Phonological Awareness Training for Adolescent EFL Learners:
From Research to Practice

Yen-Liang Lin

Assistant Professor

Department of English, National Taipei University of Technology, Taiwan

Abstract: *Phonological awareness has been considered as an emergent literacy skill or a primary building block to successful reading, offering readers the tools to sound out words and assisting with the formation of lexical representations. Worldwide curriculum guidelines also indicate that phonological awareness, expressed as the ability to decode words, is one of the core competencies that primary and junior high school EFL learners should acquire and that it may be the lever that promotes greater teacher awareness of, and pedagogical development in, teaching this important skill. However, the training of this skill is not an area upon which focus is concentrated in junior high school level in Taiwan, and the phonological awareness training activities for kids might not well suitable for teenagers. This paper, therefore, firstly argues the need for young EFL learners to acquire phonological awareness so that they can obtain more benefits from formal reading instruction. A variety of applicable activities, particularly the use of songs and games for phonological awareness training, will then be illustrated.*

Introduction

"Repeat after me!" is a commonly spoken phrase in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms; therefore, students are likely taught to and become complacent with mechanically repeating the words that they are taught by their teachers. Outside the classroom, however, they might not be able to sound out new words or even words that they have learned previously, making the link between classroom and real world tenuous. One example of such an issue can be easily found in Taiwanese junior high schools. A large number of students are not even able to independently say the names of popular brands such as *Toyota*, *Samsung*, *Benz*, etc. Such students may need additional training on phonological awareness, the prerequisite skill set for initial reading instruction that gives them the "ability to perceive and manipulate the sounds of spoken words" (Castles & Coltheart, 2004, p. 78), and lead to fluency and comprehension before entering junior high school. Insufficient knowledge of phonological awareness may cause such students to lack the motivation to work out the meanings of words or sentences, leading to their eventual loss of motivation to learn English (Lin, 2009).

In response to this, this paper argues the need for EFL junior high school teachers to continue teaching phonological skills at the early stage of junior high school education. In doing so, students would better develop their knowledge of sound-spelling relationships and further facilitate their reading development. A review of the importance of phonological awareness in learning to read and how the teaching of phonics affects reading development will first be examined. This will be followed by the illustration of a number of useful teaching activities and tasks for instructors to implement successful phonological awareness training with a view to developing learners' reading acquisition, particularly in an EFL classroom of adolescents.

Phonological Awareness in Learning to Read

Phonological awareness (PA) can be defined as "the ability to detect and manipulate the component sounds that comprise words…syllable, and onset-rime and phoneme" (Goswami, 2007, p. 125). It includes the understanding of how to divide oral language into smaller units, and the ability to manipulate those sounds orally. Such awareness of letter-sound correspondences can be seen as an emergent literacy skill or a primary building block to reading (Goswami, 2007), offering readers the tools to sound out new words, and assisting with the formation of lexical representations (Adams, 1990).

Significant amounts of research support the causal and predictive relationship between PA and efficiency in learning to read (Ehri et al., 2001; Ho & Bryant, 1997; Lin, 2009). For example, in Ho and Bryant's (1997) study, 100 Chinese pre-school children were given an onset-rime measure at age 3, and their progress in reading and spelling was assessed two years later. They found that PA was significantly related to reading development even when intelligence was controlled for, making students' alertness to rime and alliteration highly likely to predict ones' future reading and spelling performance. In addition, Lin's (2009) study on Taiwanese junior high school students indicated a high correlation (r=0.809) in participants' performance between word decoding and reading comprehension. It also showed word decoding skill to be a significant predictor of reading comprehension (R^2=0.655, p <0.05). As Stanovich (1993) found in a study of adolescent readers, "phonological awareness appears to play a causal role in reading acquisition … it is a foundational ability underlying the learning of spelling-sound correspondences" (p. 288).

