

# Phonics vs. Whole Language in Teaching EFL to Young Learners: A Micro-Ethnographic Study

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## Abstract

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to young learners is gaining increasing significance given many parents' interest in EFL learning by their pre-school children. In this micro-ethnographic study, in light of a long-held debate in literacy education, we examine the nature of the little-explored current practices of EFL teaching to young learners from two instructional perspectives: Phonics (Ph) and Whole Language (WL). Data collection was carried out through micro-ethnographic observation of an EFL teacher training course for teachers of young learners as well as four classes at a private language institute in Tehran over a period of three months. Data bodies, including audio-recordings, fieldnotes, reflective memos, teaching materials, and young learners' writings were analyzed based on a grounded theory perspective. The findings illustrate detailed accounts of teaching and learning involvements in this context and indicate that the instructional practices labeled as PH-based teaching are in fact an uneven mix of PH and WL. On this basis, we argue that a conscious and coherent combination of perspectives from the two approaches can provide opportunities for more balanced teaching and more meaningful EFL learning experiences.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Dear teacher, would you please introduce me a good language institute? My child has been learning English in a language institute for two years. However, she has no motivation to go on learning it anymore. (Mother of a 7-year-old EFL learner)

English teachers frequently encounter such requests by pre-school children's parents who had the experience of changing different language institutes, resulting in frustration in learning English. Such educational contexts may be attractive for Young Learners (YLS) at the beginning, while causing their gradual loss of interest and withdrawal afterwards. Therefore, a few questions may come to mind in this regard: How do YLS become engaged and motivated in these contexts? What kinds of interaction exist among teachers and learners in language institutes since students are too young to know and follow the rules and orders in such classes? Addressing some aspects

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of such questions, studies on young EFL learners' language learning worldwide have considered issues such as motivation (e.g., Wu, 2005), using songs and games (e.g., Butler et al., 2014; Paquette & Rieg, 2008), technology influence (e.g., Hockly, 2013), psychological aspects (e.g., Carreira et al., 2013; Wu, 2005), and teaching materials (e.g., Ahmed, 2017).

Moreover, there has been increasing interest among scholars in how literacy education to YLs in an additional language should be approached (Norton, 2012). While some suggest approaches based on non-segmented language learning experience (e.g., Whitmore & Crawell, 2005), others such as Smith (2011) concur with the idea of employing highly structured, teacher-directed activities that rely on drill, practice and memorization and assert that students should learn language bit by bit. Currently, proponents of each approach convincingly defend both approaches, and this may confuse educators and administrators to choose the effective literacy teaching (Hempenstall, 2005; Liaw, 2003). There are also scholars who prefer using a blend of methods and techniques, drawing from both the Whole Language (WL) approach and the skills-based approach (Blaklock & Haddow, 2007; Hempenstall, 2005).

Nonetheless, as the overall approach to language and literacy education for young EFL learners in Iran has not been widely examined, there is little in-depth evidence on such concerns in our context. Therefore, this study pursues two purposes: First, we aim to provide a thick description of young EFL learners' involvements to shed light on what is going on in their English language classes. In this regard, we consider the educational context of young EFL learners, including teaching and learning processes, different kinds of interactions between teacher and students, and materials used in class, as well as children's attitudes towards learning a foreign language. Second, in line with Ken Goodman's (1997) belief that language is invented by children within the dynamics of the language conventions as expressed by the society and culture, this study tries to reflect on these teaching and learning processes from the Whole Language (WL) versus Phonics (Ph) points of view. More specifically, we address two research questions:

1. What are the PH-labeled processes of teaching EFL to YLs in a selected English language institute in Tehran?
2. What are the rewards and challenges of such language education processes from the Ph perspective versus the WL one?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Approaches to Literacy Education

While YLs are considered at the core of literacy education concerns in educational policy development, "there has been intense public interest for decades in how children learn to read. This interest has often been realized in the form of vociferous argument over how children should be taught to read— a period of exchange that has become known as the "reading wars"" (Castles, 2018, p. 5). Over many years, the debate went on between those who favor the Ph approach, in which the sound letters are taught explicitly (Chall, 1967; Flesch, 1955) and those who advocate a WL approach, in which the child's discovery of meaning through experiences in authentic literacy-rich activities is emphasized (Goodman, 1997; Smith, 1971).

### *Phonics*

Phonics was introduced in the 19th century and continued to be the predominant method until the second half of the century (Watson, 1998). Some scholars like Adams (1990) regard Ph as "a system of teaching reading that builds on the alphabetic principle, a system of which a central component is the teaching of correspondences between letters or groups of letters and their

pronunciations” (p. 50). The National Reading Panel (2000) defines Ph as a way of teaching reading in which the acquisition of letter-sound correspondences and their use in reading and spelling is its primary focus. Popular forms of Ph instruction in the 1960s included synthetic and analytic instruction (Aukerman, 1981). In synthetic or explicit Ph instruction, children are taught to ‘synthesize’ the sounds existing in written words by blending the sounds together. In this regard, some “commercial Ph programs such as Letter Land, Jolly Phonics and Ants in the Apple” became widely used in the early years of school (Campbell et al., 2011, p. 369).

In an analytic instruction process, also known as implicit Ph, the known words are broken down into their component parts. Through this kind of instruction, learners often have the images in mind and can identify words by their shape, their first and last letters, and the context in which they are used in the frame of sentences. Watson and Johnston (2000) explain in brief that analytic Ph breaks down the whole to parts, whereas synthetic Ph builds up from parts to whole. Indeed, both synthetic and analytic Ph are included as systematic Ph (Shepherd, 2013). It is claimed that using a systematic approach is considered as the preferred method of Ph instruction for teaching literacy in the first years of school in countries like Australia and the UK (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005; Rose, 2006).

### ***Whole Language***

In the era that educational studies revolved around behavioral psychology, the emergence of the WL approach paved the ground for considering more humanistic studies (Goodman, 1989). The WL approach which “emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century was to a large extent, a revolt against the skills-based approach” (El-Koumy, 2004, p. 17). Studies show that there is no universally accepted definition for the WL. According to Maddox and Feng (2013, p. 6), there are various studies that “describe WL as a theory, an approach, a method, a philosophy, a belief, or even a curriculum”. Hempenstall (2005) believes that since the WL classrooms are not the same, it is not an easy task to explain definitely what happens in these educational settings. Goodman (1986) describes the WL as a philosophy rather than as a series of prescribed activities. Goodman (1991) further mentions that comprehension, reading and writing ability can develop side by side with the speaking ability. In other words, the WL proponents pay more attention to the integration of language.

