

REDES COLABORATIVAS EN TORNO A LA DOCENCIA UNIVERSITARIA

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Literacy Teaching Methods and the Subject of ‘Phonetics and Phonology’ in the Primary Education Teaching Degree with English Specialization

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ABSTRACT

This research work is part of a set of studies implemented for the ‘REDES 2017’ project. A theoretical and practical study of the methodology, significant learning, and prior knowledge of students in literacy teaching in university education was carried out. This work aims at producing a compilation of methodologies, from the most traditional to the most recent, to obtain practical results regarding (a) a theoretical framework to define most efficient methodologies in the context of Spanish universities; and (b) an empirical analysis of the methods and their implementation in the Spanish education context. This latter study depended greatly on observation and inference methods since its analysis arose from the description of current teaching methods and their adaptation to today’s settings. It is not about ‘copying’ methodologies, which obviously could be non-productive in Spanish students, but rather adapting such methodologies to the new educational context and studying its positive and negative aspects in depth. Conceptual research of this kind is necessary for any study because it enables us to know beforehand the methodologies which will take part in the contrastive analysis.

KEYWORDS: English Literacy, English, phonetics, pronunciation, Teaching Degree in Primary Education

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of phonemic-awareness methodologies in language acquisition or learning has been addressed from a number of perspectives (cf. Brooks 2002, Togerson *et al.* 2006). Their value lies in the need to adopt new practices and approaches in accordance with the Spanish educational context.

The dichotomy of synthetic and analytic phonics teaching on reading and spelling abilities has suggested that the adoption of such didactic practices depends on age, sex, and literacy degree (Johnston *et al.* 2011). In English, this kind of dichotomy or methodological choice is especially relevant due to the nontransparent spelling that characterizes the language. Occasional grapheme-phoneme irregularities have led to an array of pathways that explore the most efficient ways of guaranteeing adequate learning patterns: *lead* ‘to guide’, *lead* ‘a type of metal’ denote this kind of inconsistency.

Thus, students of Primary Teaching specialized in English would need to explore the basics underpinning these learning methods to approach their future in-class practices. Understanding

the English phonological system is not enough 'to echo' correct pronunciation patterns. A full understanding of phonics-based approaches should enable teachers to gather enough evidence to choose the right methodology to ensure overall literacy development.

2. OBJECTIVES

This research analysis is part of a wider study that focuses mainly on the evidence-based depiction of the Anglo-Saxon phonetic system, and its adequacy in English literacy. Thus, this paper is particularly aimed at describing current trends in literacy teaching, especially in the subjects related to Phonology and Phonetics. Also, by providing an updated theoretical framework, and based on the data collected through a questionnaire (see Appendix 1), this analysis is intended to relate these trends to present-day approaches in the Spanish educational system.

The description of the oft-quoted synthetic and analytic methods leads to a better understanding of what types of adjustments might be needed to embed the phonics-based strategies with novel learning approaches. An empirical study of this kind should shed some light on the relevant features these two traditional methods are characterized by.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study was divided into two main stages: (a) a description of the two major literacy teaching trends, i.e. analytic and synthetic methods; and (b) an adaptation of these Anglo-Saxon approaches to the current Primary Teaching educational curriculum. The first stage was based on an array of specialized literature (Watson 1998; Brooks 2002; Johnston 2005; Johnston & Watson 2007), to prepare the ground for subsequent studies. The second involved reviewing how the Teaching degree in Primary Education in Spain addresses the subjects of Phonology and Phonetics, in an attempt to confirm which approach fits the present-day Spanish curricula best. To accomplish this, a questionnaire was used to confirm our earlier assumptions on the importance of Phonology and Phonetics in literacy teaching approaches (see Appendix 1).

This two-step analysis was of great importance to achieve a better understanding of teaching needs and to provide Primary teachers with adequate phonics tools to enhance reading and writing skills.

4. FINDINGS

The use of a phonics-related questionnaires was of great help to understand the importance of Phonology and Phonetics in the implementation of updated literacy approaches. This questionnaire was applied to Primary teaching students before and after the subject of Phonology and phonetics in their degree, showing that their awareness and knowledge of the English phonetic system had increased abruptly after the one-term subject. This enables to confirm one of the primary premises: the crucial importance of this phonetic system to effectively implement literacy tools in Primary Education.

As this paper is concerned with examining the type of approaches that contributes to the

adequate implementation of Phonology and Phonetics in reading and writing lessons, our findings are essentially based on the theoretical framework related to analytic and synthetic phonics. Thus, the following sections are devoted to depicting analytic and synthetic phonics in detail, and to exploring present-day methods and approaches used in Spanish educational system, particularly in the Primary Education Teaching degree.

