

COMO CITAR ESTE ARTIGO: OLIVEIRA, R. P; LIMA JÚNIOR, R. M. Perceptions of undergraduate student-teachers of English on the use of synthetic phonics. **Revista Colineares**, Mossoró, v. 05, n. 01, p. 126-152, jan./jun. 2018.

PERCEPTIONS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT-TEACHERS OF ENGLISH ON THE USE OF SYNTHETIC PHONICS

PERCEPÇÕES DE ALUNOS DE ESTÁGIO DE LETRAS-INGLÊS SOBRE O USO DO MÉTODO FÔNICO SINTÉTICO

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ABSTRACT: This study aimed at investigating the perspectives undergraduate English Teaching students at Federal University of Ceará have regarding the application of synthetic phonics in their classes. The participants were all senior undergraduate students with or without teaching experience. To collect the data, an explanatory video on synthetic phonics explaining how it could be used in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class was recorded and presented to participants. After watching the video, in which synthetic phonics is explained and demonstrated, the undergraduate students answered a questionnaire about relevant aspects of synthetic phonics and its use in EFL classes. The results indicate that the undergraduate students believe in the efficacy of the techniques as an appropriate means for the formal and explicit teaching of phoneme/grapheme correspondences in an EFL context. In addition, the participants seem to defend the implementation of synthetic phonics permanently at the EFL teaching framework, especially at the beginning of the learning process.

KEYWORDS: Phonics. Teaching. English as a Foreign Language.

RESUMO: Este estudo teve por objetivo investigar as perspectivas que alunos de Letras- Inglês da Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC) têm sobre a possível aplicação do método fônico sintético em suas aulas. Os participantes eram todos alunos de semestres finais com ou sem experiência como professor. Para a coleta de dados, foi gravado um vídeo explanatório sobre o método fônico sintético e como ele poderia ser utilizado em aulas de inglês como língua estrangeira (inglês-LE), e apresentado aos oito participantes. Após assistirem ao vídeo, no qual o método fônico era apresentado e demonstrado, os alunos responderam a um questionário sobre aspectos relevantes do método e do seu uso em aulas de inglês-LE. Os resultados indicam que os alunos acreditam na eficácia das técnicas apresentadas como uma maneira apropriada de se ensinar de maneira formal e explícita as correspondências grafofônicas do inglês em um contexto de inglês-LE. Ademais, os

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participantes parecem defender a implementação do método fônico sintético de maneira permanente no ensino de inglês-LE, principalmente nos estágios iniciais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Método fônico. Ensino. Inglês como língua estrangeira.

1 INTRODUCTION

The importance of English for the current society is undeniable. Because of that, people all over the world have been running to the numerous English institutes and schools worldwide in order to pursue the language. However, the recognition of its importance and social relevance does not nullify the challenges that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students will face in the learning process of English.

During this process, learners will have to master different areas. They will have to acquire knowledge of English grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, for instance. These accomplishments demand many classes, time of exposure to the language as well as the application of some strategies, which may seem overwhelming to many learners at first glance.

However, the letter-sound correspondence in English is one of the most challenging areas. If we are to compare the English grapheme-phoneme correspondence to the ones of other languages, we clearly see it is much more irregular. For example, the suffix *-ed* has 3 different pronunciations, whereas in other languages, such as Spanish, Portuguese and Italian, letter clusters are pronounced always in the same way (WYSE; GOSWANI, 2008, p. 698). For obvious reasons, the grapheme-phoneme correspondence greatly affects the ability of decoding and encoding words; that is, the more irregular the grapheme-phoneme correspondence in a language, the more challenging reading and spelling in that language will be.

Reading is an invaluable skill to almost every aspect of our daily lives. Simple tasks of our routine would be impossible without reading. For example, just think of how problematic it would be to take a bus without the skill of decoding words? Or to prepare a dish following a recipe? Not only that, reading is a powerful means of

acquiring knowledge and the Brazilian government recognizes the implications of knowing how to read in English. Reading in English, according to the National Curricular Parameters (PCNs)⁵¹, is the skill that should be developed first and foremost. However, the teaching of the correspondence between letters and sounds in the language tends to be insufficiently addressed, in public/private schools.

Depending on the level of the learner, the spelling of even simple words may be difficult to decode. For example, beginners always show amazement when they are exposed for the first time to the spelling of words such as *daughter*, *light* and *eight*. These words are very common and usually comprise the vocabulary of many beginning learners; nonetheless, they may go unrecognized when beginners find them in a text. Therefore, knowing how to relate letters to sounds is part of reading and is of great value for EFL students.

Likewise, writing is quite affected when EFL students lack an understanding of the particularities of English orthography. To encode words, learners need to have a grasp of the irregular correspondences; otherwise, they will have to rely heavily on memorization to write. It means that if their memory fails, knowing the pronunciation of a particular word will be of no use to spell it.

The difficulty in relating letters to sounds in English for reading and writing is not restricted to EFL students. Native speakers of the language also have their challenges in the same areas. In fact, Cleckler (2008, p. 61) states that the main problem American students face concerning literacy is the “inconsistent, illogical spelling of English words”. In order to solve the low literacy rates, Australia and the United Kingdom, along with some American states, included phonics instruction in their curriculum, as research indicates the efficacy of the method for spelling and decoding words (ROSE, 2006; ROWE, 2005; PANEL, 2000).

