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Optimizing Young EFL Learners' Phonics Instruction Based on the Comprehensible Input and Output Hypotheses: Explaining the Decoding-Spelling Imbalance in Primary English Classrooms

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Abstract

Phonics instruction bears the dual tasks of decoding and spelling in the early development of reading and writing ability of young English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. However, in phonics instruction for young learners, some students show the problem of decoding-spelling imbalance, which may hinder the coordinated development of early English literacy. The existing research on phonics instruction mainly focuses on systematic skill training, decoding development, or participation in classroom activities. Few studies have examined the value of Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis and Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, and there is still insufficient discussion on the development of phonics instruction for young learners. This study adopts a qualitative literature review to synthesize relevant theories and teaching research on input, output, phonics instruction, decoding, and spelling. It examines how input- and output-related factors lead to decoding-spelling imbalance, and discusses the corresponding teaching optimization principles. The reviewed literature shows that unsystematic and non-cumulative Grapheme-Phoneme Correspondence (GPC) input may provide limited support for spelling development, and the lack of independent, spelling-oriented output opportunities may limit learners' active retrieval and consolidation of orthographic knowledge. By integrating the views of comprehensible input and comprehensible output, this study provides a theoretical framework for explaining the imbalance and puts forward research-based principles to formulate a more systematic and balanced phonics instruction for young elementary EFL learners.

Keywords

Comprehensible Input Hypothesis; Comprehensible Output Hypothesis; young EFL learners; primary phonics instruction; decoding-spelling imbalance

1. Introduction

By helping learners understand the GPC, phonics instruction allows them to decode written words from graphemes into sounds and spell spoken words. The development of these two abilities is especially important in the early stage of English learning because they support the subsequent development of reading and writing. In phonics instruction for young learners, more and more activities are designed in combination with songs, games, animations, and other

multimodal resources to accommodate learners' cognitive characteristics and maintain their participation. Although increasing attention has been paid to phonics instruction, practical teaching dilemmas still exist. Some young learners can quickly master the sounds of the 26 letters, recognize familiar words, blend sounds, and read relatively fluently, but they still find it difficult to spell words from dictation independently. In other words, successful decoding does not necessarily correspond to equally successful spelling.

Existing research provides rich insights into phonics instruction and the development of early reading and writing ability, but several issues still need to be further synthesized. For example, Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis and Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis have been widely applied to second language acquisition, but their combined relevance to the decoding and spelling development of young primary EFL learners still lacks exploration. In addition, how to maintain the suitability and engagement of young learners while supporting spelling development still requires research-based guidance. For educational research, the existing phonics research focuses on decoding training and interesting classroom design, while ignoring the input-output matching in spelling. Practically, there is a lack of integrated teaching methods to adapt to children's cognitive characteristics and achieve a balance between classroom participation and spelling skills development.

Against this background, this study adopts a qualitative literature review method, focusing on two questions: from the perspective of the Comprehensible Input Hypothesis and Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, which input- and output-related factors may cause decoding-spelling imbalance in phonics instruction for young primary EFL learners; how can phonics instruction be optimized through an integrated input-output perspective to support learners' spelling development while maintaining classroom participation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research Progress of Input-Output Theories

Krashen (1984) proposed that the necessary, though not sufficient, condition for learners to develop from stage *i* to *i+1* is that they can understand the input containing *i+1*, with learners focusing on the meaning rather than the form. However, Swain (1985) believed that comprehension alone cannot guarantee accurate language production. She defines comprehensible output as learners' efforts to produce language accurately and precisely, and points out three functions of output: noticing, hypothesis testing, and metalinguistic reflection (Swain, 2005). In EFL classrooms where input is scarce, Harmer (1984) advocated a balanced integration of input and output. Empirical research in China also shows that input-output integration can be more effective than pure input teaching (Guo & Qi, 2009). This suggests that phonics instruction should address both decoding and spelling. Previous studies have mainly applied these theories to oral fluency and overall literacy, while few studies have combined these two assumptions to explore phonics instruction for young beginners. This gap forms the focus of this study.

