” I teach the rule already. Rules in themselves could be boring so it is imperative the teacher focuses on their application, not just the theoretical aspect. One way is to give examples and present them as a puzzle for the children to analyze.

city	corn
cymbal	car
mice	close
celery	crib

I mention that letter c can say /s/ or /k/ and ask them to find the pattern. This challenges them to think and helps them remember the rule better than just me passing on the information to them.

Many books go into word parts at this point, introducing compound words, root words, suffixes like –ing, -less, -ed and prefixes, syllabication rules, syllable stress and the schwa sound.

A note about readers: There are many readers that present reading material in stages. Phonics teaching requires making use of stories where children see words in action. For example, for consonant blends and short vowels, I give stories like the following (with accompanying pictures):

*The Skull*

*Glen wants to dig a pit. He digs fast. \*There is a thing in the pit. He slaps it. It is still. Glen gets it. It is a skull! Glen drops the stick and yells. He runs to the hut. He is glad his mom is in the hut.*

\*If the children don't know how to read "there," I just tell them.

Usually, after the long vowel combinations have been taught, the children are now ready for any simple storybook. They can just pick up something in the library or in the bookstore and start reading on their own.

It is important that Phonics lessons are systematically arranged. This means new lessons must build upon previous lessons. The children must be exposed to as much letter combinations and patterns as possible. Phonics lessons must make use of the faculties of vision, hearing and feeling simultaneously. Not only should they

see the symbols or hear the sounds of the letters, they must feel them. One way of “feeling” is by writing the symbols. Another is to use their body and “act out” the letters. Thirdly is with the use of wooden or foam letters or sandpaper letters. Kids love it when they are blindfolded and asked to identify a letter by touching it. They also love the back writing exercises wherein they identify the letters someone traces on their backs. Speaking, reading and writing are taught together and not as separate subject matters. All these though are not effective without the last key ingredient: PLAY. Lessons must be presented as games. There is a surplus of books on language games in the market, mostly from Oxford University Press. Learning is at its most effective when it is fun.

## Chapter 6: HOW PHONICS INFLUENCES ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

Speaking and pronunciation, listening, reading and spelling, oral and written grammar – these are the elements of language learning. While some choose only to be adept in conversation and not necessarily need to be able to write essays, it is still worthwhile to show how a good Phonics foundation can help an EFL learner attain a good command of English at any level he so desires.

There are arguments as to what to teach first. Some say it could be confusing for a child to do reading and writing at the same time so better put off writing until later. While it is true the child needs to develop his motor skills first, I do not see any reason why he cannot read and write at the same time. Writing can start with drawing squiggly lines, straight lines, slanting lines, color in the alphabet symbols, writing in the air. A child has a natural desire to learn, a curiosity about the world. He has no concept of limitation and will try and do anything. Why not make use of this and start him off as early as possible?

Having established that all aspects of English learning are interrelated and preferably should not be learned in isolation, I would now like to take them on one by one and show how Phonics can produce competency in them.

## **Phonics and Pronunciation**

### **Story #1:**

I was in a bookstore in Taiwan browsing for English books. A Taiwanese girl came up to me asking if I was an English teacher. I said yes and mentioned I was an overseas Chinese. Then she asked:

Girl: “Can you read Chinese?”

Me: “Umm, only a little. I’m not really good at it.”

Girl: “Oh? Didn’t your plants teach you?”

Me: “MY PLANTS???”

### **Story #2:**

I was in Beijing with a local who is an English major.

Girl: “Gwen, what’s wrong?”

Me: “I don’t know. I don’t feel well.”

Girl: “Well, don’t think about it. Just smell.”

Me: “SMELL WHAT???”

### **Story #3:**

This dialogue took place in a Taiwan church during the international bilingual service. After a couple of songs from the worship team, a Taiwanese man helps welcome the churchgoers in both English and Chinese.

Man: Welcome! Thank you for coming. (He makes some more remarks and then...) ... and now let’s continue to pray.

So we bow our heads. Nothing happens. He was just looking at the

worship team.

**Story #4:**

This is a story narrated by my adult student who is Taiwanese. She went to Australia with her friends. They ate at a restaurant, and when it was time to pay one friend asked the waiter for the bill. After a while, someone sent over some beer. They thought it was a freebie or something. They had already finished the beer but their bill never came.

**Story #5:**

Nine-year-old Kevin (Taiwanese) goes to the USA every year during summer vacation. He went to a McDonald's in L.A. He asked for some pepper and he was given a piece of paper.

For most people learning a foreign language, what is the primary concern? It is usually to attain enough mastery in it to be able to enter into meaningful communication with successful negotiation of meaning. Both parties must understand each other. As a foreigner, we want to make ourselves understood so we can get by in our daily lives – buying food, asking for directions, shopping, taking a taxi, exchanging pleasantries, getting a haircut, going to the post office, etc.

Some people say not to stress too much on pronunciation. This is especially true for adults who are learning a foreign language because by this time, the influence of the first language on the second language has become too strong to overcome. I

used to think pronunciation was just a matter of imitating, which I do quite easily. However, not so for other people apparently! Despite having the same anatomical structures in our oral make-up, sounds that are not found in the native tongue are hard to reproduce especially if one has never heard that sound before. I know many westerners who, no matter how hard they try, cannot pronounce the pinyin “c.”

