

## A 'Jolly Phonics'-Based Training Program for EFL Teachers of Young Learners

Dr. Emad Ahmed Albaaly

### Abstract

Jolly Phonics is widely used for teaching young learners' English as a native language. Literature indicates that it is composed of a number of sequenced stages for teaching letter sounds, and that it has shown effective results in accelerating reading and writing. However, this method has not been manipulated in the Egyptian context. The purpose of this study was to develop a program based on this method for training EFL teachers of young learners. Towards this end, an experimental group including 53 teachers of young learners participated in the study. They were attending the One Year Professional Diploma for Teaching English to Young Learners offered at the Ismailia College of Education. They received 14 training sessions based on the stage concepts, techniques, and activities embedded in the method during the academic year 2013/2014. Results indicated that the participants' knowledge of Jolly Phonics in was improved. Additionally, The participants also expressed their satisfaction about the practical benefits of the method.

**Key words:** Jolly phonics, training program , EFL Teachers of Young Learners, Egypt

### ” برنامج تدريبي قائم على الأصوات المرحية لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلمة أجنبية للمتعلمين الصغار ”

د/ عماد أحمد محمد سليمان البعلبي

#### • الملخص :

تستخدم الأصوات المرحية بصورة واسعة في تدريس اللغة الانجليزية ككلمة أصلية للمتعلمين الصغار، وتوضح الدراسات السابقة انها تتكون من عدد من المراحل المتتابعة لتدريس أصوات الحروف وقد اوضحت الدراسات السابقة أن للطريقة نتائج فعالة في تعجيل القراءة والكتابة. ومع هذا فان التدريس بطريقة الأصوات المرحية لم يتم التعامل معه في السياق المصري ، ولقد كان هدف هذه الدراسة هو تقديم برنامج قائم على هذه الطريقة من أجل تدريب معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية ككلمة أجنبية للمتعلمين الصغار وتحقيقا لهذا الهدف ، تم مشاركة عدد ثلاثة وخمسين معلما للمتعلمين الصغار كمجموعة تجريبية للدراسة كانوا يحضرون الدبلوم المهني لتدريس اللغة الانجليزية للمتعلمين الصغار - نظام العام الواحد - والذي كانت تقدمه كلية التربية بالإسماعيلية ، ولقد تلقوا أربعة عشر جلسة تدريبية قائمة على المفاهيم المرحلية والأساليب والأنشطة المتضمنة في الطريقة وذلك خلال العام الاكاديمي ٢٠١٣ / ٢٠١٤ ، ولقد اوضحت النتائج أن معرفة المشاركين الخاصة بالأصوات المرحية قد تحسنت وازدادت الى ذلك ، فان المشاركين قد عبروا عن رضاهم عن الفوائد العملية للطريقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأصوات المرحية ، برنامج تدريبي ، معلمي اللغة الانجليزية ككلمة أجنبية للمتعلمين الصغار، مصر

## **Introduction**

Learning English language has become an important competence of living in a globalized world and this has in turn increased the importance of communicating with each other around the globe (Birch, 2007). For the speakers of English, the language has four major skills (i.e. writing, reading, speaking and listening). Gilbert (1984: 1) states that the skills of listening comprehension and pronunciation are per-say interdependent: "If they [students] cannot hear English well, they are cut off from the language... If they cannot be understood easily, they are cut off from conversation with native speakers", p.1. It is well known that pronunciation is essential for speaking and understanding spoken English. Birch (2007) states that should be the first thing learners learn when studying a language. He adds that learners of EFL should focus not only on how to make the different sounds (i.e. paying close attention to the sounds that do not exist in your language), but also how to hear the sounds). He also mentions that good pronunciation can be equated in importance to good listening and this partially leads to good communication skills.

