Investigación en docencia universitaria

Diseñando el futuro a partir de la innovación educativa
Investigación en docencia universitaria. Diseñando el futuro a partir de la innovación educativa
What do the English Literacy course students know and need to know to teach English literacy in Preschool and Primary School?

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ABSTRACT

In the current educational framework and with the new Plurilingual Programmes, there is a tendency to introduce L2 instruction at early ages along with increased exposure to L2 by teaching non-linguistic areas in English. For this reason, the introduction of literacy in English makes more sense in this new context since it allows an approach to teaching, writing and reading English at an earlier age and it is also necessary to have good reading comprehension and writing expression abilities in order to succeed when learning other areas of the curriculum in English. As these are the skills our future teachers will need, to be successful in their task as English teachers, so it is also necessary for them to master teaching English literacy when teaching English or in English. In this study we try to ascertain if our “Literacy in English Language” course gathers all the epistemological and practical knowledge our Degree in Education students’ need to know about English literacy to help them succeed in their future task as English Teachers. The study tools (Pre-Test and Post-Test), the positive results obtained and conclusions are described.

KEY WORDS: English literacy, teaching literacy, literacy methods, English phonetics.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the current educational framework and with the new Plurilingual Programmes established by the “Conselleria d’Educació”, there is a tendency to introduce L2 instruction at early ages (4 years old) along with a greater exposure to L2 achieved not only by increasing the number of hours of English lessons (“Decreto 108/2014”) but also by teaching non-linguistic areas in English (“Decreto 9/2017”). A prompt introduction to English literacy by means of a suitable phonics program makes more sense in this new context, since it allows an approach to teaching English writing and reading skills at an earlier age. Likewise, good reading comprehension and writing expression abilities are a prerequisite for success when learning other areas of the curriculum in English.

As these are the skills our future teachers will need to achieve in order to be successful in their task as English teachers, it is also necessary for them to master teaching English literacy when teaching English or in English. In our “English literacy” course, we have detected (initial evaluation) year after year, that our students take the course with scarce previous knowledge in English Phonetics or Phonology. This lack of knowledge in students has gradually represented an extreme challenge for professors teaching the course. How can we teach future English teachers the essential skills of blending and segmenting sounds in words if our students are unable to distinguish and reproduce each and all of the English phonemes?

To start with, a dossier was created gathering what to teach: all the epistemological and practical knowledge our students in the Degree in Education need to know about some English phonetics’ relevant notions and how to teach English literacy. This dossier was meant to help students succeed in
acquiring the necessary knowledge in the given topics in the 60 hour course, as they need to master these skills in their future task as English Teachers.

To complement the Education students’ English literacy learning process acquisition, apart from the theoretical aspects previously explained gathered in the course dossier, plenty of practical exercises, activities and presentations were provided to help students put into practice and face the reality of teaching Spanish students to read and write in English.

Throughout the 7 years the English Literacy course was taught, the contents and practical training were reviewed and modified. These contents were adapted and improved in such a way that students could obtain more practical, feasible and successful knowledge of how to teach English literacy to young learners. Designing the course as similar as possible to the actual practice of English literacy teaching was a priority.

The introductory part of the subject deals with getting students acquainted with some relevant phonological and phonetic issues and notions. This is especially necessary due to the fact mentioned previously that very few students had the minimum required prior understanding regarding English phonemes. Encouraging our students to be able to recognize, reproduce and to learn to teach youngsters to utter the 44 sounds of English constituted the starting point of the course. To that effect, Adrian Underhill’s (2005) practical approach in his book “Sound Foundations“, together with Dr. Enrique Alcaraz Baró - Bryn Moody’s (1984) more theoretical manual “Fonética Inglesa para Hispanohablantes” were combined to teach the students how to utter and distinguish all English sounds.

The other important concepts deemed essential to be taught prior to the teaching of phonics methodologies ranged from graphemes, phonemes, allophones, digraphs, minimal pairs and all IPA symbols to some prosodic features such as stress in words and in simple sentences, assimilation, juncture, elision and vowel reduction.

In the next part of the course, which can be considered its core part, students become familiar with the most innovative English literacy teaching methodologies and various existing successfully implemented programs. Furthermore, a historical review of the former English literacy teaching methods was provided. Additionally, the course also offered an overview of some of the reports on literacy in the UK (The Clackmannanshire Study (2005), The Jim Rose Report (2006) and The National Literacy Strategy (2001)) and in the USA (The National Assessment on Educational Progress, also known as NAEP (2015), and The National Reading Panel (1997)).

