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Teaching Alphabet, Reading and Writing for Kids between 3-6 Years Old as a Second Language

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Abstract

The present study focused on teaching alphabet, reading and writing for kids as a second language. Although teaching for kids has been taken into account with different methods, there has been little research about phonics method. Another point of interest in the study was experience of training of the kids with a new method called phonics method. Typically, teachers need to learn how to facilitate the process of teaching alphabet, reading and writing for young children. Thus, it is felt that the method of teaching may influence the degree of second and foreign language learning. The study is an endeavor to investigate the effectiveness of either one of the phonics vs. traditional approaches in teaching of alphabet, reading and writing for kids between 3-6 years old who were learning English as a second language. To embark on this study, a group of 60 kids were entered as the subjects. Based on the results of the Sue Lloyd's interview, 40 kids who were in the same knowledge level were selected. Then, the subjects were randomly divided into two experimental and control groups. The experimental group was taught via Phonics method and the control group was taught based on traditional method. The kids were taught for eight terms. The course comprised skills of teaching alphabet, reading and writing. The analysis of the results following administration of a standardized test and the obtained scores showed a significant difference between the achievement of the students in two groups. The results implied that the phonics method can be more effective in teaching English for kids.

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Keywords: Phonics, *Reading, Vocabulary, Alphabet, Writing, Second language*

1.Introduction

Young children love to learn about the alphabet (Marier, 2004). Teaching foreign languages to young children has been happening for a long time in many countries. Primary schools children have long been taught French or

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English as preparation for their use as a medium of instruction. In Europe and South America, an explosion of English classes have occurred in the last ten years, both in state systems and in private language schools (Cameron, 2001).

Teachers of young learners require an underpinning of theoretical knowledge that can help counteract misunderstanding of the job. These misunderstandings are not just annoying but they may contribute to a continuing devaluation of teaching languages at primary levels. Teachers of young learners have an important role to play concerning working with children and thereby increasing the quality of foreign language education (Cameron, 2001).

The present study focused on teaching alphabet, reading and writing for kids as a second language. Although teaching for kids has been taken into account with different methods, there has been little research in the area of phonics method.

A further enthusiasm to carry out this study was experience of training of the kids with a new method called phonics method. Typically, teachers need to learn how to facilitate the process of teaching alphabet, reading and writing for young children. Thus, it is felt that the method of teaching may influence the degree of second and foreign language learning.

2.Participants

Sixty kids took part in this study. They had registered in order to learn preliminary English in a branch of Shokooh English Institute located in Zanjan city. All of the paricipants were from Zanjan and their mother tongue was Turkish. The mean age of the participants of the study was about five, ranging from three to six, and they were both male and female, and according to the Sue Lloyd interview all of them were at the same level.

Based on the syllabus of Shokooh English Institute, this group of subjects started to learn English with two different methods in about one year. Both the phonics and traditional method were taught in this institute.

Although the students in this study were in the same level and could be taken as homogeneous, in order to be sure of their homogeneousness, the Sue Lloyd's interview was administered which subsequently resulted in the selection of forty participants for the study.

3. Materials

In order to have a homogeneous sample, not only the kids' level was taken into consideration, but also Sue Lloyd's interview was administered. This interview was oral to make sure none of the participants know more than the others. According to this interview the pictures and the letters of all the terms were shown to the kids and they did not have any information about them.

This study was held in eight levels with two different methods (Phonics system and traditional system). Phonics method was according to Sue Lloyd's method and after each level in this method a test was administered. These tests were according to Sue Lloyd's tests, too. The tests were oral and they had different items for each term. In each term students just were taught the sounds of alphabet without the name of them. New words were taught according to the letters of each term. For example for the letter **"s"** students learned the sssssssssssss sound and the words like snake, snail, sun were taught. Traditional method was taught according to both names and sounds of letters. In both methods students learned the same new vocabularies in each term.

