The Effects of Phonics Instruction vs. Whole Language Approach on Korean Middle School Students’ L2 Vocabulary Learning

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This study aims to compare the effects of phonics instruction and the whole language approach on Korean middle school students’ vocabulary learning. Forty-four Korean middle school students were split into a phonics group and a whole language group and treated separately for five weeks. The phonics group were taught the sounds of vocabulary explicitly through phonics activities while the whole language group focused on reading in context and did various reading and writing activities. A vocabulary improvement test and an interview were conducted after the treatments. The results of the improvement test showed that the phonics group outperformed the whole language group in L2 vocabulary learning. The interview results indicated that the phonics group enjoyed the fun activities and learning letter-sound relationships even though the target words were unfamiliar to them. On the other hand, the whole language group liked that they could share their opinions and do writing activities, however, they were unsatisfied by the fact that they could not get immediate feedback from the teacher. Through this study, it was found that phonics instruction is more effective than the whole language approach for vocabulary learning. The results of this study suggests that it would be beneficial for language teachers to apply phonics instruction when planning vocabulary learning lessons.

1) This work is a revised version of the author’s MA thesis. Due to the page limitation, literature reviews on English education in Korea, literacy, and vocabulary are not included here. Please refer to Lee (2016) if you have any further inquiries.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of vocabulary learning in second language acquisition (SLA) has been constantly emphasized through many studies (Allen, 1983; Lewis, 1993; Nunan, 1988; Rivers, 1981; Wilkins, 1972). Rivers (1981) insisted that second language learning is impossible without vocabulary learning, and Nunan (1988) started that vocabulary learning should be the first priority for both language teachers and learners. Wilkins (1972) emphasized the importance of vocabulary learning, insisting that meaning could be conveyed without grammar but not without vocabulary. Allen (1983) indicated that vocabulary knowledge has a strong correlation with effective communication, because good communication can not occur when people are not able to use appropriate words. Lewis (1993) also insisted that language learners would have difficulties in using the language if they do not understand its vocabulary. According to these consistent emphases on vocabulary learning, it is obvious that vocabulary learning is essential for developing learners’ literacy—the ability to read and write. Grabe and Stoller (2002) stated that skilled readers can read comfortably when they are able to understand and recognize more than ninety-five percent of the words in a text rapidly. Adams (1994) stated “only to the extent that the ability to recognize and capture the meaning of print is rapid, effortless, and automatic can the reader have available the cognitive energy and resources on which true comprehension depends” (p. 849).

Since a lack of English vocabulary may hinder L2 learners’ natural communication, the importance of vocabulary learning has been emphasized as the communicative approach became popular in Korea. There have been a lot of studies on effective vocabulary learning by comparing different vocabulary instruction techniques such as explicit and implicit vocabulary instruction, vocabulary teaching using contextual and visual aids, vocabulary teaching using a corpus, and so on (An, 2015; Ahn, 2015; Moon, 2015). However, there are only a few studies comparing the effects of phonics and the whole language approach on middle school students’ vocabulary learning. This is probably because phonics is mostly used in the development of young learners’ literacy. Although it is generally applied to the teaching of
kindergarten or primary students in L1 countries, it is used for middle school students in this study due to the fact that phonics is not covered systematically in public elementary education in Korea, thus there are many middle school students who have low literacy skills.

The phonics based reading instruction and the whole language approach have been compared in the late twentieth century due to their contrasting characteristics and the results of many studies have yielded inconsistent conclusions in terms of which approach is most effective. Lapp and Flood (1997) stated that phonics instruction helps children attend to individual sounds and syllables of words. Chall and Popp (1996) pointed out that teaching systematic phonics at an early age systematically leads to better reading ability, word recognition, decoding, spelling, and reading comprehension. While on the other hand, Stahl and Miller (1989) found that the whole language approach is needed from kindergarten in order to prepare students for school. Allen et al. (1989) taught thirty-five kindergarten students for nine months and found that the whole language approach is considerably effective in both learning the alphabetic code and developing reading skills. The effectiveness of the two methods has been discussed a lot in the previous studies, but there is still controversy in second or foreign language learning literature. Therefore, this study aims to compare the two approaches in terms of Korean middle school students’ vocabulary learning.

