The Use of Phonics Instructions as a Reading Instructional Approach for Primary Graders: English as a Second Language (ESL) Primary Teachers' Understanding and Classroom Practices (A Case Study)

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1. Introduction

English language education in Sri Lankan government schools begins in the first grade, focusing on speaking, listening and vocabulary skills through the Activity Based Oral English (ABOE) program in the first and second grades (Aloysius, 2015; Rohan, 2004). From third- to fifth-grade reading, students develop reading skills through look-and-say and read-and-find approaches (Gunawardane, 2012). However, these approaches rely heavily on memorising word pronunciations based on spelling patterns rather than a systematic and scientific method of reading. The National Reading Panel invented phonics as a scientifically proven approach for teaching reading that motivates young readers to read by acquiring letter-sound correspondence instead of the rote-memorisation of vocabulary (National Reading Panel, 2006). Nevertheless, phonics instructions reinforce word automaticity and confidence in reading texts making it crucial for ESL teachers to incorporate phonics instructions in the primary grades where ESL students begin second language acquisition (Learning Point Associates, 2004). Thus, this case study intends to;

- Analyse ESL primary teachers' (government school teachers in Embilipitiya educational zone) understanding of the phonics instructions identifying specific misconceptions and gaps in the comprehension of phonics instructions, and
- Examine the phonics instructional methods teachers utilise in teaching reading in the ESL primary classroom.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to investigate the use of phonics instruction in ESL classrooms in the Embilipitiya educational zone. The quantitative data was collected through a close-ended questionnaire administered to ESL teachers to gather background information and confirm participation in case studies. This phase utilised purposive sampling with maximum variation to select eight teachers based on years of experience, school type, and educational qualifications. Convenience sampling was also used to select the research setting. The qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participatory classroom observations. Interviews and observations were designed to gather detailed insights on phonics instruction during reading lessons. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clark's (2006) six-phase framework, was used to analyse qualitative data, and the criteria set by St. Mary's University (2023) were employed to assess phonics instruction during classroom observations. These criteria focus on several key aspects: the extent to which teachers review letter-sound correspondence; articulation of phonemes; instructional activities employed; the accuracy of phonics-related instructions and the level of students' engagement in phonics-based tasks. Quantitative data from the questionnaires was analysed using Microsoft Excel.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1 displays the four major themes of the teachers' understanding and the use of phonics instructions in ESL primary classrooms. Participants are represented with pseudonyms.

Table 1: Responses of the participants under each theme.

Theme	Participants' Responses
Definitions of Phonics Instructions	Ms. A, B, C: Teaching the correct articulation of individual sounds. Ms. D, E: Teaching pronunciation using Received Pronunciation (RP). Ms. F, G: Accurate pronunciation as phonics instruction. Ms. H: Critical aspect of the sound system in language learning. Overall Agreement: Phonics involves mastering accurate sounds for pronunciation.
Importance of phonics instructions	Ms. A, B, H: Enables reading, even without understanding meaning. Ms. B, H: Reading is impossible without phonics. Ms. C, D, E, F: Essential for correct pronunciation (silent or aloud). Ms. D: Important for writing and word recognition. Ms. G: Necessary for understanding vowel sound variations. Overall Agreement: Phonics is crucial for reading, writing, and pronunciation development.
Phonics-Based Activities in the Classroom	Ms. A: Uses poems to teach rhymes and sounds. Ms. B: Uses "Radiant Way" books by S.F.R.A. Cader and flashcards for phonics group activities. Ms. C: Uses visual aids to teach word formation. Ms. D, E: Focus on exercises to teach different sounds of vowels. Ms. F, G: Use "Writing Practice" textbooks, issued by the government to teach phonetics. Ms. H: Uses word boards, posters, and the "Phonics Reader" series. Overall: Teachers employ diverse tools and activities to enhance phonemic awareness.
Frequency of Phonics Activities	Ms. A: Focuses more on reading comprehension than phonics. Ms. B: Dedicates daily time to phonics and reading. Ms. C: Uses phonics in reading passages and the "Phonics Reader" series. Ms. D: Follows phonics activities in workbooks when available. Ms. E, G: Phonics is emphasised early in the year but decreases over time. Ms. G: Phonics is taught during the first four months of third grade. Ms. F: Limited time to focus on frequent phonics lessons. Overall: The use of phonics instruction decreases as the year progresses, with the focus shifting to other language skills.

Table 2 briefly projects the results of the classroom observation.

