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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF THE MOTIVATION EFFECTS WITH EXPLICIT PHONICS INSTRUCTION FOR CHINESE YOUNG EFL LEARNERS

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of phonics instruction on the motivation of young Chinese learners of English. Surveys and semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. The results indicated that the two participants involved in this study responded favorably after exposure to explicit phonics instructions. Decoding new words, reading aloud, as well as word memorization has become much easier by incorporating the rules of phonics in decoding new words with the help of phonics instruction. As a result, for the two participants in this study, learning English became a more intrinsic and extrinsic process after accepting explicit phonics instruction. The implication of this case study is that providing additional word attack strategies often helps a new reader become more confident. After receiving phonics instruction, new EFL learners could improve their ability to decode words in text and memorize new ones as well. This in turn will more likely help them succeed and increase their motivation for learning a new language.

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### INTRODUCTION

According to Linse and Numan (2005), "Phonic-based instruction is intended to teach students the basic English-language phonics rules so that they can easily decode words" and is to "help children see the correspondence between letters and sounds" (p.76). Phonics instruction has been a controversial topic with a very long history in English speaking countries. In the past thirty years, there have been countless and contradictory studies on the effectiveness of phonics instruction and reading in both English native speaking countries and EFL or ESL countries. But the issues over the definition and approaches to using phonics have only taken place in China in about the last fifteen years. The benefits of phonics instruction to young EFL learners have not been understood or recognized widely in China, especially for the west and central west provinces.

#### Literature Review

**Studies on Phonics Both in and out of China:** As for the history of phonics instruction in English speaking countries, there has been a come-go-come trend for phonics instructions

over the last century. This was seen, for example, in the use of the whole word approach to enhance the reading ability of students (Cothran, 2015). Finally, in 2000, after conducting one of the largest research projects by reviewing more than 400 existing researches, the National Reading Panel (NRP) released its report, saying that early, systematic instruction in phonics is the best way to teach children how to read. To be more specific, most studies have been conducted focusing on phonics instruction are generally related to its effects on students' reading skills (Peregoy & Boyle, 2008; Linse & Nunan, 2005; Pinter, 2006; Lee, 2009; Kuo, 2011). Most studies have validated the importance of early phonics instruction; and how it can facilitate students' ability to decode new words, improve their spelling ability as well as their pronunciation (Linse & Nunan, 2005; Helaine, 2015). Due to the effectiveness of phonics instruction on learners' ability to read, it has drawn increasing attention from countries where learning English as a foreign language is popular. However, in China the earliest studies that this researcher found that focused on phonics instruction was an article titled *Phonics English and Children's Dynamic Cognition*, written by LAN Huafang in 2005. Since then there have been about 240

research studies and articles written on the benefits of teaching of phonics with different levels of students in elementary schools, middle schools, high schools and college students (Luo, 2015; Su, 2012; Yang, 2014) till April, 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Some researchers have viewed phonics instruction as a revolutionary or almost magic method for Chinese English education (Zhou, 2014; Wang, 2012). Apart from this enthusiasm, a majority of these studies have shown that phonics instruction is viewed favorably by students, mainly in relation to word-decoding and text reading aloud.

**Motivation and Demotivation:** Students' motivation is a common and often studied topic worldwide. Brown (2007) pointed out, "for explaining the success or failure of virtually any complex task, motivation is a star player" and "countless studies and experiments in human learning have shown that motivation is a key to learning in general" (p.168). For EFL learners, motivation is even more important, "In comparison with the first language, motivation is crucial in learning other languages" (Pinter, 2006, p.36). When teachers and researchers look at motivation, "the most powerful, dimension of the whole motivation construct in general is the degree to which learners are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to succeed in a task" (Brown, 2007, p.172). In the past decade, more research has been conducted on what actually inspires students to work harder to learn and excel. Often, such studies focus on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Researchers have defined the urge to excel as a dynamic process during language learning. It can be defined as the "beneficial interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation would take place when people are in personal control of the activities they are carrying out" (Shim, 2010, p.177).