This shows the need to integrate EFL pronunciation learning activities in the classrooms in order to give the student situations to develop their pronunciation by listening and speaking. According to Gilakjani (2012: 119), EFL pronunciation has to be considered an integral part of learning a foreign language because it directly has an effect on learners' ability to communicate well as well as his performance. The study also maintains that poor communication skills can lower the level of learner's self-confidence, limit his/her interactions, and make the speaker under-estimate himself/herself. It draws the conclusion that it pronunciation is one of the key elements as an ultimate goal is to secure the acquisition of acceptable pronunciation for the language learner .

English pronunciation is considered to be one of the most difficult skills to acquire and develop (Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor., 2008). They add that his may be due to a number of factors, e.g. the focus on relationship between spelling and pronunciation.

Pronunciation is stated to be neglected in most English as a Foreign language classrooms. This view is supported by Atli (2012: 3665). According to the study, English teachers are accused of avoiding dealing with pronunciation skills for a set of various reasons. It is also claimed in the study that lack of self-confidence and limited pieces of vocabulary are likely to be two reasons for this.

According to Szynalski (2013), pronunciation is seen as the biggest linguistic phenomenon people encounter when speaking English as a second language. It is also thought that the teaching of pronunciation is the main element in foreign language teaching (Hişmanoğlu, 2006: 102). Szynalski (2013) hints that it will be easy for people who listen to you to find out immediately whether your pronunciation is good or bad not as quickly as they notice whether or not you have limited vocabulary or bad grammar.

Celce-Murcia et al (2000) argue that the goal of teaching pronunciation to EFL learners is not to make them sound like native speakers of English. They emphasise that establishing well-produced pronunciation should be the goal of oral communication. However, they argue that still there are some issue with methodology. They clarify that this is related to how to make the unclear clear(Ibid). This is even a problem for the communicative language teaching (CLT). In this respect, the reason for this is found to be simply because CLT has not developed an agreed upon set of strategies for teaching pronunciation from a communicative perspective (Howlader, 2011).

It is claimed that the importance of sounds for effective communication means that foreign language teachers need to emphasize pronunciation teaching in their classes (Hariri 2012). It is also asserted that because sounds are indispensable to communication, foreign language practitioners are encouraged to assign proper time-load to pronunciation teaching in their classes (Hişmanoğlu, 2006: 102). However, this aim is still seen as relatively unreachable by a considerable number of foreign language teachers.

It can be claimed that teaching the sounds of English is challenging for teachers. In this respect, Gilbert (2008:1) indicates that teaching sounds faces a number of challenges including the teachers running out of time and not being able to focus their attention on this aspect of instruction. To quote his exact words:

When they[teachers] do find the time to address pronunciation, the instruction often amounts to the presentation and practice of a series of boring and seemingly unrelated topics. Drilling sounds over and over again (e.g. minimal pair work) often leads to discouraging results, and discouraged students and teachers end up wanting to avoid pronunciation altogether.

Gilbert adds that teachers are encouraged to fight the frustrations and boredom in class by offering pronunciation ‘that is listener-friendly’ by teaching the pure sounds of the language. To cite his own words,

After all, English pronunciation does not amount to mastery of a list of sounds or isolated words. Instead, it amounts to learn and practice a way of making a speaker's thoughts easy to follow. Learners from the very beginning have to learn sounds the way they are produced and purely uttered, and this is what Jolly phonics is related to at heart.

This view is supported by Szynalski (2013) who emphasizes that the imitation of the sounds has to be accurate.

Hence, it is been seen that pronunciation and particularly pure sound teaching are important ingredients of the communicative competence and must be included in learners’ programs. Even the teachers must be aware that the inclusion of pure sound teaching is not a luxury or something to abandon.

Thus, Jolly Phonics has appeared as a systematic phonics method (1998: 11). It is well known that the UK government uses the method for learning literacy (Jolly-Learning Ltd., 2014). To teach using the method, teachers need to follow certain stages or steps. At the beginning (for nine or ten weeks), Lloyd (1998) states that the children are instructed the forty two letter sounds, how to blend them for reading whole words, and how to acquaint

the firstly-introduced few 'tricky' keywords. Then, the study concludes that at this point, the children can attempt to read books for themselves.

