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УДК 37+81

ФОНЕТИЧЕСКИЕ ПРАВИЛА В ОБУЧЕНИИ ПРОИЗНОШЕНИЮ НА ИНОСТРАННОМ ЯЗЫКЕ*

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Проблема и цель. Фонетический метод обычно применяется для формирования у носителей языка логической связи между фонемами и графемами. Поскольку в английском языке данное соотношение считается довольно трудным для обучающихся, не являющихся носителями данного языка, фонетический метод может играть важную роль на занятиях английским языком как иностранным.

Фонетический метод является довольно новым в словацком образовательном пространстве, поэтому авторами была предпринята попытка выявить уровень осведомленности о данном методе и определить частотность его применения среди учителей английского языка в Словакии.

Методология. В исследовании приняли участия 92 словацких преподавателя английского языка. В исследовании использовались методы анкетирования и полуструктурированного интервью.

Результаты. В ходе исследования было установлено, что только половина преподавателей осведомлена о фонетическом методе и менее четверти опрошенных учителей применяют его на своих занятиях.

Заключение. Фонетические правила (правила чтения) могут более эффективно помочь лицам, изучающим английский язык как иностранный, в овладении произношением и орфографией данного языка. Более подробная информация о данном методе должна быть включена в учебные планы педагогических учебных заведений и курсов повышения квалификации учителей иностранных языков.

Ключевые слова: фонетический метод; произношение; орфография; учителя иностранного языка.

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"Phonics generalizations" in teaching foreign language pronunciation

Abstract

Introduction. The Phonics method is commonly applied to teach the logical association of English phonemes and graphemes to young native learners. As the correspondence between pronunciation and spelling in English is considered rather difficult by non-native learners, the Phonics method could find its important place in foreign language classrooms as well. The Phonics method is rather new in the Slovak educational context. Therefore, we wanted to find out what is the Phonics method awareness and application rate among English language teachers in Slovakia.

Materials and Methods. To answer the research questions, the methods of questionnaire and semi-structured interview were used in the sample of 92 Slovak teachers of English.

Results. It was found out that only half of the teachers know the Phonics method and less than a quarter of teachers apply it in their English classes.

Conclusions. As the Phonics method rules (Phonics Generalizations) can help non-native learners learn English pronunciation and spelling more effectively, more information on the method should be incorporated into both pre-service and in-service teacher training curricula.

Keywords

Phonics method; Pronunciation; Spelling; Foreign language teachers.

1. Introduction

Foreign language pronunciation training undoubtedly belongs to early school years [1] because of many educational, sociological, neurological and psychological reasons [2–3]. According to the National Institute for Education of the Slovak Republic, pupils should acquire English at level A1 to the end of their primary level of education (6/7 – 9/10 years of age) and at A1.1+ to A2 levels to the end of their lower secondary level (10/11 – 14/15 years of age) [4]. They are supposed to become so called "basic users" as prescribed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages[1].

However, Slovak learners of unrelated foreign languages (e.g., English and French) often face (not only) pronunciation problems caused by inter-language interference [5]. Although Slovak, French and English use the same alphabet systems and their phoneme inventories are more or less similar [6], there are still many differences that are not commonly introduced to young foreign language learners [7].

As English is not a thoroughly phonetic language when compared to the Slovak language, where one sound is represented by one letter, teaching and learning how to read and write requires a more complex procedure. There are many sounds that are represented by more letters or combinations of letters and therefore it is rarely possible for non-native learners just guess the pronunciation of a word or the spelling of the pronounced word.

Many learners (especially at primary schools) are able to achieve high levels in foreign language pronunciation by constant repetition, drill and numerous encounter with language [8], but it is believed, that working with language on a cognitive level improves learners' foreign language command more effectively [9, 10]. One of the most common methods used in cognitive teaching of English pronunciation and spelling is the Phonics method[2].

1.2. Phonics Method

Basically, Phonics instructions teach the association of phonemes with graphemes and their combination phonically. In other words, it is a set of rules, a.k.a. "Phonics generalizations", that is gradually introduced to learners in order to teach them how to read and write step by step from the very beginning. Furthermore, Phonics is based on the key concepts[3] that learners need to be aware of when learning: sounds are represented by letters, sounds can be represented by one or more letters, longer words are made up of syllables (blocks of sounds), the same sound can be represented in different ways, and the same grapheme may represent more than one sound[4].

