Achieving reading skills in a group of EFL Ecuadorian children through English phonics

Alcançando habilidades de leitura em um grupo de crianças equatorianas EFL por meio da fonética do inglês

Logrando habilidades de lectura en un grupo de niños ecuatorianos EFL a través de la fonética en inglés

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Abstract
Reading is essential to develop while learning English as a foreign language. Thus, this study focuses on aiding children to enhance reading by first teaching them letter sounds instead of letter names. The goal is to teach children how to recognize and pronounce individual letters; if they can do so, children can combine those sounds with reading. Additionally, to mitigate the interference from the sound of L1 to L2 in some English words. The method used to answer the research questions; first teaching up to three blended letter sounds to engage kids in the development of reading English with the correct pronunciation. The results demonstrate in the mean word reading (pronunciation) test that most children had improved from 5.25 to 7.79. in their score. And the errors in the same word reading pronunciation test were reduced from 4.33 to 0.285. (Std. error mean). This study suggests that teaching English letter sounds to this group of children successfully enhanced reading from an early age.
Keywords: English Phonics; Blend letters; Reading; Letters sounds; Ecuadorians.

Resumo
A leitura é essencial para se desenvolver enquanto se aprende inglês como língua estrangeira. Assim, este estudo se concentra em ajudar as crianças a melhorar a leitura, primeiro ensinando-lhes os sons das letras em vez dos nomes das letras. O objetivo é ensinar as crianças a reconhecer e pronunciar letras individuais; se conseguirem, as crianças podem combinar esses sons com a leitura. Além disso, para atenuar a interferência do som de L1 para L2 em algumas palavras em inglês. O método utilizado para responder às questões de investigação; primeiro ensinando até três sons de letras combinadas para envolver as crianças no desenvolvimento da leitura em inglês com a pronúncia correta. Os resultados demonstram no teste de leitura média de palavras (pronúncia) que a maioria das crianças melhorou de 5,25 para 7,79. em sua pontuação. E os erros no mesmo teste de pronúncia de leitura de palavras foram reduzidos de 4,33 para 0,285. (média do erro padrão). Este estudo sugere que ensinar os sons das letras em inglês a esse grupo de crianças melhorou a leitura com sucesso desde tenra idade.
Palavras-chave: Fonética Inglesa; Misturar letras; Leitura; Letras soam; Equatorianos.

Resumen
La lectura es fundamental para desarrollarse mientras se aprende inglés como lengua extranjera. Por lo tanto, este estudio se enfoca en ayudar a los niños a mejorar la lectura enseñándoles primero los sonidos de las letras en lugar de los nombres de las letras. El objetivo es enseñar a los niños cómo reconocer y pronunciar letras individuales; si pueden hacerlo, los niños pueden combinar esos sonidos con la lectura. Además, para mitigar la interferencia del sonido de L1 a L2 en algunas palabras en inglés. El método utilizado para responder a las preguntas de investigación; primero enseñando hasta tres sonidos de letras combinados para involucrar a los niños en el desarrollo de la lectura en inglés con la pronunciación correcta. Los resultados demuestran en la prueba de lectura de palabras medias (pronunciación) que la mayoría de los niños habían mejorado de 5,25 a 7,79. en su puntuación. Y los errores en la misma prueba de pronunciación de lectura de palabras se redujeron de 4,33 a 0,285. (Media del error estándar). Este estudio sugiere que enseñar los sonidos de las letras en inglés a este grupo de niños mejoró con éxito la lectura desde una edad temprana.
Palabras clave: Fonética Inglesa; Mezclar letras; Lectura; Sonidos de letras; Ecuatorianos.

