Learning Phonics or Learning with Phonics?

Research Team:

School-based Curriculum Development (Primary) Section
Curriculum Development Institute
Education and Manpower Bureau

Tai Po Old Market Public School (Plover Cove)
Ms Ellce Li Yin Ping
Ms Carmen Pau Yuk Fong
Ms Chau Ka Ki
Ms Ho Wai Yee
Ms Wong Pui Mei
School-based Curriculum Action Research Series

The 21st century marks the development of an information or knowledge society with fast-changing needs and environment. In order to prepare our younger generation for their future needs, schools, through constant endeavours in search of excellence, have to provide students with different learning opportunities and experiences. In this respect, the school curriculum should best be aligned with the social development as well as the students’ interest.

Since 1998, the School-based Curriculum Development (Primary) Section (SBCDP) has been collaborating with school teachers in curriculum development in various Key Learning Areas. Building on the strengths and successful experiences accumulated over the years, the Section has initiated action researches jointly with teachers, aiming at empowering teachers to make informed decisions on curriculum research and development.

Why Do We Promote School-based Curriculum Action Research?

Collaborative school-based curriculum action research aims to:

- enable teachers to enhance quality learning and teaching through knowledge generated and constructed in the process of critical and systematic inquiry into different learning and teaching issues;
- develop teachers’ competence in curriculum development and research literacy as well as their sense of curriculum ownership;
- develop schools into learning organizations through collaborative team work within schools and professional sharing in school networks.

How Do We Conduct Collaborative School-based Curriculum Action Research?

In the course of school-based curriculum development, teachers’ critical reflections will help them identify issues worth addressing in the form of an action research. The following steps illustrate the basic cycle in action research:

1. Examine critically learning- or teaching-related issues worth researching into
2. Define the research focus and review literature for current theories and practice
3. Develop action plans or intervention strategies
4. Implement action plans in contexts
5. Collect evidence and reflect on effectiveness of actions
6. Draw conclusions and use feedback to improve learning and teaching
7. Start a new cycle if necessary

As teachers progress through this spiral cycle, they improve their teaching through continual reflection and move closer to the solution of the identified problems. Taking the role as facilitator, Curriculum Development Officers from the SBCDP Section work as partners with teachers, rendering professional support throughout the research cycle, assisting them in reflecting and conceptualizing tacit knowledge embedded in their practice.

**How Can These Reports Be Used?**

This series of action research reports portrays the participating teachers' educational beliefs and philosophy, and the developmental pathway undertaken to improve the school curriculum. The curriculum design, intervention strategies, action plans, research tools and instruments, as well as the findings and recommendations may be valuable references for teachers who intend to launch school-based curriculum development and/or collaborative action research in their schools. We sincerely hope that this series can serve as a platform to stimulate professional dialogue in curriculum research and development, and to spark off a research culture in primary schools in Hong Kong.

For comments and inquiries on the series, please contact

Mr. WUN Chi Wa, Ankey  
Senior Curriculum Development Officer  
School-based Curriculum Development (Primary) Section  
Phone : (852)2762 0174  
Fax : (852)2877 7954  
Email : cwwun@ed.gov.hk
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LEARNING PHONICS OR LEARNING WITH PHONICS?

ABSTRACT

This is a collaborative action research done by five Primary 2 English teachers (one of which is a seed teacher seconded to the SBCDP team) and a Curriculum Development Officer during the academic year 2001-2002. The purpose was to explore the teaching of phonics in Primary 2 and examine how students learn and use such skills. Based on our experience captured in the previous research, the action research project being undertaken focused more on the process of student learning. Data were collected mainly through lessons observations, interviews and reflection meetings among teachers.

During the learning/teaching process, teachers constantly reflected on their teaching strategies and students’ learning; and made changes to their teaching as well as understanding of students’ needs. All the teachers involved became more reflective on the role of phonics in the English curriculum. More importantly, they recognized the urgent need to elicit feedback from students’ learning, to explore how students learned phonics more effectively and why. Whether students needed to apply phonics skills in reading aloud and dictation were also explored and teachers learned that it was essential to expose students to more reading experiences. It was also noted that the design and requirements of dictation would have an important impact on the students’ use of phonics skills in spelling. The most important thing was that teachers learned to be more critical and flexible in teaching phonics. The report finally ends with reiteration of our target: it is important that our students do not just learn phonics, but learn with phonics as a meaningful tool.
I. Background

We started teaching phonics in the 2000-2001 school year and after one year’s learning of phonics, our students have developed an awareness of letter-sound relationship. They started to understand some of the basic skills of decoding sounds. Towards the end of the last school term, they were more willing to try to sound out new words. However, through observations and interviews, we noticed that most students still had problems with segmenting and blending sounds. Their concept of rhymes and word families was still confusing. The learning of individual sounds was not a problem to most students but many of them still could not apply blending skill in order to pronounce a word. We learnt that our students had to be equipped with both the knowledge and skills in order to apply phonics in their own reading.