4.1. Analytic phonics

Analytic phonics is considered one of the most popular methods for teaching phonics and the most commonly used in the USA today, also known as ‘implicit phonics’ or the ‘whole part learning of words’. According to Johnston and Watson (2005), analytic phonics could be regarded as a discovery method. In this approach, students are given a list of words and they have to examine and segment the sounds in order to find out similar words before they learn the phonics rules (Blevins 1998).

In this method, children analyze known words in order to learn letter-sound relationships in an inductive way (Anderson *et al.* 1985). As some sounds are difficult to produce separately, letter sounds are produced within a context to avoid confusion when decoding words (McCormick & Zutell 2010; Mesmer & Griffith 2005).

According to Hempenstall (2001), one of the main problems with analytic phonics is that of taking for granted that all students will have the complex phonemic awareness skills they need to compare sounds within the various words.

4.2. Synthetic phonics

As commented earlier, grapheme-phoneme incongruence in English has led to the implementation of an array of teaching approaches. Synthetic-phonics programs are characterized by developing how to blend letter sounds so that unfamiliar words can be easily decoded. According to Lewis & Ellis (2006: 4), synthetic-phonics-based strategies tend to develop instructions in which “children are systematically taught the phonemes (sounds) associated with particular graphemes (letters)”. In particular, reading encompasses the need to isolate individual phonemes, which are “recognized from the graphemes, pronounced and blended together (synthesized) to create a new word.”

This strategy is particularly earth-shattering in educational contexts in which more traditional methods (*look and say*, *analytic phonics*) are used. It certainly involves the teaching of letter/sound correspondence, which suggests that greater importance is given to phonetics-based programs. The synthetic method is tightly linked to the decoding of a word, whereby letters are sounded out and blended. This primary process necessarily activates the comprehension stage.

One of the prominent features of synthetic phonics is that it is built upon a multileveled procedure: from graphemes to words, and finally utterances. This actually generates a sense of syntactic construction and comprehension, logically extrapolated to the normative depiction of linguistic forms and levels.

4.3. Contrastive analysis of current approaches within the Spanish context

There are generally two main strategies in Primary literacy teaching: (a) *look and say*, and (b) *phonics*

(Slattery & Willis 2001). The first approach consists in learning how to read the words through everyday contact with them. It does require firstly an aural approach and then a written recognition of words. Children are exposed to real objects and images, and then they learn to relate them with their corresponding notion. As to *phonics*, it focuses on teaching the sounds of letters and letter combinations. In sum, it is based on a grapheme-phoneme relation. These aforementioned strategies, namely *look and say*, and *phonics*, are conceptually coincidental with analytic and synthetic methods respectively.

The analytic strategy (or *look and say*) is widely used in Spain, especially in EFL classes. The synthetic (or *phonics*) is becoming more accepted among bilingual teaching centers, especially because of its success in Anglo-Saxon countries. However, phonics is not necessarily replacing *look and say*, but it is adding more cues to the learning process. In other words, the use of synthetic phonics does not imply the exclusion of analytic phonics. This combination helps reach a balance in the development of linguistic skills (Barrio 2014).

The use of more traditional strategies (*look and say*, *analytic*) is conventionally driven by a transposition of Primary teaching standards in Spanish. Whereas the values of relating notions with tangible objects are evidently demonstrated, grapheme-phoneme correspondence is yet to be explored. This type of research necessarily entails the adequacy of English Phonology and Phonetics in the Primary Teaching degree, which is fundamental in the accomplishment of better reading and writing results.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The most salient finding is precisely the importance of English Phonology and Phonetics courses in the Primary Teaching degree, shown in the questionnaire-based results of Primary Teaching students (see Appendix 1). The significance of this subject relies on understanding how the English phonetic system works, which should have an impact on literacy approaches used in class.

The review of the research materials suggested that the Spanish educational system was more inclined towards analytic methods, which might have repercussions on the levels of English writing and reading skills. This one-method dependency is obviously insufficient to show English learners in primary schools the comprehensive nature of literacy. The relation between notion and object (or entity), though valuable to a certain extent, is deficient in identifying the morpho-phonological features of English.

Based on our theoretical research, it is mandatory to draw up a multifaceted literacy approach, particularly in the teaching of English. The unique features of the English phonetic system, along with the traditionally analytic methodology used in Spain, can be of great importance to implement more comprehensive phonics-related tools. One first step is precisely the improvement of current Phonology and Phonetics subjects in the Teaching Degree in Primary Education specialized in English, by relating the descriptive analysis of the English system with upgraded reading and writing techniques.

