

Improving Reading Skills through Teaching English Phonetics in ESL Classroom: A Critical Evaluation

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Abstract

Reading skills is a vital component of the English language. This is due to the fact that the practice of reading provides learners with genuine understanding and enhances their comprehension abilities. However, ESL learners of English experience numerous difficulties in developing reading skills, primarily because of challenges in articulating specific phonemes in the English language. Consequently, this paper emphasizes the enhancement of reading skills by teaching English phonetics to ESL learners, particularly focusing on undergraduate students in Odisha. The aim of this study is to assess the reading comprehension skills of first-year English Honours students who are being introduced to English Phonetics for the first time in their curriculum as per the New Education Policy 2020. This research utilizes both qualitative and quantitative methods, employing a pre-experimental approach. Data was gathered through a combination of pre-tests, post-tests, and questionnaires. The pre-test and post-test were utilized to evaluate whether the teaching method of English Phonetics has a positive effect on enhancing reading abilities. I employed the questionnaire to gauge the students' reactions to specific sounds in the English language, which aids them in reading texts. According to the observations made during the teaching of English phonetics in the classroom, students develop a positive understanding and clarity regarding the articulation of English consonants and vowels while reading.

Keywords— reading, comprehension, phonetics, articulation, observation, classrooms

I. INTRODUCTION

Typically, language comprises four main skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among these skills, reading is particularly crucial and often presents significant challenges for ESL learners in English. Reading activities are closely tied to people's everyday lives, as they are essential not only in the educational realm but also play a significant role in social interactions. Therefore, it is vital to enhance this skill.

There are several essential aspects of reading skills for ESL learners, including phonemic awareness, phonics—which encompasses the rules of phonetics—fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. All these aspects of reading skills need to be cultivated among them. Additionally, learners often lack interest in reading texts, whether they are fictional or non-fictional. This disinterest is largely due to their difficulties with proper

pronunciation of words and their limited understanding of English sentence structures, which leads to confusion regarding the meaning of the text. In light of the challenges faced in reading skills, teachers ought to modify their instructional strategies by employing suitable teaching approaches. One technique that can help kids improve their reading comprehension skills while reading on their own is the phonics approach.

According to Adams (1994), teaching pupils the alphabetic code through the phonics approach helps them become more adept at decoding unfamiliar words. Reading exercises in ESL classes are typically taught by professors using a method that is extremely dull, renders students passive, and even prevents them from engaging in the teaching and learning process. Thus, the researcher is attempting to use the phonics method to solve this reading comprehension problem for ESL

students. For all English language learners and writers, phonics is an essential skill. Words can be precisely and swiftly identified using the phonics method. Additionally, it simplifies and eases the teaching-learning process.

According to Brand (2004), phonics is an instructional method that aids students in understanding the sounds associated with letters when reading and spelling. This technique emphasizes the readers' comprehension of letters and the correct pronunciation during reading exercises. Moreover, Bald (2007) asserts that phonics is the most effective way to teach the sounds of the English language, which consists of letters and clusters of letters. It includes guiding children in blending and combining these sounds to read or write words. This method encourages learners to decode written letters into sounds based on their corresponding graphemes. Additionally, the phonics approach offers several benefits to learners, particularly young children who are beginning to read. It enables students to grasp the regular patterns of words, including pronunciation rules, thereby making reading easier and more enjoyable.

Similarly, Grayling suggests that the Phonic method can enhance students' reading habits. This approach focuses on the sounds of letters, starting with students learning to identify these sounds. Initially, students recognize the sounds associated with individual letters, which then develop into syllables and words, and subsequently, words form sentences. After this progression, students are encouraged to read the texts in full. In this study, the researcher implemented the Phonic method to make reading skills more comprehensible and effective for learners, enabling them to read independently and with confidence.

Statement of the Problems:

Drawing from the previous description and context of the research, the subsequent research questions have emerged:

- Is it possible for the Phonetics or Phonic teaching method to aid Undergraduate students in Odisha in improving their reading comprehension skills?
- What is the reaction of students in Odisha towards the English Phonetics teaching method used in the classroom?

Objectives of the Study:

The goals of this research are established based on the identified research issues. The following goals are highlighted:

- To investigate if the teaching of English Phonetics can enhance reading skills.
- To determine whether the reaction of Undergraduate students to the instruction of English Phonetics is favourable.