1. Introduction

Reading skills are improved by phonics teaching (Wahyuni, 2022). Moreover, Othman et al. (2014) pointed out that it is critical to acquire solid reading comprehension skills beginning in primary school. Previews studies have demonstrated that as younger learners are when a second language, the better pronunciation the student gets (Kuhl, 2010). Furthermore, several research has shown that reading development plays a critical role in adopting a better speller and reader to create better writing and grammar in English. (Krashen, 2004, 2007; Lee, 2007; Cho & Krashen, 2019) cited in (Wahyuni, 2022). Correct pronunciation and intonation are critical components of learning to read. As the target language is English, the assistant must focus on pronouncing the proper letter sounds early to be successful in reading a second language (Othman et al., 2014). Moving on with phonemics stands to reason since it enhances letter sound in children (Hulme et al., 2022) Some Ecuadorian EFL learners, make interference L1 with L2 as in sounds like the *U;* for example, the sound of the word *Umbrella* makes it the sound of U as in Spanish sound.

Additionally, the sound of *u*, as in Spanish, is in the target language interference in the English word *but*. Herrera E. M. (2022) mentioned that some English teachers in Ecuador teach letters names instead of letter sounds from an early age in students. However, this does not happen in all Kindergarten.

To help our children acquire vocabulary, which is an essential part of the process of knowing how to read a second language. Whereby this study aims to improve and achieve the English letter sounds of a group of Ecuadorian children by following the process of teaching them letter sounds from an early age.

As an outcome, beginning children from a young age by utilizing flashcards and teaching them the letter sounds of the English alphabet can assist them later in the reading process in the target language. As a result, it is better to instruct young learners to create their first SL/FL building from the phonological domain when their brain development is at its peak. (Kuhl, 2010) Additionally O'Brien et al. (2022). Pointed out that Young Spanish-speaking pupils learning to read in English may benefit from more outstanding training with specific phonemes and phoneme combinations in English that do not exist in their native language. Therefore more work and tools that include technology will enhance children's processing of letter sounds, Additionally, the implementation of these tools might be beneficial in engaging pupils in the process.

2. Literate Review

McArthur et al. (2018) pointed out that phonics instruction appears to help enhance literacy-related abilities; notably word and nonword reading fluency, as phonics is one of the most valuable strategies for reading instructions, especially in early ages when learning a second language refer.

Previews studies made by Mc Arthur et al. (2018) found that the effects of teaching English phonics at an early age on these children had better results in learning to read a second language, furthermore, when the employment of technology instruments is possible.

On the other hand, adopting a narrative to assist young EFL learners in improving their reading is a valuable strategy (Wahyuni, 2022). Similarly, employing technology to aid with phonics acquisition is vital. When children receive an opportunity to study SL/FL and appropriate exposure to the targeted language, they develop near-native speaker accuracy in pronunciation (Öztüfekçi & Dikilitaş 2020).

This study is critical to assisting this group of Ecuadorian kids with reading through English phonics. First, teachers must be aware that the best strategy to engage children in reading English as a foreign language (EFL). Work must start with English phonics. This strategy should be the primary means through which young students acquire the required reading skills to become

good readers (Stuart 2006) Several studies have revealed that teaching young pupils to read requires each student to receive excellent reading instruction that emphasizes phonological and phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency (Ehri, 2005b; Rose, 2006; Ehri, 2020) Hence, the Phonics reading instruction premise of decoding words and letters is considered the initial stage in teaching young students to read.

According to the second research, good phonics instruction increases students' phonological awareness and lexical restructuring abilities, allowing them to focus on text comprehension (Sun et al., 2015). The study reveals that students' phonological awareness and verbal rearrangement skills improve with quality phonics education, freeing them up to concentrate on text comprehension; following systematic phonics training and the previous research, the final step in reading education should involve linking letter/sound relationships and word reading to reading printed data in broader contexts. Today, the significance of literacy is well accepted. It is all established that failing to develop functional reading skills has damaging and long-lasting individual and societal impacts. However, a worldwide learning crisis exists, with many youngsters lacking fundamental reading abilities, especially in low-income nations (the world bank, 2018) cited in (Patel *et. al.,* 2022).