Though we have tried phonics teaching for one year and developed some strategies, we realized that we focused too much on how we taught rather than on how students learnt. As our first research report ‘Fat Cat Pat a Rat’ has illustrated, we acquired basic understanding of the teaching of phonics and tried to integrate it into our curriculum using different teaching strategies. Although we have set our direction and developed our own approach, it turned out that we gathered little evidence on student learning, an understanding of which should help us reflect and evaluate in a more critical manner. Based on our experience captured in the previous research, the action research project being undertaken in the 2001-2002 school year focuses more on the process of student learning. We want to find out what teaching and learning strategies we should adopt and how effective they are in catering for the needs of our students. In short, we want to find out how we can facilitate students’ learning of phonics and help them apply phonics skills in different areas like reading and spelling. We hope that building on the experience we got in the past year, we can further improve our teaching and have a better understanding of the role of phonics in the curriculum. We hope that our students can really use phonics as a skill to solve learning problems and read with more confidence. It is most important that our students not only learn phonics as sounds, but also use phonics as a tool.

However, despite our intention to make this year’s attempt an extension of last year’s experience, owing to some administrative reasons, there are three new teachers
in our group this year, two of which are fresh graduates and new to the school. There is only one experienced teacher who has gone through the curriculum development process in the past two years. We need to work more slowly at the beginning and revisit some of the basic concepts. To a certain extent, this research can be regarded as a continuation of last year’s experience. More importantly, the research agenda poses a reconsideration of phonics teaching to all the teachers involved.

The research aims to find out:
1. what strategies teachers can use to help students further develop phonics skills and apply them actively in their learning;
2. whether the development of phonics skills can enhance students’ confidence and competence in reading as well as spelling.

II. Theoretical Basis

We agree with what is stated in the CDC syllabus for English Language (p.75) that phonics skills ‘help learners to gain confidence and competence’ particularly in areas like pronunciation, spelling and reading. With this belief, we explore the different approaches of teaching phonics. According to Dombey & Moustafa (1998), some approaches to teaching phonics are too simplistic; ‘they present reading as essentially a decoding process, which consists of learning a system of letter-sound relationships, translating symbols on the page into sounds, and synthesizing or blending the sounds together into words’. This part-to-whole method is not effective. As our experience during the past year has illustrated, we are more inclined to adopt the whole-to-part approach which states clearly that ‘children are more likely to begin with a repertoire of known words and proceed from wholes to parts’. We learn that phonics learning should be related to other aspects of learning to read and must be a part of learning to read. This has made learning more meaningful to both teachers and students. Adams (1990) further reinforces the point that ‘children need practice in seeing and understanding decodable words in real reading situations and with connected text’ and phonics instruction should be ‘part of a reading program that provides ample practice in reading and writing’. So, we do not just embark on phonics
teaching in our school, but design our school-based English curriculum in which reading and phonics are an integral part.

Since phonics learning is dependent on the experience of reading, there are important classroom implications. From Stahl (1992), we get some useful suggestions on how phonics instructions are made: teachers should build on a child’s rich concepts about print functions; build on a foundation of phonological awareness, integrate phonics into a total reading programme; focus on reading words, not learning rules, may include onsets and rimes etc. We are most impressed by the point that teachers must build on the solid foundations of what children already know and give them space to see patterns and draw inferences. So, we have to examine first what our students know already and where they should start. It is also important that we teach phonics in context.

Regarding the teaching strategies, it is suggested that phonics teaching should be early, systematic, clear and direct, frequently practiced and applied, meaningful, and integrated with other word-identification skills into an effective word-recognition skills. Most phonological skill instruction can be embedded within the context of meaningful reading or writing (Wadington, 2000; Yopp, 1992). Therefore, how to integrate the teaching of phonics into our curriculum and explore what strategies we can use in order to teach phonics effectively and help students apply the skills in reading actively are our major concerns.

In this sense, phonics is a means to an end, not an end in itself. So, in this project, in the process of helping students develop phonics skills, we would relate phonics teaching to all reading activities adopting the whole-to-part approach. Children’s previous knowledge, their reading experiences from textbooks and big books or small readers are all considered as a whole integratively in the design of the phonics teaching. In the process, we would try to give our students ample opportunities to internalize phonics formation through using them. We would explore ways of designing systematic, contextual and meaningful phonic instruction and try out the teaching of phonics effectively to enhance students’ competence and confidence in reading. Most important of all, we would explore how our students
learn phonics and how they can use it as an effective tool to solve their learning problems such as spelling and reading aloud.

III. Methodology and Steps

For this research, a target group with 2 students from each class in P2 was involved. An interview and a reading test (Appendix I) on the students’ mastery of sounds, their confidence in sounding out words and their competence in reading aloud were conducted in the first term to find out our students’ confidence level and how much they knew. The same test was conducted again towards the end of the second term to measure students’ change in performance and confidence level. Some open-ended questions were asked to seek students’ views on their learning of sounds, their learning experience in English and their confidence in reading. Students’ oral presentations during the learning/teaching process were also recorded as the evidence of learning and improvement.

