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Synthetic Phonics: A Glimpse on its Effectiveness in Teaching Young Learners to Read in English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

Developing reading skills from an early age of schooling seems to be of paramount importance for acquiring proper literacy. As reading proves to be a complex skill to learn, the spotlight has been put on different approaches that teach young learners to read, especially in English-speaking countries. One of these approaches is *Synthetic Phonics*, which seems to be the most beneficial program in reading instruction. However, little research has been carried out in terms of its effectiveness to teach to read in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This paper examines the benefits of implementing synthetic phonics in teaching learners of EFL to read. The main purpose of this investigation is to assess the effectiveness of this approach in teaching EFL learners to read in English, improving reading skills such as fluency and accuracy. For this purpose, 11 students attending Year 1 in a non-denominational co-ed bilingual school in the city of Hurlingham participated in this qualitative study. This group of students took part in a screening check to identify the sounds that were not being correctly decoded. Six remedial sessions were carried out in order to work on these specific sounds and students were tested again. Findings indicate that synthetic phonics was beneficial and, as a result, the students showed a significant increase in accuracy when decoding. The conclusion reached supports the implementation of this programme in EFL reading instruction.

Keywords: reading skills, EFL young learners, synthetic phonics, accuracy, fluency

1. Introduction

Literacy—which is directly associated with the ability to read and write— has been one of the main social, cultural, and educational concerns worldwide. A large body of data concerning this subject matter has been reported in recent years. Purewal (2008) emphasises that different views have put the spotlight on literacy. This author explains that the functionalist view regards literacy as the teaching of the four macro-skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) that will serve to achieve a specific purpose, primarily an economic one. As stated by Cooke and Simpson (2008, as cited in Purewal, 2008), literacy is assumed to have an economic impact, whose purpose turns out to be "[making] students more economically productive" (p. 6). The social view, in turn, considers literacy from the interactionist perspective, maintaining that identity is shaped by literacy practices whereas the critical view states that people should be empowered through education to voice their opinion. Regardless of the view an individual opts, literacy directly impacts on reading since "the development of literacy is aligned with the development of reading skills" (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009, as cited in Jamaludin et al., 2015, p. 1). Tadesse (2017) highlights that reading skills refer exclusively to the ability to understand

written texts and he strongly recommends developing these skills from an early age of schooling in order to help young learners to succeed not only in school but also in life (Tadesse, 2017).

Various authors have provided different definitions to *young learners.* According to Read (2011), this term encompasses "children from their first year of formal schooling (usually somewhere between 5-7 years old) to when they are 11-12 years old" (para. 5), while Kırkgöz (2018) views *young learners* as children from 3 up to 12 years old. Similarly, Nunan (2011) states that "the term 'young learner' covers a large chronological age span: from around 3 years of age to 15" (p. 2).

1.1. Reading Acquisition and Development

Reading is defined as a complex skill, according to Kormos and Smith (2012). Examining how reading works, these authors describe reading as a skill involving several processes that "need to work parallel and automatically to aid the decoding of information" (Kormos & Smith, 2012, p. 28). As low-level reading processes such as word recognition and sentences comprehension need to be automatized before the reader is expected to understand the overall information or content of a text, reading skills are considered to be hierarchical. In fact, "fast and efficient word-recognition" (Kormos & Smith, 2012, p. 28) is the key component of lower-order reading processes. Koda (as cited in Jamaludin, 2015), further highlights that low-level verbal processing skills, such as phonological processing, which is the product of developing phonemic awareness, play an important role in the process of registering information in working memory in reading. Phonemic awareness is defined by Willingham (2017) as "the ability to hear individual speech sounds" (p. 37). With a focus on recognizing words, the reader needs to combine different processing mechanisms:

> orthographic processing (recognizing letters), phonological processing (phonological activation of word forms, converting letters to sounds, letter combinations to syllables), accessing the semantic and syntactic information related to the word, and finally, morphological processing to understand words with suffixes and prefixes (Kormos & Smith, 2012, p. 28).

Higher-order reading processes involve processing the informational content of a text and interpreting the information presented using relevant background knowledge.

According to Kormos and Smith (2012), Frith's (1986) theory of learning to read is the most influential one. Frith (1986, as cited in Kormos & Smith, 2012) argued that the acquisition of reading skills in an alphabetic language proceeds through three stages: (1) The *logographic stage*, in which children learn to read a few words as a whole single unit, such as their names or names of a frequent shop; (2) the *alphabetic stage,* when children start to segment visually perceived word forms into letters, convert letters into sounds, and combine them to form the phonological form of the word. At this point, is when children need to achieve a high level of automaticity in these processes to be able to proceed to the next stage, and (3) the *orthographic stage,* in which children analyse words into bigger units such as letter sequences and convert these into syllables.

Over the last decades, the way children from an early age are immersed in reading has aroused the interest of most researchers in the psychological and educational fields particularly. The Department for Education and Skills in England, in the report *The Importance of Phonics: Securing Confident Reading* (2011), considers that children will not succeed at school if they lack vital literacy skills since those students that do not learn to read cannot read to learn. Initially, the focus of reading instruction was on English-speaking children in their early years

of education because of their inability to read texts aloud in their first language (L1). In view of this, Purewal (2008) highlights that "there are debates surrounding what kind of instruction will provide the most opportunity for the enhancement of learners' reading ability" (p. 24). Lenters (2004, as cited in Hardy, 2013) considers that the development of an understanding of the alphabetic system is required when learning to read. This author also states that children "need to be able to decode, develop a sight vocabulary, read appropriately matched texts and have the metacognitive strategies to support fluency" (Lenters, 2004, as cited in Hardy, 2013, p. 21). Bialystok (2002) examines the three skills required by monolingual children in learning to read: language proficiency, conceptual development, and metalinguistic insights.

The author refers to the former skills outlining that children's competence in spoken language will help to predict how effectively they will learn to read (Bialystok, 2002). Bialystok (2002) also announces that diverse studies "have confirmed a relation between children's vocabulary as an indicator of oral proficiency and achievement in learning to read" (p. 170). When alluding to the latter skills, Bialystok (2002) addresses *phonological awareness* as the most clearly metalinguistic concept connected to reading. Share et al. (1984, as cited in Lesaux & Siegel, 2003) define this term as "a powerful predictor of the speed and efficiency of reading acquisition" (p. 1005). Bialystok (2002) asserts that "its role in initiating and promoting literacy in children has been documented in countless empirical studies" (p. 183).

Regarding the conceptual development -or *orthographic awareness*- Hardy (2013) citing Dombey (2006) comes to the conclusion that "learning to read in English is difficult because 'some 461 *graphemes* represent 40 to 50 *phonemes*'" (p. 23), which means that "English orthography can be classed as deep or opaque whereas the orthography of a language such as Italian is shallow or transparent as each written sound represents a speech sound" (Hardy, 2013, p. 23). In line with this author, Willingham (2017) explains that English uses a many-to-many mapping: One letter (or letter combination) can signify many sounds, as the letter *e* does in **red, flower,** and **bee.** At this point, it should be highlighted that the English language is made up of approximately 44 sounds or *phonemes* which are represented by 26 letters or *graphemes*.