But caution should be applied since in many EFL countries like China "..., children in non-English environments have limited opportunities to practice the language outside school and no immediate need or clear motivation to use and learn English" (Pinter, 2006, p. 32). Besides the importance of motivation in EFL learning, some attention should be paid to the demotivating factors that might influence EFL young learners. One study about the demotivating factors in learning English among 170 elementary school students in South Korea, the researchers found that "the most demotivating factor was reduced motivation and interest." In addition, "the difficulties in learning English was the second demotivating factor" among eight demotivating factors that been surveyed in their study (Lee & Lee, 2011, p.352). This shows that in an EFL situation if learners are frustrated by difficulties in learning English, it would be very easy for some of them to just stop trying to overcome the difficulties during their English learning.

**Shortage of Present Studies on Phonics:** Although there have be many studies on the effectiveness of phonics both in English native speaking countries and EFL/ESL countries, very few of them have looked at the relationship between phonics instruction and learner's motivation. In China, some studies have been carried out to examine the effectiveness of phonics instruction. Unfortunately, a very limited numbers of studies looked closely at motivation. This case study was designed to prove past studies on the effectiveness of phonics instruction on EFL learners; and to look closer at effects of phonics instruction on EFL young learners' motivation enhancement in English learning.

## METHODS

In this section, the following four main topics are explored: The research question, the definition of explicit phonics instruction, the participants' information, and the data collection methods.

**Research Question:** In what areas can explicit phonics instruction enhance young EFL beginners' motivation in English learning?

**Explicit Phonics Instruction:** In this case study, the definition of explicit phonics instruction refers to the systematic teaching of phonics. A wide range of studies from current internet sources were used to design the instructions: handouts, audios, etc. The phonics instructions were divided into eight stages: 1. Twenty-six alphabets including their basic pronunciation; 2. Short vowels/CVC words (e.g. cat, mop); 3. Long vowels/silent E/ bossy E (e.g. cake, hive); 4. Consonant diagraph (e.g. sock, fish, math); 5. Vowel combination one (e.g. rain, teeth); 6. Vowel combination two (e.g. book, shout); 7. R-control words (e.g. corn, bird, card); 8. Blends (e.g. blow, green, tree).

**Participants:** Two third-year elementary school students, student A is 7 years old and student B is 9 years old. Characteristics of these two students:

- Both students are boys;
- They started to learn English from their first year in elementary school;
- There are two in school English classes per week and every class lasted 40 minutes.

Comparatively speaking, student A is a little introverted and student B tends to be more outgoing and active. Before they studied phonics, student A was did not stand out in his English class; and student B scored ten to the last out of 35 students in the English class. Characteristics of younger learners: According to Pinter (2006), characteristics of younger learners (5-11 years old) relate to the school environment and the way they learn. The younger children are at pre-school or in the first couple of years of schooling. Generally, they have a "holistic" approach to language, which means that they understand meaningful messages but cannot analyze language yet; they have lower levels of awareness about themselves as language learners as well as about the process of learning; they have limited reading and writing skills even in their first language; Generally, they are more concerned about themselves than others; they have limited knowledge about the world; they enjoy fantasy, imagination, and movement (p.2).

**Data Collection:** Qualitative data were collected based on the questionnaires and on-line interviews. The questionnaires took about two weeks to finish because the students' parents were quite busy, and the on-line interview took about eight minutes for each student interviewee.

**Questionnaires:** There were two types of questionnaires: one is for the students and the other for their parents. The questionnaires to the parents were meant to get more neutral information about the research. Due to the language problem, the questionnaires were written in Chinese and the answers were given in Chinese as well, and then translated into English by the researcher. The questionnaires for the students and

their parents are basically the same, including 14 questions in total. The first question asked about the students' age; four yes/no questions, asking about their general attitude towards phonics instruction; seven open-ended questions, aiming at the comparison of students' attitude towards English before and after phonics learning and two multiple choice questions. The first multiple-choice question is used to check in what areas learners find phonics useful for their English study, and the second one looks at the aspects that motivate the learners to participate the phonics instruction.