It is noteworthy that Jolly Phonics (Ibid) is uses a multi-sensory technique. Each sound (Jolly Learning Ltd., 2014) is introduced with a short vowel accompanied by an action directly from a story. The Jolly Learning Ltd. Website adds that the sounds are introduced in seven groups:

- 1 . s, a, t, i, p, n
- 2 . c k, e, h, r, m, d
- 3 . g, o, u, l, f, b
- 4 . ai, j, oa, ie, ee, or
- 5 . z, w, ng, v, oo, oo
- 6 . y, x, ch, sh, th, th
- 7 . qu, ou, oi, ue, er, ar

The learning website adds that after learning the first six Jolly Phonics sounds, children are then able to blend simple three-letter words. It clarifies that the sounds are taught in a specific order (not alphabetical). It adds that this enables children to begin to blend words as early as possible and they become so thrilled because they are finally reading (Ibid). The website also explains that the result of sounds being learned is attributed to blending, showing the videos, singing Jolly Jingles, and at stages at the end of the year, reading stories called Jolly Readers which are stories that are graded in difficulty.

In this respects, (Llods, 2008: 5) well defines the first stage concepts for the method and gives more details about the stages embedded:

Learning the letter sounds: Children are taught 42 main letter sounds.

Learning letter formation: Using different multi-sensory methods, children learn how to form and write the letters.

Blending: Children are taught how to blend the sounds together to read and write new words.

Identifying the sounds in words: Listening for the sounds in words gives children the best start for improving spelling.

Tricky words: Tricky words have irregular spelling and children learn these separately

The study also depicted the rest of what needed to be taught:

- When to introduce capital letters and their relating sounds
- When to start dictation words and do independent writing
- When to introduce letter names
- When to start and finish teaching long vowels
- When to introduce decodable reading books, p. 74

According to the method, the study states that there is multi-sensory teaching involved and this keeps children active and engaged in their learning. It mentions that children make rapid progress and continue to develop their understanding of how language works. This even positively affects their writing and improves their spelling, making them communicate themselves more precisely. The study also suggests that Jolly Phonics offer guidance for the first nine weeks of tuition. After this, the study maintains, teaching is determined by teacher.

Obviously, Jolly phonics can be considered a gateway which facilitates understanding. The ability to decode and recognize words is located at the center of the Jolly Phonics program (White, 2011). In this respect, it is claimed that recurrence of concepts in various forms allows easier teaching of vocabulary (Rance-Rooney, 2010). Reyes (2011) emphasized that the comprehension skill levels move from the literal to inferential. According to the study, the most basic level reflects the comprehension of words, literal, and factual meanings, whereas the more intricate meanings need inferential interpretation of fiction and non-fiction.

The study of Ifeoma and Ibiam (2013) tested the efficacy of Jolly Phonics on the writing ability of junior primary pupils in Uyo

Senatorial District. In their study, they considered two variables which formed the basic skills of Jolly Phonics Instructional Strategy. The two variables embedded were blending of letter sounds (for reading) and identification of letter sounds in words (for writing). (It is noteworthy that these are two important aspects which shape literacy.) Their sample size consisted of 169 pupils from four public primary schools in Uyo Senatorial District. They used Non-randomized pretest- post-test control group research design. Their results showed that blending of letter sounds (for reading) and identification of letter sounds in words (for writing) had clearly significant effects on the writing ability of the junior primary pupils in Uyo Senatorial District.