Together with the key concepts, Phonics skills go hand in hand. Segmenting, blending and phoneme manipulation need to be practiced so that learners gain the ability to access individual sounds, join sounds together, omit or substitute sounds and generate new words. The right introduction and implementation of phonetic skills engage learners' metacognitive skills and

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help them deduce the pronunciation and spelling of unknown words and see the logic between the graphemes and phonemes.

Teaching pronunciation of other foreign languages (e.g., French) can be inspired by Phonics as well. Pronunciation training can be followed by a focus on phonological awareness so that learners learn to segment letters and sounds, to match phonemes with graphemes, to understand different spelling criteria or to identify syllables, rhyme and individual phonemes (sounds) within words. As for the French language, the following letter-sound correspondence can be used: a [a], [ɑ]; ai [ɛ], [e]; in, im, ain [ɛ̃]; an [ɑ̃]; au [o]; â [ɑ]; e [e], [ɛ], [ə]; é [e]; è [ɛ]; eau [o]; ei [ɛ]; ein [ɛ̃]; en [ɑ̃], [ɛ̃]; eu [ø], [œ]; i [i]; î [i]; ï [i], [j]; in, im [ɛ̃]; o [o], [ɔ]; ô [o]; œ, œu [œ]; oi [wa]; on, om [ɔ̃]; ou [u]; u [y], [ɥ]; un [œ̃]; y [j], [i]; b [b]; c [k], [s]; ch [ʃ]; ç [s]; d [d]; f [f]; g [g], [ʒ]; gn [ɲ]; gu [g], [gw]; j [ʒ]; k [k]; l [l]; m [m]; n [n]; ng [ŋ]; p [p]; q [k]; qu [k], [kw]; r, rr [R]; s [s], [z]; t [t]; v [v]; w [w], [v]; x [ks], [gz]; z [z].

The Phonics method is best-known in an English speaking environment and in other countries that have the phonetic type of language. Several researchers applied Phonics in English-speaking classes to study its effectiveness, but to the best of the authors' knowledge, there has not been any longitudinal research that would study the Phonics method in teaching English as a foreign/second language.

Based on the characteristics of the Phonics method, we suppose that the Phonics method would be beneficial for Slovak learners of foreign languages [11]. They learn how to read and write in their native language in the year one of primary schools and start learning their first foreign language (usually English) in the year three[5].

The Slovak language is not that difficult for reading as the English one, because each letter represents one sound. Learners thus tend to struggle with English and consider English spelling very difficult. They learn to pronounce words by heart which their developing working and long-term memory make even harder[6]. Therefore, the organized and cumulative structure of the Phonics might be beneficial for young learners, as they can directly see the rules of phonic structure that create logic in reading and spelling in the English language[7].

Nevertheless, a foreign language teacher is of key importance in introducing and applying new teaching methods. As the Phonics method is rather new in the Slovak context, we wanted to find out what is the Phonics method awareness and application rate among English language teachers in Slovakia.

2. Materials and methods
Objectives

We stated three research objectives and we wanted to find out:

1. Slovak teachers' awareness of the Phonics method.
2. The application of the Phonics method by Slovak teachers of English.
3. Methods used to teach English pronunciation by Slovak teachers.

Within this context, three research questions were formulated:

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1. Do Slovak teachers of English know the Phonics method?
2. Do Slovak teachers of English use the Phonics method to teach English pronunciation?
3. What methods do Slovak teachers of English use to teach English pronunciation?

Question 1 acted as a filter for Question 2 that was answered only by teachers with positive response in Question 1.

Methods

To answer the questions we applied the combined research scheme and the methods of questionnaire and semi-structured interview [12].

Sample

The questionnaire and the interview were applied in the group of 92 Slovak teachers teaching English at the first level of primary schools selected by convenience sampling. Their teaching experience was 7.94 years on average.

