

# Phonics, Vocal Tract Configuration, and the Importance of Phonics to the English Language

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**Abstract:** Reading English for beginners is a complex task that requires employing effective strategies to make it easier and exciting for the students. One of the strategies is the use of a systematic approach of sound-letter correspondences or phonics system. Several researches have confirmed the efficacy of the use of phonics systems as compared to other teaching methods in reading such as the whole language method for early learners or those who have English as second language. Even the US Department of Education regarded phonics as an essential part of reading process among beginners. At present, it is widely used in different reading programs targeting beginners. This paper will discuss the importance of phonics in English language particularly in reading lessons as well the vocal tract configuration of using phonics. Using different literature and previous empirical studies about the effect of phonics on reading to determine and confirm the importance of phonics system in ready, this paper will help in validating the significant contribution of phonics system in helping students learn how to read and recognize texts.

**Keywords:** phonics system, teaching methods, English Language.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Early learners are often confronted with difficulties on how to read and write with ease as they need to use different cognitive processes to recognize words, construct the meanings of the texts and retain what they have learned in their memories. Teachers usually employ strategies on how to introduce words to young readers in a way that will make it easier for them to know its sound and pronunciation. This strategy is also used in the case of those who are non-native English speakers or have English as their second language. One of the essential aspects of reading is introducing the alphabetic system to the readers where they learn different techniques such as pronunciation, spelling patterns, sound-letter correspondences and their applications to reading.

One of the techniques that are commonly used in teaching reading and writing to first-time learners such as those in the primary grade or L1 and the non-native English speakers or L2 include the use of phonics where each letter in the alphabet are given corresponding sounds. This phonetic system is a significant part of reading instruction among early learners and second language learners for it helps them to learn reading easier as compared to other methods.

## 2. WHAT IS PHONICS?

Phonics is a strategy used in reading. This method refers to the practice of emphasizing the relationship between speech sounds and spelling in systematic ways (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) and it is commonly found in various reading programs aimed at teaching early readers and second language learners. According to Stahl (2001), phonics is an approach in which teachers help students to decode words through saying or doing something such as teaching sound-symbol that corresponds to certain letters in the alphabet. Also teachers teach children how to manipulate sounds in writing through spelling tasks, patterns, and other activities which children could learn about orthographic patterns in written language (Sitthitikul, 2014). Simply put, phonics is the connection between letter and spoken sounds and it is “based on the premise that words can be decoded into sounds (Serna, 2006).” Liu (2005) refers phonics as a system of teaching that is anchored on the alphabetic principle, which central component is to teach correspondences between letter or words and their pronunciation. Learning phonics requires skills to hear and recognize sounds of letters or words, which is also called phonemic awareness.

There are different approaches in teaching phonics. These approaches include the implicit, embedded, explicit, and analogic. Implicit refers to analytic, incidental and contextual style where the teacher does not present sound teaching isolated to words (Serna, 2006). Some argues that such approach could result into some problems. On the other hand, the embedded approach is an attempt to teach children how to read through embedding phonics instructions in word ready. It heavily relies on incidental or discovery type of learning as it assumes that students could just develop a learning style that is self-sustaining through the use of contextual and grapho-phonetic cues (Serna, 2006).

Meanwhile, the explicit approach to phonics instruction believes in building up phonic skills in reading through the smallest unit. In this method, teachers present skills to students in sequential approach through the use of isolated and direct instructional ways. At the same time, this learning approach enable teachers to introduce controlled vocabulary stories during the early phase of learning to help boost the confidence of students particularly in decoding sounds of letters or words.

The analogic approach uses analogy in decoding words. It employs paying attention to patterns in the words as teachers who use this technique believe that human brain are good pattern detectors which means that if the students see an unknown word, they try to associate these words into a matching pattern from their memory stores. Through this technique, students easily remember words through the associated pattern. Some examples of instruction in analogic phonics include making words activities, manipulative lessons where children discover letter-sound relationship and others. Of the four types of phonics learning, explicit and analogic are the most commonly used style in phonics instructions. Different researches support the use of these two types of phonics learning as they are considered most effective compared to other styles.

### 3. IMPORTANCE OF PHONICS

In the early 1980s, the commonly used strategy for reading is the whole language approach which focused on identifying words and giving minimal attention to sound. Eventually, the phonics system emerged and caused an intense debate among the academes. The series of debates led to government-led researches and reviews along with congressional hearings to determine the most effective system on teaching readings. It was in one of these instances wherein the National Research Council found out that teaching phonics is more effective in early reading skills as compared to learning instructions without phonics (Liu, 2005).