The definition of phonemic awareness in this study was as follows: knowing that each word consists of phonemes— the smallest units of the sounds—and that by adding, removing, or changing phonemes can result in changing the meaning of a word. For example, a word *soy* consists of /s/, /o/, and /y/, and becomes *showy* by adding /h/ and /y/, becomes *so* by removing /y/, and becomes *boy* by changing /s/ into /b/.

The definition of vocabulary learning in this study was as follows: being able to write the correct spellings of words by listening to their sounds, knowing the meaning of the words, and being able to explain the meanings in the first language.

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. Which is more effective, phonics instruction or the whole language approach on Korean middle school students’ L2 vocabulary learning?
2. What opinions do Korean middle school students have on phonics instruction and the whole language approach?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Phonics instruction

1) Definition of phonics instruction

The definition of phonics varies. For example, Heilman (1967) insisted that connecting spoken language, which is already acquired, to written language could be a problem for native speakers in the early stages of reading. He explained that phonics is a method of teaching English spelling which aims to develop an understanding of printed words. Karlin (1980) insisted that phonics starts from the premise that letters make sounds, and it deals with the relationship between spoken and written languages. Bishop (1986) stated that phonics is the term which describes this combined teaching of letter–sound and basic spelling rules at the very beginning of school. Strickland (1998) indicated that phonics was developed by structuralists to teach the relationship between sounds and letters. She also indicated that phonics includes knowledge that certain letters and certain combinations of letters are related to certain sounds. Nunan (1999) stated that phonics is a method of teaching reading which teaches decoding words by relating printed symbols to corresponding sounds. Liebert (1971) defined phonics as “a method of teaching reading by studying the relationship between the letter symbols (graphemes) of written language and the sounds (phonemes) they represent” (p. 70). The NRP (2000) defined phonics instruction as a way of teaching reading that stresses the acquisition of letter–sound correspondences and the use of them while reading and spelling. Song (1985) stated that phonics was developed to teach native learners reading when they know meaning, pronunciation, and usage of words but only if they do not know the written form of the words.

The positive effects of phonics have been found in many studies. According
to Wijk (1966), English language does not seem to have consistency or rules in terms of letter–sound relationship, but about 90 to 95 percent of English vocabulary has predictable regular patterns, so acquiring general rules is helpful for reading printed words. Fries (1962) and Russell (1961) insisted that phonics helps learners recognize and differentiate words that were once learned and lets the learners read new words by themselves. They also found that phonics encourages correct pronunciation, improves quality of reading, and forms a habit of looking at words closely. Ko (2008) investigated the education of English pronunciation and phonics lessons in school and found that phonics was not used in many public schools in Korea. However, she found that teaching words through phonics instruction is more effective than teaching them through the phonetic alphabet. When teaching English words through the phonetic alphabet, the students are taught how to read the phonetic symbols and memorize the pronunciation of the words. On the other hand, students learn the sound of the words through the phonics instruction and that they could enhance phonemic awareness and knowledge of letter–sound correspondences. However, there are some studies which have found negative effects of phonics instruction. Jung (1998) pointed out that there is a limit in the effects of teaching phonics, indicating that there is no one-to-one correspondence between letters and sounds. He also insisted that phonics might not be effective when teaching abstract words at an advanced level since it focuses on the sound and printed form of words but does not take into consideration their meanings. Lee (2004) stated that phonics might not be helpful for EFL learners who have little opportunities to be exposed to English, because phonics is originally for teaching the relationship between sounds and letters after the native learners have been fully exposed and are familiar to the spoken language.

