

# The Importance of Strengthening Phonetic Symbol Teaching under the New Curricular Standard in Middle School

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**Abstract:** Any foreign language course aims at developing the skills of listening speaking, reading and writing. Each of these four skills is based on three main elements of language: phonetic symbol, vocabulary and grammar. Phonetic symbol is the basis of English learning, speech learning is the first step in learning English, it is closely connected with the study of grammar, lexicology and so on. “Without phonetic symbol there can be no morphology of a spoken language, without intonation no syntax,” as Professor Firth declared. And a majority of students begin their systematical teaching in junior school. Therefore, English phonetic teaching in junior school is of vital importance. However, in practical teaching, there are various problems in rural areas, due to economic situation, the competent in sufficiency of teachers, influence of dialect, etc, their problems are even more serious. Solid foundation of phonetic symbol knowledge is the premise of vocabulary learning. Besides, it is also a requirement of help students improving integrating skills, building positive self-concept and raising independent learning ability. According to the current situation of phonetic symbol teaching under the new curricular standard, we should strengthen the importance of phonetic symbol teaching in middle school.

## 1. Introduction

When we begin learning a language, we learn its phonetics first. Therefore, phonetics is one of the most important sections in language learning. Every language contains three main different parts: phonetics, words and grammar. However, words and grammar are embodied in phonetics. Only by mastering phonetics well, can we utilize grammar and vocabulary to their full potential and meet the demand of communication. In the future, the competition is about general competence. On one hand, employers, especially those who often deal with foreigners in diplomatic relations or foreign trade department are becoming more and more particular about their employees. If the applicants are better than others at English phonetics, they are more likely to be hired. On the other hand, many undergraduates will become future teachers. If they are not good at phonetics, they will surely bring their students negative influences. Moreover, even appreciating English literature requires a good mastery of phonetics, for it helps readers to understand the rhythm and rhyme in these works.

The importance of English learning is undisputed, professional education makes high demand of emphasizing practical application capacity to English learning. Students need to master basic knowledge, in order to cooperate with the requirement, we have carried out thousands of reforms and attempts to English teaching materials and teaching methods in recent years. But however English materials and methods change, one thing will never change, that is phonetic symbol learning. In other words, phonetic symbol, which is the most fundamental and the easiest to be forgot, is the key to learn English for students. According to Nie Xiyong and Cao Bao in 1987, phonetic is the physical form and the essence of language. Phonetic is the first stage of teaching, English phonetic teaching is the initial point of English teaching. For students, the study of phonetic symbol is the start of English learning. However, in real English teaching process, phonetic is not in countenance it deserves, especially in rural areas. In fact, English phonetic teaching should be placed in the most important role of English teaching. Nevertheless, there are many problems in English phonetic teaching, such as unreasonable teaching methods, lack of attention and influence of local dialects, etc.

As the basic foundation of phonetics, phonetic symbol is described as “the Cinderella of

language teaching”, one’s linguistic competence depends in a certain measure on his pronunciation. Without a solid foundation of pronunciation at early stage, it will be beyond repair in case of fossilization. Therefore, the teaching of phonetic symbol deserves much more emphases than we lay on before.

## **2. Current Situation of Phonetic Symbol in the Middle School**

### **2.1 Problems in Phonetic Symbol Teaching under the New Curricular Standard.**

Full-time Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standard (Experimental Draft) for General High School points out that, the overall goal of English course in basic education stage is to cultivate students the comprehensive application capability of language. Phonetic symbol, vocabulary and grammar are the basic foundation, which belong to basic language knowledge and language skills. English teaching in our country is mainly completed in the initial stage. Students contact phonetic symbol firstly at grade three or four in primary school, and then learn phonetic symbol systematically in junior high school. This phase covers all the phonetic symbol and phonetic symbol knowledge, students should learn phonetic symbol and how to apply it. High school and university is the stage of consolidation.

