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**Sarunya Tarat**

*The Balanced Literacy Approach:  
Enhancing Phonemic Awareness of Young Thai EFL Students*



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## Table of Contents

<i>Editorial</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Foreword</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>Program Committee</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Author Index</i>	192

### **4th Annual International Conference on Infocomm Technologies in Competitive Strategies (ICT 2013) & 3rd Annual International Conference on Education & e-Learning (EeL 2013)**

<b>A Practice-Based Conceptual Framework for e-Learning in Higher Education: From the Perspective of “Structure” and “Interaction”</b> <i>Hye-Jung Lee</i>	1
<b>Mobile Phones Icon Recognition: A comparative study with younger and older users</b> <i>Syed Ghayas , Suziah Sulaiman , Jafreezal Jaafar and Muzafar Khan</i>	10
<b>Investigating the Potential of Depth Sensor for Monitoring People with Disabilities</b> <i>Lau Bee Theng, Ong Chin Ann and Hamid Bagha</i>	16
<b>Relative Importance of Critical Success Factors for ERP Implementation: Practitioners' Perspective</b> <i>Youngjin Kim</i>	26
<b>Perceived Importance of ICT in Learning English: View from the Indigenous Students</b> <i>Johan Eddy Luaran and Nur Alyani Bt Khairol Anuar</i>	35
<b>Development of a Community of Inquiry in Selected Online Graduate Courses</b> <i>Susan C. Garton and Gwyn Snider</i>	41
<b>Towards BYOD: Examining Education student readiness for a policy of Bring Your Own Digital device at ECU</b> <i>Jeremy Pagram and Martin G Cooper</i>	47
<b>PSU.CMS Developing a Homegrown Course Management System for Pangasinan State University</b> <i>Kristen Bhing V. Salvio</i>	51
<b>Log Analysis of Mobile User Behavior on a Public-Facing Math e-Learning Site</b> <i>Akira Nakamura</i>	56



<b>The impact of the online format on an instructor's engagement with students in a teaching seminar</b> <i>Regena F. Nelson</i>	60
<b>Evaluating new learning technology in Asia - using Singapore as a case study</b> <i>Teik Toe Teoh, Bhati Abhishek, Anita Lundburg and Margaret Carter</i>	63
<b>A Contemporary Computer Adaptive Mastery Assessment using Sequential Probability Ratio and Clustering</b> <i>Kavitha Rajamani and Vijaya Kathiravan</i>	67
<b>Why and How to Implement Impromptu Speech</b> <i>Erkin Özdemir</i>	72
<b>Optimizing Learning Outcomes with New Technologies in General Education Programme</b> <i>Eunice Tang</i>	74
<b>Effects of L2 Writing Revision Tasks on Common Mistake Frequencies among Third Year Burapha University Students</b> <i>Richard Anthony O'Donnell and Laphatrada O'Donnell</i>	78
<b>Towards Linking Assessment and Learning: Extending Formative Assessment with Diagnostics</b> <i>Stanly Fernandez</i>	89
<b>Leveraging user profile attributes for improving pedagogical accuracy of learning pathways</b> <i>Tanmay Sinha, Ankit Banka and Dae Ki Kang</i>	95
<b>Teachers and Technologies: A look inside different technologies used for teacher's training and its impacts on student teacher's learning and teaching</b> <i>Niraj Pandya</i>	103
<b>Understanding Discourse Functions in an Online Learning Community</b> <i>Edsoulla Chung Hiu Yui</i>	106
<b>Instructional Design of a Learning Package of English Alphabet</b> <i>Siew Hack Ow and Teck Wei Lew</i>	113
<b>Digital technologies and continuance theory in education: Findings from initial teacher education</b> <i>Noeline Wright</i>	121
<b>Visualizing Engineering Contents through Mixed Realities</b> <i>Manjit Singh Sidhu</i>	125
<b>An innovative way to assess live performances using mobile technology</b> <i>Alistair Campbell</i>	131
<b>Creative Design, Problem-Based Learning and Geometry Teaching</b> <i>Wen-Haw Chen</i>	138