2. Whole language approach

1) Definition of whole language

Comenius (1986) first used the term “whole language” in his book *The Orbis Picture*. He believed that children can discover new information by
being able to speak a language which is learned through experiencing and manipulating concrete objects. Watson (1989) first described whole language as below:

Whole language is a perspective on education that is supported by beliefs about learners and learning, teachers and teaching, language, and curriculum. (p. 133)

Another linguist, Crowell (1989) described whole language as below:

Whole language is an excellent example of many new paradigmatic concepts. The concept of integration complexity, and holism are central to this approach, process and concept are intertwined as are students and learning. (p. 62)

Goodman (1986) is a leading linguist who furthered the development of the whole language approach. He insisted that teaching materials should include meaningful language because reading is a process of developing thinking and language learning. According to Goodman, “whole” is more than the combination of parts, and parts of a language can be learned only through the whole utterance. Bergeron (1990) defined whole language as a philosophy and an instructional approach that includes the use of real literature and writing in the context of meaningful, functional, and cooperative experiences in order to develop students’ motivation and interest in the process of learning. She tried to find the most appropriate definition of whole language through her study, but since there was no one corresponding definition, she reached that definition by analyzing how the whole language approach had been defined in many other studies.

2) Whole language and literacy

Ribowsky (1985) conducted a year-long study with fifty-three kindergarten children and compared the effects of the whole language approach and the code emphasis (phonics) approach on emergent literacy. He found that the participants who were in the whole language group had a larger vocabulary and a better knowledge of grammatical structures than those who were in the code emphasis group. The students from the whole
language group also got better in using idioms and constructing sentences. Kasten and Clarke (1989), conducted a study on preschoolers for a year and found benefits of the whole language approach. The control group had focused on letter–sound activities, and the experimental group had focused on shared reading and writing activities throughout the study. As a result, the participants of the whole language program showed better improvements in early reading measures than those of traditional phonics programs. The experimental classes performed better than the control classes on the Goodman Book Handling Task, the Metropolitan Readiness Test, and showed strong interests in reading books. Weaver (1996) supported the whole language approach, insisting that the whole language learners seem to be able to use phonics knowledge more effectively than those who had been taught phonics in traditional ways, practice phonics skills in isolation. Another study conducted by Shin (1996) on Korean elementary school students found that students who were taught through the whole language approach outperformed in pronunciation, spelling, and vocabulary than those who were taught through the Audio–Lingual Method (ALM).

3. Discussions on phonics and whole language

The ultimate purpose of both phonics instruction and the whole language approach is to develop learners’ literacy. However, there has been controversy for decades over which one is more effective due to their conflicting instructional theories. Phonics instruction tends to split language into small units in order to enhance learners’ phonemic awareness and decoding skills. On the other hand, the whole language approach teaches language holistically, providing abundant authentic texts such as novels, children’s books, newspapers, and so on. Goodman, Bird, and Goodman (1991) stated that the whole language approach includes planting a love for reading literature, problem-solving and critical thinking, collaboration, authenticity, personalized learning, and so on. Advocates of the whole language approach began to raise their voice from the late 1980s, claiming that language should not be taught through skill–based instructional means such as phonics. They gained an influence until experts in the field found
some definite benefits of phonics instruction in the beginning of the 21st century. The National Research Council (1998), in their study on reading difficulties in young children, and the National Reading Panel (2000) both reported that children who had been taught phonics explicitly showed substantially higher growth in reading competency than those who had not. However, it is hard to conclude that phonics is the best teaching method. Krashen (1999) insisted that if the whole language approach were correctly defined and included real reading, students would perform better on reading comprehension and skills tests. Also, Allen at al. (1989) taught thirty-five kindergarten students for nine months and found that the whole language approach is considerably effective in both learning the alphabetic code and developing reading skills. It is found that more study is needed to investigate the effects of the two methods because their effects have not been verified firmly.

