

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents the theoretical grounds of using a “whole-to-parts” framework of balanced reading for remedial instruction in our EFL environment. Five relevant issues including phonemic awareness, onset and rime, nursery rhymes, balanced reading instruction, and related studies in Taiwanese EFL context are reviewed in this chapter. The first section explores the role of phonemic awareness in reading acquisition. The advantages of using onsets and rimes as the instructional focus for phonemic awareness are discussed in the second section. Reasons of adopting nursery rhymes as materials for a balanced reading instruction are elaborated in the third section. Fourthly, balanced reading instruction, an approach which integrates two conflicting traditions of reading instruction—explicit phonics and whole language, is examined. To conclude, the final section of this chapter reviews related studies in Taiwanese EFL context.

#### Phonemic Awareness

Research has shown that phonemic awareness is a crucial determinant of success in reading and spelling attainment of an alphabetic language (Adams, 1990; Hu, 2002; Lomax & McGee, 1987; Stanovich, 1994). The definition and importance of phonemic awareness, its relations with phonics, and guidelines for phonemic awareness instruction are illustrated in this section.

#### The Definition of Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the understanding that spoken words consist of a series of individual sounds (Ball & Blachman, 1991; Yopp, 1992) which linguists refer to as phonemes. According to Hoover (2002), phonemic awareness is a cognitive skill

which involves three elements—the phonological units known as phonemes, explicit and conscious awareness to these linguistic units, and the ability to explicitly manipulate such units. First of all, phonemes are the most basic units of speech “that speakers and listeners unconsciously combine and contrast to produce and perceive words in spoken language” (Richards, Poremba, & McGee, 1996, p.633). Then, to be phonemically aware requires explicit and reflective knowledge upon the linguistic units underlies language (Hoover, 2002). The third element of phonemic awareness involves the ability to blend, segment, and manipulate sounds in spoken words. Children who have control over the smallest units of speech are considered phonemically aware (Yopp, 1992).

Phonemic awareness is not an all-or-nothing trait which is either present or absent. Rather, it entails distinctive levels ranging from primitive to more advanced ones which reflect a growing understanding to the sound structure of language (Adams, 1990; Blevins, 1997; Hempenstall, 2003). Adams (1990) identifies five levels of phonemic awareness: 1) the ability to hear rhymes and alliterations; 2) the ability to do oddity tasks; 3) the ability to blend separate sounds into words and split syllables orally; 4) the ability to segment words orally into the component phonemes and 5) the ability to manipulate phonemes by deleting or substituting the initial consonants of words. Blevins (1997) summarizes the five levels of phonemic awareness as: 1) rhyme and alliteration; 2) oddity tasks; 3) oral blending; 4) oral segmentation; 5) phonemic manipulation.

### The Importance of Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is important for it helps children grasp and use the alphabetic principle to read and write (Griffith & Olson, 1992; NRP, 2000). In an alphabetic language like English, speech sounds are encoded at the level of phonemes

(Yopp, 1992) and by the letters of the alphabet in reading and writing. Mastering the alphabetic principle—an insight that there are systematic and predictable relationships between letters in printed words (or graphemes) and sounds in spoken words (phonemes) requires an understanding that spoken words can be analyzed into their constituent phonemes. Children who are aware of phonemes can consciously isolate individual sounds in words and associate them with the written letters of the alphabet whereas children without phonemic awareness may only memorize isolated letter-sound relationships by rote (Griffith & Olson, 1992).

On account of the importance of phonemic awareness in reading acquisition, researchers consider phonemic awareness a powerful indicator of success in attainment of early literacy skills (Adams, 1990; Richards et al., 1996; Stanovich, 1994). Children's level of phonemic awareness on entering school is widely acknowledged as the single most powerful predictor of success in learning to read (Adams, 1990; Chien, 2002; Richards et al., 1996; Stanovich, 1994; Sun, 2002). In addition, phonemic awareness also serves as an indicator of reading disability (Yopp, 1988). It appears that a lack of phonemic awareness poses a chief obstacle for learning to read (Juel, 1988; Lyon, 1995; Wagner & Torgeson, 1987).

### The Relation Between Phonemic Awareness and Phonics

Phonemic awareness is often confused with phonics. Phonemic awareness focuses on perception and manipulation of individual sounds that make up spoken words whereas phonics heightens the relationships between the letters in written language and the sounds in spoken language.