Research indicates that reading is related to comprehension skills (Carlson et al., 2013; Suggate et al., 2013; Vadasy & Sanders, 2011, as cited in Jumaladin et al., 2015). Furthermore, in developing early reading skills, both the mechanics or decoding skills and comprehension skills are seen as inseparable elements (Lonigan et al., 2013, as cited in Jamaludin et al., 2015). As stated by Jamaludin et al. (2015), code-related skills refer to alphabetic principles, which, in turn, help children in decoding text fluently (Lonigan et al., 2013, as cited in Jamaludin et al., 2015), while meaning-related skills refer to the ability to allocate meaning from words (Carlson et al., 2013). Hence, the mastery of both decoding and linguistic comprehension skills shows to be essential in the development of reading.

1.1.1. Approaches in Reading Acquisition and Development

Whole Language. Due to the constraint in reading in L1, a variety of approaches -such as the *Whole Language* and *Whole Word* or *Look-say* approaches-, or even a mix of them, has been used to teach young learners to read. At one end of the spectrum prevails the *Whole Language* approach, which claims that students are engaged in reading through stories and books of their interest and appeal (Purewal, 2008). This method emphasises meaning-making over decoding skills. Goodman (1986, as cited in Purewal, 2008), who strongly influenced the *Whole Language* movement, states that "language is actually learned from whole to part" (p. 25), centering essentially on how language is acquired, which means "focus[ing] on allowing learners to derive meaning from text, as well as the application of higher-level processing skills such as 'prediction', where reading is perceived as a 'psycholinguistic guessing game'"

(Purewal, 2008, p. 25). Goodman (1968, as cited in Hedgecock & Ferris, 2018) vigorously supports "direct interaction between print and meaning" (p. 36). Even though the *Whole Language* approach encourages young learners to read from an early age, some students may not achieve proper spelling due to the fact that no phonetics instruction is explicitly taught to them (Nair, 2018). This lack of phonetics knowledge may possibly lead them to the inability of recognizing or reading unfamiliar words.

Whole Word. At the other end, the *Whole Word* -also called *Look-Say*- approach deals with the teaching of sight words. Oakhill and Garnham (1988, as cited in Purewal, 2008) elucidate this method in the following terms:

> Children are taught to recognize a small set of words, each of which is displayed singly on a card called a *flashcard*... Once children have built up an adequate sight vocabulary they progress to the first reading book in the scheme, in which almost all the words are taken from flashcards (p. 26).

The *Whole Word* approach relies entirely on children's visual memory as they need to remember the shape and look of the word in order to recognise the word when they see it again. Suganda (2016) asserts that the important point in this method is the learning of independent words in isolation, not focusing on the connection between words. Moreover, this author —in line with Cameron (2001, as cited in Purewal, 2008)— points out that function words, which do not have clear lexical meanings, cannot be learnt in isolation but "through multiple encounters in contexts of use, rather than separated from other words on a card" (Cameron, 2001, as cited in Purewal, 2008, p. 27).

Phonics. In contrast, Wolf (2018) describes "two strikingly different approaches to the teaching of reading" (p. 159), not acknowledging the *Whole Language* and the *Whole Word* as two different approaches but as only one, proposing the *Phonics Approach* by comparison. According to the author, this approach consists of children understanding the basic elements underlying the alphabetic principle: "that words consist of sounds or phonemes and that these sounds correspond to letters in the alphabet, with rules that can be learned as the entry to reading" (p. 159). This approach shifts the emphasis to systematic rules about connecting letters to sounds.

The Simple View of Reading. In 1986, while the Whole Language approach was dominant, researchers Gough and Tunmer (1986) proposed the *Simple View of Reading*. It considers reading comprehension (R) as the product of two independent factors: decoding ability (D) and language comprehension (C). In opposition to Whole Language methodology, the Simple View approach places decoding as a necessary (though by itself, insufficient) condition for reading comprehension to occur. Gough and Tunmer (1986) defined the skilled decoder as a reader "who can read isolated words quickly, accurately, and silently" (p. 7). However, as the term decoding connotes and denotes the use of letter-sound correspondence rules, it cannot be paralleled with word recognition. At the core of this theory, lies the concept that what is decoded, must also be understood. Even though decoding is not sufficient for reading, it is necessary. The *Simple View* affirms that decoding and comprehension are essential to reading.

1.2. The Discussion on Phonics

Later on, in 2005, Johnston and Watson published the results of a seven-year study carried out in Scotland, *The Effects of Synthetic Phonics Teaching on Reading and Spellings Attainment* (2005), on the effectiveness of synthetic phonics in teaching reading and spelling. The study was conducted with 300 children for 16 weeks, beginning soon after entry to the first year of formal schooling. For 20 minutes per day, children divided into 3 groups were taught the

synthetic phonics method, the standard analytic phonics programme, and an analytics phonics programme which included systematic phonemic awareness teaching without reference to print. The results showed that the synthetic phonics-taught group was reading and spelling 7 months ahead of their expected level. Furthermore, a 7-year follow-up on these 300 children demonstrated that the gains not only persisted but accelerated. By the end of the children's seventh year of primary schooling, the children who had been taught synthetic phonics during their first year had increased from 7 months to 3 years and 6 months ahead of chronological age. The gain in spelling had improved from 7 months to 1 year and 9 months ahead of chronological age.

In response to *The Effects of Synthetic Phonics Teaching on Reading and Spellings attainment* (2005), the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned Rose to conduct a national review of reading instruction in the early years, particularly looking at the role of Synthetic Phonics. The findings of the *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading*, published in 2006, single out and fully embrace only *synthetic* phonics rather than the more inclusive umbrella term, *systematic* phonics. However, *The Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* (2006) acknowledged the "uncertainties of research" (para. 47), but also highlighted the conceptual coherence of Synthetic Phonics, "it teaches children directly what they need to know" (para. 47). On this basis, they recommended synthetic phonics as the way forward:

> The sum of these represent 'high-quality phonic work'… High-quality phonic work is not a 'strategy' so much as a body of knowledge, skills and understanding that has to be learned. From work considered by this review, the balance of advantage favours teaching it discreetly as the *prime approach* to establishing word recognition. This is because successful phonic work for word recognition is a time-limited activity that is eventually overtaken by work that develops comprehension (sections 52-53).

As a result of *The Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* (2006), reading instruction in England starts to diverge from that of the rest of the English-speaking world as it avoids two pitfalls: (1) it specifically recommends the only bottom-up approach to reading instruction that exists: *synthetic* phonics; (2) it focuses on the *Simple View of Reading* fostering the understanding of reading comprehension correctly: as the product of both decoding and language comprehension.