<b>Design considerations for developing an educational multimedia storytelling courseware for children with autism</b> <i>Arvie S. Andal</i>	139
<b>Does Heutagogy Equate to iLearning for Faculty in Higher Education?</b> <i>Denise Hexom and Colin Marlaire</i>	148
<b>Development of Educational Use of New Information and Communications Technology and Learning Culture in Finland</b> <i>Jaakko Panula and Timo Vesiluoma</i>	155
<b>Using a “Happening” performance to get reflections of teachers</b> <i>Mustafa Gultekin</i>	157
<b>The correlation between online exercise scores and formative reading achievement</b> <i>Laphatrada O’ Donnell</i>	161
<b>The Balanced Literacy Approach: Enhancing phonemic awareness of young Thai EFL students</b> <i>Sarunya Tarat, Usaporn Sucaromana and Sririnan Srinaowaratt</i>	164
<b>Teachers' Perceptions And Experience On Professional Learning</b> <i>Remzi Y. Kincal, Dilek Beypinar and Fatih Topçu</i>	169
<b>Assessing Students’ E-Learning Readiness at the University of Papua New Guinea Open College</b> <i>Kipli Joan Minol, Yoshifumi Chisaki and Tsuyoshi Usagawa</i>	174
<b>A synthesis and evaluation of an integrated learning model using think-pair-share collaborative learning, with STAD competition in blended learning</b> <i>Apiradee Putpuek and Paiboon Kiattikomol</i>	181
<b>Review on Engineering Education System in India: Challenges, Issues and Solutions</b> <i>Prashant Sharma and Neha Jain</i>	188

# PROCEEDINGS

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# The Balanced Literacy Approach: *Enhancing phonemic awareness of young Thai EFL students*

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**Abstract**—This study examined the balanced literacy approach for teaching phonemic awareness of English to young EFL students. Two groups of the first grade students were taught for eight weeks. The first group as the experimental group was taught using the balanced literacy approach which focused on teaching the correspondences between sounds and letters along with the meaning of words. The other group as the control group was taught using the code emphasis approach which only focused on teaching the relationship between written and spoken language. The results showed that students who were taught by the balanced literacy approach produced significantly greater gains on phonemic awareness of English, compared to students taught using the code emphasis approach. Observations of student engagement for the two groups were also identified.

**Keywords**—phonemic awareness; young children; EFL students; balanced literacy approach; code emphasis approach; engagement

## I. INTRODUCTION

Phonemic awareness has been defined in various ways. It has been defined as the skill to detect individual phonemes of words, identify their characteristics, and manipulate those phonemes [3]. It also refers to the ability to examine language and recognize that words are made up of individual sounds [15, 24]. Significantly, phonemic awareness is crucial to the development of language skills because it enables learners to think about and know how to manipulate phonemes of words in order to read, spell, or write [19]. Learners who possess phonemic awareness can recognize words and understand how to read, spell, and write even if they have never seen and known those words before [10]. In other words, when learners have adequate phonemic awareness, they understand phoneme-grapheme correspondence and use this correspondence to read, spell, and write [5, 15, 22].

On the contrary, learners who have inadequate phonemic awareness will not be able to develop their language abilities equally to those who do [2]. Learners who learn another language are identified as at risk for perceiving, distinguishing, and producing phonemes of another language because of the phonological differences between their mother tongue and other language [13]. To solve the problem, appropriate approaches should be applied in classrooms. In the balanced literacy approach view, the sound-letter relationships and word meaning are equally important [7, 8, 9, 17]. In addition, this approach also represents phonemic awareness, phonics, and word identification skills that balance reading

and writing of literature and other whole texts [23]. Thus, the balanced literacy approach provides students with opportunities to master concept of print, learn the alphabetic system, acquire word recognition skills, develop phonemic awareness, involve with reading and writing, and also experience a variety of appropriate materials in the meaningful contexts [25]. While in the code emphasis approach view, the phoneme-grapheme correspondence is the important task of early literacy learning [16]. Therefore, the code emphasis approach allows students to know how to manipulate the language involving phonemic awareness, syllable awareness, and morphology [20]. As a result, the balanced literacy approach and the code emphasis approach are selected because they are distinct perspectives on how phonemic awareness may be taught to young children.

The two teaching methods are used to teach phonemic awareness of English with 6 and 7 year-old children in mixed ability groupings in the nonequivalent control group design. Within these approaches, the researcher seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) Will the Thai students learning English as a foreign language in the experimental group (the balanced literacy approach) and the control group (the code emphasis approach) develop phonemic awareness of English? (2) Will teaching the balanced literacy approach in the experimental group result in better phonemic awareness skills than teaching the code emphasis approach in the control group? and (3) Does students' engagement in learning phonemic awareness differ between the experimental group (the balanced literacy approach) and the control group (the code emphasis approach)?