Thus, it is been seen that the Jolly Phonics can improve pronunciation and literacy of early year students. However, it appears that teachers in Egypt do not know much about how to utilize the method as literature is free from any Egyptian contribution in this context. To support this claim, it was observed by the researcher - while working at the Ministry of Education in Cairo as a Minister Adviser for International Affairs - that there were no complete practical and comprehensive endeavor to involve Jolly Phonics in the EFL curricula within the early year context. This was confirmed by an Interview with the English Counselor for the ministry in 2012. She mentioned that 'we have not yet availed ourselves of the method, but we are contacting and working in collaboration with the British Council in this regard'. Also, pilot interviews with a number of early year teachers proved the definite proposition: 'we have no idea what it is'.

Also, the previous studies reviewed have proven that there is weakness in pronunciation skills for most EFL pupils, particularly the youngest ones, which may reflect a need for training their teachers.

Many interviews have been held with EFL early year supervisors and teachers in Ismailia to analyze the present situation of pronunciation and all of them have confirmed the weakness of the students in this area as the gateway to reading and writing. Supervisors even state that the sounds produced by

teachers are not often native-like. Examples are in the production of the sounds /b/,/p/, /t/, /k/, /f/, /v/, /g/,/j/, /ch/, /θ/ and /<sup>ʒ</sup> /, and / ð/ hence, they need 'more efforts to be incorporated in this regard', according to them.

The following reflects the supervisors' views:

- Twenty supervisors confirm that there is teaching weakness because of lack of professional English teaching training of teachers especially at the kindergarten and primary stage.
- Twenty confirm that teachers do not have enough professional development themselves.
- Sixteen confirm that the reason behind the weakness is the use of traditional methods (e.g. not including Jolly Phonics).
- Twenty state that they have no idea what Jolly Phonics is.

According to senior teachers:

- Fifty two teachers confirm that there is weakness because of limited class time (i.e. often more focus lies on grammar, vocabulary, listening and writing skills). Pronunciation as a gateway to reading and writing is often pushed to the bottom of the list, they claim.
- Forty two confirm that there are not tools which help them accomplish their tasks successfully. (This is not related to the present research interest.)

Also, the researcher's experience and observation inform that there is weakness in teacher pronunciation of the same sounds which pupils make mistakes in (see the aforementioned set of sounds supervisors complain that teachers make mistakes in). This is supported by his remarks taken during his supervisory visits to over fifteen schools in Ismailia, Sharkaya, Luxor, Cairo, and Giza in Egypt.

Having had a Ph.D. from a native speaking country, the researcher went to many primary schools, embracing early-year pupils in the UK. It was thought that because schools there used the method in teaching literacy; they made quick progress in learning pronunciation and reading and writing. It was then a real



initiative for the present study to propose to transfer this method setting to classrooms in Egypt probably for the first time.

Based on the literature reviewed which proves a problem in teaching pronunciation and sounds, the interview with the Ministry Counselor of English at the Ministry of Education which confirms the absence of the method, the interviews with supervisors and senior-teachers which confirm lack of the type teachers in question, it can be stated that Early-Year teachers lack knowledge about the Jolly Phonics Method. Therefore, it is claimed that an intervention is needed.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of a Jolly Phonics-based program for early-year teachers studying the Jolly Phonics method in order to develop their knowledge of the method. Also, the study seeks to assess the teachers' participants' satisfaction with Jolly Phonics.

The study, then, seeks to answer the following two questions:

1. What is the effectiveness of a Jolly Phonics training program in developing Early Year teachers' the knowledge of the method?
2. Ho far are they satisfied with the program?

### **Approach of the study:**

Quasi-experimental approach - a one-group pre-post-test method was used. The reason for choosing this design was that the Jolly Phonics method, as seen earlier, was seen as new to the Egyptian context.

### **Sample of the study**

The sample of the study consisted of 53 teachers of young learners. They were involved in the experiment and received the training at Ismailia Faculty of Education as part of their academic study within the 'One Year Professional Diploma of Teaching English to Teachers of Young Learners'. The training took place during the first term of the academic year 2013-2014.

