

# Necessities for Imposing Phonics Instruction on Pre-Service English Teachers

## -- Take Mianyang Teachers' College As An Example

Minjie Chen<sup>1</sup>, Hasimah Binti Ja' Afar<sup>1</sup>, Goh Hock Seng<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Malaysia.

### Abstract

**Phonics Instructions are introduced to mainland China recent years and become a trend. In the newly released English Curriculum for Compulsory Education in the year of 2017, phonics instructions are mentioned. Since English major students who studies in teachers' college, by most of the chance, would become English teachers for compulsory education phase, and some of them would become high school teachers, with the adjustment of the English Curriculum, the program for pre-service teachers should be adjusted accordingly too. However, it is three years after the release of the new version of the curriculum, but according to the investigation the program has not been changed and pre-service teachers even do not know anything about phonics. In order to explore more necessities of implementing phonics instruction training for those pre-service teachers, this study would analyze the importance and necessities of providing phonics instruction class to those pre-service teachers in teachers college based on literature review and self-designed questionnaire.**

### Keywords

**Pre-service Teachers, Phonics Instructions, International Phonetic Alphabet, Teaching Guide.**

## 1. Background and Context of the Study

Phonics, the relationship between letter name and letter sounds in alphabetic language, such as English, caught researchers' eyes in western countries around the 1960s. About 1990s, phonics was introduced to China and drew educators and researchers' attention since then. Before phonics, International Phonetic Alphabet, an alphabetic system of phonetic notation based primarily on the Latin alphabet, which was devised by the International Phonetic Association in the late 19th century as a standardized representation of the sounds of spoken language and used by lexicographers, EFL learners and teachers, played a crucial role in English learning in China. During that time, students in junior middle schools are required to learn IPA, by which students must remember the 48 speech sound with 48 different symbols respectively first before starting to learn English language to improve students word recognition ability and reading fluency. Of course, teachers are all equipped with the knowledge of IPA in order to teach. For years and years, IPA instruction become a must in phonology course in the teaching program for those pre-service English teachers until now. Those pre-service teachers would be English teachers for primary schools, junior middle schools and even high schools after they graduate from teachers' college. So, they must learn the knowledge which the curriculum of the compulsory education and the curriculum of high school require them to teach. As time goes by, the curriculum has been edited versions after versions, until now, the latest version was released in the year of 2017, which requires phonics instructions in the compulsory education phase and require students to do extracurricular reading in English. But, how could EFL

students read English books independently? Of course, phonics decoding rules should be taught first which requires teachers are equipped with phonics knowledge and knows how to teach it in primary schools. Because the purpose of phonics is to help the language beginners to shift from learn to read to read to learn. Since phonics instructions are required by the curriculum, the author has carried out an investigation to explore the actual implementation of phonics instruction in daily English teaching in the compulsory education phase and found most of the English teachers on the job, do not know what phonics are, never mention how to instruct. Based the survey, only 18.4% of the teachers once had phonics instructions in teachers' college and most of them had not had any on the job training which greatly arouse authors curiosity to explore the current situations of the phonics instruction training for those pre-service English teachers. During this study, the author would like to take Mianyang Teachers' College as an example to find out the necessities of phonics instructions for those normal university students.

## 2. Literature Review

Phonics is not a method of teaching reading, but it is a necessary part of every good, modern method. It is the key to word mastery, and word mastery is one of the first essentials in learning to read. Phonics is also a knowledge of the sound of letters and of the effect of the position of the letter upon its sound, is an essential means of mastering the mechanics of reading, and of enabling children to become independent readers. [7]. Since phonics is not a teaching method, there are some methods to instruct it. Phonics instruction focuses on teaching students to recognize familiar words and to decode unfamiliar words which includes teaching letter-sound associations, letter sound correspondence, sound -spelling, written language correspondence. [10]. Carnine [1] described that there are six types of phonics instructions separately. They are synthetic phonics, analytic phonics, analogy-based phonics, phonics through spelling, embedded phonics and onset-rime phonics. Those approaches differ from many aspects. The main arguments focus on synthetic phonics and analytic phonics. Among the six types of instructions, synthetic and analytic phonics are most popular ones. Especially, the synthetic phonics instruction is the mainstream in English speaking countries which is confirmed by John Bald [6]. Any roads lead to Rome, different phonics instructions serves the same purpose: to teach the language beginners to learn to read. Vincent Connelly [13] stated in the study article that the phonics beginners were better at comprehending what they read than non-phonics taught children which is also in coincide with Chall's research findings that phonics teaching produced readers who had an advantage in word recognition and also had higher level of comprehension and vocabulary than the children taught by other methods[2]. It is obvious that phonics instructions are essential for students to decode letters into sounds, and help the students to read unfamiliar words and turn into their comprehensible inner speech to become fluent readers which is import for the goal of comprehension.