The English proficiency of Ecuador is among the lowest in the region (Education First, 2019). Moreover, Ramirez and Viteri (2016) identified particular characteristics in Ecuadorian classrooms that were problematic and hampered the likelihood of achieving desired results, such as overcrowded schools, instructors who did not provide enough education, and students' lack of dedication. Cited in (Vallejo 2020). Researchers, as potential contributors to these numbers, have highlighted multiple variables. Due to a dearth of high-quality early childhood education programmers, many children start primary school without the core abilities recognized as essential for school preparation (Castles *et al.,* 2018). Therefore, it is essential to begin introducing letter sounds early.

3. Methodology

This pilot investigation used quantitative and qualitative approaches, including mixed-method inquiries, to collect data from a limited participant sample and an individual case group. Mackey and Gass (2005) mentioned that the experimental group comparison must exist to answer research questions. Quantitatively, the pre-and post-test experimental design evaluated the programme's efficiency in enhancing the performance from pronunciation (word reading) in this group of five- to seven-year-old Ecuadorian children.

Students were provided with qualitative, open-ended questionnaires to find out what they liked about the programme.

RQ1: Can children master reading English through letter sounds?

RQ2: Learning English letter sounds can mitigate the interference from Spanish l1 to L2 in reading words in this group of children?

3.1 Participants

Students in a distance learning class need to be more self-motivated because they are responsible for logging into a virtual classroom (Akazaki *et al.,* 2022). Therefore a group of children gathered face-to-face classes participants in this research were between the ages of five and seven and came from various educational settings with varying levels of English proficiency.

Twelve kids were in the group, including eight girls and four males. Before the data gathering procedure.

Some kids go to bilingual schools, while others go to public schools where English as a foreign language is not the target language.

Table 1 – Participants details.

No.	Details	Age	Gender	School
1	Student	5	Male	Bilingual School
2	Student	6	Male	Bilingual School
3	Student	6	Male	Public School
4	Student	6	Male	Bilingual School
5	Student	7	Female	Public School
6	Student	7	Female	Bilingual School
7	Student	5	Female	Public School
8	Student	6	Female	Bilingual School
9	Student	6	Female	Bilingual School
10	Student	7	Female	Public School
11	Student	5	Female	Public School
12	Student	7	Female	Public School

Source: Moncayo (2023)

3.2 Instrument for Data Collecting

Mathison (1988) argues that using many methods to collect data will help determine findings.

This study used materials from Elemental Phonics books levels one basic phonics lessons JDA. (https://jadalvarez.com) These included the fifty-three lessons in the progression chart with stickers to assist kids in learning letter sounds. On the other hand, to alter and further the learning process, bits of English alphabet flashcards were cut out and laminated. Black and white color were chosen so the lowercase characters would stand out clearly against the background.

To keep the kids' attention, we utilized a pointer, a little stick with a bell at the top, a clapper available at any party supply store, and a small plastic toy egg.

3.3 Procedure

Week # 1

The class is ready to begin, and all materials have been assembled with a set of flash cards included; the first session will focus on teaching students how to pronounce common English letters sounds. Thus, kids can distinguish its corresponding sound from the very first letter of the English alphabet.

Week # 2

Students reading levels are to be determined, and their reading difficulties must be identified.

They were tested in two aspects letter sound and word reading (pronunciation)

A chart with the most used word families was used for the pre-test. Moreover a picture next to each vocabulary word is added to help children identify the vocabulary. The children were encouraged to pronounce the word families, for instance: Sun – bug – cut – mug. Words represented 26 phonetic letter sounds, and the test included two samples of each word. For grading, we kept track of how many words each kid got right on the reading test and averaged those scores. The sample test was held together with the exact words and letter sounds that will be used later as a post-test.

The comprehension test was held together in the lesson for about 30 minutes, direct instruction was used to teach phonics, with presentation, practice, and production all being part of the model's standard operating procedure in the classroom.

Week # 3

Students were given a one-minute head start on learning the English alphabet's letter sounds twice daily. Thus, the activity was done with students three times per week.