Successful phonics instruction is dependent upon the development of phonemic awareness (Hu, 2002). To perform phonics skills requires the understanding of alphabetic principle. As described above, phonemic awareness helps children

understand the principles underlying the alphabetic code (Griffith & Olson, 1992). Without phonemic awareness, phonics makes no sense and spelling is learned by rote (Poindexter & Oliver, 1998) because children “do not understand what letters and spellings are supposed to represent” (Griffith & Olson, 1992, p. 518). Children who lack phonemic awareness are unlikely to benefit fully from phonics instruction. Hence, phonemic awareness is considered a prerequisite to phonics.

Additionally, beginning levels of phonemic awareness do not necessarily involve letters. The instruction of phonemic awareness can be accomplished either with or without any letters. Phonemic awareness is an aural/oral skill (Hempenstall, 2003). Sensibility and awareness to the sound structure of spoken words is fostered mainly through listening and speaking activities. Therefore, initial levels of phonemic awareness do not entail written letters or words and are therefore exclusive of phonics (Poindexter & Oliver, 1998; White, 2000). However, as long as basic phonemic awareness has been established, instruction and practice in phonemic awareness and phonics appear to be complementary and mutually reinforcing.

#### The Instruction of Phonemic Awareness

While almost all children develop the ability to discern and produce speech with little or no direct instruction (Sensenbaugh, 1996), some children may find it difficult to gain control over phonemes as they are abstract units of sounds which carry no meaning (Griffith & Olson, 1992; Yopp, 1992). For young children to grasp phonemic awareness requires that “they shift their attention away from the content of speech to the form of speech” (Yopp, 1992, p. 696). Phonemic awareness, therefore, must be explicitly taught (Lyon, 1995). Studies have shown that children who receive explicit instruction on phonemic awareness improve significantly in their word

recognition and spelling abilities (Ball & Blachman, 1991; Lundberg, Frost & Peterson, 1988).

Researchers have offered guidelines and recommendations for phonemic awareness training (Chard and Dickson, 1999; Yopp, 1988; Yopp, 1992; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). First of all, to develop positive feelings toward learning, the tone of the instructional activities should be “playful and game-like”, “fun and informal”, and “interactive and social.” Secondly, children’s literature provides children a familiar and comfortable context to explore sounds in language. Songs, chants, and word games are ideal for developing sensitivity to the sound structure of language among children. Finally, instruction of phonemic awareness should be developmentally appropriate, following a proper sequence of instructional activities ranging from simple to complex.

### Onset and rime

Phonemic awareness is a subcategory of a broader notion called phonological awareness, which refers to the ability to recognize and manipulate spoken language in different levels, such as words, rhymes, syllables, and onsets and rimes. Onset and rime, a stage prior to phoneme in the phonological processing, is considered effective in promoting phonemic awareness (Chard & Osborne, 1999). In this section, the definition of onset and rime is first given. The hierarchy of the development of phonological awareness and the importance of onset and rime are then expounded.

#### The Definition of Onset and Rime

Spoken words can be phonologically subdivided into different levels. They are syllables, onsets and rimes within syllables, and individual phonemes (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, Eds., 1998). A syllable can be divided into two parts: onset, which consists

of the initial consonant or consonant cluster, as the sound /f/ in the word *fat*, and rime which is made up of the vowel and any final consonants as /at/ in the word *fat* (Rigby, 1997).

Onset and rime are considered natural units of a syllable (Goswami, 1994; Treiman, 1992). As illustrated in Figure 2.1, the vowel which is central to a syllable is called nucleus. The optional consonant or consonant cluster that comes before the nucleus is the onset, and the optional consonant or consonant cluster that comes after the nucleus is the coda. The nucleus and coda together form the rime.

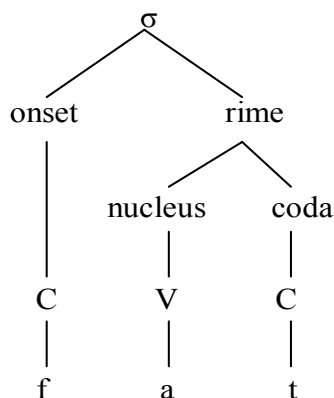


Figure 2.1 The structure of a syllable: a CVC word *fat* as an example

### The Hierarchy of the Development of Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness refers to the ability to attend to and manipulate the sound structure of language. It is the understanding that spoken language can be broken down into smaller components in many different ways, including sentences into words and words into syllables, onsets and rimes, and individual phonemes (Chard & Dickson, 1999).

Just like other stages in children's development, phonological awareness skills seem to emerge following a hierarchy or along a continuum (see Figure 2.2). The initial phonological awareness skills including rhyming songs and sentence segmentation are succeeded by blending and segmentation of syllables. This process

reflects children’s sensitivity of sounds in speech from larger to smaller units. When their awareness of phonological processing advances further, children learn that words and syllables are made up of even smaller parts—that is, individual phonemes, and that these phonemes can be blended together or broken apart. The most challenging and latest developing phonological awareness skill is the ability to manipulate phonemes (Chard & Dickson, 1999).