In the English curriculum, which is newly released by the Chinese Education Ministry, there are detailed description of the requirement for reading. In the initial grade, students are required to name the items, to read short stories with the illustrated pictures in the book. In the second grade, students are required to read new words with decoding rules, to read aloud some brief stories and to understand short stories in the picture books. In the third grade, students are required to read and understand short stories which they read and began to read extracurricular books which should contain the words no less than 40000. In the fourth grade, students are required to understand the time order and characters behavior during reading the stories and to guess the meaning of new words according to the context. The extracurricular book reading should be accumulated upto 100000 words. In the fifth grade, students are required to understand the logic relationships between plots in the stories and the extracurricular reading should reach 150000 words and more . The fifth grade if the ultimate

grade for the 9 years compulsory education from which we can see the emphasis on reading and reading comprehension. To reach such teaching goals, phonics should be put great emphasis on from the beginning in grade 1. However, according to Zhang Zhengfei [15], Yan Youwei [14], LongYihong [11], and ZhaoZhenyi [16], the phonics implementation in schools are far from being enough. In their studies, they found out one of the reasons for the poor implementation of phonics instructions lies in the teachers' knowledge of phonics. Lack of on the job training and a practical phonics teaching guide or detailed framework may lead to such problems. However, the above studies fail to consider the phonics training for those pre-service teachers. On the job training for all English teachers in compulsory education phase could not solve problems radically. Since those preservice teachers will take jobs in primary schools or junior middle schools, they should be prepared well before taking the jobs. In that case, the training program for pre-service teachers should be adjusted with the update of the curriculum for compulsory education. There are few scholars did research on the professional standard for teachers. Teachers' college, as cradles for future teachers should set a right goal and set proper training programs to realize the goal of bringing up qualified teachers who can fit into the current teaching system. The Department for Education of UK, stated in the White Paper [4]: the synthetic phonics was proven to be the best way to teach early readings and also, clear instructions for trainee teachers is contained within the teachers' standards, which stipulate that trainees must 'if teaching early reading, demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics [3]. Apparently, in English speaking country such as UK, has researched on phonics instructions and teachers training for phonics, even, the White Paper from the Education Ministry stipulate the types of phonics instruction and the pre-service teachers. For EFL settings phonics instructions for pre-service teachers are especially important. In China, there are really very few researches have been done on the course planning of the pre-service English teachers training program. Based on CNKI, only Li Xiaoning [9] carried out a research on curriculum design of pre-service primary English teacher education and found out some problems of current teaching program for pre-service English teachers such as the teaching content are out of date which are not closely related to the new curriculum of compulsory education. That is true because, in the curriculum, phonics instructions are required, but no phonics instructions provided to those trainees which directly lead to the teachers on the job do not know phonics or how to instruct phonics. Without proper phonics instructions, how could the teaching graded goal be realized?

Having reviewed the above literatures on phonics instructions, curriculum and the course planning for the pre-service English teachers. It is noted that phonics instructions are emphasized in the Compulsory Education Curriculum and the pre-service teachers training program and the course planning should be updated accordingly. The author would like to analyze this problem a little bit further to discuss the necessities of adding phonics instructions in the training program from perspective of students' needs.

### 3. The Purpose of the Study

- 1) This study aims at investigating the current problems in course planning for pre-service English teachers, with the example of Mianyang Teachers' College.
- 2) To emphasize the necessities of phonics instruction training for future English teachers from perspective of the trainees.

### 4. Research Questions

- 1)What are the deep cause for the difficulties of implementation phonics instructions in Compulsory Education Phase?
- 2)What are the countermeasures in preparing pre-service teachers for the future?

