



# REVISTA KRONOS

## Teaching phonics to EFL adult learners

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**ABSTRACT** Phonics instruction strengthens letter-sound connections and enlarges both learning abilities and meaning. While phonics training remains efficient in teaching literacy to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, a significant discrepancy in research on young adult training at a Language institute at a Public University in Ecuador is still present. The current research aimed to determine the outcomes of precise and discerned phonics comprehensive schemes on literacy attainment among EFL students. A mixed-method approach with a descriptive scope, and a quasi-experimental design was applied. Twenty-two A2.2 level students from The Academic Language Institute actively participated in a seven-week phonics workshop. For the data gathering, two main tools were used, a survey identifying ten challenging words reported by A2.2 teachers and a series of pre- and post-test based on the workshop content. The results showed a significant main effect on students' reading comprehension, pronunciation, and listening skills with pronunciation being the highest achievement. Therefore, these findings underscore the importance of integrating phonics acquisition into EFL curricula to encourage overall language competence.

**KEYWORDS** Literacy skills, Phonics instruction, Achievement, English language.

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## Enseñanza de fonética a jóvenes estudiantes de inglés como idioma extranjero

**RESUMEN** La instrucción fonética refuerza las conexiones entre letra-sonido, y amplía tanto las habilidades de aprendizaje como su significado. Si bien es cierto, la instrucción fonética se mantiene como necesaria para enseñar inglés como lengua extranjera, aún existe discrepancia en la investigación acerca de enseñar fonética a adultos jóvenes en un instituto de idiomas en una universidad pública del Ecuador. Con esta premisa, la presente investigación tiene como objetivo determinar los resultados de esquemas de fonética que ayuden a los estudiantes a entenderla de mejor manera. Empleando un enfoque de métodos mixtos con un alcance descriptivo y un diseño cuasi experimental, el estudio involucró a veintidós estudiantes de nivel A2.2 del Instituto Académico de Idiomas. Los participantes realizaron talleres de fonética durante siete semanas. La recopilación de datos se basó en dos instrumentos principales: una encuesta que identificaba diez palabras destacadas reportadas por los docentes de A2.2 y una serie de pruebas previas y posteriores alineadas con el contenido de los talleres. Los resultados revelaron un efecto significativo en la comprensión lectora, la pronunciación y las habilidades auditivas de los estudiantes, siendo la pronunciación el logro más sustancial. Estos hallazgos subrayan la importancia de incorporar la instrucción fonética en los planes de estudio de EFL para fomentar la competencia lingüística integral

**PALABRAS CLAVE** Habilidades lectoras y escritoras, Instrucción fonética, Logro, Idioma inglés.

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching English phonics to Hispanic young adults who are native Spanish speakers and currently learning English can be considered an advanced topic. If gamification is not common for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning in Latin America. Etymologies are often seen by teachers as pedantic matters unrelated to teaching or learning vocabulary, it could seem like a shot in the foot to propose to carry out phonology development activities through etymologies with students that hardly understand what these are or where they come from in their own language (Nieser & Cárdenas-Hagan, 2020).

Ecuadorian students taking EFL at the university level are commonly facing difficulties with pronunciation, particularly with broad vowels. It can be compared with a pyramid in which sounds expand from simple to challenging. Despite different difficulties, this challenging journey is worthwhile as immersing oneself in captivating rhymes and verses that can foster a more profound comprehension of the ear's intricacies and decipher the mysteries of English pronunciation.

Surprisingly, this challenge can be conquered in a relatively short period of time. Metaphors, such as the one created by the mysterious Cagliostro, prove to be invaluable tools in helping young adult students, who are native Spanish speakers learning English, grasp the subtle details of sound descriptions. Despite the complexity, we have chosen to embark on this linguistic adventure with Hispanic teenagers and young adults, all of whom share Spanish as their first language (Cortina-Pérez & Andúgar, 2021).

Learning phonics has been demonstrated to be the most effective method to learning how to read and write in English; therefore, a strong phonics approach is recommended (Nieser & Cárdenas-Hagan, 2020).