3. Results

60 % of the teachers do not know the Phonics method at all and 40 % are aware of the method (Figure 1).
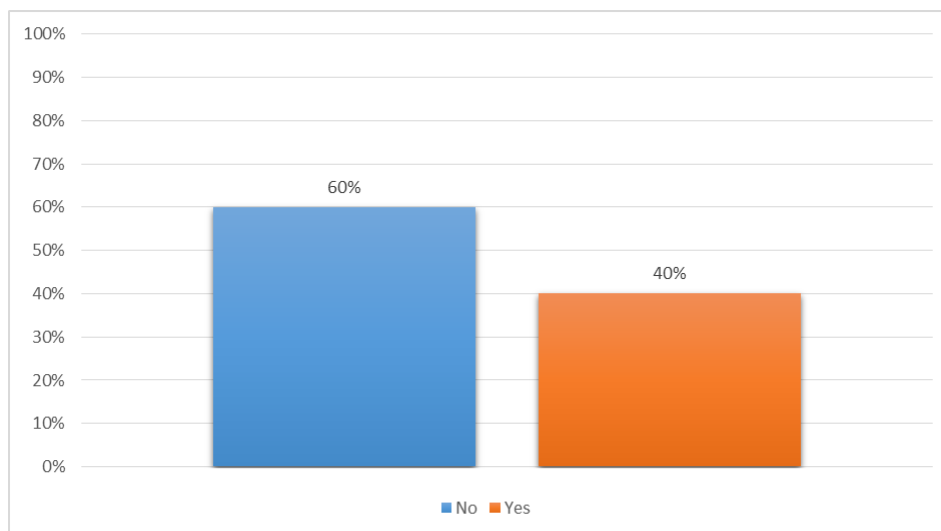

Fig. 1. The awareness of the Phonics method among Slovak teachers of English

The latter group of teachers were asked if they apply Phonics in their lessons. From the teachers who know the Phonics method 35 % do not apply and 30 % apply it in their lessons regularly. 28 % of the teachers use the Phonics method only sometimes (Figure 2).
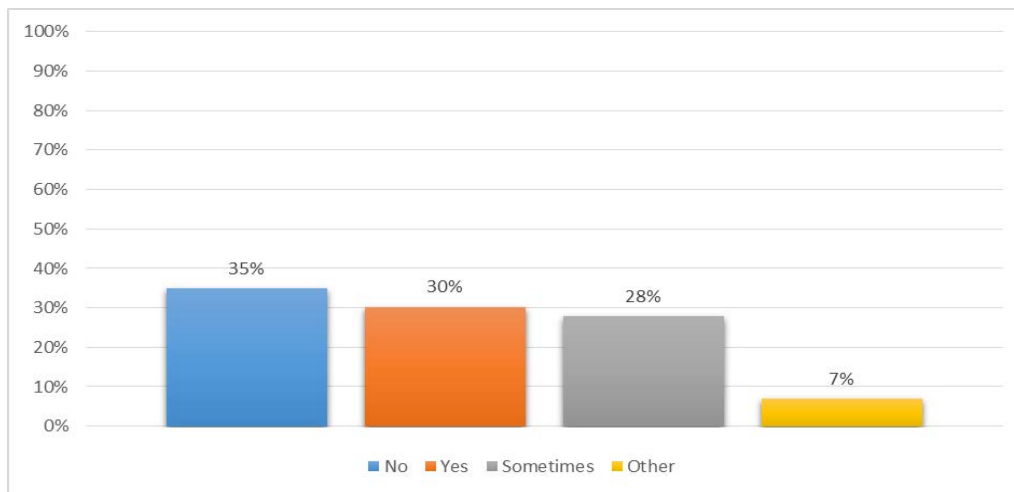
Fig. 2. The application of the Phonic method among Slovak teachers of English

Further, we asked what methods and techniques the teachers use to teach English pronunciation. 33 % use the "listen and repeat" technique, 28 % prefer reading aloud, 18% read poems and songs with their learners [13] and 17 % use various visual aids [14] (Figure 3).
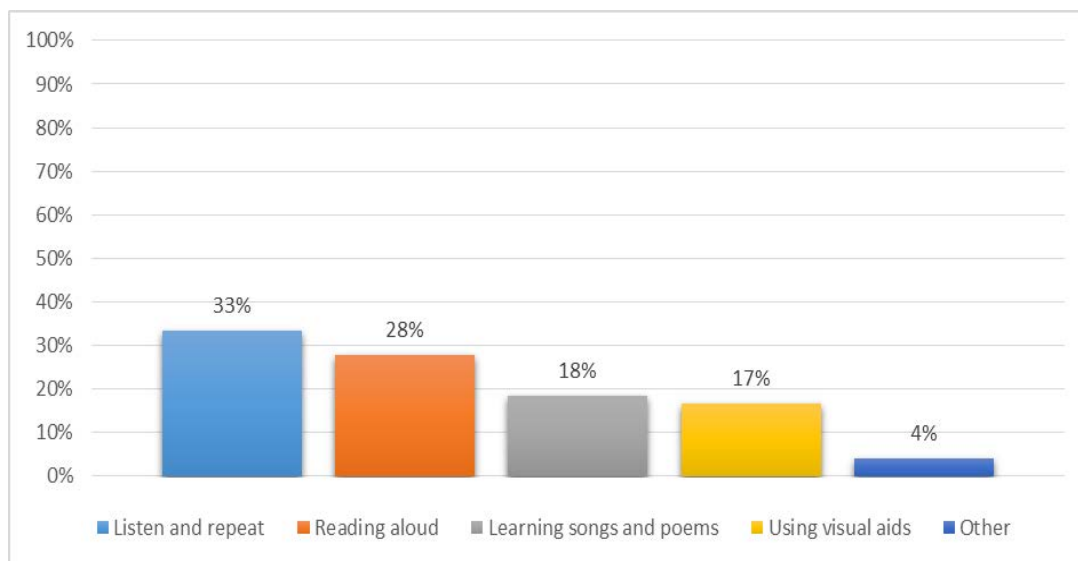