Teachers conducted observations during the process of teaching to check and note down students’ progress, their problems and evaluate instructional strategies. Peer observations and constant sharing were also held to enrich our knowledge of student learning and evaluate the effectiveness of different teaching strategies. There were chances for teachers to review the lessons together and write journals to reflect on teaching and share the impressive episodes. All such data helped to elicit more in-depth analysis and provide insight for improvement.

Besides observations and interviews which provided qualitative data on student learning, formal assessment on students’ phonics skills and reading aloud were built into the oral examination paper in both terms. Such quantitative data of all students’ performance could serve as triangulation and inform us of students’ progress in developing phonics skills.
## Schedule of the research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 2001</td>
<td>➢ do literature review, explore materials and discuss focuses;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2001</td>
<td>➢ set learning targets and focuses of teaching, discuss the aims of research;</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 2001</td>
<td>➢ plan teaching schedule and phonics instruction;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2001</td>
<td>➢ refine the aims of research;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ decide on the research methodology and target group, design the research instruments;</td>
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<tr>
<td>October–December 2001</td>
<td>➢ discuss and start teaching phonics using different resources and methods;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ conduct observations during the course of teaching;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ conduct test /interview on target group;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>➢ conduct oral examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2002</td>
<td>➢ collect teachers’ journals /conduct interview with teachers;</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 2002</td>
<td>➢ data analysis &amp; first phase evaluation;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>➢ refocus the research &amp; plan the second phase teaching;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ try out different methods to teach phonics;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>➢ conduct observations during the course of teaching;</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 2002</td>
<td>➢ teachers write journals;</td>
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<tr>
<td>March–May 2002</td>
<td>➢ conduct phonics and reading aloud tests with the target group;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ conduct oral examination;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ conduct interview with teachers;</td>
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<tr>
<td>June – July 2002</td>
<td>➢ data analysis and report drafting.</td>
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IV. Our Questions and Answers

A. How far should phonics learning be integrated with other parts of the curriculum?

In the first year, we did not have much idea about curriculum integration. With the belief that we should relate phonics learning to students’ learning in other areas like the textbook, we started to choose the sounds from the textbook first. We also tried to help students revise and apply the sounds we taught through small readers or big book shared reading. We found that students learnt better and could make analogy more easily with the words they knew already. In the second year, as the students’ prior knowledge increased, we had more room in choosing the sounds and skills and we thought that we could then go beyond the textbook. Other than the textbook, we made use of all materials and opportunities to teach phonics in meaningful contexts and activities. For example, in the module ‘Connecting with the Natural World’, students learnt to tell the days of the week and wrote diaries about their activities as well as their feelings. When we introduced the big book ‘Every Monday’, the rimes of ‘ay’ and ‘ate’ were taught since they appeared many times. Students could associate the ‘ay’ sounds with the days of the week and they were encouraged to produce more words with the ‘ate’ rime such as ‘hate’, ‘late’ and ‘plate’. Students then wrote their diaries in which they had the chance to use the words they learnt in the process. When they presented their diaries, they could use the phonics skills for producing the related words as well. For instance, the students used words like `Monday`, `days`, `hate` when they wrote about their activities and feelings. They could pronounce these words very well as they had learnt these rimes before. This was an example of how phonics learning was integrated in the reading programme as well as writing and presentation tasks. When we designed the teaching materials, we would consider the expected learning outcomes and try to explore possible ways to enrich the input. We also learnt how to connect learning in a meaningful manner through this process. Such process requires very careful planning and preparation. While realizing the importance of linking different parts of learning to form a whole, we need to be really flexible and allow enough room for both teachers and students as they have different needs.
Teaching the big book ‘Every Monday’ and focusing on the rime ‘ay’

I play basketball after school every Monday. Can you think of any other words that end with ‘ay’?

tray, day, May…

1. Major problems we faced when we tried to integrate phonics teaching into our curriculum:

- Integrating different elements in the curriculum to achieve a meaningful whole was a very demanding task for us. As there were new teachers in our group and many of us did not have any training in phonics teaching before, we needed to develop experience in curriculum planning and teaching phonics again. At the beginning of the academic year, the new teachers regarded phonics as an isolated part of the curriculum and the focus was on producing sounds as they were. The focus was always on phonics as knowledge but not on applying phonics skills. So, it was very difficult for all of us to agree on how phonics was related to other aspects of learning and whether it could be used as a meaningful tool for learning.

- We did not have adequate exposure to different teaching ways of teaching and materials. Starting from last year, we began to add other materials like big books and small readers into our curriculum and tried to use the textbooks more flexibly to suit our purpose. However, we still found it difficult and we failed to see possibilities beyond the materials we had at hand. This was also a big problem for our new members this year as they
used to rely on textbooks very heavily. We had to struggle hard to release ourselves from textbook-bound practice.