**Interview:** The interview was semi-structured with five to six questions related to those mentioned in the questionnaires. Because the researcher was still in Korea studying while conducting the interview, the appointment for the interview was made with the students' parents and a Skype face to face online interview was carried out. The whole process of the interview was recorded and information was transcript and translated later on by the researcher. Due to their limited English proficiency, both students and their parents were interviewed in Chinese.

**Data Analysis:** After collecting the questionnaires and completing the online interview, the answers for the questionnaires were translated into English by the researcher. The online interview recordings were converted into text first and then translated into English by the researcher. After this had been done, the comparisons were done between the two students and their parents' feedback to see at what areas explicit phonics instruction was helpful in the students' English learning; and to see if the students' motivation in English learning as a whole had been enhanced or not.

### Data Analysis

The following 13 questions in the questionnaire were analyzed according to the participants' feedback. Interview quotes from participants and classroom reflection were compiled and used to determine students' opinions.

### Data of the YES/NO questions

#### Do you think that phonics learning is helpful for you/your child's English learning in general?

Both the students and their parents said yes.

#### Do you/your child like learning phonics?

Both the students and their parents replied yes. They reported that phonics instruction was interesting, just as student B replied in the interview "*it is very interesting*".

#### Do you think it has become easier for you/your child to learn English after the study of phonics?

Students and their parents said yes.

#### After the study of phonics, do you/does your child tend to use the phonics rules to read new words and textbooks?

The answer was yes. Student A even pointed out that he tends to use the phonics rules to read new words.

### Data of the open-ended questions

#### Before learning phonics, what kind of response did you/your child have when reading the English textbook aloud?

Student A said that "*it was difficult to read*" and his parent said that they "*never heard him read the text at home before he learned phonics*".

Student B said that "*I had no feeling towards text reading*" and his parent said that "*the kid didn't know the English words, and he had no interest in text reading*".

From the interview data, the participants talked about this problem in more detail. They reported that before they studied phonics they felt that English was very hard, especially at the beginning at school where they were usually asked to read new words or text.

Student A said: "*English was very hard; I didn't know how to read words and how to connect words into a sentence*".

Student B said: "*I just felt that English was very difficult, I could not make any sense of it, such as word decoding, text reading, etc, they were all very hard to do*".

#### After learning phonics, what kind of response do you/does your child have when reading the English textbook aloud?

Student A said that "*it is very easy to read the text*". His parent added that "*From time to time, we can hear him read his English textbook on his own at home and he starts to talk about it as well*".

Student B said that "*I know how to sound the unknown words out*"; and his parent said that "*He knows how to sound the known words out and as a result, he has had high interest in learning English as well*".

#### Before learning phonics, did you/your child like to read English aloud in the English class?

Both student A and student B said that "*I did not like it before I learned phonics*". Their parents provided the same response. During the interview, student A said "*I did not like my English class, because when the teacher asked me to read, and I didn't know how to read, I just stood there like a fool*". Student B said "*I just could not read at all, it was too hard*". Since text reading was used as a means of evaluation for first and second graders, student B was ranked about 25<sup>th</sup> in his class, which has 35 students.

#### After learning phonics, do you like to read English aloud in the English class?

Both participants replied that they like reading aloud now in their English classes. Student B's parent said that "*He likes to read in class, and when he comes back from school, sometimes he uses English to make some simple dialogues with us, and we can see he has become more confident in English learning*".

#### Is there any improvement in your English learning before and after the phonics instruction? If yes, what kind of improvement is it?

From the questionnaire and the interview, student A stated: "*I have made big improvements, after learning phonics, I can*

*decode the new words on my own and I can read my English text without listening to the audio many times.”*

Student B said *“I have got several prizes from my school English teacher. And now I find it has become very easy to read words and text.”*

#### **After learning phonics, what kind of improvements did you notice?**

Student A reported, *“I can read faster now, and I can recognize and learn more words now.”* His parent said that *“the kid’s vocabulary size has been enlarged and he has become interested in word decoding and he always tries to decode new words consciously.”*

Student B answered that, *“I know how to pronounce the new words out now.”* His mother said that, *“he has become interested in learning English; he can decode and read the unknown words and he has confidence in his English learning now.”*

#### **After learning phonics, do you/does your child feel more confident in English learning? In what aspects?**

Student A said, *“Yes, I am not afraid anymore when my school teacher asks me to read”,* and his parent added that, *“he tends to read the unknown words actively, and even tries to read some words that he hasn’t studied.”*

Student B stated, *“Yes, I even record myself when reading and share it with my classmates”,* and his parent conformed the feedback.