## 5. Methodology

In studying the necessities for phonics instruction training to teachers and future teachers, survey research is employed to collect the quantitative data. According to Dörnyei and Kata Csizér, Survey research is a quantitative research method which aims to collect self-report data from individuals, and the typical instrument used for this purpose is the written questionnaire [5]. The basic idea behind survey research is the recognition that the characteristics, opinions, attitudes, and intended behaviors of a large population. In sum, surveys can target a wide variety of language-related issues and allow researchers to make inferences about larger L2 learning populations; this obviously facilitates decision making and policy formation in an informed and principled manner [5]. Thus, this study aims to employ questionnaires to collect data of pre-service teachers recognitions, awareness, attitudes, knowledge, applications on phonics instruction and so on to get to know their needs for phonics instructions and to locate the root cause for difficulties of implementing phonics instructions in compulsory Education Phase. All the raw data will be grouped and analyzed by SPSS 25.0

## 6. Subjects

The subjects of this study are Pre-service English teachers who are in the fourth grade of Mianyang Teachers' College. There are altogether 214 students took part in the survey.

## 7. Instrument

Questionnaires is one of the highly structured data collection instruments utilized to obtain quantitative data[5]. So, this study uses self-designed questionnaire to collect relative data.

## 8. Data Analysis

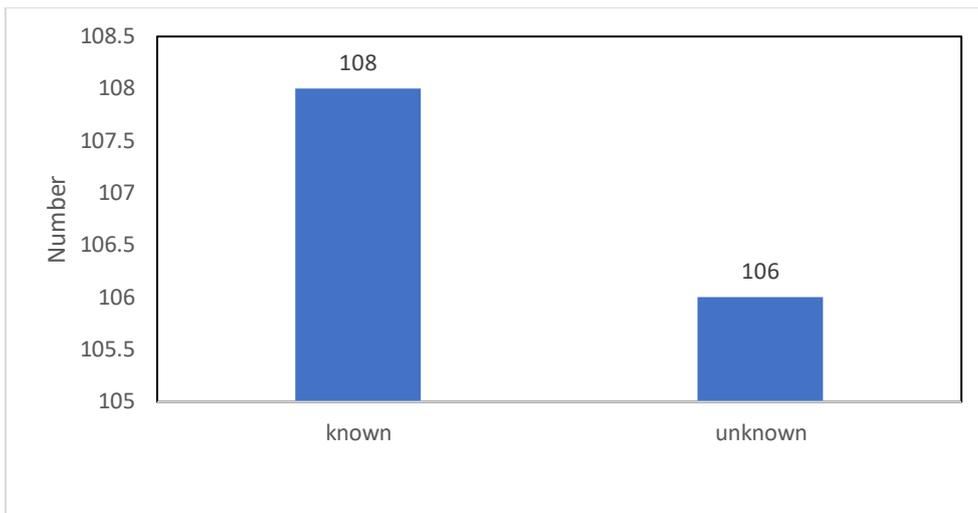
There are all together 214 pre-service English teachers took part in the questionnaire investigation. All the data collected from the questionnaire are dealt with SPSS25.0 in order to using the statistics to prove the necessities of planning phonics instruction class for those pre-service teachers.

## 9. Findings

From Tab. 1&Fig. 1, it is surprising to find out among those Pre-service teachers, who had studied English for almost four years in Mianyang Teachers' College, almost 50% of them even did not hear of phonics, never mention to learn about it.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of the degree, students know about phonics

