

A case study on the use of phonics instruction, implicit and explicit, to help low proficiency ESL learners at primary level to develop proficiency and enjoyment in English reading

Submitted by

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For the degree of Bachelor of Education (English)

at The Hong Kong Institute of Education

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Abstract

Meta-analysis has indicated that explicit phonics instruction enhances children's reading proficiency significantly more effectively than implicit phonics instruction. Studies in Hong Kong have demonstrated the contribution of phonics teaching in improving ESL learners' reading abilities. However, it remains unclear that what kind of phonics instruction, explicit or implicit, is more effective in developing Hong Kong ESL learners' reading proficiency and enjoyment.

Therefore, this study aimed to fill the mentioned research gap by firstly focusing on finding out the differences and difficulties appeared when explicit phonics instruction was conducted in Hong Kong ESL context. Then, the effectiveness of supplementary implicit phonics instruction in developing low proficiency Hong Kong ESL learners' reading proficiency and enjoyment was investigated.

This research is a case study carried out in a local primary school in Hong Kong, including 60 student participants and 5 teachers. A mix of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies is employed in this project.

The data showed the differences in language background and school systems between ESL and ENL contexts should be taken into consideration when phonics approach for reading is used in Hong Kong ESL context. Also, the data indicated additional implicit phonics instruction is highly effective in developing low proficiency ESL learners' reading ability. The effectiveness in developing enjoyment is not that outstanding, but still can be considered as effective.

The study indicated implicit phonics instruction is helpful in providing phonics teaching in real reading experience and it therefore has a significant impact especially on low proficiency ESL learners who lack exposure to English and chances to read in English.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis represents my own work, except where due acknowledgement is made, and that it has not been previously included in a thesis, dissertation or report submitted to this University or to any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualifications.

Signed _____

Ding Jia Yu

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Chapter1. Introduction

Development of reading usually addresses two dominations; namely, word reading and reading comprehension, and word reading is the focus at the initial stage of primary level (Adams, 1990). Since the focus of this research is on learners at this level, the 'reading' mentioned in this study is word reading. Over the years attempts have been made to find the best English reading instruction. Those have been nominated are not necessarily always the same instruction. Among the various methods for teaching reading, the phonics approach is one of the fundamental and popular reading teaching methods used in elementary schools (Glazer, 1998; Roe, Smith & Burns, 2009).

Along with the widespread and popular application of phonics instruction in ENL (English as native language) context, there is a rapid growth in the use of phonics instruction in English teaching reading in Hong Kong primary schools. However, the phonics teaching approaches vary among different schools. Among the various approaches, explicit phonics instruction is the one most schools adopt. Phonics, especially explicit phonics, is valued in English speaking countries for paving the way for word reading; that is, enabling children to work out the pronunciation of unfamiliar words independently based on knowledge of letter-sound relationships (Ehri, 2001; Ehri, Nunes, Stahl & Willows, 2001; Ehri, 2005;

Roe, Smith & Burn, 2009). There are two main methods of teaching phonics in English speaking countries, namely, explicit and implicit instruction. By applying explicit phonics instruction, phonics knowledge, like letter-sound relationships is directly and clearly taught in a systematic way. Various practices are planned on purpose to consolidate phonics skills (Learning Point, 2004). Implicit phonics teaches phonics in whole language activities based on teachers' sense of children's needs and it is usually integrated with reading high-quality children's literature (Gray et al., 2007; Glazer,1998).

Theoretical claims about explicit and implicit phonics teaching approaches are empirically well supported in the ENL context. In addition, a few researches have proved that building up phonological awareness can contribute to English reading for not only ENL learners but also ESL learners (Keung & Ho, 2009; Yeung & Sigegel, 2012; Yeung & Chan, 2013). However, insufficient attention has been paid to the adaptation of phonics teaching instruction and programme design corresponding to the differences between ESL (English as second language) and ENL learners. Even fewer studies in the field pertain to low proficiency ESL learners. In addition, none of them investigates opinions about phonics instruction for reading from teachers who are currently teaching phonics programmes. To help local students, especially low achievers to benefit more from phonics programme, the phonics teaching method used in Hong Kong merits further exploration.