2.2 Young Learners' Phonics Instruction Research

Phonics instruction takes systematic GPC rules as its core. It aims to develop learners' decoding ability to convert written graphemes into phonemes and blend them to read words, and their spelling ability to divide spoken words into phonemes and represent them in written form (Ehri, 2022). International research has confirmed that explicit and systematic phonics instruction is significantly better than implicit phonics or whole-language approaches in building early reading and writing skills (Ehri, 2020). Crucially, Bowey (2006) proved that GPC-based instruction outperformed rhyme-based or implicit phonics approaches in reading speed and spelling transfer, supporting the importance of phoneme-level analysis in alphabetic language learning. Despite this evidence, phonics classrooms in Chinese primary schools show an obvious imbalance between word recognition and spelling ability, with teachers focusing on oral word recognition while neglecting systematic encoding and spelling training (An, 2020). This reflects a general trend in EFL contexts, where reading ability is prioritized and output-oriented encoding is marginalized (Sun, 2023). As a result, learners may become relatively fluent in reading but weaker in spelling.

2.3 Research on Decoding-Spelling Imbalance

Empirical research shows that spelling may precede and promote the development of decoding ability. McNeill et al. (2023) tracked the reading and spelling development of 180 children during their first year of school and found that early non-word spelling scores independently predicted reading accuracy at the end of the school year. In a

matching task, children also showed higher spelling accuracy than decoding accuracy. However, for Chinese EFL learners, the transfer effect of phonics instruction may be limited by a lack of previous GPC experience. Jiang and Gai (2026) found that children who received GPC training performed better than the control group on the post-tests of spelling and showed a near-transfer effect on new words. Nevertheless, most existing studies mainly focus on teaching methods, with limited explanation from a second language acquisition (SLA) perspective. Al-Jarf (2026) notes that L2 pronunciation and spelling mostly emphasize technical tools and teaching strategies, such as CAPT and MALL, leaving the input-output mechanism relatively underexplored.

2.4 Research Deficiency Summary

In summary, the two hypotheses have rarely been jointly applied to phonics instruction, especially in explaining decoding-spelling imbalance. Existing phonics studies mostly stay at the level of comparison of teaching methods, and lack explanation from the perspective of SLA (Al-Jarf, 2026). Although this imbalance in China's EFL classroom has been recorded, few studies have systematically examined how fragmented GPC input and insufficient output tasks may contribute to this skill gap (Jiang & Gai, 2026). To address these gaps, this study builds an input-output framework to explain the formation of decoding-spelling imbalance among young primary EFL learners and proposes principles for instructional improvement.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1 Integrated Theoretical Framework

This study takes Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis and Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis as the theoretical framework (see Fig. 1). Based on Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis, this study analyses the advantages and shortcomings of existing classroom input design. With the help of Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, it examines the limitations of classroom output activities. Combining the two hypotheses helps explain the common imbalance between decoding and spelling. From this theoretical perspective, the study proposes that phonics instruction should balance different types of language input and provide progressive output activities to improve the imbalance.

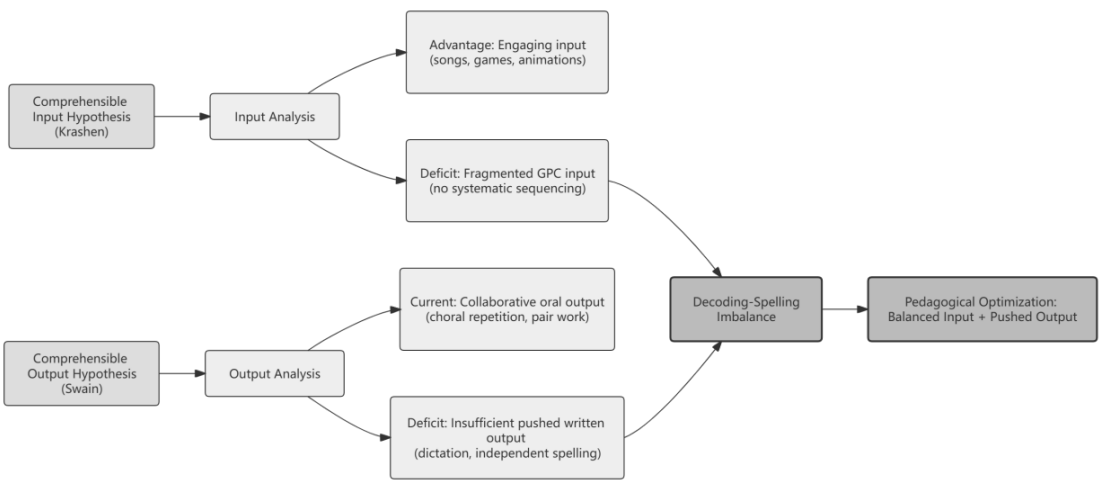

Figure 1. An Integrated Input-Output Framework for Phonics Instruction for Young EFL Learners.