⁵¹ Pedagogical guidelines established by the Government, which are not mandatory, but work as means of guaranteeing a common curriculum for the country.

However, phonics instruction is not part of EFL classes. In fact, the term *phonics* sounds quite unfamiliar for the great majority of EFL teachers. As a result, the teaching of reading in English is conducted mainly in a top-down approach (whole-language). It means that students learn to rely heavily on the pre-reading activities, pictures and other extra textual elements than on the text itself to extract its meaning. Thus, EFL students receive very little instruction on the ability to decode the words of a text to understand it.

Spelling words in English is another concern the aforementioned countries had when they include phonics instruction in their curricula. Nonetheless, the teaching of spelling in Brazilian EFL classes tends to be addressed only when adding suffixes to words. For example, doubling the last consonant of CVC words or changing *y* into *i* when adding a vowel suffix, etc. However, any spelling particularity that does not relate to adding suffixes tends to go unaddressed. Therefore, those particularities must be memorized and English ends up assuming a non-phonetic language status.

With the adoption of phonics instruction, the United Kingdom made a particular approach mandatory, namely, synthetic phonics (ROSE, 2006). In this approach, students learn to tackle words by recognizing and pronouncing each sound represented by the letters in isolation, and then, blending the sounds together in order to decode the words. For example, learners are shown the letters *t o p*. First, they recognize the sounds the letters represent, then, pronounce each one in isolation - /t/, /ɑ:/, /p/ - and finally, blend the sounds together to read the word *top*. To do that, teachers show them the phonograms of the English language and all the sounds they represent, along with the spelling rules and their morpho-phonemic aspects, which enables students to encode words as well.

The application of synthetic phonics to EFL classes seems to have a great value in matters of pronunciation, besides the decoding and encoding of words. In a synthetic phonics lesson, students pronounce entire words after having broken them into individual sounds. For native speakers, this activity helps them recognize words

that they already know how to pronounce. For EFL students, on the other hand, it might help them to be acquainted with the idiosyncrasies of English words, and as a result, improve their pronunciation.

However, the teaching of synthetic phonics demands a great deal of knowledge from EFL teachers. They must master several linguistic areas in order to teach a synthetic phonics lesson. For example, they have to know the sounds of the English language as well as all the spelling rules. Besides, EFL teachers must have good knowledge of the morpho-phonemic aspects of the language.

The English spelling system and pronunciation of English words are some of the challenges that EFL students face in the process of acquiring the language. Since synthetic phonics is part of the curriculum of English-speaking countries as a method for teaching the existing correspondence between letters and sounds in English for native speakers. Along with the challenges that the method poses for EFL teachers, a question comes to the surface:

1. What perspectives do college English student-teachers have on synthetic phonics and its use in EFL classes?

Based on the aforementioned questions, the general objective of this work is to understand the position of undergraduate English student-teachers from Federal University of Ceará on synthetic phonics. The specific objectives are to identify the level of relevance of synthetic phonics instruction in the teachers' approach to spelling and pronunciation problems, and also, to find out how much they believe synthetic phonics should be included in an EFL class, if at all. Our assumption is that undergraduate English student-teachers will recognize the significance of synthetic phonics instruction in an EFL class.

The relevance of this work is based on the possibility of including synthetic phonics instruction in an EFL class as a means for teachers to decrease the challenges that foreign students commonly face in acquiring the English language,

whether in a systematic or opportunistic way. In addition, this work shows its relevance by bringing to EFL teachers one more method of teaching.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Phonics instruction is at the center of the controversies involving the teaching of reading (STAH; OSBORN; LEHR, 1990). Since the publication of Rudolf Flesch's book *Why Johnny can't read and what we can do about it* in 1955, phonics became again one of the possible approaches to teaching reading at the beginning level. Flesch (1955) demanded the return of phonics instruction to American schools in order to teach reading and spelling in English. The general population heard his clamor and the book became a best seller as parents, dissatisfied with the progress of their children in reading, began to apply Mr. Flesch's approach at home. Despite its huge impact on society, the publication of Flesch's book was just the beginning of the controversies around reading instruction that came to be known as the Reading wars.

The fact is that phonics instruction had been banned from American schools by the 1920's because of educators' conclusion that phonics was incompatible with the goal of reading, namely, comprehension (STAHL; OSBORN; LEHR, 1990). Within a phonics program, students learn the alphabetic principle as a means of reading printed words. However, the publication of the influential book *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, by Dr. Edmund Burke Huey, in 1908, challenged this assumption and suggested that the "insidious thought of reading as a word-pronouncing" hinders the "purpose of getting and expressing meanings" (HUEY, 1908 *apud* FLESCH, 1983, p.53).