Variable	n	%
Heard of phonics or not?		
yes	108	50.5
no	106	49.5

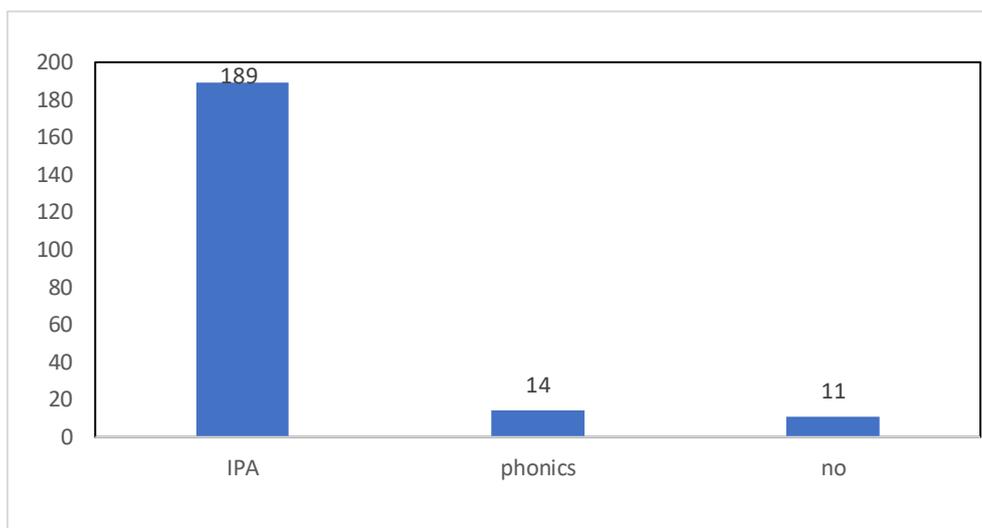


**Figure 1.** Students' Knowledge on phonics

From Tab. 2& Fig. 2, it is known that during the four years of English education for those pre-service teachers, phonology courses are provided, but, the teaching content mainly (88.3%) focus on International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistic on teaching contents of phonology class

Variable	n	%
Phonology class teaching content		
IPA	189	88.3
phonics	14	6.5
no	11	5.1

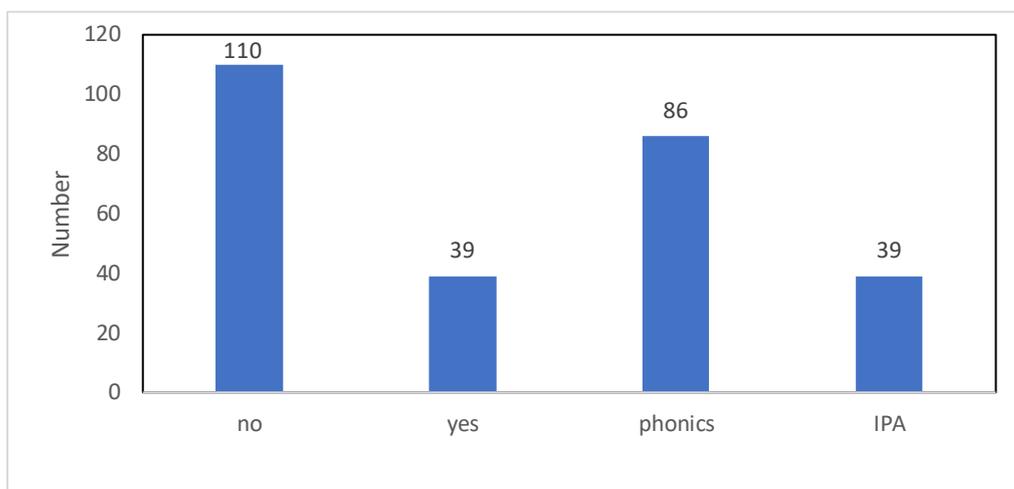


**Figure 2.** Data of the Phonology Teaching Content

From Tab. 3 and Fig. 3, amazingly, there are 51.4% of the students do not know the way primary schools carry out their English reading instructions and even 18.2% of them consider IPA is employed to teach the language beginners to read.

**Table 3.** Descriptive data of the knowledge about the way of teaching reading in primary schools

Variable	n	%
Knowledge of the way of reading instruction in primary schools		
no	110	51.4
yes	39	18.2
phonics	86	40.2
IPA	39	18.2