2. How we tried to tackle the problems:

- We realized that we could not wait until all the problems had been solved before we started. We had to learn by doing. However, this process had been quite disturbing to some of us. One of the new colleagues reflected that she had great doubt on whether integration would work or not at the beginning of the term since she was not trained in this way. She was more a follower then. However, after trying out for one term, she noticed that her students learnt quite well in such an integrated curriculum. They could put their phonics skills into practice in shared reading and vocabulary building activities when we designed that application followed learning, like the one on diary writing. Learning became a meaningful whole to students and they could well see the relationship. It was the students’ performance which had changed her mind. In other words, as teachers, we learned to be more open-minded and keep on observing students, reflecting critically, adapting our strategies and trying to check that we were on the right track.

- The skills and sounds we wanted to introduce in P2 became more complicated and therefore it was difficult for us to use a single chapter or story to cope with a particular sound or skill. We had to look for different resources. We were willing to have greater exposure to various teaching materials and different teaching strategies, but we had our limitations in time and resources. The Curriculum Development Officer (CDO) from Curriculum Development Institute really helped a lot in bringing in resources and ideas. Through her, we had invaluable chances to share the experiences of some schools. Based on what other schools have done, we developed our own ideas and materials for our students. Through this process, we have developed a strong partnership among colleagues, collaboration with the CDO and a better link with different schools.
Sharing problems and suggestions in the meetings

During the process, we designed the materials and solved the problems together. I noticed that my students tried to apply phonics skills in reading. They really used it to tackle their problems in learning.

As a start, how can I integrate phonics into the curriculum? I really have no idea on this. And how effective will it be?

Considering our students’ background, their needs and the teaching effectiveness during these two years, we further affirm that phonics learning should be integrated into the English curriculum. It should not be just a set of separate worksheets exerting extra burden to both students and teachers. It should not be singled out as separate phonics lessons. Students’ prior knowledge and their repertoire of words should be used as the starting point of phonics teaching so that students can make analogy and learn sounds more effectively. The materials we use for teaching phonics like big books and small readers are those we are already using in our teaching process and they are integrated with the textbooks. This provides students with more opportunities to practise and apply the skills more frequently and more effective learning is enhanced. An example of how different elements are integrated in one module is presented as follows and the description of the learning process is included in Appendix II:

An example of how different elements are integrated in one module

Textbook: New Welcome to English Bk 2B
B. How Important is Assessment on Phonics Teaching and Learning?

1. Feedback from students on phonics learning

We started to link up teaching, learning and assessment and build in the phonics assessment both informally and formally last year. For instance, we conducted interviews with the Primary 1 students (2000-01) and we found that students were good at making the individual sounds but weak in blending the sounds and syllabification. The examination result reflected the same problem. So, we tried to shift the focus to blending and syllabification. Since it was already April 2001, we did not have much time left for teaching. However, such information collected from assessment was useful for further planning. Learning from experience, we conducted our first interview with the Primary 2 students much earlier this year, sometime towards the end of October 2001. We discovered that the students forgot lots of the sounds they learnt last year. To solve the problem, we helped the students revisit the sounds and skills learnt in P.1. We realized that constant revision and more importantly, constant application was most essential to help students really remember and use the sounds they had learnt before.

We also conducted post-interview, formative and summative assessment to measure our students’ progress. We confirmed that the interviews could help us collect more information and better understanding about phonics learning. Through the data we collected from the target students, we could have a better understanding of the students’ learning problems. For instance, we found that in the post-interview, most students had problems with reading unfamiliar words because they lacked adequate exposure. Their repertoire of words was still too small for them to make analogy, which is the skill for students to ‘perceive patterns between related phenomena, and interpret further examples by reference to these patterns’ (Dombey, H, 1998). For instance, children who are aware of the pattern shared by ‘call’ and ‘ball’ can then recognise and work out the sound ‘tall’. The following extract from the reading aloud assessment of a very weak student illustrates a very good example:
Student A: (reading ‘Jo Jo’s New Bicycle’) …… This he (It has) a red s… (seat) and a yellow b… nor (bell) and a green … (horn)... and ... ... (blue wheels). Bo Bo (Jo Jo) ... cleans his (her) bicycle... and ... (rides) it a... (around) the ...... (garden).

Despite that fact that this was a very weak and timid student, he did apply some phonics skills in his reading and we were pleased with his attempt. He uttered sounds he recognised like ‘s’, ‘b’ and ‘a’. However, he had never seen any words like ‘seat’, ‘bell’ and ‘round’ before as his reading experience was too limited. So, he could just stop with the first sound and there was no way for him to construct analogies. In comparison, the better students who managed to read more stood a much better chance of sounding out all these relatively unfamiliar words.

So we realized that it was more important for us to expose our students to more reading texts and enlarge their vocabulary. The interview and the test have helped us to observe our students in a more critical way. The findings probably do not just lead to celebration of success as they reveal more often our students’ learning problems. But it is exactly through this process that we can consider our students’ learning more deeply and develop strategies to improve learning.
The following diagram illustrates our learning, teaching and assessment cycle:
of the ‘learning---forgetting---re-learning process’ and make it a very important consideration in our teaching programme.