4.Procedures

Having administered the Sue Lloyd's interview, forty kids who were in the same knowledge level, were selected. The subjects were randomly divided into two groups. Twenty of these kids were in Phonics method class and twenty were in traditional method class. Thus, twenty kids were set in the experimental group (Phonics system) and twenty kids as the control group (traditional system). Then, the kids were taught for the first level just learning 6 letters of alphabet. In phonics system students were taught just the sounds of letters by telling a story and making a gesture for each letter. For example, for teaching S the teacher said this story: "A child takes a dog for a walk in the country. The dog starts to bark. There is a sssssssss sound and a snake slithers away", then the teacher shows the letter "s" and weaves her arms like a snake while making the sssssssssss sound, and helps the children to make the gesture. In the traditional system, the kids learned both the names and the sounds of the letters. For example, for teaching the

"s" letter the teacher wrote the letter of the "s" on the board and said its name "s", its' sound sssssssssssss, and the kids repeated. After repetition, the kids with the help of the teacher gave some examples of that letter. At the end of this level a test based on the Sue Lloyd's was administered. Based on the age of the kids and the requirement of the study, Jolly Phonics songs were used with Phonics system and Mr. Bug's songs were used with the traditional system. Jolly Phonics for each letter has a song. In each song students showed the gesture of that letter for the song. These songs made kids happy and they learned a lot with the help of them. In Mr. Bug's songs both the names and sounds of letters were sung. They help kids to understand the letters better. Because of the age of the kids and their level the test was administered orally at the end of the term.

After one week and for the next step, subjects were asked to participate in the second level. The first session was conducted chorally and they were asked to sing the previous level songs with CD-player. The kids were asked to say whatever came to their minds from the previous level. Whenever it was felt that the subjects stopped remembering, they were asked some probe questions to give them some hints to stimulate their memory to think aloud. The questions were typically as: "What is your idea about this picture?", "What can you remember by this gesture?", "What does it sound like?", "What does it mean to you?", "Do you have any example?","Why do you say this sound?", etc. In this session, the Ss were briefly trained on thinking aloud through introducing the concept and modeling by the teacher. In the first sessions, understanding these questions was hard for the students but by body language and repetition they could understand and answered easily to these kinds of questions.

The first session of the second level indicated that they understood the alphabets of the previous level and the answers by the subjects were nearly true. Meanwhile, they were asked to say the sounds of the letters by their gestures and their shapes. This session indicated the motivation and readiness of the kids for starting the second level. In the second session a new level was started. In this level, again, another 6 letters were taught. Consequently a final test was administered. This test included letters from both levels one and two.

On the first day of the third level, the subjects got familiar with the method of reading. Then, the letters of the two previous letters were asked from the kids. And the teacher asked and helped them to blend the letters two by two. The medium of instruction up to the end of the level three was Persian language. By the end of the first session of the third level, the kids were familiared with blending. The parents of the kids were asked to help them to blend the letters at home. The following session, most of the kids were able to blend the letters two by two. Later in this level, subjects were given some reading activities and were taught six more letters, and they were asked to blend not only the previous twelve letters, but also the six new ones. On the last day as designated for their final exam, students were asked to read some two or three letter words with the alphabets that they had learnt.

In the fourth level, students were asked to read and write the letters. The alphabets were taught in this level, too. The students were taught to read the words and to write the two and three letter words. For final exam, the students' ability of the new alphabet, reading and writing were investigated.

Throughout levels five, six and seven the kids learned all the letters and they learned to read and write the words. In all of these levels vocabulary and listening were taught in addition to their reading and writing activities.

In level eight, all the kids were able to recognize the letters and they could read and write the words. They had one storybook for this level. They were asked to read the storybook in class and guess the meaning of the vocabulary of the storybook. The teacher gave some hints to the kids for guessing the meaning of the words. For the following session, the kids were asked to read again the pages of the storybook, to say the meaning of the vocabulary and to write some of the words and some sentences of the storybook. For the final exam questions of the alphabets, reading, writing and vocabulary were included.

5. Design

In this study it was attempted to find out if there is any relationship between the method of teaching and learning alphabet, reading and writing for kids. Here, the Phonics system was the experimental group and the traditional system was the control group. Sex, motivation and back-ground were the control variables.

To answer the research questions, the interview questions, the levels, and the final tests were on the basis of Sue LIoyd's method.