In the same vein, Ling (2012) asserts that “taking the aims, motives, and environments of learning foreign language into consideration, we can develop the students’ listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities at the same time” (p. 150). Using the WL theory would lead to the invention of new ways of thinking and new methods to foreign language teaching in which the activities pave the ground for creating a meaningful environment of language learning and students can learn and use English with more enthusiasm. This is in line with what Goodman (1989) refers to as a sense of empowerment through which learners “are invited to take ownership over their learning and given maximum support in developing their objectives and fulfilling them” (p. 209). In other words, students become the directors of their own learning processes.

### ***Integration of Ph and WL***

Some advocates of the WL argue that decoding instruction had always been part of the WL teaching. Considerations of interconnected Ph and WL vies have led to an argument for a *balanced literacy* that is intended to incorporate the best elements from both Ph and WL approaches (Church, 1996; Goodman, 1993; Moats, 2000; Routman, 1996). Furthermore, the new approaches to Ph instruction by the 1990s relied on constructivist principles such as spelling-based approaches (Cunningham & Cunningham, 1998) and embedded Ph approaches (Hiebert et al., 1992) which engaged learners in active construction of knowledge about orthographic patterns. The outcome

of such approaches somehow support the integration of Ph instruction with the ideas of the WL approach.

Moreover, some scholars believe that using the Ph instruction would engage learners in more challenging materials to read compared to that of the WL classrooms (e.g., Stahl et al., 1996). Therefore, “an effective program might involve elements associated with WL as well as more direct instructional approaches” (Stahl et al., 2006, p. 147). However, depending on YLs’ needs and interests, these elements might be managed. For instance, the learners with a low literacy background in early stages may need more direct instruction to develop concepts compared to those who can foster their literacy knowledge through print-based activities whether at home or in class.

### **Second/Foreign Language Literacy Education**

Many EFL teachers, as well as researchers, seek effective ways to teach English and in particular, literacy. Although learners of English as an additional language can experience additional challenges when they start to learn reading and writing in English, “there exists a consensus among second language educators that young learners need to be engaged in literacy instruction” (Gordon, 2007, p. 95). Considering the great debate, several studies were conducted around the world to find which approach is the best for the EFL learners. Many scholars advocate both the WL and Ph approaches, leaving educators, administrators, and parents in dark about effective ways to teach reading to beginners (Blaklock & Haddow, 2007; Hempenstall, 2005; Liaw, 2003).

### ***Ph in Foreign Language Education***

There are arguments in favor of Ph instruction and the effectiveness of phonological training in second/foreign language/literacy education (Purewal, 2008). It has been argued that first and second language learners use similar strategies in reading (Gass & Selinker, 2001). Similarly, scholars such as Smith (2011) assert that Ph is a compulsory component in Western and Eastern countries although the researcher does refer to the complexity of implementing Ph instruction and focuses on a crucial question of how we can ensure maximum learning outcomes for EFL students implementing Ph instruction. In this regard, while Smith (2011) considers basic approaches, progression, assessment and teacher preparation as the key aspects necessary in developing a successful Ph program, he mentions two issues that have important implications for policy and practice, namely selecting the best type of PHh instruction and the existing unique position of teaching Ph in an ESL context.

Among the commercial Ph programs of teaching Ph to YLs, Jolly Phonics series (Lloyd & Wernham, 1995) has been widely used in first language literacy education in early years of school (Campbell et al., 2011). However, as pointed out by Derakhshan and Faghani (2016), this commercial program is also the main textbook at many institutes in EFL contexts. Despite its popularity in EFL literacy education, Mullins (2013) questions some issues in teaching Jolly Phonics such as the lack of teacher’s knowledge. A related study by Tibi (2005) in the United Arab Emirates also shows that teachers were often inadequately prepared in teaching phonological awareness. In this regard, Ariati, Padmadewi, and Suarnajaya (2017) suggest a variety of activities such as story reading, games, whiteboard blending, free writing tasks, and outdoor activities to improve YLs’ English literacy skills through Jolly Phonics strategy.

### ***WL in Foreign Language Education***

The effectiveness of using the WL principles in teaching English as a foreign language at different levels has been attested by several studies. Some of the arguments in this regard focus on

the effectiveness of the WL approach in improving learners' foreign language learning through using the skills holistically (Qiang et al., 2008), and the advantages of using the WL approach in teaching reading such as increasing students' independence in learning (Alhaddad, 2014). Describing his WL Foreign Language Class (WLFLC) as a practical example, Schwarzer (2001) mentions "three basic components needed to establish a WLFLC: (1) the classroom setting; (2) the resource books used in the class; and (3) the schedule of instructional activities for the class" (p. 52). Similarly, considering instructional activities in a WL classroom, Gordon (2007) argues that these literacy pieces should be similar to authentic written texts that children might encounter outside the classroom.

Ling (2012, p. 152) believes that using the WL in these educational contexts has some advantages and disadvantages as well: "Firstly, with this theory, it becomes easier and more possible for the students to understand the whole text. Secondly, it blends the practices of listening, speaking, reading and writing into an organic unity, avoiding developing the reading ability only in the teaching of English reading. Thirdly, it adopts informal assessment so that the students can get a more objective score". Furthermore, in another study conducted by Erlina, Mayuni, and Akhadia (2016), EFL materials were evaluated from a WL point of view. They provided new materials consisting of a course book and a teacher's manual to make reading more holistic and meaningful. Focusing on learners' needs and interests, they suggest that educational institutions need to provide a rich learning environment with a variety of reading sources to let learners select the materials that suit their interests.

### *Integrating Ph and WL in Foreign Language Education*

In practice, teachers may prefer neither the traditional skills-based approach and teacher-directed view of literacy teaching only, nor the strict version of social interaction proposed by the WL view of literacy teaching and learning. In the era of effective language teaching, the classroom processes "might involve elements associated with WL as well as more direct instructional approaches" (Stahl et al., 2006, p. 147). In this regard, many scholars believe in using a blend of methods and techniques, drawing from both the WL approach and the skills-based approach (e.g., Blaiklock & Haddow, 2007; Hempenstall, 2005). Similarly, Freppon (1991) conducted a study and proclaimed that students who were taught Ph in a context could apply their knowledge and sound out words more successfully than students who were taught Ph in isolation.