- We have to adjust the language items and enrich the input in order to make sure that the students have adequate stimuli and they can use what they have learnt in authentic and meaningful ways. We are convinced that our students need to have more exposure and enlarge their vocabulary so that they can use analogy in sounding out unfamiliar words.

- We have a much better understanding of the relationship between learning, teaching and assessment and we have put it into practice. Assessment takes place all the time either formally or informally and we keep using information from assessment to improve learning and teaching.

C. How do our students respond to phonics learning?

1. Which ways of learning do they prefer?

Songs, shared reading, poem recital, reading aloud and oral presentations are some of the interesting and effectively ways in phonics learning. Some children, however, require more practice to reinforce their skills. Students of very low reading ability benefit most from explicit instruction in phonological skills paired with explicit instruction in how to apply those skills in a meaningful context (Cunningham, 1990; Lane, 1994). During the lessons, we demonstrated to students how to blend sounds with actions and invited students to come out, blend sounds to pronounce the words and tell the class clearly how they did it. From the interviews, we learnt that the students found such explicit instruction we used in blending very useful and they turned out to be quite competent in such skills.

We collected the students’ responses towards the learning of phonics and the following revealed some of their preferences:
A little girl in our target group said,

“I prefer to say the sounds individually rather than following the whole class when practising the blending skill because my teacher can hear me clearly and correct my mistakes immediately.”

cr…ab, crab.

Would you like to try?

From class observations, we found that two teachers Kai Kei and Carmen provided many chances for the students to practice individually and the students were very attentive since everyone had the chance to say the sound and the teacher listened to each of them carefully. In order to enhance students’ participation in class, we had more pair work and group activities so that everyone could join in and have more chances to practise the sounds. The weaker students learned from the brighter classmates and this helped them to differentiate the sounds and produce them more accurately. We believe that practice does help to give more individual attention to the weaker students and help them learn better.
Some students from the target group expressed the following responses towards learning of phonics:

“I enjoy using the cards to blend the sounds since this helps me learn more new words. I find it interesting.”

I forget how to pronounce the word ‘hen’ but I know how to read ‘pen’ and the sound of letter ‘h’. So I can substitute ‘p’ with ‘h’ and read the word ‘hen’.”

According to the teachers’ observations, if students are asked to revise the individual sounds of the onsets and rimes only, they would feel bored and there is not enough challenge. So we should give them new words with the onsets and rimes they have learnt and ask them to blend the sounds and pronounce the words. When students can revise the sounds, apply the blending skill and learn new words while they are playing, they definitely find it more challenging and more interesting. They can learn much better this way too. We find that most students are more confident and competent in blending sounds and pronouncing new words in the interviews. That is a very encouraging sign to all of us.

We also notice that the weaker students in the target group share a very common problem: they do not know enough words to make analogy. They need more support with some hints on the familiar words so that they can associate the new words with those they know already. Besides, the weaker ones tend to lack confidence in trying to sound out new words and they need to be encouraged from time to time.
D. When do the students need to apply phonics skills?

Our ultimate goal is to help the students learn with phonics as a tool so that they can read and spell words. We find that our students have the greatest problem with reading and spelling and these have been the major obstacles to their language learning. We do expect that with the learning of phonics, our students can improve in these areas and become more confident language learners. However, after two years’ experience, we realize that a lot more considerations have to be given before this can happen.

1. Reading aloud

Students’ performance in reading aloud has confirmed that phonics skills can help them read the words they do not know and most students are more willing to try sounding out words. Students reflected that they found phonics useful when they came across new words while reading stories. To find out our students’ progress in reading aloud, we asked the target group to read an unseen passage in October 2001 and in May 2002 during the pre and post interviews. We found that the average numbers of words that the students did not try were 8 out of 33 and 2 out of 33 in the pre and post interviews respectively. As we observed during the post interview, the students applied the blending skill to sound out the words like ‘seat’, ‘wheel’ and ‘around’. Some of them could not pronounce the words accurately but they were good at making the beginning sounds (as illustrated by Student A) and blending some sounds on their own. Their major problem was that their repertoire of words was too small. Our students did not have enough words to make analogy and so accuracy was still a very big problem. The data and our observations have indicated that the students become more confident in sounding out unfamiliar words while reading but they still need to enlarge their vocabulary and have better exposure to more reading experiences in order to improve their reading aloud. So, we are more convinced and ready to enrich the reading inputs in our curriculum, and we try to provide students with as many opportunities to read as possible as this is the most effective way they learn how to read.
2. Dictation

We expect phonics to help students in dictation all along. However, in the post interview, many students stated that they do not apply phonics in dictation although they agreed that phonics could help them in spelling. We pursued further into this issue and found that our students were still using the old method of memorizing all the words they needed to know when they prepared for their dictation. It was because all these words were familiar to them and they felt safer to memorize them by heart. It was what they and their parents had been doing all along and they could manage quite well. So, the students did not feel the need to apply phonics in dictation. The following student told us how she prepared for dictation in the interview:

