

# An Empirical Study on Problems of English Phonetic Teaching in Primary Schools and Countermeasures Based on Constructivism Theory—A Case Study of Jietou Central Primary School

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According to constructivism theory, students do not acquire knowledge in teachers' teaching but rather in cooperation with others in certain social environments. The theory stresses the importance of learning initiatives and cooperation. Based on constructivism theory, this paper uses empirical research, literature reference, and questionnaire survey to explore the phonetic teaching process of primary school English, to analyze problems from teachers and pupils, thus putting forward corresponding countermeasures. In the study, 100 pupils are interviewed from Grade 5 and Grade 6 of Jietou Central Primary School in Taizhou City. It is found through the questionnaire and data analysis of the problems on English phonetic teaching ways and skills as well as the English phonetic teaching situation that pupils lack listening training and interest in English learning. By analyzing the problems, the paper uses constructivism theory to put forward proposals of improving teachers' teaching situation and pupils' English phonetic situation, with the purpose of helping teachers to improve themselves in English phonetic teaching and finally improving pupils' level in their English learning.

*Keywords:* constructivism theory, English phonetic teaching, empirical study

## Introduction

With the implementation of the new national English curriculum standards, primary school English teaching develops rapidly in China, in which phonetic teaching plays an important role and becomes an inevitable trend towards English teaching. Chinese pupils learn English mainly through attending English classes and imitating voice of tone to improve their ability of English learning. However, English phonetic teaching in China is not optimistic; teachers mostly pay attention to teaching words and sentence patterns and lack the guidance of teachers' phonetic skills. The teaching mode omits pronunciation and intonation so that pupils' interest in English phonetic learning is not strong, whose phonetic ability is unsatisfactory. Based on this, it is necessary for teachers to analyze problems in English phonetic teaching in primary schools. This paper, according to the actual problems, explores appropriate teaching strategies by using the questionnaire survey based on constructivism theory, with a view to helping teachers to enhance their teaching quality and pupils to improve their levels of English learning.

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### **Literature Review**

Phonetic teaching is an essential part of English teaching primary schools, about which foreign scholars put forward different theories and opinions. Kingdon (1958) points out that pronunciation is the shell carrier of language and intonation is the soul of language. Ur (2000) deems that if learners master the sound-meaning correspondence in English learning, they can more easily grasp and memorize the pronunciation and spelling of words. Wells (2006) confirms the importance of tone of voice and pinpoints that what is important is not what you say but how you say. Vidal (2011) supposes that listening to standard pronunciation and intonation is more conducive to second language acquisition. The above foreign scholars pay such attention to phonetic teaching that the study of phonetic teaching receives more attention.

In addition, Chinese researchers develop various opinions about pupils' English phonetic learning. SUN Er-nv (2001) proposes that English teachers need study the difference of the phonetic system between English and Chinese languages to help pupils conduct phonetic learning and master the correct English pronunciation. YANG Bing (2005) argues that most Chinese students do not fully and accurately grasp elementary English pronunciation and intonation so that their oral English lacks the sense of rhythm, the change of pronunciation and intonation. MA Hong-yan (2008) mentions that in primary schools, it is essential to perform good English phonetic teaching by increasing listening tests, which is beneficial to phonetic teaching and learning. The opinions proposed by these Chinese researchers promote the development of English phonetic teaching and the progress of students' phonetic learning.

In a sense, this study aims to play a certain role of reference and enlightenment in English phonetic teaching in primary schools across China.

### **Constructivism Theory**

Constructivism theory proposed by Piaget is a cognitive theory for children's development. Supporters of the theory think that when learners contact new things, they do not procure information passively but obtain information under certain conditions and with the help of the outside world as well as through significant construction by using certain learning materials under certain conditions. In light of the theory, only four elements of "situation", "collaboration", "conversation", and "meaningful construction" can form an ideal learning environment. "Situation" means that the learning environment must be beneficial for students to meaningfully construct what they learn. In the real situation, the key to the success of learning is whether learners can draw on their learned knowledge to solve practical problems. "Collaboration" plays an important role in data collection and analysis, hypothesis proposal and verification, evaluation of learning outcomes and meaningful construction. "Conversation" means that in the learning process, it is necessary for learners to conduct a certain conversation if they intend to complete a task by mutual learning. "Meaningful construction" is the ultimate goal, which is achieved in the manner that learners change characteristics of external things and links between them into their own internal experience by understanding their learned knowledge.

