

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Motivation of the Study

The most crucial challenge confronting almost all the elementary school English teachers in Taiwan is differentiated English proficiency levels of the learners. A survey by National Teachers' Association finds that 76% of the elementary school English teachers in Taiwan admit a wide knowledge gap in students' English proficiency levels (Lin, 2003). A research mandated by the Ministry of Education (MOE) shows a bimodal distribution in the test scores of English in the Basic Competence Test (BCT) for junior high school students (Chang et al., 2003). In addition, the research also finds that the group of students with low grades outnumbers the one with high grades except in Taipei city, clearly indicating that a great number of junior high school students have difficulties in studying English. This phenomenon is also true with elementary school students. Some elementary school students can already pass the elementary or even intermediate level of GEPT¹. On the opposite extreme, quite a number of students still have difficulty with simple tasks as identifying letter names or letter sounds even though they have learned English for three or four years.

To accommodate learners' individual differences, classroom teachers, schools and educational authorities have appealed to remedial teaching for underachievers in our Taiwanese EFL environment. In the researcher's school, an elementary school

¹ GEPT is the abbreviation for General Language Proficiency Test. GEPT is developed by the Language Training & Testing Center (L TTC) (commissioned by MOE) as a gauge for each level of ability in English. It is a criterion-referenced test divided into five levels—Elementary, Intermediate, High-Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior.

The ability of an examinee who passes the elementary level is roughly equivalent to that of a junior high school graduate in Taiwan. The ability of an examinee who passes the intermediate level is roughly equivalent to that of a high school graduate.

located in Tao Yuan city, English teachers have voluntarily committed themselves to the remedial instruction since 2004. Due to the limited exposure to English and a lack of a sense of achievement, approximately 10 to 30 percent of the students struggle with English. These underachievers are often poor in reading and spelling skills and generally demonstrate negative attitudes toward learning English. They are recruited to the remedial classes, receiving explicit instruction twice a week for twelve weeks wherein letter-sound correspondences are directly and systematically taught.

After two years' implementation of this remedial instruction, however, the researcher noticed that the explicit, systematic instruction on sound-symbol relationships administered to the underachievers did not seem to change their reluctant attitudes toward learning English. In addition, those underachievers in general made little progress in reading and spelling abilities even though they were already instructed letter-sound knowledge. This experience has led the researcher to question the effectiveness of explicit phonics training on EFL remedial instruction. The validity of such a training calls for closer scrutiny.

Essentially, phonics for an L1 learner is much easier than it is for an EFL beginner. Most L1 children, upon entering kindergarten, have already acquired “a substantial vocabulary,” “adequate syntax,” and “a sufficient command of most of the phonemes that constitute their language” (Singer, 1974, cited in Yopp, 1992, p. 696). What they need is the ability to map their speech onto print. Thus, in their L1 context, phonics is “a way of teaching reading that stresses the acquisition of letter-sound correspondences and their use in reading and spelling” (NRP, p. 8). Since English is an alphabetic language, its speech sounds are encoded at the level of phonemes and by the letters of the alphabet. Phonics, therefore, serves as a tool to help L1 children learn and use letter-sound correspondences to read and spell words.

The importance of phonics is equally highlighted in Taiwanese EFL context. It

is stipulated in the guidelines of Grade 1-9 Curriculum that the sound-symbol relationships of English should be taught and that learners should be able to apply these associations to read, pronounce, and spell words (see Guidelines of Language Arts Learning Area in Grade 1-9 Curriculum/English, 3-1-3, 5-1-7², 2006).

Nevertheless, unlike L1 beginners of phonics who already have reasonably good command of their mother tongue English, our EFL beginners lack both the foundation of oral language and the vocabulary of English (Huang, 1999). Even if they are taught to sound out words later, their learning is not meaningful because they would not understand what they are reading (Wang, 2001).

Aware of the differences between the L1 and EFL contexts for phonics instruction, the researcher intended to switch from the previously aimless, unfruitful explicit phonics training to a balanced model of reading instruction—one that helps students explore language skills naturally through nursery rhymes.

Nursery rhymes seem to be a good solution for underachievers for several reasons. First of all, nursery rhymes are brief and repetitious. Children can memorize them easily and thus gain confidence in learning English (Chang, 2003). Furthermore, since these rhymes are fun and humorous in nature, they can also stimulate students' interest in learning English. Thirdly, by reciting nursery rhymes children are exposed to oral language, new vocabulary, and the sound structure of English naturally (Danielson, 2000; Kenney, 2005). Taken together, nursery rhymes may serve as an ideal stepping stone for later literacy development.

