

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study answered the initial research questions about the effects of nursery rhyme instruction on the development of early literacy skills and the changes of attitudes in learning English on EFL underachievers. After the instruction, these learners not only significantly improved their *phonemic awareness* skills, *word recognition* and *spelling* abilities, but also considerably boosted their *learning attitudes* toward English. These findings thus confirmed the hypothesis set for the present study.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The main findings of the study in answering three research questions are summarized in the first section. Next, based on the findings of the study, pedagogical implications are generated for instructors and educational authorities in the second section. Finally, the last section presents limitations of the study and offers suggestions for future research.

Main Findings

From the preceding chapters we noted the characteristics of Taiwanese EFL underachievers—a poverty of reading and spelling abilities as well as a lack of good attitudes toward learning English. A balanced reading instruction utilizing English nursery rhymes was proposed to accommodate their learning difficulties. In contrast to the traditional practices of remedial instruction which focus mainly and exclusively on teaching skills in isolation, the nursery rhyme instruction approached skills in the context of authentic texts.

Three research questions were raised to study the efficacy of this proposed instruction in terms of *phonemic awareness* development, *word recognition* and

spelling skills, and *learning attitude* changes. They were: 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?

A hypothesis was assumed to predict the effects of this nursery rhyme instruction. That is: 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.

Analysis of the data concerning the first research question showed that the experimental group improved significantly on all the five subtests of the PA test. This suggests that incorporating PA training into the context of nursery rhymes could improve the PA skills of the Taiwanese EFL underachievers. Moreover, since statistically significant differences were found between the experimental and control groups in terms of PA test scores, it can be argued that a balanced approach is more effective than the traditional phonics only approach in improving the subjects' PA skills. Two possible reasons may account for the improvements. Firstly, phonemic awareness is an aural/oral skill (Hempenstall, 2003). By listening to and reciting nursery rhymes, the subjects could develop sensitivity to rhymes, onsets and rimes, phonemes in language and acquire the ability to manipulate them (Danielson, 2000). The other possibility may be due to the fact that phonemic awareness was explicitly taught following the sequence from simple to complex in the proposed nursery rhyme instruction.

As for the second research question, paired-samples t-test results indicated that nursery rhyme instruction had quite noticeable and significant effects on word recognition and spelling abilities of EFL underachievers. Independent-samples t-tests revealed significant differences in favor of nursery rhyme group over phonics group. The findings thus support the efficacy of “whole-to-parts” teaching of phonics proposed by Moustafa (1998) in which the words for phonics analysis are taken from the texts that children have been familiar with. One possible explanation may be that nursery rhymes provided the subjects a basis to map speech onto print and to explore decoding and encoding skills necessary for word recognition and spelling using words they had heard and seen in the meaningful contexts.

Finally, according to the analysis of data collected from the questionnaire of attitudes, very significant differences were found in the post- over pretest comparisons between the two groups. After the instruction, the experimental group changed their attitudes toward “usefulness of English”, “fondness of English”, and “confidence in learning English” significantly for the better while the explicit phonics group did not. In addition, between-group comparisons showed that the nursery rhyme group significantly outperformed the control group in their learning attitudes toward English. This clearly suggests that the nursery rhyme instruction positively changed the subjects’ perceptions in learning English. The findings provide very strong evidence to support previous studies which also found EFL children confident and motivated in learning English through nursery rhymes (Chang, 2003; Huang, 2006). One reason could be that the subjects in general enjoy learning through fun rhymes with repetitious words, phrases, and lines along which they can easily recite and remember. Likewise, the EFL underachievers in the present study also gained confidence in reciting nursery rhymes with ease. They have thus perceived the usefulness of English while learning to read and write in the context of authentic literature.

The findings of this study underscore the effects of a balanced approach which includes teaching phonemic awareness and phonics explicitly and systematically in the context of nursery rhymes. The empirical results strongly confirm the hypothesis of the present study—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 Taiwanese EFL underachievers.

Pedagogical Implications

Based on the results of the present study, some pedagogical implications can be drawn for instructors and educational authorities.

