

ENGLISH PHONEMES KNOWLEDGE STATUS OF ENGLISH TEACHERS IN SCHOOLS OF GANDHINAGAR DISTRICT: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the results of a study undertaken to explore the level of phonemes knowledge acquired or gained by the Pre- primary or primary teachers teaching fundamental English in foundational grades (Balvatika- Grade 2 as per NEP) in schools of Gandhinagar. The data was collected from 40 teachers by means of a questionnaire. The collected data was subjected to quantitative analysis. The result of the study revealed a lack of the teachers' awareness towards the basic terminology of the alphabet teaching. The majority of subjects agreed that the grapheme- phoneme correspondence approach would make the alphabet teaching and comprehension task easier than rote memorization of letters, their shapes, and word or picture association. Phonics would simplify their endeavours of teaching, correct and proper pronunciation from grassroot level. Thus, it would definitely result in quick reading skill development. Phonemes sequence of teaching may differ, but it is a systematic approach for better learning of English.

Keywords: Language, NEP, Pronunciation, Phonics, GPC (Grapheme- Phoneme Correspondence), Blending, Digraphs, Diphthongs, Reading Skill.

Introduction

English language education in India constitutes a notably extensive and intricately layered phenomenon, marked by significant strengths as well as substantial shortcomings and constraints, as discussed by Tickoo in 1996 and 2004. This multifaceted scenario is discernible in the research topics, discoveries, and policy declarations spanning the past half-century, where scholars have sought to uncover empirical evidence of how English, as a second language, has evolved and influenced itself. Graddol's work, 'English Next India' (2010), highlights how a nation with a liberalized economy grapples with the demand for English language education and its role as a medium of instruction. The substantial demand, whether accurately assessed or somewhat exaggerated, proves challenging to address due to the country's diverse educational contexts, resource allocation for schools, and school systems.

Planning English language education to complement and supplement Indian languages in a multilingual country, while simultaneously meeting the social need for upward mobility, presents a formidable challenge. This challenge is exacerbated by the intricate diversity in curriculum planning and schooling methods. The quality of English language instruction and the various types of schools can be discerned by examining factors such as the English language environment within schools, the proficiency of English language teachers, and the pedagogical techniques employed in classrooms (as discussed by Kurien in 1997, Nag-Arulmani in 2000 and 2005, and NCERT in 2006b). These factors contribute to the establishment of hierarchies in the delivery of English language education across different schools.

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As a citizen of the nation Bharat, one cannot and should not overlook our own age old concept of Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam which means the entire world is a family. This, put in modern terms, bolsters our strong belief in Global Citizenship: The new norm. Today, every corner of the planet is connected via the Internet, e-commerce, trade, communication, travel, technology, etc. and of course to communicate for all the above purposes, most of the people take English language as a tool to exchange thoughts and ideas. We are striving to create future ready students in our schools. Moreover language proficiency is not a test of one's intelligence. So, everyone should adapt to a language required to connect globally. Even NEP (2020) considers English as an international language which everyone should learn for convenience in life. "English is a language; it is not a test of your intelligence" (NEP 2020). Now arises the need to learn a foreign language for smooth functioning in this modern world. English has been the most used common language in the world due to its colonial history. All educational institutes in India has English as FL (first language), SL (second language) or TL (third language). Even all schools in Gujarat, including Gandhinagar teaches English as FL or SL. To teach English effectively we need to understand basic terms or components which are important for the acquisition of any language. English alphabet has 26 letters. According to Wikipedia, the alphabet of modern English is a Latin script consisting of 26 letters and a Letter is a type of grapheme, which is the functional unit in a writing system. So, the formations of the letters are called graphemes and the sounds they produce are called Phonemes. (Lotha Gloria, June 14, 2023) Phonemes in linguistics, smallest unit of speech distinguishing one word (or word element) from another, as the element *p* in 'tap', which separates the word from 'tab', 'tag' and 'tan'. A phoneme may have more than one variant, called an allophone. In the words of (Brainbridge Carol, Jan. 4, 2021) phoneme is the smallest meaningful unit of sound in a language. A meaningful sound is one that will change one word into another word. For example, the words cat and fat are two different words, but there is only one sound that is different between the two words - the first sound. That means that the "k" sound in cat and the "f" sound in fat are two different morphemes. Basically all 26 letters produce pure 44 sounds which are widely accepted as Phonemes. As all letters are divided into consonants (21) and vowels (5), phonemes can be divided into consonant-vowel and digraphs. In the process of reading letter phases includes blends, complex sound/words, etc.

According to (Walley AC, Metsala JL, 1993), language development is a thought to depend on implicit representations of phonology or sound of words, initially stored as unanalyzed whole in the lexical level, the information is successively restructured during childhood to incorporate the increasing level of sub-lexical detail necessary to discriminate among a growing vocabulary of phonologically similar words.

