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PHONICS INSTRUCTION AND PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS AT AVE MARIA AMNATCHAROEN SCHOOL IN THAILAND

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by Bram Barli

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of learning English, as a young child is pursuing thriving learning, he or she needs to possess a reading skill which is possibly acquired through learning phonics; it may enable the young child to decode a word (Nadiera, & Yamat, 2019; Roe, Smith, & Burns, 2012). In this case, the young children are taught how to pronounce the letter sounds first; then, they are prepared to learn about letter-sound correspondences, syllables, words, and sentences (Nadiera, & Yamat, 2019). It is undeniable that phonics appears to be one of the topics which give rise to the massive disagreement among the educational practitioners in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand (Campbell, 2018; Clark, 2017; Ewing, 2017; Goouch, & Lambirth, 2007; Knaus, 2016; Snow et al., 2016). However, there are a lot of researches about successful phonics teaching for reading in the first language (Finnegan, 2012; Johnston, McGeown, & Watson, 2012) and also in the second language (Dixon, Schagen, & Seedhouse, 2011; Jamaludin et al, 2016; Yeung, Siegel, & Chan, 2013). Under those circumstances, it is proven that phonics is one of the most effective ways to help learners be fluent in reading.

English is one of the compulsory subjects to learn for the students in Ave Maria Amnatcharoen School of Thailand. In detail, every single student from each level of study in the primary school is required to study three different English subjects, namely English Basics, English Communication, and Phonics. Phonics plays an essential role for the students who study English as it helps the students to read better and say a word or a letter accurately. Phonics instruction strives to teach beginning and below-level readers the alphabetic code and implement that information to read words (Ehri et al., 2001).

Ave Maria Amnatcharoen School has been implementing phonics to be the subject to learn for more than five years. In fact, after more than five years of implementing phonics as the subject to learn, at the end of the academic year of 2016/2017, the results of the school report of the third-grade students showed that more than half of the students of that level performed poor basic reading skill. The results of the school report in learning phonics may lead to disadvantages for the students as they may unable to perform the basic skill of life; as the students are unable to read, the chances for personal fulfillment and for pursuing a good job will be lost (Anderson et al., 1985). On top of that, the teachers are challenged to teach phonics to the primary school students as they might not be trained in their pre-service study to teach phonics. In this case, conventional teachers may teach phonics by routing that the students are asked to memorize both the alphabet and the words without learning to write the scripts. Chandavimol (as cited in Kodae & Laohawiriyanon, 2011) found that the teachers

merely ask the students to read; the teachers also get the students done the exercises after reading. There is no dynamic interaction between the students as the readers and the written passage.

Under those circumstances, the objective of the research is to investigate the process of teaching phonics to the elementary school students of Ave Maria Amnatcharoen School in Thailand. The research questions are as follows. First, how do the teachers implement the effective techniques of teaching phonics? Second, what are the teachers' perceptions of the effects of teaching phonics to the elementary school students of Ave Maria Amnatcharoen School?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE
Phonics Instruction

It is worth noting that to teach phonics accurately, numerous approaches are needed to be implemented in the classroom, namely: synthetic phonics, analytic phonics, embedded phonics, analogy phonics, onset-rime phonics, and phonics through spelling (Harris, & Hodges, 1995; Aukerman, 1971; Aukerman, 1984). Synthetic phonics helps the students to change the form from graphemes to phonemes (e.g., to vocalize every letter of "start,"/s/t/a:/t/) by using a part-to-whole approach that the students will be able to combine the phonemes into an identifiable word (Ehri et al., 2001). Ehri et al. (2001) propose, "Analytic phonics uses a whole-to-part approach that avoids having children pronounce sounds in isolation to figure out words; rather children are taught to analyze letter-sound relations once the word is identified." For instance, the teacher may have the words of a *doll, dog,* and *duck*. The teacher helps the students read all of those words and understand that they begin with a similar sound; all of the words are associated with D.

Ehri et al. (2001) also put forward, "Phonics-through-spelling programs teach children to segment and write the phonemes in words." In particular, the children learn to identify the new words by utilizing parts of the written words they have known earlier (Ehri et al., 2001). In analogy phonics teaching, the teacher helps the students to utilize partial written words that the students have already known to identify the unknown words. Take, for instance; the learners have already learned the terms *doll, dog,* and *duck*. Then, those learners start to learn new things that they utilize the words they have understood earlier to decode the unknown words; they may practice it by segmenting the shared rime and combining it with the new-onset (e.g., *ball, frog, tuck*).