The representative views of Piaget's theory of constructivism hold that children build up their knowledge about the external world in the process of interaction with the surroundings so that their cognitive structure can develop constantly. Constructivism emphasizes that teachers should notice and use learners' previous knowledge and experience in teaching, thus guiding them to obtain new knowledge and experience. When learners construct knowledge, teachers play an irreplaceable role, as they may provide students with all kinds of

help to solve various problems. In other words, teachers should help and guide students' knowledge and experience in learning so that phonetic learning content is made more realistic and interesting and phonetic learning as close as possible to the topic concerned, thereby mobilizing students' enthusiasm for learning. The dynamic construction shared by Piaget's theory profoundly and comprehensively expounds on the cognitive process and inherent laws as well as general characteristics of learning activities.

### **Research Methodology**

This research takes as samples pupils in Grade 5 and Grade 6 of Jietou Central Primary School in Taizhou City, adopts the questionnaire survey to find out the current teaching situation of English phonetic class in primary school and pupils' pronunciation conditions to make the measures more effective. The research consists of subjects, instrument, procedures, data collection, and results.

#### **Subjects**

In the research, 100 pupils are interviewed from Grade 5 and Grade 6. The reason why pupils of two grades are chosen is that they have learned English for several years. Most importantly, they have a great potential for development of construction ability. Because pupils begin to learn English from Grade 3, the first year is the transition for them to gain access to English, understand and read simple words. For older pupils, they start to learn English pronunciation and intonation so that problems facing them from the learning process are more representative. Therefore, 100 older pupils in the primary school are selected and empirical study is made more reliable and persuasive.

#### **Instrument**

The instrument applied in this research is a questionnaire. The questionnaire is used to collect data of the questions and the data are shown directly to illustrate results.

The questionnaire is composed of 20 questions, which is a survey of primary school teachers' English phonetic teaching and covers eight questions for pupils and eleven for teachers, and only one requires pupils to write down their opinions. There are three or four options in each question for pupils to decide, whose different choices reflect if pupils pay attention to phonetic practice in English classroom and reveal if teachers perform well English phonetic teaching based on the constructivism situation. As the subjects are pupils, all the questions are raised in Chinese to avoid misunderstanding. The participants are expected to make choices according to their feelings and experiences.

#### **Procedures**

In order to guarantee the validity and reliability of the research, pupils are required to fill out the questionnaire. 100 pupils are randomly selected from Grade 5 and Grade 6 and 100 valid questionnaires are collected. All the data of the exams and questionnaires are collected to make comparison and analysis with the help of Excel.

#### **Data Collection and Results**

The data are collected from Grade 5 and Grade 6. 100 questionnaires collected from the pupils prove valid. And the following are the results of the research. The following two tables are used to analyze whether pupils are interested in speaking in class, whether pupils have enough listening training, whether teachers apply teacher-centered approach, whether teachers mention phonetic skills, and whether teachers omit pronunciation and intonation. Based on the questionnaire, it concludes that the pupils in Grade 5 and Grade 6 all have little

interest in speaking in class. Especially in Grade 6, 34 percent of pupils think that speaking in class is not interesting and they do not have enough listening training; over 60 percent choose the “Usually” in “Whether pupils have enough listening training”, which reflects the listening training is not enough. Teachers’ spelling methods and skills are less, in the item “Whether teachers apply teacher-centered approach”, over 80 percent in Grade 5 and Grade 6 choose “Usually”, considering “Whether teachers mention the spelling skills”, 10 percent in Grade 6 answer “Never”, which indicates that teachers omit spelling skills. As to “Whether teachers omit pronunciation and intonation”, 30 percent in Grade 6 say “Sometimes”.

Table 1

*Problems From Pupils in English Phonetic Teaching*

Grade		Grade 5		Grade 6	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Whether pupils are interested in speaking in English class	Interested	10	20%	8	16%
	Average	28	46%	25	50%
	No interest	12	24%	17	34%
Whether pupils have enough listening training	Usually	10	20%	9	18%
	Sometimes	30	60%	35	70%
	Never	10	20%	6	12%

Table 2

*Problems From Teachers in English Phonetic Teaching*

Grade		Grade 5		Grade 6	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Whether teachers apply teacher-centered approach	Usually	40	80%	42	84%
	Sometimes	8	16%	7	14%
	Never	2	4%	1	2%
Whether teachers mention the spelling skills	Usually	9	18%	20	40%
	Sometimes	37	74%	25	50%
	Never	4	8%	5	10%
Whether teachers omit pronunciation and intonation	Usually	15	3%	15	30%
	Sometimes	28	56%	30	60%
	Never	7	14%	5	10%

## Findings

By analyzing the research results, it comes to conclusion that there are problems from teachers and pupils in English phonetic teaching, and the problems are representative and urgently need to be solved in teaching. The following is the detailed analysis of the problems from teachers and pupils in English phonetic teaching in the primary school.