Following the positive results obtained in research (Stuart (1999), Johnson and Watson (1992, 1997, 2005), Bowyer-Crane et al. (2007), Hus (2001), Naeem, Aftab, Zaidi and Naheed (2016), Zaidi, Naeem and Naheed (2016), Qureshi, Aftab, and Naheed (2016), Farokhbakht (2015), Asonze, Agunloye, Nwaedozie, Haruna and Nwosu (2014), Inaja, Ubi, and Anagbogu (2012), Shepherd (2013), de Ayala (2012), Caserta (2013), Ruhaena (2008), Eshiet (2014) and Motsch (2016)) on Lloyd’s teaching English literacy methodology (1980) carried out all around the world (United Kingdom, India, Pakistan, Iran, The Gambia, Japan, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, France, Italy, Indonesia, Australian and the USA among others), and other research such as that led by Soares de Siqueira, Araújo Cortez, Coelho Sobrinho Galvão and Lisboa Rocha (2015) according to which countries such as the United States, Britain, France, Denmark and others promote the synthetic method to teach English literacy and “other countries such as Australia, Belgium, Canada, Cuba, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Norway and Sweden also recognize the importance of the explicit teaching of correspondences between graphemes and phonemes to facilitate literacy and decrease the incidence of reading and writing difficulties” (p. 85), it can be stated that there is enough evidence to prove how synthetic
phonics methodology is a more efficient and significant approach to learn English literacy than the analytical method.

The final aim of the English Literacy course was to enhance our student’s capability to determine, analyze and comprehend the most efficient literacy teaching methodologies which will be useful to them to teach English literacy to their future students. In order to achieve this goal through, this research, it was necessary to establish what the Education students’ competence on English phonetics and English literacy was before taking the course and to what extent they improved such knowledge once they had taken the part of the course, which served as an introduction to phonetics and phonology. We also wanted to check how efficient the course’s teaching process had been and the relevance of the contents taught.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for this experimental research was a descriptive study, in which the Pre-test-Posttest design was applied. No variables have been manipulated along this study. This methodology allowed us to determine, assess and evaluate the validity of the contents of the course and the efficacy of the implementation of the Synthetic Phonics methodology in the English Literacy course taught in the Preschool and Primary Education Undergraduate Programs.

2.1. Study Context and Description of Population

The study was carried out at the Faculty of Education of the University of Alicante during the academic course 2016-2017. Students taking part in it were those taking the “English Literacy” Course. Originally, 81 students from both the morning shift and the afternoon shift took the pre-test. Nevertheless, due to the fact that the pre-test and the post-test were conducted during class hours and unfortunately, attendance in the second quarter by senior students soon to graduate was not as high as expected, only 69 students took the post-test. Conclusions were thus drawn out from that last figure. A total of 46 out of those 69 students were studying for a Degree in Primary School Education and the other 23 were studying for a Degree in Preschool Education at the University of Alicante. There is no data available about students’ age or gender who took part in the study as the tests were anonymous and the only personal information required to complete the test was marking if they belonged to Preschool or Primary Education Degree.

Hence, theoretically not only was it possible to determine if the sample of students had increased their required knowledge in phonetics and phonology to teach English literacy, but it would also be plausible to some extent to infer which group had started the course with a higher level. In the same way, the amount of students in the morning shift (84.1% of the total population of the study) was considerably superior to that of the afternoon shift (15.9%), so even though the figures to compare both were available, no significant data could be obtained.

There were two profiles of students taking this course. Most of them were senior year students who opted to become teachers specialized in English, in the case of Primary Speciality students. However, the possibility of getting that specialization did not exist in the Preschool Speciality. In the case of Preschool speciality students, they all became Early Year teachers with no speciality attached to their title. Therefore, the second type of students taking this course was composed of the Preschool Speciality students who uniquely took the course to fulfil the foreign language requirements to graduate, and Primary Speciality students who would not become specialists in English and also needed to fulfil the minimum level of English required to graduate.
2.2. Research Tools

To collect information on what students’ prior knowledge on the required phonetic and phonologic concepts as a prerequisite to teach them the phonics programs, a pretest was designed by the professors teaching the course and by other professors taking part in this research. The pretest consisted in a powerpoint with 40 questions divided into 5 levels of increasing difficulty. Each level had 5 questions.

The group of professors involved agreed, that the questions asked would commence with basic pronunciation aspects which had supposedly been taught in earlier stages. The first concept was homophone words (students had to confirm whether the words provided were homophones or not); 3 questions dealt with this. Secondly, the rhyme of several words was checked. Lastly, the third concept dealt with in this part was the presence or absence of silent letters in the examples given. In this regard, it must be stated that silent letters were taught as digraphs, three-letter and four-letter graphemes specifically in the course, according to the phonics programs mentioned and a more technical nomenclature. However, for the sake of the research (to make it simpler for students), the more common and less accurate terminology of silent letters was purposely used to refer to that particular aspect.

