Developing Phonics Material to Improve the Spoken English of Indonesian Tertiary Students

by Imelda Gozali

Conference Paper

Developing Phonics Material to Improve the Spoken English of Indonesian Tertiary Students

Imelda Gozali

Sekolah Tinggi Teknik Surabaya (STTS), Surabaya

Abstract

Phonics is generally known as the subject that teaches correspondence between the written and the spoken word aimed to enhance the reading skill of children in first language acquisition setting. In an EFL (English as Foreign Language) environment, like international kindergartens in Indonesia, Phonics lessons are usually included in their syllabus. After teaching English conversation for a few years in a tertiary institute in Indonesia, the writer suspected that phonetic awareness might also benefit not just children, but adults as well. In a previous experiment, the writer did an Error Analysis on samples of the students' speech, and found that some speaking inaccuracy in terms of pronunciation could perhaps be addressed by developing and selecting Phonics material that will deal with those more frequently-committed errors in the students' speech. This research was designed as a qualitative one, employing observation and short survey as the data-collection method. The subjects were students in an intact English Conversation class. They were first made to read a text which has the frequently-committed errors in terms of pronunciation at the beginning of the semester. The Phonics material was then taught explicitly in each conversation class consisting of five meetings. Finally, the students were given a short survey to gauge their assimilation and the effectiveness of the Phonics material.

Keywords: phonics, english speaking, error analysis

1. Introduction

For English teachers at Kindergarten or pre-school level, Phonics subject is the bread-and-butter of daily work. Traditionally regarded as a rudimentary tool for teaching literacy to children, Phonics is a subject that teaches the relationship between the grapheme and the phoneme in order to decode a word for reading or writing (Ehri, 2003). Typical material taught in Phonics are short and long vowels ('a' and 'ea' respectively), as well as consonant blends and digraphs like 'bl' and 'sh'. By learning the basic rules of Phonics, children are expected to be able to start reading simple words. For example, by knowing

how the consonant 'm' is sounded, and after learning how to sound the short vowel 'a' in 'an', they are then combined to form 'm' + 'an' = 'man'. Phonics teaching is commonly complemented with sight-reading instruction, so as to consolidate the skill of reading (and understanding) the words by sight instead of only through decoding the Phonics rule.

In Indonesia, many international Kindergartens or Preschools adopt Singapore or British curriculum, and so Phonics is usually taught there. Being a subject for children, Phonics is usually imparted in a fun and interactive way through the use of flash cards, videos, and worksheets with lively illustrations. That is the case for the writer who has been teaching Phonics for four years to children at K2 (Kindergarten 2) level in an international kindergarten in Surabaya, Indonesia. Besides being geared for reading, Phonics here is also used to teach the students writing simple words by dictating the words taught in the Phonics lessons.

At the same time, the writer also teaches English conversation in a tertiary institution in Surabaya. In the course of listening to the students' speech for the past few years, the writer detected several pronunciation errors or mistakes which perhaps could be considered as typical for English speakers in Indonesia. Most of them are due to negative transfer of the mother tongue, Bahasa Indonesia, into the second language. In previous researches, the writer had compiled those errors and did an Error Analysis on them (Gozali, 2017). One of the conclusions derived from that research was that there might be some benefits in teaching Basic Phonics to the students in order to dispel the more common pronunciation mistakes that arise from negative transfer of Bahasa Indonesia. For example, the long vowel 'ow' present in English words such as 'shower' were pronounced in an 'Indonesian way' as \'shōw(-⊠)r\ instead of the usual way \'shau(-⊠)r\ (Gozali, 2017). Further research was then conducted to see which pronunciation mistakes were more likely to be unintelligible to native speakers of English (Gozali, 2018). Short recordings of students' speech were sent to several native and non-native speakers of English, who in turn were tasked to transcribe the speech while indicating the parts they don't understand. When it comes to pronunciation, it was revealed that some words containing the phonetic components 'ou' and 'ui', such as those present in 'house' and 'build' respectively, were unintelligible to the native speakers when they were inaccurately spoken of by the students (Gozali, 2018). All of the above results gave some inklings that Indonesian students, even at tertiary level, might benefit from some explicit phonetic awareness training.

To that effect, the writer wanted to compile some Basic Phonics materials based on the frequently-committed errors, which are also most likely to cause incomprehension

to the ears of native speakers, of Indonesian tertiary students. The Phonics materials will be then taught explicitly to the students as a kind of enrichment segment at the end of each lesson. Subsequently, the effectiveness of this Phonics material will be qualitatively measured using a questionnaire at the end of the semester to check whether the students still remember them. To the best knowledge of the writer, this Basic Phonics material development for adults is a novel approach in Indonesia and has never been done before.