Blevins (2006) outlines how a strong decoding ability is necessary for reading comprehension: as the reader maps sounds onto spellings, word recognition improves and develops. The more words the reader recognizes, the easier the reading task becomes. When children are able to recognize a large number of words quickly and accurately, "reading fluency improves" (Blevins, 1998, p. 8). As more and more words are stored in the memory, the reader gains fluency and automaticity. Hook and Jones (2004) address these terms as follows:

Automaticity is defined as fast, accurate and effortless word identification at the single word level. The speed and accuracy with which single words are identified is the best predictor of comprehension. Fluency, on the other hand, involves not only automatic word identification but also the application of appropriate prosodic features (rhythm, intonation, and phrasing) at the phrase, sentence, and text levels. (p. 16)

In a nutshell, reading fluency improves reading comprehension as children no longer struggle to decode words, therefore, their full attention is dedicated to making meaning from the text.

From the cognitive neuroscience perspective, Wolf (2018) affirms that repetition fostered in the phonics approach "provides children with the multiple exposures they need to learn and consolidate the rules for letters and their corresponding sounds and increase their knowledge

of words, stories and literature" (p. 160-161). The author highlights the importance of repetition as it stimulates "the growth of high-quality representations from phonemes to graphemes to word meanings and grammatical forms" (Wolf, 2018, p. 161).

1.3. Synthetic Phonics

Data have been presented in the literature review which show that, due to the fact that reading challenges were observed in native English children encountering texts in their L1, several approaches have been proposed to teach people to read. The synthetic phonics approach proves to be the most effective as "it teaches children directly what they need to know" (Rose, 2006, para. 47). Children are taught the sounds of individual letters separately to blend them together in order to form a word in a systematic fashion.

Considering that the synthetic phonics approach still remains widely unknown in countries where English is taught both as a second and foreign language, there is an insufficient number of research studies on the subject. Research into how synthetic phonics supports English as a Foreign Language (EFL) children in learning to read has been limited to date. Purewal (2008) cautions that there has been a "lack of research done in relation to second language learners and synthetic phonics" (p. 48). Additionally, this author outlines the impossibility to "locate studies which had a consistent length of intervention" (Purewal, 2008, p. 48). However, some authors such as Jamaludin et al. (2015) have carried out a few research studies in which they have found relevant evidence. For example, in *The Effectiveness of Synthetic Phonics in the Development of Early Reading Skills among Struggling Young ESL Readers* (2015), these authors have found that "children with poor reading strategies have difficulty in reading in a second language" (p. 2). Moreover, as suggested by Shemesh and Waller (2000), if learning to decode using synthetic phonics has been established to be an essential skill to becoming a fluent reader, learning to segment is believed to help to spell, especially struggling non-native English students. Nevertheless, most studies have not been conducted in countries where English is not spoken as L1. Therefore, further research must be carried out concerning second and foreign language learners in non-English-speaking countries regarding the application of a synthetic phonics program.

The general objective of this study was to assess how the implementation of a phonics program can help a group of 11 learners of EFL —who are in Year 1 at a non-denominational co-ed bilingual school in Hurlingham— develop and improve their reading comprehension skills, focusing on accuracy and fluency. This program was implemented in this particular group of students for a 3-week period that consists of six interventions. By the end of the study, these learners were able to produce those sounds they are not able to produce so far.

The aim of this study is to assess how the implementation of actions to enhance the relationship between phoneme-grapheme can help learners of EFL develop and improve fluency and accuracy when decoding.

The researchers framed and limited this aim by examining three aspects of this program:

1. How can the implementation of a phonics program contribute to improving fluency in a group of 11 students who are between 6-7 years old, taking English lessons at a non-denominational co-ed bilingual school in Hurlingham who have English as a Foreign Language on a daily basis?
2. How can the implementation of a phonics program contribute to improving accuracy in a group of 11 students who are between 6-7 years old, taking English lessons at a non-denominational co-ed bilingual school in Hurlingham who have English as a Foreign Language on a daily basis?

3. How can 3-times a-week interventions implemented for 3 weeks enhance these students' fluency and accuracy when reading aloud?

To answer these research questions, the researchers focused on the following specific objectives: (a) To assess the ORF rate attained by these students, (b) to assess the level of decoding accuracy achieved by this group of learners, and (c) to analyse the results of six interventions implemented for three weeks to enhance these students' fluency and accuracy when reading unconsolidated specific sounds.

To achieve this aim, the research methods used included a screening check to assess and identify the sounds that students could decode —which means recognizing the sound each letter makes— and the sounds that students cannot, yet, decode. The screening check is a simple assessment carried out by the researchers with each student individually, both at the beginning and last stage of this study, which contains forty words that are divided into two groups: real words and pseudowords. Furthermore, in order to have evidence of these students' fluency and level of comprehension, a short text was provided for them to read aloud.

The results appeared to indicate that the phonics approach helps improve reading skills such as fluency and accuracy in a group of 11 6-and-7-year-old students attending Year 1 at a non-denominational co-ed bilingual primary school in Hurlingham given that the implementation of this program contributed to enhancing unconsolidated sounds. The conclusion reached is that the synthetic phonics approach shows to have a beneficial impact on this group of learners.

The remainder of this paper is divided into three sections: Section 1 proposes assessing, on the one hand, the oral reading fluency (ORF) rate and, on the other hand, the level of decoding accuracy attained by this group of learners. Section 2, analyses the results of the interventions implemented for three weeks to enhance these students' fluency and accuracy when reading unconsolidated specific sounds. The paper closes with recommendations on how to best implement the program and finally offers suggestions for further research to be carried out in this field.

2. Methods

Hernández Sampieri (2014) highlights that in the qualitative approach several subjective realities exist; therefore, the qualitative researcher proceeds from the premise that the social world is relative, meaning that it can only be understood from the point of view of the participants studied. Alongside Hernandez Sampieri, Ogier (1998) defines qualitative research as "mainly descriptive" (p.39) and involving the collection and analysis of data regarding motivations, attitudes, and beliefs.

Within this approach, it is possible to find diverse qualitative designs, being *Action Research* (AR) one of them. Regarding the educational field, Elliot (1978) argues that *Educational Research* -also known as *teacher research*-"is carried out with the practical intention of changing a situation to make it more educationally worthwhile" (as cited in Noffke & Somekh, 2009, p. 22). In line with this, Sandín (2003, cited in Hernández Sampieri, 2014) considers that the aim of AR is to comprehend and solve specific problems to promote social change, transform the social, educational, administrative, and economic reality, and make people aware of their role in this transformation process.

Action Research seemed to be the most suitable qualitative design for the accomplishment of this study since this paper belongs to the educational field. The focus was on a practical issue which is not only problematic but also capable of being changed. To gain an understanding of which sound/s learners were not able to produce, yet, and to overcome this shortcoming, "a straightforward cycle of identifying a problem, planning an intervention, implementing the

intervention, [and] evaluating the outcome" (Cohen et. al., 2007, p. 312) was carried out by the researchers. Lastly, the chosen study design was exploratory since researchers explored what was happening in a given context.

