A Study on Differentiation and Fusion of Phonics and International Phonetic Alphabet in English Teaching

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Abstract. This article discusses the differentiation of Phonics and International Phonetic Alphabet in English teaching. Through analyzing the different stimulation on English learning of the students with these two kinds of teaching methods, this paper puts forward specific strategies for fusion application of these two methods in different stages of teaching.

Introduction

Phonics is an English teaching method introduced from abroad in recent years and is becoming popular in China. More and more domestic teachers have begun to integrate the teaching method into daily English teaching. At present, there are many controversies about the application of Phonics and International Phonetic Alphabet in teaching. This paper suggests a more effective design of existing English teaching methods after comparing the these two teaching methods.

The Concept of Phonics

The word Phonics derives from the Greek word phon, which means "sound". In ancient Greece, written language is acquired by recording words pronunciation. Around 1690, a textbook named The New England Primer was issued in New England colonies on the northeast mainland of America, which emphasized the importance of spelling. The students practiced the pronunciation of the letters in verse full of rhythm first, then the syllables, in order to achieve the goal of comprehending the whole text. From the 19th century to 1970s, Phonics was used as a synonym for Phonetics. Oxford English Dictionary explained it in the meaning as a term of teaching method, which could be traced back to 1901.

There are different purposes of phonics instruction. Generally speaking, the differences lie in whether it is for native speakers or for foreign language learners. For native speakers, the purpose of phonics instruction is to provide beginning readers with the ability of associating printed letters with their corresponding speech sounds. Phonics aims to supply the learner with a strategy for working out the pronunciation of previously unseen words. For nonnative speakers of English, they learn both written and spoken forms of English basically at the same time. So phonics cannot be applied to teach reading for them as effectively as for native speakers.

The Concept of International Phonetic Alphabet

The first edition of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) published in August 1888 was a set of symbols developed by the International Phonetic Association to mark the speech sounds of human beings. In this symbol system, each unique sound has a corresponding symbol, and the symbol represents the same pronunciation in any language. The symbol system used to indicate English sounds is IPA. Since the 1950s, our country followed the practice of the former Soviet Union, gradually popularized this phonetic notation system in all kinds of English textbooks. Thus IPA has been adopted so far in China.

The use of a standardized phonetic alphabet not only enables linguists to transcribe languages consistently and accurately, but also provides English learners a good tool to command the sound
programs. IPA is widely used by native and nonnative speakers. China is one of these countries where IPA plays an important role in English learning. And it is mainly used in teaching the students to acquire the pronunciation of English words. Many textbooks, which are used for beginners, start with lessons on the acquisition of IPA symbols, so as to help the students to have the ability to read English words correctly. The instruction of phonetic symbols from IPA can be helpful on promoting the students ability on independent study and vocabulary building besides correcting the students' pronunciation.

Comparison of the Differentiation of Phonics and International Phonetic Alphabet

The advantages and limitations of Phonics

Phonics has many advantages. Firstly, it is easy to learn. This method let the students master pronunciation rules through systematic exercises. As long as the students master the rules, they can read words easily and remember the spelling at the same time, thus reducing the burden of memorizing vocabulary in English learning.

Secondly, it can use the positive transfer of Chinese Pinyin effectively. Chinese students have learned Chinese pinyin and have the ability to spell already. What's more, there are many pronunciations in Chinese pinyin which are similar to English. Therefore, we could use the positive transfer of Chinese pinyin to improve the pronunciations of English individual letters and combinations of letters.

Thirdly, it helps the students improve the efficiency of memorizing words. For example, we can often see the students reciting words letter by letter. While Phonics combines the spelling with the pronunciations, it promotes the students to master the spelling and pronunciations of words at the same time.

On the other hand, the limitations of Phonics cannot be ignored. Phonics teaching generally begins from the pronunciation of the letters, then the examples of words. The examples are mostly monosyllabic words, because most monosyllabic words follow the spelling rules. However, English words are not only monosyllabic words, but also many polysyllabic words. Even monosyllabic words have a lot exceptions which are not conform to the rules.

Example 1: ough has various pronunciations in different words, such as although / ɔːlˈðəʊ /, bough / bəʊ /, bought / bɔːt /, cough / kɔf /, lough / lɔː /, thorough / θɔːr /, through / θru: /.

Example 2: dear /dɪər/ & bear /beər/; head /hed/ & lead /liːd/; put /pʊt/ & cut /kʌt/; live /lɪv/ & five /faɪv/. The vowels in each group of words are the same, but the pronunciation is completely different. If rigidly following the rules of phonics, we will mislead the students.

Example 3: gas /ɡæs/, has /hæz/ and was /wəz/. These words end in the same alphabets -- as, but the pronunciations of as are different.

Phonics rules do not apply to quite a few words. As Blevins’ research pointed out that 16% of the common words in English is not consistent with the phonics rules. In addition, Phonics does not involve the use of the word stress, which is a characteristics of word pronunciation. For instance, the different stress placements of the word -- record, lead to the different parts of speech and meanings. For noun, the pronunciation of record is /ˈrekɔrd/; for verb, the pronunciation of record is /rɪˈkɔrd/. At the same time, e and or in this word also change their pronunciations. For noun and verb, the pronunciation of minute is /ˈmɪnət/; for adjective, the pronunciation of minute is /ˈmiːnt/. For adjective and noun, the pronunciation of present is /ˈpreznət/; for verb, the pronunciation of present is /ˈprɛznət/. These changes cannot be solved by phonics rules. Not to mention the polysyllabic words, their stress placements must be known when spelling. Therefore, phonics cannot solve all the problems in spelling.