Week # 4

This week, the kids repeated the sounds of the letters after their English teacher said them out loud by flashing the letter sound.

Week # 5

The children started to use the option they wanted as a pointer, a little stick with a bell at the top, a clapper, and a small plastic toy egg, to strike on the letter sound after repeating them by the teacher. During this week, classes met twice daily for a total of two minutes using the children's selected objects to practice pronouncing letter sounds.

Week # 6

This week, students began to utter the letter sound by striking them as the teacher flashed them. Additionally, this week the classes were five times per week, twice a day with the same amount of minutes. To master the letter sounds in children, the teacher flashes them randomly.

Ensure that students are not memorizing the letter sound in alphabetical order.

Week # 7

To ensure that children know the letter sounds of the English alphabet, we continue to display them in random order, and the teacher chooses any letter to ask the kid what letter is, and the kid pronounces the correct letter sound.

Week # 8 & 9

After the child had mastered the letter sounds in correct and incorrect sequences, we continued teaching them how to blend two letters.

Using a board with the letter sounds they had learnt by adding the vowels, we first educated them that numerous letters form sounds.

This method continued for the next following weeks till it ensured that kids mastered this blend with two letters.

Week # 10, 11 & 12

We started to teach with three letters words; consonant plus a vowel plus a consonant. For instance: B*a*t, m*a*t, c*a*t, h*a*t. And the activities continue with the same methods used by the beginner. This time we came back as a beginner three times per week the lessons were applied. The same method was used before continuing the next following weeks to ensure they mastered three letter sounds; this time, the three-letter sounds have meaning. While the kids are learning letter sounds is essential they receive motivation from the English teacher by making them feel engaged in the activity and rewarding them for every single action they do.

In the part that appears, the vowel *u* between the two consonants sounds words such as; b*u*g, h*u*g, r*u*g, and m*u*g. We focused on that kids get to engage in those sounds.

The practice was made more fun by incorporating mini-games, such as having the kid pick up a toy animal based on the letter sound they heard the instructor speak, so that they could use their newfound to identify a word containing only three letters.

The total physical response (TPR) method included in the activity was by posting some images around the class and sticking them on the wall; the movement consisted of mentioning the sound of the three letters, then the child going around and bringing the image heard from the English teacher.

Week # 13 – 18

Students start to read, they begin to read the sentences with the images included in them, for instance:

Rat is big   Fox is big   Pig did win   Bat is big   Pat got wet

The cat sat   sun is big   Pig in mud

In order to get students excited about doing this task in class, we gave them stickers to attach at the bottom of each page from the first level of elemental phonics on jadalvarez.com.

Reading comprehension activities were implemented one lesson at a time, throughout each class, until the desired effect was achieved.

Week # 19

A post-test was given to the same group of children testing at the beginning of the program.

This time we recorded audio to analyze errors in pronunciation and fluency while they read in English; exact words were given as the pre-test.

4. Findings and Discussion

To analyze the data, we used statistical tools in the JAMOVI programmer. With the goal of reducing the impact of their native language on their English reading, the studies under consideration aim to address this issue.

Children have their effects as the pre-test and post-test emerge in the results after analyzing with the same amount of words as the beginning. *Sees* Table 1 Shows us the differences we had from the scores from the beginning, and after all the weeks we had tried with the phonics pronunciation in this group of children.

A close look at the Table 2 reveals that after completing the reading programmer, there was a notable shift in all of the analyzed statistical data from the test results.

4.1 Test Results

Table 2 - Letter Sound (pronunciation) test.

Descriptive

Letter Sound	Pre-test Scores	Post-test Scores
N	12	10
Missing	0	2
Mean	5.83	8.05
Median	5.50	8.00
Mode	5.00 [a]	7.50
Variance	2.42	0.469
Range	5.00	2.00
Minimum	3.50	7.00
Maximum	8.50	9.00

Source: Moncayo (2023).