2.1. Context

The present study was carried out in a non-denominational co-ed primary school in Hurlingham, Buenos Aires. The school is private and offers bilingual education as from Year 1[1]. The students are introduced to the English language in Kindergarten and when they start Year 1, the synthetic phonics approach is employed to teach them how to read in the foreign language. The students attend Spanish lessons in the morning (from 7.55 to 11.40) and English lessons in the afternoon (from 12.40 to 16.10). The teacher of English delivers Language, Phonics, Maths, and Science lessons, all in the target language. Also, students have Reading lessons once a week, during which they are divided into small groups made of 4 or 5 students. The eleven learners that participated in this study are in Year 1. The school has the means to provide the resources necessary to follow the synthetic phonics approach, such as cards, flashcards, posters, and sets of phonics reading books. Teachers are also trained into the synthetic phonics approach in different ways: Teachers are invited to attend the phonics courses delivered at the English Speaking Scholastic Association of the River Plate (ESSARP) and even some workshops prepared by fellow teachers within the school so to be provided all the necessary knowledge to carry out the programme. Furthermore, a teacher who specializes in phonics prepares special lessons for students in need of support and offers ideas and assistance to the other teachers.

2.2. Limitations

One of the limitations was the learners' parents' consent and the school's consent as well. Despite the fact they were kept abreast of every proceeding, the possibility of rejecting their children's participation in the research was not to be dismissed. A consent form was sent to these parents and the school principal of the English Department in written form in order to explain to them what the research involved: the reading aloud of a text to check the students' fluency and comprehension. In case children showed weakness in the production of a certain phoneme, the flaw would be worked during the support lessons delivered at the support center. Learners would be grouped according to the sound they were not able to produce, yet, with the aim of overcoming the shortcoming.

Another constraint was related to time. The research was carried out three times a week for three weeks. Time slots were to be respected, limiting the extension of each group meeting to no more than twenty minutes. Furthermore, the teacher would stay in the classroom with the children who were not participating in the study, which may be considered an obstacle in her planning. In addition, the other Year 1 group also had to adapt to follow the same planning.

Another limitation was one related to the reading fluency assessment: The researchers found that time lacked to carry out the necessary actions to show the benefits from gaining fluency. There was no time available to take the children out for more practice than the ones that were going to take place.

Just as importantly, limitations related to reliability and validity may also be considered. Since our research was carried out in a specific natural setting, there exists the difficulty of replicating the study and finding similar results in other educational contexts. Moreover, it should be

[1] In Argentina, Educación Primaria (EP) comprises from year 1 to year 6.

highlighted that the research was conducted in a group of students who have been previously introduced into the phonics programme. Therefore, the research could fall short if it were implemented in a different context.

2.3. Delimitations

The procedures of this study included screening checks, decodable books, remedial work sessions, assessment sessions, and analysis of the data collected.

The screening check was followed by a text the students were asked to read while they were timed to assess fluency. They were also asked to answer three questions to check comprehension.

Remedial work sessions consisted of activities used to reinforce the sounds and practise decoding and blending. Phonemic awareness was also used so as to help students identify phonemes and graphemes. As the Phonics programme is multi-sensory, practise involved tracing, touching, moving, and singing.

The subjects of this study attend phonics lessons everyday for a period of forty minutes.

As regards consent forms, parents' consent was necessary as students are under eighteen years old. The consent form was sent to parents including a description of the study. The forms were sent in Spanish as most of the students' parents do not speak English. The same applied to the school consent. Confidentiality was guaranteed as neither the school's name nor the students' names are provided.

2.4. Participants

The study was carried out in a non-denominational co-ed bilingual primary school in the city of Hurlingham, in the western area of Greater Buenos Aires. The investigation was targeted at a group of 11 students, who are aged between 6 and 7, attending Year 1 at this institution. These learners —whose linguistic proficiency corresponds to level A1 in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (2001)—have had English lessons since kindergarten from Monday to Friday on a regular basis in the afternoon. Their lessons in the target language —which include Phonics, Language, Maths, Science, and Reading— last approximately three and a half hours, with two 10-minute breaks in between. This group was chosen for the study considering they have Phonics lessons every day for forty minutes as part of the curriculum. Participation was obtained through a consent form signed by the students' parents which implied the voluntary participation of these learners in the study as well as a consent form signed by the school headmistress.

2.5. Materials

Data was collected through the use of the following tools:

- Phonics screening check (see Figure 1), which is an analysis grid to assess how students identify and blend sounds together.
- A short decodable book to assess comprehension through 3 comprehension questions.
- An Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) rubric (see Figures 2 & 3)
- Flashcards
- Worksheets
- Videos
- Songs
- Audio recordings to collect students' performance

Information was also collected through the reading aloud of a timed short decodable book by two students participating in the study for the purpose of assessing accuracy and fluency. Fluency was assessed through the reading aloud of a short decodable text and an ORF rubric (see Figure 2). After reading, students were also asked to answer three questions to check comprehension. Furthermore, as the phonics program is multi-sensory, learners were encouraged to perform kinesthetic movements such as singing, using gestures, tracing, and touching, among other activities.

Section 1					**Section 2**				
	Word	Correct	Incorrect	Comment		Word	Correct	Incorrect	Comment
1	ant				21	ulf			
2	box				22	blan			
3	tox				23	yell			
4	bug				24	fape			
5	vap				25	kick			
6	tree				26	spron			
7	chm				27	man			
8	dop				28	stroft			
9	van				29	shin			
10	terg				30	hook			
11	quemp				31	rain			
12	egg				32	fusp			
13	dark				33	start			
14	geck				34	shig			
15	pie				35	week			
11	zoom				36	yad			
17	chort				37	day			
18	bim				38	blem			
19	book				39	meck			
20	sut				40	vet			

Figure 1. Screening Check - Year 1 - Phonics Screening Check

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5
Overall Judgement	Reader's focus is decoding the sounds in words.	Reader's focus is reading whole words.	Reader's focus is matching reading to the syntax.	Reader's focus is using expression to convey meaning.	Reader is mastering reading fluency for his or her grade.
Accuracy	Mostly reads sound by sound and then blends to read the whole word. Sometimes makes errors in identifying the sounds and/or blending.	Mostly reads whole words. Sometimes needs to segment the sounds first. Some self-correction.	Reads whole words. Often self-corrects errors: mispronounced words or parts of words, or misread words.	Correctly pronounces most of the words exactly as they are written and according to context. Self-corrects almost all errors.	Correctly pronounces and enunciates all of the words exactly as they are written and according to context.
Fluidity (automaticity) ***Target Rate Norms on reverse***	*Reads more than 25% below the target rate norm for grade.*	Reads the text word by word. *Reads below the target rate norm for grade.*	Mostly reads the text by chunking phrases. *Generally, reads at target rate norm for grade.*	Chunks phrases to read the text like natural speech. *Reads at target rate norm for grade.*	Reads the entire text like natural speech. *Reads at or above target rate norm for grade.*
Prosody (expression, reading according to syntax to show understanding) ***Tones includes appropriate volume / projection***	Is not yet using punctuation marks to guide reading.	Occasionally pauses or changes tone according to punctuation marks e.g. for a question mark or exclamation mark. Might 'skip' or re-read sections of the text.	Usually uses appropriate pauses according to punctuation marks. Uses some appropriate voice tones. Might 'skip' individual words.	Pauses appropriately for most punctuation marks. Mostly uses appropriate variety of tones to convey emotions of characters or story/text events.	Appropriately pauses according to the types of punctuation marks. Uses appropriate variety of voice tones to convey emotions of characters or story/text events.