A number of researchers in Taiwan have reported a positive attitude change of EFL learners toward learning English after nursery rhyme instruction (Chiang 2003; Hsu 2003; Huang 2006). Other researchers have also found that nursery rhyme

² 3-1-3 Be able to use and apply phonics rules to sound out words. 5-1-7 Be able to use phonics to understand the relationship between spelling and pronunciation rules, and then try to pronounce when looking at the vocabulary and try to spell the vocabulary when listening to it.

instruction had significantly improved children's rhyme awareness (Liu, 2005; Yen, 2004). Despite the abundant research, more studies are needed to further investigate the effects of teaching nursery rhymes for two reasons.

Firstly, even though children can develop sensitivity to "phonemes" by reciting nursery rhymes repeatedly (Danielson 2000), the aforementioned studies in Taiwan have examined the effects of nursery rhymes only at the level of "rhyme" awareness, which is a more preliminary, less complex stage in phonological processing. How to systematically use nursery rhymes to nurture phonemic awareness in our EFL classroom is worthy of further exploration. Secondly, most of the studies on remedial teaching for EFL underachievers in Taiwan focus exclusively on phonics instruction (Chen, 2004; Chia, 2004; Lai, 2003); little literature is available on the effects of a nursery rhyme instruction on underachievers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study is to: 1) design for EFL underachievers a suitable nursery rhyme teaching curriculum, which follows the "whole-to-parts" framework of balanced reading; 2) evaluate the effects of the proposed program on the early literacy abilities and learning attitudes of these learners.

Firstly, there are no mechanisms for treating EFL underachievers in our local context, including a systematic remedial instruction and the affiliated curriculum and teaching materials. It is stipulated in the regulations of the governmental remedial "Hand in Hand Project"³ that the local government is obligated to develop remedial

³ Starting from 2006, the MOE has launched a "Hand in Hand Project" (攜手計畫) with the aim of bridging the gap between the underachievers and average students in elementary and junior high schools. Children whose scores are at the bottom 5 to 25 percent are given instruction on math, Chinese, and English after regular school hours. Individual schools can apply for remedial classes for underachievers annually.

curriculum and teaching materials. However, they are not yet available. As a front line classroom practitioner, the researcher attempts to design a teaching material that suits the needs and characteristics of the EFL underachievers in Taiwan. The main features of the teaching material are the integration of skills into the context of authentic literature, and the adoption of the instructional sequence of moving from “whole-to-parts.”

The second purpose of the study is to investigate the effects of this balanced and integrated instruction on the development of early literacy abilities and changes in learning attitudes of EFL underachievers. An experimental study was conducted to compare nursery rhyme instruction with explicit phonics instruction to determine which one is more appropriate for remedial teaching in our EFL context. In this study, children’s improvements in phonemic awareness skills, word recognition and spelling abilities, and their changes in learning attitudes were examined. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the curriculum, material design and implementation of remedial instruction at the elementary school level.

This present study is intended to investigate the effects of nursery rhyme instruction on EFL underachievers. The three *research questions* to be addressed are presented as follows:

1. Is nursery rhyme instruction effective in developing *phonemic awareness* of EFL underachievers at elementary level?
2. Is nursery rhyme instruction effective in promoting *word recognition and spelling abilities* of EFL underachievers at elementary level?
3. Is nursery rhyme instruction effective in improving *learning attitudes* of EFL underachievers at elementary level?

As previously stated, one of the purposes of the present study is to compare the effects of nursery rhyme instruction with those of explicit phonics instruction on EFL

remedial teaching. Adopting the framework of moving from whole to parts, the researcher teaches both nursery rhymes and explicit phonics for the nursery rhyme group. In contrast, the explicit phonics receives phonics training only. The researcher will thus take a positive hypothesis as follows:

Nursery rhyme instruction incorporating explicit, direct instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics can promote not only the abilities in *phonemic awareness*, *word recognition* and *spelling* but also the *learning attitudes* of EFL underachievers.

In other words, the researcher assumes that the nursery rhyme group will have more advantages than the phonics only group. What the researcher is interested in finding out is why? And to what extent?

Definitions of Terms

The following terms appeared throughout this paper are defined.

