

Explicit and Differentiated Phonics Instruction as a Tool to Improve Literacy Skills for Children Learning English as a Foreign Language¹

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Abstract

Explicit systematic phonics instruction is more effective for native English-speaking children learning to read and write than non explicit phonics instruction (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). This study goes beyond native speakers, and explores the effects that systematic and explicit phonics instruction has on young students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Moreover, phonics instruction for EFL students was differentiated: the instructional time, instructional sequence and phonics vocabulary were adapted to meet EFL students' needs. The findings show that, not only does explicit and differentiated phonics instruction have a positive effect for EFL learners in reading comprehension, but also that the differentiation of it has a considerable impact on EFL students literacy skills in general.

Keywords: explicit phonics instruction, English as a foreign language (EFL), bilingualism, differentiation, verb instruction

Resumen

La instrucción, explícita y sistemática de la fonética a niños de habla inglesa, que están aprendiendo a leer y escribir, es más efectiva que la no enseñanza explícita de la misma (Instituto Nacional de Salud Infantil y Desarrollo Humano de Estados Unidos 2000).

Este estudio va más allá del estudio de hablantes nativos y explora los efectos que la instrucción, explícita y sistemática de la fonética inglesa tiene en niños

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aprendiendo inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL). Además, la instrucción explícita de la fonética de la lengua inglesa se hizo de manera diferenciada, es decir: el tiempo de instrucción, la secuencia de los temas y el vocabulario fueron adaptados según las necesidades de los estudiantes de lengua extranjera. Los resultados muestran que la instrucción, explícita y sistemática de la fonética no sólo causa un efecto positivo en la comprensión lectora de los estudiantes, sino que su diferenciación tiene un impacto considerable en sus habilidades lecto-escritas.

Palabras claves: bilingüismo, inglés como segunda lengua (ESL), inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL), fonética inglesa, diferenciación

Resumo

A instrução, explícita e sistemática da fonética a crianças de fala inglesa, que estão aprendendo a ler e escrever, é mais efetiva que o não ensino explícito da mesma (Instituto Nacional de Saúde Infantil e Desenvolvimento Humano dos Estados Unidos 2000).

Este estudo vai mais além do estudo de falantes nativos e explora os efeitos que a instrução, explícita e sistemática da fonética inglesa tem em crianças aprendendo inglês como língua estrangeira (EFL). Além do mais, a instrução explícita da fonética da língua inglesa se fez de maneira diferenciada, melhor dito: o tempo de instrução, a sequência dos temas e o vocabulário foram adaptados segundo as necessidades dos estudantes de língua estrangeira. Os resultados mostram que a instrução, explícita e sistemática da fonética não só causa um efeito positivo na compreensão leitora dos estudantes, senão que sua diferenciação tem um impacto considerável nas suas habilidades leito-escritas.

Palavras chaves: bilinguismo, inglês como segunda língua (ESL), inglês como língua estrangeira (EFL), fonética inglesa, diferenciação

For children who already have reading and writing skills in their mother tongue, transferring these skills when learning to read and write in a new language would be the natural thing to do (Cisero, 1995); however non native English-speakers learning to read and write in English can find that their reading and writing skills acquired in their mother tongue may not be entirely suitable to learn to read and write this new language due to the differences of orthography among languages (Caravolas, 2004; Fashola, Drum, Mayer & Kang, 1996). This is the case of native Spanish-speakers who already have literacy skills, wanting to learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Koda, 2007).

Spanish has a shallow orthography which means it has strong grapheme-phoneme correspondence (the relationship between the letters

and the sound they produce) and therefore it is a language easy to read and write (Koda, 2007). By contrast English has a deep orthography which means that the relationship between graphemes and phonemes is not a one-to correspondence. Therefore in English it is not evident how the written words correspond to the spoken language or vice versa (Jones, 1996) and this makes it more challenging to learn to read and write in English (Sun-Alperin, 2008). This is where phonics instruction can help EFL students learn how to read and write in English.

The benefits of explicit phonics instruction have been studied and analyzed in native English speaking children (L1), and there is enough evidence to say that this instruction helps L1 students improve their reading comprehension, spelling, and overall literacy skills (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

The aim of this study is to go beyond native English-speaking children, and know if explicit phonics instruction has positive effects on some literacy skills of EFL children. The following skills were the ones that were analyzed: reading comprehension, spelling, and proper use of verbs in written statements. The objective was to determine the effectiveness that explicit phonics instruction had on these skills in EFL first grade students, in a bilingual school in Bogota, Colombia. The purpose of tracking each of these skills is to note if explicit phonics instruction had any effect on each one of them, based on students' results throughout a school year.

This study aimed to address the following questions: Does phonics instruction improve EFL students' reading comprehension?, Does phonics instruction improve EFL students' spelling skills? And does adapting phonics vocabulary from nouns based to emphasize it mainly on verbs improve students' written statements?