In the second block of questions the notions the students were asked about were long and short vowels, diphthongs, one-letter graphemes representing two different phonemes and lastly, they were asked to segment words according to the number of syllables.

At the intermediate level, the 8 questions addressed the total number of English sounds and the number of English vowels, the phonemic representation of long sounds, the difference in English between voiceless and voiced phonemes, a first sound using IPA symbols was introduced, the particularity of English being a time-stressed language and the difference in pronunciation of stressed and unstressed syllables.

In order to be able to correctly answer the questions in the upper-intermediate and advanced section, the students had to have been previously taught some phonetics and phonology since the questions were rather specific. Namely, the “schwa” sound and some of its features were asked about, words with two different possible pronunciations were presented, a new set of IPA symbols was introduced to enquire about words containing these sounds and lastly, a collection of words with a rare pronunciation was provided so as to confirm whether they were already in possession of a proficient level.

Also a questionnaire was elaborated to take into account students’ perception about what course contents they found more useful and relevant, and if some significant contents are missing or even whether they consider some contents taught not suitable for their training.

2.3. Study Procedure

The pre-test was conducted at the beginning of the course, specifically during the first session after the course presentation was conducted, and the same survey was passed to the students as a post-test once this part of the course was finished. The pre-test was embedded in a PowerPoint. Students were allowed 30 seconds to answer each question. The same procedure was followed both for the pre-test and for the post-test. The 40 questions were designed as a multiple choice kind of exam. The students had to choose from 3 possible answers, but only 1 was correct. It was agreed that answers would only count as correct or incorrect, so no wrong answer would result in the deduction of correct ones. The pre-test and post-test was passed the same day to the four groups that took part in this research so that no student could tell his or her classmates what the survey was about: classes are taught on a back to back basis.
3. RESULTS

Concerning the results of the pre-test, a holistic view of the results makes more sense. Firstly, if we compare table 1 with table 2 a significant improvement in the results took place. Needless to say that since the survey contained exactly the same questions and that they were significant to the course, some sort of progress was expected to happen. However, it was surprising that not only those students who had already shown a great command on the matters asked in the pretest did ameliorate their results, but also the ones willing to keep a low profile since their objective was clearly to graduate by just passing the course. In the pre-test we can observe that the grades ranged from a student who got less than a 3 to the one student who achieved higher than a 9. Most of the students passed (47) and only 22 did worse than 5. As shown in the table, the great majority of the students obtained between a 4 and an 8, the most common grade being in the 5 to 6 quartile.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Total Marks Comparison from Pre-test and Post-test students’ results.</th>
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<td><strong>Pre-test and Post-test Students' Total Marks</strong></td>
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In comparison with the results of the Pre-Test, the enhancement in the results of the Post-Test (Table 1) is enormous. In this occasion just one single student remained under a 5, all the rest achieved a grade above that line. Some 4 out of the total reached the highest possible quartile (between 9 and 10), and one student even got a 10. The reason why improvements were so remarkable may be that the course was goal specific and therefore, the expected outcome was clear from the very beginning. That is to say, the phonemic knowledge students were expected to grasp was clear and useful in the second part of the course which dealt with properly teaching phonics. The great majority of the students remained in the range of 6 and 9. Again, students did not feel the pressure of being assessed; they were clearly told the results of this query would not intervene with their grade point average. Additionally, since the sample was so small, we were able to study all individual performance in depth which resulted in having no single student whose grade was worst in the Post-test when compared with the Pre-test.
The resemblance of morning shift results (Table 2) with afternoon shift results (Tables 3) once again was remarkable. Both groups of students showed significant improvement in the results. Nevertheless, results on the Pre-test and Post-test of both shifts were deemed not suitable for further analysis, since the number of students in the afternoon shift was low (11 students). The next tables show parallel advancement.

Table 2. Morning Shift Students’ Marks Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test.

![Morning Shift Students' Marks](image1)

Table 3. Afternoon Shift Students’ Marks Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test.

![Afternoon Shift Students' Marks](image2)
There was some concern with regard to possible different levels of prior knowledge on English phonology and phonetics that might have arisen between those studying the Primary Specialization and those studying within the Preschool Specialization. Nonetheless, such dissimilarity was not observed, as shown rather clearly in the tables below.

