

## Phonics Teaching Deserves Prime Concern in Hong Kong Schools (Mini-research by: WU Ka Lam, Mark updated in February 2014)

Mr WU Ka Lam Mark, founder of Hu's Phonics, like many other English teachers in Hong Kong has spent much of his time and energy in his career contributing to effective teaching and learning of the English language in the local school context.

**Phonics teaching** has been the prime concern in language and literacy in the English-speaking countries like the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia and Canada. Numerous debates, researches and studies have been conducted on the different issues on phonics teaching. Yet in Hong Kong, phonics teaching is just like a submarine. Much information about phonics teaching can be obtained from the Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, for example:

### The UK Context

In March, 2011 the U.K. Department of Education<sup>[1]</sup> announced its White Paper entitled: "The Importance of Teaching". It suggested schools should have commitment to support "**systematic synthetic phonics**, as the best method for teaching reading."<sup>[2]</sup>

In fact, during the rule of the Labour Government 1997-2010, research showing that "*Systematic Phonics Instruction*" increased the literacy of all groups finally received attention.<sup>[3]</sup> Specifically, in 2006 a research report<sup>[4]</sup> summarised that "**systematic phonics instruction within a broad literacy curriculum appears to have a greater effect on children's progress in reading than whole language or whole word approaches.**" It defined *Systematic Phonics Instruction* as "Teaching of letter-sound relationships in an explicit, organized and sequenced fashion, as opposed to incidentally or on a 'when-needed' basis, [i.e. the Incidental Phonics]." The same report concluded that "**systematic phonics instruction should be part of every literacy teacher's repertoire and a routine part of literacy teaching.**"

### The USA Context

The United States has a long history of debate concerning the various methods used to teach reading. However, it is worth mentioning that the *National Institute of Child Health & Human Development* (NICHD) has come out in support of phonics instruction. The institute conducts and supports research on all stages of human development.<sup>[5]</sup> The institute published a report in 2005 and it entitled: *Report of the National Reading Panel—"Teaching Children to Read"*.<sup>[6]</sup> *Some findings and determinations of this report are:*

- Teaching **phonemic awareness** (PA) to children was "highly effective" with a variety of learners under a variety of conditions. (Note: Phonemic Awareness/PA is the ability to manipulate phonemes in spoken syllables and words. Phonemes are the smallest units composing spoken language. For example, the words "go" and "she" each consists of two sounds or phonemes, /g/-/oe/ and /sh/-/ee/.)
- Reading instruction that taught PA improved the children's reading ability significantly more than those that lacked this instruction.

- PA helped normally achieving children to spell, but was not effective in helping disabled readers to spell better.
- "**Systematic synthetic phonics**" instruction had a positive and significant effect on helping disabled readers, low achieving students, and students with low socioeconomic status to read words more effectively than instruction methods that lacked this approach.
- Systematic phonics instruction improved the ability of good readers to spell. Poor readers experienced a small improvement.
- The data supported those who suggest that phonics instruction should start at kindergarten and Grade One.

### The Canadian Context

In 2003 the Department of Education for the government of [Ontario](#)<sup>[7]</sup> published a report entitled: "*Early Reading Strategy - The Report of the Expert Panel on early Reading in Ontario*".<sup>[8]</sup> The report appeared to support the use of **systematic and explicit phonics instruction**. It suggested that instruction in **phonemic awareness** be followed up with "**systematic and explicit instruction**" on the relationship between letters and the sounds they represent. There is some indication that systematic phonics is widely taught in private schools in Canada according to The Society for Quality Education.<sup>[9]</sup>

- Betty Ann Levy, Ph.D. of [McMaster University](#) in her article<sup>[10]</sup> for the Encyclopedia of Language and Literacy Development<sup>[11]</sup> appeared to suggest that research supports early reading instruction in "spelling to sound relations" (i.e. synthetic phonics) rather than "whole word pattern recognition" (i.e. sight-word or [Whole word](#)).