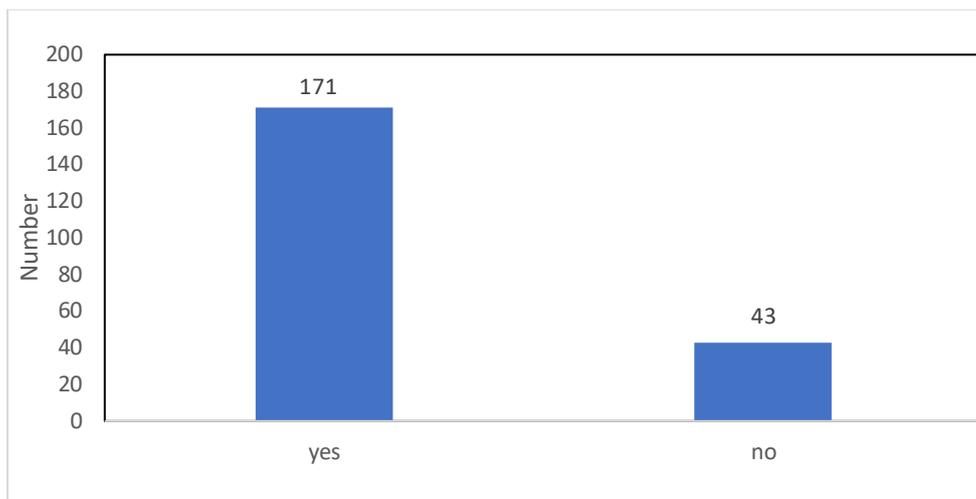


**Figure 3.** Data of students understanding of reading instruction methods in primary schools

From Tab. 4 & Fig. 4, 79.9% of the students consider being equipped with phonics instruction methods, they have more opportunities in job hunting.

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics on whether receiving phonics instruction would promote job seeking

Variable	n	%
Phonics Instruction promotes Job Seeking		
yes	171	79.9
no	43	20.1

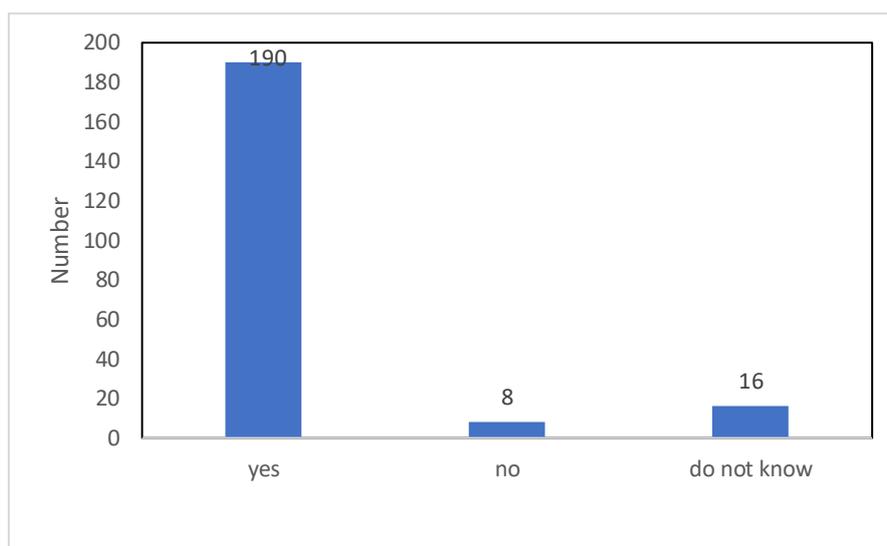


**Figure 4.** Opinions on whether phonics instruction training can enhance job seeking

From Tab. 5 and Fig. 5, 88.8% of the students are willing to take phonics instructions training during the four years of study.

**Table 5.** Descriptive Statistics on the willingness of receiving phonics instructions

Variable	n	%
Willingness of receiving phonics instructions training		
yes	190	88.8
no	8	3.7
do not know	16	7.5



**Figure 5.** Willingness on whether to receive phonics instructions training

## 10. Discussion

Based on the statistics from Tab. 1 & Fig. 1, it is astonishing that almost half of those pre-service teachers who are going to work in primary school and junior middle schools in the year of 2020 unexpectedly even have not heard of phonics or phonics instructions after the phonics instructions became a required skills in the English curriculum released in the year of 2017.

The reasons are shown in the Tab. 2& Fig. 2. 88.3 of the students say in their phonology class, the teaching contents are all about IPA which is an alphabetic system of phonetic notation based primarily on the Roman alphabet [12]. It was devised by the International Phonetic Association in the late 19th century as a standardized representation of the sounds of spoken language and used by lexicographers, foreign language students and teachers and so on. In IPA, there are 48 speech sounds separately with distinguished symbols to represent each sound. When encountering an unknown word, language learners can look up the dictionary to look up the symbols and to sound out the words. So, the key point is, in order to sound out the unknown words, one has to recite 48 different symbols with different speech sounds and to remember which symbol represents which letter or letters. For example, the word "that", before sounding out, one should segment the word as "th/a/t". Then, one should recall the pronunciation for "th" is /ð/, and for "a" is /æ/ and for "t" is /t/. Then the complete sound symbol is / ð æ t / , in this way, you can sound out the word "that". There is another set of sound symbol word as the agent to pronounce, especially for new language learners. For those skilled reader, when they see "th" they know it is pronunciation as / ð/or/θ/ in their mind without looking up the dictionary which is very close to the phonics instruction. Since it can be taught directly how to pronounce "th", why should we use IPA to teach the tedious symbols to young language learners?