Significance of the Study:

The findings of this research will be advantageous for students, educators, and the researcher for the following reasons:

- First, teachers can implement alternative techniques based on the research outcomes rather than relying solely on traditional methods for teaching reading skills in the classroom.
- Next, it has aided students in enhancing their reading comprehension and encouraged them to engage more actively in the teaching and learning process.
- The researcher can broaden his understanding of English Phonetics and its effective application in communication skills.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Numerous studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of the Phonics method or phonetic rules in enhancing reading comprehension as follows:

Mariana, in her research "Improving Reading Comprehension by Using IBT method (Inquiry Based Teaching) at the Tenth Grade of MA Izzatul Ma'arif Tappina Kab. Polman," asserts that this reading instruction technique is very effective. Therefore, the IBT method can serve as a valuable tool in the classroom for developing reading abilities.

According to Hooper (2010), phonics represents a fundamental aspect of reading development, functioning as a strategy that teaches reading through the repetition of letter-sound relationships. She further notes that phonemic awareness—the skill to identify individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken language—is crucial, and a lack of this ability can hinder the overall reading process.

Wyse and Styles (1976) argue that effective early reading instruction incorporates two essential elements: mastering the alphabetic principle and comprehension. They emphasize that these components should not be approached separately. Instead, best practices merge skills instruction with authentic, contextually relevant literacy tasks that cater to learners' interests and the literacy environments of their families and communities. They provide evidence that

some instructional strategies prove to be more effective than others, highlighting the need for educators to possess a comprehensive understanding of various effective strategies and to know when and why to implement them.

Holten (2004) illustrates the example of the word “mat,” explaining that the three letters correspond to three phonemes [m-ae-t], which are combined to create a word. By manipulating phonemes, such as replacing the first phoneme /m/ in “mat” with /k/, the word transforms from “mat” to “cat” [k-ae-t]. Therefore, this exercise enhances a child's ability to connect sounds to letters.

Heri Priyanti, in her research “The use of Snowball Throwing Method to improve students’ Reading comprehension at the eleventh grade,” found that employing the Snowball method yields positive outcomes for students’ reading skills. Thus, this method should be embraced by educators in the classroom to improve reading comprehension among students.

So from the aforementioned studies, it is evident that researchers have focused on the inadequate reading abilities and the implementation of appropriate methodologies. However, this study emphasizes the significance of teaching phonetics to enhance students’ reading skills. Certain phonemes, such as /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, and /ŋ/, exist in the English language but not in Odia, presenting substantial articulation challenges for learners when reading texts.

Content of Phonics Method:

Consonants: Consonant phonemes are all sounds that are presented through the letters of alphabet. These consonants are relatively stable, but only (m) and (v) represent consonant sounds in all words. (B), (K), (I) also represent only one sound each, but in some words they are silent. The sounds represented by the remaining consonants are fairly stable but sometimes affected by other letters in the word. Some of the consonants like /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, and /ŋ/

Vowels: The vowel letters are (a), (e), (i), (o), (u) and sometimes (y) and (w). (Y) functions as a vowel when it is not at beginning of a syllable and (w) functions as a vowel when it follows a vowel in a syllable.

Rules of Phonics method:

There are some rules in English Phonetics which are always considered to be highly essential:

- Every syllable in every word must contain a vowel. The vowels are: a, e, i, o, u and y.

- When “c” is followed by “e, i, or y,” it usually has the soft sound of “s”.
As in city
- When “g” is followed by “e, i, or y,” it usually has the soft sound “j”
As in gem.
- A consonant diagraph is two or more consonants that grouped together and represent a single sound. Here are some consonant diagraphs: Wh(what), sh(shout), wr(write), Kn(know), th(that), ch(watch), ph(laugh), gh(laugh), ng(ring).

III. METHODOLOGY

This research is based on both the qualitative and the quantitative approach. Hence by nature it is a case study. the researcher has followed the qualitative approach of sampling, data collection, tools preparation and analysis of data. The total methodological process of the study is explained below.

Population:

The population of the study was the first-year undergraduate English Honours students of U.N Autonomous college of Science and Technology of the session 2024 – 2025 consisted of 12 students.

The population was based on the following table:

Gender	Number of students	Streams
Male	04	Arts
Female	08	Arts

Teaching Procedure:

In the teaching and learning procedure, this study adopted phonics approach to teach reading by referring to Bald (2007:7) which deals with descriptive text as the material. Further, this study showed the framework in applying the phonics approach in the following figure.