This study is intended to investigate the efficiency and difficulties in conducting explicit phonics instruction to help low proficiency ESL learners develop

proficiency in English reading. It takes the form of a casestudy which has been carried out in a Hong Kong primary school. Data collected from classroom observation, interviews and formative word reading assessment results. The aim is to examine if additional implicit phonics instructions followed by explicit phonics instruction can help low proficiency ESL learners to develop proficiency and enjoyment in reading in English.

Chapter2. Literature Review

In this section, research findings about explicit and implicit phonics instruction in ENL context will be firstly explored, then concerns of phonics instruction in Hong Kong context are explained. In the end, theories referring to the importance of enjoyment and confidence in English reading will be discussed.

2.1 Explicit and implicit phonics instruction in ENL context

Torgesen, Morgan, and Davis (1997) demonstrate that children who lack phonological awareness benefit much more from systematic phonics training than implicit phonics. Similarly, Christensen & Bowey's study (2009) finds that compared to group exposed to implicit phonics programme, explicit programmes focusing on letter-sound relationships and decoding skills with extensive practice enormously improves children's performance in various aspects of reading assessment. Years passed and explicit phonics instruction has taken an important position in phonics teaching. In England, the current government insists on the superiority of explicit phonics instruction, especially the efficiency and exclusiveness of synthetic phonics for both school teaching and teacher training. (Clark, 2013)

Meanwhile, some consider the implicit phonics approach, which naturally embeds phonics skills in meaningful reading, as the most efficient in phonics teaching (Dahl et al, 1999; Kane, 1999). Although valid research results can hardly be found to support this statement, the statement still stands for the following reasons. Firstly, English language is characterized by its complexity

and irregularities. As Lyle & Bolt (2013) claim, letters of the alphabet do not systematically represent consistent sounds and there are a lot of exceptions. Explicit phonics is not as efficient and direct as how it is expected in helping develop reading skills. Mature readers do not consciously pay attention to texts at a phonemic level. (Goouch & Lambirth, 2011) Over concentrating on individual sounds may lead to ignorance of intonation, tones and complete distortion of reading and communication purposes at primary level. (Chela-Flores, 2001). It is believed that reading can be taught in a more naturalistic manner when implicit phonics instruction integrates phonics teaching into real reading experiences. (Jenna M. Bast, 2013; Chela-Flores, 2001)

Taken both the advocations and objections to the explicit and implicit phonics instruction into consideration, a balanced phonics teaching approach should be introduced (Gray et al, 2006). Rose's (2006) not only affirmed the efficiency of systematic phonics teaching but also highlighted the integration of reading children's literature both as a stepping stone and a place where children put their learnt phonics skills into practice. (as cited in Gray et al, 2007) Research also revealed that the exemplary reading teachers integrate both explicit and implicit instructions in teaching phonics (Villaume and Brabham, 2003).

2.2 Concerns about phonics instruction in Hong Kong Context

All ESL children have been reported in need of phonics instruction since compared to their L1 counterparts, they are left behind in vocabulary development due to limited chances of picking up the language in a natural context (Keung & Ho, 2009; Proctor, Carlo, August, & Snow, 2005). Previous

research has also reported that ESL children in Hong Kong are weaker in phonological awareness than ENL children (McBride-Chang et al., 2004).

Concerns of conducting phonics instruction in Hong Kong are generally related to the differences between ENL and ESL contexts in the following three areas. Firstly, compared to ENL children, ESL learners in Hong Kong usually have limited oral vocabulary in English as Cantonese is the major language used in daily life. Learning phonics requires phonological awareness and limited oral vocabulary tends to impede phonological awareness and therefore influence children's reading performance (Metsala & Walley, 1998; Yeung, Siegel & Chan, 2013). Secondly, the L1 interference may also influence phonics teaching and learning. Instead of dividing a word into phonemes, Chinese speakers tend to perceive the pronunciation of an English word as a whole unit and memorize it as a whole (Holm & Dodd, 1996) In order to learn phonics, Hong Kong children may need extra help in developing the awareness that English words are composed of different phonemes. Thirdly, ESL children have relatively fewer chances of authentic reading practice in English. Teachers in Hong Kong usually only focus on the input of phonics knowledge due to the limitation of time can be allocated for phonics class. However, Roe, Smith & Burns (2009) claim that readers keep refining their reading skills throughout reading practice. Therefore, when phonics teaching are promoted as reading instruction in Hong Kong primary schools, it is important that the knowledge and skills be paired up with sufficient reading experience where they can learn how to apply the learnt skills into practice. Yeung, Siegel & Chan's (2013) recent study proposed that both phonological awareness and language enrichment are of great importance in

designing effective instruction for early reading for Chinese ESL children.