Nonetheless, nothing was more influential on the bannishment of phonics from American schools than the publication of Dr. Arthur I. Gates' 1927 summary article. In his article, Gates summarized the finding of his yet-to-be-released book *New Method in Primary Reading* in which he states "That it will be the part of wisdom to curtail the phonetic instruction in the first grade very greatly, is strongly implied; indeed it is not improbable that it should be eliminated entirely" (GATES, 1927 *apud*

FLESCH, 1983, p.55). When the book was finally released in the following year, Gates withdrew the prediction that the phonetic principle had a great chance to be eliminated. According to Flesch, it was too late. Gates' article had already reached educators nationwide, and, indeed, phonics was removed from first grade, then, received the status of remedial instruction for fifth and sixth graders, and, finally, was relegated as the worst and last tool in the teaching of word recognition (FLESCH, 1986).

Another influential work that reverberated on Dr. Gates' prediction was William S. Gray's 1948 book *On Their Own Reading*. Gray (1948) proposed the abolishment of the alphabetic principle as a means to teach children to read and proposed a focus on meaning-first and word-analysis-latter. According to Gray, the fastest way to develop reading skills was to teach children to do exactly what adults do when reading, that is, children should be instructed to look at and immediately recognize entire words. Gray's ideas had great influence on the rationale behind efficient reading instruction and came to be known as Look-Say, as children were taught to decode words by sight rather than by letter-sound correspondences (KIM, 2008).

What Mr. Flesch proposed with the publication of his book was a return to the alphabetic principle denied by the Look-Say method. The readers of this classical book seemed to have understood the heavy criticism on the referred method as it gained predominance in reading instruction. According to Flesch, this methodology nullifies the phonetic nature of the English language and causes students to learn to read the language as if it was Chinese, a character-based language. For this reason, students are taught to memorize entire words and whenever their memory fails during the process of reading, reading is reduced to a guessing game (FLESCH, 1986).

Despite the huge impact of Flesch's book, what really addressed the biggest issue in the reading wars was Jeanne Chall's 1967 work *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. In her book, Chall sought to evaluate the existing instructional methods for beginning reading. To do that, Chall talked to teachers, visited 300 kindergartens, first, second and third grades in the United States, England and

Scotland, and analyzed previous research (KIM, 2008). Contrary to the prevailing wisdom, she concluded that systematic phonics, although not sufficient in itself, plays an important role for beginning reading and that students receiving code emphasis performed better than those who did not (KIM, 2008; STAHL; OSBORN; LEHR, 1990).

As a response to Chall's conclusion and the low literacy rate during the prevalence of the Look-Say method, educators proposed a new approach that came to be known as whole-language (EIDE, 2012). Proponents of this new approach stated that the reason behind low literacy rates was due to the repetitive and unappealing basal readers produced by the Look-Say method. Therefore, in order to learn to read, assumed whole-language advocates, children need to be "read to, and the stories and books that they hear are chosen for their interests and appeal and not for the sequence and scope of vocabulary and language structures" (PIPER, 2003, p. 272 *apud* PUREWAL, 2008, p. 25).

Although there is no precise definition of the whole-language approach, one can say that its primary premise is that "students learn to read by focusing on the meaning of words in the context of the story" (MADDOX; FENG, 2013, p. 06). In a whole-language class, the teaching of reading is child-centered and instruction is built on the assumption that reading is learned implicitly through the constant exposure of authentic and vocabulary-rich literature. This environment allows students to extract meaning from the text based on the context and the application of other strategies, such as predicting and guessing (MADDOX; FENG, 2013; PUREWAL, 2008). Thus, according to whole-language proponents, teaching reading with a focus on the context is the key to developing good readers.

Despite the big buzz proposed by whole-language proponents about focusing on the context for reading, research demonstrated the complete opposite. During the 1970's, cognitive psychologist Keith Stanovich, in an investigation about the processes involved in reading, concluded that it is poor readers that rely on the context (KIM, 2008). In addition, studies piling from eye-track movement showed that good readers do not skip unfamiliar words, as whole-language asserts; rather, good

readers process all the information in the text, thus, suggesting that successful reading demands the mastering of the alphabetic principle (KIM, 2008).

According to Kim (2008), these research findings along with Richard Venezky's argumentation about reading research and instruction in 1977 had two impacts during the 1980's. First, the US government started to summon panels in order to gather basic research and examine its implications for instruction. The second impact was a campaign led by whole-language proponents to convince state educational agencies to spread their ideas to teachers, ignoring research findings. The latter culminated in the implementation of the whole-language approach in the California state curriculum in 1987 (DAVENPORT; JONES, 2005; EIDE, 2012).

Although Californians ignored the research evidence about the role of phonics for beginning reading, they could not ignore the fourth-graders' reading scores on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The 1992 NAEP administration found that 52 percent of California fourth-graders were reading below basic level (KIM, 2008). This number raised to 56 percent with a new administration in 1994, showing "the state near the bottom relative to other states and that the decline in scores from 1992 to 1994 was evident among all ethnic and socioeconomic groups" (KIM, 2008, p. 99). As whole-language was mandate in California in 1987 and had become the prevailing reading instruction nationwide, it was readily linked to America's low literacy rate results that came to be known as The Literacy Crisis (EIDE, 2012).