Theoretical Framework

The deep orthography of English makes it more challenging to learn to read and write in English than it is to learn to read and write in Spanish (Sun-Alperin, 2008). This is why EFL learners, who already have literacy skills in their native language and are accustomed to read words in a specific, determined way, make mistakes in pronunciation and/or spelling when learning to read and write in English (Sun-Alperin, 2008). Therefore, it is important to make the learning of English as a foreign language simple and systematic; specially in the early stages of its learning; which is where phonics can play a key role (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2000).

Phonics

Why is phonics instruction important? Phonics instruction teaches students to understand and learn the relationship between the letters (graphemes) of written language and the individual sounds (phonemes) of spoken language. It also teaches children how to use these relationships to read and write words accurately (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2000).

The main goal of phonics instruction is for students to learn and use the alphabetic principle—the understanding that there are systematic and predictable relationships between written letters and spoken sounds (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2000). This principle helps greatly on children’s ability to read words, both in isolation and in reading passages.

The National Reading Panel (NRP) issued a report, in the year 2000, where it states the benefits of phonics instruction and why it should be explicit and systematic (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Explicit phonics instruction happens when students receive a direct and explicit teaching of the relationship between graphemes and phonemes. Systematic means that the instruction should follow a clear and defined sequence; and such sequence should move from simple to more complex (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2000).

The following are the scientific research conclusions related to phonics instruction found by the NRP, which were summarized in the guide *Put Reading First* (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2000). Note that these findings regard native English-speaking students:

- Systematic and explicit phonics instruction is more effective than non-systematic or no phonics instruction.
- Systematic and explicit phonics instruction significantly improves children’s reading comprehension.
- Systematic and explicit phonics instruction significantly improves kindergarten and first-grade children’s word recognition and spelling.
- Systematic and explicit phonics instruction is effective for children from various social and economic levels.
- Systematic and explicit phonics instruction is most effective when introduced early.

(National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000, p.19, 20, 21).

Phonics for ESL

What does research tell us about teaching phonics to ESL or EFL students? Now that the major findings of the NRP regarding explicit systematic phonics instruction for English-native speakers are stated, one wonders if the NRP findings are also applicable to students learning English as a second language (ESL) or EFL students.

Even though the research conducted concerning phonics and the effects for EFL/ESL students is very scarce, and there is a big need of future research concerning this topic; Timothy Shanahan and Isabel Beck (2006) found five studies that explored the effect explicit phonics had on ESL students. It is important to mention that these studies had their limitations, but in general the findings are consistent with the NRP findings for L1 learners. Here is an excerpt from the chapter:

“Clearly, five small studies of phonological awareness and phonics are far from sufficient to allow a determination of the most useful instructional methods for meeting the early literacy needs of English-language learners. However, the findings of all five studies are consistent with the solid findings of first-language research. The National Reading Panel examined 52 studies of phonological awareness instruction and another 38 studies of phonics instruction. Both conferred clear benefits on children’s reading development, as determined by a wide range of measures, including beginning reading comprehension. The five studies of phonological awareness and phonics with English-language learners had similar results, although only one of these studies measured reading comprehension outcomes.” (Shanahan and Isabel Beck, 2006, p.427).

Even though the resources are scarce, and the research found has some limitations, the NRP findings regarding the benefits phonics instruction has for native speaking children, can also be translated to EFL children (Shanahan & Beck, 2006).

Review of Related Literature

As mentioned above, research papers about EFL students and explicit phonics instruction are scarce and hard to find. Nevertheless, the few studies found, are in accordance with what the NRP has to say in regard with explicit phonics instruction for L1 learners.

Even though the correlation between explicit phonics instruction and the enhancement of reading comprehension for L1 students has been found (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), few empirical studies regarding reading comprehension abilities in foreign language learners have been conducted. Taguchi (1997), working with Japanese EFL students, considered word recognition

ability of primary importance in reading comprehension. Such ability derived mainly from EFL students' phonemic awareness. In another study with Taiwanese students, Shen (2003) states that EFL learners should have explicit phonics instruction to develop their phonemic awareness efficiently; which will lead to successful automaticity in word recognition, and thus enhance their reading comprehension. This is also supported by Kern (1989), who found that through explicit instruction important comprehension gains were obtained in an EFL study group. All of the studies, mentioned above, correlate with Timothy Shanahan and Isabel Beck (2006) findings, that indeed explicit phonics instruction helps EFL students robust their reading comprehension skills.

Regarding spelling skills in ESL students, the studies found that phonological representations in the mother tongue of ESL students can cause interference errors when spelling words in the English language (Jared & Szucs, 2002). Jared and Szucs (2002) stated that "if a bilingual's two languages share the same alphabet but have different pronunciations for the letters,..., then there will be two conflicting pronunciations at the same time" (p. 225). This conflict in EFL students will then result in misspelled English words. These findings are supported by Ferrolí and Shanahan (1992), who found that "Spanish speakers perceive English sounds as if they are Spanish and spell those sounds in Spanish-like ways." (p. 3). Sun-Alperin and Wang (2008) also found that "Spanish-speaking children learning to spell in English encounter difficulties in spelling vowels that are represented by different graphemes in Spanish." (p.946).