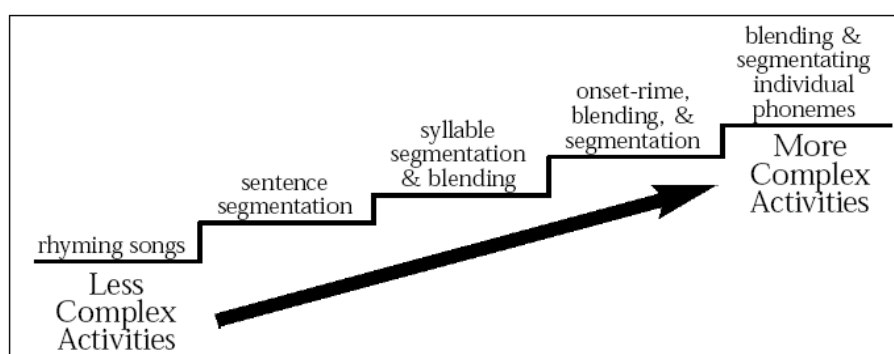


Figure 2.2 A continuum of complexity of phonological awareness activities (Chard & Dickson, 1999, p. 262)

Although the stair-like chart suggests a developmental process of phonological awareness which progresses along a continuum, “it should be noted that the description of the process as developmental does not imply spontaneous development—for many students it needs to be taught” (Lindamood, 1994, cited in Hempenstall, 2003).

### The Importance of Onset and Rime

Onsets and rimes are regarded as the most effective focus of phonological activities for beginning reading and spelling (Bowey & Francis, cited in Hempenstall, 2003). Children appear to be better able to discern onset-rime structure than the phonemic structure of the syllable in learning to read (Treiman, 1985; Chard & Osborne, 1999; Goswami, 2001). Before they are taught how to read, children are well aware of larger units, such as onsets and rimes, but that is often not the case with

phonemic awareness (Bryant & Bradley, 1985). Skills in blending and segmenting onsets and rimes may serve as a stepping-stone to reading. Research has suggested teaching phonemic awareness by breaking down words according to onsets and rimes. Then move on to phonemic blending and segmentation after children master the skills of onset and rime (Blevins, 2000; Gunning, 1995).

In addition, a body of research also reveals that onset and rime may be a valuable emphasis to teach children with reading disabilities. Rimes have more predictable and regular pronunciations over individual letters (Adams, 1990; Gunning, 1995). Knowing that *ring* and *sing* rhyme, for instance, children are likely to read *bring* and *swing* by analogy (Hempenstall, 2003). Since children with reading disabilities are inclined to have phonological deficiencies, this strategy has made some researchers to propose that focusing on onsets and rimes may be an easy access to other phonological skills and subsequent reading skills (Bowey, Cain, & Ryan, 1992; Hulme & Snowling, 1992; all cited in Hempenstall, 2003).

In brief, in learning to read, children appear to be more sensitive to the onset-rime structure than to the full phonemic structure of the syllable. Onset and rime is therefore held as the most effective focus for promoting the development of awareness at the more difficult phoneme level of phonological awareness.

### Nursery rhymes

Nursery rhymes are a good threshold to the development of language skills. The relations of nursery rhymes to language development, to phonemic awareness, and to learning attitudes are illustrated in the following three sections.

#### Nursery Rhymes and Language Learning

Nursery rhymes are songs and verses sung or recited to children from



generation to generation (Danielson, 2000). They introduce young children the ways how English language works. They have traditionally been used widely with extensive range in the preschool classroom (Opie & Opie, 1959). Danielson (2000) stated the reasons for reading and reciting nursery rhymes: “(a) to learn the intonation patterns of a language, (b) to learn new words and concepts, (c) to understand the basis of learning to read and write, and (d) to gain appreciation of poetry” (p. 7).

Nursery rhymes can help children master rhythm of a language (Hamner, 2003). According to Kenney (2005), nursery rhymes are powerful carriers of rhythms. The rhythm of a language helps young children develop sensitivity for the music of words, phrases, and sentences (Cullinan, 1991, cited in Danielson, 2000). Chanting and mimicking the phrases, nonsense words, and alliterative or rhymed repetitions contribute to children’s mastering of the pitches, stresses, and junctures, i.e. the suprasegmental of a language (Danielson, 2000).

Nursery rhymes can also help children learn new vocabulary, novel ideas and concepts. Through reciting nursery rhymes, children get to know people, places, and objects that may not yet have been part of their life (Kenney, 2005). Nursery rhymes thus provide a solid oral language basis. The knowledge of oral vocabulary may prepare children for the written text.

