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Fostering Phonetics for Teaching English to ESL Students

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Research Paper - English

ABSTRACT

Phonics is not a good choice for ESL Students. They may not understand the vital role of phonics in learning this world language. In this context this paper discusses the essential role of phonetics in the teaching of English as a second language with focus of segmental and super segmental features of language. For ESL teachers, the question of whether to use phonics with students learning English is sometimes a difficult one to answer. Though much of English follows phonetics rules. Is phonetics a better way to teach pronunciation and reading? This question is being discussed in this paper.

Teaching English to second language learners is a challenge itself as they are lots of areas where they go wrong. Unfortunately students do not recognize exactly where they are making errors. ESL learners (particularly Indian learners) do blunders in spoken English as they are unaware of English sounds. They should be made aware of the lacunae in their pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation. So that they become eager to fill those lacunae. It is the responsibility of teacher to expose the students to maximum use of phonetics and show them how spoken English is different from written English. Spoken English follows phonetic rules. Do the drawbacks of phonics outweigh its benefits? Is phonetics a better way to teach pronunciation and reading? Or will it do ESL Students more harm than help? All these issues are discussed in this paper. Here

are some of the advantages and disadvantages attributed to phonics.

Benefits of phonics:

To understand letters:-

Phonics plays a vital role for students who are just learning the English alphabet. Indian students whose first language does not use the same alphabet as English does have an extra challenge as they learn English. Without associating sounds with letters may create obstacles in learning spoken English. For these students, phonics can be a great help. By studying sounds of each letter helps ESL Students in their pronunciation as well as in their reading.

To become better spellers :-

Phonics teaches ESL Students to break down words into syllables that helps them to become better spellers. They are able to understand sound of each part of a word determines the letters needed to write it. Many times spellings and pronunciations are totally different. The sound knowledge will help ESL Students this tricky characterstics of English.

To pronounce unknown words accurately:-

Phonics makes clear concept of word letters and sounds, so ESL Students can even read unfamiliar words in better way. This study helps them to sound out the letters and letter groups in new vocabulary and often accurately pronounce them on the first try. The ESL Students can relate the letters with sounds easily because of their study of phonics.

To enable Students to understand word structure :-

The study of phonics enables students to understands word structure with its phonemes. They get an advantage to decoding English words from their word roots. It becomes easy to them to understand spelling patterns as well as to make connections between spelling and meaning. This practice may help them to become familiar to new words that follow the spelling patterns they already know.

To enable students to pronounce English with correct tone :-

As G.B. Shaw has rightly said in his popular Essay 'Spoken English and Broken English', ESL Students are very poor in word accent and tone. Because of this they can't

converse well in English. Actually the fact is that in their study of language, phonics was not given prior importance. ESL Students are always confused at the time of speaking English. This confusion may be cleared with the study of phonics. Accurate understanding of sounds enables them to pronounce words with correct accent and tone.

To give confidence to ESL Students:-

Learning phonetics gives ESL Students a boost in their confidence. The study of phonics provides them the tools (the rules of sound and spelling in English) which enable them to produce this language accurately. Naturally their confidence increases which spill over them from reading and spelling into other areas of language learning. The study of phonic makes them bolder and more willing to experiment with English in other language situations.

Drawbacks of phonics:-

To many exceptions :-

English language becomes difficult because it has more exceptions to rules of sound and spelling. Phonics does teach the rules of spellings and pronunciation, but these rules can't apply to every word of the category. It makes students more confused if they depend solely on phonics as a reading and spelling strategy. Pronunciation of English words has changed over decades while spelling has remained the same. So students should be careful and be patient with the myriad exceptions in English.

Reading becomes prior to other skills:-

It has a chance in the learning of phonics that ESL Students who get success at phonics may become false readers. They are able to pronounce the familiar or unfamiliar words easily. But for ESL Students, comprehension is far more than reading a word on a page. The meaningful context is essential for students to get this language thoroughly. Learning of phonics gives this misunderstanding that students are reading words means they also know the meaning of them. If they are unable to use words appropriately, only reading words accurately does not get any value in learning this language.

Learning phonics demands too much extra efforts:-

For all second language learners of English, the English teacher's pronunciation becomes the only model that students adopt. This puts a great onus on the teacher. At

the same time, teaching phonics requires a lot of work on the teacher's part. He should constantly label and point out the letter patterns in words and help students recognize and remember them. Teaching phonics is a not a part of a topic only but a continuous efforts to enable students to understand word structure. This efforts can take a year or more. Phonics has significant advantages and disadvantages for second language learners of English. Listening, speaking and phonology will help students of phonics develop a more well rounded and more effective English learning strategy. Each teacher must determine and find the balance that is right for him or her to use it in the classroom with a little effort and some experimentation. Ultimately, no one system will be enough to teach ESL students flawless use of English and motivate them to work for it. The following are some ways through which a teacher can teach phonics to ESL students and make them aware the importance of learning phonetics. If teacher plans systematically phonics lessons, teacher as well as students can enjoy them and result of these classes will be positive.

Phonics can be taught at different levels:

- I. The first level concentrates on teaching sounds of the language.
- II. On the second level, teacher gives emphasis to teach students the connections between a letter or letters to each sound. Particularly for Indian students, the stress should be given to make them aware that written English and spoken English is different. At this stage, let students learn to blend letter sound to make simple decodable words. Be sure that this level should provide sufficient knowledge of phoneme and syllable structure to students.
- III. The third level presents diagraphs and trigraphs: sounds which are represented by more than one letter (for example 'ay' in play a e in bake as a split diagraph, and 'ght' in fight respectively). This level gives ESL Students good practice of correct pronunciation of spellings.
- IV. The last level presents frequent tricky words. ESL Students do not have base knowledge of vocabulary as native speakers. So at this level exposure of new unfamiliar tricky words should be given to the students and let practice them until they get hold on their pronunciation.

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Conclusion:-

With these efforts teacher can foster phonetics for learning English to ESL Students. I hope the awareness of phonics among teachers may give them enjoyment in classroom teaching. Their task of teaching English becomes easy.

This paper discusses how the teaching of phonics has to be encouraged. The atmosphere in the classroom has changed by focusing the cause root of the problem of teaching English to ESL Students. A teacher has to come out from the constrain of the curriculum and experiment some new ways to indulge ESL Students in learning phonics for the acquisition of English language. This will go a long way in minimizing the frustration that learners feel when they have to speak English.

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