When searching for differentiated phonics instruction for EFL vocabulary, there has been no qualitative research done about the issue yet, to the authors' knowledge.

The actual literature regarding the effects explicit phonics instruction has on EFL learners is very limited. This scarcity is a precise indicator of the urgent need of conducting more research to conclude whether explicit phonics instruction is an important area to develop to strengthen EFL students' literacy skills.

Data Collection

The major source of information for this action research comes from the grades of 85 EFL first grade students. These grades were recorded throughout the whole academic year of 2009-2010.

Participants

The children of this research were students attending a catholic, private, bilingual school only for girls in Bogota, Colombia. At the time

of this study the students were in first grade, which is comparable to second grade in the U.S.A.

This Action Research took place during the academic year of 2009-2010, within three first grade classrooms, for a total of 85 girls. Most of the children at the commencement of this study were seven years old. The majority of these children started studying at this school since they were four years old, thus had been studying in this institution for three full academic years prior to this action research. During these three previous years, these girls learned to read in Spanish as well as write short personal passages, also in that language.

Since this school is considered a bilingual school in Colombia, these girls started learning English as a foreign language from the very beginning of their school years as well. During the first three years of preschool (pre-kinder, kinder, and transition) they had three subjects taught to them in English every academic year. When entering first grade they knew the alphabet in English, the proper pronunciation of the main diagraphs (sh /ʃ/, wh /hw/, ch /tʃ/ , th /θ/ , etc.), and could use basic vocabulary words such as: Classroom objects, school related vocabulary, colors, numbers, farm animals, household objects, etc.

The girls of this research project all belong to a medium-high socioeconomic status and all of them speak Spanish as their mother tongue.

Context

For two consecutive years I was the English Specialist Teacher for all of these first graders, and taught each classroom on a daily basis for 50 minutes per day. It is important to clarify that I was not a main stream teacher; instead I was the English teacher, who went into the classroom for one 50 minute lesson, and came out of the classroom afterwards. Besides my English lessons, these students also received math, science and social studies lessons in English, for a total of sixteen lessons per week instructed in English. Each of these lessons lasted 50 minutes approximately.

During my first year as an English teacher for first grade students, I followed the syllabus given to me by the school. In phonics, I specifically taught first short vowels and then long vowels. The spelling and pronunciation of short vowels and long vowels were taught in an explicit and systematic way. It was explicit since each grapheme and corresponding phonemes were shown directly to students, and various practice opportunities (exercises, readings, pictures, etc.) were given to students to assess each of the short and long vowels. It was systematic because the instruction went from easier to more difficult and student's

new knowledge was needed to build upon it to scaffold for further learning.

During that first year I observed three things:

1. The time given to short vowels instruction was too long while the time given to long vowels instruction was not enough.
2. The order in which long vowels were introduced and taught was confusing for students.
3. The phonics materials and vocabulary were mostly taken from English text books originally designed for L1 learners.

Concerning time instruction, during my first year, I noticed that the short vowels were easily understood by my students. Since my first graders already had phonological and phonetic awareness in their native language (Spanish), this allowed for them to easily correlate Spanish vowel sounds with short vowels in English, as well as some consonant sounds that had the same phonetic sounds in both Spanish and English (e.g. t, p, b, m, n, etc.).

By contrast, understanding long vowels sounds was harder for students and many got confused. Long vowel sounds demanded more instructional time and more practice for students to fully understand and properly use them. In many opportunities time was the major constraint for giving students more instruction and more opportunities to practice. Therefore, during my second year, I decided to give short vowels less instructional time, and this extra time was then passed to long vowels instruction. This change significantly helped students' comprehension and proper use of long vowels sounds.

The *order* in which short vowels were introduced to students presented no problem and, since the vowel order was the same of the alphabetical order in Spanish (a-e-i-o-u), students found it easy to follow through all of them. The fact that the only short sound that is different in Spanish is the 'u' sound, and that this was coincidentally also the last short vowel, made it easy for students to understand this exception.

32

A very different situation arose when introducing long vowels. During the first year I taught the long vowels in the same order as short vowels. After viewing the long 'a', I continued with the long 'e', then the long "i" and so on. This sequence was extremely confusing for my students, since they had a hard time catching the concept of a vowel having more than one sound when being read or pronounced. This due to the fact that in Spanish a vowel only has one unique sound, generally,

and in English a single vowel has various ways of pronunciation (Sun-Alperin, 2008).

It also became obvious that the long vowel ‘e’ sound presented the major challenge for my EFL students. This happened since the pronunciation of the vowel ‘e’ from English to Spanish actually interchanges: The long ‘e’ sound in English is like the ‘i’ sound in Spanish. Something similar happens with the long ‘i’: The long ‘i’ sound in English is, in Spanish, composed of two vowels: “ai”. On the other hand, the long ‘a’, ‘o’ and ‘u’ were the easiest long vowel sounds for students to understand and recall in different situations.

