

# Teaching Written and Spoken Form of Words based on Nation's Criteria

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## Abstract

Taking advantages of the rules of phonics is one of the most efficient strategies in teaching the spoken and written form of words to Chinese EFL students because it builds connections between English and Chinese phonetic marking system so that enlighten students' learning burden of producing words' spoken form and infer the written form of words according to its spoken form. This essay firstly introduces the Nation's criteria for knowing a word and clarifies the challenges that Chinese primary school students have in the process of learning the spoken and written form of words. Afterwards, it demonstrates the theory of phonics, function of phonics, and connection between the English phonetic system and Chinese pinyin. At last, a teaching practice of my own will be presented to demonstrate how to use the phonics rules to help students study the spoken and written form of words that contains ow phonics.

## Keywords

Teaching Written and Spoken Form of English Words; Nation's Criteria of Knowing a Word; English Phonics.

## 1. Introduction

The study of words is the basis of developing students listening speaking reading and writing ability. According to Nation, knowing a word includes knowing its form, meaning, and use. Among all of the aspects, the first one students will meet is its form [1]. However, Chinese primary school students face some challenges of getting a good command of English words' spoken and written form because of the lack of similarity between English words and Chinese characters and limited chances for students to produce the word form. One of the most efficient ways of teaching the spoken and written form of words is using the rules of phonics because it builds connections between English and Chinese phonetic marking system so that enlighten students' learning burden of producing words' spoken form and infer the written form of words according to its spoken form. In this essay, I will firstly introduce the Nation's criteria for knowing a word. After that, I will clarify the challenges that Chinese primary school students have in the process of learning the spoken and written form of words. And then I will present the theory of phonics, function of phonics, and connection between the English phonetic system and Chinese pinyin. At last, I will use my own teaching practice to demonstrate how to help students study the spoken and written form of words that contains ow phonics.

## 2. Nation's Criteria of Knowing a Word

Words are not an isolated item, they fit into many related systems and has many aspects of knowledge. According to Nation, there are three aspects of knowing a word, namely form, meaning, and use [1].

## 2.1. Word Form

For word form, learners need to know its spoken form, written form, and word parts. Knowing the word's spoken form means knowing what it sounds like and being able to produce it to express the meaning. Research on the tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon reveals important components of the spoken form includes numbers of syllables, initial letter, final letter, syllabic stress, and suffix [2]. When we need to produce the spoken form of an English word, we have to pronounce the sounds in the word as well as the degrees of the stress of the appropriate syllables of the word. Knowing the word's written form means knowing what it looks like and how it is spelled. For word parts, students need to know that words are consist of affixes and stems. For example, they need to recognize that underdevelopment is consists of under-, develop, and -ment. These affixes and stems can also be used to rebuild other words. Word building has different stages. Bauer and Nation categorize words into different stages based on their frequency, regularity of form, the regularity of meaning, and productivity [3]. Thus, knowing a word also means knowing the members of its word family. For example, knowing predict involves knowing predicted, predicting, predictable, unpredicted, and so on [4]. Students also need to know that both affixes and stems carry a certain meaning, which contributes to the whole meaning of the word. They can use them to infer the meaning of unknown words.

## 2.2. Meaning

The meaning of the word involves the connection between form and meaning, concept and referents, and associations. Word form is connected with its meaning. When learners hear or see the word, they need to be aware of its meaning. When they want to express the meaning, they have to produce the form. The connection between the form and meaning will be strengthened whenever one of them is successfully retrieved [5]. However, the connection between word form and meaning are not usually one-to-one. The same written and spoken form can represent different meanings, like snipe(bird), snipe(shot). These are called homonyms. Words have different spoken forms but the same written form like bear(verb) and bear(animal) are homographs. Words have different written forms but the same spoken form like air and heir are homophones. These words should be counted as different words. In the case that one word form can represent several senses when the form is met, learners need to select the appropriate sense that it stands, and this process is sense selection [6]. When learners meet the word in context, students need to search for what this word refers to, and this process is the reference specification. What needs to be noticed here is that word meaning can be comprehended differently according to the context it occurs and the cultural meaning it possesses. Words are also associated with each other. Nouns, verbs, adjectives, and synonymy have their own organizational structure. Nouns can be organized into tree diagrams and 26 assigned beginning points of nouns can create tree diagrams that include every English noun [7]. The hierarchy of nouns has several levels and nouns in a hierarchy are distinguished by parts, attributes, and functions. The relationship of items in a hierarchy is called hyponymy. The whole-part relationship is called meronymy. The organizational relationship of verbs is different from that of nouns. Miller and Fellbaum divide them into troponymy, entailment, and antonymy, suggesting that something is done in a particular manner, engaging in one action also involves in the other and the relationship between co-troponyms [7]. Adjectives can be divided into non-predicative adjectives and predicative adjectives. These two kinds of adjectives can be organized into hyponymic relationships and antonymic relationships respectively. The way that adverb is divided is just like adjectives. Understanding these hierarchical relationships helps classify, justify, and grouping words, so that helps learners to generalize texts, make counter argumentations, and suggest cause and effect chains [8].