2. Literature Review

In countries where English is the first language, phonemic awareness and phonics are part of the basic instructional tools to teach children how to read. After learning the alphabets, children are taught the smallest combination unit of letters which in spelling of words is termed grapheme. When these smallest units are pronounced they are then called phonemes. Phonics is therefore the subject that teaches the relationship between the grapheme and the phoneme in order to decode a word for reading or writing (Ehri, 2003). The effectiveness of Phonics for teaching reading to children as compared to other methods like Whole Word and Whole Language approaches is still a matter of debate (see for example, Krashen 2002). However, this short paper is not the place to dwell into that and it suffices to say that Phonics is still being taught in kindergartens and primary schools up to now. And although the main focus of teaching Phonics is to teach children how to read, it is taken for granted that they also 'read out' the words, that is, they also learn how to pronounce the words according to the Phonics rule taught.

While Phonics is normally not taught to adults who speak English as their native language, increasing research shows that Phonics may not be unprofitable for adults in ESL (English as Second Language) and EFL (English as Foreign Language) environment. For example, Jones argued that ESL adults possess sufficient analytical skill to understand the phoneme-grapheme relationship in English words, basing her research on Phonics instruction to Mexican, Spanish-speaking immigrants in the US (Jones, 1996). She posited that Phonics then should be incorporated into English instruction for adults. In Taiwan, explicit phonemic awareness training was shown to cause significant improvement in the vocabulary size and pronunciation skill of 133 technological university students (Huang et al, 2004). A more recent study conducted in Japan had twenty native Japanese learners of English being exposed to explicit Phonics instruction in the area of certain segmentals in order to improve their pronunciation (Saito, 2010). They were randomly divided into control and experimental groups, at the end of which their speech

were analysed by native speakers of English who gave judgment on their comprehensibility. The result of this study showed that the Phonics instruction made a significant effect in the speech intelligibility of the experimental group. A few years later, the same author carried out similar study related to the relationship between phonetic instruction and communication, although this time the focus was more to test the effectiveness of the Form-Focused (explicit) Instruction (FFI) in teaching a certain linguistic form (Saito, 2013). In this study, 49 Japanese ESL (English as Second Language) learners were also assigned randomly into control and experimental groups, with the latter being taught explicitly to notice and practice pronouncing the phonetic sound /ɹ/. He concluded that the FFI treatment benefited students in the pronunciation of the English phonetic sound /ɹ/, especially for the beginners who were unable to notice and self-correct their pronunciation inaccuracies (Saito, 2013).

When it comes to Indonesia, one can find similar situations as those described in the preceding paragraph. The sentiment expressed by a lecturer about the difficulties faced by English learners in Indonesia when pronouncing (and teaching, in the case of teachers) English words (Rofiq, 2016) could easily be felt deeply and shared by many others. Strongly influenced by the first language, English learners and teachers alike pronounce English words in the 'Indonesian way', like saying /ʊːnʊ/ for number 'one' instead of /wʌn/ (Rofiq, 2016). He suggested that one of the reasons for this speaking inaccuracies is the Communicative Approach that is more prevalent nowadays in the English teaching curriculum (see also Saito, 2015). In this way, it is possible that the macro skill of communication and getting the message across is achieved at the expense of accuracy in pronunciation (Rofiq, 2016). He then argued that explicit instruction in Phonetics and Phonology, as well as Audio Lingual Method, should be revived and consolidated in the curriculum for English pre-service teachers so they can be more competent and confident to speak with good pronunciation (Rofiq, 2016). In another study on the phonological errors made by students in the English department in Indonesia, Tiono identified several main pronunciation errors in the English pronunciation of several consonants that are not present in Indonesian phonetic system (Tiono, 2008). Similarly, the writer has also compiled a list of frequently-committed pronunciation errors of her students (Gozali, 2017), and has also zoomed into the errors that are more pertinent to the comprehensibility of their speech to native speakers (Gozali, 2018).

3. Method

This short study was done in a qualitative manner, with the aim of developing and testing the effectiveness of teaching some basic Phonics materials to university students, in order to improve their English speaking accuracy. The instruments used were a reading text, a voice recorder and recording playback, Phonics materials to be taught, and a simple survey form distributed at the end of the research. The research period spanned 7 weeks, done within a once-a-week English Conversation Class (ECC) of 90 minutes each. The participants of this study were an intact class of eight college-level students who were enrolled in Level 2 of the ECC. This class was chosen among the other four classes available, simply because the number of students are sufficiently low to allow for an additional Phonics teaching time in addition to the usual ECC material.