Studies on Phonics Teaching Techniques

In the first place, phonics should be introduced in playful, imaginative, and adaptable ways as it suits best for the whole language teaching (Langenberg et al., 2000). Lloyd (1998) states that young children learn faster as they are engaged in a certain activity. Therefore, it is suggested that teaching phonics requires the movement of the body, ears, eyes, and speech delivery to help the children learn and remember well. Besides, the song is attested to be one of the most powerful ways of teaching learners to listen and speak out the letter sounds. Research conducted by Chapman et al. (2018) confirmed that teachers enjoyed using YouTube videos in their teaching process on letter sounds.

Moreover, Lloyd (1998) suggests that playing games appears to be a successful way to help students learning phonics. Tankersley (2003) also proposes that the best way to introduce phonics to young children is by fast-paced, multi-modal, fun, and focus learning. The games which the teachers usually use in teaching phonics are letter bingo, missing letter, and hangman (Tankersley, 2003). Furthermore, book reading serves to be the technique of teaching phonics to young children. In this case, Campbell, Torr, and Cologon (2011) conducted a study that revealed most of the samples of teachings phonics were using picture book reading. In this case, a picture book may help the students, especially those who are visual learners, understand the words better.

It is worth noting that flashcards serve to be the media for teaching phonics. Tankersley (2003) puts in writing that flashcards enable the students to study the words that contain a letter of combination. Take, for instance; there are three different flashcards of "ay", "ch", and "bl". Students are asked to make a new word by using those letter combinations. Also, modeling is one of the techniques of teaching phonics which the teachers usually adopt. Johnston and Watson (2004) propose that blending the letter sounds through modeling is helpful for the students to learn phonics better. Besides, an onset-rime technique is considerably beneficial for helping students acquire reading skills (Hines, 2009). Young learners should be familiar with the parts of the words as well as the group of the letters. They need to be taught to relate and draw the connection between what they see in the group of letters with the certain pronunciation they have known for those onsets and rimes.

Essential Components of Reading

There are six components of reading identified by The National Reading Panel (2000). They are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and spelling (The National Reading Panel, 2000). In the first place, phonemic awareness deals with the students' capability to focus on and manipulate the phonemes in spoken syllables and words. According to the National Reading Panel (2000), teaching phonemic awareness to young children may enhance their reading more than instruction that lacks any attention to phonemic awareness. Meanwhile, phonics teaches the children to use the relationship of the letters to read and spell the words (The National Reading Panel, 2000).

Fluency refers to the ability of the children to read aloud with a suitable speed, accurate structure, and appropriate expression (Read Naturally, 2019). Vocabulary is helpful for the students to make meaning of the reading passage that they are currently reading (Read Naturally, 2019). Armbruster (2010) also suggests that vocabularies play a significant role in students' reading comprehension. Armbruster (2010) proposes that new vocabularies are required to be taught to enhance students' reading skills. Furthermore, the National Reading Panel (2000) states that comprehension is dealing with young children struggling to excel in reading comprehension through numerous techniques. Those techniques include responding to the questions (doing some quizzes) and also summarizing the text (the story is told with one's language). The National Reading Panel (2000) reports a positive impact on primary education as young children have been introduced to learn phonemic awareness and phonics instruction. The spelling skill of the students might constantly increase as they are accustomed to learning through reading instruction.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative design. According to Ary et al. (2010), a qualitative study emphasizes the understanding of a social situation or social fact, which is seen through the eyes of the human person; the phenomenon may happen naturally without the interferences of any humankind. The writers might focus on the process of implementing the effective techniques of teaching phonics of the teachers. Besides, the writers emphasized the teachers' perceptions of the effects of teaching phonics to the elementary school students of Ave Maria Amnatcharoen School. The data were elaborated in the form of a narrative account.

The participants of this study were five English teachers of Ave Maria Amnatcharoen School of Thailand. All of the teachers were female teachers; the participants were between 23 and 25 years old. In this study, the writers utilized a closed-ended and an open-ended questionnaire. After the writers obtained the data from the questionnaires, the writers started to conduct an in-depth interview with the five English teachers who taught phonics. In the data analysis, the qualitative data were analyzed in the form of a descriptive narrative. It was done to obtain a better understanding of the answers from the participants in dealing with the two research problems.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the first place, the writers presented the result of both questionnaires and interviews into two main parts, namely how the teachers implemented the effective techniques of teaching phonics and the teachers' perceptions of the effects of teaching phonics to elementary school students of Ave Maria Amnatcharoen School are. In general, the first part analyzed the process of implementing effective techniques of Phonics teaching. The second part examined the extent to which the implementation of effective techniques of Phonics teaching helped the students of Ave Maria Amnatcharoen School.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Process of Implementing Effective Techniques of Teaching Phonics