Taking into account individual results, if we compare the highest and the lowest mark obtained in the Pre-test and Post-test in both groups, students from the Preschool Speciality would after superficial analysis seem to have obtained lower grades. The last grade in the Pre-test was a 2.82 of one student in this group whereas the highest grade in the Post-test was a 10 reached by a student in the other group. Nevertheless, this picture is deceiving, and after more accurate observation, figures show that the average grade in the Preschool Speciality group increased from a 5.05 in the Pre-test to a 7.10 in the Post-test (Table 4): grades were raised by 2.05.

Table 4. Pre-test and Post-test Marks Comparison of Preschool Speciality Students’ (23 students).

![Preschool Education Degree Students' Marks](image)

The improvement in the grades of the Primary Speciality group was slightly lower; from a 5.97 average in the Pre-test to a 7.77 middling in the Post-test (Table 5) the gain was 1.8. In any case, the difference in the results attained by both groups was insignificant, even more once it was pointed out that the student who obtained 10 had already graduated in English Philology, having hence taken at least a quarterly course in Phonetics, and was now studying the Primary Speciality. Figures were so close that no conclusion could be drawn with this sample.
4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As stated at the beginning of this study, the final aim of the English Literacy course was to enhance our students’ capability to determine, analyze and comprehend the most efficient literacy teaching methodologies deemed useful to teach English literacy in the future.

In order to achieve this goal, the main aim of this research was to establish what the Education students’ competence on English phonetics and English literacy was before taking the course (as in previous years the students’ knowledge on this theme was detected as almost nonexistent) and to what extent they had improved such knowledge once having taken part in the course (an introduction to phonetics was included as course content to be able to teach English literacy to our students who were not familiarized with the English phonetic code).

Based on the results obtained in this study we can state that by and large, a large part of the students had very poor knowledge of English phonetics before taking the course (31.8% were graded under 5 on a scale out of 10), most students had some knowledge (66.6% were graded between 5 and 8 out of 10), and very few students had good knowledge of the topic studied (1.45% were graded above 9 out of 10).

Through this study we also wanted to check how efficient the course’s teaching process had been and the relevance of the contents taught. Comparing results obtained by students in the Pre-Test with those in the Post-Test, contents addressed in the course not only were relevant to help students learn English phonetics and literacy but they also helped them greatly improve their knowledge. While in the Pre-Test 31.8% of the students were graded under 5 out of 10, only 1.45% of them obtained this grade in the Post-Test (this means that more than 30% of the students improved their knowledge from very poor to acceptable). Furthermore, in the Pre-Test, the grade that most students obtained was between 5 to 6 points (31.9%) while in the Post-Test it was from 8 to 9 (34.8%).
We believe that these positive results achieved by the course students in such a short period of time (60 hour course) is due to working English literacy with them following the Synthetic Phonics method. As a result of following this method, we did not have to focus on single sounds but we were able to teach groups of 4-8 sounds at a time. This gave us time not only to teach them English phonetics (30% of the students improved their mark from the pre-test to the post-test) in a short period of time (Synthetic Phonics teaches the 44 sounds of the English language, systematically asking students to sound every letter in a word and to blend them together to read instead of guessing and ‘analyzing words’, which becomes about memorizing the look of the whole word) but to give them the correct model to how to teach English literacy to their future students. This method also helped students to improve their spelling skills thanks to knowing how to segment words in order to write them. Synthetic Phonics has improved our students’ test results as it is a significant approach to English literacy and it is not just based in memorizing. In this method there is a simple to complex logic, so we got more complicated as students developed and built upon their foundations.

As explained before, a questionnaire was drawn up to take into account students’ perception about what course contents they found more useful and relevant, and if some significant contents were missing or even whether they considered some contents taught not suitable for their training. This would be the qualitative analysis. However, this questionnaire will be passed once the course is over, as a debriefing of the course. Unfortunately, this would only happen a few weeks from the writing of this article. Once this information is gathered, decisions about making or not more adjustments in the course contents could be extended to further academic courses.

Results obtained cannot be compared with other available data as the research cited in this study was carried out with Pre-school and Primary Education students, and no studies with a similar population or context have been found. What we can advance is that in order to teach our students English phonetics and phonology we have to focus on the Synthetic Phonics methodology, as most practical activities carried out in class were taken from this approach, so we can agree with Stuart (1999), Johnson and Watson (2005), Bowyer-Crane et al. (2007), Naeem, Aftab, Zaidi and Naheed (2016), Farokhbakht (2015), Shepherd, (2013) and Motsch, (2016) about the effectiveness of this method to learn English literacy based on the results obtained by our students in the Pre-Test and Post-Test.

5. REFERENCES