Because nursery rhymes are often the earliest literature or the first reader young children have been exposed to, they can be used to develop the concepts of how speech matches to print (Danielson, 2000; Goswami, 2001; Holdaway, 1979, cited in Weaver, 1994). Engaging children in reading familiar and favorite stories, poems and rhymes again and again facilitates children’s learning of letter-sound patterns, of words, as well as the capacity to map sound to print and vice versa.

### Nursery Rhymes and Phonemic Awareness

Research has shown that the knowledge of nursery rhymes helps build phonological awareness, including rhyme awareness and phonemic awareness. Children's knowledge of rime (also termed as rhyme awareness) emerges at a relative early age, upon beginning kindergarten (Torgesen & Mathes, 1998). Preschool children develop an awareness of rhyme through chants, songs, word games, and predominantly, through nursery rhymes. Rhyming words are a common feature of nursery rhymes. Through instruction, students can learn to identify written words with similar endings by hearing and reciting nursery rhymes. Lombardo (2005) pointed out that when children listen to and recite nursery rhymes, they learn about rhyming words. She offers a way of teaching beginning sounds (onsets) and word families (rimes) through nursery rhymes:

Lessons can also be planned using words from the rhymes to teach beginning sounds as well as common word families. Take the rhyme, "Jack and Jill" (for example). It's perfect for teaching the "j" sound and also for making words that sound and are spelled alike: Jill, hill, bill, dill, fill, and Jack, back, lack, pack, rack, tack (Lombardo, 2005: 38).

Furthermore, research indicates that learning nursery rhymes can help young children take a step further toward becoming phonemically aware. Bryant, MacLean, Bradley, and Crossland (1990) suggested that the development of phonemic awareness is rooted in traditional rhyming and word games. Hearing, singing, and chanting nursery rhymes repeatedly will sensitize children to the individual phonemes that make up words (Danielson, 2000; Routman & Butler, 1998). Hence, it is important for teachers to develop children's phonemic awareness by exposing them to literature which play with sounds in language through rhyme and manipulation of phonemes (Griffith & Olson, 1992).

As mentioned in the section about the definition of phonemic awareness,

Adams (1990) identifies five levels of phonemic awareness: 1) rhymes and alliteration; 2) oddity tasks; 3) phoneme blending; 4) phonemic segmentation and 5) phonemic manipulation. Researchers have offered suggestions for using nursery rhymes to develop different levels of phonemic awareness.

### **Level one: Rhyme and alliteration**

First, having children recite a simple nursery rhyme. Second, tell them that rhyming words sound the same at the end. Then, encourage them to listen for the initial sounds in words. Take “Hickory Dickory Dock” as an example<sup>1</sup>. It contains a rhyming pair, *dock/clock*; and alliteration of *d* in the opening and closing phrase: “Hickory dickory dock.”

### **Level two: Oddity tasks**

Children first hear and recite the rhyme “One Two Buckle My Shoe” several times. They will be asked to pay attention to the beginning, medial, and ending sounds<sup>2</sup> of the words taken from the rhyme (Sadlier-Oxford, 2000). Instructional activities may be designed for children to do oddity tasks by asking questions like:

- Which word has a different beginning sound? (e.g. *ten, two, cat*)
- Which word has a different middle sound? (e.g. *big, fat, pick*)
- Which word has a different ending sound? (e.g. *lay, ten, hen*)

### **Level three: Phoneme blending**

Children will sing the song “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” together. Then, they will practice oral blending of phonemes by an animal guessing game. The teacher

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of teaching rhyme and alliteration was inspired by Sadlier-Oxford (2000: p. 4). The present study used the rhyme “Hickory, Dickory, Dock” to illustrate instead of the originally suggested “Hey Diddle, Diddle.”

<sup>2</sup> Again, the nursery rhyme illustrated for oddity tasks was “Mary, Mary” (p. 4). However, the researcher used another rhyme “One, Two, Buckle My Shoe” and developed similar instructional activities.

may first segment the target animal (pig) by onset and rime (/p/...ig) and then phoneme by phoneme (/p/ /ɪ/ /g/). The following animals can be used: (cat) (/k/ /æ/ /t/), (dog) /d/ /ɔ/ /g/, (fish) /f/ /ɪ/ /ʃ/, (goat) /g/ /o/ /t/. Children will then blend the sound segments into the target animal and sing the answers together (Blevins, 1997).

Old MacDonald had a farm, E-I-E-I-O.

And on his farm he had a /p/ /ɪ/ /g/, E-I-E-I-O.

With a pig, pig, here

And a pig, pig, there,

Here a pig, there a pig,

Everywhere a pig-pig.