Although recent study has proved that phonics teaching can enhance Hong Kong ESL learners' phonological awareness and that in turn benefit their English reading ability (Chim, 2007). However, the manners in which the phonics instruction should be implemented are more effective for Hong Kong ESL children remains unclear.

2.3 The importance of enjoyment in English reading

Enabling children to perceive reading as an enjoyable pursuit is regarded as one of the important principles of teaching reading (Roe, Smith & Burns, 2009).

Therefore, offering children pleasure experience in reading is supposed to be one of the crucial objectives of phonics teaching. And it is especially important for second language learners who find the language unfamiliar. For struggling readers, Meyerson & Kulesza (2002) suggest improving their interests and motivation as the step before providing them with series of reading strategies. It is also claimed that struggling readers are usually found to be either over dependent on word recognition strategies such as phonic or lack of basic phonics instruction.

In the process of promoting English phonics learning, it is both dangerous and easy to shift the focus from teaching children phonics in order to help them read to simply feeding them phonics knowledge. Children shall never be stopped at the word reading stage and one of the goals for reading instruction is to help students to participate in a substantial, insightful and motivating reading

experience, thus, reading enjoyment should also be taken into consideration (Roe, Smith & Burns, 2009). Although research has found phonics approach for reading is effective in building up the enjoyment of English reading for middle school students in the context of Hong Kong (Ip, 2004) Nevertheless, the effectiveness on beginning ESL learners is not yet clear.

Chapter 3. The study

The present study is set to investigate the following three research questions:

1. Compared with conducting explicit phonics approach for English reading in ENL context, what are the differences and difficulties when it is applied in ESL context?
2. Does additional implicit phonics instruction help low proficiency ESL learners progress in reading proficiency in English?
3. Does additional implicit phonics instruction help low proficiency ESL learners develop enjoyment in reading in English?

3.1 Setting

The study was conducted in a local primary school in Hong Kong. The school was prestigious in its school district for its educational achievements especially in Chinese and English subjects. The English curriculum for Key stage one (P1-P3) in this school was mainly composed of three components: everyday English lessons following the Longman Express textbook series, school-based phonics programme and guided reading programme. The school-based phonics programme was focused on providing explicit phonics instruction and aimed to enable students to tackle the pronunciation of unknown words by using systematic and straight-forward sound-letter relationships. Students had a 35 minutes phonics lesson once a week. The guided reading programme provided students with access to different types of text and was set to improve reading comprehension. Students were divided into 4 groups according to their reading abilities and had a 60 minutes guided reading lesson once a week. Both of the school-based phonics and guided-reading programmes were co-taught by a local teacher and a native teacher.

To help the group of struggling readers in every class, these students were invited to join an optional buddy reading programme, which generally focused on providing implicit phonics instruction. Twenty students from higher forms who were considered as fluent English readers were trained to be buddy tutors to help lower form students in reading leveled English texts under two native English teachers' (NETs') supervision. Students involved attended a 20-minute buddy session twice a week in groups of fifteen.

3.2 Participants

This research was not restricted only to investigating the effectiveness of additional implicit phonics approach for reading on children's word reading performance. It is also aimed at collecting opinions toward phonics reading approach from different stakeholders, namely, students, LETs and NETs. The study population included a total of 60 primary 2 students who were considered as low achievers in English word reading by the end of Year 1, including 28 boys and 32 girls, 3 local English teachers (LETs) and 2 native English teachers (NETs). The age range of the students involved was from 7 years old to 8 years old. Their reading levels ranged from level 0 to level 6. Among them, 30 children volunteered to join in the buddy reading programme for receiving implicit phonics instruction and 8 of them were invited to have a group interview with the researcher. Both the local and native English teachers involved were currently offering phonics instructions to these students.

3.3 Methods of data collection

This case study was an empirical investigation to explore the use of phonics approach for improving low reading proficiency students' English reading in a local primary school. It attempted to provide a holistic and detailed description of how the current

phonics reading approach helped children in word reading in practice. The major fieldwork was conducted by quasi-experiments and group interviews. Formative reading assessment was adopted in the quasi-experiments to record the participants' reading level which represents their reading proficiency.