However, Castles and Coltheart (2004) argue that the causal link connecting competence in PA to success in reading and spelling acquisition is not that "the awareness of phonological units will cause children to be *able* to read but that it will cause them to be better at *learning* to read at some later date" (p. 79). They also argued that it is possible that the acquisition of reading skills does not actually change the level or nature of PA itself. Rather, "it influences the way in which children perform PA tasks" (p. 80). Despite these arguments, PA still plays an important role in learning to read. Consequently, the pedagogical practice of integrating PA training into the early literacy program is needed so that young learners can benefit from formal reading instruction.

Phonological awareness training

Regarding phonological awareness training, it is suggested to begin with teaching the ability to play with sounds in words, for example, to segment, blend, delete and insert phonemic elements. It involves students' understanding that speech is made up of individual sounds, including such things as the ability to tell if two words begin or end with the same sound, and the ability to focus on the form of speech apart from focusing on its meaning or content (Ediger, 2001). Such awareness is to contribute to helping students learn to read since the structure of the English writing system is alphabetic. Moreover, instruction with a focus on PA training has been found to make a statistically significant contribution to reading acquisition. For example, Ehri et al. (2001) summarised 52 studies conducted by the US National Reading Panel for evaluating the effects of PA instruction on learning to read and spell. Analysis of effect sizes revealed that the impact of PA instruction on helping children acquire PA was large and statistically significant (d=0.86). PA instruction exerted a moderate yet statistically significant impact on reading (d=0.53) and spelling (d=0.59). This benefit extended to not only word reading, but also reading comprehension. Based on their findings, they further suggest that PA instruction was more effective when it was taught with letters than without letters, when one or two PA skills were taught rather than multiple PA skills, when children were taught in small groups rather than individually or in classrooms, and when instruction lasted between 5 and 18 hours rather than longer (Ehri et al., 2001, p. 251).

Beyond phoneme-level process is the alertness to rime and alliteration. Words which have the same vowel sound and final consonant are riming words, while words which share an onset are alliterative. For example, the category of words, such as *play*, *plain*, *place*, and *please*, which share the common onset *pl* are alliterative. Meanwhile, words such as *night, fight, light, might,* and *bright*, which share the common vowel and final consonant *ight*, are riming words. Goswami (2007) suggests that a student's ability to categorise words by onset-rime units may be related to that students' awareness of spelling sequences in words, and this may facilitate the development of reading. That is, students may learn that there are groups of words which rime and have the same spelling sequence, and as Goswami found, it is more economical to learn about categories of words with the same spelling pattern than to have to learn how each individual word is spelled. Therefore, the training on the alertness to rime and alliteration might well be essential since they promote learners to be aware of spelling-sound relationships.

Bryant et al. (1989), cited by Goswami and Mead (1992), demonstrate that nursery rime knowledge at three years old has a significant correlation with reading ability at six years old even after differences in social background and IQ are taken into account. In addition, Su (2004) investigated the effects of onset-rime-based phonics instruction on the development of phonemic awareness and oral reading ability of 192 elementary school students in Taiwan. Subjects were divided into an experimental group, receiving 17 weekly mini-lessons of onset-rime-based phonics instruction in addition to standard textbook lessons, and a control group, receiving

instruction from the textbook only. Analysis of PA pre- and post-tests showed a marked increase associated with onset-rime-based phonics instruction, with the percentage of progress of the experimental group 9.25%, but only 3.5% for the control group. In the score of an oral reading test, the percentage of progress of the experimental and the control groups were 20.25% and 5.5%, respectively. It can be shown that onset-rime-based phonics instruction is rather profitable for beginning learners in both PA and oral reading. Nevertheless, more rigorous statistical analyses, such as Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and t-test, could be adopted to further clarify the importance of these differences.

It appears that PA training is related to success in word recognition and spelling acquisition in that it helps learners to be aware of a series of sounds in the speech stream and provides learners with the ability to manipulate sounds in words.