The students' mean score (Mean) increased from 5.03 to 8.05. The mode score also rose from 5 to 7.50, the most common score rising from 5, and the median score rising from 5.50 to 8. This suggests that more students overall improved their performance. The population of participants had a minimum score of 3.50 before enrolling in the experiment, with the greatest score being 8.50. After students participated in the trial, these numbers skyrocketed, with 7s and 9s being the trial's lowest scores.

On the other hand, students from bilingual schools had better results than those from public schools where English is not the target and they just have two English classes per week. The results demonstrate The Mean of 17.7 on the pre-test and rose in the post-test up to 8.50, yet for the students that come from public schools, their mean was 4.50, very low as their minimum was 3.50.

The number of students that come from bilingual schools increased from 6 to 8 in their minimum score.

See Table 3 for the results from letter sound in the pre-test and post-test.

Table 3 - Results of letter sound in students from public and bilingual schools.

Descriptive

	School	Pre-test	Post-test
Mean	Bilingual School	7.17	8.50
	Public School	4.50	7.38
Median	Bilingual School	7.00	8.50
	Public School	4.75	7.50
Standard deviation	Bilingual School	0.816	0.447
	Public School	0.632	0.250
Minimum	Bilingual School	6.00	8.00
	Public School	3.50	7.00
Maximum	Bilingual School	8.50	9.00
	Public School	5.00	7.50

Source: Moncayo (2023).

Figure 1 - Results in bar from the letter sound in pre-test and post-test in students from public and private schools.
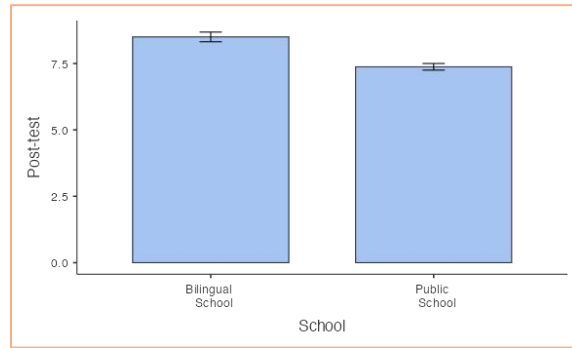
Source: Moncayo (2023).

Answering research question number 2, whether the students can mitigate the interference of L1 in L2 when pronouncing them in English while they read, to analyze the results from this investigation, a pre-and a post-test was made to see differences.

The same software program was used to analyze these interferences in this group of children after several months since we started with the results from the JAMOVI software statistical analysis program.

The scores were taken over 10. The Table 4 down below shows the those scores.

The pre-test and pos-test show us a decreasing errors after the post-test.

Table 4 - Error mean in Word Reading (*pronunciation*) in the total group of students.

Descriptive

	Pre-test	**Post-test**
Std. error mean	0.433	0.285

Source: Moncayo (2023).

After learning the letter sounds, students' errors started to read English with three and four words with correct pronunciation, and as can see in this table above, the errors were reduced from 0.433 to 0.285. The results that were obtained after this experiment. The results were significant after concluding the experiment several weeks after we started figuring with great results, as shown in the table below.

Before the program started, the minimum score students got was 3.50; after the experiment, the minimum was 6, according to the errors analysis in Table 5. The maximum score children got in the post-test was 9 in comparison with the pre-test, which was 6. It seems that the activities applied in the process were accurate. They now master how to read in the target language with fewer errors in pronouncing English words correctly.

Moreover the *(Mean)* in the post test was rose up to 7.79 in compare with the pre-test that was 5.25 that was essential improvement in students. See Table 5.

Besides the *(Mode)* in the post test is encouraging than in the pre-test the results give us a 8.50; most of the students were adequate with the trial from the results obtained. In other words, the trial was good enough for most students to help them improve their pronunciation while they read in target language.

The activity done in this process also show us that the aid in the contrast of interferences from L1 to L2 had been significantly improved.