3.3.1 Quasi-experiments

Students' reading levels were collected to investigate the effectiveness of additional implicit phonics instruction in helping low proficiency ESL learners improving reading proficiency. The 60 student participants were divided into two groups. Group A consists 30 students volunteered to join in the buddy reading programme and receives implicit phonics instruction twice a week in addition to explicit phonics instruction once a week. Group B consists the other 30 students who only receives explicit phonics instruction once a week. The student participants' reading levels were based on formative word reading assessment and collected two times by the researcher. The first time was by the end of Year 1 before the school had offered any implicit phonics instructions to any students from the participant group. The second time was by the end of Year 2 when a group of 30 students (Group A) had been involved in the implicit phonics programme for about 8 months (excluding the 2 months of summer break).

The formative word reading assessment was done by the English teachers at school. The English books of the school were put into different levels of difficulties from level 1 to 19 according to Fountas & Pinnell's (1999) leveled book list based on its levelling difficulty criteria (*to facilitate data analysis, the original levelling represented by alphabets A-S is represented by numbers instead). Throughout the

year, as students were divided into four groups in their guided reading lesson, every group of students would be assessed and given with their current reading level by their English teacher twice a month during the lesson. The students' reading levels were collected in the record of book reading progress of students by using Fountas & Pinnell's (1996) model. Each time teacher assessed students' word reading by letting students read aloud a book in their current level and noted down their accuracy rate. “✓” means accuracy below 70% and the child need to be moved down a level, “✓✓” means accuracy between 70-80% and the child remains at the current level, “☆” means accuracy above 90% and the child can be moved up to the next level. (samples of record forms are provided in appendix 1 for information)

3.3.2 Interview:

3.3.2.1 Interview with teachers

Group semi-structured interviews (see appendix 2) with local English teachers (LETs) and native English teachers (NETs) were aimed to brainstorm and stimulate teachers' perceptions in order to identify the differences and difficulties when explicit phonics instruction is applied in ESL context. The interview questions for 3 LETs were focused on the difficulties while the interview questions for 2 NETs were in addition with the differences they found between phonics reading instruction in ENL and ESL classroom.

3.3.2.2 Interview with students

The purpose of small group interview with students (see appendix 2) was to investigate if additional implicit phonics instructions could help low proficiency ESL

learners develop enjoyment in reading in English. The questions included were generally focused on the influence of implicit phonics instruction on the children's interest and confidence in English reading. Both closed and open-ended questions were included to allow children to enrich the data by adding explanations or remarks.

Small group interview was chosen instead of a questionnaire survey because of the consideration of the age of the participants. It was concerned that young children's attention span and writing ability were limited to complete paper-based questionnaires that consists of questions related to description and reasoning. Also, the interview was conducted in Cantonese rather than English to make sure children felt comfortable and easy to fully express their feelings and opinions.

3.4 Method of analysis:

3.4.1 Quantitative Data analysis

The quasi-experiment provided qualitative data for RQ2. The reading levels of students achieved by the end of Year 1 and Year 2 were collected to figure out the gained reading levels. In order to investigate the effectiveness of additional implicit phonics instruction, the average gained reading levels across the year of the group of students who had not been exposed to implicit phonics instructions (group B) were compared with the average gained reading levels of students who received additional implicit phonics instruction (group A).

3.4.2 Qualitative data analysis

The semi-structured interviews provide qualitative data for RQ1 and RQ3. The interview with teachers responding to RQ 1 and interviews with students responding RQ were respectively transcribed and coded in the light of Bogdan and Biklen's (2007) qualitative content analysis research framework to identify key items in the interviews. Firstly, the interviews were fully transcribed. Then, conceptual themes were extracted after reading through the transcripts and identifying the recurring ideas. These conceptual themes were utilized to generate a matrix of major themes which were sorted under specific headings. Finally, the representative words from the interviewees were quoted under the related themes. In addition, as interview with 8 students included both close and open-ended questions, the relative proportions of the answers to the close-ended questions were presented.

Chapter 4. Findings and Discussions

This chapter reports the findings collected during 14 weeks of teaching practicum. The findings include three main aspects, namely, differences and difficulties between explicit phonics instruction for reading in ESL and ENL context, the effectiveness of additional implicit phonics instruction in improving low proficiency ESL learners' reading proficiency and the effectiveness of implicit phonics instruction in developing reading enjoyment of learners with low reading proficiency. The analysis will show complete answers of the 3 research questions.