To begin with, the writers emphasized the teachers' perceptions on the process of implementing effective techniques of teaching phonics. In general, the teachers utilized the synthetic phonics program, analytic phonics, phonics-through-spelling program, phonics in context, and analogy phonics. Moreover, the teachers also used kinesthetic activities, hand gestures, flashcards, modeling, and the onset-rime technique. The details of those processes of implementing phonics teaching were presented in table 1.

Based on table 1, the writers learned that 80% of the participants strongly agreed that they taught the letter sounds by asking the learners to repeat the sounds orally. It was worth noting that the teachers had positive perceptions of the synthetic phonics programs as most of the teachers had the same opinion as to the first statement. According to Ehri et al. (2001), "synthetic phonics programs use a part-to-whole approach that teaches children to convert graphemes into phonemes (e.g., to pronounce each letter in stop, /s/-/t/-/a/-/p/) and then to blend the phonemes into a recognizable word." It was worth noting that teachers, as the mentors, were required to help the students to learn the letter sounds. The young children

could have practiced by repeating the letter sounds; it might be helpful for the children to be accustomed to reading. In this case, the student might learn better by repeating sounds and modeling. Students might not be familiar with the letter sounds, and blending for the two skills was new to them. In brief, all of the teachers agreed that they implemented synthetic phonics programs in teaching phonics.

Table 1. Results of the Closed-ended Questionnaire on the Process of Implementing Effective Techniques of Teaching Phonics

No.	Statements	SA	A	D	SD
1.	I teach the letter sounds by asking the learners to repeat the sounds orally.	80%	20%	-	-
2.	I teach the students to identify the words with the same sound (put, pig, play, pet - dog, doll, duck, dice).	100%	-	-	-
3.	I teach the students to divide and write the letter sound in words.	60%	20%	20%	-
4.	I teach the students to use letter-sound to identify unfamiliar words	60%	20%	20%	-
5.	I teach how to blend the letter sounds with the alphabetic flashcards.	80%	20%	-	-
6.	I use songs to help the learners to remember the letter sounds.	80%	20%	-	-
7.	I use hand gestures to help the learners remember the letter sounds.	60%	-	-	40%
8.	I use different kinds of flashcards to teach the letter sounds.	100%	-	-	-
9.	I teach how to blend the letter sounds orally.	80%	20%		-
10.	I teach the students about the word parts and letter group (e.g., c at – cat; b at – bat, c is the onset, and at is the rime).	100%	-	-	-

As presented in table 1, all participants strongly agreed that they taught the students to identify the words with the same sound (put, pig, play, pet - dog, doll, duck, dice). In detail, all of the teachers strongly agreed that they adapted and adopted analytic Phonics (Ehri et al., 2001). Analytic Phonics is a whole-to-part approach that enables young children to pronounce the sounds collaboratively to discover the word. Another key point, the young children learned to examine the relations among the sound letters once the word is recognized. For instance, the teacher wrote the letter "R," followed by different words; they were: read, ride, run, and rose. After that, the teacher asked the students to read those words; the teacher would also help the students to identify that all of those words began with a similar sound associated with R (Ehri et al., 2001).

The results showed 60% of the teachers who chose to strongly agree that they taught the students to divide and write the letter sound in words. Also, 20% of the teachers agreed with that statement; meanwhile, 20% of the teachers disagreed with the third statement. Ehri et al.

(2001) suggested, "phonics-through-spelling programs taught children to segment and write the phonemes in words."

Over half of the participants, reaching 60%, strongly agreed, and 20% agreed that they taught the students to use letter-sound to identify unfamiliar words. However, there were 20% of the teachers disagreed with the fourth statement. Ehri et al. (2001) also proposed that phonics in context enabled young children to utilize the letter sounds altogether with context cues to reveal the unknown words and new words found in the reading passage.

