Developing Phonics through Activity Based Learning at Early Years

Hina Akbar[*]
Hafiza Gulnaz Fatima[**]
Namirah Aslam[***]

Abstract

The purpose of this action research was to gain an understanding of the phonics awareness through activity-based learning. The subject of this study was 13 students of prep class at a low-paid private school located in a slum suburban area. The academic performance was evaluated through dialogues with and observation of students. For this study 20 sessions with students were conducted with different activities to develop phonics and its effect on the personalities and level of learning and understanding of prep class students. The results of the study showed that the students tend to learn phonics more actively when they are exposed to activity-based learning. The head of the school and the classroom teachers appreciated that their students developed more intellectual skills and abilities in them after these sessions.

Keywords: language development, phonics, activity-based learning, early childhood education

[*] Lecturer at Lahore College for Women University, Lahore.
Email: hinaakbar48@yahoo.com
[**] Lecturer at Lahore College for Women University, Lahore.
Email: gulnazfatima59@yahoo.com
[***] Lecturer at Lahore College for Women University, Lahore.
Email: Namirah.asalm01@gmail.com

Introduction

English is one of the most globally recognized languages. Because it has become an international language over the years, learners must be adequately equipped with English communication skills. Now, it is duty of the teachers to help their students in developing good English communication skills. The four main skills necessary for boosting communication skills are reading, writing, speaking and listening. This research, however, was solely focused on the skill of reading, because reading is one of the most important of these skills. Without good reading skills, acquiring information from the bulletins, magazines, newspapers or any other print media can be really hard (Koda, 2005). Students in many countries learn English as second language and they prefer acquiring information in written form over oral form (Caligiuri, 2000). Now, taken very much for granted, reading is also one of the most problematic of these skills (even when it's mostly believed that it's something anyone can do). Most crucial goal of reading is reading comprehension (getting the context of text for acquiring information from it). Teachers can boost their students' reading comprehension by developing productive methods and techniques. It is already known that the process of learning can be enhanced by active learning. This factor paves a way for the possibility of developing methods that can actively enhance reading comprehension (Cunningham, 1990).

Though every educator probably has heard of the term 'phonics', hardly most of the educators know what this term exactly means. Phonics, a way of teaching children how writes and read, helps children hear, identify and use different sounds that distinguish one word from another in the English language. Written language, in its own way, is kind of a code. Now the only possible way for children to decode it is by knowing the sounds of individual letters and how those letters sound when they're combined. Having a firm grasp over phonics can help children know which letters to use when they are writing words. Matching individual letters or groups of letters with the sounds of spoken English is what phonics is all about. For example, the sound *k* can be spelled as c, k, ck or ch (Smith, 1999). Take another example, when a child (or any person for the say) knows the sounds of letters "e, a, c and r", that child (or any person) can build up the words from these letters himself/herself i.e. race, car, ear or ace (Alhumsi, 2020).

One of the major subjects of debate for many years has been teaching through synthetic and analytic phonics. In recent years, however, a rapidly growing interest in synthetic approach of teaching

phonics is noticed by the educationists. The declaration of including synthetic phonics approach in UK government policy is the reason behind this rapidly growing interest. Policy makers now have an easier choice between getting a blended progression for their English language learners or leading synthetic phonics instructions for their bilingual students (Ramanair, Rethinasamy, Misieng & Pandian, 2020).

In Pakistan, however, teaching English language through synthetic phonics approach is still not evident. During reading activities, the context of storybooks could be expected to endorse the use of phonic knowledge (Malik, Waqar & Bokhari, 2017). Providing children with the key knowledge and skills to ensure that they have a firm grasp over application of that knowledge in their reading and writing is the main goal of phonics instructions (Alharthy, 2019). Children require phonemic awareness in order to make use of letter-sound information. To elaborate, in other words, to decode words they need to be able to blend sounds together and to read words they need to be able to break spoken words into their constituent sounds. Helping beginner level readers to understand how letters are linked to sounds (phonemes) to form letter-sound correspondences and spelling patterns is the primary focus of the phonic instructions along with helping them to learn how to apply this knowledge in their reading (Daud & Salamah, 2016). Systematic or incidentally, phonics instructions can be given in any of these ways (Carlisle & Thomas, 2016).