4.1 Differences and difficulties between explicit phonics instruction for reading in ESL and ENL context

The interview with native English teachers (NETs) and local English teachers (LETs) about the explicit phonics instruction are fully analyzed to generate main themes corresponding to RQ1. The research found the language exposure to English, L1 interference and rote-learning of phonics knowledge and skills in the ESL learning process as well as the limited time allocated for phonics teaching, lack of phonics instruction beyond English class and insufficient professional support for phonics teaching in terms of teaching phonics make the situation of phonics instruction in ESL context distinct from the situation in ENL context. Therefore, the way of giving phonics instruction in Hong Kong ESL context should be adjusted accordingly

4.1.1 Differences and difficulties in learning

Lack of exposure to English

All the teachers interviewed reported that compared to young ENL learners, the lack of exposure to English of young ESL learners was inevitable and mainly displayed in the following three respects: smaller word bank, lack of sensitivity to language grammar and structure and fewer chances of English reading in print.

These features further lead to some typical problems found in ESL learners' word reading performance. Compared to ENL learners, much less frequency of self-correction in word reading was found among the beginning ESL learners. Namely, when young ENL learners read the words incorrectly, and when they finished the sentences they knew they made mistakes. However, this was very hard for young ESL learner's to realize their mistakes.

Young ESL learners' limited word bank and lack of sensitivity of the language grammar and structure may account for this difference. Differing from the ESL learners, ENL learners know what they read do not make sense because they have the language background. They know what the language should sound like because they have been listening to the language since they were born. The following statements are indicative of the responses from NETs about the typical problems found in ESL children:

"They will read "I was a dog. The problem is that they switch the order of the characters in the word "s-a-w" because they do not understand the sentence they say "I was a dog" do not make sense since they are lack of vocabulary and grammar. While the native speaker will say "I was a dog... or not, I saw a dog." They can self-correct." (Interview with NETs)

This finding echoes the view that limited oral vocabulary may not only hinder learners' phonological development but also impede their reading abilities. (Bialystok, 2007; Metsala & Walley, 1998) Also, Heilman (2002) suggested, "if children are reading for meaning, they will instantly correct some errors in their reading that make the text they are reading meaningless." It further indicates that when explicit phonics instruction is applied in reading in Hong Kong, the meaning in reading tend to be missed.

Also, compared to ESL learners, ENL learners have more chance to receive incidental reading guidance, namely, implicit phonics instruction at home when they are reading with parents. At the same time, it means, ENL children have more opportunities to put their learnt phonics knowledge into actual reading experience. This may be the reason why implicit phonics instruction is not necessarily to be included in the curriculum for providing children chances to apply their phonics knowledge. The following extract is provided to support this view:

"In England, it is more common for parents to read 5-6 books a week with children. But here, 1-2 books may be the maxim and actually some parents do not have the time or ability to do so." (Interview with NETs)

L1 interference

Most teachers interviewed also considered L1 interference on ESL learners as an inevitable factor that account for their differences and difficulties in learning explicit phonics for English reading. Chinese is logographic and students firstly learn Chinese with the whole-word approach but English is alphabetic. It was reported that at the very beginning of receiving explicit phonics instruction,

children tend to look at the word as a picture and it thus make them easily miss out some sounds in the middle. Here is the related extract of the transcript:

“They tend to look at the words as whole pictures and the entire picture make sense to them however the individual parts of the word make no sense at all.”
(Interview with LETs)

This finding is in line with what had been pointed out in Holm & Dodd (1996) study that ESL children tend to transfer their L1 reading skills, and strategies to read English. Also, this finding indicates that explicit phonics approach may be used in combination with shared reading experience of picture book for young ESL learners to help them ease the transition.

Rote-learning of phonics knowledge

The majority of the teachers interviewed mentioned that for children with lower abilities. They tended to fall into rote learning habits when they were learning the sound-symbol relationships. Therefore, In Hong Kong where the overall curriculum is rather packed, remembering the phonics knowledge may become an extra burden for them instead of a useful tool to help them. The following statements are indicative of this view:

“The weaker students, they struggled a lot in remembering the sound symbol relationships.” (Interview with LETs)

This problem is also identified by Neuman & Roskos (2005), they also claimed that the explicit phonics programmes tend to be adult led and require children to recite, chant and review the phonemes and graphemes, which may not be appropriate and effective for beginning learners at young age.