Compared with the phonetic teaching, the phonics instruction directly and briefly shows the correspondence between the phoneme and the grapheme without any medium between. If decoding rules are acquired, the language learners could sound out unknown words simultaneously and independently. If this word belongs to his listening vocabulary, he or she would comprehend the meaning right away. Comparatively, it is more efficient than IPA. More, over, phonics instructions are required by Compulsory Education Curriculum, why not updating the training program for those pre-service teachers to keep them up with the date. If they are not well trained, how could they implement phonics in their teaching career since there is no on the job training of phonics for the current English teachers. From this point of view, phonics instructions should be arranged into phonology class.

From Tab. 3& Fig. 3, we can see almost 51.4% of the pre-service English teachers do not know the requirement of the curriculum, even haven't known what the methods the primary schools employ to instruct reading which reflect that there must be some flaws in such a training program, and the course setting should be adjusted. In order to solve such problems, first, the courses of the training program should be re-considered, and the policy makers should be familiar with the requirements of the compulsory education curriculum and keep up with all the new policies or trend in the education market. At the same time, the teachers who are training those pre-service should also be equipped with related knowledges required in the compulsory education curriculum. Rather than only focus on the textbooks, teachers should help students to expand their ken of knowledge. The last but not the least, a phonics teaching guide which should contain the phonics knowledges and the way to instruct phonics should be prepared for pre-service teachers training.

From Tab. 4 & Fig. 4, almost 80% of the students considers being equipped with phonics knowledge and with instructions methods, their competitive strength would be greatly enhanced because they thought, if they knows phonics and how to teach phonics, the more job selections would be presented in front of them. For example, if they could not get a job in primary schools or junior middle schools, they prefer to go to some English training centers where phonics instruction is a must skill. Some of the students even told the author in the interview that, they get to know phonics not from teachers' college, but from their part-time job in English training centers or from the parents of the child they are tutoring. What a miserable situation that the teachers' college failed to teach those pre-service teachers with what they need or what the society need!

From Tab. 5&Fig. 5, strong willingness is expressed by those pre-service teachers to learn phonics and phonics instruction methods. 88.8% of them would like to take such trainings. Since it is required in the compulsory education curriculum, and this is must skill for hunting a job in the English training centers, why not provide them with such trainings? The reasons lie in, the course planning is not adjusted, the policies are not made and the curriculum for pre-service teachers are not updated. Even there is no systematic phonics teaching guide for teaching. In that case, things should be arranged step by step to gradually, make the pre-service training program to meet the requirement of the society needs rather than carrying it on blindly.

## 11. Implications

However, those findings are not quite encouraging, countermeasures should be proposed anyway. With the update of the new English curriculum for compulsory Education, new training framework for pre-service teachers should be formed right away. In order to set up a new framework for training future teachers, the first step is to locate the new course target which means, what kind of teachers we are going to foster. Course target is the starting point for a training program. It decides the purpose of the teaching, the content, the teaching target, and the teaching methods. In some perspective, all the education or training purpose will be realized through different courses. In that sense, the course target is a key factor to guide us to course planning. To locate the course target, the policy makers should first make the main training target based on widely survey on the characteristics of students, the need of the society and so on. With a definite main training target, the course targets can be made accordingly to decide which courses should be provided to those pre-service teachers. The second, the course planning principles should be followed, such as comprehensive, cohesive, systematic, practical, developmental and diversative. The third, course structure should be reasonable for those pre-service teachers' training. LiQilong& Chen Yongming[8] stated that the best portion for pre-service teacher training courses should be as follows: general knowledge courses should take up 30%, professional course should take up 30%, educational course should take up 30% and the practice should take up at least 10%. Take Mianyang Teachers College as an example, in the training program, the general knowledge course takes up about 28% which is very close to 30%. The professional courses take up 45% which exceed 30% greatly. The education knowledge courses only take up 12.8% which is far less than 30%. The last is practice courses which take up 13% around 10%. From those data, the imbalance of four modules is shown, educational courses should be added to equip students with instruction skills. And among those professional courses, some courses unrelated to teaching should be replaced or deleted such as tourism English or Business English. More focus should be paid on training them how to teach rather than teach them English language itself. In that case, courses should be planned considerably to meet the course goal and the need of the society. The fourth, the teaching contents should be updated, and more elective courses should be provided to meet different students' different needs. The teaching contents should closely relate to the new curriculum for compulsory education and high school education. Students should know the curriculum in detail. Schools should provide courses like "Textbooks Analyzing for Primary Schools" or for junior schools or high schools. And course for "Understanding Curriculum for Compulsory Education" to make those pre-service teachers understand what they are going to teach and how to teach. At last but not the least, abundant of teaching resources and materials should be provided to those pre-service teachers to make them broaden their ken of knowledge and keep up with the times.