In the same vein, Hornsby and Wilson (2009) refer to the evidence supporting the view that Ph is best learned when taught in the context of learning to read and write. Similarly, Maddox and Feng (2013) asserted that the WL approach would be most effective with the integration of Ph instruction. Stressing on using authentic and meaningful text, the scholars mentioned Ph instruction as "daily, specifically planned, teacher-directed" activities (p. 19). Since there is a need for learners to overcome unknown Ph patterns to decode them efficiently, working on explicit Ph lessons seems to be of great importance among classroom activities. Although the scholars recommended the integration of the Ph and WL into one curriculum, they place greater emphasis on Ph development believing that Ph instruction will most effectively build literacy skills for all young readers.

## **3. METHOD**

### **Context and Participants**

Considering the guiding questions of the study, this research aims to provide a thick description of YLs' educational environment. Then, these classroom processes are going to be analyzed from two perspectives, namely Ph versus WL. In this regard, two related settings shape the context of

the study, namely a Teacher Training Course (TTC) and an English language institute. After observing the TTC that was mainly based on teaching the procedure of sound letters, in a language institute that worked in line with the TTC, four classes were selected for observation. The second author of this article participated in the TTC as the first setting of the study. The course was held for 11 teacher trainees and comprised four three-hour sessions. All the sound letters of Ph1A–Ph3B along with their related story, actions, words, and sentences were taught during the course.

The language institute was a branch of major institute with more than 50 branches around the country. This branch is located in the west of Tehran and its courses for different ages include *Phonics for YLs* (for children aged 4–7), *Take Off* and *English Time* (for children aged 7–12), as well as *Cambridge Exam Preparation* course and *Free Discussions* (for students aged 12 and above). Teaching materials for YLs provided by the central institute are student books, flashcards, and CDs. The course materials are based on Ph system (adopted from Jolly Phonics series) in which children do reading and writing activities.

After the TTC, four classes of the institute were proposed by the institute for observation, namely Ph1A, Ph1B, Ph2B, and Ph3A. In this regard, the teachers as well as the YLs of these classes are considered as two groups of participants of the study. The four female teachers (aged 21–36) have all passed the TTC held by the main institute. Some have a university degree related to teaching English and some have acquired English in private language institutes. Students of the four classes included 18 young boys and girls aged 4–7.

### Data Collection

Data was collected based on an ethnographic approach (Murchison, 2010) using multiple methods, including participation, audio recording, and field notes so that it would “reduce the risk of chance associations and of systematic biases due to a specific method” (Maxwell, 2005, p.112) and help gain more credible results. Data bodies were collected within three months, first through participation in the aforementioned TTC and then through observation of those classes that were in line with that course. The second author of this article first participated in the TTC of the institute and then conducted observations of YLs’ classes to be able to see the realization of the TTC in these classes. Based on practicality and availability, five sessions of each of the four classes (overall 20 three-hour sessions) were observed and audio-recorded by the permission of the institute manager.

Field notes were recorded during the observation to keep track of non-verbal expressions, physical reactions in different situations, and all other aspects of data that could not be audio-recorded. They were written as soon as possible after each observation session to record the details. Furthermore, since memo-writing can help researchers be actively engaged with materials, generate new ideas, and modify the subsequent data-gathering (Charmaz, 2014), the observer’s own thoughts and attitudes were written in reflective-memos. Some learners’ writing samples were also gathered as the secondary data of the study. Moreover, the second author of this article also talked with parents about issues related to YLs’ learning experiences and challenges. During these interactions, they let her cast a look at children’s English books and notebook and take photos of their writings. These often consisted of quizzes, dictations, and other writing activities.

### Data Analysis

Grounded theory and coding procedures were employed to explore the data (Charmaz, 2014). In grounded theory, “rather than approaching the data with pre-existing theories and concepts and applying these theories to the data (a deductive or etic approach), researchers begin by collecting data, engaging in open line-by-line analysis, creating larger themes from these data, and linking

them together to create an emergent explanation or theory.” (Tracy, 2020, p. 63) In this regard, coding was used as a process of extracting themes from EFL YLs’ educational settings. Based on Tracy’s categorization, we analyzed the data in the two rounds of *primary-cycle coding* and *secondary-cycle coding*. The former provides a summary of “what’s going on” in the context, whereas the latter seeks to ask ““why” and “how” empirical materials are interesting and significant” (Tracy, 2020, p. 232). Based on this categorization, the word ‘cycle’ in the aforementioned coding procedures reveals that these processes are not simply a one-trial stage but, repeated and recoded for a couple of times through several phases. For trustworthiness, Tracy’s (2010) eight criteria were considered to take care of the quality of the study.

#### 4. FINDINGS

The themes that emerged out of the coding procedures are presented in this section and are illustrated by examples. The main emerging categories of teaching and learning involvements in these contexts include: Whole-Institute Activities (including four kinds of exercises in which all teachers and students are involved before starting their classes); Class Warm-up (including YLs introducing themselves and talking about their favorites at the beginning of each session); and Literacy Teaching (including different parts of teaching these YLs how to read and write). Following the illustration of each main category, brief notes are presented based on TTC discussions related to that category, and then some reflections on the activities of that category are provided from the Ph versus WL perspectives.

##### Whole-Institute Activities

Every morning before the start of classes, teachers and students of all classes stand in the middle of Class C (the largest one) to sing and do some whole-institute activities together. These activities consist of four main ones, namely, Thank You God, Morning Exercise, Show Me, and Super Songs. The details of each activity are explained below. (All ***bold-italic*** parts of the paragraphs as well as the block quotes in the rest of this section are excerpts of the data, and all names are pseudonyms.)

##### ***Thank You God***

Thank You God is the first subcategory of the whole-institute activities. It is a one-minute preschool worship song for kids to recite and learn. It is around 9 o’clock. The children say goodbye to their parents and often enter the institute with sleepy faces, go to the biggest class, and put their backpack on the chair around the class. One may expect to see all the 6 boys and 12 girls for the whole-institute activities, but rarely can we see more than 10 students at the beginning of the activity. Three or four children often join the group in the middle or near the end. The teachers of all four classes start greeting students. There is a Master teacher (MT), Miss Mona, with long-term experience of teaching in that institute (about 10 years).

The MT starts the whole-institute activities exactly at 9 o’clock: ***Everybody hand in hand.*** Teachers and students stand in the middle of the class, take each other’s hand and make a circle. Then she goes on: ***Ok, raise up your hand [as if you want to pray]. In the name of God. Thank you God, for the world so sweet Thank you God for the birds that sing. Thank you God for the food we eat. Thank you, God, for the water we drink. Thank you, God, for everything.*** All four teachers sing the song as it seems there is just one voice. Raising the hands up, children mostly try to do the actions of flying, eating, and drinking as they hear the words in the rhyme.