Teacher : Do you use your phonics skills in preparing for dictation?
Student B: No. There is no need to do that.
Teacher : What do you do then?
Student B: I just memorize the words. If I forget, I will try to remember where I see them.
To test how phonics could help in spelling, we asked another student who thought phonics could not help in dictation to spell the words ‘chop’ and ‘mop’. He gave us the correct spelling very quickly. Obviously, he blended the ‘ch’ and ‘op’ sounds into the word ‘chop’ since he knew both the digraph ‘ch’ and rime ‘op’. He then demonstrated to us that he knew ‘op’ and so combining the beginning sound ‘m’ which he knew very well, he pronounced ‘mop’ very accurately and confidently. The interesting thing was he did not know the word ‘mop’ and what it meant at all. He was only applying his phonics skills in the process. He then noticed that he could spell the new word by applying phonics skills without having to study and memorize it. In our evaluation, we share that whether the students can use phonics skills in dictation depends on how we organize the dictation content. It is important that we design dictation in such a manner that we provide our students with the chances to spell the words without having to memorize them.

We also observed that the students used the phonics skills when they forgot the spelling or when they had unseen dictation. They tried to listen to the teacher and extract the sounds they knew and then jotted down the similar words. For example, some students forgot the word ‘hamburger’. They listened to what the teacher read but they have not learnt the ‘ur’ sound. They tried to use another letter to replace ‘u’. They wrote ‘hamberger’ instead of ‘hamburger’. They could not spell the word correctly but they demonstrated their effort in applying phonics skills when they were required to do so.”

We noticed another interesting phenomenon. We have just started to introduce phonics to our P.4 students in the second term. Margaret, one of the teachers in our team, taught P.4 English at the same time. Once she had dictation with her P.4 class, the students requested her to read slowly so that they could hear the sounds of the words clearly in order to spell the words. Margaret also noticed that the P.4 students could use the words they knew to make analogy even though they have not been taught to do so. She observed that the P.4 students acquired phonics skills more quickly when comparing with her P.2 students. We reflected that it might be because our P4 students have a richer vocabulary to draw analogy, they are more mature learners and they have a
greater need to use phonics to tackle the words they do not know. This leads us to reconsider this question: when should we start the teaching of phonics and how ready are our students to learn phonics effectively?

We conclude that the design and requirements of dictation would have an important impact on students’ use of phonics skills in spelling. How to help students apply phonics in spelling and design dictation to enhance this need must be explored further. We have to redesign our dictation so that we require students to really use the phonics skills to spell the words they have not come across before (like those in the unseen dictation or sound game) or when there are too many words they have to spell and mere memorization becomes quite impossible. In that case, they have to use phonics skills actively in the preparation and production process. Of course, we have to be careful in designing the dictation and consider our students’ ability. How to design tasks or dictation, which require students to use the skills actively and provide suitable challenge to them, is our major concern in the next stage.

E. How do we perceive phonics learning after two years’ experience?

1. Phonics cannot solve all the reading problems

Phonics can help students read fluently and accurately to a certain extent. However, there are many exceptional cases (for instance, students cannot apply phonics in reading the words ‘the’ or ‘pilot’) and so it is difficult for the students to apply the skills when the rules do not apply. In the reading test, our students performed poorly in reading out the high frequency vocabulary (or sight vocabulary) like ‘the’, ‘has’, ‘her’ etc. As Student A has demonstrated, he could not read ‘it’, ‘has’ and ‘her’ correctly. The training in phonics fails to help the students read these words because these cannot be worked out through phonics alone. ‘While phonics skills can be used to identify printed words, many frequently used words are not phonically regular; these words must be recognized accurately and quickly’ (Pikulski, 2002). According to Mikulecky and Jeffries (1997), there are ‘100 words’ which we see very often when we read in English and good readers should know them very well, read them very quickly and do not have to stop and think. The list includes words like ‘are’, ‘be’, ‘has’, ‘have’, ‘he’, ‘her’, ‘him’, ‘it’, ‘is’, ‘in’, ‘me’, ‘my’, ‘the’, ‘their’, ‘them’, ‘they’, ‘these’, ‘who’,
‘what’ etc. So, in order to improve the students’ reading aloud, we realize that we have to teach them read the more important high frequency vocabulary. Decodable books for practice with high frequency words and words that include previously taught phonic elements should be chosen as far as possible. We need to take all these into consideration in our teaching plan in the future. Besides, to help students read effectively, we should draw the students’ attention to other skills in reading aloud and spelling such as stress, intonation, feeling (reading with meaning) and some spelling rules. So, the learning of phonics should include a greater variety of reading skills and activities, all of which should be planned and arranged in a purposeful manner.