I have always been a stickler for pronunciation. I don't claim to know how to pronounce everything correctly, but I certainly can speak English well enough to pass myself off as a native speaker. I can speak four languages quite decently. My dad can speak a bit of Japanese and my mom Cantonese. In Chinese schools in the Philippines, the medium of instruction is English and we have Mandarin Chinese classes in the afternoon. Of course, we have a subject called “Pilipino” for Philippine history and literature, and the medium of instruction is either English or Tagalog. With family, especially the grandparents and uncles and aunts, we speak Fookienese. I have been exposed to the sound systems of four different languages well enough to tell the difference.

Correct pronunciation is very important to me. Most people don't care though. Lynn Truss, my current idol, author of the punctuation book, “Eats, Shoots, and Leaves,” says there are people like us who obsess about stuff that others would just ignore, like pronunciation and punctuation. “Get a life!” is what we are advised to do, just because it causes sticklers like us so much agony to hear words being

mutilated either orally or in print. I have to bite my tongue to keep myself from correcting people's mispronunciation and resist the urge to reach for my pen to make the corrections.

Just how important is pronunciation? The 5 examples above are not fiction.

**Story #1:** I could not process the question I was asked. The girl was extremely distressed, apologetic for her poor English. I finally understood what she meant when she said, "Your plants, your mom and dad."

**Story #2:** I thought I was being told to smell the roses or something. I asked her what she meant and after some time I understood. She meant "smile."

**Story #3:** Turns out we were waiting for him to pray when actually what he wanted was for the worship team to continue to play the music.

**Story #4:** The problem of "l" and "r" and long and short vowels caused the confusion here. My student's friend who asked for the bill said, "Beer, please," and that's what he got – beer!

**Story #5:** Asians find it hard to pronounce the long sound of a, confusing it with the short e sound. This is very, very common. At a Subway branch here in Taiwan, I thought the food preparer was asking if I wanted paper wrapped around my sandwich when actually she was asking me if I wanted pepper.

So, I say THE POX to all who say pronunciation is not important. It interrupts the flow of conversation. It causes a crash landing of the thoughts. Personally, I

feel like I am suddenly transported to the Twilight Zone.

When I first came to Taiwan and handled a K2 class, their pronunciation was the typical Chinese-accented English. I asked “What is a cap?” and got answers (in Chinese) like cat, cut, cup. This is a disaster! Without teaching the different sounds different letters make, how do they distinguish the words “mad,” “map,” “mat,” and “man?” I was shocked to find out many Chinese ESL students cannot differentiate “house” from “horse” and “mouth” from “mouse.” Some kids would actually write sentences like “I want to ride a house” and “Open your mouse.” One child wrote “breastfirst” and I found out he meant the meal we have in the morning. It all stems from the fact their bad pronunciation influences what they write. I had one year to work on the K2 kids and during their graduation program, we had English speakers as guests. They expressed delight at actually being able to understand what the children were saying and not the usual unintelligible blabber one normally associates with kids learning EFL. The accent reduction was very obvious too.

I maintain that if one claims to speak English and yet orally mutilates words beyond recognition, then THAT IS NOT ENGLISH and there is no communication. I do not expect the EFL student to speak like an American complete with slang and twang. I do, however, aim for comprehensibility which I do not think is too much to ask.

Phonics is very clearly the first line of defense against mispronunciation. Phonics teaches sounds, makes comparisons between sounds, puts sounds in different positions (beginning, middle, end), mixes up sounds in different combinations, and teaches pronunciation rules. For example, if “n” comes before a “k” sound, the “n” makes the sound “ng” like in *monkey, uncle, thank*. Phonics first assures that it is done right from the very beginning.

## Phonics and Enunciation

Enunciation is defined in the dictionary as the following:

1. Mode of utterance or pronunciation, especially as regards fullness and distinctness or articulation; as, to speak with a clear or impressive enunciation.
2. The articulation of speech regarded from the point of view of its intelligibility to the audience.

Enunciation involves the mouth more than the ear. It is how clearly a word is said. In normal speech, we slur or drag words, string words together, or drop off some sounds. I like to call this the “lazy tongue syndrome.” Some examples are the following: *Gimme twenny dollars. Didja wanna go? I’m gonna go.* It freaks me out to hear Americans say “fith” instead of “fifth,” “eksetera” instead of “etcetera,” and “ax” instead of “ask.” Is this the lazy tongue syndrome, a simple case of carelessness, or worse—ignorance? There is a connection between enunciation/pronunciation and spelling, and I believe that people who speak well, spell well. If you can orally distinguish between *savor* and *savior*, you won’t spell them the same way because they do not sound the same at all.

Phonics starts with the sounds. Children must be taught proper enunciation. How many times have I heard my Chinese students say “sit dung” instead of “sit down” all because in the Chinese rhythm of normal speech, “n” at the end of a

Chinese is highly nasalized into an “ng” sound. The English “n” is clearly pronounced as a nasal sound with the tongue between the upper and lower teeth.