Phonological awareness and phonics instruction in Taiwan

The latest *General Guidelines of Grades 1-9 Curriculum for Compulsory Education*, published by the Taiwanese Ministry of Education in 2010, points out that the ability to decode words, that is, converting printed words into spoken language, is one of the core competence indicators that primary and junior high school students should acquire. It also emphasises the importance of phonics instruction, and consequently, teachers in both primary and junior high schools should offer PA training. However, phonics teaching is not an area upon which focus is concentrated by EFL teachers, particularly in junior high school context (Lin, 2009; Su, 2004). Instead, they tend to teach K.K. phonetic symbols, which refer to the system of phonetic alphabets coined by Kenyon and Knott in 1953. The system includes seventeen vowels and twenty-four consonants, which are used for transcribing a spoken language into written sounds. However, students who have mastered the symbols may encounter difficulties pronouncing new words without the aid of their accompanying K.K. phonetic symbols, making real-world decoding a difficult task for many students. As a result, phonics has increasingly begun to gain purchase in the teaching context in Taiwan.

Increasingly large numbers of studies have demonstrated the benefits of phonics instruction for phonological ability, word recognition, spelling, and reading development. One such study conducted by Lin (2009) examined the effects of phonics instruction on the fostering of word recognition and reading comprehension of junior high school students in Taiwan. Performance on word decoding, word meaning, and reading comprehension measures indicated that progress from pre- to post-tests was highly significant ($p<0.001$). It appears that systematic phonics instruction, including PA training and explicit teaching, may well have positive influences on learners' recognition of written words and reading comprehension.

Such results, however, seem to contradict those presented in Huang's (2003) study, which showed no significant difference in word recognition measure after 70 Taiwanese vocational

senior high school students received phonics instruction intervention once a week. The inefficiency of the phonics instruction was possibly attributable to the study, which was not sufficiently intensive. Also, the senior high school students had been learning English for more than six years, and consequently, their learning methods seem to have been fossilised. This might have contributed to the unwillingness to use a new approach, such as phonics, in their learning. As a result, it is believed that intensive, explicit, and early teaching of phonics is the most productive way to develop learners' automatic word recognition skills (Adams, 1990; Lin, 2009).

Practical Applications of Phonological Awareness Training for Teenagers

Since teenagers' span of concentration is short, it is suggested that teachers use various types of activities to keep them on track. As a result, PA training should be included in part of everyday teaching as warm-up activities, and the use of music, jigsaws, drama and even different seating arrangement is highly recommended. A selection of proven phonics activities are outlined below.

Knowledge of nursery rhymes

The rudiments of phonemic awareness are seeded in children's knowledge of nursery rhymes (Layton & Deeny, 2002). Rhyming activities can be divided into three categories.

(a) Rhyme judgment: Learners judge whether or not the words within a given category rhyme. It is suggested that in everyday situation, teacher frequently ask their students *Do these words rhyme?* orally. This is very helpful for raising the awareness of sound recognition. It would be also useful to teach your students to point to the picture associated with the sound you say. For example, you say 'ee' and the child points to a picture of a tree. Another activity is "Picture Pairs". The student names all the pictures presented by their teacher and collects pairs which rhyme. For example, *tree* and *bee* have the same 'ee' rhyme, so they would be collected.

For teenagers, it is important to always look for ways of including movement in lessons since it is very hard for teens to pay attention to something while seating in the classroom (Leiguarda, 2004). In response to this, Gomes (2011) suggests an activity called "Musical Talk". In this activity, teachers prepare cards with sounds and spread them on the floor, facing down. Then the teacher plays music that teenagers normally listen to, making the activity more relevant to their lives. The students are then asked to walk around the room and, when the music stops, the teacher announces a word (e.g., *tree*). The students then are tasked with picking up a card from the floor that rhymes with the word that the teacher announced (e.g., *bee*). When the music is turned back on, they put their cards back on the floor and start walking around the classroom again.