## II. METHODS

### A. Participants

Sixty students participated in this study, aged 6 to 7 years old. They were identified as having different levels of phonemic awareness: low, moderate and high. Twenty students in each level of phonemic awareness were equally assigned to the experimental and control groups using purposive sampling, resulting 30 in the balanced literacy approach (the experimental group) and 30 in the code emphasis approach (the control group). All students received the pretest, with the 8-week of phonemic awareness training and they received the posttest after the training. Two weeks later, they were given the follow-up test.

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## B. Measures

1) *Phoneme Discrimination Tests*: The phoneme discrimination tests were adapted from Harris's [21] and Heaton's tests [4]. The two types of phonemic awareness were designed to measure performances on the initial and the final sound identification. The tests were multiple-choice questions. Students heard a single word from CD twice, then identified and selected a correct answer. The two 10-item tests were scored out of 20 points. Hence, the two tests were summed for an overall phonemic awareness.

2) *Student Observation Form*: During the 8-week period of phonemic awareness training, students of both groups were observed when they received training for 50-60 minutes each time. Observations focused on student's engagement and responses to the phonemic awareness training. Video recording and taking field notes of student responses while training provided evidence and information concerning each teaching approach.

3) *Design*: Mixed-methods design was applied in this study involving integrated with teaching and classroom management practices in each group. The quantitative data were from the scores of the pretest, posttest, and follow-up test of the experimental and control groups. The scores obtained were analyzed and assessed whether the mean scores of the experimental and control groups were significantly different. The qualitative data were from analysis of video recording and taking field notes during teaching. The qualitative data provided information about student's engagement.

## C. Instruction

1) *The Balanced Literacy Approach*: The students in this group were exposed to the two phases activities. The first phase was teaching phonemic awareness through short stories and songs and learning the sound-letter relationships. In addition, the students were taught about the place and manner of articulation to pronounce sounds.

The researcher read the whole short stories, or sang songs containing the target sounds and words to the students. After that, the researcher read each sentence of stories or songs to them and asked them to repeat. To understand stories and songs, the researcher translated the contents or texts into Thai and explained the meaning of stories and songs. After translation, the researcher showed flash cards with the letters corresponding to the target sounds and played the CD with the target sounds corresponding to the letters on the cards three times. The students were given the mirrors to pronounce the target sounds correctly. After that, the researcher presented flash cards with pictures and words to the students. On the flash cards, the target sounds were red, boldfaced, and underlined. After showing the cards, the researcher played the CD with the words containing the target sounds three times. After that, the researcher told the meaning of words to the students. In order to complete the first phase, the students were given worksheets that required them to trace dotted lines and color pictures.

The second phase was playing activities. The researcher followed Yopp's recommendations [6] to apply activities to

encourage the students to enjoy learning. Keeping a sense of playfulness and fun, avoiding drill and rote memorization, using group settings that encourage interaction among children, encouraging children's curiosity about language and their experiment with it, allowing and being prepared for individual differences, and making sure that the activity not evaluative but rather fun and informal were important part to use activities in class [6]. As these recommendations, the six activities were administered to encourage teaching and learning phonemic awareness as follows.

a) *Sound identification*: On this activity, the researcher asked the students to answer the questions that aimed to help them to detect the target sounds, for example, "What is the first sound you hear in the word...? What is the final sound you hear in the word...?" The students needed to pronounce sounds which they heard.

b) *Same or different*: The researcher pronounced two or three words and asked the students to listen to the sounds. After that, the researcher questioned the students whether those sounds were the same or different.

c) *Fun with sound boxes*: This activity was adapted from Elkonin Box. It is a type of instruction that teaches phonemic awareness by having students listen to individual sounds and marking where they hear them in the boxes. Each box in an Elkonin box card represents one phoneme, or sound [8]. The researcher gave flash cards to the students. The card was prepared with a picture at the top. Squares for each phoneme were below the picture. The squared box for the target sound was blank while other boxes were filled in. The students needed to fill the blank in with the letter or letters to make a word.

d) *Finding graphemes*: The researcher provided the students with pages of English books, newspaper or magazines. The researcher pronounced the sounds, and then the students needed to find and cut out the letters corresponding to the sounds.

e) *Who am I?*: The students were provided the two cards. The first card had printed letters at the top of the right-hand corner of the card with a picture of the animal, object, or place at the center of the card. The other card without a picture had a printed letter at the top left-hand corner. The students had to place those cards together to form a word.

f) *Crossword*: A crossword was the form of a square or a rectangular grid of white and shaded squares. The goal was to fill the white squares with letters, forming words or phrases, by solving clues which led to the answers. The students had to complete the crossword by filling letters that fitted each clue.