### **Tools of the study**

To achieve the purpose of this study, the following tools were used:

1. a Jolly Phonics achievement pre-posttest
2. a Jolly Phonics attitude evaluation form applied to the participants at pre-post stages.

The pre-posttest and the evaluation form were valid after being submitted to two TEFL specialists who reviewed both. Their comments were acted up to. The test and the form were then valid. Then, only the test applied twice within an interval of two weeks, i.e. mean was 0 (out of 100 total score) on the first occasion and 5 on the second. The results were 95% the same. This indicated the test was highly reliable.

The pre-posttest covered knowledge questions relating to the items (concept stages, techniques, and activities – all mentioned in the following section below) and had a total score of 100.

The evaluation form dealt with such items embracing the ideas of the practicality, usability, and benefits of the method. It also asked about students satisfaction about the method. The total score was 20.

### **The program**

The Jolly Phonics-based program reflects the intervention. It is used to cover up the gap in the participants' knowledge regarding the Jolly Phonics method. The concept stages, techniques, and activities from Llods (2008) and Jolly Learning Ltd. (2013), aforementioned, were used as the focal core of the program. Fourteen lectures (2 hrs. each) covering the core content had to be given to facilitate the method. Table (1) below describes the stage concepts, techniques, and activities embedded in the program as distributed over the procedural lectures of the program :

Also, as regards the assessment, the pre-posttest described earlier was the means for it, and it took into consideration the relative weight of lectures with more content focus, i.e. lectures dealing with the 42 sound learning, and those addressing blending as clarified in the table.

**Table (1) Program Procedural Description**

Stage Concept (for improving the sub-skills relating)	Technique	Activity	Lecture No.
Learning the 42 letter sounds	-Pure sound production -pure letter sound recognition	- showing videos -singing Jolly jingles -producing letter sounds	Lectures 1, 2,3, & 4
Learning letter formation	-Using different multi-sensory methods, e.g. air writing -letter shape-related stories	-Tasks to properly hold a pencil and to write letters	Lecture 5
Blending:	-minimal pairs -drills	-Tasks to read simple words and sentences	Lectures 6 & 7
Tricky words:	-presentation -Giving examples for separate words	-Word reading	Lecture 8
Identification of the sounds in words:	Listening to the sounds in words	-Various tasks on acoustic spelling/ pure letter sound production	Lecture 9
Introduction of Capital letters and their relating sounds	-Flash cards -presentation -drawing on air -pure sound production	Writing and reading tasks	Lecture 10
Dictation words and independent writing	-word sound pauses -letter shape story reminder	Writing exercises	Lecture 11
Introduction of letter names	-pictures -videos -magic 'e' presentation -examples -drills	Reading tasks	Lecture 12
Introduction of long vowels	-examples	Reading in isolation and in words	Lecture 13
Introduction of decodable reading	-Graded pictorial stories -Literature circle	Reading graded pictorial stories	Lecture 14

**Hypotheses of the study:**

The following hypotheses were tested:

1. There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the participants on the Jolly Phonics achievement pre-posttest in favour of the posttest results.

2. There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of both the pretest and the posttest in regard to their attitudes towards the program in favour of the posttest results.

## **Results**

After obtaining the pre-post-test results, an SPSS t-test and a practical significance equation were administered in order to assess the effectiveness of the program. At the end, the results were analyzed and discussions and conclusions made. The following reflects the attempt to answer the two study questions:

To answer test the first question of the study addressing the extent to which the program was effective in developing the knowledge of the participants, a t-test was administered to the results of the achievement pre-posttest. The following Table (2) reflects the t-test results.

***Table (2) t-value and t-significance for the Jolly-Phonics' pre-posttest***

		<i>Paired Sample Test</i>					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Paired Differences							
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	pre - post	88.47170-	9.50223	1.30523	-91.09084-	-85.85256-	-67.782-	52	.000

As shown in the Table (2), there are statistically significant differences between the pre and posttest results. The mean is 88.4717 (out of 100 as total score) and the standard deviation is 9.50223. This reflects high student scores on the posttest and less variations in the participants' scores. The t-value is 67.762, which means it is significant at both statistical significance levels of 0.05 & 0.001. This makes clear that the value is in favour of the posttest results.