### 2.3. Use

The use of words includes grammatical functions, collocations, and constraints on use. Words play an essential role in determining the grammatical construction of the sentence [9]. The knowledge of the use of words is also linked to the grammatical pattern it can fit into. The learning burden of the English words' grammatical functions depends on the parallels of their first language and English as well as the similarity of their known and unknown words. Remembering collocations is also an important part of knowing a word, which could help learners speak more fluently and sounds more like a native speaker [10]. Collocations are different in their size, type, closeness, and range. The use of collocations also related to their contextual knowledge such as their situation, topic, and local context. Words have constraints of use, to use words appropriately, learners need to pay attention to the context in which it is used. The range of word constraints includes extent, quantity, currency, recency, restrictedness, level, register, and figuration [11]. However, these constraints vary from culture to culture.

### 3. Challenges of Learning Words' Spoken and Written Form for Primary School Students

For Chinese primary school students, their challenges of mastering the spoken and written form of words are that the Chinese language shares little similarities with English and students have few chances to produce the word form, which causes difficulties for students to pronounce English words and produce the words' written form respectively.

Learning burden varies according to learners' different language backgrounds. The more a word represents patterns and knowledge that the learners are already familiar with, the lighter its learning burden. However, the Chinese language is quite different from English. The spoken form of English words is connected with the pronunciation of letters in the word. But Chinese use characters rather than letters and do not have the same phonetic marking system as English to show the sounds of letters [12]. Meanwhile, Chinese also rarely has any loanwords like Japanese or Spanish, which is helpful to build a connection between their first and second language. Therefore, students cannot use their former knowledge in learning their native language to foster their English language learning. When they study the spoken form of English words, many of them can only remember that through repetition, which is time-consuming. Other students may use Chinese characters that have similar sounds to mark the word and try to remember it. As a result, students may remember the wrong pronunciation since the sound of Chinese characters is not exactly the same as the word marked.

As for producing the words' written form, a lot of students find it more challenging because they just need to remember some distinctive features or a roughly approximate written form when they need to recognize a word, but they have to remember all of the letters of the word precisely then they will be able to write it. Thus, productive learning of the word's written form is more difficult for students [13]. This can be shown in students' dictation grades, they usually get higher grades when seeing the English word, write the Chinese translation than see the Chinese, write the English translation [14]. Another reason that gives rise to students' difficulty in producing the word's written form might be that students lack chances or motivation to write words. Chinese primary school students rarely need to write English words in daily life or in class. Without chances of producing words' written form, students can only remember the words' written form by reciting it mechanically. But in this way, they are more likely to make spelling mistakes.

## 4. How to Teach Primary School Students the Spoken and Written Form of Words

The adoption of phonics might be of great help in teaching students' spoken and written form of words because it reveals the underlying connections between the English phonetic system and Chinese pinyin. (a kind of phonetic alphabet) By advantage of the English phonetic system, students can also infer the written form of English words.

### 4.1. Definition of Phonics

Regarding the definition of phonics, different people hold different views. Johnson and Pearson believe that teaching English Phonetics is to teach learners how to read unknown words, and it is a way to read words by associating letters with sounds [15]. Adams argues that Phonics is a method of teaching words [16]. It instructs learners to recognize some correspondence between letters and sounds and to use relevant skills to recognize words. Blevins states that Phonetics is a method that helps learners to autonomously spell words by using the one-to-one correspondence between English letter glyphs and spelling sounds [17]. Richards and Platt suggest that Phonetics is a teaching method that helps learners achieve the ability of autonomous spelling of words by enabling them to understand the one-to-one correspondence between letters and their sounds [18]. From their description, it can be seen that Phonetics is an effective rule system, which emphasizes the one-to-one correspondence between letters and their pronunciations.