2) *The Code Emphasis Approach*: For this group, the students were taught heavily on the phoneme-grapheme correspondences. In other words, they were instructed to crack the alphabetic codes and understand how the codes corresponded to the sounds. Firstly, the researcher introduced words to the students. After that, the researcher showed flash cards with the letters corresponding to each sound. Next, the researcher played the CD with the sounds corresponding to the letters on the cards three times. The researcher pointed to each letter of the words and slowly made each sound three times. The researcher then pronounced the words composed of each sound on each flash card three times. Each flash card



represented each sound and its corresponding letter or letters. On the flash cards which were the target sounds, the letter were red, boldfaced, and underlined. The students had to repeat the words three times.

After that, the researcher pointed to each sound on each flash card, pronounced each sound slowly, let the students pronounce each sound. This procedure was repeated three times. After that, the researcher told the meaning of words for one time only. Next, the researcher pointed to the target sounds, pronounced the target sounds slowly, and informed the students about the letters corresponding to the target sounds. The researcher also asked the students to pronounce each sound and read the whole words by themselves three times. To finish the lessons, the researcher played the CD with the target words three times and asked the students to repeat after the CD three times. Finally, the students completed worksheets that required them to trace dotted lines and color pictures.

The students in the experimental group who were taught using the balanced literacy approach learned how the target sounds corresponded to the letters and understood the meaning of words. The researchers used the pictures to show the meaning of words. Additionally, they also learned how to pronounce the target sounds correctly. The students were instructed to understand the place and manner of articulation and they were then practiced pronouncing the target sounds. It would support them to recognize the target sounds. At the same time, the students in the control group were taught how to break words into phonemes and to understand the phoneme-grapheme relationships. In other words, they learned to break both the target and nontarget sounds and then learned the sound-letter relationships repeatedly. The meaning of word was not as important as the phoneme-grapheme relationships. Therefore, the students were told the meaning of words once and kept practicing phoneme segmentation.

#### D. Procedure

The current study included ten weeks. The target phonemes of this study were English fricatives: /f/, /v/, /s/, /z/. These four English fricative phonemes were chosen because /v/ and /z/ did not exist in Thai consonant system, therefore, Thai people always made substitutions /v/ and /z/ with Thai fricative phonemes /w/ and /s/ [18]. Although /f/ and /s/ occurred in Thai consonant system, /f/ and /s/ did not occur as the final consonants in Thai system. Thai people replaced /f/ with a voiceless bilabial plosive /p/ and substitute /s/ with a voiceless alveolar plosive /t/ [18]. Hence, if these sounds were not heard correctly, the process of distinguishing and pronouncing became more difficult [18].

Students were individually pretested in the first week. They were purposively assigned to the experimental and control groups with mixed ability groupings. The second to the fifth week, students were taught the phonemes /f/, /v/. The sixth to the ninth week, they were taught the phonemes /s/, /z/. Students were instructed for 50-60 minutes each time. Video recording and taking field notes of students' responses while training were used to obtain evidence and information concerning each teaching approach. Students were individually given the posttest using the same measures

administered at the pretest. Two weeks later, they were also given the follow-up test.

#### E. Data analysis

Quantitative data included the pretest, posttest, and follow-up test measures of phonemic awareness. Descriptive statistic and MANOVA were used to compare the scores of the pretest, posttest, and follow-up test within the experimental group and control group and to assess whether the mean scores of two groups were statistically different.