But in recent years, phonetic symbol and word spelling are not listed in the exams, so they are not paid much attention to by both teachers and students. Many middle schools mainly focus on reading, grammar, vocabulary and writing. In order to catch teaching process, many teachers finish phonetic symbol teaching within six or seven periods. As for what it is composed of, then point out incidentally when reading new words. This hasty leads to some students fail to master basic phonetic symbol knowledge in middle school, even in university. They can only recognize some single phonetic symbol symbols, but can not spell new words, especially multi-syllabic words. There are some students complaining that it is difficult to memorize new words and easy to forget. When spelling, they often add or omit letters and often make some low level spelling mistakes. Incorrect spelling, poor listening. Even if facing some lamprophonia and easy words, they are unable to spell by pronunciation. The frustration caused by phonetic symbol learning brings in boredom, and some students even give up English learning. Because of lacking of teachers who can pronounce purely, this kind of problem is more outstanding in some remote areas [1]. For instance, under the effect of negative transfer, their English will be with thick accent and clear plosive. They also used to add vowel after the last consonant. Besides, some pronunciations are not in the right position, either too long or too short. These are all cause by poor basic phonetic symbol foundation.

### **2.2 Problems in Phonetic Symbol Learning under the New Curricular Standard.**

For one thing, Chinese and English belong to different language systems, which causes a great number of differences in phonetic symbol, vocabulary and grammar. Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family, while English belongs to the Indo-European language family. Chinese belong to ideograms, but English belongs to the Table sound writing. [2] Due to those differences, students encounter a number of problems in learning English phonetic symbol. For instance, the way some students pronounce /s/ can illuminate this issue. Some students notice that this phoneme is different from the initial consonant of the Chinese character. But they don’t know the essentials of /s/ articulation (or can not find the feeling in its pronunciation). At last, they pronounce a phoneme that is between /s/ and /sh/.

Generally speaking, the native phonetic system of foreign language learners has a positive or negative effect on foreign phonetic symbol system, namely the positive and negative transfer. Chinese and English are two completely different languages. The two languages have a very big gap in pronunciation, the position of tongue, duration, rhythm, intonation and other aspects. However, they also have something in similar, which will produce positive or negative effect on English phonetic symbol learners, causing the phonetic learning difficulties.

For another thing the pronunciation habits of students are deep-rooted and are not easy to be changed; for another thing, their sensitivity of hearing organs and the flexibility of speech organs

can not catch up with those of children.

Especially, when learning English, students tend to pronounce vowels in English in the way they pronounce those in Chinese. Students often pronounce long vowels as short vowels, which shortens the length of the long vowels. For example, pronounce fool /fu:l/ as /ful/ (full), hit /hit/ as /hi:t/ (heat), ship / ship/ as / shi:p/ (sheep) and so on. It is not the correct way, obviously. If this point is neglected, listeners will misunderstand “I am now in the ship” to “I am now in the sheep.” The lengths of phonemes are different in English, which is one of the most significant features in English phonetic symbol. Some learners are inclined to replace the articulation of /θ/ and / ð/ with that of /s/ and / z/, while others do not manage to imitate the articulation of some other phonemes.

Meanwhile, when two or more than two consonants come immediately one after another (without any vowels inserted between them) they are called consonant clusters. Desk /desks/, spring /sprɪŋ/, throw /θrəu/, and fly /flai/ are such examples. There are a great number of consonant clusters in English, while in Chinese this phenomenon does not exist and the Chinese students often find it hard to pronounce consonant clusters correctly. Therefore, some students are apt to add a /r/ to syllabify the English consonant clusters. For example, they pronounce “Table” as /teiblr/. Some students pronounce /naif/ as /laif/, for they are influenced by their dialects which do not contain the phoneme of /n/.

Another common problem is the Phenomena of Elision. Elision means the omission of a sound or sounds, either within the body of a word or at the conjunction of words [3]. Some students omit or can not pronounce a few phonemes when reading or speaking English, which makes their reading or speaking seems rather awkward even if they can finish their performance. For instance, pronounce victory / vɪktəri / as /vɪktri /, pronounce /knait/ as /nait/, pronounce /tɔ:lk/ as /tɔ:k/. The vowels that are often omitted are / ə/ and / i/ in unstressed syllables of disyllabic or polysyllabic words. The consonants that are often omitted are mostly plosives, nasals, laterals, and some fricatives.