4. Findings and Discussions

As has been mentioned above, some ideas about the Phonics material to be developed and taught explicitly had been obtained from previous research (Gozali 2017, 2018). Examples of some of the pronunciation challenges identified in those previous studies are the silent 'w' as present in words like 'answer' and 'who', short 'u' ('bus', 'study'), digraph 'ow' ('browsing', 'shower'), and silent 'c' ('scene') (Gozali, 2017). In addition, some phonetic pronunciation inaccuracies proved to be unintelligible to native and near-native speakers of English like the digraph 'ou' ('house') and long vowel 'ay' ('play') (Gozali, 2018). Based on the those findings, a simple test material was developed for this study in the form of a reading text containing words with phonetic sounds that have the potential of causing inaccuracies when read aloud by the students. A copy of the reading text is appended here as **Annex A**, with highlight in the form of boldface given to words to see the phonetic emphasis. Naturally, the copy given to the students do not have such highlight.

In the first week of class, a copy of the reading text was given to the students and each one was asked to read the text aloud. Permission was asked from the students to record their speech and assurance was given that the recordings were to be used solely for research purposes. In the following two weeks, the recordings were analysed to see which words were pronounced inaccurately by the students. Out of the eight students, there were seven who wrongly pronounced the long vowel 'igh' (in the word 'sigh'), five made mistakes in the exception to the long vowel 'ai' ('mountain'), and four said the silent 'w' (in 'answer') inaccurately. Apart from these, a few students were inaccurate in

the pronunciation of the words 'longing' ('ng'), 'box' (ending 'x'), 'drawing' (long vowel 'aw') and 'scenery' (silent 'c'). A summary of the Phonics elements and words examples is depicted in the table below:

TABLE 1: Summary of Content of Phonics Lessons.

Phonics to teach	Example of words
-igh	sigh, high, thigh
silent w	write, wrong, answer, sword, two, whole, who
silent c	scene, science, scissors, scent, ascend, descend, muscles
-tain	mountain, fountain, captain, curtain
-ng-	longing
-x	box, fox, wax, ox
-aw	fawn, hawk, squawk, dawn, crawl, prawn, draw, straw, jaw, paw, awful

Following those findings, Phonics materials were developed in order to address the above pronunciation inaccuracies. In the next three classes, two Phonics materials per week were selected and taught explicitly to the students. For example, the students were told that the word 'sigh' contains the phonetic elements 's' +'igh'. They were then taught that the word is supposed to be pronounced as \'sī\ and not \'sig\ for example. They were then given examples of other words containing 'igh' that are spoken in the same way, such as 'high', and 'thigh'. Similar procedure was followed for other phonetic sounds. It was observed during those 'enrichment sessions', that perhaps lasted no longer than 5 minutes, some students appreciated this information and it was like an enlightenment for them.

On the last day of class, a brief survey was given out to the students to ask them if they could remember the materials taught in the Phonics lessons and, if affirmative, to write them. Out of the eight students, three answered in the negative and the rest in affirmative. From the latter, three students wrote that they could remember the Phonics lesson about silent 'c' like in the words 'scenery' and 'science', and two could recall the silent 'w' in 'answer', 'write', and 'wrong'.

So what can we glean from this result? Although this simple study lacks the rigour of empirical research as such, it might have laid the foundation for future works targeted at improving the accuracy of the spoken English of Indonesian adult students. Firstly, echoing the proposal of Rofiq (2016) above, the result of this study corroborated the need to teach phonetic and phonology explicitly to students. Simple observation done during the Phonics teaching in this study noted that the students were unaware of such knowledge and they seemed to be able to notice their own pronunciation inaccuracies. This is somewhat reflected by the fact that they could recall some of the lessons. Without

detracting from the focus on communication skill which is the main thrust of many English syllabi in Indonesia nowadays, a certain form of imparting phonetic and phonological skill might still be required to achieve greater speaking accuracy and, thus, intelligibility and communicability.

Secondly, due to constraints of time or syllabus scope, it may not be necessary to teach Phonetic and Phonology in the way that students majoring in English are taught. It is perhaps sufficient to teach Basic Phonics like those taught to kindergarten students of English-speaking countries, while selecting the materials to suit the needs of Indonesian students. In this regard, the Phonics materials identified in this study could be the start of the development of a more comprehensive Basic Phonics manual for adults, so to speak. A more exhaustive study involving cross-linguistic analysis is needed to compile a fuller list of phonetic and phonological materials that are more relevant for Indonesians, as was done in a Japanese study (Saito, 2014) which gathered the materials by surveying several experienced English teachers. Similar to what was done in Taiwan in the above-cited literature research, the Basic Phonics materials could be given as a supplementary materials integrated into the syllabus, taking up not more than 10 minutes of teaching time (Huang et al, 2004)

Lastly, this study also indirectly supports the continuing importance for Contrastive Analysis in pronunciation teaching. Jenkins (2004) purported that Contrastive Analysis, in which the students are made to notice the difference between their native language (L1) and the target language (L2) in different linguistic aspects, is a useful pedagogical tool that takes into account learners' background and needs. An excellent book by Smith (2001) has a section that provides information for English teachers in Malay-speaking countries, including Indonesia, as to the contrast between the phonology of English and Malay. Perhaps the next work would be to develop this material into one that is specific for Bahasa Indonesia and to translate this into operational teaching material.