The negative achievements in reading during the whole-language prevalence resulted in political calls to return to the alphabetic principle proposed by phonics instruction (DAVENPORT; JONES, 2005). From 1995 to 1997, those calls took the form of introducing phonics bills in legislative sessions around the country. During this period, California introduced the largest number of bills (KIM, 2008). Along with the bills, the government decided to turn to national panels as an attempt to put a definite end to the reading wars. One of these panels was convened by the National Reading Council (NRC). The panel report was released in 1998 under the name

Preventing Difficulties in Reading in Young Children (SNOW et al, 1998). In the preface, panel leader Catherine Snow states quite clearly that

all [members of the panel] thus also agreed that early reading instruction should include direct teaching of information about sound-symbol relationships to children who do not know about them and that it must also maintain a focus on the communicative purposes and personal value of reading (SNOW et al, 1998, p.vi).

Although clear in its recommendations and findings, the NRC's report did not address issues involving instructional approaches for teachers (KIM, 2008). This aspect of the report caused the American congress to summon the National Reading Panel (NRP).

Released in 2000, the NRP report was pivotal for “ending” the reading wars for several reasons. First, the NRP meta-analysis concluded that “specific systematic phonics programs are all significantly more effective than non-phonics programs” (PANEL, 2000, p. 93), which confirmed previous research findings, such as Chall's 1990 and NRC's 1998. Second, the Panel discarded the idea that phonics instruction would hinder students from comprehending text, as argued by whole-language advocates (PANEL, 2000; EIDE, 2012). In addition, the NRP asserted that phonics is not sufficient in itself as a means to guarantee the development of good readers. In fact, the report asserts that “Phonics teaching is a means to an end” and that in “implementing systematic phonics instruction, educators must keep the *end* in mind and ensure that children understand the purpose of learning letter-sounds [...]” (p. 96, emphasis in the original). These assertions helped form the current prevailing eclectic approach to teach beginning reading, which focus on both code and meaning.

The main purpose of the NRP, as stated before, was to provide detailed insight on the instructional approaches to teach reading at the beginning level. Therefore, by designating the five essential reading instructions (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension), the Panel ended the big and long research disputes on literacy, and, consequently, addressed the political part of the debate as well. According to Kim (2008), the NRP helped to

shape the Reading First Legislation, which is a program that focuses on putting proven methods of early reading instruction in classrooms (U.S DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, 2017). Thus, American schools participating in the program had to implement only research-proved methods in order to develop good readers until third grade. Since the meta-analysis proposed by the Panel concluded that a balanced approach is the best way to address literacy development, the great debate between phonics and whole-language does not make sense anymore.

2.1 The synthetic phonics approach

Phonics instruction is the teaching of reading in which the main purpose is the acquisition of letter-sound correspondences and their use for reading and spelling (PANEL, 2000). It is a bottom-up approach to reading in which students receive instruction on how to decode the meaning of words using the knowledge of letters, or combinations of them, and the sounds they represent. In other words, in a phonics program, students learn not only how letters are called, but also the sounds they represent in order to develop the abilities of reading and spelling.

However, the English alphabet has just 26 letters to represent the 44 sounds of the language. Therefore, one letter may represent more than one sound and one sound may have several different grapheme representations. According to Dewey (1971 *apud* JONES, 1996), there are 3.5 phonemic alternatives for one grapheme, and 13.7 grapheme alternatives for just one phoneme in English. This fact about the language may cause confusion and is the main counter-argument against the teaching of phonics. Nonetheless, research has shown that the spelling system of the English language is more regular than it first appears to be.

According to Crystal (1987), 80% of English words follow patterns. The patterns of English words are due to their morphophonemic aspects (JONES, 1996; EIDE, 2012). In a morphophonemic language, spelling represents not only phonemes, but also the meaning expressed in the morphemes of the language. Therefore, the repetition of morphemes that are part of thousands of words creates word patterns. The spelling patterns of morphemes are part of several phonics

programs. Thus, phonics instruction provides clarification both when there are no patterns in words by addressing the letter-sound correspondence and when the patterns are present in words.

The way a phonics program addresses each case may be either in an unsystematic or systematic fashion. In an unsystematic approach, the teaching of phonics happens incidentally or occasionally (TORGESON; BROOKS; HALL, 2006). Thus, the teaching of English word particularities does not follow an organized way of instruction, and teachers are supposed to identify, during the lesson, when students need explicit instruction. On the other hand, in a systematic approach, a set of phonics elements is planned and taught both explicitly and sequentially (EHRI, *et al*, 2001; EIDE, 2012).

Research has shown that the systematic approach to teaching phonics is more efficient. For example, the Panel (2000, p. 92) concluded that “findings provided solid support for the conclusion that systematic phonics instruction makes a bigger contribution to children’s growth in reading than alternative programs providing unsystematic or no phonics instruction”. Among the systematic approaches to teaching phonics, synthetic phonics has gained great acceptance in countries such as the United States, New Zealand, and especially the United Kingdom and Australia. Besides its use among English-speaking countries, synthetic phonics has been part of some programs in an EFL context (BELTRÁN-HERRERA; ANDRADE-CHÁVEZ; ÁLVAREZ-ROJAS, 2016), which will be discussed later.