3.2 Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative literature review method. Based on Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis and Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, five dimensions are constructed as the core analysis framework: input form, input focus, output form, output depth, and decoding-spelling imbalance. Relevant teaching practices are

matched with this framework, and corresponding information is extracted from the research design, description of teaching activities, data results, and discussion parts of the selected literature. Through literature comparison and thematic analysis, the study examines the formation process and typical problems related to the input-output relationship in phonics instruction and provides a systematic analysis of the current situation and possible causes of the imbalance.

3.3 Research Objects

The authoritative empirical literature on phonics instruction from China and abroad serves as the object of analysis. The Chinese literature is collected from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), using "phonics" as the main search term in combination with "primary school" or "lower grade". English literature is collected from Web of Science, Scopus, and ERIC, using the search formula: ("phonics instruction" OR "phonics teaching") AND ("decoding" OR "spelling") AND ("young learners" OR "primary"). The literature that meets the requirements of this study needs to take EFL/ESL young learners as the research object; the studies must provide relevant empirical results on learners' decoding or spelling abilities; and the literature must contain sufficient classroom teaching descriptions to support the analysis of this study. Non-empirical results such as theoretical reasoning or teaching essays, as well as conference abstracts that cannot provide complete teaching process information, are excluded.

4. Research Findings and Analysis

4.1 Current Input Status and Deficiencies in Phonics Classrooms

At present, phonics classes can provide engaging multimodal input for young learners. For example, classroom observations by Shafee et al. (2025) found that teachers often introduce letter sounds through phonics songs, movements, and group reading. These activities can attract learners' attention and help them initially establish sound-grapheme connections. However, the effect of a single activity does not mean that the overall input is systematic. The studies also found that phonics activities are often integrated into classrooms in an unsystematic way, lacking a clear cumulative teaching sequence and sufficient consolidation of the learned sound-grapheme correspondences. This defect is worthy of attention because Bowey (2006) showed that systematic GPC instruction produced better spelling transfer than implicit phonics and orthographic rime instruction. Therefore, the core problem in current classrooms may be fragmented GPC input. Learners may recognize familiar words through repeated exposure, but fail to establish stable phoneme-grapheme representations to support independent spelling.

4.2 Current Output Status and Deficiencies in Phonics Classrooms

The output activities in existing phonics classrooms are mainly collaborative and oral output. Shafee et al. (2025) recorded learners engaging in choral repetition, group reading, and guessing words from the teacher's movements. Other activities also required learners to circle the correct words from given options. Although these tasks can increase classroom participation, they also provide substantial external clues. As a result, learners mainly recognize or reproduce existing languages rather than construct them independently. More importantly, phoneme segmentation and letter names may also be confused in practice. In one observed activity, when learners were asked to segment *web*, they responded with *w-e-b* instead of recognizing the individual phonemes. This suggests that the cognitive processes involved in decoding and spelling practice may not be clearly distinguished. From Swain's view, opportunities for pushed output are relatively limited, as learners rarely segment sounds independently, retrieve corresponding graphemes, and write words. Thus, opportunities to notice knowledge gaps, test spelling choices, and reflect on mistakes are also restricted.

