

Seven Linguistic and Pedagogical Principles Leading to Success of Phonics Based Instruction: An Overview of Magic Phonics

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Abstract

Until recently, the dominant phonics material to teach Iranian Young Learners of English was *Jolly Phonics* originated by Sue Lloyd and Sara Wernham in 1970s. However, a growing body of national and international researches has questioned the efficacy of *Jolly Phonics* in over 100 countries where they are being taught either in public educational institutions or private ones. In Iran, orthographic and phonological differences between Farsi and English are accounted as the main cause of such inefficacy. Therefore, after a period of two years of field observation, library research, and learners' assessment, the researcher set seven unique linguistic and pedagogical principles ahead to develop a new phonics material, *Magic Phonics* (2012), which has been greatly welcomed by private language schools specializing in early literacy of Iranian EFL Young Learners. In this study, the researcher shares with the audience the "Seven Linguistic and Pedagogical Principles" that has been considered as the foundation of his work in authoring *Magic Phonics* series.

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Introduction

Teaching initial reading and writing, as the key to the world of literacy, is the core subject not only in elementary school level but also in preschool level. Since English is increasingly being taught to young learners as young as three and above, the question of how soon and how effectively they become literate has given birth to a large number of materials, mainly known as phonics, in publishing houses specialized in child related educational products. However, the diversity in needs and contexts is not regarded much in these products. Some, like *Jolly Phonics*, are written for the native speakers of English. Some others are written for ESL contexts and some others for EFL contexts. The problem arises when local publishers and distributors find one method successful in one context, regardless of the unique features of that context, they import the book to their own country regardless of those unique features; in doing so, they overgeneralize the success of the newly imported material to their own context and such overgeneralization rarely comes to reality.

In Iran, *Jolly Phonics* has been introduced in kindergartens, private language institutes, and elementary schools for years. However, since the copyright law is not observed for foreign intellectual properties, the black and white “Workbooks” are massively and cheaply pirated and distributed among ELT bookshops. Based on the author’s field observation, library research, and learners’ assessment, the series fail to meet the requirements of Iranian young EFL learners. In Iran, English is only taught in limited hours (usually up to four hours a week) in schools as a foreign language and it is not easy to find people speaking English beyond classroom walls. Furthermore, the alphabet of Farsi, Iranian’s official language (first to the majority of the population), is Perso-Arabic which is fundamentally different from Latin. This scenario is not unique to Iran and it can be seen in many of the former Soviet Union countries such as Georgia, and Armenia, many Middle East countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Afghanistan, as well as many Asian countries such as Thailand, Korea, Japan, and China.

In all the above-mentioned contexts, orthographic and phonological differences between L1 and English are accounted as the main cause behind the difficulties often experienced in teaching initial reading and writing through phonics approach. Therefore, after a period of two years of field observation, library research, and learners’ assessment, the researcher set seven unique linguistic and pedagogical principles ahead to develop a new phonics material, *Magic Phonics* (2012), which has been greatly welcomed nationally by private language institutes, kindergartens, and elementary schools specialized in early literacy of Iranian EFL Young Learners. In this writing, the researcher shares with readers “Seven Linguistic and Pedagogical Principles” that has been considered as the foundation of his work in authoring *Magic Phonics* series.

Principle #1: Teaching All Phonemes and Graphemes

In many of the conventional phonics books, perhaps because they are written by native English speakers for native English children, some sounds such as the schwa sound or the sound of *WH* are not included while these phonemes occur in many English words and consequently non-native learners of English would not be able to recognize and articulate this sound when they are not phonemically aware of that. Moreover, they often fail to encode when they hear words including such phonemes.

In addition to many phonemes missing in conventional phonics products, some frequent graphemes are consistently missing across phonics products. However, inclusion of all phonemes and graphemes in initial reading programs is of vital importance because the spelling structure of English is rather complex and there is no one-to-one correspondence between sounds and the letter patterns that represent them. The deep orthography of English is due to the fact that it attempts to represent about 40 phonemes of the spoken language with an alphabet composed of only 26 letters (and no diacritics).

In *Magic Phonics*, the author has included 81 graphemes to cover the most frequent spelling structures of American English and to represent all phonemes of American English including schwa (Moloudi, 2015). Although such structures are not always consistent (such as *AI* in *plaid*), when English spelling rules take into account syllable structure, phonetics, etymology and accents, there are dozens of rules that are 75% or more reliable (STOR, 2000).

Principle #2: Avoid Teaching Non-phonics Lexical Words

As stated in STOR, the Elementary School Journal (2000), identifying reliable generalizations for English spelling structure is essential for initial readers and since such generalizations are not devoid of exceptions, therefore, the inclusion of those lexical exceptions hinders the generalizing ability of young initial readers. When the digraph *AI* often represents /eI/, the inclusion of the word *plaid* confuses the young learner and her/his generalizability which is a requirement for decoding more words and building confidence is hindered.