The traditional method was according to Catherine Yang Eisele and Richmond Hsieh. In this method, unlike the phonics method, both the names and the sounds of the letters were taught. In these classes, Mr. Bug's songs were used. The final exams in this method were according to this book, too.

6. Results and Discussion

This longitudinal intervention study of teaching alphabet, reading and writing for children with two different methods led to a number of findings of both practical and theoretical significance. Before discussing our results it is important to emphasis that the intervention we conducted did not involve total control of the children's experience in learning alphabet, reading and writing. Rather, our intervention involved just a small supplement of individualized tuition that was additional to the teaching that these children were otherwise receiving.

Descriptive results for research variables

Overall scores

In last term students took a final exam. The questions of this exam were a combination of reading and writing they were exposed to throughout eight terms. The scores of this exam were reported under the label of overall scores. The performance of the subjects concerning their overall scores represented the following results. The results were as follows:

Statistic Indexes for Overall Scores

Table 1 Statistic indexes for overall scores

Statistics			
overall		phonics	traditional
N	Valid	20	20
	Missing	0	0
Mean		97.3000	93.3500
Std. Error of Mean		.59868	.62943
Std. Deviation		2.67739	2.81490
Variance		7.168	7.924
Skewness		-1.527	-.619
Std. Error of Skewness		.512	.512
Kurtosis		1.985	-.184
Range		10.00	10.00
Minimum		90.00	87.00
Maximum		100.00	97.00

As it can be seen, the mean of the post test in phonics method was higher and the standard deviation was lower than the traditional method. According to these results phonics method was better than the traditional method.

The mean for phonics method was higher and the standard deviation was lower than the traditional method. Comparing the results obtained in this section for two methods of teaching, it can be concluded that the phonics method was better than the traditional method in terms of reading.