That is why, for my second year, I purposefully adapted the sequence in which long vowels were introduced to my EFL students. I started with the long ‘a’, ‘o’ and ‘u’ and left the long ‘i’ and long ‘e’ for the very end of the school year. This proved to be a good change. After viewing the first three long vowels, students were familiarized with the long vowel patterns and differences in sounds when pronouncing or reading a long vowel. They were also accustomed to the methodology used when instructing long vowels, hence when they reached the long ‘i’ and ended with the long ‘e’, they expected differences in sounds and were less confused. During my second year my students grasped the long ‘i’ and long ‘e’ examples faster, applied the pronunciation more accurately, and the class had a faster pace during these lessons.

Regarding *Materials and Vocabulary*, most of the EFL students learn English with texts originally designed for L1 students. Such texts assume that the students learning how to read in English have a background and knowledge of an English speaking environment and culture; expected from daily interaction within a community who speaks English dominantly.

The L1 texts for teaching English expect some background knowledge from students, which will help them infer the meaning of a picture, sentence or text. A simple but clarifying example is the seasons: When someone reads: “The chilly, windy morning and the white scenery”, this is a clear reference of a winter scene; however for EFL learners this is a big puzzle and they do not have the knowledge to solve it and be able to relate it with a winter scene. Since, in many cases, EFL students do not have snowy winters in their homeland. (This would be the case of my EFL students in Colombia.)

The vocabulary that comes in those texts is also designed and thought for L1 students. Many of the phonics vocabulary used in my first year was taken from these L1 sources and some words were so rare and foreign to my students that it took a lot of time for me to explain

them and for my students to understand them. I clearly remember how difficult it was for my students to understand the word sled. How can you explain to children, that have never lived a winter, and have never played with a sled, what this word means. At the end I simply skipped the word due to the difficulty it presented. This situation also occurred with other vocabulary words during my first year.

During the first year, I also noticed that all the phonics vocabulary was mostly nouns and in a few cases adjectives; however there were no verbs, not even one. This had a big impact in sentence production: My students were excellent at writing sentences with one noun and many adjectives that described it (e.g. The cat is big, fat, black, and beautiful.), however they did not have the vocabulary to transcend those sentences into more richer and complex ones.

Whenever my students needed to know a verb, they would approach me and ask for it, over and over again. Shortly after I realized that the focus on vocabulary should be shifted to a verb focused vocabulary, instead of a noun focused vocabulary. This simple but effective change had a huge impact in my students writing. I tailored the phonics vocabulary lists for them to have mostly verbs and adjectives and few nouns. After introducing some short vowels verbs (eg. ask, has, clap, hang, nap, get, send, help, smell, drink, sing, sit, swim, wish, hit, hop, drop, stop, shop, cross, cut, hug, run, jump, hum, punch, etc.), my students went from writing mainly descriptive sentences to writing more complex sentences that expressed actions and I observed they felt more confident when writing and did it more independently.

Grading

In Colombia, the majority of the bilingual schools have four marking periods called bimesters, each one covering approximately two months. In this private school they also have four marking periods. All children were tested twice each marking period, for each of the English delivered subjects mentioned above. Students presented a midterm exam and a final exam at the end of each bimester. Each of these exams (midterm and final), was designed to evaluate several of the following skills in my English class: parts of the book, reading comprehension, spelling, vocabulary, phonics skills, verb use in written sentences, sentence structure, use of capital letters, recognition between fiction and nonfiction, etc.

The midterm exam was not as long, and did not cover as many topics or skills as the final exam for each period. Hence the final exams were more difficult, assessed more skills and required more time from the students to answer them.

In total, eight grades, from these types of exams, were recorded through the whole academic year: four midterms and four final exams. The eighth grade was the most important since it was the annual final exam, and assessed all the skills and knowledge a student should have acquired throughout the school year.

Assessing

All the eight exams were administered to whole classes. Students had one class (50 minutes) to answer each test. The only test students could have two lessons for answering was the annual final exam.

All the exams followed a known sequence for students and had the same type of exercises or questions previously done during class exercises or quizzes. This was to reduce the possibility of students getting confused or unable to answer because of how questions were set or because a new type of exercise was being asked.

Since students were familiarized with the type of exercises and the type of questions, their answering techniques were not being assessed. On the contrary, making sure students knew how to answer a specific type of question ensured that what was being assessed was the skill or knowledge the teacher wanted to assess.

Reading Comprehension was assessed in every single one of the eight exams, and was always the first point students had to answer. To assess reading comprehension the teacher read aloud a piece of age-appropriate text or a short story. Students also had the text and were asked to follow the teacher while she was reading. Then the teacher would answer any vocabulary questions the students had about the passage. Each of the questions on the test were also read to make sure students understood what was being asked. Finally students had to answer four multiple choice questions and one open ended question regarding the story.

All the *vocabulary* assessed was part of the phonics vocabulary seen in class, which students had copied in their notebooks and they had used in different opportunities during class activities. To assess vocabulary, students were presented with several pictures and they were asked to write the word corresponding to each picture. In some cases it was the other way around: Students were given the word and were asked to make the picture of it. Another way to assess vocabulary was to ask students to draw colored pictures of given sentences. These sentences had several vocabulary words seen during class.