III. METHOD

1. Participants

A total of forty-five first grade students from a middle school in Uijeongbu-si, Gyeonggi-do, Korea were selected as participants for this study. They were separated into two groups and received different treatments: a phonics group of twenty-three participants and a whole language group of twenty-two participants. The phonics group consisted of twelve girls and eleven boys, and the whole language group consisted of thirteen girls and nine boys. A survey was conducted to see if there were any students whose level of English competency was too high to take part in the study. The survey revealed that only one out of the twenty-two whole language group participants had studied abroad in an English speaking country for more than a year. In addition, there were four students who had traveled to an English speaking country. The other students had never been to any English speaking country. The researcher had a talk with the participants who had been to an English speaking country and found that the
student who studied abroad for more than a year had a very high level of proficiency in English. As a result, that student was excluded from this study in order to maintain a balance in the English level of the participants. Therefore, the entire analysis of this study dealt with forty-four participants, excluding one absentee (N=44).

2. Materials

1) Survey

A survey was administered before the treatment in order to identify the participants’ background information. It was a brief five-minute survey consisting of two parts: Part A was concerned with the participants’ basic information and Part B was concerned with their English learning background. In Part A, participants wrote down their names, grades, classes, and gender. In Part B, they were asked whether they had studied abroad in an English speaking country, how long they had been there, and what age they visited that country for the first time. Part B, was designed to filter out the students who were inappropriate for this study due to a high level of proficiency in English.

2) Vocabulary test

To verify the English vocabulary levels of the students, a vocabulary level test was administered to twenty-four students from the same school who were not participating in the study. Forty-four words from a children’s book *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch were selected for this pilot test. The book was considered to be suitable material for the participants because it has an instructive plot about gender equality and it is featured in a Korean high school English textbook. According to the pilot test, the selected vocabulary was found to be too easy for the participants. Therefore, another world famous children’s book *The Rainbow Fish* written by Marcus Pfister was selected as the material for the study. It was considered to be more difficult than *The Paper Bag Princess* because it contains lots of unfamiliar
vocabulary which are related to fish anatomy and swimming styles. Thirty-five words were selected from the book, and a vocabulary level test and vocabulary improvement test were conducted to compare the phonics group with the whole language group.

During the vocabulary level test, the participants were given a five option multiple choice test and asked to choose the appropriate Korean translations of the given English words. During the vocabulary improvement test, however, the English words were given orally and examples were not provided. This was to see if the participants were able to use their phonemic awareness to correctly spell the English words as they listened to them being read out. A vocabulary improvement test was also conducted in listening form. The participants listened to thirty-five target words three times each from an audio file, which was recorded by an American English native speaker who is currently working as a professor in the field of English language teaching, and wrote down the spellings and Korean translation of the target words (see Appendix).

3) Interview protocol

An interview was conducted after the treatments to obtain additional information from the participants. Three students from each group participated in the interview and responded to questions about the treatment they received. They answered with their opinions on what seemed to cause vocabulary and reading competency improvements through the course and what seemed to hinder them. They also were asked to share things that they liked the most and did not like on the course.

3. Procedures

A pilot test was conducted with twenty-four students from the same school in order to determine how many of the thirty-five target words the students would understand. The target words, which were from a children’s book The Rainbow Fish written by Marcus Pfister, were carefully selected for instruction after it was found from the pilot test that The Paper Bag
Princess, which was selected as the material at first, was too easy for the participants. A vocabulary level test was then administered prior to the beginning of the first treatment session. The treatment, which consisted of a total of five English lessons, was given to the two groups. The phonics group were taught using phonics instruction, whereas the whole language group were taught using the whole language approach without any additional explicit phonics lessons. The Presentation, Practice, and Production (PPP) method was used for each session. Each lesson started with the PPP phases and finished with a review phase. The phonics group took phonics lessons with the five target words from the story The Rainbow Fish and then practiced phonics skills by doing some phonics activities such as word monster and word family. Those activities allowed the students to produce some work such as posters or maps. During the review phase, the target words were reviewed.