Many EFL learners in Mainland China think they got English down to a T. I have met some who would argue with me about pronunciation, insisting they are right and I am wrong. They see Phonics as another gimmick, one of the many methods of teaching English used by businessmen looking to make money in English-hungry China. Saying that Phonics can get them speaking proper English was not enough to convince them so I came up with some evidence. I conduct seminars promoting Phonics and I came up with a list of words commonly mispronounced by the Chinese people. I ask for volunteers to read them out loud.

	what they say		what they say
brown	<i>brung or brong</i>	letter	<i>later</i>
name	<i>nem / neigh</i>	ball	<i>bowl</i>
five	<i>figh</i>	school	<i>sgool</i>
sheep	<i>ship</i>	down	<i>dung</i>
wood	<i>ood</i>	sometimes	<i>sun-tie</i>
food	<i>foot</i>	bad	<i>bed</i>

I very quickly point out that “dung” is another word for excrement and can they imagine what mental image it brings up if they say “sit dung?” I explain that if they had learned to pay attention to the difference between long oo and short oo, and the

letters t and d, they will not say something like “I’m hungry. Let’s get some food.”

It is all about proper enunciation and Phonics holds the key to getting this right.

## **Phonics and Listening**

I read somewhere that when a child is born, he has an innate knowledge of all the sound systems of all languages in the world. However, he will only retain the sounds of the language he is exposed to and thus forgets the others. The logical sequence of first language acquisition is to start from the listening process. A child will imitate what he hears. At a certain listening level, there is an amount of comprehension that must be acquired first before the child can internalize deeply enough for future verbal reproduction.

Filipinos of Chinese descent and overseas Chinese living in the Philippines are simultaneously exposed to the sounds of three, even four language systems before they start formal education. Maybe not all will develop fully but at least this exposure gives the child an awareness of them and he can reproduce these sounds when the need arises some time in the future because he has heard them before.

Children are unaware that the words we say consist of discrete sounds. Phonics instruction shows them that the sounds we say may be put down on paper by way of the letters representing them. We want to create phonemic awareness. They listen first, identify, pronounce, read and write. The letters on paper are actually symbols for sounds we can make with our voice. Having the children get attuned to speech sounds and sharpen their ears to listen for fine differences between sounds are essential for good English learning.

I start the Phonics lesson by making the sound first with strict instructions for the students to keep quiet and just listen. It is their natural instinct to immediately imitate and that interferes with the listening process. I want their focus entirely on listening. I never make use of the complicated explanations found in some phonetics books about positions of the various parts of the oral cavity. I like to keep it simple without using an arsenal of terms like bilabial, fricative, explosive. I just say the sound, explain salient points as to how that sound is produced, and get the child to imitate. They listen first, look at my mouth, and try to imitate the sound they hear while looking at the mirror. For example, when I teach the sound of “n,” I point out it is nasal and I cannot produce the sound with my nose pinched. I ask them to listen and look and see how my tongue is wedged between the upper and lower teeth. Then they do it.

Most classes have listening sessions that are very teacher-oriented. The teacher does all the talking and the children do all the listening and then say the sounds in rote drill. I do not require a chorus of “b, b, b” or “da da da” as the Chinese are fond of doing. When I point to the symbols, I only need to hear it once correctly and that is enough.

More importantly in the listening process is that the children must LISTEN TO THEMSELVES as they make the sounds. English has sounds not found in Mandarin (i.e. /th/ and /zh/) which the children may find awkward to pronounce, strange even.

Listening to the teacher, listening to themselves and their classmates provide much auditory practice. It is good for them to get used to hearing how they sound and to hear the same sound coming from others. At a certain point, I step back and let the children listen to each other and correct each other. One student reads a word and another one checks if it is right or wrong.

The first language will always interfere with the acquisition of a second language. That is why it is vital for the teacher to make contrasts. For example, the English “b” and pinyin “b” are two totally different sounds and the distinction between them must be made clear. I do a lot of listening exercises, sometimes with the help of audio tapes, constantly providing contrasts between sounds. Or if there is something in the Chinese language I can use to approximate an English sound, I use that too as a memory aid. For example, the neutral schwa sound sounds like the Chinese character for *hungry*. When I teach the long e sound I tell them it is the sound you make when you see something disgusting –“ Eeeeeeee!”

Dictation is a vital tool not really for students to memorize spelling but more for checking their listening. Can they translate on paper what they hear? Can they break a word into its individual sounds and write the symbols down? I often use nonsense or unfamiliar words which I think is a good gauge so everybody is on equal footing since there will be always be the advanced learners who have committed to memory words taken up in class. For checking dictation work, I do not recommend

the usual practice of having children submit their papers and the teacher checks, makes corrections, and hands them back their papers. A good Phonics teacher uses dictation exercises as further review. The children exchange papers and they sound the words back to the teacher as she writes on the board. When the class has more than one spelling for a particular word, she writes all of them down and everybody reads those words and analyze which one is the correct one. During dictation exercises, after the child has written down the word and I see an error, I just tell him to sound it out loud and compare with the word I said. Most of the time, they will know if they are wrong. I never give them the answer immediately. They have to find out for themselves. Sometimes when they read and I just listen, a simple lifting of my eyebrow signals to them they pronounced incorrectly and they go back and self-correct. Self-correction is a wonderful learning tool.

Some children are very smart. Instead of listening intently as I ask them to identify sounds, they look at my mouth instead. If it is opened wide, it must be short a. If it is smaller, it must be short e. I want them to focus on the listening process so I usually cover my mouth as I ask them to identify vowel sounds. Of course, I do not do this with easily confused sounds like m/n or b/d which obviously requires visuals for proper identification.

