TEACHING ENGLISH PHONICS TO YOUNG LEARNERS WITH NON-ENGLISH FIRST LANGUAGES: A THEORETICAL DISCUSSION OF POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES

Anorboeva Kamola
email: anorboyevakamola@gmail.com
DOI:https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23832654

Abstract: Phonics is widely supported as a foundation for learning to read English, but teaching it to young learners whose first language is not English raises important questions. This paper theoretically discusses whether English phonics can work in early foreign-language settings and what makes its implementation difficult. The discussion focuses on English orthographic complexity, limited English input, phonological awareness, first-language influence, oral vocabulary, and the need to connect decoding with meaningful language use.

Keywords: phonics; early literacy; English as a foreign language; young learners; phonological awareness; decoding; first-language influence; orthographic mapping

Introduction. Learning to read in English is not simply a matter of learning the alphabet. Children need to understand how written symbols represent the sounds of spoken language and how these relationships can be used to read unfamiliar words. Phonics addresses this need by explicitly teaching grapheme–phoneme relationships and helping learners blend sounds to decode words. Research with English-speaking children provides strong support for systematic phonics as an important part of early reading instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000; Castles et al., 2018). However, the situation is different when English is taught as a foreign language (EFL).

For a young EFL learner, English may be neither the home language nor the language of everyday communication. The child may have limited opportunities to hear English, and classroom exposure may be much smaller than that experienced by children learning to read in English-dominant environments. Therefore, the key question is not whether phonics is possible, but under what conditions it can support early English literacy for children who are still developing the oral language needed to understand what they read.

Why Phonics Is Relevant to Early English Literacy. English uses an alphabetic writing system, so learning to read involves establishing links between graphemes and phonemes. Castles et al. (2018) argue that gaining control of the alphabetic code is a central foundation of reading development. Systematic phonics gives beginning readers relationships that can be applied to unfamiliar words instead of requiring them to memorize every printed word.

Ehri's (2014) concept of orthographic mapping offers another useful explanation. Children build strong word representations by connecting spellings with pronunciations and meanings in memory. Phonemic awareness and grapheme–phoneme knowledge support these connections. Thus, phonics should not be seen only as learning isolated sounds; its deeper purpose is to help children build stable links between print and speech that later support fluent word recognition.

Evidence also suggests that phonics and phonological awareness can benefit learners of English as an additional language. In a synthesis of EFL research, Huo and Wang (2017) found generally positive effects on underlying skills such as phonemic awareness and non-word reading. Odo (2021), in a meta-analysis of L2 English studies, reported moderate effects on word reading and larger effects on

© 2026 London International Monthly Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation. All Rights Reserved.

pseudoword reading. These findings are important because pseudoword reading indicates the use of decoding processes rather than simple memorization.

Why the EFL Context Creates Additional Challenges. The first challenge is the amount and quality of English input. Huo and Wang (2017) noted that learners in the EFL studies they reviewed often had substantially less English exposure than children in English-dominant settings. Phonics can teach children how letters and sounds are related, but it cannot by itself provide the vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation models, and meanings needed for successful reading. A child may decode a word accurately but still not understand it. Therefore, phonics in EFL settings needs to be connected to oral language development.

English spelling creates another difficulty because its sound–spelling relationships are relatively complex. Castles et al. (2018) explain that learners need to master both common and less predictable grapheme–phoneme correspondences. For beginners with limited English, this can make decoding demanding. Systematic sequencing is therefore important: children can meet useful and relatively consistent correspondences first and gradually encounter more complex patterns. This suggests that a phonics programme designed for native English-speaking children should not automatically be transferred unchanged to an EFL preschool classroom.

Children also approach English literacy with an existing linguistic background. Their first language can support some aspects of English literacy, but differences in phonology and orthography may affect transfer. A meta-analysis by Melby-Lervåg and Lervåg (2011) found moderate to large relationships between L1 and L2 phonological awareness and decoding, while also showing variation according to writing system and instructional language. Patel et al. (2024) similarly found evidence that L1 phonological awareness can contribute to English decoding among emergent Hindi–English bilinguals. The L1, therefore, should not simply be treated as an obstacle; teachers need to consider both transferable skills and English-specific features.

