

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Motivation

Over the past ten years, English education has undergone many fluctuations and shifts in Taiwan. In 2004, the elementary school curriculum guidelines were revised from focusing on listening and speaking to including reading and writing. In 2006, MOE's Guidelines of Grades 1-9 Curriculum for Elementary and Junior High School Education specifically stipulated that an elementary school graduate should at least be able to speak 300 and spell 180 English words while a junior high school graduate is expected to be able to utilize 1200 words in listening, speaking, reading and writing (2006). In essence, the new curriculum shows more emphasis on students' writing and spelling ability on the latter stage.

Nevertheless, spelling ability is regarded as a problem in the transition from elementary school to junior high school curriculum of English. First of all, many elementary school students from 3rd to 6th grade in general lacked spelling training and are only capable of using the simplest spelling skill - rote learning, to memorize or spell words (Chang, 2003; L. L. Hsu, 2004; H. L. Lai, 2004; Yeh, 2006). In addition, Chen (2004) also indicated that many 7th graders feel that learning English is difficult because for each lesson, they now are expected to spell out 10 to 20 multi-syllable new words, a big leap from their previous requirement of 10 mono-syllable new words.

On the other hand, phonics, a common and effective spelling strategy, has already been included in the elementary school curriculum (MOE, 2006). In fact, according to the guideline of the elementary school curriculum, students should be able to utilize phonics to understand English letter-sound correspondence and finally

achieve the ability to spell what they hear. Nonetheless, at the elementary school level, students are only instructed to apply phonics on mono-syllable words in their textbooks. When these students attend junior high school and face 10-20 multi-syllable new words for each lesson, they may become rote learners, helplessly memorizing words letter by letter (H. L. Lai, 2004; W. T. Lai, 2003). In essence, if a student fails to get any help to overcome the spelling problem at the juncture of 7th grade, he may soon become an underachiever in English.

Fortunately, many researches have suggested that phonological awareness, if implemented with phonics, can successfully improve students' reading and spelling (Chu, Yu, & Hu, 2007; Schommer-Aikins, Hodson, & Swanson, 2005; Stage & Wagner, 1992; Su, 1999). In view of this, the researcher considers syllable awareness, one type of phonological awareness training, a possible rescue to solve the aforementioned spelling problem of 7th graders in Taiwan. Firstly, syllable awareness, though important, is not easy for Chinese learners to acquire. According to Huang's (2002) study, many junior high school students do not even know how to count syllables. A similar result is also reported in Liow & Lau's investigation (2006) --- Chinese-speaking children have more difficulties to get the concept of syllables than either English-speaking or Malay-speaking children. The reason may be that in Chinese, a logographic language, most words are monosyllabic. As a result, Chinese-speaking students have no need to be aware of syllables. Secondly, many researchers have reported that syllabification, an application of syllable awareness, is a crucial spelling strategy in the latter stage of phonic instruction (Adams, 1990; Blevins, 1998). Through the training of syllabification, students will be able to divide a multi-syllable word into many syllables to spell and to remember it more easily.

In brief, related studies have proven that both phonics instruction and syllable awareness are important methods to improve the vocabulary learning of students. A number of studies show that phonics instruction is an effective method in improving students' reading and spelling ability (Blevins, 1998; Dombey, 1999; Graham, 1983; Panel, 2000). Other studies also show that syllabification is a helpful device in spelling multi-syllable words (Adams, 1990; Jeffrey, 2001; M. H. Lin, 1999; Yeh, 2006). However, few studies are available on the effectiveness of phonics instruction combined with syllable awareness training for 7th graders on their spelling of multi-syllable words, an area well worth exploring.

Purpose and Research Questions

In order to solve the aforementioned spelling problems that many of my students in the 7th grade encountered, the teacher-researcher conducted the research within the framework of action research for two aims. The first aim is to find an effective spelling method with the application of phonics for junior high school students. In this research, the researcher attempts to integrate phonics with syllable awareness training to solve the complication of spelling multi-syllable words. The second aim is to evaluate subjects' attitude toward the method. In view of the preceding research purpose, two primary sets of research questions (RQs) to be posed in this study are as follows:

1. For 7th graders, is the syllable-awareness based phonics instruction more effective than the phonics instruction in spelling multi-syllable words?
2. After the instruction, are there any differences between the two groups in learning attitudes and perceived difficulties?

Definitions of Terms

Some key terms appeared in the paper are defined below.

Phonics

Phonics refers to a method which stresses the correspondence between letters and sounds (Blevins, 1998). In English-speaking country, phonics is taught for L1 learners with rich oral vocabulary to recognize and spell words; it is also a method for teaching learners to read. On the other hand, phonics instruction in Taiwan is regarded as a method of teaching EFL learners letter-sound correspondence for pronunciation and spelling (Z. L. Huang, 1999; Yin, 2000).

Phonological awareness

Phonological awareness is defined as the ability to recognize or manipulate units of spoken language, such as rhyming units within words, syllables within words and words within sentences (Adams, 1990; Blevins, 1998). According to Chard and Dickson (1999), phonological awareness can be divided into 5 stages from sentences into individual phonemes --- rhyming songs, sentence segmentation, syllable blending & segmentation, onset-rime and phoneme blending and segmentation.

Syllable awareness

Syllable awareness is in the middle stage of phonological awareness development. It means the ability to segment and blend syllables (Chard & Dickson, 1999). In this research, learners need to count syllables in words to spell out phonemes in each syllable.

Untrained words

Untrained words in this research mean words which learners have not been taught but will learn later according to the junior high school curriculum. To prevent learners from learning untrained words in cram school, the researcher did not choose them for the pre- and post- spelling tests.

Low frequency words

Low-frequency words in this research mean words out of the most common 2000 spoken or written words in Longman Dictionary (Summers, 2003) and the basic level 2261 and intermediate level 6638 words in Wen Shin Dictionary (Yang, 1993)¹. Since the words are low frequency to use or learn, the researcher chose them for the pre- and post- spelling tests.

Action research

Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1988) defined that action research is carried out by a teacher to solve a real problem in the classroom and to evaluate the solution used in practice. Furthermore, it aims to improve teaching effectiveness and can be conducted on an individual or small group professional practice (Wallace, 1998). In brief, the significance of action research is to help teachers develop their profession by reflecting on their practice.

¹ The researcher chose the two dictionaries as the tools for selecting low-frequency words because both dictionaries mark words' frequency clearly, and are commonly used in Taiwan.

Organization of the Thesis

The layout of this thesis is summarized as follows.

Chapter one introduces the outline of the thesis. It includes the researcher's motivation, purpose of the study, research questions, and definitions of terms.

Chapter two reviews related studies on phonics, syllable awareness, and related studies in the Taiwanese context. It not only justifies the importance of syllable-awareness based phonics instruction on spelling multi-syllable words, but also points out the shortages of previous related studies.

In Chapter Three, a pilot study and formal research design are presented. Subjects, instruments, and data analysis are also mentioned.

Chapter four will discuss the results of spelling performance and attitude change. Interview and questionnaire will also assist the interpretation of the findings.

The last Chapter will make a conclusion of the main findings, implications, limitations and suggestions for the future studies.