(b) Rhyme detection: This task asks the learners to select, from a given set of alternatives, a word that rhymes when compared with other words. For example, the teachers could offer some categories of words, and the learners have to decide which word, from a selection of words prepared by the teacher, rhyme with the target. Then, the learners may match the two words from different categories and devise some sentences, such as:

Steve Snake likes some … (***cake***, rice, carrot, roll, cheese, jam, pear…)

Peter Parrot likes some … (cake, rice, ***carrot***, roll, cheese, jam, pear…)

Bobby Bear likes some … (cake, rice, carrot, roll, cheese, jam, ***pear***…)

In this way, the learners may learn to detect the similarity of riming words. Also, the teachers could create any two categories of words for subjects and objects, and ask students to match them and make sentences. In addition, songs and chants can be employed to teach rhyming and PA. Two examples are as follows:

(1) ***Rain**, **rain**, go **away**.*

   *Come **again** another **day**.*

   *Little Johnny wants to **play**.*

   ***Rain**, **rain**, go **away**.*

(2) *Star **light**, star **bright***

   *First star I see **tonight**.*

   *I wish I may, I wish I **might**,*

It is accepted that learners remember better when learning is fun, and learning through songs is one of the most popular activities among EFL learners. The tunes of the two examples above are quite familiar to students, and the rhyming words with specific sound patterns help to strengthen phonological and phonemic awareness. The students are first asked to listen to the music and count the numbers of the specific rhyming words. Then the students can be asked to sing along with the teacher while specific words are pointed to on the blackboard. It is sometimes necessary to exaggerate the specific sounds being highlighted after the first verse of the song. For teenagers, however, these songs might seem childlike, and consequently, the use of more contemporary pop songs that are familiar and enjoyed by the students has been shown to be highly effective. The following examples include a number of my students' favorite songs, such as *Born this Way* by Lady Gaga, *Call Me Maybe* by Carly Rae Jepsen, *Just the Way You Are* by Bruno Mars and *Love Me Like You Do* by Ellie Goulding, as in (3)-(6).

   (3) *I'm beautiful in my **way***
     *'cause god **makes** no **mistakes***
     *I'm on the right track **baby***
     *I was born this **way***   *< Born this Way* by Lady Gaga >

(4) *I threw a wish in the **well**,*
  *Don't ask me, I'll never **tell***
  *I looked to you as it **fell***
  and now you're in my way

*I trade my soul for a **wish**,*
*pennies and dimes for a **kiss***
*I wasn't looking for **this**,*
but now you're in my way

< Call Me Maybe by Carly Rae Jepsen *>*

(5) *When I see your **face***
  *There's not a thing that I would **change***
  *'cause you're **amazing***
  Just the way you are

< Just the Way You Are by Bruno Mars *>*

(6) *Fading in, fading out*
  *On the edge of **paradise***
  *Every inch of your skin is a holy grail I've got to **find***
  *Only you can set my heart on **fire**, on **fire***
  < Love Me Like You Do by Ellie Goulding *>*

Leiguarda (2004) states that "if we want to draw teenage students' attention to what we teach, we have to make it emotionally relevant for them by presenting and practicing topics in new ways" (p. 11). That is, if what is being taught does not have a direct connection to their real life, teens simply switch off (Gomes, 2011). In this regard, pop songs can be one of the materials that have this connection.

*(c) **Rhyme production and generation**:* In this activity, students are requested to supply rhymes for a given word. For example, teachers may propose the word *eye*; students are then encouraged to produce rhyming words, such as *fly, cry, sky, mine, time, like*. Teachers could then present the song lyrics and the set of words to choose from, as in (7):

(7) *Believe me I can_____(fly)*. *I'm proud that I can _____(fly)*.
  To give the best of _____(mine). *The heaven in the _____(sky)*.
  <Proud of You by Fiona Fung>