According to Brooks (2003 *apud* TORGESON; BROOKS; HALL, 2006, p.13), synthetic phonics is defined as “an approach to the teaching of reading in which the phonemes associated with particular graphemes are pronounced in isolation and blended together (synthesized).” Therefore, in a synthetic phonics class, reading instruction begins by teaching the sounds each letter represents. Then, students start taking single-syllable words such as *cat*, break them into letters, pronounce each phoneme for each grapheme in turn (/k æ t/), and blend the phonemes together to say the word. Synthetic phonics for spelling reverses the order of instruction; students first say the word they wish to write, segment it into phonemes and say

them in turn, for example, /d α: g/, and write a grapheme for each phoneme in turn to produce the written word, *dog*.

In order to do the processes described earlier, students need to master all the sounds and phonograms of the English language. The English language has 44 sounds and 74 phonograms (EIDE, 2012). Phonograms are the letters or combination of them that represent the sounds of a particular language. In English, they may consist of one up to four letters. Depending on the phonogram, the number of sounds one single phonogram represents varies from one up to six (EIDE, 2012). For example, the two-letter phonogram *kn* is the representation of just one sound - /n/; however, the phonogram *ough* is the representation of six different sounds - /ɔ:/, /oʊ/, /u:/, /aʊ/, /ʌf/, /ɔ:f/- in the words *thought*, *though*, *through*, *bough*, *rough* and *cough*, respectively. Synthetic phonics proponents argue that such a growing complexity in the teaching process demands a systematic approach to teaching reading and spelling in English.

Besides its synthesizing (pushing the sounds together) process and systematic nature, synthetic phonics instruction presents other characteristics. According to Eide (2012), a marking system is useful in a synthetic phonics class. Since phonograms may represent more than one sound, teachers may mark them in order to signal to students which sound the phonogram in question represents in a particular word. For example, the two-letter phonogram *ea* has three different realizations: /i:/, /e/, and /eɪ/. Therefore, teachers may use numbers above the phonogram to mark and signal to students that the *ea* phonogram says its first, second and third sound, as in the words *eat*, *head* and *steak*.

Another characteristic of a synthetic phonics class is the teaching of spelling rules. The fact that there are several options for spelling out a phoneme may create uncertainty when writing down words. According to Eide (2012), the teaching of spelling rules together with the teaching of phonograms help every English learner, native and non-native speakers alike, to spell 98% of English words. She states, for instance, that if students acquire knowledge of spelling rules such as *ck is only used after a single vowel which says its short sound*, the number of options for spelling the

sound /k/ in many words is reduced. Thus, synthetic phonics instruction equips more efficiently students to master the irregularities of the English orthography.

As the program advances to the stage in which students receive instruction on the level of multisyllabic words, synthetic phonics programs address the fact that the English language is a morpho-phonemic one, that is, a language in which the spelling represents both sound and meaning (EIDE, 2012). At this stage, students learn that morphemes are part of words that carry meaning (CARTAIRS-MCARTHY, 2002). Therefore, some spelling rules are not applied to them. Their spellings must be preserved. This information helps students master some situations that first seem to be exceptions to what they had learned previously in the program. For example, the words *phonemic*, *emphatic*, *strategic* all have a single vowel saying its short sound before the sound /k/, however, they are spelled with a *c*, not with a *ck* as in the words *attack* – *deck* – *sick* – *block* – *truck*. That is because IC is a morpheme used to transform nouns into adjectives (CAMBRIGE ENGLISH DICTIONARY, 2017). Its spelling must be preserved and the spelling rule should not be applied to it.

These characteristics of synthetic phonics have been pointed out by some researchers to be the ones that best address the peculiarities of the English language for young native learners. For example, Rose (2006, p.05) states that:

Despite uncertainties in research findings, the practice seen by the review shows that the systematic approach, which is generally understood as 'synthetic' phonics, offers the vast majority of young children the best and most direct route to becoming skilled readers and writers.

The findings in Rose's report were crucial to recommend the continuation of synthetic phonics as part of the primary curriculum in the United Kingdom. In the same way, the Australian government conducted an inquiry about teaching literacy that includes in its findings the importance of teaching systematically the alphabetic principle – another term for synthetic phonics - to young learners:

In sum, the incontrovertible finding from the extensive body of local and international evidence-based literacy research is that for children during the early years of schooling (and subsequently if needed), to be able to link their knowledge of spoken language to their knowledge of written language, they must first master the alphabetic code – the system of grapheme-phoneme correspondences that link written words to their pronunciations. Because these are both foundational and essential skills for the development of competence in reading, writing and spelling, they must be taught explicitly, systematically, early and well. (ROWE, 2005, p. 37).

Thus, the synthetic phonics approach became the preferred method to address reading and spelling in English at the early age among the referred countries.

As mentioned previously, the application of phonics instruction in an EFL context is rare. Therefore, research papers on this theme are still scarce. The few studies conducted in this new context seem to corroborate with the positive results of previous research on phonics for L1 students.