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7. APPENDICES

7.1. Appendix 1: Questionnaire used to test prior knowledge on phonetics and phonology.

BEGINNER

1. THIS and THESE have the same pronunciation:

- a. true
- b. false
- c. depending on the context

2. Which ending of the following words sounds different?

- a. worked
- b. watched

c. wanted

3. Which word (underlined part) belongs to the 'er' sound family?

- a. apple
- b. comfortable
- c. play

4. Which word is a homophone (same pronunciation) of RED?

- a. read (present)
- b. read (past)
- c. raid

5. Which group of words are homophones?

- a. two, too, to
- b. lid, lead, led
- c. cut, cat, cot

6. Which of the following pair of words are not homophones?

- a. plain, plane
- b. beer, bear
- c. wood, would

7. Which of these words has a letter that is not pronounced?

- a. camp
- b. slept
- c. walk

8. Which word rhymes with FRY?

- a. high
- b. friend
- c. rhythm

PRE-INTERMEDIATE

9. How many syllables are there in the word 'HOUSE'?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3

10. Find the word whose underlined part is pronounced differently to the others

- a. apple
- b. tomato
- c. cabbage

11. Which of the following "a" is pronounced differently from the others?

- a. pack
- b. hat
- c. park

12. The sound produced by the digraph "ay" in the word "pray" is:

- a. a long vowel
- b. a short vowel
- c. a diphthong

13. Which set of 3 words has long vowel sounds in all 3 words?

- a. bed, bad & good
- b. feed, card & food
- c. but, bid & bad

14. In which of the following sets of words is there a word with no diphthong?

- a. chair, eye,
- b. deer, out,
- c. dream, slow

15. Which group of words has silent consonants?

- a. street, milk, sleep, break
- b. castle, write, listen, half
- c. completion, stand, ink, spring

16. In which set of words is there one word with no long vowel according to the RP pronunciation?

- a. park, zoo, see
- b. car, sheet, girl
- c. bird, set, true

INTERMEDIATE

17. According to the IPA, what symbol is used for long sounds in phonetics?

- a. ‘
- b. :
- c. _

18. How many single vowel sounds are there in English?

- a. 5
- b. 9
- c. 12

19. How many basic phonemes are there in English?

- a. 24
- b. 34
- c. 44

20. Are the following sounds voiceless or voiced: /p/ /t/ /k/?

- a. voiceless
- b. voiced
- c. can be both, depending on the next sound

21. What is the difference between /a:/ and /æ/ ?

- a. the length of the sound
- b. /a:/ is a short vowel
- c. /æ/ is a long vowel

22. Say which of the following sentences about the English language is true:

- a. unstressed syllables need a greater respiratory and muscular effort
- b. stressed syllables are more easily perceived by listeners
- c. none of the above

23. English is...

- a. syllabic
- b. stress timed
- c. weak

24. Vowels are always...

- a. voiced
- b. voiceless
- c. can be both depending on the next sound

25. The sound /tʃ/ can be found in...

- a. cheese
- b. June
- c. televisión

UPPER-INTERMEDIATE

26. The /ə/ (schwa) is by far the most common phoneme in RP English

- a. true
- b. false
- c. the sounds /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ are even more common

27. The article 'A' can have two possible pronunciations:

- a. /a/ and /ə/
- b. /eɪ/ and /ə/
- c. none of the above

28. The article 'THE', when placed before a vowel sound, is pronounced:

- a. /ðə/
- b. /ðeɪ/
- c. /ðɪ/

29. Choose the correct phonetic transcription for 'SAD'

- a. /sɑ:d/
- b. /sæd/
- c. /sʌd/

30. This phonetic symbol /ŋ/ stands most frequently for the sound produced in...

- a. -n
- b. -ng
- c. -ing

31. Choose the correct stress mark for INVINCIBLE

- a. /'ɪnvɪnsəbəl/
- b. /ɪn'vɪnsəbəl/
- c. none of the above

32. The phonetic transcription for "comfortable" is...

- a. kʌm'fɔrtəbəl
- b. 'kʌmfətəbl
- c. kʌm'fɜ:təbəl/

ADVANCED

33. Say which of the following sentences is true

- a. In English all letters are always pronounced the same
- b. In English every sound is only written one way
- c. One sound can be represented by different graphemes

34. What word does not have the phoneme /z/?

- a) television
- b) pleasure
- c) zoo

35. The reduced vowels --/ɪ/, /ʊ/ and /ə/-- usually appear in weak/unstressed syllables

- a. true
- b. false

- c. these vowels only appear in diphthongs

36. One of these words can have two possible vowel transcriptions (/eɪ/ and /æ/) in GA

- a. made
- b. data
- c. maid

37. Which shapes can the lips assume when pronouncing sounds?

- a. close rounding and open rounding
- b. spreading and neutral
- c. close and open rounding, spreading and neutral

38. “choir” is pronounced:

- a. /tʃu'or/
- b. /'kwaɪə/
- c. /tʃu'aɪə/

39. “squirrel” is pronounced:

- a. /'skwɪrəl/
- b. /'skɪrl/
- c. /'skwɔːrəl/

40. “vegetable” is pronounced:

- a. /vedʒe'teɪbl/
- b. /ve'dʒɪtɪbl/
- c. /'vedʒɪtəbl/