Furthermore, Lin (2009) employed beginning-analogy and end-analogy tasks to assess children's ability to make orthographic analogies. At first, children in these tasks learned a 'clue' word like *beak*, and then they were asked to pronounce 'analogous words' such as *peak/weak/speak* and *bean/bead/beat*. The purpose was to see if children could work out end analogies and beginning analogies. Cunningham (2008) also claims that when readers encounter unfamiliar words, they are likely to do a fast search through their cognitive word stores for similar words with the same letters in the same places, and they then use these analogs to come up with a possible pronunciation. It appears that such approaches might well facilitate learners' efforts to decode

unknown words. Nonetheless, Stahl et al. (2006) suggest that "analogies can be a very powerful teaching approach but need to be taught after a child has reached the phonetic cue level and in conjunction with other decoding approaches" (p. 142). It can be seen that, while vital to the development of word recognition, the use of rhymes must act in association with a strong base of fundamental PA skills.

Oddity tasks

In oddity tasks, the learner is presented with a set of spoken words and is required to select which of the words is different or does not belong. They could be asked to identify the initial letter sound (e.g., *bit, bin, **pig***; *dog, dig, **kid***), the final sounds of the words (e.g., *cake, make, **hate***; *church, coach, **trash***), or the middle sounds of the words (e.g., *sad, cat, **red***; *cut, but, **hot***). Furthermore, the set of words in this kind of activity could be replaced by a set of pictures, in which all the students have to do is to identify the pictures with one non-rhyming, "odd-one-out", picture (Layton & Deeny, 2002). For example, four pictures, representing the words *ball*, *sun,* and *bun*, are given to the students. The teachers then ensure that the non-rhyming one (*ball*) is identified.

Blending tasks

Another effective learning tool is blending. As Adams (1990) notes, "blending tasks should stand as relatively simple and powerful tests of the child's familiarity with the nature and function of phonemes" (pp. 75-76). It has been shown that isolating the sounds and teaching students to blend the sounds of letters together to try to identify words are useful instructional strategies. In this activity, the teacher says each sound segment with a pause between them, and the students are then prompted to say the whole word. For example, the teacher provides the segments of a word (e.g., *to…ge …ther*), and the students are encouraged to put them together (*together*). Students can also create and speak out their own words (Chai, 2009), making this activity suitable as a teacher led or student led endeavour. In this activity, it is suggested that it is better to start with "chunks" when teaching multi-syllable words. Cunningham (2008, p. 192) claims that such long words often have recognisable roots, prefixes, and suffixes, and these "morphemic chunks" are particularly useful because they may not only provide clues to pronunciation, but also help learners to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words. This study suggests further that training in such "chunks" is necessary because this could help learners to decode words with familiar word part patterns.

Syllable-splitting tasks

Syllable-splitting tasks require that "the children attend carefully to the sound of the syllable and that they have and apply the insight that its initial sound can be broken away" (Adams, 1990, p. 72). Layton and Deeny (2002) offer an activity "Syllable counting – sorting the toys", which involves students in the categorisation of items in the classroom. For instance, the teacher

prepares six objects, and each object representing either one- (e.g., book, car, and key), two- (e.g., pencil, cushion, and jig-saw) or three-syllable words (e.g., telephone, elephant, and computer). While naming the objects, students are required to say the words and tap the beat to each syllable. Then, the teacher asks them how many beats there are in each word, and the students finally sort the items correctly. This training would be a springboard for learners to acquire multi-syllable words, which have been identified in Lin's (2009) study as the most difficult aspect of phonics learning.

Peer tutoring

It has been shown that peer tutoring can be an effective means of instruction for phonics learning, particularly for young learners (Chia, 2004; Lin, 2009; Snow, 2005). In Lin's (2009) study of junior high school students, both questionnaires and interviews revealed that all the participants endorsed the beliefs that the peer tutor played a positive role in phonics learning, helping to develop not only English vocabulary and pronunciation learning but also intrinsic motivation. In addition, a study by Chia (2004), investigating the effects of peer tutoring on phonics learning of primary school students in Taiwan, also showed an increase in both learning outcomes. Chia's results indicated that the experimental group, with peer tutoring three times (30 minutes each time) a week, performed significantly better than the control group, in which phonics was studied by learners themselves, in rapid letter sound, phonemes segmentation, and word recognition. Also, the students from the experimental group showed more active participation in class after the experiment. It appears that peer tutoring can be of enormous value for PA and learning motivation. A sample check sheet of phonics for peer assessment can be seen in the Appendix A.