First of all, the results of the study indicated that Taiwanese EFL underachievers can be trained in phonemic awareness. It also showed that without explicit and systematic instruction, the subjects in the phonics group failed to make significant progress in rhyme detection, one of the least complex tasks of phonemic awareness (Adams, 1990; Chard & Dickson, 1999). The findings are in accord with the view that phonemic awareness does not develop spontaneously but needs to be taught (Lindamood, 1994, cited in Hempenstall, 2003). Therefore, EFL instructors should explicitly introduce phonemic awareness following the hierarchy of task difficulties. In other words, teachers can move from rhyming songs to blending and segmenting a word into an onset and a rime, and finally to fully blending and segmenting a word into phonemes as suggested by Chard and Dickson (1999) and Yopp and Yopp (2000). By doing so students are allowed to move from larger units of sounds which are easier to grasp to smaller units of sounds to which they are less sensitive.

Secondly, phonemic awareness can be trained through all sorts of aural and oral activities. According to Griffith and Olson (1992), phonemic awareness is prerequisite for phonics. Without the understanding that spoken words are made up of individual sounds (phonemes) and the ability to perceive and manipulate these sounds in spoken words, children will have difficulty in mapping sounds onto letters and consequently, in applying the letter-sound relations in their reading and spelling. Yopp and Yopp (2000) suggest integrating phonemic awareness instruction into the curriculum. They further stress that the instructional activities of phonemic awareness should focus children's attention on the sound units of spoken language by using playful music, games, and literature that are already being used with children. Thus, in our EFL context, teachers can take advantage of the fun and engaging nursery rhymes as a good vehicle for young learners to explore and play with sounds in English language. Besides, just as White (2000) points out, beginning levels of phonemic awareness do not involve written letters. Therefore, at the very onset, teachers may consider introducing beginning levels of phonemic awareness, such as rhyme, alliteration, and phoneme blending, before teaching explicitly the letter-sound correspondences.

Thirdly, given the results that the nursery rhyme group significantly surpassed the phonics group on word recognition and spelling skills, this study gives insights into how a remedial instruction might be structured. As distinct from explicit phonics instruction focusing on isolated skills, such as letter names, letter sounds, and sound-letter relationships, a balanced instruction that utilizes authentic literature like nursery rhymes with word analysis skills embedded within the texts may be a more effective approach for remedial intervention. This kind of instruction is more comprehensible to children because it is connected to meaning and whole texts from the very start. Since speech develops before written system, nursery rhymes, fun and rich in prosody, rhymes, and easy to recite and memorize, serve as a good basis for

learning to read and write (Danielson, 2000). Skills including letter knowledge and phonics are approached in a familiar context with words children have initially acquired verbally through their listening to, singing and reciting nursery rhymes. Later on through one-to-one matching of spoken words and written words, they are led to explore the printed texts of the nursery rhymes. EFL underachievers can benefit greatly from a balanced reading instruction in which English is learned and used within the context of meaningful reading and writing activities.

Fourthly, findings of this study suggest that the nursery rhyme instruction succeeded in positively changing the attitudes towards learning English of EFL underachievers. Clearly, a literature-based instruction that integrates the teaching of skills has an edge over the one wherein the prime concern is the direct instruction and practice of letter-sound correspondences in a fixed, sequential way. Empirical evidence of the present study showed that the phonics group made no significant improvements in their attitudes toward learning English. The subjects' perception of the usefulness of English even changed negatively to a significant level. The importance of phonics instruction in learning an alphabetic language like English has been widely acknowledged in both L1 and EFL contexts. However, overemphasis on isolated drills and rote memorization should be cautioned. EFL instructors should approach skills and drills in the context of authentic literature. Hence, children can be motivated to develop phonemic awareness and phonics skills naturally because these skills are attached to fun and interesting rhymes, songs, books, and other literature texts.

Finally, this study also offers insight into the implementation of remedial instruction in our EFL environment. Analysis of data revealed that subjects from both the nursery rhyme and the phonics groups evidenced significant improvements on measures of phonemic awareness, word recognition and spelling tests in comparing

the pretest-to-posttest gains. Given the fact that the underachievers substantially benefited from both the nursery rhyme instruction and phonics teaching, the researcher appeals to the educational authorities for the implementation of a whole and consecutive remedial instruction for EFL underachievers to level off the bimodal distribution common among elementary school students. The “Hand in Hand Project” of MOE is not available to all. Individual schools have to apply for the subsidy from our government annually. In addition, originally the project was meant to serve children whose academic achievements are at the bottom 5 to 25 percent in their classes. Confined by the tight budget, now the target subjects are limited to children from low-income and foreign spouse families. To achieve the aim of equity in education, a regular remedial instruction available to every needed child is urgent and indispensable.