Framework for establishing the importance of study is given in literature review. It relates the current study, filling in gaps and extending prior studies, to the larger ongoing dialog in the literature about the same topic.

Phonics
As depicted by Salamah (2017), the relationship between sounds and their spellings is involved in phonics. Teaching students the sound-spelling relationships is the main goal of phonics instructions. This understanding of sound-spelling relationships is necessary in decoding words.

Reading Phonics
For children's early education, phonics reading is highly essential (Ehri, 20014). Phonics, a knowledge that allows children to read, is also a learning mechanism that builds up a good word dictionary. The more alertness children develop with time, the more self-directed they will become. They will also be able to more appropriately apply the habits of

mind spontaneously and, in doing so, deepen their valuing of these mind habits (Campbell, 2018).

Importance of Phonics Instructions

In helping students comprehend text, phonics instructions play a key role by helping students map sounds onto spellings. In a way, it enables them to decode words and this decoding helps students in recognizing words and increasing their reading fluency. Fluency in reading improves reading comprehension (Jolliffe, Waugh & Gill, 2019). Also, spelling abilities are enhanced by phonics instructions because spelling patterns are emphasized by it. As proved by studies, phonics rules that relate to one letter to one sound can be used to spell half of the English words.

Strategies of Reading Phonics

In order to gain the better understanding of English language, strategies must be promulgated that are related to the reading phonics. These strategies must also be exercised in order to gain a better perspective of English language (Adams, 2017). These phonics instructions, when given systematically, can nurture a child's ability to read and comprehend text.

Types of Phonics Instruction Methods

Synthetic and analytic are the two most recognized approaches for phonics instructions. In synthetic phonics, individual letters or letter combinations are linked with appropriate sounds and then these sounds are blended together to form words (Ren & Ma, 2017). In analytic phonics, whole word units are taught followed by step-by-step instructions on linking all the specific letters in a word with their specific sounds (Smith, 1999). The explicitness by which phonic elements are taught and practiced in the reading of text varies the phonic instructions. In teaching phonics, various phonics instruction approaches can be applied. Examples of these approaches include:

Analogy Phonics

Using analogies of words students already know, teaching students words that are unfamiliar to them (Alharthy, 2019).

Analytic Phonics

Helping students to analyze letter-sound relations in words that are already familiar to them (Alhumsi, 2020).

Embedded Phonics
Embedding phonics instructions in text reading to teach students phonics skills. This approach relies on incidental learning (Alharthy, 2019).

Phonics through Spelling
Segmenting words into phonemes and selecting letters for those phonemes (Alhumsi, 2020).

Synthetic Phonics
Converting letters into sounds and then blending these sounds to form words (Smith, 1999).

Eight Steps of Teaching Phonics
Ramanair (2020) made teaching phonics easier by creating a step-by-step strategy consisting of 8 steps to teach phonics. Those 8 steps are as follows:

Step 1:   Introducing the vowels and their short sounds.
Step 2:   Introducing the consonants and their sounds.
Step 3:   Blending short vowels with consonants.
Step 4:   Blending and reading one vowel words and short sentences.
Step 5:   Introducing the long vowel sounds.
Step 6:   Practicing blending long vowels with consonants.
Step 7:   Blending and reading two vowel words, and Introducing two special rules.
            The One Vowel Rule
            The Two Vowel Rule
Step 8:   Introducing the Phonics Charts which includes the special sounds that are made when letters "stick" together.

The Importance of Method Selection (Activity Based Learning)
For better and effective learning, teaching methods are shaped under many principles and strategies. Some of these strategies are can be determined by the nature of subject to be taught while others can be determined by the nature of learners. Because the primary role of teachers is to pass knowledge onto their students, if is necessary for the teachers to capable of coming up with effective learning strategies for their learners (Snider 1995).