In addition, According to the descriptions from most teachers, inconsistency in the mastery of phonics knowledge and reading performance were some children were found in some students. That is to say, some students studied well in phonics lessons and knew a lot of phoneme representations but could not perform good as well in the overall reading performance. Here is part of the transcript extracted from the interview:

“I have some students who actively participate in phonics class and show mastery of the taught phonics knowledge, but when they are reading aloud on their own, they still struggle a lot.” (Interview with LETs)

This finding indicates that a good mastery of phonics knowledge does not necessarily lead to good English reading performance. Furthermore, phonics instructions which only focus on the knowledge of sound-symbol relationships may not be able to contribute to learners’ reading performance.

4.1.2 Differences and difficulties in teaching

limited time allocated for phonics teaching

All the NETs pointed out that compared to the phonics teaching in ESL context, the time allocated for phonics teaching in the ENL context was more sufficient and flexible. While in most schools of Hong Kong, phonics teaching was constrained to a lesson once a week. Hence, it is highly possible that the knowledge input of a single lesson may be overwhelming for some students.

Here is part of the transcript extracted from the interview:

“But for students in America, they definitely have it more than once a week. Its once a day but it’s brief, part of a lesson..” (Interview with NETs)

“Usually the contents of one phonics lesson is packed because we do not have much time for it.” (Interview with LETs)

Lack of phonics instruction beyond English lessons

According to the response from all the NETs interviewed, as in ENL context, teachers taught the same group of students for every subject, there were a lot of chances to integrate phonics teaching into other subjects. Namely, even though there was no official implicit phonics programmes in ENL context, there were a lot of chances for implicit phonics instruction throughout the school time.

However, in Hong Kong where English was only used in English class in most primary schools, except English lessons, there was almost no chance for giving implicit phonics instruction. The related extract was shown as follow:

“So in America, it is a Maths class and can be a language class at the same time. So those phonics items just come up in the context of everyday class.”

“So native children are actually exposed more to implicit phonics right?”

“Yes, much more implicit phonics!” (Interview with NETs)

Professional support for phonics teaching

According to the interview with LETs, most primary schools in Hong kong has implemented phonics teaching since 2004 after the promotion of Education and Manpower Bureau of Hong Kong. However, compared with native English teachers who are familiar with phonics teaching, most local teachers were neither given with phonics instruction nor received any professional training of

giving phonics instruction. The following statements are indicative of this finding:

“Actually I did not know anything about English phonics until I am requested to teach it. So I am also learning while I am teaching.” (Interview with LETs)

4.3 The effectiveness of additional implicit phonics instruction in improving low proficiency ESL learners’ reading proficiency

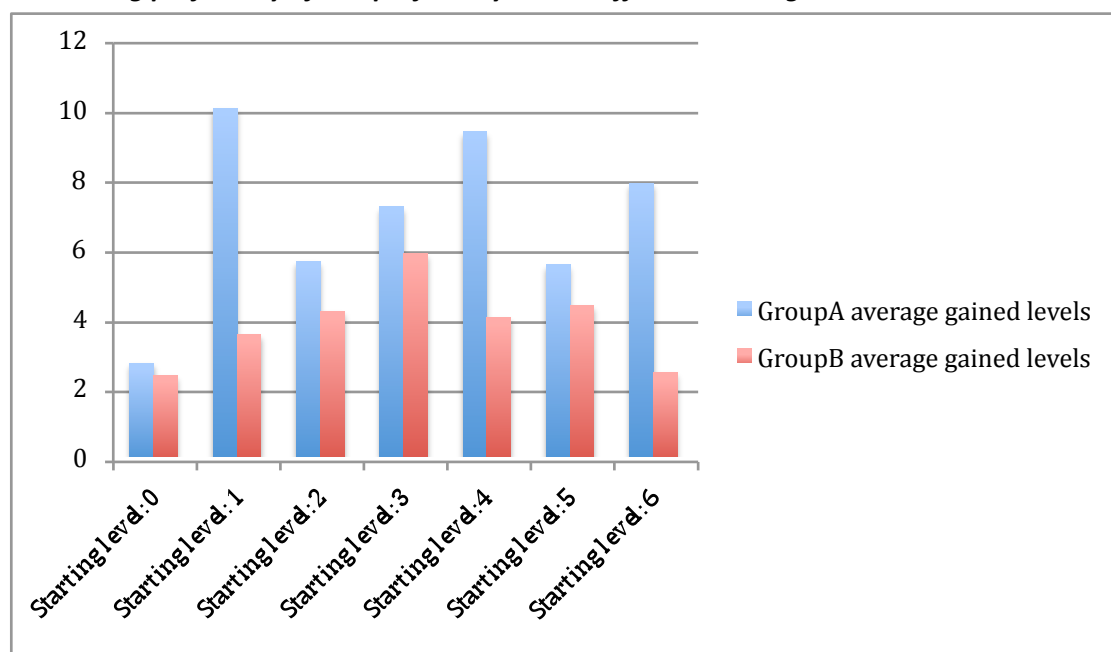
The result of the quasi experiment (Appendix3) shows that for low proficiency ESL learners, the group who receives additional implicit phonics instruction made remarkable progress in English reading proficiency if compared to students who only receives explicit phonics instruction.