Listening should not be a passive activity. Let the children know that as they listen they are being called upon to analyze for something and that there is a reaction

required of them afterwards. There is a higher purpose than just listening so they can parrot after the teacher. Honing their listening skills to distinguish sounds will make students good speakers, good spellers and good readers.

## Phonics and Spelling

One of my pet peeves is seeing misspelled words in public places. They completely ruin my day and wreak havoc on my senses! Consider the following examples:

A sign in a bar: *“No miners allowed”*

“Now open. *X Beauty Saloon*”

“For sale: *liter of puppies*”

On a menu: *“Soups and salads to wet your appetite”*

When I gripe about these spelling and grammar atrocities, I am often told it is no big deal and that my energy is better expended somewhere else. After all, nowadays people use spell checkers. My spell checker certainly didn't do anything for the above misspelled words. If you type “their” instead of “there” or “series” instead of “serious,” do not expect the spell checker to detect them. If spelling wasn't all that important, why was the entire world all over poor Dan Quayle and his spelling version of “potatoe?” After all, the extra e didn't change the sound of the word. Harmless really if one goes by people's who-cares-about-spelling attitude.

English words must be spelled correctly in order to convey the right message. The examples above completely changed the meaning intended. Although essentially we know what the writers really meant, what do the errors say about their education, ability and even personality? A resume with writing mistakes, no matter

how impressive the credentials, gets thrown into the dustbin. A document with spelling errors is unprofessional. I understand the difficulty because of the inconsistencies of the English language. However, it is not impossible to be a decent speller. It just takes an understanding of how to go about learning it. Spelling is a matter of putting down on paper the speech sounds we make. It requires knowledge of symbol-sound relationship which is what Phonics does.

People who can spell well are generally also good speakers of English. I consider myself an excellent speller because I pronounce well. I am not a spelling bee champion but when I write, most of the time I do not need to consult a dictionary. I would never write “house” when I mean “horse” because I know there is the sound “or.” I would never mistake “bazaar” for “bizarre” because I can distinguish the difference between a schwa sound and a short *i* sound. I have a grade 6 Taiwanese student who did not have much Phonics background and has already developed the usual bad habits when it comes to English pronunciation. He writes “litter” when he means “little,” “store” when he means “story,” “everbody” for “everybody,” and “thins” for “things.” There are many like him. In my experience, once bad habits have set in, it is very hard to erase everything and start from the beginning. That is why it is important that we start them young.

The key to learning to spell well is to know sounds. Since a sound can be represented by a variety of letter combinations, this is when the component of

memorization and context comprehension comes in. One has to remember that it is “firm” and not “ferm” or “furm.” If one’s eyes are focused on the components, it is easier to remember those compared to looking at the whole word’s configuration. Good spellers make use of both phonological and visual cues. A good speller can assemble words from their basic phonetic components. Most of the time good spellers can spell words they have only heard but have not seen in print nor know the meaning of. Good spellers can make use of analogy – for example if I hear somebody say “rountain” I would probably spell it similarly to “mountain.”

I am very much against spelling words using the names of the alphabet. Letter names have absolutely no relationship to the sounds the letters make. The sound /h/ has nothing to do with its name, “aitch.” The word “hat” is not “aitch-ay-tee” but /h/ /a/ /t/. The word “mouse” is spelled /m/ /ou/ /s/ silent e. Multisyllable words can be sounded by breaking them into individual syllables and the same principle applies.

Books on how to spell well all start with sounds and how these are represented on paper. Phonics does that and more. Phonics also deals with general spelling rules. The trouble with English is there are several exceptions to the rules. Nevertheless, generalizations can be applied to the majority of words so instead of trying to memorize the spelling of a hundred words, just remember the one rule that covers all those words. Here are some examples:

1. 111 double rule – In a one-syllable words with one vowel and one consonant after

the vowel, the consonant is doubled before adding endings like *ed* and *ing*.

2. British English uses “ou” instead of “o” in words like *colour/color*.
3. The letters “q” and “u” always go together.
4. probably the most famous of spelling rules:

*i* before *e*

except after *c*

or when sounded like *a*

as in “neighbor” or “weigh”

Children, both native English speakers and EFL learners, who are not getting good Phonics instruction will definitely have a hard time with spelling. The reason we must learn to spell properly is to make ourselves understood and facilitate meaningful communication. English words are tough to spell because there is no one-to-one correspondence between sounds and letters. But again, it is not an impossible task and Phonics provides a foundation to build upon instead of flailing around wildly trying to master spelling by rote memorization.

## **Phonics and grammar**

A sign outside a shop:	“We Are Close”
A sign at a hospital door:	“Do not disturbed”
From student essays:	Goldilocks run when she see the three bear. He like to eat apple. Yesterday he is eat a pizza.

Grammar is learned differently by the native speaker and the EFL learner. The native speaker learns grammar implicitly through his environment and this is also the same for immigrants. They learn grammar by ear. On the other hand, the EFL learner must learn grammar explicitly with focus on form and structure. So what role does Phonics play in the teaching of grammar?

William Safire is a political columnist who writes for the New York Times. He also writes columns on language – grammar, usage and etymology, and he is author of several books on the English language. I remember he once wrote “writing will follow the editing of speech.” His concern was that informal spoken English keeps deteriorating with the way young Americans are talking now and it will most likely affect formal writing. I think it is a natural process that the grammar of our speech will transfer itself to the grammar of our writing. I am not attempting to simplify the teaching of grammar but I believe Phonics can improve written grammar by focusing on the spoken grammar.