It is vital for a language teacher to know phonemes because if one is clear with the sound of a letter then only they can pronounce it correctly. In the traditional system, teachers introduced letters (graphemes) to students and then repeated its name followed by word picture association. This is called whole language approach, which is ineffective and outdated. For example: Letter 'A' is called as 'A' but its sound is 'Ae' as in Apple/Alligator etc. As a vowel 'A' has more sounds, but initially while introducing these letters it is required that one introduces the sound of it so, that the early learners are clear of its usage. Phonemes can be learned systematically. It is divided into 6 phases or sets. Generally it is suggested that those letter sounds should be taught first which share close sounds as per the letters' names.

- Example: 'S' is called 'Es' and sounds 'Ss'.....
- 'P' is called 'Pee' and sounds 'Puh'.....
- 'B' is called 'Bee' and sounds 'Buh'.....

The best approach which can be executed is GPC (grapheme-phoneme- correspondence). It is generally called letter-sound-correspondence. According to (Britannica) phoneme- grapheme, mapping of a word is redundant if the pronunciation and print form of the word are separately specified with the representation. The redundant cues of phoneme-grapheme correspondence can confirm the connection among a words pronunciation and meaning by avoiding the confusion with words similarly spelled or pronounced. For example, one who memorizes the word 'President' by rote and does not decode it phonologically may have difficulties in distinguishing it from words that are visually similar such as 'president' or 'precedent.'

The benefits of this would be:

- Students will be able to learn letter names along with sounds systematically.
- Students will not be burdened to learn both grapheme-phonemes separately.
- Once alphabet is covered they can learn about digraphs and later blending.

It is generally observed that wrong sounds uttered repeatedly in classrooms results in mispronunciation amongst students, in later years these learners speak in an awkward accent and become subject to humiliation at times. This results in hesitation for public speaking amongst non-native speakers and learners of English.

According to the National Reading Panel (2000), effective phonemic awareness instruction occurs in small groups and is combined with letter identification to aid transfer of skills to reading.

After going through extensive Literature review; it was found that very few studies have been conducted on English phonemes knowledge status of English teachers in schools of North-Gujarat. This implies that there is a need to understand the knowledge status of English teachers of English Phonemes. So, it is an attempt to begin the study by conducting the research on English phonemes knowledge status of English teachers in schools of Gandhinagar District.

Problem Statements

Erroneous pronunciation of English language teachers in schools.

Reasons

- Ignoring qualification of teachers teaching specially in preprimary sections.
- Lack of phonics sounds knowledge which they were never taught in their learning years.
- No effective phonic teaching in many universities or even in professional degree institutes.
- Following the traditional way of teaching alphabet by just repeating the letter (graphemes) names and then picture association whole language approach.
- Expensive phonic courses
- No differentiation/valuing at the time of recruitment between phonetics trained or untrained teachers.
- Lack of overall awareness among school management/HR/recruiters.

Objectives

The objective of the study is to explore the level of phonemes knowledge acquired or gained by the Pre- primary or primary teachers teaching fundamental English and also to identify the lack of the teachers' awareness towards the basic terminology of the alphabet teaching in foundational grades (Balvatika- Grade 2 as per NEP) in schools of Gandhinagar

Research Methodology

Cross sectional study was conducted to examine the relationships of independent and dependent variable by applying the self-administered survey questionnaire. Primary data is collected with the help of a questionnaire designed for the purpose of the study. In the following Research quantitative approach is adopted where the data was collected through personal visits and online with the help of Google form. Questionnaire consists of two sections – the first section presents questions related to demographic details of the respondents such as Gender, Education Qualification, Experience, English subject teacher and Section Working in and the second section provides questions related to English phonemes knowledge status of English teachers in schools of Gandhinagar District.

Results-Findings & Interpretations

Part 1

Sr. No.	Demographic Details	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
1	Gender	Male	2	5.00
		Female	38	95.00
2	Education Qualification	Graduate (B.Ed. Eng.)	23	57.50
		Graduate (B.Ed. Others)	7	17.50
		Graduate (Non B.Ed.)	6	15.00
		Other	4	10.00
3	Section Working In	Pre-primary	7	17.50
		Primary	29	72.50
		Mother Teacher in KG	4	10.00

4	Experience	<2 years	3	7.50
		2-5 years	13	32.50
		5-7 years	3	7.50
		7-9 years	1	2.50
		>9 years	20	50.00
5	English Teaching	Yes	40	100.00
		No	0	0.00

Interpretations

As per the above data, the total number of participants in the research study were 40. Out of which 2 (5%) were male and 38 (95%) were females. 23 (57.50%) were qualified and 17 (42.50%) were not qualified.

20 (50%) were having experience of 9 yrs. All the 40 teachers taught English. Mother teachers were 4 (10%) the pre-primary subject teachers were 7 (17.50%) and 29 (72.50%) taught in primary Section (std1&2).

Part 2

1. Are alphabet and letters same?

Sr. No.	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
1	No	20	50.00
2	Yes	19	47.50
3	Not Sure	1	2.50
	Total	40	100.00

Interpretations

The findings are really astonishing and catches eyes. Where (47.50%) teachers are believing that alphabet and letters are same surprisingly (2.50%) are not sure of the fact that alphabet and letters are different, (50%) knew that the two are different.