Many researches have proven the significance of phonics in teaching early readers, second language students and persons with special reading needs. For instance, Serna (2006) noted that a phonics instruction is helpful in reading considering the complexity of learning how to read among early learners. In the United States, it has also been considered as an effective method for teaching students in reading at a word level. This realization came up when the US Congress asked the US Department of Education to produce available programs on reading instructions in 1990. To comply to this request the US DOE came up with a book *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*. In this book, Dr. Marilyn J. Adams reported that phonics is an effective way for learners to build their skills in reading through decoding words through sounds (Liu, 2005.).

Of the reason why phonics is important was how Flesch (1995) described the use of phonics in one of his books, which reads:

*“Since I started to work with Johnny, I have looked into this whole reading business. I worked my way through a mountain of books and articles on the subject, I talked to dozens of people, and I spent many hours in classrooms, watching what was going on. What I found is absolutely fantastic. The teaching of reading – all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks, -- is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense. Johnny couldn't read until half a year ago for the simple reason that nobody ever showed him how (Flesch, 1995).”*

In the United Kingdom, the department of education has confirmed the importance of phonics in primary education as it offers the best route in helping children become skilled readers. They give emphasis on systematic phonics teaching as effective tool for children with different abilities and background (Thaen-nga & Leenam, 2016). Today, phonics is an important ingredient when it comes to effective programs on reading. Hurford et al. (1993) stressed that having phonological awareness is among the hallmark of a good reader. Phonemic awareness is the ability to manipulate phonemes, the smallest units consisting language, in spoken words (Sitthitikul, 2014).

Meanwhile, in Vietnam, a study about the use of phonics system on grade three students was conducted to determine the effect of phonic system instructions on the development of English reading ability of the Grade 3 students at Nam Yuen school in the said country. The sample students underwent a pretest to test their reading skills prior to the introduction of phonics system in the learning process and then they underwent posttest after the administration of phonics lessons. The results of the study confirmed that phonics is effective in improving students reading ability, in this case, for students with English as their second language. Also, the study shows that the students enjoyed the process and has a positive perception towards phonics use (Thaen-nga & Leenam, 2016).

Among the noted significance of phonics instructions include the following (Sittihikul, 2014):

1. It impacts achievement measurements especially on decoding and reading non-sense words.
2. It is more effective in kindergarten and first graders and early readers in general.
3. It is helpful in helping students who struggle reading especially those within the early grades.
4. It is helpful for children with special needs as it simplify or break complex reading tasks.
5. It helps in building up the solid foundation of sounds in English for young readers to internalize.
6. Children are able to develop their literacy abilities by applying what they learn to create meaningful literacy knowledge.
7. Phonic system is able to support children in learning the language systematically from its smallest detail up to the more complex one.
8. It teaches kids the mechanics of reading before they even learn how to read.

In this regard, studies also suggested the inclusion of phonics into reading programs as researches shows that those who learn reading through phonics do better than those who do not (Hoffman (2014). It has been widely used now in many school systems as teachers combine phonics with whole language for reading and reading comprehension.

#### **4. PHONICS AND THE CONFIGURATION OF VOCAL TRACT**

The use of phonics system in reading requires a configuration of the vocal tract called articulation which positions the mobile organs of the vocal tract. The configuration enables the modification of an airstream in the vocal tract to produce the sounds of speech. Among the main articulators of speech are the tongue, the lower and the upper lips, upper teeth, upper gum ridge, hard and soft palate, the alveolar bridge, uvula, pharynx, larynx, and trachea (Britannica, 2019). There are two types of articulators which include the active articulator and the passive articulator. Active articulators are those that move towards another articulator in the vocal tract to produce sounds while the passive articulators are those that remain stationary while the vocal tract is on the process of producing speech sound (School of English, n.d.). Meanwhile, there are different manners of articulation which include stops, fricatives, affricatives, nasals and approximants. Stops are sounds produced through complete stoppage of the airstream such as in /p/. Fricatives refer to the sound produced when tongue is in almost full closure such as in /f/ and /sh/. Affricatives refer to the combination between stops and fricatives such as /c/h/. Nasals refer to the closure of oral passage, open nasal cavity such as in /n/ and /n/g/. Approximants are those in halfway between consonants and vowels such as in /l/ and /r/. Meanwhile, articulation also comes voiced or voiceless. When there is vibration in the vocal chords, it is considered as voiced (Osuna, n.d.).