In Phonics children are encouraged to read out loud. The EFL learner must listen to himself when he reads since most students will only have themselves, their classmates and teachers as sources of aural English. They must be encouraged to read correctly, pronouncing what needs to be pronounced as a way of applying grammar rules. For example, the past tense verb is difficult for Chinese EFL students to grasp. They may know the rule but they do not apply it to speech and ultimately it is reflected in their essays. The ed past tense ending has three pronunciations. If one hears and reads and says “we are clozd” then he knows there is an additional sound to which he must add an “ed.” It should be “We are closed.”

Another grammar rule is the helping verbs “do/does/did” must be followed by a verb in its base form. Just because the children have been informed of this rule does not mean they have internalized it, even if the rule has been translated into their native tongue. This is often a source of frustration for the teacher. An alternative would be to zero in on this incidentally during the conversation or reading class. Chinese children will usually be familiar with the standard teacher talk of “don’t run,” “don’t shout” and all other don’ts. As they read and come across sentences with the *do* helping verb the teacher can point out the grammar rule. If they read and say “do not disturb” then they will not write “disturbed” since they do not say it with an extra sound. Again, I am not attempting to oversimplify the teaching of grammar. I am just trying to point out that Phonics can aid in grammar competency. Some more advanced Phonics textbooks do word parts and as an aside mentions rules like *be*

verbs which are followed by *-ing* verbs.

For my kindergarten class, no explanation of grammar rules is needed. However, I make sure that when they read, if there is an “s” at the end of a plural noun or a singular verb, they must pronounce the “s” succinctly. The Chinese have a habit of dropping end sounds to which I still have not attributed a reasonable explanation other than syllables in Mandarin do not usually end in consonants other than the nasals. This is understandable since it is inevitable that the first language interferes with the acquisition of a second language. So when children read, make sure they clearly say what needs to be pronounced and in this way build basic oral grammar skills. When they drop some sounds I immediately point out their existence and remind them to sound them out. I pay more attention now to my Chinese students when they speak to me in broken English. I make corrections immediately.

Child: My brother like apple.

Me: likes. My brother likes apples.

When I was put in charge of the book reports, I was surprised that the children whom I thought had good conversational skills had poor written grammar. When I paid more attention to the grammar of their speech, I found it paralleled their writing. The way I write is the way I talk. And the way I talk is a result of what I have heard and read. There are just some grammar points for which I cannot offer any explanation except to say “I’ve always said/heard/read it this way” or “that’s just the

way it is.” I know this could also be possible for EFL students through constant exposure and practice.

In Mainland China, there is a test called HSK or Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi for foreigners to know their Chinese language level. I have been informed the difficulty of this test lies in the grammar element. Many foreigners go to language centers to review for this test. Most of the materials reviewed are about grammar. There is a Chinese grammar teacher in one language center in Beijing who is quite popular and he is often asked for advice on how to master Chinese grammar. He told the students to just go out and keep listening, speaking and reading Chinese. Expose, expose, expose. When the time comes to take the multiple choice grammar examination, things will just fall into place even if you do not know the grammar rules because you just choose the answer according to how you have heard it said. Speaking, listening and reading are highly influenced and enhanced by Phonics and ultimately it is these three that come into play to help grasp grammar.

## **Phonics and Handwriting**

When I was a little girl I remember asking my mom why Americans had such bad handwriting. I had come to this conclusion because my friends and I were members of an international pen pal club and we all noticed the same round, wide handwriting of our American pen pals. My mom said Americans use machines – typewriters and something called a computer so they do not have much practice with handwriting. Unfortunately, handwriting is becoming a lost art. With the advent of email most people correspond by typing on a keyboard. If hard copies are needed there is the printer.

It was part of my education to be taught how to write the alphabet nicely. First it was in print with ball and stick strokes. For cursive, we practiced making circles, curves and lines before going to the letters. In Chinese class, I had to practice writing characters by strictly following the order of the strokes to make the writing process more flowing. Also, one must know how to count strokes when looking for words in the Chinese dictionary, certainly a challenging process for the foreign student learning the language, so it pays to learn writing correctly.

I believe that both native and non-native speakers need to have legible and neat handwriting. This gives our communication a personal touch and makes the recipient feel he was worth the writer's time and effort. Poor handwriting not only strains the reader's eyes but gives a poor impression of the writer as well.

While teaching the sounds of the letters, I incorporate teaching writing. It is important especially for children in Taiwan because they do not use a Romanized alphabet. Mainland China's pinyin is in ABC which makes it easier to teach the writing. The only problem is there is a difference in the positioning of letters and the strokes between pinyin and English alphabet. Also, the same symbol represents different sounds. All the sounds in Chinese phonetics are voiced. So it can be confusing unless differentiated clearly the difference of the English /k/ which is an unvoiced consonant from the pinyin /k/ which is voiced. This is the reason why Chinese people say "sickuh" or "like-uh" or "finishuh" where they drag the unvoiced consonant at the end to make it voiced like in their language. When I teach writing, the class is not supposed to be quiet. In the early stages of learning, whether writing letters or words, I require students to sound out what they are writing. A Phonics class is a noisy class and in this way they get all senses simultaneously working – visual, auditory, kinesthetic.