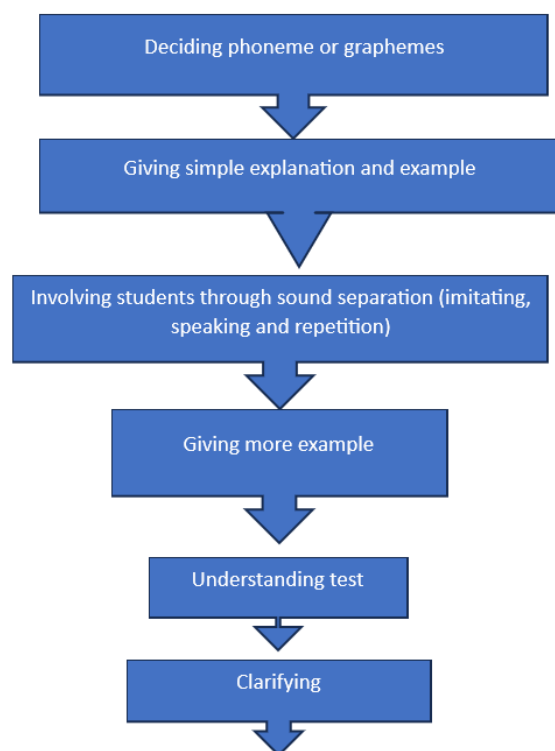


Fig.1. Framework of Applying Phonics Approach

Hypothesis:

Based on the review of literature and the conceptual framework, the researcher formulates the following hypothesis:

- ❖ Students will have the positive response towards the use of Phonic method.
- ❖ There is a significant difference between improving reading comprehension through the Phonics method at the Under graduate students of Odisha.
- ❖ The teacher would be extended his knowledge in the field of English Phonetics.

Data Collection:

The method used in this study was pre-experimental research. Daniel (2004) states that an experimental design is sometimes known as the scientific method due to their popularity in scientific research where they originated. Then he said that the basis of the experimental method is the experiment, which can be defined as: a test under controlled conditions that is made to demonstrate the truth or examine the validity of a hypothesis. Furthermore, this study aimed at knowing the effectiveness of Phonics approach in teaching reading. Therefore, this study established the regular instruction to one group that is experimental group. This group was treated by using Phonics approach and it was given the pre-test and post-test. Objective test was given to the students in form of descriptive text. This study then required students to read the text in order to know the pronunciation, fluency, accuracy, and phoneme awareness.

Table 2: Students' scoring in Reading skill

Instrument	Excellent	Very good	Good	poor	Very poor
Pronunciation	06	05	04	03	02
Lexical accuracy	06	05	04	03	02
Fluency	06	05	04	03	02
Phonemic Awareness	06	05	04	03	02

Example of the Reading text:

We were standing on the bridge, trying to catch some fish for supper when a small red plane flew almost directly above our heads. We could even see the pilot's face. "What on earth is he up to?" I asked. I felt rather annoyed. "I think he's in trouble," Jack said. "His engine is making a strange noise." "Well, we can't do anything, can we?" I said. "We can't even phone from here." We were on a boating holiday and we were miles from the nearest town. "We can follow the plane down the river." Jack said. "Come on! Let's go!" I must admit I liked the idea. There weren't many fish in that part of the river and I was bored. We dropped our fishing lines and ran

towards our boat. It lay under some bushes about a hundred yards down the river. Luckily the engine started almost at once and soon we were roaring down the river. "But can the pilot land here?" I asked Jack. He came to this part of the country for a holiday almost every year and he knew the area well.

The data was collected for the study by the method of pre-test and post-test. Pre-test was given to the subject before the present researcher doing teaching and learning process by using the phonics approach as well as to know the students' prior knowledge in reading. Meanwhile, post-test was given after applying the phonics approach which was aimed at knowing

students' achievement. Before conducting the post-test, however, the treatment was given to the experimental group by applying phonics approach.

Data Analysis:

The data of this study was collected and analysed by using descriptive statistic. Descriptive statistic is used to know the mean and standard deviation of students score in reading test. Then the study calculated the mean and standard deviation of the experimental group by using SPSS 17 for Windows. The collected data should be normal and homogenous. There are two required statistics, namely Normal Distribution and Homogeneity that was tested by using SPSS 17 for Windows. The study used One-Sample Kolmogorov Z Test to calculating Normal Distribution, and the present researcher used One-Way ANOVA to calculate homogeneity of the variance of the variable. This study performed a paired of t-test by using SPSS 17 for Windows to measure the collected data. This was aimed at knowing whether the alternative hypothesis was accepted or not.