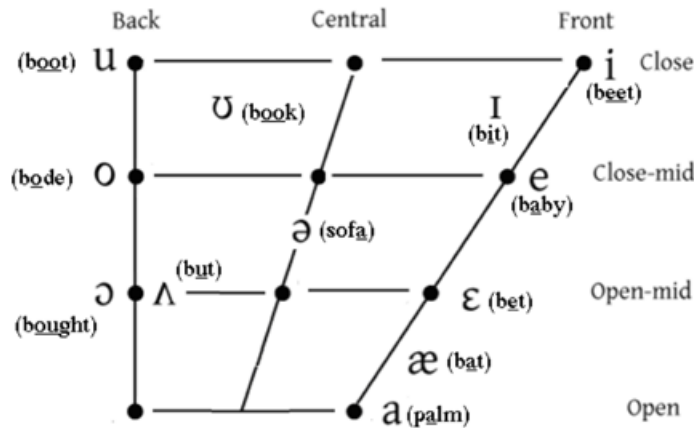
The following chart is useful to understand how different sounds in our own language are produced.

Figure 1: Consonant Chart

			PLACE							
MANNER		VOICE	LABIAL		CORONAL				DORSAL	
			BILABIAL	LABIODENTAL	DENTAL	ALVEOLAR	POSTALVEOLAR	PALATAL	VELAR	GLOTTAL
OBSTURBUENTS	STOP (PLOSIVE)	-	<b>p</b> "pay"			<b>t</b> "to"			<b>k</b> "key"	
		+	<b>b</b> "boy"			<b>d</b> "do"			<b>g</b> "go"	
	FRICATIVE	-		<b>f</b> "fee"	<b>θ</b> "thigh"	<b>s</b> "say"	<b>ʃ</b> "shoe"		<b>h</b> "hay"	
		+		<b>v</b> "vow"	<b>ð</b> "they"	<b>z</b> "zoo"	<b>ʒ</b> "viʒion"			
	AFFRICATE	-					<b>tʃ</b> "chew"			
		+					<b>dʒ</b> "jaw"			
SONORANTS	NASAL	+	<b>m</b> "me"			<b>n</b> "no"			<b>ŋ</b> "siŋg"	
	LIQUID	LATERAL	+			<b>l</b> "lay"				
		RHOTIC	+					<b>ɹ</b> "ray"		
		GLIDE	+	<b>w</b> "we"					<b>j</b> "yes"	<b>w</b> "we"

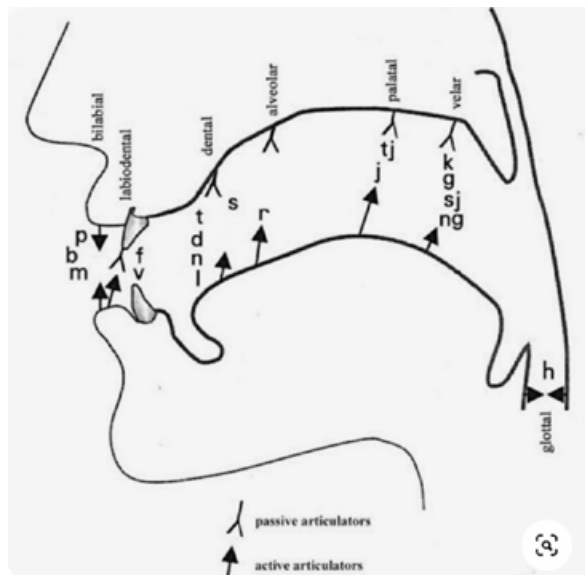
Note. Adapted from The Speech Guide [Image], Copyright 2022, <https://thespeechguide.com/place-manner-voice-chart/Standard>

Figure 2: Standard tongue position chart of English vowels



Note. Adapted from Standard tongue position chart of English, uploaded by Lan Wang, 2011. Research gate. Copyright b) standard tongue position chart of English | Download Scientific Diagram (researchgate.net)

Figure 3: Standard tongue position chart for English consonants



Note. Adapted from Standard tongue position chart of English, uploaded by Lan Wang, 2011. Research gate. Copyright b) standard tongue position chart of English | Download Scientific Diagram (researchgate.net)

## METHODOLOGY

The present study aimed to determine the outcomes of precise and discerned phonics comprehensive schemes on literacy achievement among EFL students. This study employed a mixed-methods approach with a descriptive scope and a quasi-experimental design. The mixed-methods approach refers to combining both quantitative and qualitative data. According to Labaree (2020), quantitative research focuses on gathering numerical data and conducting statistical analysis, while qualitative research seeks to understand underlying concepts through descriptive analysis. This integration allowed for a more nuanced exploration of phonics instruction's impact on literacy achievement.