The English writing notebooks in Mainland China and Taiwan are interesting in that there are 4 lines instead of the usual three. The small letters are divided into tall letters (*h, t*), short letters (*m, a*) and tail letters (*g, y*). The fourth line is for the tail letter's end. However, the centers I worked for in the Mainland and Taiwan both printed their own three-lined notebook since all the foreign teachers thought this was better.

I also teach sequencing of strokes for the English alphabet for a smoother and more flowing kind of writing. For letter *b*, I ask the kids to draw a line from top to bottom and without lifting the pencil, and then go up and around to make a belly. For letter *d*, make the half circle first starting a little below the middle line, and then go up and then down in a straight line without taking the pencil off the paper.

I have noticed that Chinese children usually start writing from the bottom line. They write the letter *c* by starting on the last line and then make a half circle in a clockwise motion. Ideally it ought to start at a point a little below the middle line, go up and around in a half circle counterclockwise. In Mainland China, local teachers teach the pinyin tail letters is written by starting from the top line instead of the middle line. The letter *o* is written clockwise instead of counterclockwise. I have had a harder time teaching writing in the Mainland because they have their own order of strokes for pinyin. If I taught a different way, the children, out of habit, will write what their Chinese teacher has taught. I came to a point that as long as a child wrote nicely and legibly, I would not be so strict with the strokes. However, since Taiwan's Chinese phonetics is not the Roman alphabet, there is much less confusion so I can be stricter about writing. By the time the students reach grade 4, we start teaching them cursive writing.

In Mainland, the students already write from left to right, like the English speaking world, but not so in Taiwan. The Taiwanese go from right to left, top to

bottom. Practicing writing with sounding lets the Taiwanese students get into the habit of going from left to right.

In this modern day and age, the art of handwriting is becoming obsolete but I believe there is still a place for teaching handwriting skills and that it should be part of English language learning, together with all other building blocks like spelling, grammar, etc.

## Chapter 7: MAJOR ARGUMENTS AGAINST PHONICS

*Reading is choppy because kids have to sound out the words. Therefore it is not “natural.”*

I had piano lessons when I was a little girl. In the beginning, I was very slow as I read and played the notes one at a time. Gradually though I picked up speed until the notes blended and I actually played some music. The same principle applies in Phonics. A child must be taught how to sound out and blend words. As he practices and keeps reading his eyes begin to move faster over the letters as he blends sounds together into words. The blending phase of instruction is vital so the child is not stuck in the sounding stage. Spelling patterns become more and more familiar and reading speed increases with constant practice. More mental energy can now be devoted to deciphering meaning.

A child conditioned by the whole word method will not be able to sound out in the first place and all he has as a basis is to guess the word. In fact, one of the cues of the word method is to see if a new word’s familiarity with a previously learned word. For example, if a child encounters for the first time the word “bun” he should be able to connect it to a more familiar word like “sun” and just change the first letter. This does not work. I have students who were not taught Phonics earlier on and they are not making that so-called connection. A child well versed with Phonics principles will have no such problem. He will have a higher success rate reading an

unknown word with accurate pronunciation. The issue at hand is not the speed but whether the INDIVIDUAL CAN READ OR NOT.

***Phonics drills turn children into repeat-after-me robots – KILL AND DRILL***

The “kill and drill, repeat-after-me” argument is unfounded for modern Phonics teaching styles. The children do not have to keep repeating after their teachers. The teacher’s job is to present letters or letter combinations and the sounds they make. She could model once or twice the blending techniques. Most of the time it is up to the students to decode the pronunciation of a word whose component sounds they already know. I leave it up to the children to “discover” how a word is read. My job then is to just listen. If a mistake is made, I do not correct them by saying the word and making them repeat after me. I just raise an eyebrow or say no and they try to figure out themselves where their error lies. I believe self-correction is more important than the teacher always giving the answers. Children are encouraged to analyze and be active thinkers.

Me: How do you read this word – spray?  
Student: Spry.  
Me: No. Do you see “ay?” What sound does this combination make?  
Student: ay – spray.

Student reads: Ben like banana.  
Me: No. You forgot /s/.  
Student: Ben likes bananas.

As far as I’m concerned, the negative repeat-after-me drilling is more applicable to the look-say method where words are repeated over and over again until the child

has supposedly internalized them.

*There are so many Phonics rules (both pronunciation and spelling rules) to memorize. Also, why bother with rules when there are so many exceptions to them anyway?*

When children are taught a specific rule followed immediately by its application, he can read many, many words just by knowing that one rule.

**Rule:** use */tch/* after a short vowel and */ch/* otherwise

patch	ditch	kitchen	botch	wretch	butcher
beech	leach	pooch	bench	roach	search

**Exceptions:** (more common words)

such	sandwich	much	rich	attach	which
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When the child sees a /tch/ at the end of an unfamiliar word (or syllable), he knows the vowel before it is short. If he is asked to spell a word with a /ch/ sound at the end and he hears a short vowel sound before it, he knows he should use t-c-h. The exceptions to remember are not many.

What is the look-say method offering as opposed to this? Memorizing EVERY SINGLE ENTRY in the dictionary. This might work at the beginning but a critical point of information overload is inevitable. A more reasonable and logical tactic is to remember rules or generalizations, apply them, and just take note of the exceptions.