Old MacDonald had a farm, E-I-E-I-O.

#### **Level four: Phoneme segmentation**

Children can be taught to isolate the sounds in words taken from nursery rhymes. One activity suggested by Yopp (1992) to begin working toward the full segmentation of phonemes is to have children segment just the first sound in a word and repeat it while reciting a nursery rhyme<sup>3</sup>. For example, when singing “Are You Sleeping?,” the teacher may encourage the children to sing “Are you s-s-s-sleeping?” for the opening line in the song.

#### **Level five: Phonemic manipulation**

Deleting, adding, or substituting sounds in words in a familiar context may also help children focus on the phonemes that make up speech (Yopp, 1992). Take the song “Row Your Boat” as a model. Have children sing the song a few times. Then tell children to change the line “Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily” to “Serrily, serrily,

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<sup>3</sup> Yopp (1992) offers this activity using two songs as examples—“When the m-moon shines over the c-cowshed...” and “P-p-p-p-POP goes the weasel” (p, 701). The researcher chose the song “Are You Sleeping?” to teach phoneme segmentation because it is easier for children to detect the sibilant /s/ sound with a higher frequency and longer duration than the stops /m/, /k/, /p/.

serrily, serrily.” Each time replace the first sound in the word *merrily* to create a new nonsense word<sup>4</sup> (Blevins, 1997, p, 55).

Another phonemic manipulation activity suggested by Hu (2002) is vowel substitutions in the nursery rhyme “Humpty Dumpty Sat on a Wall” (p, 24). After introducing the story and familiarizing children with the rhyme, teachers may add a new plot, saying that it is not just Humpty Dumpty who is sitting on the wall. His friends Hompty Dompty and Himpty Dimpty are also there. By doing so, several vowels can be substituted and practiced in a playful and game-like way<sup>5</sup>.

### Nursery Rhymes and Learning Attitudes

Nursery rhymes can be used to engage and motivate children. Since nursery rhymes are stories full of fun and imagination, most children enjoy themselves in reading them (Gunning, 2000). Varied themes, vivid characters, and a sense of humor are also characteristic of nursery rhymes (Chang, 2003). Besides, they are brief, rhymed, rhythmic, and repetitious in words, phrases, and sentence patterns (Chang, 2003; Hu, 2002). Therefore, they are easy to recite and remember even for young children and beginning readers. As a result, young EFL learners will become more confident and motivated in learning English (Chang, 2003; Huang, 2006).

In sum, nursery rhymes provide a familiar and comfortable context for children to explore language, to accurately and effortlessly read words they have heard and seen repeatedly, and most important of all, to discover and to be able to manipulate the smallest units of sounds comprising speech. Exploring rhymes in an enjoyable and

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<sup>4</sup> This activity is ideal for practicing phonemic manipulation, so the researcher adopted it directly and included this song in the training list.

<sup>5</sup> Originally Hu suggests that by revising the lyrics and adding a new plot, students will take delight in learning nursery rhymes. The researcher modified this activity and changed the story plot, saying that Humpty Dumpty’s brothers are also sitting on the wall—Hampty Dampty, Hempty Dempty, Himpty Dimpty, Hompty Dompty. This activity aimed to practice short vowel substitution (see Appendix F Activity 6-2 for details).

engaging way “provide knowledge and skills that can later help children become successful readers and writers” (Danielson, 2000, p.11).

The idea of using nursery rhymes to develop skills like phonemic awareness is in accord with the rationale of a balanced reading instruction, which is a combination of whole language and phonics approaches in teaching reading. To verify this viewpoint, the development as well as principles of balanced reading is reviewed in the next section.

### Balanced Reading Instruction

The balanced reading approach provides an alternative for two extremes of beginning reading instruction—phonics and whole language. In this section, phonics approach and whole language are first introduced respectively. The controversy which has lasted for decades between these two camps is then discussed. Finally, principles and classrooms practices of the balanced reading instruction are presented.

#### Phonics Instruction

Phonics instruction is a way of teaching reading which highlights the acquisition of the alphabetic principle. Children who know the correspondences between letters and sounds are capable of using the information to read unfamiliar words by sounding them out. This process is called decoding (Demoulin & Loye, 1999). In phonics instruction, special emphasis is usually placed on phonemic awareness. It is crucial in understanding the alphabetic principle and how the spelling of words relates to the sounds when spoken (Reyhner, 2003).

Phonics is considered consistent with “the analytic model of teaching reading” which moves from parts to whole; that is, from sounds to words, to short sentences, to paragraphs, and to short stories (Brumer, 1998; Carbo, 1996). It is often referred to as

a “bottom up” method to reading instruction which is based on the premise that “children best learn language in a sequential ordered process of acquiring linguistic components and then (re)arranging them appropriately” (Brooks & Brooks, 2005, p. 272).