IV. RESULTS

Descriptive statistics was concerned to know the mean score and the standard deviation of data which were collected from pre-test and post-test before calculating hypothesis testing. Based on the observation of data, it can be stated that the lowest and the highest students' score in pre-test were 6 and 12, while in post-test obtained the lowest and the highest score were 13 and 18. The Standard Deviation of pre-test was 1.079 and post-test was 1.457. The mean score of pre-tests was 8.860, while the mean score of post-tests was 15.860. That result showed that, mean score of post-tests was higher than mean score of pre-tests. In other words, the mean score after approach was higher than before treatment was conducted. It proved that, phonics approach was significantly effective in teaching reading. Before testing hypothesis, however, the data must be normal and homogenous. The calculation of normality testing was used to know whether the distribution of pre-test and post-test were normal or not. Moreover, the data was said to be normal if the values of the significance level of pre-test and post-test were more than the values of the significance (p) = 0.05. After calculating normality test by using one-sample K-S test (SPSS 17 for windows), the values of Kolmogorov-Smirnov in pre-test and post-test were more than the values of the significance (p) = 0.05. The value of Kolmogorov-Smirnov in pre-test was 0.861 and in post-test was 1.030, while values of the asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)

of pre-test was 0.449 and post-test was 0.239. Those all values were higher than the two-tailed at 0.05. It proved that the data was normal. Next test was homogeneity testing, this test was done to know whether the data was homogenous or not. Moreover, the data was said to be homogenous, if the values of the significance level of pre-test and post-test are greater than $p = 0.05$. Based on the calculation of One-Way ANOVA (SPSS 17 for windows), the value of Levene's Statistic was 0.716 at $p = 0.400$. The value of $p = 0.400$ was greater than 0.05, it implied that the data was homogenous.

After the data was proven to be normal and homogenous, this study calculated hypothesis testing to know whether the alternative hypothesis was accepted or rejected. The hypothesis of this research is Phonics approach was effective in teaching reading for the undergraduate students of Odisha especially English Honours students for the session 2024-2025. This study used paired sample t-test in analysing the data to get the answer of the hypothesis. The alternative hypothesis (H_a) was accepted if the value of significant level was lower 0.05 and the value of t-test was higher than 0.05. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis (H_a) was accepted and the null hypothesis (H_o) was rejected. As the conclusion, Phonics approach significantly effective in teaching reading for the undergraduate English Honours students of Odisha in the year 2024-2025.

V. DISCUSSION

Reading is an active process to understand the meaning of the texts as well as understanding the important points to find information from the texts, including some elements: phonemics awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency as well as comprehension. Therefore, teachers have to choose an appropriate approach to help students for better understanding on the reading activity. Phonics approach is one of the appropriate approaches to teach reading, it can be observed from the finding of this study. After collecting and calculating the obtained data, the result of the study showed that Phonics approach was effective in teaching reading. It can be seen from the result of calculation descriptive statistics; the result was mean score of post-tests was greater than pre-test. It is clearly indicated that there was improvement on students' reading comprehension after treatment by using Phonics approach. Additionally, it can be said that the treatment was successful for undergraduate students of English Department in Odisha. Based on the result of testing hypothesis, the study found that there was significant different mean score between pre-test

and post-test. The result showed that the value of significant level was lower than 0.05. It meant that the alternative hypothesis (H_a) was accepted and the null hypothesis (H_o) was clearly rejected. So, the result of this research can be concluded that Phonics was significantly effective in teaching reading for the undergraduate students in English. Based on the above result of this study, Morrow (1996), stated that Phonics approach is important for students to learn about the relationship between letters and sound to immediate way to distinguish between *cap* and *cape*. Additionally, learning to read with phonics can be extremely effective, especially for children to learn reading at early age. Through phonics approach, students learn the rules of letters' pronunciation. So, it is advisable that teachers should use the phonics approach in teaching reading skill to enhance the comprehension ability among the undergraduate students in Odisha.

Conclusion and suggestions:

Based on the result and discussion part of the study, the conclusion can be made that phonics approach was effective in teaching reading for the undergraduate students in English. It can be seen from the result of the research that post-test score was higher than pre-test with mean score 8.860 for pre-test and 15.860 for post-test.

Suggestions:

Based on the conclusion above, the researcher would like to present some suggestion as follow:

- English lectures are recommended to adopt the Phonic method as an alternative method in teaching Reading comprehension which has great impact on students of Undergraduate colleges.
- The students should be more active in learning reading text and students have to read more in order to have more knowledge.
- The students need to realize that learning two-way process, not only teacher centre but also student- centre. It means that they have significant roles in achieving their success in Study.
- Both the teacher and students can collaborate effectively in teaching and learning process. It is used to make them easier to solve the problems faced in teaching and learning process.

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