Therefore, imitating the pronunciation of English perceptually is insufficient. More knowledge of phonetics is required to facilitate a more analytical learning. The locations of speech organs needed to be taught to students. At the same time more must be understood to control the phonatory organs.

### **2.3 The Importance and Necessity of Strengthening Phonetic Symbol Teaching.**

The International Phonetic Alphabet is confirmed by Henry Sweet, William Vietor and Paul Passy under the effect of The Reform Movement in late 19<sup>th</sup>, it is also a symbol system to record the phonetic symbol of language [4]. The early phoneticians and language teachers reach an agreement in four aspects, one of the four items formulates that phonetic symbol is a very important part of language, we should teach learners phonetic symbol before language. As the core component of the phonetic symbol, phonetic symbol plays an important role in phonetic symbol teaching, even in the whole language teaching. Early phoneticians also agree that the study of English phonetic symbol should be connected with language teaching, and the findings should be applied to practice, which provides an important theoretical foundation for phonetic symbol teaching.

Therefore, the Full-time Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standard (Experimental Draft) for General High School show the overall goal of English courses by intuitive course goal structures. It clearly points out that the goal of the course is to develop students’ comprehensive language application ability, which is based on conformity development of language skills, language knowledge, emotional attitudes, study strategy, cultural consciousness and so on. The curriculum standard has seven appendixes, which mainly embody a big part of study project from language knowledge. Professor Lu Ziwen from Hua Zhong Normal University confirms importance of phonetic symbol under the curricular standard in 21<sup>st</sup> Century English Language Weekly.

Furthermore, Phonetic symbol is an important way of words memory. As we all know, most English learners complain that English words are complex and easy to forget. Of course we have to admit that the grasp of lexicology influence the process of learning. Just as reports tell us that it is not enough to use visual memory without auditory to learn a foreign language. Only through voiced

study, can we get twofold results with half the effort. We have all experienced that the word which is learnt by phonetic spelling is easy to remember and kept for longer time. English word is different from Chinese character, the morphology of former one has directly relation with its pronunciation and can be remembered by the law of letters combination [5]. However, if you want to master this kind of ability, you have to grasp some phonetic knowledge. Therefore, the deep grasp of phonetic knowledge is the most fundamental knowledge. The more words you know, the firmer your phonetic knowledge, which will bring in virtuous circle. Many students, even some teachers ignore the importance of the phonetic study at the very start, so they fail to pronounce some words. What's worse, more and more mistakes are made, which has a very negative effect on English learning.

Moreover, Phonetic symbol is the base of listening comprehension. Almost all the students still misunderstand the study of phonetics. They think just like the study of mandarin and calligraphy, to learn phonetics well is just driven by personal interest, and not everyone can study it well; neither will they know that the level of phonetics is the main factor that affects the listening ability. Some listening materials are easy to understand, but we cannot figure them out when we hear them from a recorder, because the wrong pronunciation has become a formulary in our mind. The reason is that we do not pronounce the sentence word by word, we pronounce it by the influence of stress, apposition, liaison, speed, rhythm and intonation, so even the familiar words heard unfamiliar, and the whole material is difficult for us [6]. Only do we enhance the training of pronunciation and be familiar with all the rules under different situations can we improve the ability of receiving and responding towards sound effectively. So, many factors in pronunciation influence listening, it is hard for us to improve listening without the necessary knowledge of phonetics.

Simultaneously, phonetic symbol is helpful to enhance reading ability and oral communication. Good master of Phonetics to those students who only want to perfect reading ability, is also available. Because characters are nothing but the written records of vocal language. If grasping the right voice phenomena of these symbols, people could read all the materials exactly, fleetly and coherently, which is greatly helpful to deeply understand and exactly memorize the information that you read. And also, any language study aims at applying. Then, on the way to applying, communication takes up great scale. If words fail to convey the idea in communication, or pronounce ambiguously and improperly, any of them will lead to misunderstanding and fails to achieve the expected outcome. Although many learners, who have already learned all the phonemes, can pronounce correctly, most of them are unable to speak English fluently, even if simple daily English. Moreover, only grasp the phonetics of single letter, it is possible to use liaison [7]. Besides, you have to pay attention to intonation at the same time, then you can communicate with others normally. Phonetics is the physical shell of language, the foundation of grasping language knowledge and achieving verbal skills. So we should put phonetics learning before language study. That's why the schooling English books put the pronounce teaching at the beginning of English study. They intend to help students learn better pronunciation and lay the foundation of the ability of pre-learning, self-study and applying English in social communication.