To *assess* the correct use of verbs and their meaning, students were asked to fill out with verbs, sentences with blanks. A word bank

with all the verbs was given to students and they had to choose the correct one to complete each sentence. During the second half of the year, students continued filling sentences with blanks, but were also asked to write a complete sentence with a given verb.

Spelling was always assessed as a whole class. The teacher would say aloud words from the spelling lists from the vocabulary seen in class, and students were asked to classify each of these words in their correct phonetical column and write it. Spelling was not assessed in all of the eight exams. In the last semester only the third final exam and the fourth final exams assessed spelling, that is why there were only six spelling grades recorded throughout the academic year.

Note that almost every single point of the exams involved phonics. Vocabulary, spelling, and verbs all directly related to using phonics skills. Only the reading passage, to assess reading comprehension, was not related directly to phonics. Nevertheless, when choosing the reading passages, the phonetical awareness and phonics knowledge of the students were taken into consideration. For other type of assessments, besides these exams, such as reading fluency and accuracy, phonics also played a key role.

Having phonics as the common factor for my English instruction was done on purpose since phonics was not to be taught per se, but as a skill that would benefit student in multiple areas. Phonics was the horizontal vector of all my teaching during my second year as an English teacher and it was embedded in most of the different classroom exercises and activities.

Grading Range

In this private bilingual school the grading system is numeric and it ranges from zero to 100%. Being zero the lowest score and 100% a perfect score. The lowest grade a student can still pass with is 60%; therefore anything below or at 59% is considered a failing grade.

For this research children were classified in three different ranges based on their performance on the grades they obtained in the first period midterm exam. Students were classified as performing above average if their grade was at 90% or more. Students which scored between 60% and 89% were considered average performing students, and if their grade was at or below 59% students were classified as performing below average.

The purpose of choosing the first period grades was to see the initial state of students' performance without explicit phonics instruction. Afterwards, the objective was to observe if explicit phonics

instruction had any effect on the performance of the same group of students.

Having classified students, the grades of the same girls for the following exams were then observed throughout the year for their improvement on each of the different skills being studied. This was done to compare students' performance after having received explicit phonics instruction.

Each student had several grades for each of the exams, since each exam consisted of different points. Each point targeted to assess a specific skill, ability or knowledge. For example, the first final exam had a total of six points: The first point assessed students' knowledge about the parts of the book and the ability for recognizing them in a front cover. The second point assessed reading comprehension, by giving students a reading passage with five related questions to answer. The third point assessed spelling, and it was a short dictation. The fourth point assessed students' knowledge of vocabulary. The fifth point assessed the proper use of capital letters and punctuation within a sentence. Finally, the last point asked students to draw a picture for a given sentence assessing vocabulary, reading comprehension and verb understanding.

Out of these six points, only the results regarding reading comprehension, spelling and verbs usage were taken into consideration for this study. The rest were not analyzed for the purpose of this research project.

Data Sources

The main data sources for this action research project are the following;

- Students' grades
- Colleagues' interviews
- Surveys
- Class notes and observations

Students' Grades

At the end of the 2009-2010 school year each of the 85 students had presented two exams per bimester: One midterm and one final exam. This gave a total of eight different exams during the whole year. Additionally, each exam also had different points assessing a specific skill. Therefore each exam gave various grading points per student.

For reading comprehension every single one of the eight exams had a point assessing it. This means that there were 680 grades recorded

for reading comprehension throughout the school year. For spelling, six out of the eight exams had a short spelling dictation aimed to assess this skill, resulting in 510 grades for spelling. Finally, for verbs only the first two exams did not include a point assessing the proper use of these words within a sentence, meaning that 510 grades in total were recorded when assessing students' proper use of verbs during the academic year. The sum of all these grades gives us a grand total of 1700 grades as data collected for this study.

Colleagues' Interviews

The bilingual teachers who also instructed these first graders were interviewed after the 2009-2010 school year was finished. The interviews sought to know, on firsthand, the perceptions of the other bilingual teachers that also instructed these students in English.

There were, in total, six bilingual teachers: three science teachers (one teacher per classroom), two math teachers and a social studies teacher. I wanted to corroborate if what I had observed, as the English teacher, was also being observed by my colleagues that also had to assess and interact with these children in English. These interviews were done after the 2009-2010 school year was over and were done personally or by phone.

Survey

After the 2009-2010 school year, I decided to conduct a survey for the other bilingual teachers who also taught my EFL students. Therefore, an online survey was designed for these teachers to answer. The survey had in total six questions and was sent to each of the teachers by email (Appendix A).

The survey showed six statements, which each teacher had to agree or disagree with, in several levels. Teachers could choose from six possible ranges; these were the categories: strongly disagree, moderately disagree, slightly disagree, slightly agree, moderately agree and strongly agree.

The survey sought to estimate, in an accountable way, the perceptions about students' performance that the other bilingual teachers had. Specifically, the survey aimed to look at the following skills: Reading comprehension, reading accuracy, spelling skills, students' level of self confidence while reading, students' ability to write more complex sentences and students' oral use of English.