### 4.2. Functions of Phonics

Phonics is seen as an effective way of improving English learners' vocabulary pronouncing and spelling ability. This method is suitable for both children and EFL learners.

Chall suggested that Phonics can improve students' vocabulary recognition, spelling, and memory ability and that direct and systematic teaching of phonics is a prerequisite for enhancing vocabulary recognition [19]. In 1997, the National Reading Panel research of the United States drew a conclusion based on the analysis of 38 articles of Phonics teaching class, that Phonics teaching was beneficial to improve students' word decoding, reading, spelling ability, regardless of their class size, grade, level of English reading and socioeconomic status [20]. In 2004, Johnston and Watson stated that students who studied Phonics with a comprehensive approach achieved greater improvements in word pronouncing, spelling than students who were given an analytical approach [21].

Phonics is especially helpful for beginners, as most of the vocabulary they learn conforms to the pronunciation rules. Adams deemed that there is a very stable correspondence between the letters and letter combinations of the words in the primary reading materials and their pronunciation [22]. If a child can master 37 sound groups with the highest frequency of use, he can independently spell about 500 most commonly used words. Meanwhile, in 2014, through research conducted on 4 years old children, Mc Geown and Medford found that phonics effectively assist children's early recognition and short-term memory of words and play an auxiliary role in their vocabulary learning [23]. Phonics can also be applied in EFL classes. Chiyoki Takeda studied the effectiveness of Phonics for Japanese students and found that it is effective for their reading ability [24]. Hu revealed that phonics can help young Chinese learners of English raise their phonological awareness so that foster their study in learning new English words [25].

### 4.3. Connection between the English Phonetic System and Chinese Pinyin

For Chinese English learners, the Chinese phonetic alphabet shares some similarities with the phonetic system of English, which would be helpful to reduce the learning burden of students. The pronunciation of Chinese pinyin and its rules play a positive role in promoting and

transferring the pronunciation of English letters. The vowels and initials in Chinese correspond to vowels and consonants in English. For example, the pronunciation of some initials in Chinese, such as b, p,m,f,d,t,n,l,g,k,h are similar to the pronunciation of some of the consonants in English/b/, /p/, /m/, /f/, /d/, /t/, /n/, /l/, /g/, /k/, /h/. The pronunciation of vowels ei, ai, ao, ou in Chinese are also very similar to the pronunciation of some English vowel combinations like [ei], [ai], [au], [əu]. The correspondence between the Chinese Pinyin and English alphabet phonetic can help learners mastering the English alphabet and alphabet combination pronunciation more quickly so that enlighten the study burden of students [26]. Therefore, teachers should make full use of this correspondence and transfer the knowledge of Hanyu pinyin to the learning of English phonetics.

#### 4.4. Teaching Spoken and Written Form of English Words with Phonics

When applying phonics into the teaching of spoken and written form of English words, I divide the teaching process into three parts: alphabet pronunciation teaching, vocabulary pronunciation teaching, and vocabulary spelling teaching. And I will introduce it using my example of teaching words that contain ow.

In the first stage, I use the animation “Letter Factory” to activate students' prior knowledge of patterns of sound-spelling correspondence. We can also use alphabet phonetic gymnastics as a substitute. The study of word form relies more on implicit learning, which calls for repeated meeting opportunities in texts [27]. Thus, I provide students with a poem that contains key words of this class. “It's spring. I look out of my window. I can see something yellow, up comes a flower. Slow Slow Slow...” After that, to improve the awareness of phonological units, I use a rhythm and turn it into a chant for students to sing. Next, I select out the words which contain ow in this poem and ask students to read them so that figure out what ow sounds like in each word group. In the word group cow, flower, wow, down the pronunciation of ow is /aʊ/. In the group of slow, snow, yellow, window ow sounds like /əʊ/. In categorizing words according to their sounds, the relationship between the sounds and the letter combination is revealed [28]. To secure memory of the sound and spelling connection, repetition is needed [29]. Games enable students to repeat words interestingly. I play picking apples and finding differences with students. In this process, students can distinguish the different sounds of ow in each word. In picking apples, students are required to read apples on the tree and picking them to different baskets that have /əʊ/ and /aʊ/ written on them. In finding the difference, students need to read the four words in the house find the one which has a different ow sound among them. The study of alphabet pronunciation will lay a foundation of the vocabulary pronunciation and vocabulary spelling study [30].