Obviously, phonetic study plays a significant role in the process of English study, which requires us to enhance the pronounce teaching to the status it deserves in English teaching. Especially in evening school, if ignore the pronunciation teaching, the English class will become harder and harder. If we want to make students get useful knowledge, for my perspective, phonetics is the way to make our teaching recycle benign.

### **3. Countermeasures of the Problems**

#### **3.1 The Main Teaching Methods of Phonetic Symbol for Middle School Teachers.**

In phonetics teaching, the most widely used methods are direct-imitation and analytical-imitation. In the primary stage of phonetics learning, direct-imitation is the most basic and effective way of drilling [8]. However, emphasizing direct-imitation alone is far from enough. In the teaching practice, many students can mimic the exercises in textbooks perfectly whereas in real

communication, they can not apply the knowledge of phonetics in a flexible way. Therefore, when the learning of phonetics progresses towards higher stages, a more practical and elastic method like analytical-imitation is needed.

Authentication always goes with comparison. In the teaching of phonetics, a moderate application of the method of comparative analysis can improve the teaching efficiency. By comparing and contrasting unique phonetic features in English and Chinese, teachers can help students sufficiently understand the differences of phonetics between English and Chinese. What is more, teachers can also help students promote the influence of positive transfer and reduce the impact of negative transfer so as to improve teaching efficiency [9].

In the past, the mode of the teaching of phonetics experienced a transition from “theory-inclined” to “practice-inclined”. However, nowadays it is recommended that consideration be given to both practice and theory and the focus should be laid on practice [10]. The teaching of theory should be concise and pragmatic, which can ensure a more positive result.

Imitation is indispensable when learning phonetics. Currently, students have already had more accesses to the mimicry of a genuine accent of English. The effect of imitation in learning pronunciation is self-evident and its function is irreplaceable. However, just as Gui Cankun wrote in the preface of his book, *A Pragmatic Phonetics for American English*: “it will not work relying on imitation alone in mastering English phonetics. The scientific knowledge of phonetics must be used to guide the learning process.” For example, the pronunciation of / ch /. It is an affricative. Its articulation key is to protrude lips to form a rectangle and uplift the blade of tongue to the hard palate at the same time. Some students are not accustomed to protruding their lips and uplifting their tongues. In consequence the / ch /’s they pronounced sounds like / tr /’s. When they pronounce China, it sounds like / trainə/, which of course does not sound pleasant.

The problems discussed previously including the unaccustomedness to speech organs and so on all derive from the negative influence of Chinese. Because of our mother tongue, more efforts should be devoted to the comparison between English and Chinese [11]. As Li Tingxiang put in his book *English Teaching Methodology*, “the knowledge of comparison between English and Chinese helps teachers predict the difficulties and priorities in students’ learning of phonetics based on the differences and similarities in English and Chinese so as to promote the teaching quality.” Xiong Wenhua, Zhang Fengtong and Yu Yungeng also advocated the comparison between English and Chinese be used in phonetics teaching. Consequently, our English teachers should comprehend the differences between the two languages and organize drills aiming at helping students understand how the mother tongue influences their English speech recognition and pronunciation system in order to establish a completely new one of English speech recognition and reaction.

### **3.2 The Concrete Strategies of Improving English Phonetic Symbol Teaching Level.**

In order to change the current situation of phonetic teaching, cover the shortage, implement the spirit of the new curriculum standard, the key point is to change teachers’ teaching conception and improve their professional qualities. The education departments should compile systemic and complete phonetic courses [12]. If possible, the advanced network techniques should also be included. It is worth to popularize the idea that using network to achieve self-taught in phonetic courses put forward by Professor Yan Junyi. This new pattern makes full of advanced network technology, which makes “Zero hour-course” and self-taught become new teaching method. This kind of teacher is indispensable in phonetic learning by students themselves. The pattern mainly concludes pronunciation classroom, pronunciation correction, pronunciation imitation, pronunciation appreciation and so on. This self-taught phonetic pattern is a specific magic to overcome phonetic weakness of Chinese students.