In a study with first graders in Colombia, Martinez (2011, p.46) concluded that systematic and explicit phonics instruction had a positive effect on reading comprehension. According to her, “explicit phonics instruction helped EFL students to improve their pronunciation when reading in English, which directly impacted the understanding of what was being read [...]”. Thus, phonics becomes an important tool to help students to extract meaning from a text.

The improvement in pronunciation seems to be the greatest impact of phonics instruction for EFL students, according to research. On their study, Beltrán-Herrera, Andrade-Chávez e Álvarez-Rojas (2016) concluded that “phonics Instruction can be considered as great tool not only to learn reading and writing; but also to improve pronunciation in EFL students [...]” (p. 61).

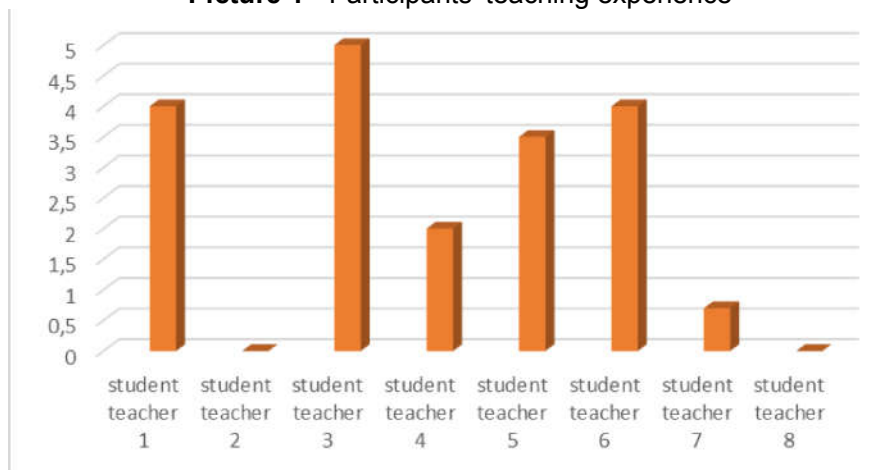
The limited research on the area of phonics in an EFL context is a great indicator that more studies are needed to identify the precise role that phonics might play on the development of EFL students’ literacy skills.

3 METHOD

This work follows a qualitative approach as a means to analyze data for its main purpose is to access the subjective perspectives that college English student-teachers have on synthetic phonics.

This research was conducted with 8 English student-teachers who were at the end of their language teaching major at the Federal University of Ceará. There were 3 men and 5 women, and their ages varied from 22 to 51 years of age, with a mean of 33 years. Regarding their education, three student-teachers were taking a second major, and the others their first one. The teaching experience of the student-teachers varied from 0 to 5 years, as indicated by the following picture:

Picture 1 - Participants' teaching experience



As demonstrated by the chart, there is a substantial variation in teaching experience, which may lead to different perspectives regarding the teaching of synthetic phonics in an EFL context.

All participants answered a questionnaire that was divided into two parts. The first one contained factual personal questions, as its purpose was to collect information regarding name, gender, age, and education (DÖRNYEI, 2007), and the second part of the questionnaire contained behavioral questions, since the purpose was to gather information about their teaching experience and the teaching

strategies/techniques the respondents apply for teaching reading, spelling and pronunciation (DÖRNYEI, 2007). These variables were taken into account during the data analysis.

In order to get the participants acquainted with the synthetic phonics approach, the first researcher produced an explanatory video, in English, on the subject. The video gathered important information about a typical synthetic phonics lesson and brought concepts that equipped the student-teachers to answer the second questionnaire about their perspectives on the referred approach in an EFL context.

The video has four parts. The first one presents a brief introduction in order to inform and establish the purposes of the video as well as its organization. The second part discusses and illustrates the particularities and concepts around phonics instruction. The third part describes how a synthetic phonics lesson looks like. Finally, the fourth part shows the authorized teachers training videos excerpts conducted by Denise Eide, author of the Logic of English program.⁵²

After watching the video, the student-teachers answered a second questionnaire, composed mainly by attitudinal questions towards the method. This specific questionnaire directly addressed the research question of this study. Following are the questions in it:

- (1) Had you ever heard about synthetic phonics before watching the video?
- (2) Do you think that synthetic phonics should have a place in an EFL class? Why or why not?
- (3) Would you use synthetic phonics to address your students' difficulties in reading, spelling or pronunciation? Why or why not?
- (4) In your opinion, what are the challenges for teaching synthetic phonics?

⁵² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbHW8yi_vVQ&t=3s.

(5) Based on your experience as a teacher, would you say that the correspondence between letters and sounds occurs spontaneously or does it need to be formally taught? Why or why not?

(6) Are you positive or negative on the effects of synthetic phonics instruction for EFL students? Be free to give your reasons.

In order to answer the research questions, it was applied the process of coding. The codes themselves were preceded by the process of pre-coding, which “involves reading and rereading the transcripts, reflecting on them, and noting down our thoughts in journal entries and memos” (DÖRNYEI, p. 250, 2007). After this, the relevant topics that appeared in participants’ individual answers were highlighted, labeled and saved. A second-level coding process was conducted. This time, all respondents’ accounts were compared and where similarities were found, codes were formed.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Each question of the questionnaire will be presented and respondents’ answers will be discussed, with a few excerpts being used for illustration purposes. The results allow for discussions related to the research question set out for this study.