##### ***Morning Exercise***

Morning exercise is a three-minute activity through which children review different parts of body such as head, hand, foot, fingers, and the like. This section consists of two main parts: Up &

Down and Do & Count. In the former, YLs gradually become familiar with right and left hands, and in the latter, they learn numbers from one to ten by doing some exercises at the beginning of every session. In Up & Down, the MT asks the group (all students and teachers) to move their heads, hands, and legs up and down. What the MT asks the group to do are in a fixed order as follows: *Hands up, hands down, right hand up, right hand down, left hand up, left hand down, right foot up, right foot down, left foot up, left foot down*. While doing the actions, some of the students wrongly raise their right or left hand. However, the MT pays no attention and with a smile on her face shows her approval towards children.

During the activity, Miss Mona tries to respond to children's actions: *Excellent! Thank you!* Furthermore, she sometimes asks for children's help to complete the order while the MT is doing the action in advance. As an example, once the MT put her hands on her shoulders and said: *Put your hands on your...?* The children replied together, *shoulders*. While the teacher was taking all the children's actions under consideration, she showed no reaction as she noticed that Aida was doing wrongly. Taking a look at the teacher, the child took the hands off the knees and put them on the shoulders as well.

### *Show Me*

Show Me takes about five minutes and is performed in two sections, namely Feeling Actions (dealing with different kinds of feelings like being sad, happy, angry, surprised, etc.) and Daily Actions (related to simple verbs and daily actions such as washing, sleeping, walking, running, etc.) While Miss Mona asks the group *Show me you are tall*, the group responds while they try to stretch themselves upward: *I am tall*. When the MT says *Show me you are surprised*, the group pretends to be surprised and says, *Vow!* Then, the MT asks the group: *Show me you have a headache*. The group answers putting their hands on their forehead: *Ouch!* etc.

In Daily Actions as the second part of the activity, children review the routine verbs used in one's life. They do whatever Miss Mona asks and verbalize the action verb three times. As an example, when the MT says *Show me you are eating*, the group replies: *eat, eat, eating* while doing the action of putting something in their mouth with a spoon. Most of the children perform the orders together and imitate what the MT does. In case a child does not cooperate with others, the MT indirectly helps her/him do the action with the group. For instance, when the MT noticed that Aisana, a 4-year-old girl had stopped doing the actions and just was watching other children, she looked at the child, raised her voice to grab her attention while pretending cutting her own nails. Then the young learner repeated the action and did whatever the whole group were doing.

Sometimes the children want to attract their teacher's attention. For example, as the MT says *Show me you are sneezing*, all students make a sneezing sound while keeping hands in front of their nose. Then, teachers together say: *Bless you. Thank you*. Once, Helia kept doing the same action and looking at her teacher. A big smile appeared on her face and stopped sneezing after the teacher said: *OK, bless you!* Usually, girls are more active than boys in doing exercises. Occasionally, the MT says to the boys: *I just hear the girls' voice*. Afterwards, the boys try to raise their voice while the girls are encouraged more and do the rhymes eagerly. Some children give a different personal answer to the orders but see no reaction from the teachers. For instance, once the MT said: *Show me you are happy*, the whole group answered, *I am happy*. But Aida replied: *I am sad*, saying the word 'sad' louder, still receiving no reaction from the teachers.

### *Super Songs*

The last part of the whole-institute activities is Super Songs. Children sing together the songs chosen from the book Super Songs. It is a collection of 27 traditional action-songs and chants for very young learners accompanying audio CD with lively recordings of all the songs (Figure 1). It

is expected that YLs sing nine songs of this collection among which three songs are the most popular ones, namely The Wheels on the Bus, Head, Shoulder, Knees, and Toes, and Wind the Bobbin up.

Unlike the previous sections of whole-institute activities in which teachers' voice is heard more and children mostly do the action while murmuring the rhymes in low voice, in this part, children often sing louder and do the actions together. It seems that this part is more interesting to them. For instance, once Miss Mona noticed that one of the students is singing the song in a very loud voice, she turned to him and said, *Nima, why are you shouting?* The MT starts with: *Everybody! Are you ready to sing Super Songs?* All of the children reply together, *Yes, I'm ready.* Then, she plays the CD. During singing the songs, the MT may stop the audio file and let children sing the songs without the CD. Occasionally, some students (often boys) may give their own idea about the content of the song. For instance, in the song The Wheels on the Bus, the students sing:

The children on the bus go riggle, riggle, riggle  
The mummies on the bus go don't do that, don't do that  
The babies on the bus go wah, wah, wah  
The daddies on the bus go read, read, read...

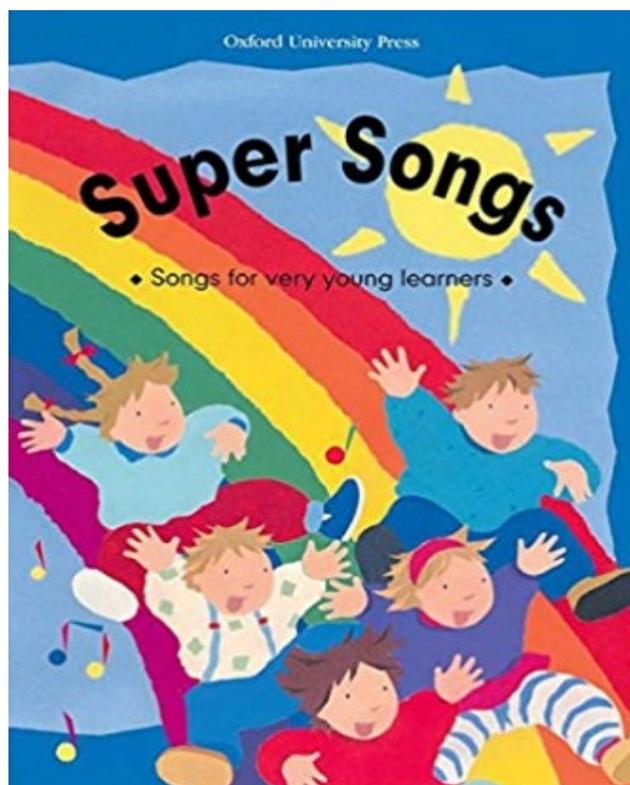


Figure 1: Cover of the book 'Super Songs'

Once the children were singing a song that did not belong to the collection of super song. They raised their right hand up and started singing: *Daddy finger, daddy finger, where are you?* Then, they raised their left thumb and went on: *Here I am, here I am, how do you do?* They went on the same procedure with mommy finger while showing their point finger and the like. At the end of the activity, the MT said: *Clap for yourself.* The children clapped and said in group, *Goodbye!*

**Thank you, teacher.** As the songs are finished, the students take their backpacks, line up and go to their own class getting ready for about three hours of activity.