### The Australian Context

In December 2005 the Department of Education, Science and Training of the Australian Government<sup>[12]</sup> published a report entitled: "A National Inquiry into the Teaching of Reading".<sup>[13]</sup> The report recommended **direct and systematic instruction in phonics** as the foundation of early reading instruction. Some of the findings and recommendations were:

- Among the successful schools visited, there were a number of key similarities. Three of those similarities are:
  - 1) a belief that each child can learn to read and write regardless of background;
  - 2) an early, systematic, and "explicit" (i.e. specific and clear)<sup>[14]</sup> teaching of phonics;
  - 3) the phonics instruction was followed by "**direct teaching**".<sup>[15]</sup>
- Regardless of from where the evidence comes (i.e. research, good practices, consultations, or personal experience) the conclusion is that direct, systematic phonics instruction is an "essential foundation" to reading instruction.

- Students learn best from an approach that includes phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension.
- A whole-language approach, "on its own, is not in the best interests of children, particularly those experiencing reading difficulties".
- If synthetic phonics was taught first, "the combined effects" of phonics instruction and whole language instruction was significantly more effective than phonics instruction on its own.
- Where there is unsystematic or no phonics instruction, children do not perform as well in such areas as reading accuracy, fluency, writing, spelling and comprehension.
- A recommendation that teachers provide "**systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction**".

### **The Hong Kong Context**

Unlike the English-speaking world, the dilemma is Hong Kong schools lay no or little emphasis on phonics teaching or phonics instruction. First of all, there is not much information giving guidelines or suggestions about phonics teaching even in the current EDB's Curriculum Guide on English Language Education 2004. On the other hand, nearly all English language primary school teachers even with the benchmark requirements do not possess any teacher training in phonics instruction. Therefore, phonics instruction in the primary school classrooms is only a myth for many of the English language teachers.

I have served in many schools. I discover that nearly all local English language teachers regardless of their age levels have not received any form of phonics training in their teacher training education. That is why phonics teaching is very uncommon in the school context. Worse still, even if there is a school which stresses the acquisition of phonemic awareness (PA), there is no significant proven evidence of success which can contribute to language learning.

I once worked in a private English primary school in which there were nearly twenty native English speakers working as NETs and the school pays special emphasis on phonetic training, twice every week in the morning assembly. The phonetic training is conducted by the NETs on incidental basis. Yet, there is no direct reflection of the success on students' English language performance.

In most primary schools, students learn new vocabulary through the Look-Say Approach in class and they have to memorise the learnt vocabulary through the practice of weekly dictation. Yet, dictation is not an effective means of vocabulary building. As we can see dictation is one of the major reasons which accounts for most school phobia cases especially in the primary schools setting. Many Hong Kong mothers have become desperate housewives due to the weekly dictation exercise imposed to primary children in our language and social context.

### **What an Oasis at Kei Oi Primary School**

As an intruder, I parachuted into SKH Kei Oi Primary School as the school principal in September 2010, turning a new leaf for the Kei Oi kids and their parents as well as the teachers all within one month and bringing tremendous success in English language learning and other aspects of teaching and learning.

In my first encounter (22 September 2010) with the parents in a parent talk cum workshop introducing the two clear goals of school reforms, I started a wave of English learning, the teaching and learning of my specially designed and developed Read-Aloud-and-Spell Phonics Instruction. This wave of English learning in the form of phonics teaching and learning has become very popular in the Shamshuipo District.

Every time, when I have talks and workshops about Read-Aloud-and-Spell Phonics Instruction, our school hall must be full-housed with eager-to-learn parents and adults together with their children or grand-children. Principal WU Ka-lam Mark has become an icon of effective English learning and every time there must be parents who treat me as a pop-singer ask me for the sale of my phonics VCDs.

### **Information about Hu's Phonics® Instruction**

In the past few years, Hu's Phonics® has been under further development with special reference to the findings and recommendations of the researches in the UK, USA, Canada and Australia in order to fine tune the teaching and learning strategies so that second language learners can grasp the phonics skills in a more effective way.

**Hu's Phonics® Instruction** is now a **direct, systematic, synthetic, explicit** pronouncing method that derives from a combination of morphology and phonology for **phonemic awareness**. This phonics instruction has already been implemented and proved effective in some primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong in recent years. Hu's Phonics® not only helps those more able students but also improves the ability of the less able learners.

Hu's Phonics® is different from the traditional mode of learning through the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) i.e. the letter-symbol correspondence. Instead, it is based on the association with letters and sounds for **phonemic awareness**. Hu's Phonics® is taught in a way of **direct teaching** that learners have to read aloud the basic phonic tables (Multiplication Tables, i.e. the Phonics Charts, 60 letter-sound combinations table for spelling skill and 75 letter-sound combinations for pronouncing skill) first especially in connection with the vowels and consonants combinations during the process of decoding in language learning and acquisition.