The target population was formed by 22 students at the A2.2 level enrolled in regular courses at the Academic Language Institute. Their age ranged from 19 to 37. This research utilized a convenience sampling method, choosing participants based on their availability and willingness to participate. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

1. Students registered at A2.2 level at the Academic Language Institute.
2. Students who agreed to be part of the research.

**Table 1: Population**

<b>Level</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
<i>A2.2</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>22</i>
	<i>50%</i>	<i>50%</i>	<i>100%</i>

Source: Direct Research

The intervention consisted of explicit and differentiated phonics instructional strategies implemented over a seven-week period. The instructional strategies included activities that focused on letter-sound relationships, phonemic awareness, and decoding skills. Differentiated instruction was used to customize learning experiences. Strategies varied according to learners' learning styles, including collaborative activities, individual feedback and even games. The workshops were conducted twice a week, each session lasting 60 minutes.

To assess the phonics instruction productivity, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. The process was as follows. Firstly, it was necessary to identify troublesome words for learners. Then, an online survey was administered to A2.2 teachers so challenging words could be detected. Afterwards, a pre-test that consisted of dictating ten words to the students was executed to be able to evaluate students' abilities to accurately perceive and produce sounds. The intervention took seven weeks. Once it was completed, students were given the same evaluation as in the pre-test to notice any possible advances referring to phonics.

In addition, it is a must to note that students were always considered throughout the process since they were regularly interviewed, and valuable qualitative data about their phonics instruction were gathered. This was done through a process to evaluate their progress. Thus, students' pronunciation was analyzed to highlight areas of improvement or persistent difficulties. It helped to provide insights into typical difficulties with some specific sounds or phonics rules related to the ten words chosen for this research. This component showed how significantly students had improved their understanding of phonics.

To analyze the advance and the possible difference between learners' performance after and before the seven-week intervention, some statistical techniques like paired t-tests were used by examining data gathered from the pre- and post-tests. As reliability and accuracy are crucial in this type of research, the quantitative data were scrutinized with SPSS software while the qualitative used thematic analysis to determine insights about phonics such as efficacy and most importantly learners' engagement.

Following ethical procedures, students involved in this research were told not only about the study's aim but their right to drop out without any penalty along the intervention. Additionally, the Academic Language Institute Direction gave their approval.

Following the phonics teaching method proposed by Owl Tutors (2023), students first learn to identify the individual sounds of letters and then to combine those sounds to form words, as it can be seen below:

**Step 1:** Letter sounds: Students were taught to see a letter and say the sound it represents. At the same time students learned how to write these letters to form words using the correct formation. Some videos from YouTube were used for this purpose to support letter learning sound.

**Step 2:** Letter blending: to combine single sounds jointly to utter an entire word. They started with CVC (consonant, vowel, consonant), then CCVC and finally CVCC words. Examples: cut, sat, CVC; stop, plan CCVC; and milk, past CVCC respectively. Students arranged different combinations of letter to form words.

**Step 3:** Digraphs: once students checked individual letter sounds, they learned to read and write consonant digraphs like ng, sh, ch as well as vowel digraphs like ea, oo, ai. Right after students moved on to sounding out whole words such as blood, hair, schedule, glacier, etc. at the same time students were taught about common exception words, the ones that do not follow the normal phonics rules: example he, she, was, they, all, since, heart, among others.

**Step 4:** Alternative graphemes: Students also learned that one sound can be represented by graphemes. For example, 'eigh' for eight, "a\_e" for take, 'ai' for rain. Alternative pronunciations for graphemes were also reviewed, e.g. 'ea' as in break, sea, head, heart. Students enjoyed using their phonics skills to decipher and try new words.

**Step 5:** Fluency and Accuracy: At the end, students spelled and read many familiar words in the right way. They became more fluent readers and accurate spellers. Moreover, they learned to develop speed, fluency and more importantly comprehension. (How to teach Phonics: A Step-by-Step Guide, 2023).

## RESULTS

After detecting the learner's needs by conducting a survey with A2.2 teachers, some academic actions were put into practice to consolidate knowledge. This phase took seven weeks of intervention workshops focused on phonics, emphasizing reading comprehension, listening and spelling using worksheets during two hours per week within the normal schedule. These activities were engaging for learners and met their needs of improving pronunciation.

