

The Benefits of Incorporating Phonology and Morphology in English Education

Zongxuan Yu^{1,a,*}

¹University of Washington, Seattle, 98105, USA

a. zongxuany@icloud.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: English teaching methods have undergone significant changes and improvements over the past four decades. However, teachers continue to encounter challenges when delivering lectures in the classroom. While numerous teaching approaches have been proposed, there has been limited focus on the areas of phonology and morphology. Nonetheless, phonology and morphology have demonstrated their effectiveness in teaching English as a second language. Integrating these linguistic elements into the teaching process can greatly enhance its efficiency and provide inspiration to new learners. The paper analyzes how these two fundamental linguistic components can be effectively integrated into our current English teaching model. Based on the studies completed by former researchers, the results indicate that they can serve as valuable tools and crucial building blocks for both teachers and students alike. This paper may help envision a future where the current English teaching model is reshaped, and teaching becomes more efficient, inspiring a new generation of English learners.

Keywords: English teaching methods, phonology and morphology, linguistic components.

1. Introduction

English, as an international language, has been learned and studied by many people and distinct cultures around the world. However, issues with teaching methods have also come to the surface. What is an effective way of teaching English as a second language? Some scholars have brought up various approaches throughout the past 40 years. Among all those means and techniques, incorporating phonology and morphology while teaching English has become one of the most effective and efficient ways for new learners to acquire the language. In this paper, some of the methods from other previous studies on phonology and morphology are discussed and utilized in order to show the importance and benefits brought by these two key elements. By incorporating phonology and morphology in general English teaching, with the results of these studies, people can envision a future where the current English teaching model is reshaped, and teaching becomes more efficient, inspiring a new generation of English learners.

2. Background Information

2.1. The Issues in the Current Model

Jenkins [1] wrote in her book that “the majority of EFL teacher training and education courses, both preservice and inservice, persist with phonology syllabuses that assume a ‘native-speaker’ interlocutor. They therefore involve elements that are unnecessary, unrealistic, and, at worst, harmful for preparing teachers to equip their learners with pronunciation skills appropriate to an international use of English.”

In the current English education model across many countries in the world, the role of language structure is less significant or evident as part of the lesson plans. The usual pattern would be the teacher demonstrating the pronunciation and some so-called “fitted use of grammar” while the students follow along, which is tedious and thus makes it slow for any person to acquire a new language. Under such a model, the students' future English ability highly depends on their teachers' abilities, and they would not be motivated and comprehensive enough to learn some higher level of English. Therefore, this could lead to a vicious cycle where the students are repulsively forced to learn English as their second language. They have to acquire the ability to speak and write the language tediously and exhaustively; plodding progress will absolutely crush their confidence and thus make them more repulsive in learning English. Eventually, only very few students could make a way out of the cycle and actually become able to utilize the language, leaving out the rest of the majority who constantly question themselves for the usage of their effort and even the usefulness of the language.

As Hamka [2] has eloquently stated in his work, languages are similar to our society. We, as humanity, are a species that were created to live in a group. With the assistance and accomplishments of other people, this study scaffolds the pride and prosperous cultures around the world. When talking about a specific culture, people will never think of one single person or incident, but everything that has occurred and accomplished in the past — the historical figures, the architecture, the traditions, and so many more. The same applies to languages; in the field of linguistics, a language can be broadly divided into phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Each of these individual aspects can only provide a tiny grasp of the language. In order to see the full image, it is necessary to incorporate all of them together.

However, the current model only briefly touches upon phonetics and syntax, which correspond to pronunciation and grammar. Solely memorizing the pronunciation and being forced to stare at the words repetitively in order to remember them without knowing the theories and patterns behind them will only bring frustration and prevent the students from moving forward. Therefore, there is an urge for change in our current English education model.

2.2. The Importance of Incorporating Phonology and Morphology

As mentioned previously, the urgency of introducing phonology and morphology to English teaching is at hand. Therefore, the importance of these two English essentials should also be seen and acknowledged.

Firstly, making phonology part of English learning can help the students understand the sound system of English and assist them in producing sounds correctly. Knowing how morphemes, which are the smallest units of meaning in a language, interact and change sounds in different contexts, such as plural endings and verb conjugations, helps more inaccurate pronunciation. Thus, learning phonology and morphology can help improve pronunciation significantly.

Secondly, they can help facilitate the vocabulary development of the students. Learning with morphology can help the students understand how prefixes, suffixes, and root words combine, which

can expand vocabulary more efficiently and aid in guessing the meanings of new words. After familiarizing themselves with the phonology, the students can also memorize and recall words by associating sounds with meaning, which will build a more robust vocabulary effectively.