Table 2: Use of phonics instructions in the ESL primary classroom.

Teacher	Focus of lesson	Phoneme articulation (Correct-✓ Incorrect-✗ Not Applicable- NA)	Key activities used	Accuracy of instructions (Accurate-✓ Inaccurate - ✗)	Students' engagement	Alignment with the phonics principles (Aligned-✓ Not aligned - ✗)
A	Multiple graphemic represen	✓	Word sets displayed on board, choral	✓	Low (teacher-led choral	✓ (letter-sound correspondence but lacks

	tations of /ə/		reading, drills		reading, repetition)	independent application)
B	Letter-sound correspondence of B, C, D, and F	✗	YouTube video on consonant sounds, group reading from "Radiant Way"	✗ (introduce /b/, /k/, /d/, and /f/ sounds and /ba/, /ka/, /da/, and /fa/)	Medium (group reading, but with errors)	✗ (mispronunciation affects letter sound accuracy and phoneme articulation)
C	Phoneme / ə / representations	✓	Listing words with specific sounds	✓	High (active feedback)	✓ (emphasizes phoneme articulation)
D	Vowel sounds (U, A, O)	✓	Sorting words by sounds, use of Tamil letters for sound explanation (in Tamil medium classroom)	Mixed (introduced accurate sounds for U, and A while inaccurate sound for O)	Medium (sorting activity)	✓ (partial alignment with phoneme articulation but lacks focus on blending)
E	Reading comprehension and vocabulary	NA	Vocabulary and comprehension tasks	Not focused on letter-sound correspondence	Medium (vocabulary focus)	✗ (focused on comprehension only)
F	Phonemic representation of vowels	✗	Singing songs with action verbs	✗ (introduce inaccurate sounds for vowels)	Low (confusing instructions)	✗ (inaccurate vowel sounds limit phoneme articulation focus)
G	Reading comprehension	NA	Comprehension exercises	Not focused on letter-sound correspondence	Medium (vocabulary focus)	✗ (focused on comprehension only)
H	Consonant sounds (B, C, D, F)	✗	Drills, sound blending exercises	✗ (introduce /b/, /k/ sounds and /ba/, /ka/)	Low (incorrect blending was done when practising reading based on phonics)	✗ (inaccurate sound blending)

The findings of this study revealed that ESL primary teachers in the Embilipitiya educational zone have an incomplete understanding of phonics instruction. Many teachers have misunderstood phonics instruction as phonemic awareness, interpreting phonics instructions merely as teaching sounds, rather than recognising phonics as the relationship between sounds

and the corresponding letters. Moreover, despite the lack of knowledge of phonology, all teachers expressed a positive attitude towards the importance of phonics for reading development. This circumstance was common in the Jordan ESL context according to Allouh's study (2021). The classroom practices depicted that phonics instruction is sporadic and largely textbook-oriented. Students merely repeat after the teacher reads the text rather than reading independently using phonics rules. Similar practices were noted in studies by Zhang and Kang (2021) and Ly and Thuy (2021), where students primarily repeated after teachers, with limited application of phonics rules. Exceptions were noted where some teachers integrated the sounds of students' mother tongue into their phonics instruction, such as Tamil, but overall, the use of phonics strategies remains infrequent in Sri Lankan ESL primary classrooms.

4. Conclusion

This research explored ESL primary teachers' understanding and the methods they use to give phonics instructions in the ESL primary classroom when teaching reading. According to the study, five major findings could be identified. 1) Most of the teachers do not have a clear understanding of phonics instructions. 2) The teachers have positive attitudes towards using phonics instructions, especially as a method that can be utilised to improve younger learners' (primary students') reading skills. 3) Teachers conducted reading lessons glueing to the government textbooks. Thus, teachers practice phoneme identification, phoneme blending, and phoneme categorisation activities that are given in the textbook. 4) Only a few teachers manipulate teaching materials such as decodable reading books, YouTube videos on phonics rhymes, and approaches such as teaching sounds of the target language through the sounds of the mother tongue, to improve students' knowledge of letter-sound correspondence. 5) The most frequent method of teaching reading is drilling. Therefore, phonics-based independent loud reading could hardly be observable in primary classrooms. The aforementioned findings are effective in designing the English curriculum for primary grades and teaching practitioners. In future, a comparative study can be conducted to examine the use of phonics-based reading practices in the ESL primary classroom in government and private school contexts in Sri Lanka.

5. Keywords

ESL primary education, phonics instruction, reading practice, teacher understanding

6. References

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