TTC Evidence: Starting the first session of the TTC with a brief explanation of pre-phonics, the instructor, Miss Alavi says: Young learners participate first in a course called pre-phonics to get ready for Ph1. They will get familiar with some colors, fruits, animals, family members, parts of body, numbers 0 to 10, and simple questions. In the further explanation of group exercise, Miss Alavi, goes on: Do not correct students' sentences directly, they will gradually know how to do them in a right way. She adds that: Through imitation, practice, and repetition young learners will gradually get to know them. The instructor emphasizes: As a teacher, try to admire young learners all the time as they listen to your orders with the words such as, Excellent, Good boy or Good girl, I love you, Thank you, and the like. She goes on with a brief introduction of Super Songs saying that: The students will sing about 9 songs. All of them are in a book with a CD called Super Songs.

**Ph vs. WL Perspective:** Exposing the YLs to a language-rich environment contrasts with the idea of decontextualized language learning in Ph that defines class activities for the sole purpose of instructing language forms. Immersing students in an authentic speech asserts the idea of *relevance* in the WL. Children learn meaningful information connected with their lives, as their exercises in the whole-institute activities are somehow relevant to the children's daily lives. However, in some cases the content reminds the behavioristic theory of do and practice drill in the Ph point of view in which the main focus is on language not on real experiences and background knowledge of the learner. In line with this point of view, the YLs first have a sense, then practice, imitate until they learn it. From the *empowerment* point of view in the WL, these YLs have no power to use the activity in which they are more interested. The prescribed curriculum and teacher's authority in doing the activity asserts features of the Ph approach in these educational settings.

### Class Warm-Up

After completing the whole-institute activity, the YLs enter the class, sit around the tables in a circle or semi-circle while putting their backpacks beside themselves on the floor (Figure 2). The number of girls is more than that of boys in all four classes. Moreover, the students often call their instructor *teacher* or add *Miss* to the beginning of her first name. At the beginning of each session, approximately 30-45 minutes are devoted to warm-up. It makes up a large part of class activity in which the learners introduce themselves one by one to their classmates. In this part of the activity, the children find the opportunity to speak and talk about themselves. However, the teacher tells them what to talk about. Depending on the level of students, warm-up is divided to two stages, Answer Me and Introduce Yourself.



Figure 2: Setting of chairs and tables in one of the classrooms

### *Answer Me*

At the beginning of every session, students of Ph1 and Ph2 should answer the questions asked by the teacher about their first name, last name, mother's name, father's name, and age. For instance, as Miss Mahsa wants to teach YLs how to introduce themselves, she goes towards Hasti, shakes hands with her and says: **Hello, my name is Mahsa. I am Mahsa. What is your name?** The student says nothing while looking at the teacher surprisingly. Then Miss Mahsa goes on with the same question while saying some male names to make the child react: **What is your name? Ali? Reza?** At the same time, the young girl answers: نه، هستی! Miss Mahsa says: **Aha, your name is Hasti.** Then the teacher goes on with repeating the same question and its answer, word by word: **What is your name? My... name... is... Hasti.** Afterwards, the teacher does the same for the rest of the students. While students have problems in answering the questions, they are often helped by reminding the familiar songs or activities.

Warm-up activity has its own disciplines. During a teacher-student dialogue other students should be silent, put their hands on the table, listen to their classmate and wait for their own turn to speak. They are not allowed to make noise whether with their body or by speaking with each other. For example, when Parsa was answering the questions, Miss Elham interrupted him, looked at Diana and said: **Don't talk to Negar! Be quiet! Listen to your friend's speaking.** Silence filled up the class with a heavy look towards her. The child looked at the classmates and started playing with fingers while her head was down. Again, the teacher said angrily: **Diana don't play with your fingers. Put your hands on the table. Listen to Parsa carefully. The next turn is yours.** Keeping the child's attention all the time is so important for the teachers that Miss Neda, for instance, frowned at Mobina as she was yawning to the child's embarrassment.

### *Introduce Yourself*

As mentioned before, from Ph3A on, the warm-up activity becomes much longer. Learners should introduce themselves to their classmates and talk about their parents as well as their favorites (e.g., color, animal, food, sport, cartoon, and car). Finally, the teacher gives some orders using on, in, and under to the students. The students are always expected to follow a fixed order of the statements. In other words, they should first talk about their appearance, then their parents. Afterwards they would shift to their favorites. The following is an example:

Elena: My mother's name is Elham. My favorite color is....

Miss Mona interrupted her, **She is tall and thin.**

Elena: She is tall and thin. My favorite ...

Miss Mona: **My father's...**

Elena: Aaaaah! My father's name is Reza.

She seemed to decide for the YLs when to talk and what to say. For example, when Hanieh said, **My mother's name is Maryam. He is young and strong,** Miss Mona interrupted her and said: **Is your mother a boy?** All students laughed except Hanieh. Miss Mona corrected the answers: **Your mother is tall and thin. Your father is young and strong.** The young learner stopped talking any more, then Miss Mona helped her saying, **OK, talk about your favorites.** The student was still silent staring at the teacher. Thus, the teacher went on, **My favorite cartoon is?** Getting no response, Miss Mona continued, **My favorite cartoon is Sponge Bob.** Trying to show her disagreement with the teacher, Helia added, اون گیسو کمند رو دوست داره. Insisting on her idea, Miss

Mona repeated her statement: *No, Her favorite cartoon is Sponge Bob*. Helia and Elena said nothing but looking at each other in astonishment.

As the sentences are repeated every session over and over with no variation, it seems that children feel bored with introducing themselves parrot-like and using fixed statements. Teachers often do not let other students speak while their classmate is doing the activity. They ask them to listen and wait for their turn. As an example, once Roham was talking about his favorite color, his classmate Bahar went on: *My favorite color...*, Miss Neda interrupted her seriously: *It's not your turn. Next turn is yours. You should wait*. Bahar said in a low voice while playing with her fingers: *آخه من هم می خوام رنگی که دوست دارم رو بگم*. The teacher showed no reaction and again asked the child to wait for her own turn.