2. Teaching has to be adjusted all the time to help students learn better

It is important that teachers have to put theories into practice, try things out and evaluate students’ learning from time to time. We find that we have to really study the students’ problems and seek alternative ways to help students learn better. For instance, we planned to teach the consonant blend ‘fl’ but we found that students had problem in sounding out ‘flat’. They tended to drop the ‘l’ sound and read the word as ‘fat’. So, instead of asking students to blend ‘fl’ and ‘at’ (which was our original way of teaching), we asked students to read ‘lat’ first, then added the sound ‘f’ to ‘lat’. By adjusting and exploring different ways of teaching, we found that the students could pronounce the word ‘flat’ more correctly. We understood that this might not be the only way or the ‘best’ way in teaching the ‘fl’ sound. However, in our experience, this was how our students learned and this worked for them. To find out how our students learn more effectively in areas of consonant clusters is the biggest lesson we have learned here.

The learning of phonics should include knowledge as a start and then proceed to the skills acquisition and application when students are more ready. After the students have mastered the basic knowledge of letter-sound relationship and acquired the individual sounds quite well, we feel that more effort should be spent on helping students apply phonics skills in reading and spelling. The focuses can be on the blending skills. As we develop more knowledge of phonics teaching, we feel that it is really important for teachers to develop a better
understanding of how students learn and use phonics and then adopt suitable strategies to enhance students’ use of phonics.

3. Active learning and application are most essential

In order to make phonics a meaningful tool for learning, ample opportunities for students to apply the skills should be provided. In this sense, phonics learning should be connected with shared reading, poem recital, reading aloud and oral presentations so that students can use phonics skills in various occasions. Once students have mastered phonics as an active skill, there is no need to teach them every sound and students should be able to learn on their own. At the early stage, we tried to help the students apply the blending skill by leading them to sound out the onsets and rimes and blend the separate sounds into words. Teachers always took the lead and students followed quite well and we were quite satisfied at that stage. We expected that the students should be able to blend the sounds on their own then. However, we noticed that when the students came across new words in a passage, they would just stop and wait for help even though they knew the onsets and rimes and were capable of blending the sounds. It was the attitude which mattered. The students simply did not apply the skills out of their own accord and they adopted a passive attitude in reading. Maybe they lacked the confidence and we seldom gave them opportunities to practice the skill actively. We reflected on our teaching and decided that we should provide the students with the challenges which force them to master and apply the skills actively on their own. Rather than taking the lead in separating and blending the onsets and rimes all the time, we would let the students try all the steps themselves.

Since phonics teaching is new to us, there is still a lot to learn before we can gather more knowledge and experience to make phonics learning really effective. Many problems have been identified in the process and it is still difficult for us to see how phonics can be related to other aspects of learning in a meaningful manner. However, when we are open-minded, keep observing, evaluating the students’ learning, reflecting critically and adapting teaching strategies to suit the students’ needs, it is easier to find the right direction and we do become wiser
and more effective teachers eventually. That is the greatest satisfaction we have achieved in the whole process.

V. Looking Forward

As we have tried teaching phonics for two years, we find that the students have different needs at different stages. Very young kids have to take a longer time to master the sounds and skills as they have limited vocabulary and exposure. More mature students like those in P.4 on the other hand can learn and use phonics much more quickly and effectively. They have better ability to make analogy among different sounds or words. Besides, whether we can provide opportunities for students to learn and apply phonics actively in different occasions makes a big difference in the students’ learning effectiveness. So, we feel that we need to know more about the impact of students’ age, cognitive level and repertoire of words on the learning of phonics. With more knowledge of these areas as well as the students’ ways of learning, we hope that we can plan our teaching of phonics more effectively in the future. After these two years, our target is much clearer: it is important that our students do not just learn phonics, but learn with phonics as a meaningful tool. However, how to make this happen remains the biggest challenge to us and we guess it will be a never-ending task.
References


Curriculum Development Council (1997). *Syllabuses for primary schools: English language (Primary 1-6)*. Hong Kong: The Education Department.


Websites


Appendix I

Assessment on students’ phonics skills and reading aloud

Name: ________________  Class: _____________   Date: ________________

A. Phonics skills:

1. Can you say the sounds?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>s</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>l</td>
<td>y</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>ch</td>
<td>pl</td>
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<td>y</td>
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<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>air</td>
<td>ay</td>
<td>op</td>
<td>ake</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Can you say the words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(w + in) w + ay</td>
<td>sh + in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s + at</td>
<td>s + an</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. When you hear the word, please tell me the beginning sound of the word.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(sun) sand</td>
<td>dot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chin</td>
<td>clean</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. When you hear the word, please tell me the final sound of the word.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pot</td>
<td>shop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kind</td>
<td>ink</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Do the words rhyme?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sat, cat</td>
<td>lamp, land</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stall, tall</td>
<td>pin, pan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Give brief reasons

6. Clap your hands each time you hear a syllable:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>eagle easter(2)</td>
<td>radio (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pear (1)</td>
<td>spaceman(2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Find the word in the second column that is in the same family as the words in the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
<th>column 1</th>
<th>column 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>day</td>
<td>tray</td>
<td>play</td>
<td>dad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chop</td>
<td>pop</td>
<td>top</td>
<td>shop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hair</td>
<td>pair</td>
<td>chair</td>
<td>hire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Please indicate the choice of the student.