### Problems of Teachers in English Phonetic Teaching

Some problems of teachers in English phonetic teaching in the school are given from three perspectives.

**Applying teacher-centered approach.** Many teachers teach precisely on the contrary to the core view of constructivism teaching; they tend to apply teacher-centered approach and they keep speaking in class teaching in such an extent that pupils become spectators without thought and have few chances to express themselves, thus making phonetic learning practical effect less ideal. YANG Yong (2007) proposes that the key to the

success of phonetic teaching lies in the ability to deal with the relationship between phonetic teaching and listening and between oral language and basic knowledge in teaching.

**Neglecting spelling skills.** Teachers often require pupils to listen to the text for a few times, then ask them to read immediately, which indicates that they do not really implement spelling skill teaching. They pay more attention to the letters of reading and memorizing words, which causes them to use improper methods in learning English such as reading words on mechanical imitation, memorizing them by rote-learning in alphabetical order, reading word by word from Chinese pinyin or characters. Pupils have poor ability of word spelling under the rules of spelling, whose pronunciation of letters is not so accurate that words are pronounced inaccurately and memorized mechanically, which makes them less interested in English.

**Omitting pronunciation and intonation.** Many teachers neglect the training of pupils' pronunciation and intonation. Crystal (1997) points out that intonation has such functions as emotional, grammatical, textual, psychological, and indexical functions. Nevertheless, teachers are found to be weak in phonetic teaching awareness in class; they are apt to focus on teaching reading, writing, and vocabulary so that pupils' English pronunciation and intonation are not accurate. While speaking and reading English, they cannot grasp stressed words and syllables, whose English output is stiff without a sense of rhythm. Though they are often seen to read aloud or read in chorus, the reading method fails to allow them to experience the rhythm of English language. Therefore, they are typically afraid of speaking, and they cannot stimulate their interest in English phonetic learning.

### **Problems of Pupils in English Phonetic Teaching**

In English phonetic teaching, pupils are learning subjects, who have some problems in learning, which cannot be ignored.

**Lacking necessary listening training.** Language acquisition is listening first, followed by reading and writing, but due to weak phonetic awareness, pupils pay no attention to listening training and their pronunciation is not accurate so they do not understand the standard pronunciation. Lack of vocabulary, to some extent, limits pupils' listening ability of comprehension. In the research, most pupils generally reflect that lack of listening training is the biggest obstacle to English phonetic practice. Although they have learned English for two or three years, they do not have a good command of their learned words or sentences. Furthermore, their accumulation of words is so limited that they cannot understand what they read. Additionally, the mechanical memory of words is also one of the reasons, which lead to the lack of listening training.

**Lacking interest in English learning.** The traditional cramming method of teaching makes class teaching boring and rigid, under which pupils learn English only for the sake of getting high scores. Therefore, their learned English in class cannot be used in real life and it is changed into "dumb English" so that they lose interest in English. On the other hand, pupils often show fear, so they dare not ask their teachers questions. With the passage of time, problems facing pupils gradually pile up, resulting in a decline in academic performance, and loss of interest in learning. When pupils are in the fifth and sixth grades and encounter relatively complex words and long sentences, they do not develop good speaking habits and lack the ability of spelling so that their pronunciation is not good, their speaking content limited, thus failing to be understood by speaking. Some pupils have the feeling of tiredness in learning and gradually lost interest in phonetic learning.

### Countermeasures and Implication

In view of problems in English phonetic teaching, it is necessary to adopt corresponding countermeasures to provide an effective help for English phonetic teaching.

#### Countermeasures That Teachers Should Take Based on Constructivism Theory

In English phonetic teaching, teachers should take advantage of constructivism theory to carry out the following strategies.

**Applying pupil-centered approach.** Teachers should attach importance to problems in phonetic teaching, updating teaching concepts. According to constructivism theory, students should become the center of teaching and the subjects of cognition as well as the active builders of knowledge, while teachers are only supporters and accelerators. For Lewis (1993), the natural use of languages, whether input or output, is a cognitive process, the “process-oriented” teaching mode helps to focus on language learning and realize the purpose of the pupil-centered English class teaching. The teacher’s role is less dominant while more emphasis is placed on pupils’ contribution by independent learning, in which pupils acquire through their efforts phonetic skills and phonetic awareness with the help of multimedia, pictures, animation, and other tools, thus giving pupils direct experience and increasing their fun of learning.