For the fifth statement, most participants, which were 80% and 20%, strongly agreed and agreed that they taught how to blend the letter sounds with the alphabetic flashcards. In detail, none of the participants chose to disagree with this statement. Analogy phonics served to help the young children to utilize certain parts of the written word that they had been familiar with to reveal the unknown or unfamiliar words. For instance, the students were learning a pack of keywords listed on the wall: bent, cake, and peg. After that, the students started to learn to utilize those words to decode the new words by segmenting the similar rime and blending the same time with the new-onset (tent, wake, leg) (Ehri et al., 2001). Based on the interview, Jomjam and Som Ow helped the students blend the letter sounds by using the common blending techniques; it was by saying aloud every single letter sound and blending those letter sounds from left to right.

Based on the questionnaires distributed to the teachers who were teaching Phonics in Ave Maria Amnatcharoen School, the writers acquired information that 80% and 20% of the participants strongly agreed and agreed that they used songs to help the learners to remember the letter sounds. These results might correspond to the theories of Lloyd (1998), who stated that young children learned faster as they were engaged in a certain activity. Therefore, it was suggested that teaching phonics required the movement of the body, ears, eyes, and the delivery of the speech to help the children learn and remember well. Also, it was attested that the song appeared to be one of the most powerful ways to help the learners to listen and speak out the letter sounds. Based on the interview, Porpor added that "To achieve my goal in teaching phonics, I used interactive media related to the materials, such as using flashcards, songs, rhymes, chants, games, and storybooks. I also used pictures as the media to support students' engagement in learning phonics."

The seventh statement showed that the majority of the participants, 60%, strongly agreed that they used hand gestures to help the learners remember the letter sounds. However, 40% of the participants strongly disagreed with that statement. In this case, as the teachers taught phonics, they also let the students sing the songs. It helped them recall the letter sounds

better. The teachers began the lesson by inviting the students to sing the phonics songs, which they were familiar with, dancing, or bodily gestures to recall the basic sounds.

For the eighth statement, 100% of the participants strongly agreed that they used a pack of flashcards to introduce the different kinds of letter sounds. Tankersley (2003) puts in writing that flashcards enable the students to study the words that contain letter combinations. The result of this research was in line with the theory of Tankersley (2003). Based on the interview, Nuni also added that flashcards were helpful in teaching phonics. Nuni stated: "I use games and flashcards at the same time to make the students happy in learning phonics. An example of the game is I spell and pronounce some words, and then I ask them to run and touch the flashcards. The students do love running."

The ninth statement of the questionnaire showed that the majority of the participants, which were 80% and 20%, strongly agreed and agreed on how to blend the letter sounds orally. Johnston and Watson (2004) proposed that blending the letter sounds through modeling was helpful for the students to learn phonics better. It was worth noting that based on the interview, all of the participants explained that they taught their students in early reading through modeling. The teachers began by giving the students the example. Then, the students imitated what the teachers had taught on how to blend the letter sound. Som Ow added, "The children enjoyed playing and singing. They learned a lot while having fun through songs, games, and some demonstrations."

For the tenth statement, 100% of the participants strongly agreed that they taught the students about the word parts and letter group (e.g., c at - cat; b at - bat. c was the onset, and at was the rime). An Onset-rime technique is considerably beneficial for helping students acquire reading skills (Hines, 2009). It was worth noting that students were required to learn to identify the parts of the word as well as the letter groups. The students were also required to draw the connection between the letter groups, which they had seen together with the pronunciations they had known for those onsets and rimes. Applying the onset-rime technique in teaching phonics helped the students to develop their decoding skills. Based on the interview, the teacher, Jomjam, explained that "If the students want to read the word "bat", they need to combine "a" and "t" to form "at". Then, the students continue to combine "b" and "at" to read the word "bat"."

To sum up, the teachers might have various kinds of effective techniques for teaching phonics. The majority of the teachers had positive perceptions of the implementation of the effective techniques of teaching phonics. The responses in the closed-ended questionnaire indicated the perceptions. In detail, most of the teachers might implement synthetic phonics

programs, analytic phonics, phonics-through-spelling programs, analogy phonics, and classroom activities and learning media for phonics. From the above exploration regarding the implementation of various teaching techniques for teaching phonics, the findings showed the need for further and more practice and exploration of teachers' phonics teaching techniques.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Effects of Implementing the Effective Techniques of Teaching Phonics

In this section, the writers focused on how the teachers perceived the effects of implementing effective techniques of teaching phonics. The details of the effects of implementing Phonics teaching are presented in table 2.