Students of the whole language class first watched a video clip as a warm up activity, then read the story The Rainbow Fish together. Following on from that, they did some group tasks such as counseling, writing letters, and making stories during the PPP phase. Last, the story of the book was reviewed at the end of each class. In the final session, a vocabulary improvement test was conducted in order to measure the effect of the treatment on the participants’ vocabulary development. During the vocabulary improvement test, the participants listened three times to each of the target words and wrote down their spellings and meanings.

1) Teaching materials

As stated in the literature review, there has been different opinions on which method is better between the phonics instruction and the whole language approach in the previous studies. The two methods has been compared in various aspects such as their effects on students’ reading comprehension, reading skills, word recognition, and so on. And, their effects were compared in terms of the students’ vocabulary learning through this study.

Both the phonics group and the whole language group were taught with the
same material, The Rainbow Fish, but they received different treatments. The phonics group was taught through phonics instruction, focusing on learning the relationships of the shapes, meanings, and sounds of the words. The whole language group focused on comprehending the story and did various activities that involved reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

(1) Phonics instruction

The phonics group focused on developing students’ phonics skills and learning the thirty-five target words. Thus, the students of the phonics class received phonics lessons and then practiced decoding skills through phonics activities. One of the phonics activities was word monster which was made by the researcher. The activity followed as such: a student put his or her hand into the monster box and picked out a word card from it; then the teacher asked the student to identify the first and the last sound of the word; if the student answered wrongly, the teacher rubbed a scalp massager on the student’s head as a tickling punishment. Another activity used was word family. It was a group activity where the students found words that had the same sounds. For instance, students of group one searched for the word family of the sound -ly such as carefully, hopefully, and mainly. Other groups had to find other word families of different sounds such as -er”, “-ny”, and “-ful”.

(2) Whole language approach

The whole language class focused on motivating the students and helping them understand the stories. Students of the whole language class watched a short video clip during each of the warm-up sessions and were asked questions related to the topics. Then, they read The Rainbow Fish and answered the comprehension check questions together. In addition, they did some open-ended activities related to the story and topic. They wrote letters to the rainbow fish, gave some advice to imaginary characters, described characters from the story, and predicted events from the story using their imagination. After the activity, they reviewed the story together.
4. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted at the alpha level of .05 using SPSS 18.0. An independent samples t-test was used with a dependent variable, the vocabulary level test, to compare the two groups before the treatment. The independent samples t-test was then used again with another dependent variable, the vocabulary improvement test, to verify which group showed better vocabulary improvement. Lastly, the interview responses were described to show the students’ opinions on each treatment.

IV. RESULTS

1. Overall test results

Table 1 shows the vocabulary level test results of the phonics and whole language group. The mean score of the phonics group was 16.00 and the whole language was 21.71. An independent samples t-test was performed in order to see if there was a significant difference between the phonics and the whole language groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phonics</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>10.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole language</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21.71</td>
<td>9.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows the results of the vocabulary level test, which was conducted before the participants received the treatment. The results revealed that there was no significant difference between the two groups at the 0.05 level. This clarifies that the participants of the two groups had the same vocabulary level before they received the treatment.
Table 2. Independent Samples t-test of Vocabulary Level Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level test</th>
<th>Levene’s test for equality of variances</th>
<th>t-test for equality of means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances</td>
<td>.170</td>
<td>.682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assumed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows the results of the vocabulary improvement test that the participants took at the end of the treatment. The mean score of phonics group was 26.17 out of 35.00, and that of whole language group was 8.23.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Vocabulary Improvement Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phonics</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>26.17</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole language</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8.23</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An independent samples t-test was applied again to examine whether the scores depicted from the descriptive statistics were statistically significant or not. In Table 4, the p-value revealed as 0.00 which is less than alpha level 0.05. Therefore, it can be said that there is a statistically significant difference between the phonics group and the whole language group after they received the treatments. The results show that the phonics group received a much higher score on the vocabulary improvement test than the whole language group. This indicates that the phonics instruction greatly contributed to the participants’ vocabulary learning, whereas whole language approach had little effect on it.