Figure 2. Fluency Assessment Rubric

Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) Target Rate Norms

Grade	Fall (WCPM)	Winter (WCPM)	Spring (WCPM)
1		10-30	30-60
2	30-60	50-80	70-100
3	50-90	70-100	80-110
4	70-110	80-120	100-140
5	80-120	100-140	110-150
6	100-140	110-150	120-160
7	110-150	120-160	130-170
8	120-160	130-170	140-180

Figure 3. Fluency Rate

2.6. Procedures

Students were administered the screening check (see Figure 4), where they were asked to decode forty words divided into two groups: both containing real words and pseudo-words. Pseudo-words were accompanied by a picture of an imaginary creature to help students distinguish between real words and pseudowords. This distinction enables students to

contextualise and identify real words. The grid (see Figure 1) allowed the researchers to identify the sounds that need support. Then, students read a decodable book and the researchers asked three questions to check comprehension. These sessions were recorded in order for the researchers to ensure reliability and resort to the materials as many times as necessary, and become familiar with the data as well.

Section 1 **Section 2**

Word
ant
box
tox
bug
vap
tree
chom
dop
van
terg

Word
quemp
egg
dark
geck
pie
zoom
chort
bim
book
sut

Word
ulf
blan
yell
fape
kick
spron
man
stroft
shin
hook

Word
rain
fusp
start
shig
week
yad
day
blem
meck
vet

Figure 4. Screening Check for Students - Year 1

After the results were analysed, students attended support sessions during which they were provided with the specific practice for the identified sounds. During these sessions, the following work was carried out: (a) A story was told that had the intended sound and actions incorporated into the storyline. The students were invited to imitate the sound and mimic the action and to watch a video with the story and a song with the action. Words containing the grapheme were shown in the video highlighting the grapheme and modeling the pronunciation. Students were encouraged to decode the word along with the video. In the following session, students were presented with flashcards to decode while playing a game. Before the session finished students were given a worksheet with some words to decode and identify the grapheme.

Once these support sessions were completed, students were asked to retake the screening check so as to compare the results from the first screening check with the second one.

3. Results

The objective of this study was to assess how the implementation of a phonics program can help a group of 11 learners of English as a Foreign Language aged between 6 and 7—who are in Year 1 at a non-denominational co-ed bilingual school in Hurlingham—develop and improve their reading comprehension skills, focusing on accuracy and fluency.

In order to collect data, the screening check was carried out (see Figure 5). It contained 40 words which were intended to test students' skill at decoding as they select the correct phoneme for the word. The established threshold mark in England is 32, which means that children are expected to read 32 words correctly to achieve the expected standard. It is worth mentioning

that although in Argentina students learn English as a Foreign Language, the same standards are followed in this non-denominational co-ed bilingual institution in which the research has been conducted. In the present study, over a quarter of the students achieved this goal (see Table 1).

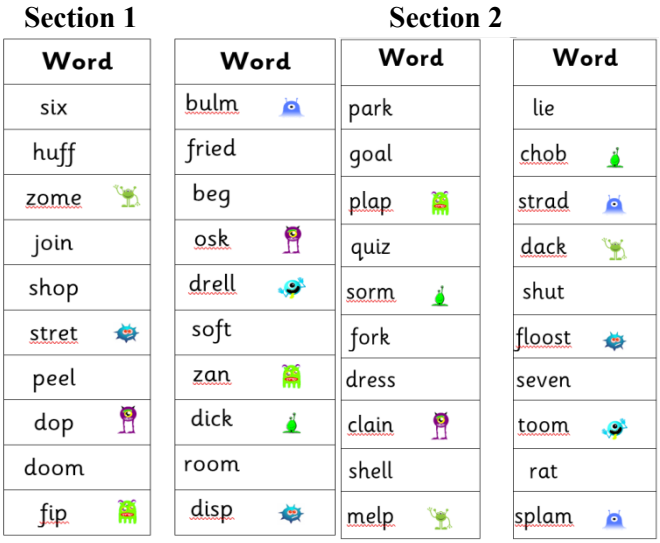
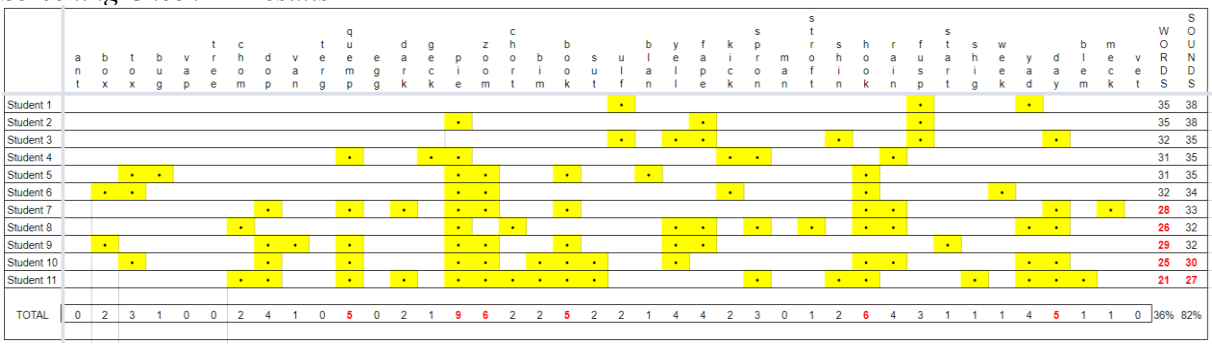


Figure 5. Screening Check 2 for Students - Year 1

Table 1.
Screening Check 1 - Results



However, for the purpose of the present study, the focus was placed on the sounds. Only a tenth were incorrectly decoded by more than half of the children (see Table 2). Some sounds have been pronounced incorrectly repeatedly, as in the words *zoom*, *book*, and *hook* (see Table 3). In most cases, the three words were read as containing the sound o /ɒ/, instead of oo (/u:/ and /ʊ/). The analysis of the sounds showed that the most difficult phoneme to be pronounced correctly was the long vowel *ie* /aɪ /, followed by both *oo* /u:/ and /ʊ/ and *ai* /eɪ/. In total, out of the 40 words, The vast majority of the students achieved the threshold in producing the correct sound when decoding.

Table 2.
Screening Check 1 - Comparison between Words and Sounds Decoded

Student	Correct words		Correct sounds	
	n	**%**	***n***	**%**
Student 1	35	88	38	95
Student 2	35	88	38	95
Student 3	32	80	35	88
Student 4	31	78	35	88
Student 5	31	78	35	88
Student 6	32	80	34	85
Student 7	28	70	33	83
Student 8	26	65	32	80
Student 9	29	73	32	80
Student 10	25	63	30	75
Student 11	21	53	27	68

Table 3.
Incorrect Decoded Sounds

Sound	Incorrect	
	n	**%**
ie	9	82
ai	6	55
oo-oo	6	55
qu	5	45
b	4	36
y	4	36
u	3	27
ck	2	18
x	2	18
sh	2	18
ch	2	18
ee	1	9
s a t p i	0	0
n c/k ck e h r	0	0
m d g o	0	0
l f v	0	0
z w	0	0
v	0	0
th	0	0

Note. Sounds showing correct pronunciation have been grouped according to presentation planning.