And thirdly, these can aid the students further in their grammar acquisition. Grammatical distinctions often depend on correct pronunciation, such as the difference between "teach" and "taught". Also, understanding how morphemes change according to grammatical rules helps in forming grammatically correct sentences.

In summary, there are many benefits that students can receive from learning English with the assistance of phonology and morphology. Thus, it is now clear that these are some of the most critical factors for elementary English teaching.

3. Effective English Teaching Methods

Before teaching English phonology, there is one thing that is also essential and worthwhile for the students to learn, and is that there are many different and distinctive dialects in English. English is spoken in a global region by various people with other tongues. Even among the native speakers of English, there are diverse varieties, such as American English and British English. And within these broad varieties, there are also many subcategories. For instance, within North American English spoken in the United States, the dialect regions can be generally divided into six geographic factors—North, Midland, South, West, New England, and Appalachia (Figure 1).



Figure 1: U.S. Dialect Map [3].

After learning the fact that people speak differently in each dialect region, students should also know the major factors that cause language variation within speech communities. As argued by Curzan and Adams [4], "the speakers' age, gender, socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, and social networks can all have an effect on how people speak."

With all the efforts introducing the variety of the English language, it addresses one big common problem in many societies, that is, many people are ashamed of their English accent. People are scared of speaking English because they don't want to be laughed at for their pronunciation, which sounds different, and they would feel awkward. As a result, they don't have the opportunity to practice pronunciation and use the language. Over time, they will become unwilling to speak. The problem is caused by people judging each other and their discrimination, which starts with a lack of understanding of the language. Therefore, people need to know that there are varieties within every

language, and there is nothing to be ashamed of for their different pronunciations. Giving new learners the confidence to say and practice will be a solid foundation to start the journey of English teaching.

3.1. Phonological Teaching

The very first thing for the students to acquire before the entire systematic phonology teaching is the IPA symbols (Figure 2), the symbols invented to mark the phonological values of every language around the world spoken by human beings. Without the IPAs, the task of teaching English will only become more complicated and more burdensome for both students and teachers because the teachers will have to explain every individual pronunciation for every single word.



Figure 2: International Phonetic Alphabet [5].

As one of the pioneers in this field, Pennington [6] researched in her book that phonology has several single differences in lexical meaning, grammatical meaning, and utterance meaning. A minimal pair of *pan* and *ban* shows that a change in the consonant can result in a meaning change. The contrast between the present tense *read* /ri:d/ and the past tense *read* /ɹɛd/ marks the phonological difference in grammatical meaning. And lastly, the utterance difference can be marked by the intonation of English. An example would be, provided by Pennington, *He left*, as the final intonation goes down, compared to *He left?*, where the final intonation goes up. In these two sentences, the phonological differences indicate whether the sentence is a statement or an analysis.

One practical application to teach phonology is to put words with similar pronunciations together and form a list for the students to read along. For example, words like *cat*, *bat*, *rat*, *mat*, etc., can be on one single list, and the teacher can ask the students to pronounce these words. In this way, students can learn and recognize the phonological values along with the patterns between the vowel [æ] and the final consonant [t].

With the useful phonological information in mind, the teaching will become more intuitive and more straightforward. This was also proven in a study completed by Yeung, Siegel, and Chan [7], where they experimented on the effects of phonological awareness on ESL children. Their findings from this valuable study illustrate that the students who were under training in phonological awareness performed significantly better in oral language proficiency, word reading and spelling, and letter knowledge than the control group, which was the one without phonological awareness practice.

Therefore, it is obvious to see the positive effects of phonological awareness in English language education that can bring to the students in their L2 (Second Language) acquiring process, not only in their pronunciation accuracy but also in their reading and spelling ability.

3.2. Morphological Teaching

As stated by McCarthy [8], no matter how well this student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way. It is shown that words are the

fundamental elements of a language. Thus, the students need to master the words before mastering the language, which is through morphology teaching.

In morphology, new words are usually formed in the following major ways:

- Derivation: a new word is formed from an existing word. For example, *investigation* and *investigator* are derived from the verb *(to) investigate*.
- Compounding: a new word is formed by combining two words. An example would be *laptop*, which is formed by combining *lap* and *top*.
- Blending: a new word is formed by combining two words in both sound and meaning, which is different from compounding since blending also includes sound changes. For instance, *motor* and *hotel* become *motel*, and *breakfast* and *lunch* become *brunch*.
- Acronyms: a new word is formed from the initial letters of several words. For example, *NASA* is an acronym of *National Aeronautics and Space Administration*.