Taken together, it is the researcher’s belief that nursery rhymes are an ideal tool for teaching EFL underachievers who have limited exposure and proficiency in English and who lack positive attitudes toward learning English. In reciting nursery rhymes, they have positive language transfer as they discover that the concept of rhyming is not new to them but is already a part of their native language learning experiences. They are motivated by the fun and humorous stories and characters. They gain confidence in reciting and memorizing nursery rhymes with ease. Moreover, they are exposed to the prosody and phonological structure of English language naturally. As they are introduced a variety of vocabulary and short, simple texts, they are provided with basic concepts about print and a basis for skills instruction including phonemic awareness and phonics. It is strongly recommended that instructors and educational authorities may consider using nursery rhymes as remedial teaching materials for our young EFL underachievers.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

While the present study did yield positive effects, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First of all, in order not to interfere with the regular school curriculum, the instruction only lasted for 12 weeks. As compared to the phonics only approach which simply addressed the phonics skills and drills, the nursery rhyme group involved multiple instructional focuses, including the time-consuming aural and oral practices of nursery rhymes, and a variety of phonemic awareness and phonics activities. On account of the tight schedule, the last two out of the total eight nursery rhymes were hastily finished. In future studies, researchers may either prolong the treatment span or reduce the number of nursery rhymes intended for children to master.

Secondly, even though the subjects in the nursery rhyme group learned all the consonants as well as short vowels in terms of phonics training, other phonics rules including long vowels, digraphs, blends, and vowel diagraphs were not attended to in a well-organized fashion in the training due to the limitation of time. The subjects in the control group, however, finished all the other phonics rules. In another word, the control group learned more phonics rules than the experimental group. As is presented in the Instrument section, in the PA, WR, and spelling tests, half of the stimulus words were taken from the teaching materials of the two groups, and half of them were new words the subjects had never learned before. Based on this principle, the researcher tested the subjects mostly on words in CVC structure. Therefore, the tests might have been designed biased toward the advantages of the experimental group in that the other phonics rules that the control group had learned were not included in the tests¹.

Thirdly, the study only involved 18 fourth graders in each group. They are chosen from a local public elementary school in Tao Yuan city. The sample size

¹ I owe my gratitude to Professor Lin, my committee member, for calling my attention to this point.

might be too small to be generalized to other EFL settings in Taiwan. In future studies, the number of subjects needs to be increased. Whether the effects of nursery rhyme instruction can extend to other levels of schooling is also an area worth exploring.

Fourthly, considering the limited English proficiency of the EFL elementary school underachievers, this present study assessed their reading and writing abilities only at the lexical level. Higher levels of early literacy skills, such as oral reading fluency at sentential or even paragraph levels, reading comprehension, and essay writing were not included as parts of the instruments. Researchers may seek to address these issues in future studies.

Finally, to examine the effects of nursery rhyme instruction, the present study took quantitative analysis of data. Statistic calculations were adopted to decide the significance of the differences. Since qualitative research is beyond the scope of the present study, the valuable data collected in videotapes and audiotapes² will be reserved for future explorations.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study marks a step into exploring the effects of using English nursery rhymes as teaching materials on promoting phonemic awareness, word recognition and spelling skills, and learning attitudes of EFL underachievers. Results from the present study may offer support for the value of a balanced reading instruction in which skills needed for reading and writing attainment are embedded within the context of authentic literature. In the present study, the nursery rhyme group was found to gain substantial advantage over phonics group on beginning reading measures as well as on English learning attitudes. The results can be viewed as evidence for the value of nursery rhyme instruction as an effective alternative to the explicit phonics approach now widely adopted as remedial

² The videotapes filmed all the 48 sessions (a total of 32 hours) in the twelve-week treatment span for the two instructional approaches. The audiotapes recorded all the 36 subjects' oral responses in PA and WR pre- and posttests (a total of 36 hours).

classroom practice in Taiwanese EFL environment.