Seven professors participated in the survey which consisted of four specific questions which objective was to grasp A2.2 level teachers' opinion on problems related to phonics instruction in this level. Also, there were two open ended questions which allowed professors to give qualitative feedback and suggest additional problem areas, as well. The survey aimed to get the most troublesome words for A2.2 level learners. The feedback provided was key to choose ten most words used in both the workshops and later assessments. The table below summarizes the results gotten:

1. Pronunciation difficulties Frequency: Professors ranked how often students had problems with pronouncing some specific words.

**Table 2: Frequency of pronunciation difficulties**

<b>Word</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Always</b>
<i>Since</i>	0	2	1	4
<i>Cut</i>	2	0	3	2
<i>Lettuce</i>	0	1	1	5
<i>Glacier</i>	0	0	2	5
<i>Stomach</i>	0	2	1	4
<i>Viral</i>	0	0	4	3
<i>Heart</i>	1	3	3	0
<i>Small</i>	2	3	2	0
<i>Bitter</i>	1	2	3	1
<i>Schedule</i>	0	0	2	5

Words like “Since,” “Lettuce,” “Glacier,” and “Schedule” were reported as consistently problematic for students, with most teachers marking them as “Always” challenging.

“Heart,” “Small,” and “Bitter” showed more variability in responses, indicating they were less consistently challenging.

Teachers also suggested other challenging words for students, such as “friends,” “head-ache,” “comfortable,” “potato,” “danger,” “listen,” “swum,” “sung,” “tomato,” and “interesting.”

Referring to difficult sounds of phonemes, teachers identified the most difficult phonemes for students, such as /ʌ/ as in “cut” and /æ/ as in “cat,” /ɜ:/ as in “bird” which were marked by most teachers as challenging.

Finally, Strategies like Phonetic Drills, Minimal Pairs Practice, Visual Aids, Repetition and Drilling, and Peer Feedback. This question sought to identify best practices and inform the instructional strategies used in the phonics workshops.

A post-test identical in structure to the pre-test was given to students after the intervention to measure the success of phonics teaching methods on the learners’ literacy attainment. The tests’ purpose was to evaluate learners’ ability to identify and correctly pronounce sounds related to the target vocabulary.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to conduct a paired samples t-test to compare mean scores before and after the process of intervention. This helped to determine if it was significant in terms of showing improvement in students’ phonics skills.

**Table 3: Paired Samples T-test Results for Pre- and Post-test Scores**

Measure	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Difference	95% CI for the Difference	t	df	p (two-tailed)	Effect Size (Cohen's d)	Effect Size (Hedges' g)
Mean (SD)	4.45 (2.483)	6.77 (3.085)	2.318	[0.580, 4.056]	2.773	21	0.011	0.591	0.570

The paired samples t-test revealed a significant improvement in the students' scores from the pre-test to the post-test. The mean score on the pre-test was 4.45 (SD = 2.483), while the mean score on the post-test increased to 6.77 (SD = 3.085). The mean difference of 2.318 (SD = 3.920) was statistically significant,  $t(21) = 2.773$ ,  $p = .011$  (two-tailed), with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.580 to 4.056.

To further interpret the magnitude of this improvement, effect sizes were calculated. Cohen's d was found to be 0.591, indicating a moderate effect size, while Hedges' g, which accounts for small sample sizes, was 0.570. It means the intervention had a moderate and meaningful progress on the learners' phonics abilities.

The explicit and differentiated phonics teaching strategies used in this research produced significant improvements in the phonics skills of EFL learners. It was evidenced by the increased post-test scores and a moderate effect size. The study leads to conclude that it was not only significant in terms of statistics but showed practical implications on improving learning outcomes.

With the data obtained from the survey, the pre and post-test, an excel database was made that allowed the homogenization of the information. SPSS statistical software was used to analyze the results. A frequency and mean comparison were done to access the learner's performance before and after the intervention.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this research indicate that explicit and differentiated phonics instruction is a helpful tool to develop literacy skills in EFL learners. A meaningful improvement in pronunciation challenges as well as in phonics skills were shown in the post-test, with gains in reference to specific phonemes. These results highlight the importance of teaching phonics to young adults learning EFL. It emphasizes the need for incorporating phonics-based instruction curricula that can help learners achieve fluency and accuracy in both spoken and written English as stated by Hanson (2022) and Almuslimi (2020).

It is important to mention that the survey applied to A2.2 professors showed that learners at this level usually struggle with /b/ as in "bird." This information was shown in the pre-test results, where a need for focused pronunciation practice was revealed. Having these challenging phonemes in mind, the phonics workshop was created and gave learners structured and repetitive practice, and according to the results it proved to be effective. And this was also corroborated in other studies made by Ortín & Simonet (2022).