There are primarily two types of phonics instructions—explicit and implicit. In Adams’ (1990) definition, “explicit phonics” refers to “the provision of systematic instruction on the relation of letter-sound to words” while “implicit phonics” refers to “the philosophy of letting students induce letter-sounds from whole words” (p. 49). An implicit phonics is often viewed as a synonym of whole language, which is basically a meaning-centered approach (Dahl, Scharer, Lawson, & Gorgan, 1999).

Advocates of explicit phonics argue that explicit phonics is the most effective type of phonics instruction, especially for children at risk for reading difficulties (Adams, 1990; Chall, 1996; all cited in Blevins, 1998). According to Blevins (1998), unlike good readers who are capable of “discovering” sound-letter relationships from a story context and generalizing them to read new words, poor readers rely on explicit instruction on individual letter-sound correspondences. If children at risk are to memorize each sound-letter relationship, they need extensive practice of sounds in isolation from story context (Hempenstall, 2001).

### Whole Language Instruction

Whole language, in contrast, builds on the presumption to view language as a whole rather than fragments (Heald-Taylor, 1989, cited in Brooks & Brooks, 2005). Whole language conforms to “the global model of teaching reading” which moves from whole to parts (Carbo, 1996). Children focus on the whole words, sentences, and paragraphs of children’s literary works, discerning and creating meaning from the contexts. A literacy rich environment of books, charts, labels, and other materials are

provided in which speaking, listening, reading, and writing are combined to foster the children's enjoyment of reading (Reyhner, 2003).

Comprehension and meaning are emphasized over skills. Phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary and grammar skills are just components of the whole language classroom. They are incorporated into holistic reading events by engaging children in reading or writing the real texts rather than through isolated drills (Brooks & Brooks, 2005; Reyhner, 2003). Take phonics for example, it is often used by encouraging children to "discover" similarities in words they have encountered in their reading and writing (Carbo, 1996).

### The Great Debate

The controversies have lasted for decades concerning the two extremes of reading instruction—explicit phonics and whole language. Phonics first supporters advocate explicit and systematic instruction on the sound-letter relationships, phonemic awareness, and decoding skills (Adams, 1990; Chall, 1996). Proponents of whole language, on the other hand, emphasize the importance of meaning-centered and literature-based reading instruction (Goodman, 1986).

Phonics and whole language both receive criticisms from the opposite side. Phonics is often criticized as stressing boring memorization and mechanical drills at the expense of meaning and children's access to real books (Bock, 1998; Song & Miskel, 2002). Whole language is considered "ineffective" because it fails to teach directly and systematically the sound-symbol correspondences needed for sounding out words (Bock, 1998; Moats 2000). Reyhner (2003) also pointed out a major problem facing whole language; that is, it lacks a structure that has been traditionally outlined by the scope and sequence. Lessons, activities, and extensive graded literature found in phonics basal readers are absent in whole language programs.



There is a heavy burden on teachers to develop their own curriculum.

### Balanced Reading—Integration of Whole Language with Explicit Phonics

Over years of conflicts between phonics and whole language, more and more researchers and educators have come to an agreement; that is, “no single approach to teaching reading is fundamentally superior to all the rest” (Stoicheva, 1999, p. 1). A number of researchers have called for a balanced approach to reading instruction in which principles from phonics and whole language are combined (Diegmueller, 1996; Honig, 1996). The language and literature-rich activities associated with whole language are combined with explicit skills connected to phonics instruction. Other researchers try to incorporate language and literacy skills and strategies into the context of reading and writing the whole and meaningful texts (Stoicheva, 1999).

The goal of balanced reading instruction is to foster meaning, understanding, and the love of language simultaneous with the skills needed to develop fluent and proficient readers. Skill instruction such as phonics and phonemic awareness are merged into authentic reading and writing experiences rather than being taught as a separate subject with an emphasis on drills and rote memorization (Snow et al, 1998; Weaver, 1998).

As for the classroom practice of balanced reading, researchers have explored the application of balanced reading in instructional frameworks. Moustafa (1998) advocates the “whole-to-parts” teaching of phonics through shared reading of children’s literature, poems and songs. The words for phonic analysis should come from the texts children have already interacted with a number of times. Children make analogies between familiar words selected from the texts and unfamiliar print words to pronounce unfamiliar words at the onset-rime level. Strickland (1998) proposes another balanced framework for skills instruction called “whole-part-whole” approach.