The learners often get encouraged in three ways, getting happy face, sticker and postman's gift. Happy face would be dedicated to those who do writing activities which will be explained later. Whenever students have few or no mistakes in their dictation (at most one or two), they get a sticker. Teachers often let them select their own ones. Girls often get stickers of heart or flower while boys prefer to have those of cars or characters like Spiderman and Batman. Moreover, once in a term, parents are asked to provide a gift for their child and give it to the teacher as a postman's present for those who have followed teacher's orders and class disciplines. The children are told that there is a camera in each class in which the postman can see all the students to decide which student would deserve a gift.

**TTC Evidence.** Finishing with the explanation of whole-institute activities on the first session of the TTC, the instructor goes on with talking about warm-up: *Each session the students have warm-up questions like 'What's your name?', 'Are you tall or short, etc.?'... As a teacher, you should try to teach them the true structure and gradually help and motivate the young learners to use the correct structure*. She devotes most of the session to talking about class management: *Make a list of your own rules and stick to them firmly*. She further asks the apprentices to draw a sad face on the right and a happy face on the left of the board to clarify some disciplines for children. The teacher also specifies a few other rules, including one about the language of instruction: *Don't speak Farsi!* The focus of the TTC instructor is on the syllabus: *The syllabus defines for you what to do, what to ask, and what to teach*. Nothing is mentioned about variations in answering warm-up questions, but she suggests stickers as an encouragement tool for children.

**Ph vs. WL Perspective.** Warm-up is performed in the way defined by the TTC instructor. Accomplishing such prescribed practices without any variation reveals the Ph assumptions in such educational settings. The WL perspective is at odds with mechanical processes in which students imitate language. From a WL point of view, the sense of the activities takes priority over imitation and practicing. Moreover, based on the idea of *relevance* in WL, the content of warm-up activity is somehow relevant to YLs. Yet, in terms of *meaningfulness*, repeating the same words and statements over and over for the entire term makes little sense to learners anymore. In addition, keeping quiet for about 30-45 minutes and just listening to the one who is speaking or answering teacher's questions may be acceptable in Ph that believes in repetition. However, it seems questionable in the WL approach which sees language learning as a dynamic form of meaning-making in the context of purposeful social interactions.

## Literacy Teaching

After warm-up, the teacher goes on with working on literacy. The aim of this part is teaching YLs all English letter sounds (not just the alphabet) in a defined order through 15 levels of phonics. Based on Jolly phonics series, every sound follows a defined action along with a brief storyline to

build the child's interest. Since all branches of the institute follow a fixed prescribed curriculum with the same syllabus for teaching new sounds, teachers' priorities are working on the pages of the student book and covering the syllabus of each session. Therefore, trying not to run out of time was one of the main concerns of most teachers.

### *The Review Section*

After warm-up activities, the teacher goes on with reviewing lessons; first letter sounds, then words and sentences. The teacher starts the activity with drawing two lines on the board. Then, she goes on with writing both capital and small letter sounds taught before. Afterwards, she asks children to read them first, chorally then, individually. In Ph1 and Ph2, the teacher just writes the known letters; however, every session in Ph3, while all capital and small letters are written by the teacher on the board from A to Z in blue and red respectively, learners try to sing the alphabet song together along with the teacher. After writing all letters on the board, the children are all asked to take their hands up, verbalize the sounds, and do the related action together. For instance, for 'p' the action is pretending to puff candle and saying *p-p-puff the candle* twice. Focusing students' attention on the activities is of great importance to the teacher. Nobody is allowed to just sit and watch others. Those who do not cooperate with other classmates in doing the activity will be warned by teacher facing statements such as, *Are you sleeping? Where are your hands?* and the like.

Reading activity for Ph1 and Ph2 students relies on reading isolated morphemes and vocabulary words. Two types of words are to be worked on: the words out of the known letters and tricky words which have to be memorized and learned as a whole word. For instance, for teaching the sound letter 'o', Miss Mona wrote some words on the board and asked Helia to read. She started reading the words first part by part, then as a whole in: *g-ot, got; p-ot, pot; h-ot, hot*. Sometimes learners have some suggestions for special words to read. The more students learn the sound letters, the longer words they are asked to read to get proficient in reading words. Such activities are not confined to just reading the meaningful words. Focusing too much on combinations of sounds in blending activities, teachers even work on meaningless words as a further practice. For instance, once Miss Mona made some meaningless words out of the known letter sounds on pieces of paper (Figure 4.5), she asked students to come to the board and read them as fast as possible.

When blending is finished, the teacher starts reviewing words and sentences using Flash Cards (FCs) which are used as one of the main learning tools for teaching English to YLs. It bears a word on one side and the image of it on the other. Teachers often follow a routine procedure for FCs. For instance, once, Miss Neda showed the image of *dog* to students and asked them: *What is it?* All children answered: *dog*. Then, she showed the written side of FC to them and went on with another question: *Dog begins with?* The learners replied while doing the action of beating on a drum, *ddddddrum*. Finally, she asked children to make sentences. They all together made two sentences: *Dog is an animal. Dog has short tail*, as if a tape recorder was making the sentences.

From Ph3 on, the YLs practice reading an 8-page story book titled *Did It Fit?* (Figure 4). In the story, three animals (a dog, a cat, and a pig) and a man try to have something on their head as a hat. None of the stuff mentioned in the book such as *tin pot, pot lid*, and *pan* fits the animals. The learners are asked to practice reading pages through a term while defining Tricky Words (TWs) by drawing a circle around them. A few words of the story may be new to students; however, no new letter sound can be found there. It seems that the book is selected based on children's phonics level. At the beginning of the activity, the teacher explains the whole story while trying to clarify some key words such as 'fit' for them. Then, she goes on with reading the book.