8. Write another word in the same word family and say it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>make</td>
<td>lake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hen</td>
<td>pen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mall</td>
<td>tall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sun</td>
<td>bun</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9. Can you say these words?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>toy change t to s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kite change k to b</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ship change sh to ch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>goat change g to fl</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Please indicate the sound(s) students produce.
B. Reading aloud

Jo Jo has a new bicycle.
It has a red seat… and a yellow bell…
and a green horn… and blue wheels.
Jo Jo cleans her bicycle…
and rides it around the garden.

Teachers’ comment (student’s confidence, attitude, strengths, weaknesses, skills applied etc...)

_____________________________________________
_____________________________________________

Duration: (  ) minutes
Running words: _______
Errors: _______
Self corrections: _______
Error rate: _______

C. Open questions:
1. What strategies have the teachers used in teaching phonics?
   老师用過什麼方法教拼音?

2. Which strategies are effective? Why?
   你認為哪些方法有效? 為什麼?

3. What have you learnt in phonics learning?
   在學習拼音時, 你學到什麼?

4. When do you apply the phonics skills?
   你什麼時候會運用學到的拼音技巧?
Appendix II

An example of curriculum restructuring & integration ----- from input to output

Topic: “My diary” (from module 2, Bk 2B)

a. Considerations: enriching inputs for different purposes

Bk 2B Module 2: Connecting with the natural world

Textbook: (for equipping students with necessary language, content and context)

Small readers: (for enjoyment and reinforcement of learning regarding language and ideas; for appreciation and eliciting personal response, with target words selected particularly to help students reinforce and apply phonics skills in meaningful contexts)

Big books: (for enjoyment and enrichment of experiences)

Supplementary worksheets: (for reinforcement of language learning, stimulation of ideas and training of skills)

b. The teaching/learning process:

In Unit 5 ‘Our day’, students first learned from the textbook how to tell the time and describe habitual events using the simple present tense. A worksheet on ‘Miss Ducky’s Busy Day’ was used to enrich students’ vocabulary on different activities. Then a small reader ‘The Busy Giant’ was shared with students and a worksheet was designed to help students read for information paying special attention to the time and activities. It was hoped that students could read with a purpose. Students were expected to learn how to write about their daily activities with all such inputs. Mini-tasks were provided to help students master and apply the language learned. After that, two big books ‘What’s the time?’ and ‘Every Monday’ were shared to provide enjoyment and stimulate students so that they could start thinking about their own dream timetable. Students were encouraged to share their dream timetable with their classmates so that they could learn from each other.

In unit 6 ‘Our week’, students learned about days of the week. ‘All through the week with cat and dog’ and ‘Winnie and the cat’ were very stimulating stories with events structured around the days of the week. These two books were shared so as to expose students to different ways of presenting activities and funny imaginative ideas. A worksheet on ‘Winnie and the cat’ was designed to enhance students’ understanding and appreciation of the story. With such inputs, students were expected to choose and describe some special activities happened to them during the week.

In units 7 & 8, students learned about weather, seasons and clothes. They acquired the essential vocabulary and language patterns from the textbook. ‘What’s the weather like today?’ and ‘Weather
Machine’ were shared with students for reinforcement of the vocabulary and language patterns learnt. ‘Weather Machine’ was an imaginative story which could further stimulate students to develop ideas and express feelings. Students were expected to learn how to plan activities according to the weather conditions and add these elements in their diary.

To help students master the essential language patterns they had to use in this module, grammar worksheets on ‘wh-words’, prepositions, telling the time and vocabulary exercises were designed for students at appropriate times.

Throughout the process, teachers had prepared 4 pieces of the teacher’s diary to help students learn the format and style of writing diaries. They were also used to develop students’ reading skills like scanning for specific information. Rather than models for students to follow, these diaries aimed at providing a framework and stimulating students so that they could use language to express their ideas and feelings.

c. The learning product:

Students’ learning was enriched and extended with the use of readers, big books and supplementary worksheets and different activities. Students could make use of the language, functions and content they learnt from the textbook and the various related materials including readers, big books and teacher’s diaries for self-expression in their diary writing. Students’ diaries demonstrated that they could use a variety of language patterns (other than those in the textbook) effectively for self-expression and they had different interesting ideas because of the rich inputs they had got in the teaching process. The students also showed that they could read for meaning and apply what they had learnt in the writing task. Many students began to organize their ideas and present them in their own style.

Most students showed the motivation and ability to write about their own activities and express feelings. There were great variations in the students’ diaries. The teachers assessed students’ work according to their use of language, ideas, skills and attitude. Throughout the process, the teachers gave feedback on the students’ diaries and the students were willing to make response and improve.