Table 4. Independent Samples t-test of Vocabulary Improvement Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level test</th>
<th>Levene’s test for equality of variances</th>
<th>t-test for equality of means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances</td>
<td>.393</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assumed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Invented spellings

Notably, all the answers from the participants in the phonics group were written in English, whereas those from the whole language group were written in Korean. The participants of the phonics group listened to the sounds in the words and tried to guess the spellings form the sounds. They wrote down the way it sounded according to the phonics rules they had learned. This is called *inventive spelling* or *invented spelling*, which refers to spelling words the way they sound. One participant from the phonics group wrote “pin” for the answer “fin”. She also wrote “caerfly” for “carefully”, “tuk” for “tuck”, “wader” for “weather”, “pcurriur” for “peculiar”. Another participant from the phonics group wrote “flow” for the answer “follow”, “aredy” for “already”, and “diright” for “delight”. Unlike the participants from phonics group, the participants from the whole language group did not write the answers in English when they were unsure of the spelling. Instead of writing the invented spellings of the words in English, they wrote them in Korean. For example, one student wrote “써든리” for the answer “suddenly”, “에더바이스” for “advice”, “쇠이나” for “shiny”. Another participant from whole language group wrote “플래시” for the answer “flash” and “엣마이알” for “admire”. They also tried to guess the spellings of the words according to their sounds, but the difference was that they wrote them in Korean. This is probably because they know the letter–sound relationship of Korean, which is their first language, but do not know it in English.

Read (1975) investigated thirty children who were able to relate printed letters to sounds and named the words that the children wrote in their own unique ways “invented spelling”. He indicated that learning the spelling of words is more like understanding than memorizing. Mary–Jo (1996) described invented spelling as a process that children use when they formalize words from spoken to written form. Schickendanz (1986) stated that making mistakes is essential for children in the process of learning; thus, teachers should not intervene in children’s spelling development by fixing their invented spellings. According to these studies, the invented spellings of the phonics group implies their development in vocabulary spelling.
3. Interview results

An interview was arranged after the treatment had finished. The participants were asked to talk about what aspects of the treatment they were satisfied with and what difficulties they encountered.

1) Strong points of phonics course

Below is an excerpt from an interview with three students of the phonics class.

Student A: The activities were very exciting, so it wasn’t painful to learn new words.

Researcher: What did you like about the activities?

Student A: The most impressive activity for me was finger soccer. We played soccer, putting our fingers into paper puppets, and practiced reading words whenever the foil ball stopped on the word box. It was really fun, and I totally enjoyed it.

Student B: The activities were not only fun and enjoyable, but also very helpful.

Researcher: Why do you think that the course was helpful?

Student B: I’ve learned that letters can make different sounds when they go together. For example, letter “p” makes /f/ sound when letter “h” goes with it.

Student C: After I learned those rules of letters and sounds, I’m now able to guess the spellings of words that I’ve never heard before. Although I write them wrong most of the time, at least I can try.

Student B: Me, too. I feel as if I’m doing a puzzle when I try to guess the spellings of the words. It’s fun.

The students of the phonics group said that they enjoyed most of the activities they did in the classes. Student A said that her favorite activity
was finger soccer. The students played soccer with their fingers and practiced sounds of the words during the activity. She pointed out that she enjoyed the activity because it was more like playing a game than studying. Student B and C were satisfied that they learned letter-sound relationships and were pleased that they are now able to accurately guess the spellings of new words. Student B also said that guessing spellings is as exciting as doing puzzles.

2) Weak points of phonics course

Below is an excerpt from an interview with three students of the phonics class.

Researcher: Did you have any difficulties when taking the course?

Student A: It wasn’t as hard as I expected.