Researcher adopt activity based learning for effectively teaching them phonics and phonemic awareness. researcher includes the activities-session strip, spider grams (after and before) mind map and the main

game. Researcher planned lesson efficiently and use warm up activity before teaching phonics and also write reflection on daily basis. These activities helped the student to make good spellings, recognition and recitation of words and sounds.

Objectives

Following were the objectives of the study:
To equip the students of prep class with the skills related to phonics awareness in English.
Equipping students with phonics awareness to make their reading better.
Improving phonic awareness through activity based learning

Research Questions

Following were the research questions:
How can students learn phonics in English through activities?
What is the difference before and after intervention?
How can students make their reading better with the help of phonics instructions?

Methodology

The procedural information is given under this part. It is the strategy used for fulfilling the purpose of study. The methods used for achieving the objectives of the study are brought to light here. And the fact that it highlights the instruments used for the study and design of research goes without saying. How data was collected and analyzed, all of it, is given under this section.

Research Design

Action research was applied in this study because it is a reflective process that makes room for the inquiry and discussion as components of the research. In other words, it is a systematic inquiry conducted educationists to gather required information. The information gathered through this process is used in gaining insight and developing reflective practice. It is used for bringing out positive changes (Mills, 2000).

In this case, action research was used to find out (and sort out) the problems faced by students in their phonics instructions. The first step, of

course, was to highlight the area where students faced difficulties in their reading. Passage comprehension, sentence making or connecting words and sentences, you name it.

The second step was to come up with creative activities to improve the reading phonics skills of prep class students from slum area School held by Alif Laila book bus and demonstrated by its own manager, researcher attended two training workshops. In these workshops, five habits of mind were explained. Their use and meaning was elaborated.

It was instructed to transfer these 5 habits of minds in accordance with the personalities of students. Researcher was even invited to the society office of Alif Laila book bus to observe the creativity in things and ideas that came by recycling. It was very helpful to see that the recyclable stuff was used in making new games and fun things.

Creative Pedagogical Methods

For teaching prep class students, different pedagogical methods were used. The activities were made in accordance with the topics from syllabus. Phonics was the main subject of teaching. Before the teaching on these topics begins, a five-minute warm-up game was played with students to keep them active and interested in the activities. The total time for these activities was 30 minutes each. At the end of these activities, reflection and feedback performances were done. Each day a 70 minute lecture was attended by researcher to teach prep class students English phonics.

Population of the Study

All the students in slum area school, Lahore allotted by Alif Laila book bus society were the population for this study.

Sample of the Study

Purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample of this action research. Thirteen prep class students, six boys and seven girls, were selected by the researcher from slum area Lahore allotted by Alif Laila book bus society. All these students had poor backgrounds and belonged to underdeveloped areas. Researcher selected these students to better their reading phonics skills.

Research Instrument

Worksheets, activities, lesson plans and field notes were the instruments of the study. In accordance with the understanding level of prep class students, worksheets, tests and interviews were used as research instruments by the researcher. They were used for checking how much prep class students were getting at pronouncing and recognizing words, letters, sounds, images and written text.

Data Collection

Data was collected from activities (spider game, feed the shark, role play, word buddy), worksheets, reflection performances and field notes. Researcher plan a lesson to taught phonic awareness. Kids play with sounds, syllables and rhymes by following the instruction of teachers and then complete the worksheets. Researcher make observations and field notes while observing the performance of students to analyze their understanding level. All the warm-up games played before the activities also contributed their fair share in the data collection part.

