

Identification of Content Knowledge Required for Chinese Pre-service EFL Teachers to Teach Phonics

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Abstract

Empirical studies have shown that pre-service EFL teachers were not well prepared to teach phonics because they lacked a phonics instructional guide. To develop the guide, the required knowledge should include reference to a needs assessment at the initial stage of instructional design. This study aimed to identify the required knowledge with which pre-service EFL teachers can teach phonics. A survey was issued to 146 school EFL teachers who were appointed as practicum supervisors from five full-fledged schools, a focus group discussion was held among 7 EFL group directors, and a focus group discussion was conducted among 5 teacher educators. The results revealed that 7 knowledge dimensions generalised from the literature were consolidated as required knowledge, including i) phonics-related knowledge; ii) decoding rules; iii) phonics instruction approaches; iv) sight words instruction; v) sound system knowledge; vi) phonemic awareness; and vii) rule-maintenance approach. Three new findings also emerged. First, a knowledge discrepancy was identified in understanding the National English Curriculum. Second, further investigation is needed into the Curriculum Design and Study of the Curriculum and Textbooks courses in teacher preparation program. The third is the suggestion to include curriculum design and lesson planning within the knowledge required by EFL group directors, through which enlightened educators include lesson plans in the phonics instruction approaches section in the guide. Most importantly, the identified required knowledge would provide the prerequisites for investigating pre-service EFL teachers' present knowledge and their desired changes needed to develop a guide that prepares them to teach phonics.

Keywords: EFL context, instructional design, knowledge base, needs assessment, phonics instruction, subject matter content knowledge

1. Introduction

Phonics, in a narrow sense, is defined as the letter-sound relationship in the English language (Bear et al., 2020). Broadly, it is regarded as an early English language reading method that fosters language learners' ability to identify and manipulate the phonemes used in oral language so they can learn how phonemes and graphemes correspond (Gopal & Singh, 2020; Papp, 2020). Phonics instruction, as a teaching activity, aims to teach language learners about the phoneme-grapheme correspondence (Gopal & Singh, 2020). It benefits all language learners, including EFL learners who are also struggling readers in English, in terms of decoding, reading accuracy, reading fluency, reading comprehension and spelling (International Literacy Association [ILA], 2019; Papp, 2020). In mainland China, teaching phonics was suggested by the National English Curriculum for Compulsory Education in 2011 (Ministry of Education, 2011), a proposal that was further specified and emphasised in the newly released National English Curriculum for Compulsory Education in 2022 (Ministry of Education, 2022). To note that, in China, compulsory education includes Grade 1-Grade 6 in primary schools and Grade 7-Grade 9 in lower secondary schools. Some full-fledged schools include Grade 1 to Grade 9. In the context of this study, specifically, schools are referred to as the full-fledged schools that offer both the primary and lower secondary education within the same premise. According to a specific section in this new curriculum, the ultimate purpose of phonics instruction is to enable EFL learners to achieve word recognition automaticity by the end of the Ninth Grade at the latest. Ideally, EFL learners should at least start to learn phonics decoding rules from Grade Three onwards and vocalise unknown words via the acquired phonics decoding rules. In other words, phonics instruction is practically mandatory in assisting EFL learners to realise reading automaticity at word level rather than text level (Nasir et al., 2019). Moreover, to maximise the teaching quality, the National English Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2011, 2022) emphasised the need for professional training to update the teachers' knowledge base. This should include both subject matter content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge because, from the behaviourist perspective, teachers are responsible for manipulating the knowledge input in a specific learning environment when endeavouring to alter the learners' learning outcomes (Robinson, 2018). Blevins (2017), ILA (2019) and Papp (2020) noted the importance of a teacher's knowledge base, stating that subject matter content knowledge is especially essential as it affects a teacher's pedagogical decisions and logically determines the teaching efficacy. To implement phonics effectively and assist EFL learners to recognise unknown words rapidly to achieve word-level reading fluency, in-service and pre-service EFL