Student B: Well, most of the words from the book were unfamiliar to me, because there were a lot of words related to fish. There were many words that described the beautiful scales of the rainbow fish, body parts of the fish, and movements of the fish. Those words were quite new to me since school usually doesn’t teach those kind of words.

Student C: I agree. But, it wasn’t difficult at all to learn those words.

The students agreed that the target words they had learned from the course were new to them, because they bore little relation to everyday language. All the target words were from the children’s story book The Rainbow Fish, so most of the words were related to fish.

3) Strong points of whole language course

Below is an excerpt from an interview with three students of whole language class.
Researcher: Can you tell me anything that you liked or didn’t like about the course?

Student D: A good thing was that I could totally empathize with the rainbow fish, and bad thing was that I hate the other fish. Why did the rainbow fish have to give his scales to them? I can’t understand it at all. If they were true friends, they wouldn’t bully him just because they couldn’t take his scale! I want to hug him now.

Student E: I also felt empathy for the characters of the story, and I liked that we shared our opinions during the class. It was interesting that people can think differently about the same story.

Student F: I liked the writing activities. Normally, we don’t have many opportunities to write at school. And, it wasn’t painful because the writing activities were very short. It was also nice that I was able to get feedback from the teacher right away.

It was found that the student had empathy for the characters of the story, and they liked sharing their opinions about the characters and the story with each other. They also said that the writing activities were helpful and it was good to get immediate feedback from the teacher.

4) Weak points of whole language course

Below is an excerpt from an interview with three students of whole language class.

Student D: But, I think writing activities could be burden for some students who weren’t good at English.

Student E: Right. Writing activities were difficult because I have only little experience in writing English. I couldn’t find right words and expressions to describe my opinions during the activities.

Student F: Yes, I agree. It’d be better if we can use a dictionary or do the activities with partners. I also saw some students couldn’t get
feedbacks from teacher. I think a teacher can’t take care of every single student during the class.

It was found that some students had difficulties in doing writing activities because of their low level and little experience in writing English. Also, not all the students were able to get feedback from teacher due to a lack of time. The interview results are presented in Table 5 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strong points</th>
<th>Weak points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phonics</strong></td>
<td>- Activities were fun and enjoyable. (e.g. finger soccer and word monster)</td>
<td>- The target words were unfamiliar to the students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Students could learn letter–sound relationships.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Students were able to guess the spellings of words by listening to their sounds.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Whole language</strong></td>
<td>- Writing activities were helpful.</td>
<td>- Writing activities were quite difficult to some students because of their little experience in writing English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Students could share opinions on the story and the characters together.</td>
<td>- Some students could not get immediate feedback from teacher.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### 1. Discussion

Phonics instruction was seen for a long time as one of the most powerful English language teaching methods for young learners to develop early literacy. However, as many were unsatisfied with the approach, the whole language approach appeared in 1980s in reaction to it. These two fundamentally different approaches to teaching literacy have stirred up a controversy among linguists in recent years. There are many studies which compare the effects of the two methods on developing L1 learners’ early
literacy, but not many discussing their effects on L2 learners. Therefore, this study was conducted to compare the effects of phonics and the whole language approach on L2 learners. This study investigated the effects of these contrasting methods on Korean middle school students’ vocabulary learning.

