

The Development and Cross-Language Transfer of Phonological Processing Skills
Among Taiwanese Young Learners of English

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One aim of this study was to investigate whether Chinese-speaking children could develop phonological processing skills at sub-syllabic level in English in the beginning of learning the new alphabetic language. The other purpose was to explore whether these skills might have, due to the method used to teach Chinese in Taiwan, transferred from Chinese to English.

Sixty-three 9-year-olds were given five phonological sensitivity measures in Chinese and English respectively. The Chinese tasks, as a prelude to the English ones, were always administered prior to their English counterparts. Resembling the CVC-syllable structure adopted for English word items, each Chinese word item comprised of three phonetic symbols from the Zhu-Yin-Fu-Hao script, which is used to mark the sounds of Chinese characters when Taiwanese children are taught to learn to read Chinese.

The result shows that the participants had more sophisticated large-unit phonological sensitivity, consistent with previous research findings on native English-speaking children that large-unit rhyme sensitivity developed earlier than small-unit phonemic awareness. Given that Taiwanese young learners have generally received more instruction in small-unit awareness, i.e., phonics, it is likely that large-unit phonological sensitivity is more of a universal skill reflected in the phonology of all languages and develops regardless of whether an opaque relationship exists between the orthography and the phonology of a language.

In addition, inter-correlations were observed when the same measures of two different languages were computed against each other, suggesting that cross-language transfer of phonological processing skills might have occurred. With the assistance of Zhu-Yin-Fu-Hao, Taiwanese children managed to manipulate phonological units at sub-syllabic level and combine such phonetic symbols to sound out new Chinese words. The result indicates the possibility that small-unit phonological awareness is not language-specific but highly likely acquired through sub-syllabic instruction in L1 literacy acquisition and transferred to L2.