**Valuing spelling skills.** Teachers should combine text-based words, sequential continuously infiltrated letters and letter combinations of pronunciation and spelling. Phonetic strategies can effectively help pupils’ perception of the pronunciation letters in one word and learn how to read new words to improve the accuracy of their speaking English and independent spelling ability. With the increase of and double- and poly-syllable words, teachers should make pupils understand the rules of spelling, double syllable or multi-syllable word spelling in line with the rule. Specified in the primary school English vocabulary standard, pupils need grasp over 400 words, most of which are consistent with spelling pronunciation rules. Moreover, a good command of word spelling not only reduces the difficulty in word learning and memory but also increases interest in English phonetic practice.

**Stressing pronunciation and intonation.** In teaching, teachers should make it clear that pronunciation and intonation are used to express emotional attitude and different pronunciation and intonation have different meanings so that they should strengthen the demonstration and guidance for pupils to enable them to understand various contexts of expression and communication. Besides, teachers should help pupils learn to master the fundamental rhythm of English pronunciation by introducing the video relevant to pronunciation rhythm or by singing English songs. LIAO Jian-ping (2003) holds that the songs not only have distinctive rhythm but the cheerful tone, which is well possible to arouse pupils’ interest in English learning. Furthermore, teachers can organize a variety of activities suitable for pupils’ psychological characteristics in learning English, such as role-play, phonetic performance, and recitation contest.

#### Countermeasures That Pupils Should Take Based on Constructivism Theory

Based on constructivism theory, pupils are offered the following strategies depending on problems they meet with in English phonetic teaching.

**Increasing time for listening training.** Due to limits of pupils’ understanding ability, it is suggested that they listen to letters, words, and sentences by starting with 26 letters of English, cultivating good habits of listening in the alphabet teaching stage, letting them listen and identify, guiding them to listen and imitate. YANG Lian-rui (2007) finds that the advantages of children aged 3–10 in learning foreign language are to have

their strongest resilient brain and make no difference in language as well as obtain an absolute advantage in the acquisition of natural pronunciation. In order to gain the language flow, pupils should pay attention to listening input and phonetic imitation, listen enough and then to repeat and imitate in place, which must take a full listening input as a guarantee, practicing from silence to sound imitation.

**Stimulating pupils' interest in English learning.** Teachers should stimulate pupils' interest in English learning to the maximum, whereas phonetic ability is more directly influenced by interest. It is often found that pupils can actively communicate with teachers, exploring ways to conduct English phonetic practice; they are not afraid to ask teachers questions, to attend English classes and face English teachers. With the help of teachers, pupils cannot merely choose suitable after-class English reading materials and see interesting English movies to expand the knowledge of English but actively participate in school English activities, such as English reading competitions, English tabloids, the English corner, etc. These activities undoubtedly make pupils in English language environment; experience the fun of life filled with English; meanwhile, teachers should inspire pupils' positive attitude consciously so that they can actively partake in speaking to stimulate interest in phonetic learning and improve enthusiasm for speaking English.

### **Implication**

Based on constructivism theory, this research puts forward corresponding strategies for effectively improving English phonetic teaching in order to provide theoretical support of English phonetic teaching. The research makes much sense in both teaching and learning: for one thing, it helps English phonetic teaching in primary schools to develop healthily in a right direction; for another, it facilitates the improvement of pupils' phonetic learning to increase their interest in English learning.

### **Conclusion**

This paper takes as subjects 50 pupils in Grade 5 and 50 pupils in Grade 6 in Jietou Central Primary School in Taizhou City by the questionnaire survey to find pupils' problems in English learning and teachers' problems in teaching. Accordingly, corresponding countermeasures are proposed in view of constructivism theory to be able to solve the problems: teachers can apply pupil-centered approach, value spelling skills of teaching and stress pronunciation and intonation; listening training can increase pupil's interest in phonetic learning. Teachers should adopt teaching methods well suited to pupils' constructive ability, which is pupil-centered in class teaching; meanwhile they give pupils timely guidance, train their autonomous learning ability from different respects. Besides, teachers should seize sufficient chances to observe pupils' problems in English phonetic teaching, which can help them learn English well. Although this research has some limits, it can be used to help not only pupils learn relatively easily and effectively but teachers better conduct English teaching activities.

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