In American English, there are four general classes of sounds which include vowels, diphthongs, semivowels, and consonants. Each of these classes are divided according to the articulators used such as the manner and place of the constriction in the vocal tract (Osuna, n.d.).

There are three processes involved in articulating phonetics or articulatory phonetics especially on consonant letters, which include initiation or the setting of air in motion through the vocal tract; the phonation or the modification of the airflow when it passes through the larynx; and the articulation or the shaping of airflow to generate sounds (School of English, n.d.). there are also different places of articulation of phonics involving vocal tracts. These places include the following (Osuna, n.d.):

- Bilabial – the bilabial sounds uses the upper and lower lips where lips come into contact with each other to form constriction. Among the bilabial sounds include /p/, /b/ and /m/.

- Labiodental – Labiodental makes use of lower lip and upper teeth where they both come in contact with each other to form a constriction in the vocal tract. Among the labiodental sounds are /f/ and /v/.
- Interdental- This is constriction of the vocal tract through the upper teeth and tongue tip. Among the examples of interdental sounds are /θ/ and /ð/.
- Alveolar – Alveolar refers to the constriction in the alveolar bridge through the contact of tongue and the alveolar bridge. Among the examples of alveolar sounds are /t/, /d/, /n/, /l/, /s/.
- Palatal-alveolar – Palatal alveolar sound is produced through slight constriction behind alveolar bridge. Among the examples of palatal alveolar sounds are /sh/ and /zh/.
- Palatal – Palatal sounds are produced through a constriction in the hard palate. Example of palatal sound is /j/.
- Velar – Velar sound is produced when there is constriction closer to the soft palate. Examples are velar sounds are /k/, /g/, /r/, and /ŋ/.
- Labiovelar – labiovelar sound is produced through constriction of lips and velum such as in /w/.
- Glottal – glottal sound is produced when closure occurs within the glottis such as in saying /uh-uh/.
- Uvular – uvular sound is produced through constriction in the uvula. There is no uvular sound in English but it is observed in French utterance of /r/ as in rouge.

For vowels, there are different vocal tract configurations involved such as the vertical tongue position, lip position, and the horizontal tongue position. For vertical tongue position, the tongue is close to the roof of the mouth, which is labeled as close. Meanwhile, if the tongue is positioned below in the mouth during the production of the sound, it is labeled as open. Examples of open vowels are /i/ and /u/ while the close vowels are /æ/ and /ɔ/. On the other hand, the horizontal tongue position refers to the position of the tongue in the vocal tract, if it is at the front or back when the sound of the vowel text is produced. If the tongue is in front, it is labeled as front vowel and if it is at the back it is called as back vowels. Also, there is a label 'mid vowel' which happened when the tongue is in the middle of the mouth. Examples of front vowels are /i/, and /e/. Example of mid vowel is /ə/. For back vowels, the examples are /ʌ/ and /ɒ/. For the lip position, it corresponds to whether the lips are round, spread and neutral. Round vowels are /u/ and /o/ while spread vowels are /i/ and /e/ (School of English, n.d.). Vowels generally have the largest phoneme group. They are usually voiced and come in greatest intensity and a duration which range from 50 to 400 ms (Osuna, n.d.)

Diphthongs, on the other hand, have a dynamic vowel sound wherein the tongue and the lips move between two vowel positions. They usually start as one vowel and end as a different vowel sound.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Through the years, phonic system has been widely used in teaching young beginners to recognize letters and words through associating them with certain sounds, patterns or symbols. It has also brought enormous impacts in teaching young learners and those that have English as their second language. Numerous studies have proven the effectiveness of phonics system and identified its importance in the reading curriculum.

To sum it up, phonics enables children to easily identify texts through sound correspondences. It also promotes positive learning experience and let young learners to creatively employ learning styles of their own. It helps children with learning difficulties as it breaks reading tasks into segments and most of all it teaches children the mechanics of reading even before they actually learn how to read.

Employing phonics especially in primary grades and in English as second language studies will help students to read easily. Educators, policy makers, parents, and other stakeholders when it comes to reading education need to continue employing this strategy in English language reading and even create innovations that will correspond to the changes in the educational landscape. The presence of online and offline phonics tutorials for children, along with the parents' interventions to teach them phonics at the first sign of their readiness to engage in reading activity will be helpful in unleashing potentials among children to learn how to read. These and the formal reading education they will get in regular setting using phonics will be a lot of help in their reading journey.

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