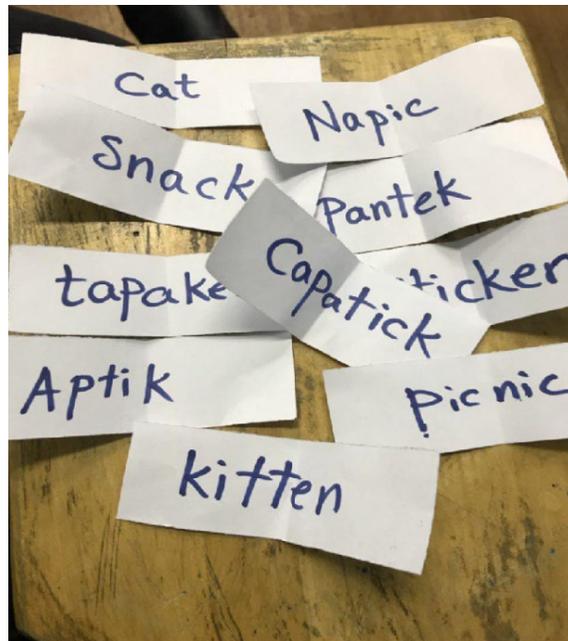


Figure 3: Teacher-made cards for blending

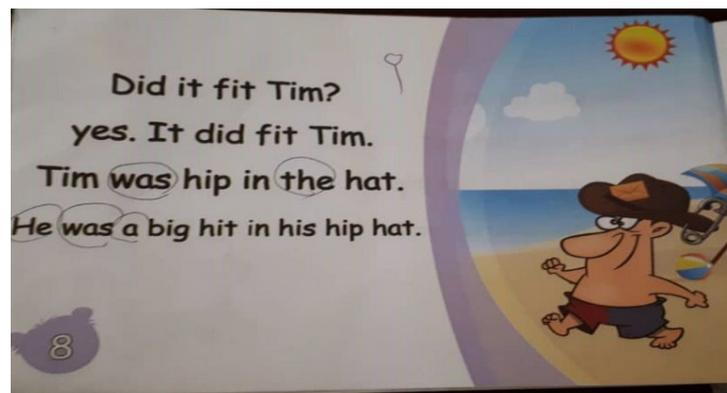


Figure 4: Sample page of the story book

### *Teaching a New Lesson*

Teaching new letter sounds and numbers is often the main focus of YLs' classes. Students are always taught a new item after snack-time which is around 11 o'clock. The process of teaching and learning a new letter sound mainly consists of four parts: story, action, formation, and blending. Every sound has its own story and action derived from Jolly phonics series. Three characters, namely Inky Mouse, Bee, and Snake make different stories for each letter. First the story is read out and then, students become familiar with the formation (capital and small) and blending of the sound with the vowels and consonants taught before. Afterwards, new words and sentences are introduced through flash cards. As an example, to teach 'd', Miss Neda first points to the related picture and asks the students: *Look here, what do you see on this page?*

She goes on with the questions followed by negative answers such as, *what are they doing? Are they sleeping? No. Are they reading? No. Are they eating? No. So, what are they doing?* The students keep looking at the picture in silence. The teacher continues while drawing the students' attention to the drum on the page: *Look here, there is a drum, yes? They are banging at the drum.* Then, she starts doing the action of banging at the drum while verbalizing, *d-d-d-drum, d-d-d-drum.* Making the students familiar with the action of new letter sound, the teacher then goes on with teaching the 'formation'. She first draws two lines on the board and writes the capital and small form of the letter while performing and verbalizing its action. As an example, for the formation of 'd', Miss Neda said: *up to down, round. Capital d-d-d-drum.* Then she went on with the small letter, *up to down, down to up, round. Small d-d-d-drum.* Repeating the formation for a couple of times, the teacher asked the students to come to the board one by one and read, trace and write both capital and small forms of 'd'. Afterwards, the teacher continued with blending. She wrote the new sound with a red marker and started blending with other sounds, *m-ad, mad; d-ad, dad; r-ed, red,* and the like, which are later assessed in dictations (Figure 5).

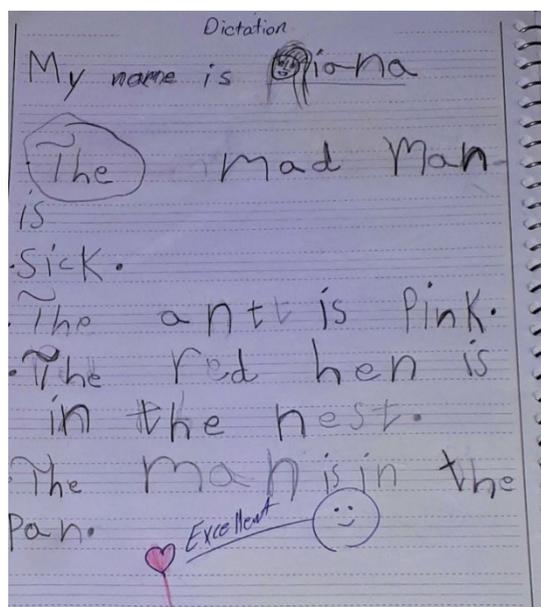


Figure 5: Sample dictation of a 5-year old learner in Ph2A

Finishing with formation and blending, the teacher shows a few flashcards of the last sound taught. For instance, for the sound 'i', Miss Elham shows two FCs of *Ink* and *Igloo* to the students. Then, she asks the young learners to repeat each one three times while focusing on the beginning sound. The teacher tries to correct children's pronunciation whenever it is needed. On the next session, after reviewing the FCs, Miss Elham draws a line with a black pen on one of her fingers. Then she shows it to the students and says: *Ink is black. Ink is in the pen.* Afterwards, she asks learners to repeat each sentence three times. Then, she goes on with making sentences with *igloo*: *Igloo is white. Igloo is made of snow.*

There is no text for students to extract meaning. In Miss Neda's class, she often tries to introduce new words to the learners in a known context such as songs. As mentioned before, singing the songs and rhymes are the routine of every session in the whole-institute activities. Back to teaching 'd', while introducing the word 'hand' to YLs, the teacher first starts doing the rhyme with action:

**Wash your face.** Students pretend to wash their face and say, *wash wash wash, wash wash wash*. Again, the teacher does the same with the word, hands. Then, the teacher draws a hand on the board, makes two sentences, and asks the learners to repeat: *We wash our hands in the sink. We have two hands.*

Making simple sentences is acceptable only in Ph1A and Ph1B. From Ph2 on, the teacher expects the students to go beyond that and make more complex ones. For instance, in the review section Miss Mahsa asked Aida: *Can you make a sentence with hen?* Aida answered: *It is a hen?* The teacher asked for a more complex one: *Don't you remember the last session I drew a hen on the board?* Then, Aida went on: *Hen has two legs. Hen lives on the farm.* The teacher: *Excellent! Good girl!*

There is also a defined syllabus for teaching *numbers* to YLs. The days on which YLs are not taught a new sound, they work on learning a new number. Children are expected to count numbers from 0 to 10 without being able to write them. Then, each term they learn writing 5 new numbers. Regardless of the fact that students do not know all the numbers, every session the teacher writes numbers on the board from 0 to 10. Afterwards, the teacher draws two lines on the board and shows the formation of the corresponding number. She tries to write the numbers in the shape of a boy or a girl as if it is a human being. Miss Elham draws eyes, hands, and feet for number 6. Then, she says: *What number is it? Number six.* Then, the teacher asks the students for a couple of times: *What number is it?* The students answer, *number six.* Therefore, the teacher starts greeting with the number: *Hello number six.* Then, she asks the students to repeat the statement with a rhythm two or three times.