Techniques such as repetition of sentence pairs as well as including sight word recognition showed effectiveness on enhancing reading and comprehension and listening skills since learners were more familiar with the sounds and rhythm of the language. Miranda

and Wahyudin (2023) stated that teaching phonics is key for improving reading, writing and pronunciation

As noted by Miranda and Wahyudin (2023), phonics instruction is crucial not only for reading and writing but also for pronunciation—a usually overlooked element of traditional EFL learning. This study further supports that explicit phonics instruction enhances sound-symbol association, fundamental for reading fluency and comprehension.

This also supports the use of contrastive analysis between English and Spanish phonologies to enhance pronunciation learning. Given the shared and distinct phonetic characteristics between the two languages, it is vital for EFL teachers to highlight these contrasts in their instruction. Previous studies, such as those by Andrä et al. (2020), suggest that adult learners can benefit from understanding these differences, as they help in adjusting their articulatory settings for English pronunciation.

Furthermore, this approach is further validated by the significant gains seen in students' pronunciation scores after the phonics workshops. What helped students to better understand and produce the target sounds was to focus on common and unique sounds. In addition, methods like minimal pairs and visual aids were also helpful during the intervention.

Despite the importance of phonics instruction, research in public universities on this topic remains limited in Ecuador since there are issues about limited use of technology as well as the use of traditional teaching methods. This study addresses this gap by demonstrating that explicit phonics instruction can significantly enhance the pronunciation, reading comprehension, and listening skills of young adult EFL learners. Given the moderate effect size found in this study, it is recommended that similar phonics-based instructional strategies be integrated into the EFL curriculum across language institutes to see a better and higher impact.

In addition, some interactive activities like, Hangman, Bingo and free applications like Quizlet showed to be effective in the teaching of phonics to be able to cover the different ways students learn. As the focus of this study was to develop literacy skills, systematic phonics instruction was coring all the time.

The results of this study suggest that the teaching of EFL should incorporate strategies based on phonics for maximum effectiveness. The impact of context-specific phonic practices and long-term retention among learners should also be examined. It is recommended to expand this research to include a larger sample size with students from various regions of the country to provide more meaningful phonics instruction in different contexts.

In conclusion, the explicit and differentiated phonics instructional strategies employed in this work proved effective in addressing the pronunciation challenges faced by Spanish-speaking EFL learners. This highlights the need for more targeted phonics interventions in EFL curricula, particularly in regions where English exposure is limited. Moreover, early phonics instruction could also prove to help learners improve pronunciation skills and avoid problems when taking EFL classes at university.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study have a series of important implications for the future practice of teaching phonics regarding the improvement of pronunciation, reading-comprehension, listening and spelling. To begin with, it is key to recognize that students' pronunciation is a vital aspect that should be of interest for every EFL professor. When students feel confident in their pronunciation, and can make themselves understood, their confidence and empowerment increase notably.



This research has gotten the following conclusions:

- Educators ought to be aware of learners' challenges associated with achieving correct pronunciation, especially with problematic words and phonemes shown in this research.
- The authors suggest having teachers with expertise in phonics in the first levels of study to help learners be aware of their phonics skills to avoid error fossilization.
- The clear and customized phonics intervention resulted in meaningful improvements in learners' pronunciation, something that lets them reduce their affective filter and gain confidence on speaking the language. It is clear the intervention led to gain confidence while speaking.
- This research emphasizes the strong need for integrating phonics acquisition methods into EFL teaching to provide stronger overall language skills at university level.
- Similar studies with larger samples should be conducted to have an overall view of how positive it may be teaching phonics to university level students to get a generalized and definite sight of the impact on improving learners' skills.

### CONTRIBUCIONES DE LOS AUTORES

Mirian Cleopatra Cuenca Fernandez: investigación, parte final de la metodología, recursos, resultados, borrador original redacción, curación de datos, revisión y edición.

Mariela Teresa Herrera Bonilla: encuesta de investigación, metodología, conceptualización, discusión, conclusiones, resultados, validación estadística, análisis formal, redacción – curación de datos, revisión y edición.

### IMPLICACIONES ÉTICAS

Las autoras declaran que no existen implicaciones éticas, y su participación es voluntaria.

### CONFLICTO DE INTERÉS

Las autoras declaran que no existen conflictos de interés financieros o no financieros que podrían haber influido en el trabajo presentado en este artículo.

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