Table 1 and Graph 1 compares and analyzes the effectiveness on the low reading proficiency students with different starting reading levels. As can be seen in Graph 1 and Table 2, it is clearly seen that Group A students at every starting reading level made greater improvement than the Group B students with the same starting reading level. According to table 1, students who only received explicit phonics students (Group B) improved 3.87 reading levels in average while the students who received additional implicit phonics instruction (Group A) improved 7.1 reading levels in average, which almost doubled the levels gained by the previous group.

Table1: Comparison of the effects of additional implicit phonic instruction on improving the reading proficiency of low proficiency ESL at different starting levels

	GroupA average gained	GroupB average gained	Difference in gained levels
Starting level:0	2.67	2.33	0.34
Starting level:1	10	3.5	6.5
Starting level:2	5.6	4.17	1.43
Starting level:3	7.17	5.82	1.34
Starting level:4	9.33	4	5.33
Starting level:5	5.5	4.33	1.17
Starting level:6	7.83	2.4	5.43
Average gain of the group	7.1	3.87	3.23

Graph 1: Comparison of the effects of additional implicit phonic instruction on improving the reading proficiency of low proficiency ESL at different starting levels



The findings provides evidence that implicit phonics instruction as a supplementary way for explicit phonics instruction is highly effective in improving the reading proficiency of low reading proficiency ESL learners. On one hand, the present research result at some degree challenges the accumulated evidence found in ENL context that explicit phonics programmes are more effective in improving children's reading performance (Christensen & Bowey's, 2009; Torgesen, Morgan, and Davis 1997). On the other hand, it further affirms the differences between ESL and ENL contexts and therefore indicates that modifications should be made when phonics instruction is applied in ESL context.

The different result compared to what had found in ENL context is probably in correspondence with what have discussed in the previous section that ESL children are lack of exposure to English reading in ESL context. Implicit phonics instruction, which immersed children in meaningful English reading experience with phonics instruction, provides children with opportunities to apply the phonics knowledge in use. As suggested by some researchers, for beginning learners at young age, phonics can be taught more effective through meaningful experiences by directly relating phoneme-grapheme instruction to picture books in shared reading (Pianta, 2006; Wyse & Styles, 2007).

Also, for ESL learners who are lack of exposure to English reading, the acquisition and cosolidation of the representation of phonemes embedded in the implicit process of print lexical experience provide them with opportunities to put their learnt phonics knowledge into application.

In addition, children are engaged and excited to learn when reading meaningful texts with guidance. As Hyan & Marshall (2003) pointed out, the ‘teachable moment’ where educators observe, recognize and interpret spontaneous opportunities for providing phonics guidance in implicit phonics instruction is highly valued in improving reading proficiency.

4.4 The effectiveness of implicit phonics instruction on developing reading enjoyment of learners with low reading proficiency

The findings of the interview reflect the effectiveness of implicit phonics instruction on developing the reading enjoyment into three areas: the enjoyment of the implicit phonics programme, the interest in reading in English and the confidence in reading in English. The results showed that the implicit phonics programme provided all the students interviewed with positive and comfortable experience of learning phonics. 80 % students interviewed claimed that implicit phonics instruction boost their confidence in English reading. Half of the students interviewed found implicit phonics helpful in raising their interest in English reading.