Q.1 – *Had you ever heard about synthetic phonics before watching the video?*

From the 8 respondents, only one affirmed to have heard about synthetic phonics. Their answers to this question show that, to the great majority of the student-teachers, the research findings about bottom-up approaches to teaching reading are still unknown. In addition, this finding may be a direct reflection of the overwhelming prevalence of top-down approaches to reading in the EFL scenario.

Q.2 - *Do you think Synthetic Phonics should have a place in an EFL class? Why or why not?*

All the respondents stated to believe that synthetic phonics should be part of EFL classes. The main reason for such a position is generally supported by the recognition of synthetic phonics as a powerful method to address the areas of reading and spelling, but mainly of pronunciation as shown in the following responses:

Student-teacher 3: *“I think so. Because, Synthetic Phonics would help EFL students to improve both pronunciation and reading/writing ability”.*

Student-teacher 7: *“Yes. It would help in pronunciation acquisition”.*

Student-teacher 8: *“Yes I do. Pronunciation is very important in learning English Language”.*

The position of this group of student-teachers is in line with some research about the efficacy of synthetic phonics in a native speaking context, as demonstrated in the theoretical groundwork laid in the second section (EIDE, 2012; PANEL, 2000; ROSE, 2006; ROWE, 2005).

Q.3 - Would you use Synthetic Phonics to address your students' difficulties in reading, spelling or pronunciation? Why or why not?

For this question, 7 respondents said that synthetic phonics is a method that they would apply in their classrooms. However, some student-teachers did not provide clear reasons for applying synthetic phonics for teaching the three different areas addressed in the question. They did not explain why, as reflective teachers would, their choice for the method is suitable in addressing the peculiarities of reading, spelling and pronouncing English words. Answers as the ones provided by student-teachers 7 and 8 may be an indication that it is still difficult to evaluate the enhancement the method may provide, according to their own perspectives, for the three areas:

Student-teacher 7: *“Yes, Why not? It is a different strategy that can lead to different outcomes (maybe better)”.*

Student-teacher 8: *“Yes I would. I believe that this method would help students to improve some skills”.*

One student-teacher said he was not able to answer the question as he seems to believe that only after having specific training on synthetic phonics, he would be able to better answer the question:

Student-teacher 6: *“I cannot answer this question now, as I have had no instruction on it”.*

This response seems to point to the same conclusion of studies on the systematic teaching of phonics (PANEL, 2000; ROSE 2009). Since the mastering of the method involves several linguistic areas, qualification training is just indispensable.

Q.4 - In your opinion, what are the challenges for teaching synthetic phonics?

Although the question aimed to retrieve the challenges EFL teachers may face when teaching synthetic phonics, apparently the respondents answered the question in the students’ perspectives and mentioned other aspects that go beyond teachers’ performance, as shown by the following answers:

Student-teacher 1: *“The interference of L1, for sure. There are many sounds in English that don’t exist in Portuguese (...)”.*

Student-teacher 3: *“(...) Also, our students don’t have frequent contact to English, so they need to be constantly motivated to keep their minds fresh and working on this”.*

Student-teacher 7: *“Depends on the audience. In public schools, for examples, we do not have plenty of time to work with pronunciation”.*

Student-teacher 8: *“Getting the support of school coordination”.*

According to the research (PANEL, 2000; ROSE, 2009), the success in teaching the alphabetic principle proposed by any form of phonics instructions demands teacher training due to the several areas of expertise that teachers must master. The aim of this question was to compare the group’s perspectives to what research says about the required skills for teachers to teach synthetic phonics. Eide (2012) suggests that in order to teach synthetic phonics, teachers must master all the sounds of the English language and be able to relate them to each phonogram.

In addition, those teachers must know all the spelling rules and have a good grasp of English morphology. All those areas together may be challenging for some teachers.

Q.5 - Based on your experience as a teacher, would you say that the correspondence between letters and sounds occurs spontaneously or does it need to be formally taught? Why?

The formal and explicit teaching of letter-sound correspondence is at the heart of phonics instruction. Agreeing that such a correspondence does not occur spontaneously means to recognize the relevance of synthetic phonics for this specific aspect of any phonetic language. This is exactly what seems to indicate the answers provided by the respondents:

Student-teacher 1: *“It needs to be formally taught. Brazilian students who were never exposed to the language before don’t know how to pronounce letter A in the word CAT, for example”.*

Student-teacher 3: *“It need to be formally taught, because in English the grapheme/phoneme correspondence is far away of being perfect, as it occurs in Italian, for example.*

Student-teacher 4: *“I think it needs to be taught. In English, we have a vowel for example that has several sounds. It is difficult for a student to realize it spontaneously”.*

Q.6 - Are you positive or negative on the effects of synthetic phonics instruction for EFL students? Be free to give your reasons.