2. Do you use phonemes (Phonics Sound) frequently to teach English language in the class?

Sr. No.	Response	Frequency	Percentage
1	Always	8	20.00
2	Hardly	1	2.50
3	Most of the Time	20	50.00
4	Some Times	11	27.50
	Total	40	100.00

Interpretations

Only 8 teachers out of 40(20%) of responders uses phonics sounds always to teach young learners. 20(50%)teachers claimed to use phonemes most of the times one (2.5%) has hardly used it in teaching while 11 (27.5%) accepted that sometimes, they use phonemes.

3. Up to what age do you think a child learns flawless reading?

Sr. No.	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
1	7 Years	20	50.00
2	11 Years	3	7.50
3	15 years	15	37.50
4	Not Sure	2	5.00
	Total	40	100.00

Interpretations

20 (50%) agrees that up to seven years of age a child may become independent reader if systematic phonic assisted instructions are used from the beginning of learning. 15 (37.50%) believed that good reading skill can be attained lately up to 15 years of age, 03(7.50%) claimed 11 years and 02(5%) were not sure.

4. How many phonemes are there in English language?

Sr. No.	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
1	26	8	20.00
2	34	3	7.50
3	44	27	67.50
4	Not Sure	2	5.00
	Total	40	100.00

Interpretations

27 (67.50%) knew the right number of English phonemes. The rest 11 (27.50%) teachers chose incorrect option like 26/34 and 2 (5%) were not sure.

5. Smallest unit of letter sound is called

Sr. No.	Response	Frequency	Percentage
1	Grapheme	5	12.50
2	Morpheme	6	15.00
3	Not Sure	3	7.50
4	Phoneme	26	65.00
	Total	40	100.00

Interpretations

Here 26 (65%) teachers claimed to know the definition of phoneme which is the smallest unit of sound. 3 (7.5%) were not sure of any option. 5 (12.50%) called it grapheme. 6 (15%) opted for morpheme.

6. A letter representation in English language is called?

Sr. No.	Response	Frequency	Percentage
1	Grapheme	20	50.00
2	Morpheme	1	2.50
3	Signs And Symbols	10	25.00
4	Phoneme	9	22.50
	Total	40	100.00

Interpretations

When questioned about the term that represent a letter representation just 20 (50%) considered right option that is grapheme. 10 (25%) said it is signs and symbols 1 (2.5%) morpheme and surprisingly 9 (22.50%) said it has phoneme.

7. Digraphs and blends are mixing of two letters to make a new meaningful word?

Sr. No.	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
1	No	10	25.00
2	Yes	24	60.00
3	Not Sure	6	6.00
	Total	40	100.00

Interpretations

Mounting disbelief is observed when 24 (60%) teachers marked 'yes' to the statement that digraphs and blends are mixing of two letters to make a new meaningful word. Nearly 10 (25%) stated no and 6 (15%) were not sure.

8. Sound of the letter 'B' is: ('B' for 'Ball')

Sr. No.	Response	Frequency	Percentage
1	Bee	6	15.00
2	Bi	1	2.50
3	Buh	31	77.50
4	Not Sure	2	5.00
	Total	40	100.00

Interpretations

The sound of letter B was clear to many as 31 (77.50%) of teachers opted for Buh. 6 (15%) said its B and 01 (2.50) believed it to be by and 02(5%) were not sure to the answer.

9. Is Phonic sound teaching important for non native English learners?

Sr. No.	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	33	82.50
2	No	1	1.00
3	Sometimes	6	6.00
	Total	40	100.00

Interpretations

Here,33 (82.50%) claims 'yes' that phonic sound should be taught to non-native English learners. Only 1 (2.50%) said no and 6 (15%) believe that sometimes it should be taught.

10. Do you think if students learn correct sound of a letter then they would speak and read effectively?

Sr. No.	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	38	95.00
2	May Be	2	5.00
	Total	40	100.00

Interpretations

The response clearly shows that 38 (95%) teachers understand that knowledge of correct sound of letters will lead to good reading and speaking skills of learners. Only 2(5%) opted for maybe.

11. Would you like to up skill yourself and learn the correct sounds of all letters for better pronunciation skills?

Sr. No.	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	39	97.50
2	No	1	2.50
	Total	40	100.00

Interpretations

Here 39 (97.50%) teachers agreed to learn the correct sounds of all letters (phonemes) and up skill their pronunciation skills only 01 (2.50%) denied.

Conclusion

Research should serve as a catalyst for societal and national progress, advancing our understanding and generating novel knowledge. The research findings presented here shed light on various aspects of education, encompassing primary education. They provide insights into contemporary trends in educational policy implementation, curriculum design, English language education delivery methods, teacher professional development, and pedagogy for young learners, among other areas that warrant further investigation. From the analysis of these studies, several key theses emerge. The major thrust is felt to design a basic course which can facilitate our in-service teachers to acquire the knowledge of phonetics, phonology and can equip them to render to students.

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