Bimodal distribution

The bimodal distribution is a statistical distribution that has two peaks—the high score peak and the low score peak. The test scores of junior high school students are concentrated on these two peaks. The phenomenon of “polarization” indicates that there are quite a number of students who are struggling with English.

Underachievers

Underachievers refer to learners who exhibit normal intelligence while their academic achievement is below their grade level (Chang, 2000). Recently the subjects of the “resource program” in junior high schools are those whose achievement test scores are below the mean of the whole school students. There are also classes for students with “adapting difficulties in learning” whose scores are at the bottom 5% to 20% in their class.

Remedial instruction

Remedial instruction refers to evaluation and intervention for learners with learning difficulties. Children with learning disabilities need more direct, intensive and systematic inputs from the teacher. In addition to the instruction they receive in the regular classroom, students with learning disabilities benefit significantly from remedial instruction or resource room program. These programs specifically address the needs of every individual in the learning areas of language and math (Du, 1993).

Remedial instruction in this present study refers to the implementation of nursery rhyme instruction to enhance phonemic awareness, word recognition and spelling skills of EFL underachievers. Other than the instruction they had in the general classrooms, remedial learners received additional tuition in a small group before regular school hours. This instruction is therefore termed as a resource program. According to Chang (2000), a resource room program is designed to supplement the regular classroom instruction for students with learning deficiencies through individual or small group instruction.

Alphabetic principle

In an alphabetic language like English, symbols reflects the pronunciation of words. The alphabetic principle is the understanding that speech sounds are represented by written letters in a systematic and predictable way (Neuman, 2006). For L1 learners, knowing that there are predictable relationships between sounds and letters enables them to apply these relationships to read and write familiar and unfamiliar words.

Phonics

Phonics is the system of relationships between letters and sounds. It is also a method of teaching beginners to read in L1 early literacy programs by associating

letters with sounds. The main focus of phonics instruction is to help beginners to form letter-sound correspondences and spelling patterns by associating sounds in spoken language with written symbols in print (NRP, 2000). Phonics instruction helps children develop an understanding of the alphabetic principle.

Word recognition

Word recognition is the ability to virtually recognize written words correctly and effortlessly (NIFL, 2006). It entails a reader's ability to recognize words by sounding out the constituent letters. In the present study, word recognition is termed as identifying an isolated word and pronouncing it. Real words and pseudo words are included.

Decoding

Decoding refers to the process of converting letters into sounds and blending them to form recognizable words (Ehri, 2003). It is the ability to translate printed words into spoken language (Blevins, 1998). Learners' knowledge of the mapping between letters and sounds helps them figure out the pronunciations of printed words. In the present study, decoding skills is defined as the ability to read real words and pseudo words in isolation.

Phonological and phonemic awareness

Phonological awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate the sound structure of English language. It is the understanding that spoken language can be broken down into smaller components from simple to complex. The stages of phonological development are: word awareness, rhyme awareness, syllable awareness, onset and rime, and, at the highest level, phonemic awareness (Ehri et al., 2001, cited in Hempenstall, 2003). Phonemic awareness enables beginners to grasp and use the alphabetic principle to read and spell. It is thus viewed as the most powerful predictor

of success in learning to read for L1 learners (Adams, 1990; Stanovich, 1994).

Throughout the article the term phonological awareness will be used to mean an awareness at all levels of spoken language from basic word, rhyme, syllable, to phonemic awareness. The term phonemic awareness, however, refers specially to the most sophisticated level of phonological awareness, namely recognition that spoken words can be broken down into individual phonemes.

Organization of the Thesis

The layout of the present study is described as follows:

Chapter one serves as the introduction. The researcher will first present her motivation, goals, research questions and hypothesis. Then, some terms which may cause confusion will be defined.

Chapter two will review related theories and studies on phonemic awareness, onset and rime, nursery rhymes and balanced reading in an effort to justify the adoption a balanced reading instruction using the framework of “whole-to-parts” for Taiwan’s EFL remedial education at the elementary school level.

Chapter three will present the empirical method employed in this study. It includes the research design, the subjects involved, the teaching materials and the instructional procedure for the experimental and control groups respectively, the instruments administered to the subjects, and the way to analyze the collected data.

Chapter four will present the results of the empirical investigation as well as the researcher’s interpretation of the findings in terms of the within-group and between-group comparisons of the two groups.

Chapter five will conclude the present study with a summary of the main findings, pedagogical implications, limitations as well as suggestions for future studies.