It is also important to distinguish phonological awareness from phonics. Phonological awareness is mainly an oral ability to notice and manipulate sound units, whereas phonics connects sounds to written symbols. Young EFL learners may have phonological awareness in their first language but difficulty identifying or producing particular English phonemes. They may therefore need explicit attention to English sounds before they can use English grapheme–phoneme correspondences efficiently.

Is Phonics Possible for Very Young EFL Learners? The theoretical evidence supports a qualified yes. Phonics is possible for young EFL learners, but its success depends on instructional design and on what outcomes are expected. The evidence is strongest for foundational decoding-related skills rather than for complete reading proficiency. Huo and Wang (2017) found that positive effects were more consistent for phonemic awareness and non-word reading than for real-word recognition and reading comprehension. Odo (2021) also found meaningful effects of L2 phonics and phonological-awareness instruction on word and pseudoword reading.

This leads to an important distinction: phonics can provide a mechanism for decoding English print, but decoding is only one part of literacy. Castles et al. (2018) emphasize that fluent reading and comprehension require development beyond initial phonics. For EFL preschool learners, phonics should therefore be integrated with oral English, vocabulary teaching, listening, stories, meaningful interaction, and opportunities to use new words. A child should not only learn that /m/ can be represented by “m”; the child should also hear, understand, and use words containing that sound.

A Critical Theoretical Position. Taken together, the literature suggests that the main problem is not the suitability of phonics itself but the conditions under which it is introduced. Limited English input

© 2026 London International Monthly Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation. All Rights Reserved.

may prevent decoding practice from developing into meaningful reading. L1 differences may affect transfer, English spelling may increase cognitive demands, and insufficient vocabulary may cause children to decode words without understanding them. These issues help explain why evidence from English-dominant settings cannot simply be generalized to EFL preschool classrooms.

At the same time, rejecting phonics because EFL learners face these challenges would also be difficult to justify. The evidence indicates that phonological awareness and phonics can improve important early reading processes in L2 English. A more defensible position is that phonics should be adapted rather than abandoned. An EFL-oriented approach should be explicit and systematic but also developmentally appropriate, language-rich, and sensitive to the learner's L1. It should teach decoding while continuously building the oral English knowledge that gives decoding a purpose.

Conclusion

English phonics instruction for young learners whose first language is not English is theoretically possible and supported by a growing evidence base. However, phonics should be understood as a foundation rather than a complete literacy programme. Limited exposure, English orthographic complexity, L1 differences, and insufficient vocabulary may reduce the transfer of phonics skills into meaningful reading. The most appropriate theoretical position is therefore to place phonics within a broader early English literacy model. Future research should examine how phonics can be adapted to particular EFL preschool contexts, especially where English exposure is limited and children begin with little or no prior English literacy experience.

References

1. Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K. (2018). Ending the reading wars: Reading acquisition from novice to expert. Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 19(1), 5–51. https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100618772271
2. Ehri, L. C. (2014). Orthographic mapping in the acquisition of sight word reading, spelling memory, and vocabulary learning. Scientific Studies of Reading, 18(1), 5–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888438.2013.819356
3. Huo, S., & Wang, S. (2017). The effectiveness of phonological-based instruction in English as a foreign language students at primary school level: A research synthesis. Frontiers in Education, 2, Article 15. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2017.00015
4. Melby-Lervåg, M., & Lervåg, A. (2011). Cross-linguistic transfer of oral language, decoding, phonological awareness and reading comprehension: A meta-analysis of the correlational evidence. Journal of Research in Reading, 34(4), 415–431. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9817.2010.01477.x
5. National Reading Panel. (2000). Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.
6. Odo, D. M. (2021). A meta-analysis of the effect of phonological awareness and/or phonics instruction on word and pseudo word reading of English as an L2. SAGE Open, 11(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211059168
7. Patel, P., Chatterjee Singh, N., & Torppa, M. (2024). Understanding the role of cross-language transfer of phonological awareness in emergent Hindi–English biliteracy acquisition. Reading and Writing, 37, 887–920. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-022-10253-x
8. Yeung, S. S. S., Siegel, L. S., & Chan, C. K. K. (2013). Effects of a phonological awareness program on English reading and spelling among Hong Kong Chinese ESL children. Reading and Writing, 26, 681–704. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-012-9383-6

© 2026 London International Monthly Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation. All Rights Reserved.