#### **Data for the multiple choice questions**

#### **In general, in what aspects phonics learning is helpful for your child’s English learning?**

Among the seven choices included: reading aloud of the textbook; word decoding (they can read unknown words); word dictation (spell words out as they listen); grammar; vocabulary building; correct pronunciation; and confidence in English learning.

Participants A and B both felt that phonics learning was helpful in the word decoding (they can read unknown words); correct pronunciation; and confidence in English learning.

#### **What are the main features of learning phonics that your child really like?**

Seven choices were given for to answer this question: the teacher; the pronunciation of letters and coloring; word decoding; word search; spelling contests; unit tests; and unit game boards.

Both students found that the teacher; the pronunciation of letters and coloring; word searches; and spelling contests were the main parts that they liked.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

A comparison of the students’ attitudes or feelings towards English learning before and after phonics instruction showed that both participants, at first, were struggling with

pronouncing words out in their textbooks, which caused great anxiety and discouraged their motivation and interest in English learning. In other words, they had very low intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in English learning. But after they received the phonics instruction, the data showed that these two students made noticeable progress in their English learning, especially with word decoding, text reading, and interest/confidence. As a result, both student A and student B responded favorably after exposure to phonics instruction. Decoding new words, text reading as well as word memorization has become much easier by incorporating the phonics method in decoding new words. As a result, learning English became a more intrinsic and extrinsic process after being given explicit phonics instruction. Just as Helaine (2015) said: *“The stigma of not being able to read or having difficulty pronouncing words may cause problems with self-image and self-confidence. When a child learns phonics, it can build his confidence, so he begins to speak up more often.”* Due to the instruction of the phonics, both students had made progress in their school performance as well. During the middle of the special phonics course, student A was nominated as the English monitor. In addition, student B has made great improvement, becoming number one or two in his class in consideration of text reading. Some researchers have pointed out that *“Phonics instruction should be based on the English words that children already have in their oral-language repertoire”* (Linse & Nunan, 2005, p.77). However, for Chinese EFL young learners who have limited opportunities to build these words in their oral-language repertoire, it might be best to teach these students how to sound these words out first. This allows students to be more confident and motivated in English word decoding and text reading, rather than feel embarrassed for not being able to sound the words out due to lack of knowledge about the rules between letters, sounds and words.

**Conclusion and Implication:** With the help of explicit phonics instruction, participants found it to decode words and text. In turn, they felt more confident in word decoding and text reading in their school English classroom, as well as their self-study time. They became intrinsically and extrinsically motivated in English learning. Since *“the difficulties in learning English was the second demotivating factor”* among eight demotivating factors for ESL elementary learners (Lee & Lee, 2011, p.352), teachers should also be aware of the difficulties that this group of learners encounter in English learning and try to avoid them through the utilizing of word decoding and pronunciation using explicit phonics instructions. This case study provides additional word attack strategies that can aid a new reader to become more confident. After receiving phonics instruction, new learners can significantly improve their ability to decode words in text and memorize new terms, which in turn will more likely help them succeed and increase their motivation for learning a new language in the early stage.

**Limitations:** Since this is just a case study of two Chinese boys (one is 7 and the other is 9 years old), there are several limitations in this research. The first one is the population for study was too small; second, the long term effects of phonics instruction cannot be fully understood in such a short study. Last but not the least; the participants are young EFL beginners, so the results may be not suitable for older or more mature beginning students. Suggestions for other researchers interested in this area might be to design a one to two year

study with students of different ages. A population of 30-50 students might be considered. Researchers and educators who are interested in exploring the effects of phonics instruction can carry out some research looking at the long term effects of phonics instruction or making comparison between phonics instruction and other teaching methods, such as whole word approach, or the international phonetic method in teaching young Chinese EFL beginners as well.

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