### *The issue of comprehension*

Perhaps the number one argument against Phonics is that it does not foster comprehension. The idea was the word method immediately immersed children in literature when they read meaningful texts in their proper context and thus enjoy the learning experience more than just sounding out disembodied words. In the look-say method, children feel good about being able to read immediately. They are encouraged to predict by looking at pictures or word patterns. They are free to substitute or skip words as long as overall understanding of the meaning is intact. The main objective of reading is comprehension and Phonics teaching only serves to delay this.

I can sum up this entire thesis' theme in eight words. **FIRST LEARN TO READ, THEN READ TO LEARN.** When children are denied the right to learn HOW to read, this holds them back from becoming independent readers and they can never advance beyond the few easy and common words they are limited to learning in the look-say method. Who gets to decide what words children should know and how do they go about coming up with the list? It is controlling and manipulative!

Too many have criticized Phonics texts like "*The cat sat on the mat*" without realizing it is just a starting point. I consider the above sentence simple but still very much literature. The sentence makes sense and meaning can be derived from it. Modern Phonics textbooks emphasize comprehension as very much a part of Phonics

with pictures and stories incorporated into the curriculum.

I was fortunate to get my hands on a copy of “Reading with Phonics” by Hay and Wingo, one of the earliest Phonics books. The contents are mostly lists of words to sound and say. There are some phrases and sentences and short stories but a significant percentage of the book is a compilation of word lists. To the EFL student especially, it is not fun to go through decontextualized pieces of text. Modern Phonics books are different now. Comprehension and reading go together and unlike the look-say method, the child can still read the word WITHOUT the corresponding picture. Comprehension is enhanced through pictures, funny sentences and stories to provide context. Actually, I gauge my students’ comprehension by their laughter as a reaction to the following:

Can a frog swim in the sky?

(child’s name) is in the mud.

(child’s name) is mad at the big rat.

The rug is on top of (child’s name).

I also make use of word repetition but my purpose is for the child to remember the MEANING and not HOW TO “READ” the words through its shape. James Asher, in his TPR Teacher’s Guide, mentions *novel utterances*. When he teaches vocabulary words, he recombines them in various ways to check for comprehension. This is how I repeat words, using them in different situations to serve as review for

the child without making it appear obviously repetitive. It is a good gauge of level of comprehension.

Comprehension of words in context is very much a fundamental part of Phonics as it is with look-say. The big difference is the Phonics-trained student has an advantage in that he is better equipped to effortlessly read the words and remember them.

## Chapter 8: Phonics First, Not Phonics Only

A child of six who is a native speaker of English has an obvious advantage over the EFL learner. When he starts school at age 6, he has acquired an enormous amount of speaking and listening vocabulary. This helps because after he blends the sounds /f/ /or/ /k/, he excitedly realizes he understood the meaning of this jumble of letters he just sounded out and read to mean the pronged thing he uses to eat. My sister was teaching the alphabet to her 3-year-old son. She would say “A is for \_\_\_” and my nephew would answer “apple.” When she got to “F is for \_\_\_\_\_,” my nephew said “frustrating!” He most likely picked this up from his parents or from the cartoons he had been watching. A thought occurred to me after I heard this story. When in the look-say method will “frustrating” appear for my nephew to see the printed form and have the chance to read it? Will it be in a level 4 reader? Level 6? 8? A child who enters first grade will have had five or six years of interacting with others in his native tongue and comes to school with a huge speaking vocabulary. How can any look-say basal reader possibly match this? Who gets to decide the exact words that appear on the look-say readers and the reason behind it? A child who knows Phonics can read “frustrating” once consonant blends, short and long vowel sounds, silent e, and –ing suffixes have been taught. My six-year-olds can read it after one semester of Phonics.

The highly developed oral language of a child who is an English native speaker helps with comprehension once he starts to learn how to read. For EFL, the situation

is different. It is not enough for children to just learn how to sound words. They must develop their oral and aural English. Vocabulary building must be taught along with Phonics to speed up comprehension. Comprehension can come in two ways – from new words they are able to sound out or from words they may not be able to read yet but are constantly exposed to. The teacher engages them in conversation, lets them sing songs, do chants, etc. I am not opposed to doing a couple of sight words but only as an aside, like visual candy to make the children feel they could read when they most probably are looking at picture cues or have memorized words as they have heard the teacher say them.

So far for two years now, we have had a high success rate with our kinder 2 classes. There are two teachers, one for Phonics and another teacher who builds their vocabulary and teaches simple grammar. I could clearly see the excitement in their faces when they sound a word and realize they recognize it because they have encountered it during conversation. They know how to say “It’s time” or “I’m fine” and after learning the rule silent e may make short vowels long, they were thrilled to “discover” that after sounding *time* and *fine*, they understood what the words meant. When we had some consonant clusters sounding exercises, they were blending /s/ /t/ /a/ /n/ /d/ and their eyes lit up, realizing they were reading the word “stand,” a classroom command they are all too familiar with.

I fully endorse combining Phonics with other techniques or activities that increase

the child's speaking and listening vocabulary. Some of my favorites are the following:

✧ *Communicative Approach Using Biographical Database*

I let the children go around asking simple questions like "What's your name?" "How old are you?" "Can you swim?" and letting the one being questioned answer in complete sentences. They can ask funny questions like "Are you a dog?" "Can you sit on a frog?"