Children begin with a variety of whole texts which provides them the basis for phonics skills instruction. They then apply what they have learned to reading and writing with other whole texts.

In sum, balanced reading instruction seeks to strike a balance between the skill-based approach often associated with phonics and the meaning-based approach distinctive of whole language to reading instruction. An extensive exposure to meaningful, authentic literature and a strong foundation in phonics training are both integral and indispensable parts of an effective literacy program.

### Related Studies in Taiwanese Context

In recent years, various studies on Taiwanese EFL learners have shown strong correlation between phonological awareness and reading/spelling skills. In a longitudinal study with fifth graders in Taiwan, Sun (2002) confirmed a significant correlation between phonological awareness and word recognition ability in learning English. Chien (2002) also found that among all the three levels of phonological awareness tasks administered in her study—syllable awareness, onset-rime awareness, and phonemic awareness—phonemic awareness was shown to have the highest correlation with spelling and reading.

Consistent with the findings of the studies on L1 children with learning difficulties, EFL underachievers in Taiwan were found to have a general deficiency in processing phonemes. Ko (2004) compared the phonological processing and word decoding skills of 32 fourth-grade EFL underachievers with those of the grade-matched average students. The findings indicated that EFL underachievers were inferior to their average peers in their phonemic awareness skills. Lin (2005) also found the phonological awareness skills of EFL sixth-graders with learning disabilities significantly lower than those of the normal students.

Research has indicated that phonemic awareness can be taught and learned in L1 context (Ball & Blachman, 1991; Lundberg et al., 1988). Studies conducted in our Taiwanese EFL environment have yielded similar results. Wu (2005) evaluated the effects of training in phoneme segmentation on early reading ability of Taiwanese EFL first-graders. Children in this study received training in phonemic segmentation as well as letter-sound correspondences. The experimental group significantly outperformed the control group which received training only on letter-sound correspondences. Moreover, comparison of within group performance between the pretest and posttest indicated that the experimental group also improved significantly in their phoneme segmentation and word recognition abilities.

A study on beginning reading also suggests that teaching through onset and rime facilitates the development of phonemic awareness on EFL children. Su (2004) investigated the effects of onset-rime based phonics instruction on the development of phonemic awareness and oral reading ability of fourth graders. Subjects in the experimental group received onset-rime based phonics instruction. The results showed that the experimental group performed better in phonemic awareness posttest and oral reading posttest and that onset-rime based phonics instruction promoted the subjects' phonemic awareness ability.

For children with reading disabilities in L1 context, explicit and systematic phonics is regarded as the most effective type of phonics instruction by many researchers (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001; Adams, 1990; Chall, 1996; all cited in Blevins, 1998). Researchers and classroom practitioners in Taiwanese EFL context hold similar outlook on the issue of teaching reading in remedial learners. Explicit phonics is thus the mainstream strategy of remedial instruction in three local studies administered to elementary school and junior high school students (Chen, 2004; Chia, 2004; Lai, 2003).

Chen (2004) conducted an action research to examine the effects of onset-rime analogy phonics instruction on decoding and oral reading of ten remedial second-grade EFL junior high school students. The result indicated that these underachievers benefited from explicit phonics in decoding. Besides, three of the ten students were motivated and five of them had more confidence in learning English.

Chia (2004) investigated the effects of peer tutoring on phonics learning and English learning attitude in low-achieving elementary school students. The control group and the experimental group, each comprising 14 fifth graders, reviewed phonics three times a week for six weeks (30 minutes each time). The subjects in the experimental group were offered one-to-one peer tutoring on phonics learning, while the subjects in the control group reviewed phonics lessons by themselves. The instructional focuses of the phonics lessons were: sound-letter correspondences, phonemic blending and segmentation, sight words, short text reading, and spelling practices. The results showed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in rapid letter sound, phoneme segmentation, and word identification. No significant difference existed in English learning attitude between the two groups despite the fact that the experimental group exhibited more active participation in class after the experiment.

Lai (2003) investigated the effects of phonics instruction with phonological awareness activities on spelling skills of some remedial junior high school students in an English resource program in Taiwan. After the fourteen-week instruction, all the participants enhanced their spelling skills.

Even though explicit phonics seems to be the mainstream strategy of remedial instruction, it may not be the best solution for treating EFL underachievers for two reasons. First of all, in the phonics remedial instructions mentioned above, phonemic awareness is viewed as a consequence of phonics instruction. For the most part,

phonemic awareness training is incorporated into phonics programs and attended to after letter names, letter sounds, and phonics rules have been introduced. Nevertheless, as revealed in an earlier section on the relation between phonemic awareness and phonics, since phonemic awareness activities primarily involve aural/oral skills, it would be best to be treated as a prerequisite to phonics.