The Comparison of Reading Grades in Two Methods

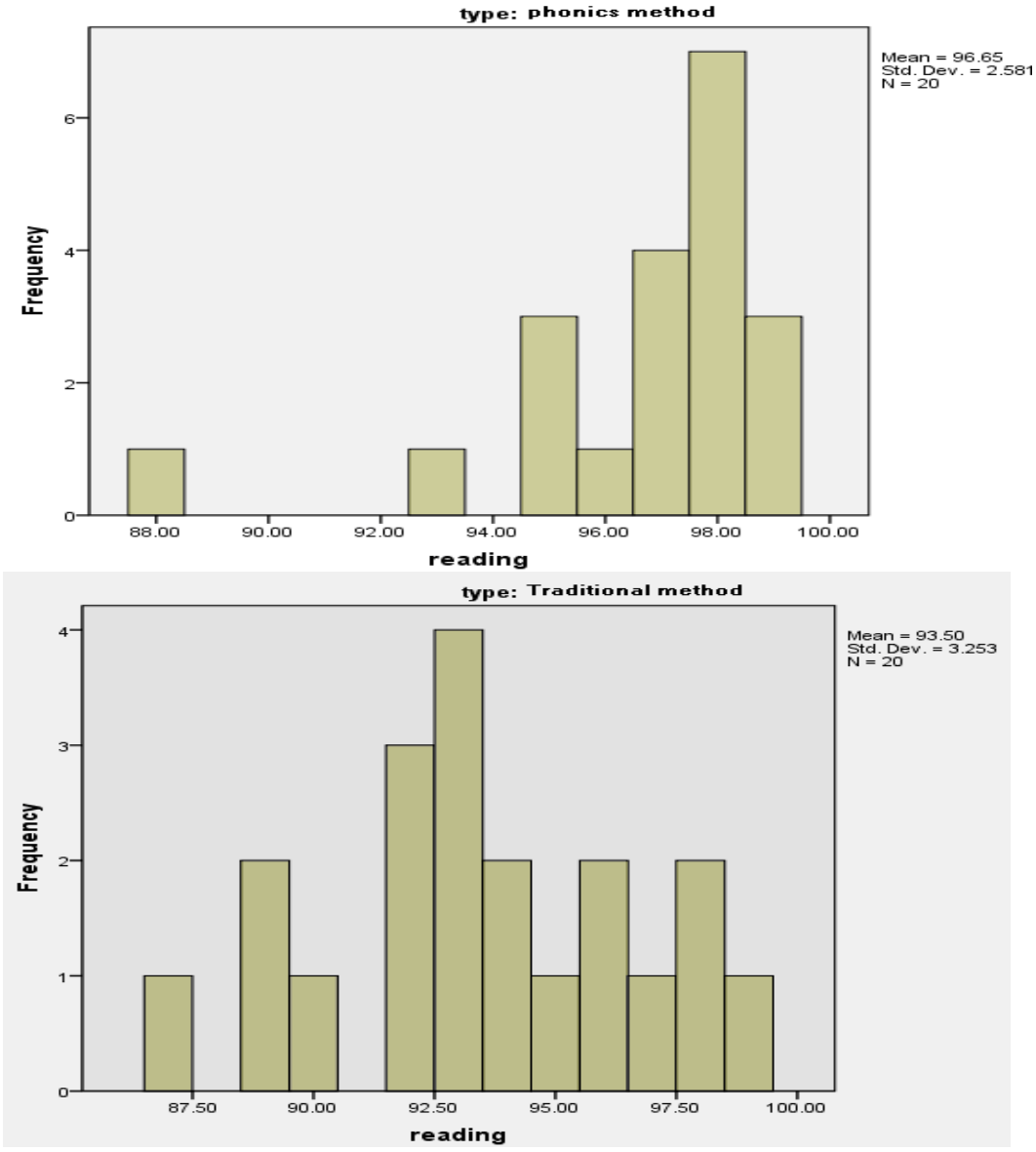

Fig 1a-b: The Comparison of Reading Grades in Two Methods

Writing grades

As far as writing is concerned, due to the age of the kids, there were a lot of challenging problems for these groups of subjects. The results are presented in the following table.

Statistic Indexes for Writing Grades

Table 2 Statistic Indexes for Writing Grades

Statistics		
writing	Phonics method	Traditional method

N	Valid	20	20
	Missing	0	0
Mean		95.9000	91.8000
Std. Error of Mean		.61516	.72402
Median		97.0000	91.0000
Mode		98.00	91.00
Std. Deviation		2.75108	3.23793
Variance		7.568	10.484
Skewness		-1.570	.168
Std. Error of Skewness		.512	.512
Kurtosis		2.494	-.651
Std. Error of Kurtosis		.992	.992
Range		11.00	11.00
Minimum		88.00	86.00
Maximum		99.00	97.00

A glance at table shows that the mean in phonics method was higher and the standard deviation (2.58) was lower than traditional method (3.25). Comparing these two results, one can infer that phonics method was better than traditional method in writing.