Development of Innovative Games

An innovative game was developed by the researcher. This game includes the session strip, spider grams (after and before) mind map, role play and the main game. The main game included a shark, pictures of different objects and cutting alphabets for making spellings. This game was named "feed the shark". Children were shown a picture of any object and were asked to find the alphabets for naming that object to feed the shark. There was a jumbled path from which each pair of students have to cross and collect pictures from the respective baskets. Their task was to find out the word, collect its proper spellings and paste it on the shark. This game was at its best when played in pairs and students were beyond excited to play this game. This game helped the students to do these main objectives justify the pictures, make correct spellings, phonemic awareness and to recognition and recitation of words there sounds. Students participate with full focus and attention and enjoyed them with full excitement.

Technique of Data Analysis

Data analysis is the part where collected data is analyzed to look for insights that are relevant to the study's main objectives. The data is then transformed to make room for improvement and effectiveness. Children and their responses in the activities and games were observed thoroughly to analyses their understanding level. This was all done to find out how students were taking in these new activities and lesson plans. It was also done to highlight the hurdles that students faced in phonics. Researcher also analyzed data with the help of tests taking from students and researchers field notes.
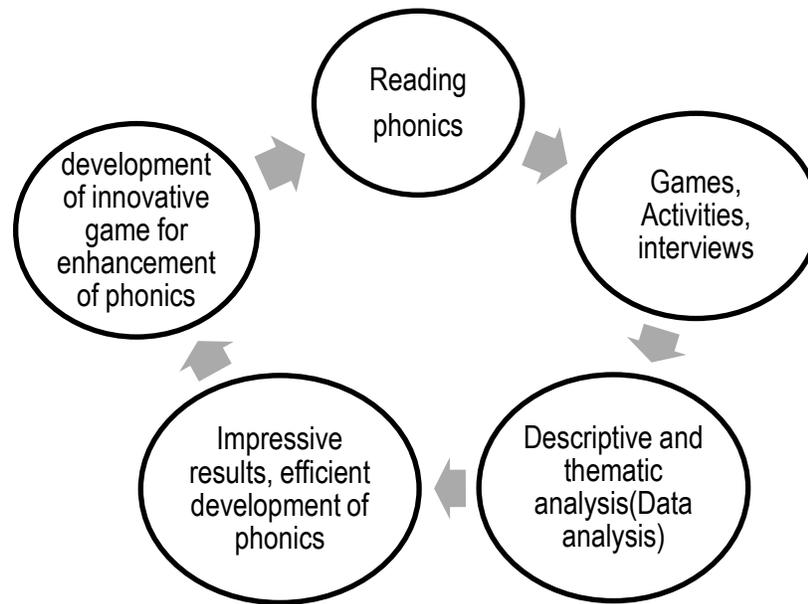

Figure: Action research cycle.

Results

Analysis of Students Work before Intervention (Observation)
It was analyzed by the researcher that because students were from the poor backgrounds and had illiterate parents their mental capabilities were low. They were not able to recognize the sound of letters and didn't even know about the blending of words. Even the use of words in sentences

was out of their domain. Fluency and comprehension were both terms alien to them goes without saying.

Analysis of students work after intervention (Researchers field notes)
However, after applying the activities students showed a positive progression. They were starting to read and make proper sounds of the letters. They were having zero difficulties in pronouncing words and were now better fitted with the ability of phonics. Their mental capabilities were getting higher and better. They were making their own sentences and had better fluency now. Comprehension came as natural as blinking to them. Not only did they effectively learned through activity based learning, but they also enjoy these daily sessions. They cooperated with each other. It can be said that their personalities were getting positively shaped for the better now. And everything they learnt, they learnt with all their heart in it. They were able to read, write and recognize the words properly.

Table 1
 Student's Checklist

Statement	Yes	No
Did you develop the five habits of mind during the process of 15 sessions?	8	2
Did you think that warm up activities were beneficial for the learning of students?	10	0
Did your teacher was aware of such type of teaching method?	0	10
Do you think that your class teacher should also use this type of teaching method?	9	1
Do you think that this type teaching method is helpful and beneficial for your learning?	10	0

The above table depicts the results about the student improvement and students interest. Students explained that they had developed the 5 minds of habits in themselves. They agreed that warm up activities are purpose for their learning. They were not aware of such kind of learning activities. They didn't know that teaching can be done in this way as well. They wanted that their teacher should also use this new method for teaching because they have enjoyed a lot by learning through this method. They wanted to learn through these new activities. In short they enjoyed all of it.