4.4.1 The enjoyment of the implicit phonics programme

All the students interviewed enjoy the implicit phonics programme. The major reason for this is children are not only encouraged to sound the words out with their phonics knowledge, but also encouraged to looking at the language context, clues in the story and illustrations may helpful in guessing the words they do not know, which makes the learning and reading experience more enjoyable. This

finding is consistent with what Calette et al (2007) has affirmed, both enjoyment of the sounds and the meanings of the words are indispensable factors of an enjoyable phonics lesson. The following statements are indicative of this view:

“I like it because when I have problems in reading some words, my buddy will give me a lot of hints by explaining the story.”

4.4.2 The confidence in reading in English

80 % students interviewed think implicit phonics instruction is helpful building their confidence in English reading. The major reasons given for this response are as follow. Firstly, children are treated as active participants in implicit phonics instruction instead of recipients of knowledge in explicit phonics lessons before. They try to read by their own and they are offered with guidance in phonics only when needed. The change of role in phonics instruction boost their confidence Secondly, the implicit phonics instruction which enable phonics guidance and reading practice at the same time encourages the students who have never thought about they can reading English books make their first step forward to successful reading (Torgesen ,2004). And the low proficiency learners’ confidence is therefore built up. The related extract is shown as follow:

“I already finished reading a lot of English books in buddy reading programme and it makes me feel that reading in English is not that difficult.”

4.4.3 The interest in reading in English

Students’ respondent statements indicated a diversity of views regarding to implicit phonics in developing their interest in English reading. The growing

interest in English reading is found highly related to their confidence in English reading.

It is worthwhile to mention the main reasons for half of the students who do not respond favorably for implicit phonics in developing their interest in English reading. The reasons are related to and the fail of comprehension of the contents of the English books the students reads and the boring contents of the book the students read. This echoes Colette Gray et al's (2007) assertion that word reading and reading comprehension should be developed at the same time instead of assigning word reading with priority in order to enable readers' enjoyment in reading. Therefore, for implicit phonics instruction, choosing good quality English books that matches with learners' reading ability is crucial in developing children's reading interest. The related extract is shown as follow:

" Because I can't understand the book"

" Because the stories in the English books are not interesting"

Chapter 5: Conclusions and implications

5.1 Summary of findings

The primary aim of my study was to examine the effectiveness of the additional implicit phonics instruction in helping developing the reading proficiency and enjoyment of low proficiency ESL learners. The data showed the differences in language background and school systems between ESL and ENL contexts should be taken into consideration when phonics approach for reading is used in Hong Kong ESL context. The study proved that additional implicit phonics instruction is not only highly effective in improving low proficiency ESL learners reading ability but also helpful in enabling children to recognize the value of reading as a source of information, recreation and enjoyment with confidence.

5.2 implications

As the study demonstrates that a combination of implicit and explicit phonics instruction achieves better effect in helping struggling readers in improving both reading proficiency and enjoyment. The study provides insights into the pedagogical practices of English reading in the context of Hong Kong that there is no single best way for reading instruction. Educators who let children be exclusively exposed to explicit phonics instruction may disadvantage the low proficiency English learners. And this may be applicable to other ESL contexts or even ENL contexts as well.

This study also has implications for teachers in preparation for phonics lessons. Both implicit and explicit instructions can be planned and provided in phonics lessons to cater for students with different learning needs. Implicit instruction

can be followed up with implicit instruction to further consolidate the knowledge of sound-symbol relationships in authentic reading experience.

In addition, for the tight teaching schedule in Hong Kong, it may not be easy to arrange extra time for implicit phonics instruction. Therefore, phonics teaching can be integrated into everyday English classroom. For instance, phonological features can be introduced during vocabulary learning whenever the teacher finds appropriate. As Lewis & Ellis (2006) claimed, phonics knowledge occurring throughout learners' participation in learning tasks involving sociocultural experiences and prior knowledge more likely to make reading as meaningful in children's daily life.

5.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size was small and specified in a single school. Secondly, it is hard to ensure that the student participants only receive English reading instruction at school. Some of the participants may be given with extra reading instructions out of school and this may vary their reading performance to some extent. Future studies can be done to examine the effectiveness of additional implicit phonics instruction on higher ability ESL learners' English reading performance to see if implicit phonics instruction can benefit different ESL learners.

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