Fig. 3. Methods used to teach English pronunciation by Slovak teachers

We also asked the teachers how often they practise English pronunciation in their lessons. 66 % practise pronunciation in each lesson (usually three times a week), 14 % once a week, 14 % only rarely, 4 % never and 2 % devote their time to pronunciation once a month (Figure 4).
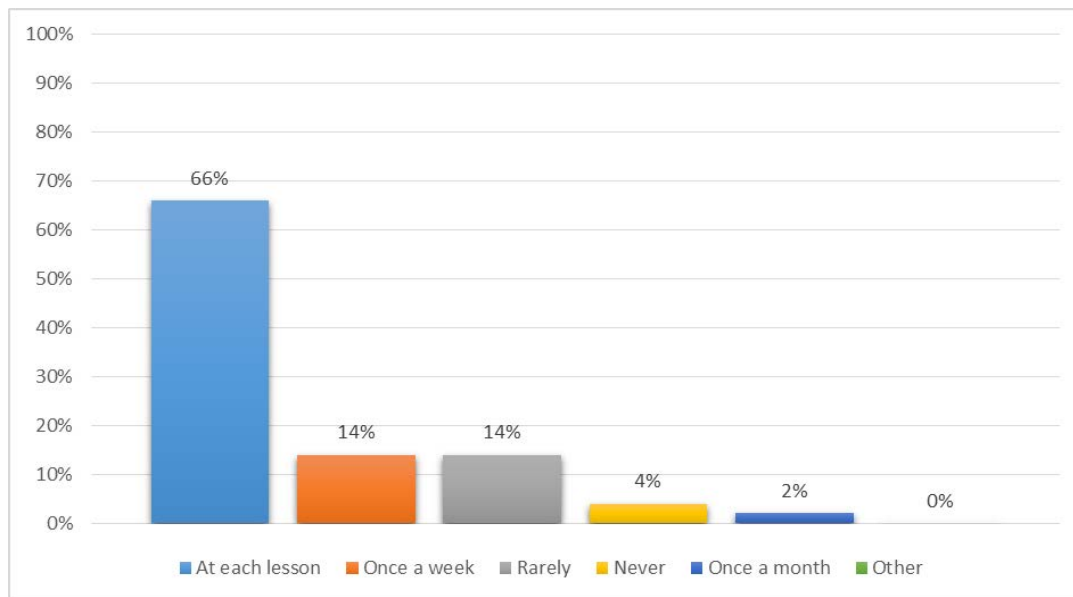
Fig. 4. Frequency of teaching English pronunciation by Slovak teachers

4. Conclusions

As can be seen from the results, more than half of the teachers questioned know the Phonics method and only half of those apply it in their English classes. However, the Phonics method has the characteristics that could help learners who struggle with reading and writing in a foreign language. It can make learning English spelling and pronunciation less stressful and more enjoyable [15]. What is more, each learner is of different learning type, has different learning needs [16] and different level of foreign language competence, so individual approach and accommodations can make Phonics generalizations fit for everybody [17].

There are many programs, materials and applications of the Phonics method available online, so the learners and teachers have free access to them and some textbooks used for teaching English contain Phonics exercises as well. Nevertheless, more information about the method should be incorporated into both pre-service and in-service foreign language teacher training curricula[8].

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