In *Magic Phonics*, non-phonetic words do not correspond with the *Overall Plan* of the program and therefore they are excluded from the word-controlled readings written specifically for the young initial readers until they reach into the final Steps known as *Magic Phonics Fairy Tales*. In these adapted fairy tales, there is no vocabulary control and therefore, young but competent readers read more authentic and more entertaining passages.

Principle #3: Teaching Non-Phonic Functional Words through Whole Word

The immediate objective of any phonics instruction program is to teach the ability to read sentences and many of the English sentences are not complete without linking verbs, pronouns, or prepositions. However, many of such words known as functional words are orthographically complex; that is to say either they cannot be decoded by phonics rules such as the pronoun *your* or in case of following an alphabetic order of presentation in teaching phonics, learners learn their constituent letter-sounds very late such as the pronoun *it* and the linking verb *is*. Finding sentences initiating with *It is a/n ...* or sentences including possessive adjectives is very regular in initial reading programs.

Therefore, in *Magic Phonics*, in each *Step* (level) functional words such as pronouns, linking verbs, prepositions, etc. are included in a separate unit at the end of each volume known as *Magic Words*. These words are taught through the Whole Word (Look-and-Say, Lexical, Whole Word, or Sight Word) approach (Borowsky, et al. 2007; Borowsky, et al. 2006; Sanabria Diaz, et al. 2009; Chan, et al.).

Principle #4: Avoid Violating Earlier Teachings

In conventional phonics materials, it is often seen that the words presented in association with the target letter-sound do not follow any systematic order. For instance, lesson A is associated with *ant* and *apple*, lesson B is associated with *bat* and *bear*, and lesson C is associated with *cat*, *car* and *cake*. When the young initial reader is ready to generalize that the letter A sounds /a/ as in *ant*, *apple*, and *bat* s/he is confused with being pushed to read *car* and *cake* in which the letter A gives its alternative sounds other than /a/. Furthermore, encouraging or pushing the young initial reader to decode *ant* when s/he does not recognize the letters N and T does not foster the generalizability of the learner which is an essential reading skill for real life reading.

The author had established an *Overall Plan* for *Magic Phonics* based on corpus analysis of young learners ESL materials and the rule of frequency order. The plan consists 81 phonics lessons teaching nearly 600 words without violating phonic rules. This has helped learners quickly crack the code of reading and they are seen to generalize phonic rules into new words efficiently.

Principle #5: Highlighting L1-L2 Phonetic and Phonological Differences

The sound system of English language has unique features and some of these features are not commonly seen in other languages. For instance for Iranian learners of English whose first language is Farsi, learning short vowels is tricky. Therefore, words such as *big* are often pronounced with a long /i:/ rather than a short one. It is not surprising to see learners grow up with these mistakes and in latter stages of puberty such mistakes are often fossilized. After observing the impact of *Magic Phonics* on young Iranian readers for three years, the author strongly believes that explicit teaching of the sound system of the English language through a multisensory approach is not only essential for the phonological mastery of the language but also vital for encoding skills and listening comprehension skills of the non-native English learners.

In *Magic Phonics*, adequate attention is paid to the differences between sounds that are often perceived as tricky for non-native English speakers such as the sounds associated with the letters V and W, the schwa sound, the nasals, short vowels, etc.

Principle #6: Using a Multisensory Approach

Learners learn best when their right-hemisphere of their brain is engaged. Learning can be more efficient when all the three auditory, visual, and kinesthetic senses are involved (Linse, 2007) and phonics instruction is not an exception to this fact. In an ideal phonics classroom, letter-sound relations should be shown using songs, finger clapping games, mouth reading, letter pattern crafting and collage activities.

In *Magic Phonics*, there are auditory activities (e.g. karaoke songs and chants, choral repetition, dictogloss, etc.), visual activities (e.g. pictures, visual cues, etc.) and last but not least tactile activities (e.g. craft making, sky writing, salt writing, collage, tickling, etc.).

Principle #7: Associating Animals with Graphemes

Children are keen on fantasizing about animals and therefore they participate in the learning procedure more attentively if animal figures, posters, and mascots are used throughout the content of their books and by their teachers.

On the *Content* page of each *Step* of *Magic Phonics* each target letter-sound is associated with an animal as long as the spelling of that animal is phonic and corresponds to Magic Phonics Overall Plan. In doing so, no emphasis was given to choosing words with necessarily target letter in the initial position. This was to include more animal names to associate with the target phoneme-graphemes. Here are some examples: *ant* for *A*, *bat* for *B*, *ox* for *O*, *fox* for *X*, *snail* for *AI*, and *crow* for *OW*.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, effectiveness of phonics based instruction depends much on the type of the course book selected for the reading program. *Magic Phonics* as a phonics program meant for non-native speakers of English follows seven linguistic and pedagogical principles that ensure the optimal learning outcomes in initial reading classes of young learners.

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