This question aimed to retrieve the general position of the group of student-teachers in face of the nature of the method within the EFL context. Results indicate that for the respondents, the EFL body of learners presents a context in which synthetic phonics would fit. This indicates that this group of student-teachers has the same position supported by research on the positive effects of synthetic phonics for native speakers (ROSE, 2006) and non-native speakers (HARDY, 2014), as the following answers demonstrate:

Student-teacher 1: *“Positive for all the reasons I mentioned before. The more techniques we use in the language classroom, the more efficient in this language students will be”.*

Student-teacher 2: *“I am very positive about it, because it can help students in many skills.*

Student-teacher 3: *“I am very positive on the effects of synthetic phonics instruction for EFL student performance, especially if it can be done since the very beginning of the learning process.”*

5 CONCLUSIONS

Below the codes that came to surface as the answers of the questionnaire were analyzed in regards to the research question of this work (*What perspectives do college English student-teachers have on synthetic phonics and its use in EFL classes?*). As the following table shows, three codes indicate the perspectives that the participants have on the method.

Table 1 – Codes found in participants’ answers to questionnaire

Codes	Excerpts of student-teachers’ answers
Enhancing learning technique	Student-teacher 1: <i>“...I really consider that every single technique that aims to facilitate learning should be used in the classroom”.</i> Student-teacher 3: <i>“I am very positive on the effects of synthetic phonics instruction for EFL students’ performance, especially if it can be done since the very beginning of the learning process”</i>
Method appropriate for children	Student-teacher 5: <i>“...Mainly, if it were taught since childhood”.</i> Student-teacher 4: <i>“Yes, but I would apply this approach to students in literacy phase because it is an approach that connects speech and the way the words are written. It may cause some confusion when applied to adult students.</i>
Another tool for teaching	Student-teacher 6: <i>“Anything that adds is welcome”.</i> Student-teacher 7: <i>“It is a different strategy that can leads to different outcomes (maybe better)”.</i>

The first code identified shows that one of the perspectives the student-teachers have on synthetic phonics is that it is a powerful technique to enhance

learning, especially in the area mentioned in question 2 of the questionnaire: reading, spelling and pronunciation.

Another perspective those student-teachers have on the research phenomenon is that it is more suitable for children, as demonstrated by the second code. This may indicate that adults will not benefit as much as children when synthetic phonics is applied. It is important to state that no student-teacher gave any precise information about the reason it might be so.

Lastly, the student-teachers participating in this research tend to take synthetic phonics as just another tool for teaching. According to some of them, synthetic phonics may contribute to the set of strategies that EFL teachers should have in dealing with peculiarities of the English language that are difficult for their students.

It is important to highlight that the respondents stated that the correspondence between letters and sounds in English should be formally taught (question 5). Complementary to question 5 in the questionnaire, question 3 asks about student-teachers' choice of applying the method or not to teach such a correspondence. 7 respondents said they would use synthetic phonics. Student-teacher 6 answered: "*I cannot answer this question now, as I have had no instruction on it*", suggesting that this participant believes he would need to have formal training on the method.

All the 8 participants agree that synthetic phonics should be included in the EFL class. To this direct question in the questionnaire (*Do you think that synthetic phonics should have a place in an EFL class? Why or why not?*), all the respondents answered with a blatant yes. The reasons for such a position include the belief on the improvement of pronunciation, as student-teacher 8 and student-teacher 2 say, respectively: "*Yes I do. Pronunciation is very important in learning English Language*"; "*Yes, because the knowledge of it will make easier to learn and express the sounds in English*".

It is important to highlight that the position of the 8 student-teachers on the place of synthetic phonics in an EFL context is in line with the position of educational departments of different English-speaking countries. Australia (ROWE, 2005; WYSE;

GOSWAMI, 2008) and the United Kingdom (ROSE, 2009) included synthetic phonics in their national curriculum after pointing it out as the preferred approach to teach the existing correspondence between letters and sounds to young learners.

The results here presented address the objectives of this research. The general one was to identify the position of undergraduate students-teachers of English on synthetic phonics. The specific ones were to identify the level of relevance of synthetic phonics in the participants' way of addressing spelling and pronunciation difficulties and also to find out whether the participants believe synthetic phonics should have a place in an EFL class. These objectives were achieved by demonstrating how a synthetic phonics class looks like and then, applying a questionnaire to retrieve the position of each one of the 8 participants.

The position and perspectives of this group of student-teachers on synthetic phonics are clearly shown through the codes and excerpts of their answers. In addition, as the specific objectives of this work, we can identify that for these student-teachers, synthetic phonics has great relevance for the formal and explicit teaching of the idiosyncrasies of English spelling and pronunciation. Thus, the recognition of synthetic phonics in an EFL class established as the assumption for this research was confirmed.

One of the limitations of this study is the number of participants. It is not large enough to establish the actual perspectives of undergraduate student-teachers of English on synthetic phonics. Therefore, for a future study, the number of participants will be greater. Another limitation is that it was through this research that the participants had their first contact with the method. This may be a limiting factor for them to express their own view of it based on just one video on the subject. There are two possibilities for a next study: experienced teachers on the method should compose the body of teachers under investigation, and some training sessions could be administered to teachers, allowing them to test the method with their students before collecting data on their perspectives. These limitations, however, do not hinder the positive impact that phonics instructions could have in EFL classes, as has been argued throughout this paper.

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