Within a very short period of time, after the learners have acquired and experienced some **knowledge** and **skills** to successfully and easily pronounce words or new and strange words on their own during the Hu's Phonics® workshops, their **attitude** towards learning English has been changed dramatically. It is all because of the effectiveness of Hu's Phonics® which has opened up the sensitivity zone of proximal development<sup>[16]</sup> of spoken and written language in relation to linguistic intelligence.<sup>[17]</sup>

Due to its similarities with Hanyu Pinyin, Hu's Phonics® particularly suits native Chinese learners who learn English as their **second language**. They have to read aloud the phonemes and at the same time write the spelling of the graphemes (morphemes), following the natural practice of "I write what I read aloud." and getting rid of the traditional spelling mode of learning.

The special features of Hu's Phonics® lie in its learning effectiveness in association, correspondence and internalization of letter-sound relationship which enables long-term memory and easy retrieval for lifelong and independent learning. In particular, the local Chinese students' assessment results such as TSA, HKCE, HKAL and HKDSE reflect that there is a **norm** for the spelling mistakes committed by our students and Hu's Phonics® is specially-designed **by me** to cater for the patterned weaknesses.

### Theoretical Concepts in Developing the Read-Aloud-and-Spell Phonics

- Emphasises the relationship of letter combinations (morphology) and letter sounds (phonology) increasing learners’ phonemic awareness
- Based on the regular and corresponding patterns of graphemes and sounds
- Stress the combination and association of the read-aloud-and-spell (“spell” means “write”) process
- Practises the habitual action of “I write what I speak.”
- Embedded with lyric memorization for easy chanting
- Reflects the learning style of the Chinese people (rote-learning)
- Built on the gist and operation of the Multiplication Table (Maths)
- Process of decoding in language learning and acquisition

### Common and Patterned Norm of Spelling Mistakes in the Hong Kong Context

Spelling mistakes in common	Correct spelling	reason
gril	girl	Lack of phonemic awareness in letter-sound relationships
frist	first	
Firday	Friday	
tiolet	toilet	
voilin	violin	
hoilday	holiday	
tired	tried	
tried	tired	
quiet	quite	
quite	quiet	
panio	piano	
pinic	picnic	
speacil	special	
left	lift	

The patterned norm of spelling mistakes tells us that the local students lack phonemic awareness to decode new words and vocabulary in the acquisition of language skills in association, correspondence and internalization of letter-sound relationships during their school language education.

Looking back at the Jim Rose’s report submitted to the U.K. Government in 2006, I find that the report did address the question: *Why children’s reading and writing (especially the boys) have not been meeting expectations...* It further argued that it is *far more often the nature of the teaching than the nature of the child which determines success or failure of the ‘basic’ skills of reading and writing.* <sup>[4]</sup>

Hu’s Phonics®, in particular, provides specially-designed teaching and learning strategies. That is why many parents talk to me, saying that they have spent much money on the phonics courses outside the classrooms for their children. Yet, the courses could not help even after two to three years of singing and dancing in the phonics lessons. They say that Hu’s Phonics® is different. Why NOT to experience the magic of Hu’s Phonics® workshops? Come and join us! You may also visit [www.husphonics.com](http://www.husphonics.com) for more information.

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## More about WU Ka Lam Mark, founder of Hu's Phonics®

**Marker**, English Language (Syll B, Paper I) in HKCEE of Hong Kong Examinations Authority in 1978-1979 and 1982-1984

**Committee Member**, Board of Education's Task Force on Promotion of Learning Through Reading (2000-2002)

**Committee Member**, CDI's English Language Education Committee (2003-2005)

**Author** of the following books:

***Read To Write***, books 1A to 6B, published by DMS Publishing House in 2008

***Training Handbook on Hu's Phonics***, published by MKY Education Services Limited in 2013

***Guidelines on Implementing Hu's Phonics in the School-Based Curriculum***, published by MKY Education Services Limited in 2013

***Easy to Learn Phonics—Level 1***, published by New International Standard Press in 2013

***Hu's Phonics*** published by Advanced Technology (Asia) Ltd in 2013

***Hu's Phonics 1 and 2 (Malaysian version)*** published by Advanced Technology (Asia) Ltd in 2014