The second reason is that researchers have also warned of the dangers of an overemphasis on explicit phonics at the expense of comprehension, creativity, and love of literature (Bromley, 2005; Putnam, 2002). This is especially true for our Taiwanese FFL learners who do not have ample exposure to spoken language or print concepts of English and thus lack any context to apply their knowledge of individual sound-symbol relationships. Focusing too much on the isolated knowledge may seem meaningless to EFL underachievers (Zapparoli, 2005).

Other researchers in L1 context have suggested that a balanced and integrated instructional program might be helpful for children with reading difficulties. In this kind of instruction, language and literacy growth are approached in an integrated rather than isolated fashion (Bock, 1998; Snow et al., 1998).

There is also a growing tendency in applying the integrated model of reading instruction in local studies. The efficacy of integrating phonics instruction with principles of whole language is investigated in an EFL elementary classroom of 37 fifth graders (Liaw, 2003). The findings showed that the abilities in phonemic awareness, vocabulary learning, and independent storybook reading of the subjects were substantially improved “through explicit and systematic phonics instruction as well as whole language practices including teaching sounds and words in meaningful contexts” (p. 28). In a more recent study, Leou (2005) explored the principles for designing a balanced reading program for elementary school students in Taiwan and investigated the effects of such a program on reading ability and motivation. The

results showed that after the instruction, the experimental group, receiving balanced reading program in addition to regular classroom instruction, significantly surpassed the control group, given only regular classroom instruction, in both word recognition test and reading motivation questionnaire. This study confirmed the positive influence of a balanced reading instruction on the reading ability and reading motivation of young EFL learners.

Nursery rhymes fit ideally into a balanced reading approach to learning English. These short and fun children's literary works not only introduce L1 beginners to the spoken language and vocabulary naturally, but also lead them to acquire useful language skills, such as rhyme awareness, phonemic awareness, and concepts of print. They are especially suitable for EFL underachievers who lack both early literacy skills in English and a positive attitude toward learning English.

Research in our EFL settings has verified the effects of nursery rhyme instruction on rhyme (rime) awareness. Yen (2004) examined the effect of English nursery rhyme and chant instruction on rime awareness of Taiwanese EFL beginners. The same English nursery rhymes and chants were introduced to both the experimental and control groups. However, the experimental group received explicit instruction on rimes while the control group did not. The results showed significant pre- to posttest improvements on rime awareness for the experimental group, but no significant difference for the control group. In another study, Liu (2005) compared the effects of nursery rhyme instruction with those of story-telling instruction on rhyme awareness of EFL third graders. She concluded that nursery rhyme teaching significantly improved rhyme awareness of EFL third graders and which could in turn be generalized to non-teaching target rhymes.

Two other studies have shown that nursery rhymes can help children develop abilities in dealing with speech sounds and can arouse their interest in learning

English. Chiang (2003) observed a lack of good attitudes toward learning English among elementary school students due to the limited time and practices in the EFL setting in Taiwan. By incorporating English rhymes and songs into every subject in a fourth grade classroom, students' attitudes toward learning English improved after nine months of instruction. Huang (2006) investigated the effects of an eight week nursery rhymes instruction on the development of phonological awareness and learning motivation of fourth-grade students. The experimental group receiving nursery rhymes teaching was compared with the control group given conventional English teaching. The results showed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in phonemic segmentation and developed a positive and supportive attitude toward nursery rhymes instruction in English.

In brief, for our EFL underachievers with limited or no oral proficiency and vocabulary of English, isolated phonics rules and drills may seem meaningless to them (Wang, 2001; Zapparoli, 2005). On the other hand, nursery rhymes have been used to develop phonological awareness and boost learning attitudes on EFL learners. Nevertheless, the focus of investigation of the development of phonological awareness was mainly on the level of rhyme awareness, which is a shallower sensitivity to the sound structure of language (Stanovich, 1986, cited in Hempenstall, 2003) and a less crucial indicator of reading and spelling abilities than phonemic awareness. Little work has been done to explore the effects of such an instruction on the development of phonemic awareness and other early literacy skills including word recognition and spelling skills on EFL underachievers.

To bridge the gap, this present study explored the feasibility of an instruction which incorporated explicit, systematic phonic skills training into the meaningful context of nursery rhymes. In contrast to explicit phonics which built up language skills from parts to whole, this proposed instruction approached phonemic awareness

and early literacy skills from whole to parts. Using nursery rhyme to engage the students, the instructional sequence moved from larger units of sound to smaller ones; that is, from rhyming songs, rhyme awareness, onset and rime, to phonemic awareness. Skills needed for decoding and encoding could thus be taught systematically in the meaningful context.