As regards oral reading fluency (ORF) (see Figure 6), in the non-denominational co-ed bilingual school under analysis, students are expected to read the 40 words in between 4 and 9 minutes. Again, most of the students decoded the words in less than 4 minutes, and the remaining minority decoded words in less than 9 minutes.

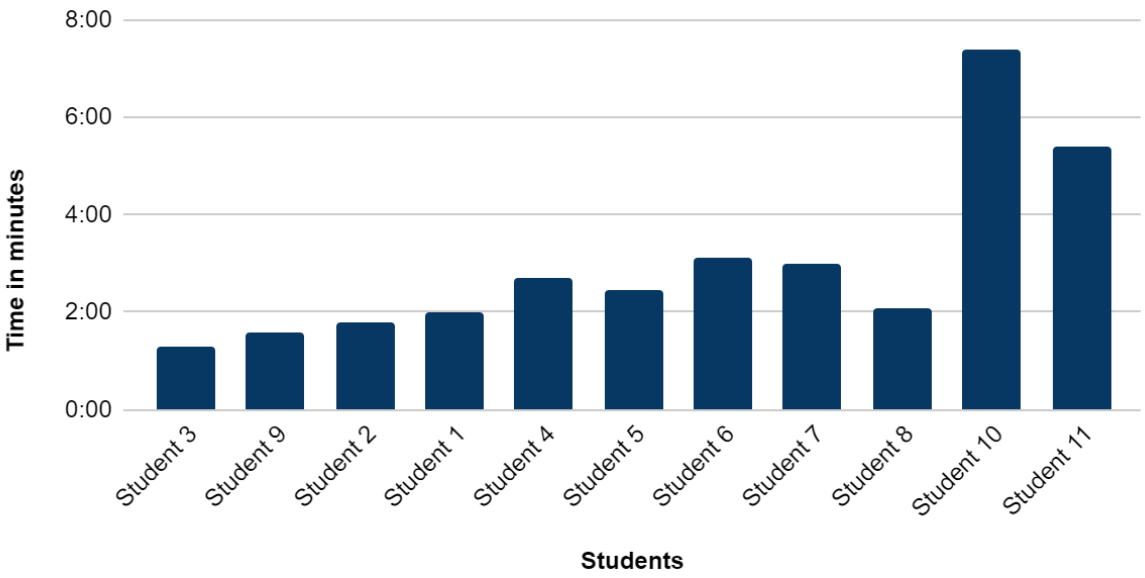


Figure 6. Oral Reading Fluency

During the remedial sessions, students completed all the proposed activities. The first session, students were shown the video with the digraph *ie* and the story. They sang the song and mimicked the action for the sound. They watched the presentation of words containing the phoneme and practised sounding out the words. The second session, another video was introduced with a story containing words with the *ie* sound followed by flashcards of the same words from the video to practise the sound and decode the words while playing a game. The third session, students were asked to mimic the action and say the sound. Flashcards from the previous session were presented as a revision and then students completed a worksheet where they decoded words and identified the ones that contained the *ie* sound. The fourth session, the sequence was repeated and students were asked to decode and identify words involving the *ie* grapheme from a worksheet. At the end of this session, a video containing the *oo* digraph was presented. In the fifth session, a short video comprising the *oo* digraph and some words to decode was watched, followed by a game using flashcards encompassing both sounds: *ie* and *oo*. The final session involved a memory matching game using the flashcards from all previous sessions.

Along the remedial sessions, students seemed to be slowly building the concept that the digraph *ie* corresponds to the sound /ai/. Most of them, when blending the sounds, started self-correcting, showing the connection being made between grapheme and phoneme. By the fourth session, when the digraph *oo* was reintroduced, it showed the same pace of performance by the students. It is important to mention that the digraph *ie* was practised during the six sessions, while the digraph *oo*, was worked on only the last 3 sessions.

After the remedial sessions, a second screening check (see Figure 7) was carried out in order to evaluate the outcome (see Figure 9 for researchers' grid). In this test, most of the students achieved the threshold of 32 correct words (see Table 4). As regards sounds, all the students achieved the threshold (see Table 5). Among the sounds that were incorrectly decoded in the first test, the long vowel *ie* /aɪ / was accurately produced by half of the students the second time while *oo* /u:/ and /ʊ/ was correctly pronounced also by half of the students (see Table 4). The long vowel *ai* /eɪ/ was erroneously pronounced by a slightly higher number of students. However, the sound q /kjuː/ was incorrectly produced by a larger number of students. All in all, only a fifth of the students did not achieve the threshold (see Table 4).

	Word	Correct	Incorrect	Comment		Word	Correct	Incorrect	Comment
1	Six				21	park			
2	huff				22	goal			
3	zome				23	plap			
4	join				24	quiz			
5	shop				25	sorm			
6	stret				26	fork			
7	peel				27	dress			
8	dop				28	clain			
9	doom				29	shell			
10	fip				30	melp			
11	bulm				31	lie			
12	fried				32	chob			
13	beg				33	strad			
14	osk				34	dack			
15	drell				35	shut			
11	soft				36	floost			
17	zan				37	seven			
18	dick				38	toom			
19	room				39	rat			
20	disp				40	splam			

Figure 7. Screening Check 2 for Students - Year 1

Table 4.
Screening Check 2 - Results

	six	huff	zome	join	shop	street	peel	dop	doom	fip	bulm	fried	beg	bosk	drell	soft	zank	dick	room	dosp	park	goal	plap	quiz	sorm	fork	dress	clain	shell	melp	lie	chob	strad	dack	shut	floost	seven	toom	rat	splam	WORDS	SOUNDS
Student 4			•																																						39	39
Student 7											•													•				•													37	37
Student 9															•									•																	38	37
Student 5		•		•							•																	•							•	•					34	36
Student 2												•												•				•				•				•					35	35
Student 3		•		•							•	•			•									•											•						33	35
Student 6															•									•							•				•	•		•			34	35
Student 8									•			•							•					•			•	•			•					•		•			31	35
Student 10											•	•	•									•						•			•										34	35
Student 1		•	•	•		•			•		•	•			•						•			•				•							•	•					27	32
Student 11																																										
TOTAL	0	3	2	3	0	1	0	0	2	0	4	5	1	0	4	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	7	0	0	1	6	0	0	3	1	0	0	4	5	0	2	0	0	20%	100%

Table 5.
Screening Check 2 - Comparison between Words and Sounds Decoded

Student	Correct words		Correct sounds	
	n	%	*n*	%
Student 4	39	98	39	98
Student 9	38	95	37	93
Student 7	37	93	37	93
Student 5	34	85	36	90
Student 2	35	88	35	88
Student 6	34	85	35	88
Student 10	34	85	35	88
Student 3	33	83	35	88
Student 8	31	78	35	88
Student 1	27	68	32	80
Student 11[a]				

[a] Student 11 did not participate in Screening Check 2.