Class Notes and Observations

During my first year as an English teacher, I purposely made notes about specific difficulties or challenges that I observed as a common

pattern among my students. Thanks to those notes, I was able to determine what changes had to be done in the following academic year to improve my instruction. I also decided which activities I was going to repeat and which were left out.

Taking notes after class activities proved to be very useful and I continued to do it during my second year as an English teacher. However, I also decided to take notes on students' performance, both as a group and in some cases individually. I made brief comments after checking all the exams and after assessing students orally. This turned out to be very helpful when since I had specific information regarding the strengths and difficulties of my class as a group, and I could also tell, on an individual basis, which skills a specific student needed to reinforce.

Note taking after my instruction helped me reflect on it and allowed me to notice the impact that some changes, I had introduced during my classes, had on students' responses. These notes were also thoroughly reviewed and considered to back-up the findings presented in this research.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

For this study, first the results of the students' grades gathered through the year will be analyzed. Then, these results will be compared to the survey results, the interviews and my personal class and field notes for final interpretation.

The purpose of following this sequence is to be able to answer each different question stated previously. The first of these questions is: Does phonics instruction improve student's reading comprehension?

Reading Comprehension

In the first period midterm exam the reading comprehension results are the following: 20 girls performed above average with an average grade of 93%, only nine girls performed below average with an average grade of 34%, and the remaining 56 students had an average grade of 75%.

Once the performance based groups were established, the reading comprehension grades of each of these groups were also averaged for the following seven exams. The purpose was to track the effects explicit phonics instruction had on the reading comprehension skills each group had throughout the academic year.

The grades of the same 20 girls that belong to the above average group were averaged for the other reading comprehension points in the

seven following exams. The same was performed for the nine girls who scored below average and also for the average group.

The group of students that performed above average continued to perform above 80% on most of the exams and in the final annual exam they had an average grade of 89%. This shows that there was not a significant effect for the high performing students and that these students stayed in the high range.

The same situation happened for the group of average performing students. They began with an average grade of 75% and ended the year with a 74%. Throughout the whole year the group's average grade stayed between 73% and 75%. This means that the effect for this group was not negative but neither was it positive, and they also stayed within their range.

By contrast, the effects shown in the low performing group were considerable and were interesting to review in detail (Figure 1). These students began with an average grade of 34% then rose to a 59%, and continued rising exam by exam, until they reached an incredible 82% in the seventh exam, even surpassing their high performing fellow students. For the final annual exam they declined again, but still had a significant difference from the first grade at the beginning of the school year.

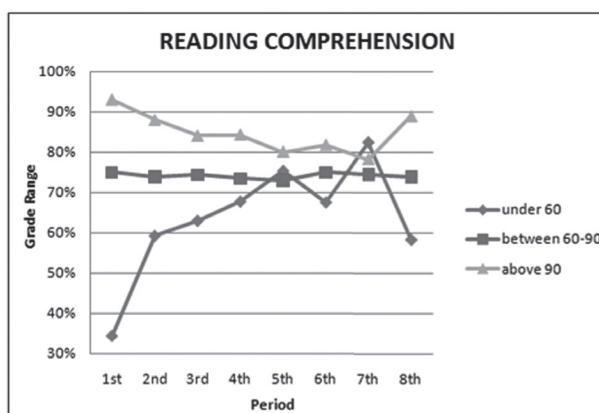


Figure 1. Reading comprehension average grades throughout the academic year.

These findings are the confirmation of what I, as a teacher, had sensed and observed among my low performing students. When reviewing my class notes, I had several positive notes about my struggling students and how I had seen that their understanding while reading had improved due to their enhanced ability to read words more accurately. This, in turn, led to a better understanding of what these students were reading, which increased their reading comprehension.

Similar observations were recalled from the other bilingual teachers during the interviews. All of them manifested that the students read aloud much better than at the beginning of the year and this contributed to a better understanding of what was being read. I specifically remember the comment of one of the science teachers, when she listened to one of the students who struggled the most. The girl was reading a nonfiction story about snakes, and while doing so, the science teacher was amazed at how well this little girl was properly pronouncing words such as snake, scales, nest, skin, etc. During the previous school year (2008-2009), this teacher had had other students read aloud the same nonfiction story, and she could recall the difficulties those students had while reading long vowel words. She told me that her reading students instead of reading *snakes* properly, said “*snack-es*”, as if reading the word in Spanish.

Finally, if you compare the grades results to those of the survey, in which teachers were asked to agree or disagree with the following statement: After receiving phonics instruction students’ *reading comprehension* increased; the teachers’ answers also confirm the results. All of the teachers who answered the survey agreed with this statement. Three of them strongly agreed, two agreed moderately, and only one slightly agreed. This supports the evidence that, indeed, explicit phonics instruction had an overall positive effect in students reading comprehension, however this effect was more significant for the low performing group of students.

Spelling

Once the average grades concerning spelling skills are analyzed, a particularity about these results can be observed. The students’ general performance improves in the first four exams, however after the fourth exam the grades for all students drop considerably (Figure 2). (The grades for the third and fourth midterm exams do not show since spelling was not assessed in these two exams).