In the second stage, students are expected to use phonics to pronounce unknown words. Productive knowledge requires productive learning to be effectively learned [31]. In fostering students to produce the spoken form, I start by using the animation Alphablocks by Cbeebies to lead them to practice how to combine different phonemes so that pronounce a word successfully. After watching the video, I encourage them to try to pronounce the words they have learned before to practice the application of phonics. I start with dissyllable words like low, now, how, show, vow. After that, guiding students to pronounce some polysyllabic words like brown, crown, flow, glow. Instead of solely rely on repetition to enhance students' memory of words' spoken forms; learners should link the shape of known words and the shape of unknown words [32]. Therefore, I provide unknown words that contain the same letter combination and their phonograms to let students pronounce them by virtual of phonics themselves. In this process, I first led students to divide the polysyllabic words into several syllables and pronounce these syllables separately. Afterward, they need to connect each short syllable into a whole to form the pronunciation of the word. Finally, I encourage them to create nonsense words using phonogram calendar with their partner and check each other's

pronunciation. They may create words like p-ow-n, d-ow-k, t-ow and infer their pronunciation by virtue of the phonogram includes /p/, /n/, /d/, /l/, /t/. In this way, students may come to realize that they can use the phonics rules to speculate the spoken form of words.

In vocabulary spelling teaching, I intend to cultivate learner's ability to spell words based on pronunciation. According to Schmitt, teachers need to relate spoken form to written form at various levels [33]. Therefore, I first ask students to identify which word contains the sound provided. We can say /əʊ/ and present choices include blow, blur to let students choose. Secondly, I say some of the words they have already learned but not easy to spell and require students to spell them now. For example, a lot of students would write floer rather than flower. However, after they have figured out that flower sounds like /aʊ/ rather than /ʌ/, they may not make this mistake when they hear their teacher stress the /aʊ/ while giving dictation. Later, I produce sounds of some unknown words and nonsense words that contain /aʊ/or/əʊ/ and guide them to spell it. For example we can say/p/-/aʊ/-/t/, /k/-/aʊ/-/d/. After that, students also need to be trained to use phonics themselves and become independent in applying strategies [33]. They are asked can use a phonogram calendar to pronounce and write words with partners on their own. One student creates a pronunciation that contains ow sound or finds a word that contains ow, the other student tries to write it. It should be admitted that students may not be able to spell the word correctly as sometimes the sound and the letter do not correspond with each other one-to-one. However, this activity raises students' awareness that we can infer the written form of a word according to its pronunciation. When they remember the spoken form of a word, they are more likely to be able to spell the right spoke form. In this stage, I also advise students can also use some internet resources to study words by themselves includes reading bear, Dr. Kids, and Starfall. They can strengthen and consolidate students' knowledge of phonics and develop students' ability to use the rule of phonics to spell a new word.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, knowing the words' spoken form includes knowing what it sounds like and being able to produce it to express the meaning. Knowing the word's written form means knowing what it looks like and how it is spelled. For Chinese primary school students, their challenges of mastering the spoken and written form of words are that the Chinese language shares little similarities with English and students have few chances to produce the word form, which causes difficulties for students to pronounce English words and produce the words' written form respectively. Phonics helps connect the English phonetic system and Chinese pinyin, so that enlighten students' burden of learning the productive knowledge of words' spoken form. Meanwhile, students can also infer the written form of words according to the sound-spelling correspondence in phonics. Therefore, teachers can take advantage of phonics to implement their vocabulary teaching. When using phonics to teach students word form, we can divide the process of teaching into three stages namely alphabet pronunciation teaching, vocabulary pronunciation teaching, and vocabulary spelling teaching. In the meantime, phonics also facilitates students' independent learning as students can produce both of the spoken and written forms of words by themselves according to the phonics rules.

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