As a result, the phonics group outperformed the whole language group in the vocabulary improvement test. There are some studies that support this result. For example, Fries (1962) and Russell (1961), who are advocates of phonics instruction, indicated phonics instruction is good for learning the spellings of words because it forms a habit of observing words when the children come into contact with them. Ko (2008) also insisted that phonics instruction has a great effect on teaching children the meaning of words. Jin (2013) studied effects of phonics instruction on reading with disabled students. He taught sixth graders of elementary school English through a phonics associated reading program, conducted pre and post reading tests, and let the participants write reviews on the program. Through his study, it was found that the phonics associated reading program teaches the participants to recognize letter–sound relationship of English words, and has a great effect in making the participants fluent in reading. Moon (2001) also insisted that phonics instruction is helpful for English reading, writing, speaking, and listening since it improves learners’ English pronunciation. She conducted listen-and-write and look-and-say vocabulary tests and investigated learners’ awareness of the relationship between letter and sounds. As a result, the participants improved their abilities to produce sounds and write the spellings of words correctly through learning phonics rules. She insisted that phonics instruction would have a great effect in improving awareness of vocabulary pronunciation since it basically aims to let learners understand regular patterns which exist between the letters and sounds of words. Oh (2014) investigated how chant associated phonics instruction affects primary school students’ word sound discrimination skills and learning attitudes. Through the study, she found that phonics teaching using English chants not only improves learners’ word discrimination skills but increases interest, self-confidence and enthusiasm in English.
2. Implications

According to the results, phonics instruction has a positive effect on vocabulary learning. The mean score of the phonics group was more than three times than that of the whole language group and, supporting this result, an independent samples t-test scores showed that the results were statistically significant. Therefore, it can be said that phonics instruction is more effective in teaching vocabulary than the whole language approach.

This result may be helpful for language teachers when planning lessons. They may apply phonics instruction if they want to focus on vocabulary learning or to aid learners who have difficulty with learning vocabulary. Phonics instruction can also be applied to improve the classroom atmosphere and motivate the students. The participants said that they liked fun phonics activities and that they came to like English as well. Teachers can make good use of phonics instruction if they are creative enough to make phonics activities fun and enjoyable by associating them with some songs, chants, games, quizzes, and so on. However, adhering to phonics instruction only would not be a great idea since teaching English is not limited to teaching vocabulary. These days, many linguists are suggesting “balanced literacy instruction”, which is a combination of phonics instruction and the whole language approach (Adams, 1994; Clay, 1991; Share & Stanovich, 1995). Keating (1998) tried to find out which method is more helpful for teaching reading to children through his study. In the study, the control group was taught through the whole language approach and the experimental group was taught through both the phonics-based method and the whole language approach. It was found that there was a significant difference between the two groups in regards to word analysis. The results showed that combining the whole language approach and phonics instruction has a great effect on improving children’s word analysis. Pressley et al. (2002), found that the balanced approach fosters learners’ phonemic awareness, acquiring alphabet rules, vocabulary recognition, and vocabulary acquirement. Reutzel and Cooter (2000) indicated that the balanced approach is not an eclectic approach but a transformative approach. They stated that transformative approaches can constantly develop and gradually become a balanced approach, seeking for
better ways of teaching. Therefore, further studies should focus on finding appropriate ways to combine phonics instruction and the whole language approach in a balanced way rather than separating and contrasting them. It would be good if the two approaches were combined harmoniously with the strong points of each emphasized and the weak points eliminated.

3. Limitations

Some limitations of this study need to be addressed. First, the participants received only five weeks of treatment in this study, so more insight would be provided from a longitudinal study. Secondly, the vocabulary test was conducted in a listen–and–write form, which is related to encoding ability. It would have been better if the vocabulary test had been focused on decoding ability since phonics instruction is deeply related to decoding. Last, this study separated phonics and whole language. However, the current trend of teaching early literacy leans towards a balanced approach: combining the strength of phonics instruction with the whole language approach. Therefore, further study is needed to focus on how to balance phonics instruction with the whole language approach rather than try to separate and contrast them.

REFERENCES


Pronunciation. Pukyong National University.


### Appendix: Vocabulary Improvement Test

발음을 잘 듣고 영어 단어와 한글 뜻을 적으세요. 각 단어는 세 번만 들려줍니다.

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Examples in: English
Applicable Languages: English
Applicable Levels: Secondary Education
Key words: Phonics, Whole language, Phonemic awareness, Decoding, Letter-sound relationship, Invented spelling, Balanced literacy, Early literacy

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