By observing the spelling average grades for each of the groups, it can be noted that the above average group starts with an average grade of 95%, followed by average grades of 91%, 94% and 94%. These four

grades belong to the first four exams; afterwards this group drops to 85% and continues descending until reaching 78% in the final annual exam.

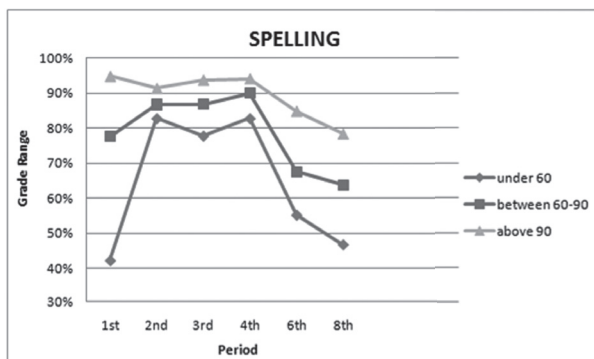


Figure 2. Spelling average grades throughout the academic year.

Something similar happened to the average group. The average performing students began with a 78% average grade, rising through 87% and reaching a good 90%. This improvement also happened in the first four exams; however after the fourth exam, they dramatically drop to 68%, descending even further to a 64% in the final annual exam.

The case is even more dramatic with the below average group, which began with a low 42%, rising dramatically to an 83%, followed by a 78% and then a 83% for the first four exams. After the fourth exam this group drastically dropped to 55% finishing with a 47% for the final annual exam.

By looking at these results one wonders what was done during the first four exams that significantly improved students' performance in spelling dictations, and also wonders what happened after the fourth exam that changed the results obtained in the first four exams. When I first observed these results, I was quite intrigued and could not decipher why my students had such a good improvement in the first semester (The first four exams were conducted in the first school semester) and then a poor performance in the last semester of the year.

I realized then, that the short vowels had been studied during the first semester and that during the last semester the study of long vowels was covered. Could this have a correlation with the results found in the grades? My field notes and class observations led me to notice that

when spelling dictations (in quizzes and exams) had to do with short vowel words, my students were very accurate. This could be due to the fact that Spanish vowel sounds correlate with short vowel sounds in English.

On the other hand, when students were asked to write long vowel words, the results of these dictations were not as good. In many cases I found words spelled as if written in Spanish (e.g. foun instead of phone), or written with a different blend that also represented the long vowel sound heard by students (e.g. *gaim* instead of *game*). Spelling mistakes for long vowel words were encountered in all of my students, regardless of the group they belonged to.

The fact that Spanish vowels only have one unique sound, and are always pronounced and spelled in the same way, could explain why such type of mistakes happened. When students were not sure of how a word was spelled, they recalled their knowledge in Spanish to write it. Since in the English language a long vowel sound does not have a unique letter combination, but instead various blends of vowels or letter combinations can produce the same long vowel sound (eg. *cake*, *play*, *rain*), could also explain the misuse of these letter combinations in the dictations.

Since short vowels were assessed in the first four exams, and then long vowels were assessed in the last exams, the results found in the grades do correspond and validate what I observed as a teacher: Students had a correct spelling of short vowel words but had difficulties when spelling long vowel words.

Nevertheless, when interviewed, the other bilingual teachers manifested that after the second half of the school year students were more aware that the long vowel sounds could be spelled differently, and teachers recalled students approaching them to ask the proper spelling of a long vowel word. This correlates to the survey results where two teachers strongly agreed and the other four moderately agreed when answering to the following statement: After receiving phonics instruction students' *spelling* improved.

Regarding the effect explicit phonics instruction has on EFL students' spelling abilities; it cannot be suggested that such instruction has a positive effect on EFL students' spelling performance.

Verb Usage

For proper verb usage in written statements, 21 girls scored 90% or more and thus were classified as performing above average. The average performing students that scored between 60% and 89% were

32. Finally another 32 girls scored 59% or less and thus were classified as performing below average.

The average grades for all of the three groups of students, on the proper use of verbs, increased significantly from the very beginning of the school year (Figure 3). Even though the positive effect was generalized among all students, the students who were performing below average at the beginning of the year had the major difference of performance, from the commencement of the school year up to the end of it.

The below average group began with average grade of 29%, had a huge leap towards 61%, continued rising to 74%, then descended a bit to 68%, and finished with an amazing 78%.

The improvement also took place with the average performing group, however it was not as outstanding. The average performing students began with a 67% and rose up to an 84%, and finally finished the year with an 83%.

Finally the top performing students began with an impressive 99%, afterwards their grade decline to 94%, then to 89%, reached the lowest score of 88% for the seventh exam, and rose back again to a 99% for the final annual exam.