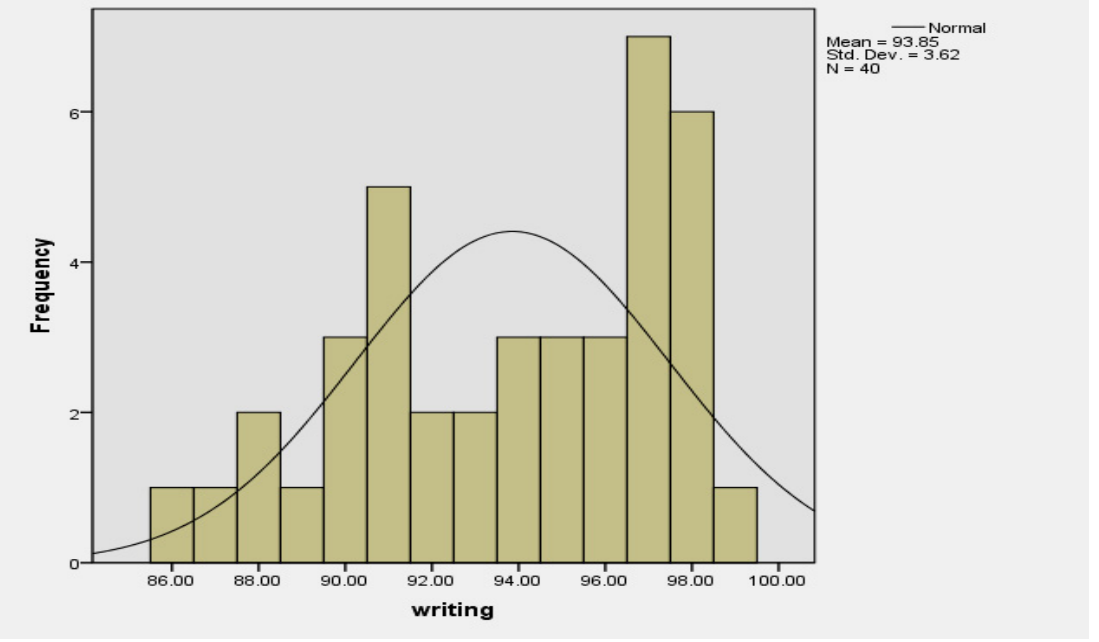

Fig 2.

Investigation of hypothesis I

According to the first null hypothesis, there will be no statistically meaningful difference in the mean of overall grades between phonics and traditional method. Having applied the parameter test, it was proven that this null

hypothesis could be rejected at 0.000 level of significance to find support for the first hypothesis of difference. The results are displayed in the following table.

Table 3 Results of the Parameter Test for Overall Grades Variable in Phonics and Traditional Methods

	Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
overall	phonics method	20	97.300	2.67739	.59868
	Traditional method	20	93.350	2.81490	.62943

Table 4 Test for Equality of Variances

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Overall	Equal variances assumed	.110	.741	4.547	38	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			4.547	37.905	.000

According to the findings of significant area, that is lower than alpha, we are quite safe in rejecting the null hypothesis that is, the difference in overall grades between phonic and traditional methods is statistically significant.

Investigation of hypothesis II

The second null hypothesis assumed that there would be no statistically meaningful difference in the mean of reading grades between phonics and traditional method. Similar to the first null hypothesis, a parameter test was utilized to see the difference between experimental group and control group who were exposed to phonics method and traditional method in the classes. The number of significant area is lower than alpha, so the null hypothesis was rejected at 0.002 level of significance. Thus, statistically there was a significant difference between the means of reading grades in phonics and traditional methods.

Investigation of hypothesis III

The third null hypothesis assumed that there would be no statistically meaningful difference in the mean of writing grades between phonics and traditional methods. Having applied the parameter test, it was proven that this null hypothesis could be rejected at 0.000 level of significance which supports the hypothesis of difference. The results are displayed in the following table.

Results of the Parameter Test for Writing Grades Variable for Phonics and Traditional Methods

Table 5 Writing Grades Variable for Phonics and Traditional Methods

Group Statistics					
	Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
writing	Phonics method	20	95.9000	2.75108	.61516
	Traditional method	20	91.8000	3.23793	.72402

Table 6 Test for Equality of Variances

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	result

writing	Equal variances assumed	.875	.355	4.315	38	.000	H0 rejected
	Equal variances not assumed			4.315	37.034	.000	

The value of significant area was low enough to reject the null hypothesis pointing out that “the difference in reading grades between phonics and traditional methods is statistically significant”.

The test of the main research hypothesis

For investigation of the main research hypothesis, according to this fact that research hypotheses were proved with a high certainty, it could be resulted that the efficiency of phonics method in teaching was more than the traditional method.

Since the statistically meaningful levels of the tests were found to be very small-scale values, the outcome of the multiplication of the levels needed to be somewhat less than 0.05 so that the researcher could present the general findings of the study with the purpose of making simultaneous decision regarding the results. When these steps were carried out, the result was lower than 0.05. So the main research hypothesis with more than 95 percent certainty was proved and with more than 95 percent certainty it could be said that the efficiency of phonics method in teaching English was more than traditional method.