Table 5 - Word reading *(pronunciation)* test**.**

Descriptive

	Pre-test score	Post-test score
N	12	12
Missing	0	0
Mean	5.25	7.79
Median	5.25	8.00
Mode	3.50 [a]	8.50
Minimum	3.50	6.00
Maximum	7.00	9.00

Source: Moncayo (2023).

The fact that the mean value of all participants went from 5.25 to 7.79 see Table 6, shows that the programme made a big difference in how the students read and pronounced words. Getting the attention of all of the participants.

Table 6 - Paired samples t-test of word reading (pronunciation) test.

Paired samples t-test

Descriptive

	word reading (pronunciation) test =	N	Mean	Median	SD	SE
Pair 1	Score Pre-test	12	5.25	5.25	1.500	0.433
	Score Post-test	12	7.79	8.00	0.988	0.285

Source: Moncayo (2023).

4.2 Survey results

All twelve students responded to the questions made, and their answers were as I expected after these questions were collected and analyzed.

Children enjoy learning English phonics and playing with other students immersed in the English reading program; the survey demonstrates that most of the children show interest in learning with others to play and have fun; this result indicates that students are engaged when they have others to play with.

Some of the children found it very different from how they learned reading in their regular English lessons, as the activity that the English teacher plays with the group is significant while the class is in progress to engage children in the activities.

5. Conclusions

An essential aim of this paper was to mitigate that interference from L1 to L2 while kids are learning to read English as Foreign Language (EFL). To mitigate wrong pronunciation while reading, the best thought was to do it from an early age to check whenever this method works, such as teaching them letter sounds to start reading English with correct pronunciation from an early age. As we see in *Table 5,* the maximum score rose to 9 over ten, which is a very successful result found in the post-test with this group of Ecuadorian children from different English standard proficiency.

The effects of teaching letter sound from an early age demonstrated that also students enjoy reading a second language by producing them correctly in their sounds.

Finally, students demonstrate that they can master reading English in at least three sentences.

When they are motivated by others, as the survey after the program demonstrated see Table 7 It can be said that they are not learning when they are moving or not paying enough attention, but they do. Teachers should have a positive attitude toward the participants and ensure that their lessons and activities are well thought out. (Mínguez et al., 2020). This will create a suitable environment for both the teachers and the people they are teaching. They started to read the sentences with the correct sound in their phonics, which enhanced the reading of the target language after learning to pronounce the correct letters.

In other words, this group of learners needs to keep practicing and doing reading activities in class, so they don't forget about it. Researchers will also be able to test them in small groups of children and perhaps give them more time to go over them again in a naturalistic environment.

To revise if they have trouble with the transition from their first language to their second language, such as with the Spanish letter sound of *U*, which is often mispronounced by students when they are reading English.

What may be lacking in this study are further sentences and periods to determine whether or not this group of youngsters has mastered the letter sounds in English reading.

Table7 - Students survey after the program is done.

No.	Questions	Themes	Number of responses (out of 12)	Samples of Students' comments.
1	What do you think about the program? Did you enjoy?	Really enjoy.	5	I enjoy the reading program.
		Enjoy	5	It is more enjoyable than my reading lessons.
		Just so-so	2	Sometimes I do not like reading.
2	How did you enjoy the program?	Playing with the rest of the students while the activity is in progress.	9	Having someone who I can compete in the activity
		Be rewarding by mentioning the word correctly.	2	I felt motivated every time I mentioned the word correctly.
		Reading the sentence by including pictures on it.	1	It was helpful to read with an image included in the text.
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		Just so-so	2	Sometimes I do not like reading.
2	How did you enjoy the program?	Playing with the rest of the students while the activity is in progress.	9	Having someone who I can compete in the activity
		Be rewarding by mentioning the word correctly.	2	I felt motivated every time I mentioned the word correctly.
		Reading the sentence by including pictures on it.	1	It was helpful to read with an image included in the text.

Source: Moncayo (2023).

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