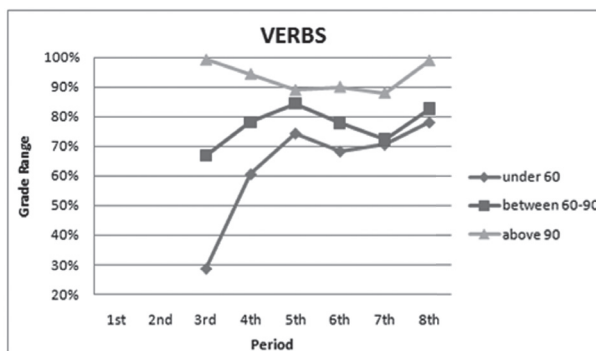


Figure 3. Proper use of verbs in written sentences average grades throughout the academic year.

After analyzing the grades regarding verb usage for all the students, it can be said that, indeed, the shifting of vocabulary to be focused on verbs had one of the greatest positive impacts in students' sentence production. At the beginning of the school year students were very good at writing descriptive statements that included one noun and

various adjectives. (e.g. The cat is big, fat and black.). Nevertheless, it was a common situation for student to have an important lack of verbs knowledge, and hence had a hard time trying to communicate beyond descriptive aspect of objects.

As a whole class the effect is notorious, but the major impact on the differentiation on vocabulary emphasis was, without a doubt for the low performing students. The change is simply dramatic.

Regarding the survey teachers were asked to agree or disagree with the following statement: After receiving verb focused vocabulary instruction, students' ability to write more complex sentences increased. The results show that all of the teachers agreed at some point with this statement. Three of the teachers strongly agreed, two agreed moderately and only one slightly agreed. This supports the evidence that, indeed, the modifications on the phonics vocabulary, where verbs played a key role, had a positive effect in students' written statements.

My observations during the school year, as a teacher, also confirmed what the students' grades and the survey's results show. I personally found that the major advances observed in my English classes, regarded the introduction of verbs as part of the phonics vocabulary. Almost daily, it was evident how students took those verbs and started using them in different sentences, both orally and written. The students then felt empowered by knowing new verbs, and by being able to communicate new ideas, feelings and events of their daily life.

Findings

According to the NRP explicit phonics instruction is beneficial for L1 learners; however this statement could be broaden to include EFL learners as well. By analyzing the grades of these 85 students, together with the surveys and interviews conducted to the other bilingual teachers, and my class observations, some of the NRP findings can also apply for EFL students.

Explicit phonics instruction does improve EFL children's reading comprehension. Phonics help students to better decode and pronounce an English word, which translates into better understanding of what is being read, and hence improve the reading comprehension of EFL students.

Unfortunately the same cannot be said regarding spelling. Although, explicit phonics instruction does help L1 children improve their spelling skills, for EFL children this is not the case. The EFL students of this study had a good performance when asked to spell short

vowel words, but the difficulties arose when asked to spell long vowel words. This difficulty could be explained when acknowledging the different spelling ways that a long vowel sound has in English and the tendency students have to spell these long vowel sounds in Spanish like ways. This correlates to the findings of Sun-Alperin and Wang (2008) were native-Spanish speakers learning ESL made spelling mistakes by writing English long vowel words as if written in Spanish.

Without a doubt, the major finding concerns the effect differentiated vocabulary used to instruct phonics had on students writing. By adapting and tailoring the vocabulary of EFL students, and shifting it from a noun based to a verbs based vocabulary, students' sentence complexity improved. Students went beyond expectations and made a leap from very basic, descriptive sentences, to more robust sentences which described actions and enabled students to communicate effectively.

There are some educational implications that emerge from these findings. EFL teachers should be aware that native Spanish-speaking children's L1 knowledge can be transferred to their L2 learning and therefore use this knowledge to make the learning of EFL easier for students. Making subtle changes, such as changing the sequence for introducing long vowels to native Spanish-speaking EFL students, can allow students to understand the difference between the Spanish and English orthography and that the English language has different graphemes corresponding to a single phoneme.

Finally the shift from a noun based vocabulary to a verbs based vocabulary can suppose a great benefit for EFL students in terms of writing production. Empowering EFL students with relevant and useful vocabulary, like verbs, can open a lot of possibilities to improve student's written communication.

Conclusions

Although there is no much research conducted regarding explicit phonics instruction for EFL students, my students' experiences and results clearly demonstrated the benefits of this instruction for EFL learners.

A significant benefit of explicit phonics instruction for EFL students was the improvement on students' reading comprehension. Explicit phonics instruction helped EFL students to improve their pronunciation when reading in English, which directly impacted the understanding of what was being read; thus enhancing their reading comprehension.

Even though explicit phonics instruction enhances the spelling abilities of L1 students (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) the same cannot be confirmed for EFL students. The EFL were native Spanish-speakers, and since Spanish has the characteristic that each vowel has a unique sound; EFL students had a hard time understanding the long vowel sounds and learning the different ways in which a long vowel could be written. Therefore misspelling English long vowel words and spelling these words in Spanish like ways.

Finally the most significant benefit that explicit phonics instruction had for EFL students was the improvement of their written statements by revising and adapting EFL phonics vocabulary, and focusing it mainly on verbs. This differentiation allowed EFL students to write much more complex sentences and to communicate in a more effective way.

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