Apart from the findings above,Our most notable result is that we have been able to demonstrate the effects of two different methods on these children’s learning alphabet, reading and writing. In line with the phonics method, we have shown that an effective way of improving teaching alphabet, reading and writing involves a joint approach that integrates the training of the names of letters with their sounds. Spending an equivalent amount of time concentrating on both names and sounds of letters in isolation, according to the traditional method, is less effective. Although the individual teaching of alphabet, reading and writing received by the traditional method group did produce some gains, they were not as large as in the group given just the sounds of letters. This is an important, and not at all obvious, result. Generally the most effective way to teach reading and writing is to teach alphabet simply and directly. Our children given the traditional method actually received less time being simply taught alphabet than did the phonics method group. The fact that they nevertheless made significantly more progress in reading and writing is quite believable.

According to our phonics method, it is crucial that in this method explicit links were formed between reading and writing skills and their alphabet knowledge. To this end the children in both groups undertook linkage activities such as relating spellings to sounds using plastic letters and writing words while paying attention to letter-sound relationship. Of course because the children in phonics method did not know the names of letters had better performance in these kinds of activities. A skeptic might argue that the explicit linkage activities are not crucial to the success of the phonics method’s group and that instead children in this group might abstract the relationship between name and sound once they have some level of exposure to alphabet, reading and writing exercises. This is certainly a possibility that our data can not refute. We would, however, expect separate training in alphabet, reading and writing skills to be less effective than the explicit linkage given to the phonics method’s group. The study of Byrne and Fielding-Barnsely (1989) supports this ides. They looked at young children’s understanding of the alphabetic principle, the concept that particular phonemes in words are represented systematically by particular letters. Byrne and Fielding-Barnsely found that such understanding was achieved only by children who could perform phonemic segmentation, understood phoneme identity, and had also been taught explicitly the critical phoneme symbol relations (that S says /s/ and M says /m/, e.g.). This training of phoneme-symbol relations is an example of what we have termed a linkage exercise in that it forces children to relate the sounds of letters, without knowing the names, to the process of reading and writing words. Byrne and Fielding-Barnsely found hat such training was necessary for their young children to come to understand the alphabetic principle.

Leaving these details aside, our results certainly provide support for the view that teaching according to both the names and sounds of letters (traditional method) is not a powerful way of teaching reading and writing skills. (Bradly and Bryant, 1983) trained children in sound categorization and found that the gains in reading that resulted were significantly greater that in a control group trained in bo5h manes and sounds categorization. Similarly, (Lundberg et al., 1988) found that training phonological skills in kindergarten children produced big effects on their later progress in learning to read. Our own results from children between 3-6 provide further evidence that teaching according to the sounds of letters, phonics method, do translate directly into improvements in reading and writing

skills effectively.

7.Conclusions

The research questions addressed in this study concerned the comparison of two methods of teaching alphabet, reading and writing for kids (phonics method and traditional method). In order to come up with answers to the research questions of the study, first the frequency of teaching reading and writing in methods of teaching was determined and then the other computations were calculated. According to Hatch and (Farhadi, 1982, p 165) "we are often content with describing frequencies in terms of proportions, percents, rates, and ratios". However, to further guarantee the validity of the obtained results from statistical point of view, the statistical techniques of Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, Levene's test and t-test were used. This inferential statistics were used to determine the effect of each method of teaching on children's learning.

With reference to the tables of chapter 4, the results pointed out that there was a statistically significant difference between the two methods of teaching for kids. In other words, those subjects who received phonics method had also a better performance on reading and writing. On the other hand, based on the results obtained, most of the kids' learning difficulties were due to the method of teaching. And in the domain of reading and writing the traditional method turned out to be problematic for young learners. It can be inferred that the phonics method is more effective than the traditional method because the performance of children in reading and writing who received phonics method was better than the kids who received traditional method. Also, on the basis of the subjects' performances on final tests, the traditional method was more problematic than the phonics method because most of the students who received phonics method had better performance and better grades on reading and writing on these final tests. Furthermore, Wiley Blevins (1992) also believes that the goal of all phonics instruction is teaching students the most common sound-spelling relationships so that they can decode, or sound out words better.

Simply training children to memorize letters without providing learning in a larger literacy context has proven unsuccessful as a predictor of beginning reading success (Strickland & Schickednz, 2004, p.8).

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