It is clear that because the students' pre-test scores were all zeros, the effect-size could not be calculated by computer programs. To test the supposition that the program has been effective in developing the students' knowledge about the method, the following equation (Gravetter et al, 2007) has been administered:

$$\eta^2 = t^2 / t^2 + df = (88.47170)^2 / (88.47170)^2 + 52 = 0.993$$

Because the result of the equation (0.993) is bigger than 0.14, then this shows a big effect size. To support the previous finding, it is well known that whenever means change from zeros or no value at all (which was the case of the pre-test results for the present study) to a high extent towards a positive direction beyond the mean score, a positive effect size can be deduced. Therefore, the practical significance for the present hypothesis can be stated to be high. This leads to the conclusion that:

‘There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the participants on the Jolly Phonics achievement pre-posttest in favour of the posttest results.’ This positively confirms the first hypothesis.

In order to answer the second question of the study addressing the extent to which the participants were satisfied with the program, the results obtained by applying the Jolly Phonics attitude evaluation form at the pre and posttest stages were manipulated and a t-test was administered. The t-test results are as follows in Table (3):

**Table (3) t-test results for the pre-posttest evaluation form**

Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
1.92000E1	2.46912	.45080	18.27802	20.12198	42.591	29	.000

As shown in the Table (3), there are statistically significant differences between the pre and post test results for the questionnaire. The t-value is 42.591, which means it is significant at both statistical significance levels of 0.05 & 0.001. This indicates that the value is in favor of the post stage administration where the mean score is 19.20 compared with a zero or no value at all at the pre-test stage.

Again, because the students’ pre-test scores were all zeros or no values at all, the effect-size cannot be calculated by computer programs. It is evident that a big effect size can be deduced.

Therefore, the practical significance for the present hypothesis can be stated to be high. This confirms the second hypothesis:

‘There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of both the pretest and the posttest in regard to their attitudes towards the program in favour of the posttest results’.

### **Discussion**

All the above results, and related analyses, consolidate the claim that the program was well-instilled and was ready to be used by the participants in making desirable changes in teaching pronunciation using the method. Overall, as discussed above, the previous results represent a positive change in students’ knowledge and attitudes. The results are actually supported by another study results, e.g. Jolly Learning Ltd. (2014) which has quite the same results. However, the only difference is in that the present study is probably the first study to have been conducted on Egyptian soil and context, i. e. to a different sample.

The present study is different from the study of Ifeoma and Ibiam (2013) which tested the efficacy of Jolly Phonics Instructional Strategy on the writing ability of junior primary pupils’ in Uyo Senatorial District, as mentioned earlier, in that the present study covers all aspects of pronunciation, reading and writing with all stages for the method being in mind. In other words, Ifeoma and Ibiam’s study only incorporated two variables which were blending of letter sounds (for reading) and identification of letter sounds in words (for writing). Another important difference is in the sample: the present study is incorporated teachers while Ifeoma and Ibiam’s involved pupils.

It is noteworthy that when the participants of the present study saw that the method covering teaching a wide range of vocabulary depending on teaching of letter sounds, and when they noticed how practical it was to see the production of pure sounds could make words and make reading and writing faster, they were all satisfied with the program and expressed their desire to take it to their classrooms. They also expressed that it was usable and

valuable and that it had the potential to make learning more fun. taking it fully to their schools.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of this research, it is recommended that:

1. The Egyptian Ministry of Education should adopt the method for teaching literacy as one of the main ones for TEFL within the early years.
2. Both supervisors and all in-service primary teachers in Egypt should be trained vastly on the method.
3. Lecturers at university should make use of the method and endeavor to involve it in their teaching program

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