✧ *Songs and Chants*

Carolyn Graham's jazz chants are excellent for teaching vocabulary. Nursery rhymes and Christmas songs are also incredible tools for word building. Our school also exposes students to pop songs sung by kids— Yellow Submarine, We Will Rock You, Top of the World, Eternal Flame, YMCA, etc.

Songs like "My Toes, My Knees" and "Head and Shoulders" expose children to the names of the parts of the body even before they have seen the words on paper. When the time comes that long sounds and special vowel sounds are taught, reading and comprehension occur simultaneously and it all just clicks into place.

✧ *Total Physical Response*

TPR is an excellent way to expose them to words they do not necessarily have to know how to read. TPR helps develop listening skills and incorporates body movements, all designed for building vocabulary and associating vocabulary with

meaning. Especially for young beginners, the teacher modeling and demonstrating is a good way to

### *Task based approach*

I use realia or toys or flannel boards, anything to give context to a task the children are asked to do. One is to ask them to arrange and rearrange toy furniture. They learn new words like *sofa, dresser* or *refrigerator* and prepositions of place – *in front of, under, on*, etc. Interaction with the teacher and their classmates provides plenty of opportunity for children to practice. Other activities which make use of toys include “cooking” something, assembling something with toy tools, making a sandwich or pizza.

### ✧ *Story telling using the Direct method*

The direct method is oral-based. Everything is in the target language. Every EFL teacher finds this very difficult to stick with 100%. Sometimes, it just saves time to translate rather than go around in circles, especially with young kids. I only do this for story telling with flannel boards or big picture books. I use familiar stories like “Goldilocks” and “Cinderella.” Vocabulary words like pumpkin, stepsister, porridge, fairy godmother, carriage, bowl, etc. are brought up. After the story we review new words through the flannel pieces and come up with comprehension exercises like “put the pumpkin on the carriage” or “put Goldilocks on the little chair” etc. I encourage them to retell the story as a group or even make up

their own. I don't mind using flash cards either with both words and pictures, doing a bit of sight words here and there because I know even if the children forget how to read the word without the pictures, they will be able to do so as they advance further in their Phonics lessons. At the very least the purpose right now is vocabulary.

Many articles on TESOL/TESL/TEFL that deal with vocabulary emphasize reading as vital for vocabulary development. I fully agree with this as the only way the EFL learner can grasp the nuances of the English language, especially some grammatical elements and words that go together in fixed phrases - *beck and call*, *nook and cranny*, *Thank God* (as opposed to *Thanks God* which I hear too often). Imagine someone with the double task of DECODING PRONUNCIATION and DECIPHERING MEANING at the same time! Why bother going through the torture?

In Taiwan and most especially in Mainland China, there is not a lot of reinforcement of English from the environment. These children come with little or no knowledge of English. The current popular method of learning English is still through sight words and rote memorization. They do not have enough oral vocabulary to help them figure out texts for meaning and on top of that they have no strategy of reading the words except the brain draining act of memorization. Phonics and vocabulary building go hand in hand and I believe this is the formula for upgrading the English level of the Chinese.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

On January 2004, I attended the TESOL methodology seminar conducted by the Canadian Institute of English. Around March, I got an email from a classmate regarding a reunion. Also in that email was a question posed by a John Michael. (I have edited it down to the pertinent points.)

*And I was wondering--in case anybody feels like talking shop-- Has anyone been able to use some of their new techniques with their students?*

*Although I found that many of my techniques before the course incorporated a lot of what Dr. Cotton was teaching, I had very little success in accent reduction. At least half my kids still produced what I call "lazy mouth" at some point when they speak or recite full sentence. For example, the students read a small conversation taking place at a b-day party in the text. I can hear the lazy mouth on "THIS IS FOR YOU. THANK YOU."--"THEE EE FOH YOU. SANK YOU."*

This sparked the idea for the topic of this thesis. I had been in his shoes and understand his frustration. I was formally introduced to Phonics in Mainland China through Ms. Evelyn Garrard, the curriculum developer of LEM Phonics based in Australia. The program was successful initially but there were problems because we were applying a Phonics course designed for native speakers of English to EFL students. It was challenging to discover for myself through trial and error the modifications needed since there was limited access to information about Phonics in

an EFL setting. It was in Taiwan that I finally had the chance to confirm my theories. The head of my school gave me free rein to run the Phonics program and I was able to do more research and learn more about Phonics. Teaching English as a foreign language is a challenging field and I have read books after books about it but most of the techniques or methodology or approach need Phonics instruction in order to be effective in the long term. Reading is not a natural biological phenomenon. It has to be taught and it has to be through Phonics first. It is precisely because of my own experiences, not second-hand information, that I am strongly grounded in my belief that Phonics first works.

Phonics is for everybody, whether native speakers or foreign learners. The way to go about teaching it may be different but the same underlying principles apply. By making Phonics FIRST, this gives hope to many discouraged EFL learners make heads or tails of the wonderful, crazy language that is English. For the Chinese, learning English is not just for communication but for them to get better jobs or be able to go abroad. Phonics starts them right and paves the way to fulfill their dreams. It would also serve the Americans well to learn their own language more efficiently because there is such a rich supply of literature to read and learn from. To the conscientious EFL teachers who really have it in their hearts to teach well, it would be a good idea to take a look at Phonics and give it a try.

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