The analysis of the first screening check indicated that most students did not correctly decode the sound /ai/, but the second screening check showed that learners' performance had raised significantly above the first screening check. By this stage, students could associate the digraph *ie* with the corresponding sound /ai/, correctly decoding words such as *fried* and *lie*.

As regards the digraph *oo,* the results of the second screening test showed slight improvement over the first screening check, which can be attributed to the fact that this sound was practised half of the time than /ai/. Although pseudo-words such as *toom* and *floost* had shown inconsistencies, most of the students pronounced the former correctly whereas the latter was only pronounced correctly by half of the students. Real words, such as *room* and *doom* had been correctly decoded by most of the students.

Concern may arise from the increase in the second screening check where some learners showed more problems when decoding the grapheme *q*. This result may be due to the fact that phonics programmes use the Sassoon font for all the material and resources, such as books, flashcards and worksheets. This particular font differs from the Spanish cursive, causing confusion when decoding for Spanish students. Difficulties with other graphemes, such as *k,* can be overcome by the use of the same font and handwriting both in English and in Spanish.

Even though time was short and limited because the sessions lasted only 20 minutes, the work carried out throughout the sessions enabled students to establish the correct association between sound and letter, improving accuracy.

With respect to ORF, most of the students (see Figure 8) decoded the words in less than three minutes and only one of the students decoded the words in less than 5 minutes. In fact, the comparison between the ORF rate in the first and the second screening check (see Figure 9) showed an improvement when decoding.

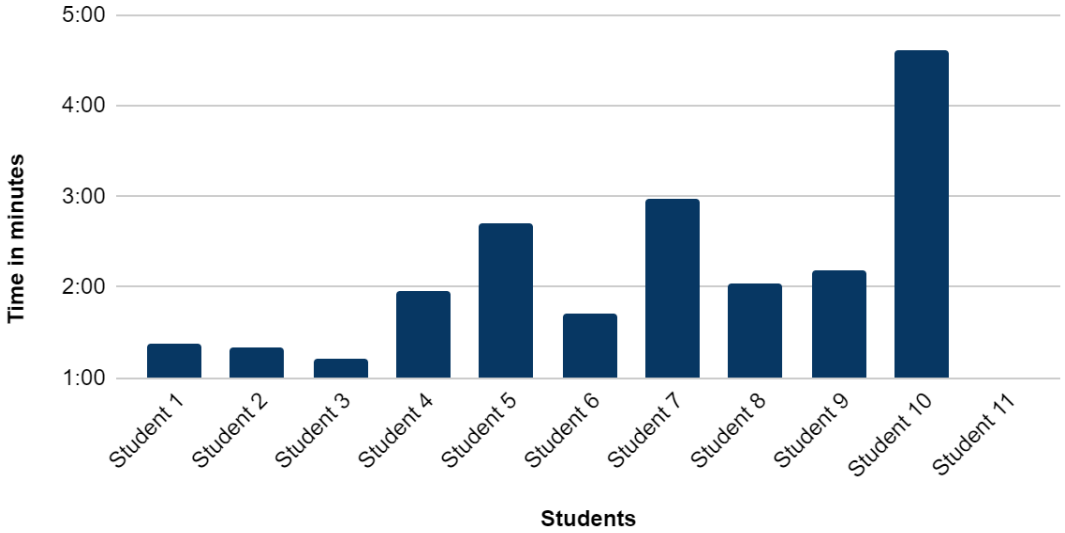


Figure 8. Screening Check 2 - Oral Reading Fluency
Note. Student 11 did not participate in Screening Check 2.

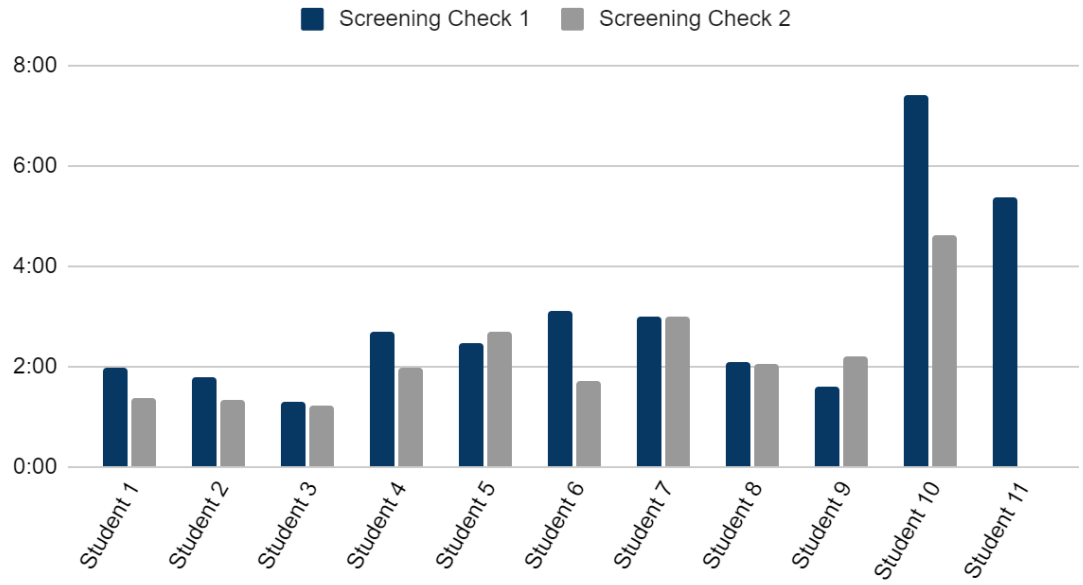


Figure 9. Comparison between Oral Reading Fluency in Screening Check 1 and Screening Check 2
Note. Student 11 did not participate in Screening Check 2.

4. Discussions

In this section, the outcomes and contributions of the present study will be discussed in the light of the literature of synthetic phonics and the literature of literacy, L1 and EFL as well. This study proposed answering three questions in order to assess the benefits of implementing a synthetic phonics programme to teach children to read in EFL developing their reading skills such as fluency and accuracy, and whether remedial sessions can enhance students' performance when decoding. The hypothesis raised was related to the implementation of this

programme in a group of 11 students —aged between 6 and 7, attending Year 1 at a non-denominational co-ed bilingual school in the city of Hurlingham— during six interventions in a period of three weeks and its positive contribution by the end of the study in the enhancement of these learners' pronunciation of unconsolidated sounds.

4.1. As Regards Accuracy

The significant difference in the increase in scores when decoding demonstrates the strong effects that the use of synthetic phonics has on accuracy (see Table 6 & Figure 10). Moreover, as students were exposed to phonological knowledge, the foundation to decoding skills, it can be established that the synthetic phonics approach enhances phonemic awareness in EFL learners, which in turn, improves decoding accuracy. Furthermore, in the context of the present study, where students' native language is transparent, these results confirm that the synthetic phonics programme becomes a valuable advantage as it helps learners to overcome the difficulty of reading in English, especially considering that English language is opaque (Hardy, 2013).