5. Conclusions and Suggestions

This study sets out to attempt to develop basic Phonics materials in order to improve the English speaking accuracy of Indonesian university students. After administering a reading test which contain words that potentially cause erroneous pronunciation for Indonesian university students, several phonetic elements were identified and these, in turn, were taught explicitly to the students. It was observed that the students appreciated the information and many, when asked in a survey, could recall the Phonics lesson taught. This has led to the conclusion that Basic Phonics lessons may prove to be useful

to improve the speaking accuracy of the students. Those lessons are short, only 5-10 minutes in duration, and are made up of Phonics sounds that are most needed for Indonesian speakers. The phonics materials gathered in this study, as well as in our previous works, could serve as the basis for future, more comprehensive compilation.

Needless to say, this simple study is far from perfect. The same reading text could have been administered again at the end of the semester to check the students' retention of the Phonics lessons taught. The small size of the number of participants may not support a generalization of, say, the Phonics elements needed. Nevertheless, this research may just be the start of more rigorous studies in the future and to lay the foundation for more works in the area of English pronunciation in Indonesia.

References

[1] Ehri, L. C., Nunes, S. R., Stahl, S. A., & Willows, D. M. (2001). Systematic phonics instruction helps students learn to read: Evidence from the National Reading Panel's meta-analysis. *Review of educational research*, *71*(3), 393-447.

[2] Gozali, I. (2017). Learning from mistakes: Error analysis on the English speech of Indonesian tertiary students. In *UNNES International Conference on ELTLT (English Language Teaching, Literature, and Translation)* (Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 275-280).

[3] Gozali, I. (2018). Local vs global errors: comprehensibility judgment on the speech of Indonesian students by native speakers. *Language in the Online & Offline World 6: The Fortitude*, 152.

[4] Huang, C. C., Lin, S. J., & Su, S. C. (2004). The effects of phonological awareness training on technological university students' phonics and vocabulary knowledge. *Journal of National Taipei Teachers College*, *17*(1), 59-90.

[5] Jenkins, J. (2004). 5. Research in teaching pronunciation and intonation. *Annual review of applied linguistics*, *24*, 109-125.

[6] Jones, M. L. (1996). Phonics in ESL Literacy Instruction: Functional or Not? *Proceeding of the 1996 World Conference on Literacy.*

[7] Krashen, S. (2002). Defending whole language: The limits of phonics instruction and the efficacy of whole language instruction. *Reading Improvement*, *39*(1), 32-42.

[8] Rofiq, A. (2016). A phonological outlook on the difficulties of learning English and its implication on the teaching English as a foreign language.

[9] Saito, K. (2013). The acquisitional value of recasts in instructed second language speech learning: Teaching the perception and production of English/ɹ/to adult Japanese learners. *Language learning*, *63*(3), 499-529.

[10] Saito, K. (2013). Reexamining effects of form-focused instruction on L2 pronunciation development: The role of explicit phonetic information. *Studies in second language acquisition*, *35*(1), 1-29.

[11] Saito, K. (2014). Experienced teachers' perspectives on priorities for improved intelligible pronunciation: The case of Japanese learners of English. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *24*(2), 250-277.

[12] Saito, K. (2015). Communicative focus on second language phonetic form: Teaching Japanese learners to perceive and produce English/ ⊠/without explicit instruction. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, *36*(2), 377-409.

[13] Smith, B. (2001). *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems*. Ernst Klett Sprachen.

[14] Tiono, N. I., & Yosta, A. M. (2008). A study of English phonological errors produced by English department students. *k@ta lama*, *10*(1), 79-112.

Annex A: Reading Text for Phonetic Test

Longing for freedom

Jimmy is taking a br**ea**k from his w**or**k. He looks at his w**a**tch. He still has one **h**our before the next meeting. He is hungry, and he opens his lunch bo**x**. It is full of fr**ui**ts, because he is on a diet. While taking his lunch, he opens his coffee-table book. It has dr**aw**ings of beautiful **sc**enery; m**ou**ntains and heavenly i**s**lands. He s**igh**s and closes his eyes; how much he longs for a holid**ay**. He can't w**ai**t for June to come, when he will go to Mexico. He has to p**ay** a lot for it, but it doesn't matter. Suddenly his phone rings; he quickly an**sw**ers it. Ah, it's from his boss. He has to see him now. He doesn't know what it is all ab**ou**t.

Developing Phonics Material to Improve the Spoken English of Indonesian Tertiary Students

toward word processing", JEES (Journal of English Educators Society), 2020
Publication

8	publications.aston.ac.uk	1 %
	Internet Source	

Exclude quotes	On	Exclude matches	< 1%
Exclude bibliography	On		