### **3.3 Some Examples of Phonetic Symbol Teaching in the Middle School.**

“English has more vowels than many languages” (*Understanding Language* by Doris Myers). Any changes in the form of lips and level of tongue can produce different phonemes, which is not the same case in Chinese. The round shape of lips acquired when pronouncing the back vowel /u:/ is not familiar to Chinese students. Thus causing student quite a few troubles in pronouncing /u:/.

Moreover, all the English diphthongs do not exist in Chinese, therefore, many students tend to omit them. For example, they pronounce “they” /ðei/ as /ǎ/, “house” /haus/ as /hɔ:s/. Some consonants like /θ/ and /ð/ which are not founded in most dialects in Chinese can lead students to speak “think” as /sɪŋk/, “that” as /zæt/. Many read “week” as /vi:k/ unconsciously while some read “village” as /wɪlɪdʒ/.

In teaching /P/,/t/,/k/,/b/,/d/,/g/,students are required to touch their throats to feel their vocal cards. When they pronounce the voiced /b/,/d /and /g/, they could obviously feel their vocal cords. A piece of paper being put in front of the mouth may also be moved when /P/,/t/ or /k/ is pronounced.

When teaching /n/ and /l/,teachers should first tell the students that /n/ is a nasal sound and /l/ is a lateral sound.Then they are asked to touch their noses to feel the differences between them.At last, teachers write some words containing /n/ and /l/ on the blackboard and ask the student to pronounce one by one.The students would be interested in doing this exercise in class and shortly afterwards they know how to pronounce these two words.

Teaching / æ/ is a quite difficult step for teachers of phonetic symbol.Students can be asked to imitate the sound of a sheep or a goat in front of a mirror.Teachers should tell the students pronouncing way of the phoneme like this:/æ/ is a short,open,unfounded front vowel.The opening between the jaw is rather wide;the front of the tongue is very much lowered.The lip of the tongue generally touches the lower teeth.Teachers also ask the students to give a comparison between /æ/ and /e/ until they catch the right pronunciation of this phoneme.

Teachers of phonetic symbol may assign the students to do more oral practices.Tape -recording can be regarded as a good example for the students to do it.By checking their tapes, teachers quickly know some common problems, troubling them and find out effective solutions to deal with these problems [13].For an English learner,English phonetic symbol is very important and necessary to learn at the beginning stage.It turns out to be useful in helping the students to learn English better.So as long as they keep on practicing reading aloud every day, the students will have a good command of English phonetic symbol [8]. Certainly, there is still a long way for teachers of English phonetic symbol to go.

#### 4. Conclusion

English teaching in middle school is consisted of phonetic teaching, grammar teaching, vocabulary teaching, sentence pattern teaching and text teaching. English phonetic teaching is where the whole English teaching starts, whether teachers can guide students to pass through phonetics determinates whether students can get the key to English world. Besides, having a full realization of the importance of phonetics teaching and using various teaching methods will regular phonetic training. English phonetics plays an important role in English learning, which is one of the three most significant sections of the language, while phonetic symbol is the base of phonetics.

Learning phonetic symbol well is the crutch of learning English, is the golden to lead students to English world. Several methods like direct-imitation and analytical-imitation are widely used in the teaching practice. However, mere imitation is not enough, because the teaching of phonetic symbol is always influenced by our mother tongue, which can cause some problems for students. The problems include the unaccustomedness to a new habit of pronunciation, syllable swallowing, and so on. To reduce these negative influences, teachers should make use of a new method to draw students' attention to the comparison of English and Chinese in order to achieve a better result in phonetics teaching. For our students who live in Non-English environment, to acquire the basic element of English —phonetic symbol, is the most scientific, reasonable and effective way of learning English.

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