The advantages and limitations of International Phonetic Alphabet

The international phonetic alphabet is a system in which one symbol represents one sound, which is different from the spelling and pronunciation. So English learners can easily read all kinds of
words, including polysyllabic words and those that do not follow the spelling rules. Therefore, the greatest advantage of IPA symbols is that it can help learners pronounce each word accurately.

In addition, mastering IPA symbols means mastering an effective way of learning English. The greatest difficulty in learning a foreign language is vocabulary. With IPA symbols, the students can not only read words correctly, but also learn new words by themselves, consequently to improve their reading and expression abilities. Over these years teaching practice, the students who have good command of IPA symbols can learning English more easily and efficiently.

Nevertheless, the international phonetic alphabet also has its limitations. As a special phonetic system, the symbols are different from the alphabets of the words. There are many confusions between them, making it more difficult for beginners to remember separately. For abecedarians, they cannot put forward clearly the distinctions between /g/ and g/dʒiː/ in KK system; the phonetic alphabet for /dʒiː/ and j /dʒæ/ in Jones system, while /dʒiː/ in KK system; the phonetic alphabet for pass is /pæs/ in Jones system, while /pæs/ in KK system; the phonetic alphabet for aluminum is /ˈæljʊm/ in Jones system, while /ˈæljʊnˌmæm/ in KK system. If the students remember the words only by IPA symbols, they will focus too much on the phonetic symbols, rather than the spelling. When they meet some unfamiliar words during reading, the students cannot associate them with the comparable words. In that case, they have to look up the words in the dictionary, so as to reduce their reading rate.

**The Fusion Application Design of Phonics and International Phonetic Alphabet in English Teaching**

From the above comparison, it can be seen that the two methods are complementary. Therefore, it is important to make a teaching design which combines both phonics and IPA, which is more effective than teaching them separately. The most significant and difficult problem for making such a teaching design like that is how to balance and distribute phonics and IPA in it. The distribution of the two methods should be guided by their functions and features. The instructional design can be made to be effective for acquisition of both phonics and IPA symbols, but it is unnecessary to be paid equivalent attention and taken equal efforts on each. Therefore, the interaction use between phonics and IPA symbols at different stages will result in better teaching effect.

Firstly, phonics is applied to English learning in primary school, which is more effective. Primary school students learn English after learning Chinese pinyin, and then they could utilize the positive transfer of Chinese pinyin to promote their English learning. For example, teachers can add phonics in classroom games, and blend phonics in oral and listening training. The pronunciations of some symbols in Chinese pinyin are similar to that of English phonics, and the teaching approach of them is similar, too. So it will reduce the burden of learning international phonetic alphabet for the primary school students as English learning beginners, avoid their fear of learning English, and maintain the fun and confidence in English learning. With the increase of the students’ age and their familiarity with English, it is more efficient to learn international phonetic alphabet in junior high school.

Secondly, learning international phonetic alphabet is conducive to the long-term development of the students. IPA symbols are used to mark the pronunciation of the words, and one symbol corresponds to one sound. As English learning deepens, the students will encounter many words which are not conforming to the phonics rules, whose spelling is inconsistent with pronunciation, and those with more syllables, and even many foreign words. The accurate pronunciation of these words can only be read by looking up the phonetic symbols in the dictionary. Without mastering IPA symbols, there are serious problems in reading and memorizing these complicated words, which is very unfavorable for further study of English. There are 20 vowels and 28 consonants in
IPA symbols. After learning 48 phonemes, the students could read and remember the vocabulary through checking the dictionary. Only in this way can we lay a solid foundation for the accumulation of English vocabulary in the future. At the same time, the students can form a good sense of language and intonation by learning IPA symbols, which lays the basis for oral English training.

Thirdly, teaching international phonetic alphabet should pay attention to the method and strategy. The real purpose of learning IPA symbols is to master the pronunciation of words and memorizing the spelling. The ideal time for teaching IPA symbols should be the high grades of primary school or the junior high school. At this time, the students are more mature in mind, have a certain mastery of English, and have a strong ability to distinguish the international phonetic symbols and English letters without too much confusion. Teaching IPA symbols should focus on the method, such as integrating the international phonetic symbols into the normal teaching of words and sentence patterns. In strategies, we should adopt the teaching method of "concentration -- dispersion -- induction", and consolidate the learning results with diversified and interesting exercises. Meanwhile, in daily teaching the teachers should minimize the importance of writing, but attach importance to understanding, listening and reading. In addition, the teachers should compare the basic phonetic sounds of international phonetic symbols and English letters, and set up exercises for further understand and mastery of IPA.

Fourthly, English teachers should strengthen their professional studies. Most of the English teachers in our country have high proficiency in International Phonetic Alphabet, without systematic study of Phonics. In order to improve teaching efficiency with the combination of these two teaching methods, the teachers must study Phonics seriously, and pay attention to summing up the basic rules of Phonics in teaching practice.

At different stages, the teachers should practice various teaching approaches to train student’s pronunciation, spelling, listening and vocabulary memorization based on different needs of the students. For beginners, phonics can be an ideal method to learn pronunciation and make sounds related to letters of English spelling. For higher level learners, the phonics rules can help them check their pronunciation and spelling so as to correct their pronunciation and spelling systematically, while IPA symbols can be used for learners to speech out the unfamiliar words, especially polysyllabic words and those which do not follow the phonics rules.

Communication is the main function of a language, English learners need to improve both their written and oral English for the purpose of comprehensive communication. For the students, pronunciation and spelling of words is the core and foundation for their English learning, thus the teachers should combine the rules of phonics with IPA in different stages of teaching, and summarize the experience and lessons in time, to achieve the goal of greatly improving the English teaching efficiency.

References