Table 2. The Effects of Implementing the Effective Techniques of Teaching Phonics

No.	Statements	SA	A	D	SD
11.	The students are able to read aloud simple words sentences fluently.	80%	-	20%	-
12.	The students may be rich in vocabulary.	80%	20%	-	-
13.	The students are able to respond to the questions (quizzes) correctly.	40%	40%	20%	-
14.	The students are able to retell the story of what they have read.	60%	20%	20%	-
15.	The students are able to spell out the words correctly.	20%	60%	20%	-

From the eleventh statement of the questionnaire, 80% of the teachers strongly agreed that the students were able to read aloud simple word sentences fluently. However, there were 20% of the teachers disagreed with this eleventh statement. It was worth noting that fluency is dealing with the capability of young children to comprehend the text orally with a considerable speed of reading, with accurate structure and appropriate expression (Read Naturally, 2019). In detail, all of the fifth participants believed that their teaching techniques for Phonics teaching positively impacted their students' reading skills. Based on the interview, Nuni asserted, "The students can pronounce correctly and easily recognize the words."

From the twelfth statement, the writers acquired the information that 80% and 20% of the teachers strongly agreed and agreed that the students might be rich in vocabulary. Porpor elaborated that "Most of the students are able to memorize the words. Some of them have a huge range of vocabulary as well. However, some other students still had difficulties in learning new words."

It is worth noting that vocabulary may help the children make sense of the text they are currently reading (Read Naturally, 2019). Armbruster (2010) also emphasized the importance of vocabulary, which was dealing with reading comprehension. It could be inferred that teachers were required to drill students with new vocabularies from time to time to expand students' vocabularies. As a result, it might be helpful for students to develop their reading skills.

From the thirteenth statement, it was noticeable that 40% of the teachers strongly agreed as well as 40% of the participants agreed that the learners were able to respond to the questions or quizzes correctly. In contrast, there were 20% of the teachers chose to disagree with this statement. Based on the interview, Nuni affirmed that the students were able to pronounce the word correctly as it was a part of the quizzes. The students were also able to recognize the word easily. However, Jomjam might have different statements. Jomjam stated that "I realized that even though the students were good at writing the sounds in English, some of them were still difficult in producing some sounds in English."

Based on the fourteenth statement of the questionnaire, the researcher acquired the information that 60% of the teachers strongly agreed that the students were able to retell the story of what they had read. Also, 20% of the teachers agreed with this statement; meanwhile, there were 20% of the teachers disagreed with this statement. It was worth remembering that comprehension might refer to the young children who were struggling to develop their reading comprehension through numerous techniques, namely responding to questions (doing a quiz) and making a summary (retelling the story with their language) (The National Reading Panel, 2000).

Table 2 shows that for the fifteenth statement, the majority of the teachers agreed that the students could spell out the words correctly. There were 20% of the teachers who strongly agreed with the fifteenth statement. Also, there were 60% of the teachers chose to agree with this statement. There were 20% of the teachers who disagreed with this statement. Phonics served to teach the young children to utilize the connections among the letters to read and spell the words (The National Reading Panel, 2000).

Overall, the quantitative and qualitative data analysis results revealed that most of the teachers were not yet able to consistently agree that teaching phonics was helpful for students' ability in early reading, although there were indicators of early reading ability. However, it could be concluded that the findings revealed that most of the teachers had positive perceptions of the effects of effective teaching techniques of teaching phonics. The findings revealed that the teaching techniques for phonics teaching contributed to students'

reading skills. However, there were still some students who had difficulties in developing their reading skills through phonics.

CONCLUSION

It was worth noting that this study investigated the teachers' perceptions of the process of implementing effective techniques in teaching phonics. Also, this study focused on finding the teachers' perceptions of the effects of implementing teaching phonics to the elementary school students of Ave Maria Amnatcharoen School. In particular, this research had found that the teachers, in general, might have positive perceptions of the process of implementing effective techniques in teaching phonics. The majority of the participants had attested that they implemented various teaching techniques of the phonics approach for introducing students to learn reading. Moreover, the research participants might also have positive perceptions of the effects of implementing effective techniques in teaching phonics. The majority of the participants agreed that the students had developed phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and spelling. However, some students still needed special assistance in learning as their reading skills did not develop through learning phonics.

This study found that generally, teachers had implemented various teaching techniques for teaching early reading through the phonics approach. In fact, a single category of teaching technique would not be sufficient for nurturing students' reading ability. For this reason, it is suggested that teachers explore and make use of new techniques which fit students' needs. Even though the study results had shown that there were positive impacts on students' reading comprehension as they were studying phonics, it was worth noting that this study was limited to five participants only. Thus, it is recommended that future researchers conduct studies on phonics teaching techniques involving more participants to nurture students' reading capabilities.

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