Table 6.
Comparison between Incorrect Decoded Sounds in Screening Check 1 and 2

Sound	**Incorrect**		**Incorrect**	
	n	**%**	**n**	**%**
ie	9	82	5	50
ai	6	55	6	60
oo-oo	6	55	5	50
qu	5	45	7	70
b	4	36	1	10
y	4	36	0	0
u	3	27	4	40
ck	2	18	0	0
x	2	18	0	0
sh	2	18	0	0
ch	2	18	1	10
ee	1	9	0	0
satpi	0	0	0	0
n c/k ck e h r	0	0	1	10
m d g o	0	0	0	0
l f v	0	0	0	0
z w	0	0	0	0
v	0	0	0	0
th	0	0	0	0

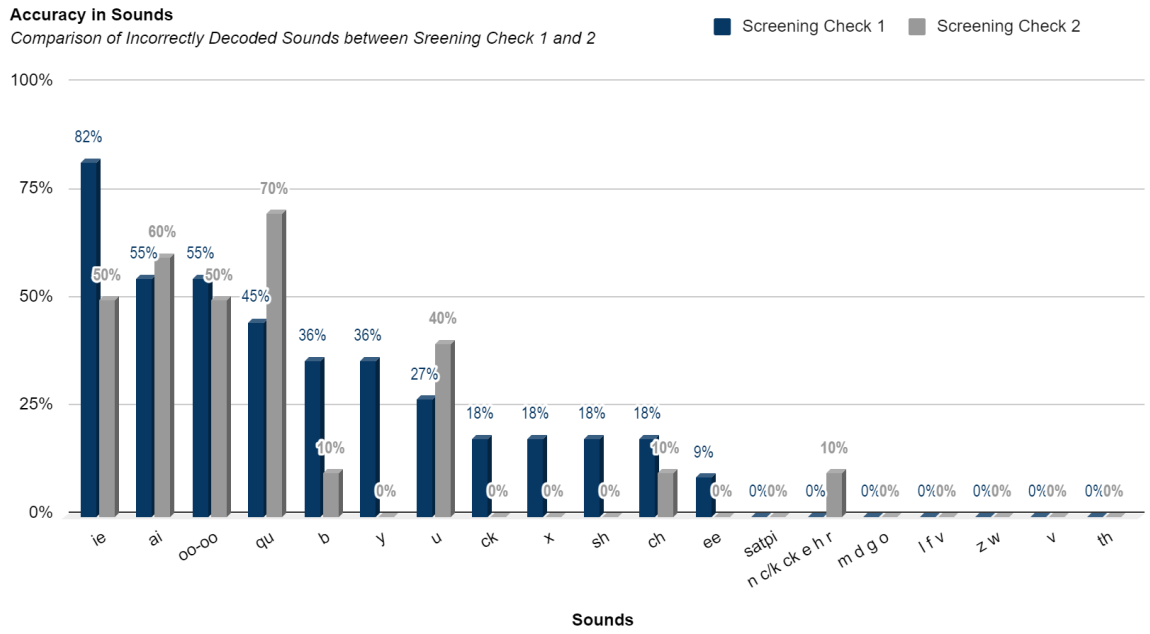


Figure 10. Comparison of Incorrectly Decoded Sounds in Screening Check 1 and 2
Note. Student 11 did not participate in Screening Check 2.

Another implication of these findings is that by using pseudo-words the researchers could confirm that students were not decoding the words by sight or memory, contrary to what the *Whole Word* or *Look-say* approach proposes. Also, the use of pseudowords evidences whether students are going through the logographic stage, alphabetic stage, or orthographic stage (Frith, 1986, cited in Kormos and Smith, 2012) in the reading process.

The researchers consider these findings to be consistent with research showing that learning to decode using phonics is an essential skill to becoming a fluent reader.

4.2. As Regards Fluency

The present results agree with Blevins' (2006) belief regarding decoding abilities, who states that these skills are of paramount importance to enhance and develop word recognition in order to improve fluency, thus simplifying the reading task.

In relation to fluency, although the comprehension tests could not be completed due to limitations of time, students were assessed during the screening checks using the standards of L1 learners, and not only did students decode within the time frame but also improved the ORF rate. From these results, it is clear that using a synthetic phonics program helps EFL learners enhance their reading fluency. Even though it is not their native language, they achieved the same ORF rate as L1 learners.

4.3. As Regards Interventions

The teaching of phonics should be explicit and systematic to support learners in making connections between what they hear, the phonemes, and the way in which these words are written, the graphemes. These short-term synthetic phonics interventions showed that phonics instruction helps EFL learners improve their accuracy significantly. Moreover, the fact that due to time and curriculum constraints the interventions had to take place 3 times a week instead of on a daily basis, shows that the synthetic phonics program can be used in non-bilingual schools to teach EFL learners to read in English. However, it is important to highlight once

more that the program has to be followed systematically, as these researchers did when carrying out the scheduled interventions.

The reliability and validity of these results are impacted by the specific natural setting in which the research study was conducted. Therefore, the replication of the study and findings of similar results in other educational contexts may be hardly likely. In addition, as the research was carried out in a group of students previously introduced into the synthetic phonics programme, it may be unsuccessful when implemented in a different context.

In a nutshell, the results of the present study indicate that the synthetic phonics programme can be highly beneficial in teaching to read in EFL, improving students' reading skills such as accuracy and fluency. These findings can be linked to the claims of Johnson and Watson (2005) and *The Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* (2006) who found similar results in more longitudinal studies carried out in Scotland and England respectively. Hence, the researchers consider them beneficial when coping with educational matters of this kind.

5. Conclusions

The general objective of this research was to assess how the implementation of actions to enhance the relationship between phoneme-grapheme can help learners of EFL develop and improve fluency and accuracy when decoding. In light of the results, it can be concluded that the research questions raised whether the implementation of synthetic phonics would benefit the enhancement of accuracy and fluency when reading aloud in order to further the pronunciation of unconsolidated sounds supported the advantages of deploying this programme. Therefore, recapturing these initial inquiries, it can be claimed that such an approach helped to significantly improve the *ie* and *oo* phonemes, whose spelling had not been previously achieved by these learners before the interventions carried out by the researchers.

5.1. Recommendations

The present study has contributed to the growing corpus of research showing the benefits of using a synthetic phonics program in reading instruction in EFL. It may be worth noticing that if the study had been carried out with more time than allotted, better results could have been found regarding not only the improvement of these students' pronunciation of unconsolidated sounds but also fluency. Even though the researchers were able to corroborate their hypothesis, they consider it advisable to carry out more comprehensive research in order to drill down on the benefits of the synthetic phonics approach in EFL learners in the development of reading skills. Then, future studies could fruitfully explore this issue further by conducting a more longitudinal study.

As few research studies have been carried out on synthetic phonics in non-English speaking countries, the programme remains still unknown in places where English is learned as a Foreign or Second Language. Consequently, future research studies could address the benefits of implementing this programme to support non-native English students to read in EFL or ESL in countries where the target language is not spoken as L1.

Moreover, since this is an exploratory study that aimed to examine what happens in a specific context in which students have been previously introduced into the synthetic phonics programme since kindergarten, it could not rise to the occasion if it were implemented in a different educational setting. Therefore, the replication of the study and finding of similar results in other educational contexts may be hardly likely, which is desirable to consider for future work.

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