Over the 8-week of phonemic awareness training, observation data were collected and analyzed to assess teaching approaches. Students were also observed each time to obtain information about their actions while training. Video recording and taking field notes were used to obtain the information about students' responses. Students were defined as "attentive" during each teaching period if the researcher judged that they responded appropriately to the researcher's instructions during the entire period. Conversely, students were identified as "inattentive" if they responded inappropriately to the researcher's instructions.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined phonemic awareness of English of the Thai EFL students. Phonemic awareness was taught in two different methods with two groups mixed ability aged 6 to 7 year-old students. The first question addressed whether the experimental group (the balanced literacy approach) and the control group (the code emphasis approach) developed phonemic awareness of English. Both groups showed improvement over the 8-week of phonemic awareness training. The results showed that students of two teaching methods performed better scores on measures of phonemic awareness both initial and final sounds. In other words, the balanced literacy approach was successful in enhancing phonemic awareness. The results were consistent with the research by O'Day [12] suggesting the balanced literacy approach showed to be effective in improving phonemic awareness for learners. Similarly, the students in the control group also developed their phonemic awareness. The results were consistent with Mesmer's study [10] suggesting that learners were taught using the code emphasis approach improved their phonemic awareness and applied letter-sound knowledge to decode texts.

The second question was whether teaching the balanced literacy approach in the experimental group resulted in better phonemic awareness skills than teaching the code emphasis approach in the control group. The mean score of students in the experimental group made greater scores in the pretest than the control group. In other words, students who were taught phonemic awareness using the balanced literacy approach made significantly greater gains on phonemic awareness than students taught using the code emphasis approach. However, two weeks after post testing, the students in both groups were again given the posttest as a follow-up period. The results of follow-up period showed that the students in both groups could retain and recall information from their memory.



The results were consistent with the study by Donat [11], suggesting that students who were taught using the balanced literacy approach developed and performed better performances on phonemic awareness than another approach. In addition, the effect was occurred in students with low levels of phonemic awareness as well as students with moderate and high levels of phonemic awareness. The results were consistent with research suggesting that various activities based on the balanced literacy approach was also effective to increase phonemic awareness with mixed ability children [1].

The last question concerned the qualitative results. The question was whether students' engagement in learning phonemic awareness differed between the experimental group (the balanced literacy approach) and the control group (the code emphasis approach). Over the 8-week of training, the researcher observed students in both groups. In the control group, the researcher observed that some students occasionally disrupted instructional activities and interfered learning of the rest of the students. Meanwhile, the students in the experimental group had higher levels of engagement than the control group.

In other words, the students taught using the balanced literacy approach always held to the researcher with the use of direct eye contact. Moreover, the students in this group rarely displayed disruptive behavior during learning activity. They also respectfully listened, discussed, and asked questions and also helped their peer in solving problems. When the researcher asked the students to follow directions, they responded to the researcher's instruction without hesitation most of time. Moreover, the students properly generated questions and/or problems around a topic. Finally, they were also usually prepared with assignments and required class materials. It might be because the students were encouraged to learn meanings along with sound-letter correspondences and also to get involved with their peers in class. Therefore, they enjoyed learning and felt comfortable to be in class.

Conversely, the students in the code emphasis approach group displayed minimal eye contact with the researcher. Moreover, they occasionally displayed disruptive behavior during the learning activity. They often talked with their peers and sometimes walked around in the classroom. In addition, the students also had trouble listening with respect, and took over discussions without letting their peers have a turn. When the researcher asked them to follow directions, the students responded to the researcher's instruction after non verbal cues were used. Questions or problems were the researcher generated. Additionally, the students were rarely prepared with assignments and required class materials. It might be because the students were heavily taught sound-letter relationship only. Thus, they felt unhappy and bored when learning each lesson. This might create negative learning environments.

This finding was consistent with the quantitative results and suggested that the balanced literacy approach might improve students' phonemic awareness and might help to explain that the balanced literacy approach was more effective than the code emphasis approach in encouraging students to draw their attention to classrooms. Additionally, the balanced

literacy approach was appropriate to teach ESL/EFL students. The research by O'Day [12] also suggested that ESL/EFL students could take advantages from engaging in conversations and discussion in literacy that provide practice for oral language development in a context of meaningful communication.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusion of this study was that the balanced literacy approach was appropriate teaching phonemic awareness. It became clear that students taught using the balanced literacy approach could develop phonemic awareness successfully. However, this study was a first attempt to teach phonemic awareness to young children. The study led to three suggestions. First, the need of future studies should look more in-depth into teaching phonemic awareness through the balanced literacy approach with EFL students, especially young children. Second, investigations should explore whether students in another grade taught using the balanced literacy approach could improve phonemic awareness equally as well as the first grade students. Finally, more research should compare the effectiveness of the balance literacy approach and another approach in teaching phonemic awareness.

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