Findings

Findings that were revealed in the light of this study were as follows:
Students were able to pronounce paragraphs.
Students' ability to recognize images was increased positively.
Students became more aware of the sounds of letters.
Students were easily able to make new words from different sounds.
Students' listening habits were sharpened positively. They became more active in listening.
Students' phonics were greatly improved.
Students; vocabulary was shaped for the better and they were found cooperating with each other without any hurdle to stop them. They shared words they learnt.
Students were able to make sentences because their thinking abilities were increased.
Students were getting fluent in their reading and could actually comprehend everything they were reading**.**

Conclusion

Students effectively improved their phonics. They cooperated with each other without any hurdle stopping them. They were active during the activities and lessons and were getting adept in picking up and comprehending new words and sentences. They were getting more and more fluent in their reading by every passing day. They had a clear grasp over phonics now.

References

Adams, M. J. (2017). Alphabetic anxiety and explicit, systematic phonics instruction: A cognitive science perspective. *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*, *1*, 66-80.

Adams, M. J., Foorman, B. R., Lundberg, I., & Beeler, T. (1998). *Phonemic awareness in young children: A classroom curriculum*. Baltimore: Brookes.

Alharthy, N. (2019). The Impact of Raising Phonological Awareness and Phonics to Improve Reading and Spelling Skills. In *Kansas State University Khbrat SUMMIT. Manhattan, KS: Kansas State University, Center for Intercultural and Multilingual Advocacy in the College of Education and the English Language Program.*

Alhumsi, M. H. (2020). The influence of phonemic awareness instruction on EFL emergent readers word recognition. *Language Literacy: Journal of Linguistics, Literature, and Language Teaching*, *4*(1), 1-14.

Campbell, S. (2018). Teaching phonics without teaching phonics: Early childhood teachers' reported beliefs and practices. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 1468798418791001.

Carlisle, A. A., Thomas, C. N., & McCathren, R. B. (2016). The effectiveness of using a content acquisition podcast to teach phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and phonics to preservice special education teachers. *Journal of Special Education Technology*, *31*(2), 87-98.

Daud, B., & Salamah, U. (2016). Teaching phonics and phonemic awareness in English beginning reading. *English Education Journal*, *7*(3), 329-340.

Ehri, L. C. (2004). Teaching Phonemic Awareness and Phonics: An Explanation of the National Reading Panel Meta-Analyses.

Fraenkel, J. R., Wallen, N. E., & Hyun, H. H. (1990). How to design and evaluate. *Research in Education. New York, McGraw-Hill Publishing Company*.

Jolliffe, W., Waugh, D., & Gill, A. (2019). *Teaching systematic synthetic phonics in primary schools*. Learning Matters.

Malik, N. F., Waqar, Y., & Bokhari, T. B. (2017). Impact of Reading Strategies on Reading of Kindergarten and Nursery Students: A Case Study. *International journal of English and education, 6*(2), 168-175.

Marshall, C. R., & Rossman, Y. GB (1989). *Designing qualitative research*.

Ramanair, J., Wee, C. S., Rethinasamy, S., Misieng, J., & Pandian, A. (2020). Phonemic Awareness among Rural Primary School English Language Teachers in Sarawak: *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, *10*(8), 434-449.

Salamah, U. (2017). Teaching phonics and phonemic awareness in english beginning reading. *etd Unsyiah.* *https:etd.unsyiah.ac.id/index.php?=show_detailed&id-31305*

Smith, F. (1999). Why systematic phonics and phonemic awareness instruction constitute an educational hazard. *Language Arts*, *77*(2), 150-155.

Snider, V. A. (1995). A primer on phonemic awareness: What it is, why it's important, and how to teach it. *School Psychology Review*, *24*(3), 443-456.