4.3 Formation Mechanism of Decoding-Spelling Imbalance

The decoding-spelling imbalance results from the interaction between fragmented input and shallow output. Fragmented GPC instruction mainly helps learners identify familiar words, while choral reading and option-based tasks further enable learners to rely on visual clues or teacher support. GPC input is not always systematic, while output activities provide limited independent coding opportunities (Gao, 2026). In contrast, spelling requires learners to

hear a word, cut it into phonemes, retrieve appropriate graphemes, and construct its written form. When this encoding process lacks both systematic input and sufficient pushed written practice, decoding and spelling may develop at different speeds. McNeill et al. (2023) further showed that spelling cannot simply be regarded as a by-product of reading. Early non-word spelling could independently predict subsequent reading development and promote decoding ability. Their matching task also showed that, at an early stage, children achieved higher spelling accuracy than decoding accuracy for most graphemes. Clearly, neglecting spelling practice may weaken a process that can also contribute to decoding development, eventually forming an imbalance of active classroom participation, relatively fluent reading, but weak independent spelling.

4.4 Cognitive Adaptability of Young Primary EFL Learners

The above problems do not mean that engaging phonics activities should be replaced with mechanical spelling exercises. For young learners, songs, movements, and repetitive exercises remain valuable, as they make phonics input more accessible and help maintain attention. The key is to connect these activities with progressively more demanding spelling tasks. GPC instruction should follow a clear teaching scope and sequence, and repeatedly consolidate previously learned content before introducing new content. The output tasks can also gradually develop from supported activities to independent completion. This progressive method can retain the incentive effect of multimodal activities while increasing task demands, allowing young learners to develop independent spelling ability without excessive cognitive load.

5. Discussion

5.1 Core Findings Recap

The study results answer the two research questions from complementary perspectives. The decoding-spelling imbalance is related to uneven input and output conditions; phonics instruction should regard decoding and spelling as related outcomes. Input builds phoneme-grapheme knowledge for spelling, while output moves learners from supported recognition towards independent spelling.

5.2 Literature Dialogue

These findings are consistent with studies on systematic GPC instruction and the relationship between spelling and reading development. However, existing studies mainly examine specific teaching methods or single literacy abilities, rarely combining input and output as an explanatory framework. This study expands existing research by linking the quality of GPC input with spelling output through the Comprehensible Input and Output Hypotheses.

5.3 Teaching Optimization Principles

According to the findings, three teaching principles can be put forward: (1) engaging and understandable multimodal input. Young learners can consolidate phonics knowledge through multimodal resources within limited class time. (2) systematic and cumulative GPC teaching. Teachers should regularly review learned correspondences to help learners build a more stable and coherent knowledge system. (3) balanced oral and written output. Teacher-supported oral exercises can help learners establish initial accuracy, while independent spelling tasks should be combined to promote deeper encoding.

5.4 Specific Phonics Instruction Strategies

These principles can be translated into four classroom practices. For example, teachers can use visual GPC charts, colour-coded examples, or animations to present the sound-grapheme correspondence for introduction or review. Songs, gestures and pictures can further connect phonemes, graphemes, and meanings. Spelling output can gradually progress from sound recognition and phoneme segmentation to word selection, guided dictation and independent spelling of unfamiliar words. In this way, input and output can be integrated within the same teaching cycle.

5.5 Teaching Misconception Reflection

The findings also reflect two common misconceptions. First, fluent oral word recognition should not be regarded as indicating that phonics learning has been completed, because independent spelling requires learners to actively encode phonemes and retrieve corresponding graphemes. Likewise, an active classroom does not necessarily ensure effective literacy development. The key difference lies between recognizing a word and reconstructing it autonomously through phonics.

6. Conclusion

This study examines the problem of decoding-spelling imbalance in phonics instruction of young EFL learners from an integrated input-output perspective. The study found that fragmentation and a lack of cumulative GPC input, with limited independent spelling output opportunities, jointly lead to the uneven development of decoding and spelling abilities. The theoretical value of this study lies in combining Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis with Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis to explain this imbalance. It also provides practical implications for phonics instruction that combines systematic input with gradual independent output. Additionally, this study has several limitations. The literature examined covers a limited range of learners and teaching contexts, and the analysis mainly adopts qualitative methods. Moreover, the proposed teaching principles have not been verified through long-term classroom interventions. It should be noted that, while Krashen's (1984) Comprehensible Input Hypothesis has been subject to debate, this study adopts it solely as an analytical tool for examining classroom input practices. Future research could conduct quasi-experimental teaching interventions, compare effects of different input-output activities, and extend comparative research to phonics classes in different regions to test and improve the proposed framework.

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