## 12. Limitations & Future Study

This study indeed answers the research questions promoted at the beginning of this article. It is true, those pre-service teachers should be trained phonics instruction and its teaching methods. However, there is no perfect man in the world of course there is no perfect study either. This study indeed has limitations. First, the questionnaire is self-designed focusing on a small range of questions the author wants to know without applying the scaled questionnaire. The second limitations, this study is only focus on the survey in Mianyang Teachers' College, the samples are not big enough to represent all the teachers' college. The following up studies might to go to apply a more comprehensive and a scaled questionnaire to survey on the next grade to see the whether the result can be replicated or not. Besides, the follow-up studies including how to plan the courses and the study on most effective phonics instruction for EFL students would be carried out soon in order to have phonics instruction guide as early as possible.

## 13. Conclusion

The results of the survey showed the current flaws in pre-service teachers training program. The course plan and the teaching content are not updated with times and the newly released English Curriculum for Compulsory Education. Anyway, in view of the limitations discussed above, the scope of this study is still too narrow to be generalized to all the pre-service training program. And future research direction are clear. This study, nonetheless, still provide a peer into the current pre-service training program, hoping to explore more problems and propose more countermeasures to solve them in order to promote the teaching quality of English teaching in compulsory phase and in high schools.

## References

- [1] Carnine, D. W., Silbert, J., Kame'enui, E. J., and Tarver, S. G. Direct instruction Reading, 4th edn. Columbus, OH: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2004, pp53–35.
- [2] Chall, J.S. Learning to read: The great debate. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967.
- [3] Department for Education Teachers' Standards, [www.gov.uk/government/publications/teachers-standards](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teachers-standards) (retrieved 3/11/13), 2012a.
- [4] Department for Education, The Importance of Teaching: Schools White Paper, London: DfE, 2010.
- [5] Dörnyei and Kata Csizér, Research Methods in Second Language Acquisition, A. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd Publication, 2006.
- [6] John Bald, Using Phonics to Teach Reading and Spelling, Paul Chapman Publishing, 2007.
- [7] Lida M. Williams, How to Teach Phonics. Project Gutenberg, 2006.
- [8] Li Qilong & Chen Yongming, International Comparison of Pre-service Educations, Education Science Publishing House, 2002.
- [9] Li Xiaoning, Research on Curriculum Design of Pre-service Primary English Teacher Education Under the Background of NEW Curriculum Standard[D]. Southwest University 2015.
- [10] L H Mason, International Encyclopedia of Education vol.2 3rd edition. Elsevier Inc.
- [11] Long Yinghong, On the Current Situation and Countermeasures of Applying Phonics to English Teaching of Rural Middle Schools——Take Jiujiang Middle School of Shuangliu District in Chengdu for Example. Sichuan normal University, 2019.

- [12] The International Phonetic Association, handbook of international phonetic association A guide to the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet. Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- [13] Vincent Connelly, The effect of phonics instruction on the reading comprehension of beginning readers. *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 2001, 14: 423–457.
- [14] Yan Youwei, A Research on the Problems and Countermeasures of Phonics in Primary School English Teaching. Liaocheng University, 2018.
- [15] Zhang Zhengfei, Problems and Countermeasures of English Phonics Teaching in Elementary Schools from the Perspective of Convergent Teaching [D]. Ningbo University, 2013.
- [16] Zhao Zhenyi, A Case Study on Primary School Novice English Teachers' Beliefs and Practice about Phonics Teaching. Sichuan normal University.