**TTC Evidence.** In the second session, while Miss Alavi is explaining stories and actions of letter sounds in Ph1A and Ph1B, Sima, one of the apprentice teachers, interrupts the instructor: *Can we use games in class?* She answers: *Yes, at the end of the class after finishing writing activity.* Focusing on literacy, she goes on with reading activities: *Ask the students to read words in FCs and workbook provided for them by the institute. Say their beginning and ending sound. Just in Ph1A and Ph1B, we are allowed to tell YLs meaningless words and sentences to read and write.* Then, she mentions the story book used for students as another reading activity: *From Ph3A children are given a story book to practice reading. It is based on Jolly Phonics syllabus and all the letters in the book are known to YLs of this level. As you go for observation you will know how to work on it.*

**Ph vs. WL Perspective.** Confining the review section to repetition of known words and sentences reveals the Ph assumptions. Such activities, that stop children like Hasti and Bitra from making their own sentences out of their previous knowledge contrast with the idea of *creativity* in the WL approach, which sees these educational settings a chance to talk freely in class and generate new sentences. Moreover, reading meaningless words illustrated in Figure 3 might be questionable based on the idea of meaningfulness in the WL perspective. It seems that teaching literacy in the TTC as well as in classes under observation is strictly based on the Ph assumptions since raising phonological awareness and explicit instruction of sound-symbol correspondence are the main focus. Such decoding practices in language learning might be questionable from a WL view.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In line with what the National Reading Panel (2000) points out regarding the importance of Ph instruction and its use in the early stages of reading, in the context of our study, the acquisition of letter-sound correspondences and their use in reading and spelling appear to be prioritized. Besides, the popularity of using Jolly Phonics for young EFL learners (Campbell et al., 2011) is observed in these classes. The materials are based on this commercial Ph program, and in line with

understanding language learning as practicing fragmented elements (El-Koumy, 2004), the classroom activities of the context under study often include working on separate language skills. However, as Ling (2012) claims, “taking the aims, motives and environments of learning foreign language into consideration, we can develop the students’ listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities at the same time” (p. 150). Moreover, the importance of raising cultural awareness of YLs also appears to be ignored in the context under study. While language learning in these classes is restricted to sound letters, blending, memorizing words and making sentences, many scholars consider culture as an integral part of teaching second language to learners.

Although the activities in the context under study are basically claimed to be Ph-based, a few features of the WL seem to be embedded in classroom processes, like group activities, warm-up, and learning students’ own names. While Goodman (1989) basically rejects “part-to-whole views of literacy development, insisting on real reading and real writing from the very beginning” (p. 210), a more balanced Ph-WL literacy teaching activity can consist of both decoding and wholistic practices (Stahl et al., 2006), and teachers should use a variety of techniques such as “retelling the story, discussing the context and characters of the story, and performing a play” (Ling, 2012, p. 151) with the main focus on exchanging ideas and using language for communication. However, the focus of reading and writing activities in these educational settings is practicing decoding skills through reading and writing decontextualized teacher-made sentences. What scholars such as Hempenstall (2005), Blaiklock and Haddow (2007), and Moghadam and Adel (2011) point out about the importance of integrating the WL and Ph approaches is only partially realized in these classroom processes.

Although Jolly Phonics is said to be popular among scholars and effective in EFL literacy education (Campbell et al., 2011), some basic issues regarding YLs such as their age, needs, interest, creativity, empowerment, and the like seem to be ignored in the context under study. Implementing the predefined syllabus step by step on the one hand, and pressuring learners for doing exactly what the teacher orders on the other hand, may lead to children’s exhaustion and disappointment. In such educational settings, the YLs may have difficulties in learning the language effectively. More importantly, they might become frustrated and might even abandon language learning. Considering the great debate and the integration of the Ph approach in which the sound letters are taught explicitly (Smith, 2011), and the WL approach in which the child’s discovery of meaning through experiences in authentic rich-literacy environment is emphasized (Mirhosseini et al., 2020; Whitemore & Crawell, 2005), our illustrations of these YLs’ EFL learning can hint at possibilities for the integration of these two at this level of education for more balanced literacy (Moats, 2000).

Considering that “policy is hugely important in the YL context as it directly influences the lives of millions of children” (Copland et al., 2014, p. 229), the findings of this study can provide policy makers and material developers with important insights into a more holistic view towards language teaching in ways other than strict Ph-based instruction. As a result of such awareness, the authorities may provide for YLs more authentic, meaningful, and interesting materials considering their age and culture based on a *balanced literacy* approach (Moats, 2000). Moreover, the results might invite researchers and scholars to open the floor for further studies and deepen the knowledge about literacy development and educational theory and practice in the Iranian context of teaching EFL to YLs.

Managers of TTC courses for EFL teachers of YLs can pay more attention to raising teachers’ level of competency in these courses regarding both pedagogical and psychological matters towards young EFL learners not only in pre-service TTCs but also through on-going job training

workshops. Our findings have highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the language teaching approaches commonly used in these educational contexts for directors of language institutes. This study could lead to the revision of the current syllabus based on the integration of language skills, learners' empowerment, and using relevant and authentic materials. The study also provides teachers with better insights into their critical role regarding young EFL learners. They may reconsider and prioritize YLs' feelings and interests as the core of their teaching and learning objectives. Teachers could also be aware of the benefits of non-fragmented language teaching, using contextualized materials and relevant activities.

Finally, this study can be insightful for parents in terms of their attitude towards their young children's language learning. The findings may draw parents' attention to the idea that practicing isolated words and sentences over and over is not the utmost purpose of learning a language. As a result, they may not select a language institute just based on the popular label it bears. Presenting the perspective of the WL in these EFL settings may enhance parents' understanding of effective language learning and purposeful activities. This may help them establish more appropriate criteria for selecting a language institute, let their children learn language in a more friendly environment, and pave the ground for YLs' interest in more meaningful learning in the future.

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