Conclusion

As has been discussed in Section 2, children who begin reading instruction with sufficiently developed phonological awareness understand instruction better, master the alphabetic principle faster, and have a quantifiable increase in reading acquisition. As a result, PA plays a significant role in success at the beginning stage of reading, influencing reading achievement not only in the early period, but also at subsequent stages of development. This essential skill helps EFL learners to map sounds on spellings, which is the ability to enable them to decode words and improve the development of word recognition, which eventually promotes accurate reading fluency. To that end, this paper hopes to promote greater teacher awareness of, and pedagogical development in, teaching this important skill.

As the saying goes, "Give a man a fish, and he eats once. Teach a man to fish, and he eats forever". In this regard, teaching phonological awareness provides a valuable skill that EFL learners can use for a life time. If students acquire the knowledge of how letters combine to represent sounds, they will be able to pronounce unfamiliar words and will have the necessary tools to become independent readers. As a result, it is necessary not only for primary school

teachers but also junior high school instructors to offer phonological awareness training instruction in order to develop their students' knowledge of sound-spelling relationships. This would enable them to read words independently, thereby eventually facilitating their reading development.

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Appendix A: Check Sheet for Peer Assessment

Class:_____ Number:____ Name:_____

1. short vowels a, e, i, o, u

rules	examples								For Peer Tutors
a	dad	bad	bag	sad	ham	cat	hat	fat	
e	bed	red	sell	tell	help	pen	next	send	
i	big	pig	gift	kiss	list	milk	sick	will	
o	ox	box	hot	a lot	god	jog	shop	stop	
u	bus	but	cup	fun	lucky	run	sun	uncle	

2. Long a

rules	examples							For Peer Tutors
a_e	cake	make	save	face	hate	snake	plane	
ai	rain	train	wait	mail	paint	snail	Daisy	
ay	play	say	day	may	way	pay	delay	

3. Long e

rules	examples							For Peer Tutors
e_e	these	even	cheese	Steve	Chinese	Pete		
ea	read	meat	clean	please	teacher	speak	eat	
ee	week	need	sleep	green	tree	sheep	beef	

4. Long i

rules	examples		For Peer Tutors

i_e	like	bike	nice	price	time	tired	smile	
ie	pie	tie	die	lie	/	/	/	
igh	high	night	fight	flight	light	might	bright	

5. Long o

rules	examples							For Peer Tutors
o_e	coke	joke	hole	role	rose	nose	home	
oa	boat	coat	goat	soap	coach	road	roast	
ow	low	slow	snow	know	rainbow	follow	yellow	

6. Long u

rules	examples						For Peer Tutors
u_e	use	huge	cute	June	tube	cube	
ui	suit	fruit	juice	/	/	/	
ue	blue	glue	true	Sue	/	/	
oo	too	soon	room	moon	food	pool	

7. weak vowls

rules	examples					For Peer Tutors
a	alone	breakfast	about	pizza	husband	
e	seven	eleven	happen	department	student	
o	tomorrow	computer	lion	season	convenient	

8. ph/wh

rules	examples						For Peer Tutors
ph	phone	photo	elephant	telephone	dolphin	physical	
wh	what	when	white	which	whale	where	who

9.th/sh/sh/ch

rules	examples						For Peer Tutors
th(1)	three	thin	thirsty	teeth	mouth	math	
th(2)	this	that	they	brother	mother	father	
sh	trash	wish	dish	cash	short	sheep	
ch	cheese	chicken	chair	lunch	bench	beach	