After knowing how English words are generally formed, students will have an easier time identifying those segments in their vocabulary. Only by mastering the knowledge of word formation and lexemes can we expand our vocabulary quickly, better understand and express our thoughts and feelings, and improve our language application skills [9].

The most significant and beneficial way of implementing morphology in English teaching is to help the students recognize that in English, and similar to other European languages, words are composed by combining different morphemes. Instead of memorizing those long and complicated words by repeating their letters, knowing how they are formed by identifying their morphemes is undoubtedly the most efficient way and, indeed, the only way for native speakers. However, such a way may not be apparent for ESL learners. And thus, it will eventually prevent students from expanding their vocabulary.

Similar to Chinese language teachers, rather than diving straight into lecturing on how to write different Chinese characters, the teachers will start by showing how the characters are formed with a combination of radicals. The same idea should also be applied to English teachers.

One of the numerous practical teaching ways is that English teachers should begin their lectures by introducing and explaining English morphemes as a cornerstone of the language. For instance, English words contain roots, prefixes, and suffixes. Among these big categories, each of them includes many morphemes, such as *re-*, *in-*, *un-* as prefixes, and *-able*, *-tion*, *-ment* as suffixes. A combination of these three categories, an English word is composed. Transportation, for example, consists of the prefix *trans-*, which stands for "across," the root *port*, meaning "to carry," and the suffix *-ation*, representing "the action of (a verb)" or "the result of (a verb)." Therefore, the word *transportation* means "the action of taking or carrying (people or goods) from one place to another".

In sum, more and more people in the field of English education have realized and recognized the significance of morphology. By utilizing various creative teaching methods, it would only be more beneficial and efficient for the students' English journey, which is also suggested by another researcher, Yajie Jiang, in order to learn English well, you must master the knowledge of word formation. To acquire English vocabulary comprehensively and in-depth, we must rely on scientific theories and methods [10].

4. Conclusion

The core part of this paper is to provide an analysis of the significance of incorporating phonology and morphology into our current English education model that the school uses. The paper first introduces the issues in our current English education model for ESL students and the reasons why people should learn English or any other language in a systematic way. Then, the effective ways and evidence of incorporating phonology and morphology in our English education are discussed in detail,

which started by showing the importance for the students to realize the variety in people's accents. The paper also refers to some prior studies and experiments, in which the results of these studies showed that the students who were trained in phonology and morphology performed significantly better than those who were not, to prove that including these new factors can practically improve students' English level and proficiency. There are still a few things that could be improved in this paper, such as insufficient citation of articles due to the lack of awareness of the significance in this area. Thus, there needs to be more valuable research on the topic to attract other people's, especially the educators', attention so that more scientific research can be completed and language education can be improved. As a result, future studies can focus on coming up with more phonology and morphology teaching methods that can be utilized in practical teaching environments and the actual experiments that use phonology and morphology as the main emphasis of an English teaching model and gather data that directly reflect the results.

References

- [1] Jenkins, J. (2000). *The phonology of English as an international language: New models, new methods, new results*. Oxford University Press.
- [2] Hamka, H. (2016). *Phonetics and phonology in teaching English as the theory of language production*. *Proceedings of ISELT FBS Universitas Negeri Padang*, 4(1), 348-362.
- [3] Department of Linguistics, (2016). *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics*, 12th Edition. Ohio State University Press.
- [4] Curzan, A., Adams, M. (2012). *How English works: A linguistic introduction (3rd ed.)*. Pearson.
- [5] International Phonetic Association. (2015). *Full IPA Chart*. <https://www.internationalphoneticassociation.org/content/full-ipa-chart#ipachartkiel>
- [6] Pennington, M. C. (1996). *Phonology in English language teaching : an international approach*. Longman.
- [7] Yeung, S.S.S., Siegel, L.S., Chan, C.K.K. (2013). *Effects of a phonological awareness program on English reading and spelling among Hong Kong Chinese ESL children*. *Read Writ* 26, 681–704.
- [8] McCarthy, M. J. (1990). *Vocabulary*. Oxford University Press.
- [9] Wang, S., Wang, N. (2013) *Application of morphology in college English teaching*. *Journal of Shijiazhuang Vocational Technology Institute*, Vol.25, No.4.
- [10] Yajie Jiang. (2020). *The Role of Morphology in English Vocabulary Teaching*. *Learning & Education*. 9. 120. 10.18282/l-e.v9i2.1422.