Introduction

Government education policy currently seems intent on making EAL learners invisible and so NALDIC is particularly delighted to launch EAL MATTERS, our new online publication, with two papers that highlight bilingual learners’ distinctive needs in such central areas as writing, reading and assessment. As yet another ‘new’ National Curriculum lumbers into place it is essential that we are reminded that in the absence of an EAL curriculum and assessment system bilingual learners are always going to be at a disadvantage if we fail to understand that progress might proceed differently for them.

Johanna Funk and Anne Hardy both draw on case studies of EAL learners in schools to ensure we do not lose sight of the realities of the classroom and draw on a wide body of research and point to concrete alternatives to show us what we might be doing better to ensure the best possible outcomes for our students.

Johanna Funk

Johanna is a Research Associate at Charles Darwin University and has taught in multi-ethnic inner city schools in London. Her paper reports the findings of a study based in a primary school where there had been a downward trend in attainment. Johanna gives a nuanced description, exploring the interrelationship between several key factors and explores the links between recent assessment structures and the resultant teaching practices these can lead to.

At a time when great changes to assessment procedures for English are being mooted, this article provides us with a timely reminder of the factors which can have either a negative or a positive impact on EAL pupil attainment; and a reminder too of the kinds of assessment practices which more directly speak to the identities of the learners being tested.

Anne Hardy

Anne Hardy is a primary school teacher with over twenty-years’ classroom experience. Her paper is based on her MA dissertation, for which she was awarded a distinction by Canterbury Christ Church University. In it she examines the impact of synthetic phonics on teaching learners with English as an Additional language (EAL) to read. The aim of the study was to evaluate how effective this strategy is in teaching these children to learn to read and whether it has application for other learners of English. The case studies she undertook involved four EAL children aged between six and ten years old who attended a primary school in the south-east of England. The children were from the Czech and Slovak Roma community who resided in the area. The study also involved adult participants who worked as teachers or teaching assistants in the school.

Synthetic Phonics has come under increasing scrutiny as teachers and academics question both the efficacy of relying on a single strategy to support such a complex and individual process as reading in general, and its appropriateness for EAL learners in particular. Anne’s paper provides some welcome hard evidence that gives cause for caution.
Comparing the measuring stick to the measured: Supporting EAL pupils’ writing development

Johanna Funk, Charles Darwin University

Abstract:
This article reports a study conducted in an inner London primary school. The study, conducted in 2011, explores the extent to which the school supports the early development of ‘English as an additional language’ (EAL) pupils’ writing. The school had seen a downward trend in attainment. What is not clear is whether the cause of this decline was due to the issue of English being an additional language or dialect for the majority of the pupils and / or whether curriculum, assessment structures and instructional practices were a contributing factor to the perceived failures.

Literature and theories relating to bilingualism, EAL approaches and motivation are presented within the context of a case study conducted at the school. Teacher interview transcripts were coded for theoretical references. In addition to this form of data collection, other prevailing themes were identified in this and curriculum document analysis to ascertain and portray the possible reasons for these low results.

Some of the findings from the study suggest that while the National Curriculum is supportive of the need to adapt instruction to pupils’ needs, an inconsistent approach to local curriculum provision, and national assessment practices, and the lack of autonomy felt by some teachers may explain the observed underachievement in attainment. Practical recommendations for more supportive and progressive approaches are suggested.

Keywords: EAL/D, English as another language or dialect, EAL; English as another language as used in England and Wales, ESL, LBOTE, Language backgrounds other than English, National Curriculum, Standardized tests, language acquisition.

Introduction and Context:
This paper describes a case study conducted at an inner London primary school that had been experiencing consistently low written English test results over three consecutive years. The majority (71.4% - DfE 2013) of the school’s students spoke English as additional language (EAL). In addition to their EAL status, these students were eligible for free school meals at a higher than average level, an indicator of below average socio-economic background. A literature review of EAL approaches, bilingualism and motivational theories informed the data analysis and subsequent recommendations. A number of documents were analysed including the UK National Curriculum, assessment materials, exemplar plans published by the local education authority and interview transcripts. Also addressed was the possibility that the measuring instruments used to attain these scores was a determining factor in instructional practices which contributed to the scores themselves. Since the case study, reforms to the UK national curriculum have been undertaken, and another inspection of the focus school has been reported on. This information will provide additional perspective on the subsequent perspective shifts in the support of EAL students, and provide perspective to the implementation of national curricula in other contexts with similar features.

Bilingualism
Bialystock (2001) defines Bilingualism as the ability to communicate fluently in two languages. As the students in the school concerned were still acquiring proficiency in both English and their home language in addition to many learning Arabic in after-school lessons, this somewhat exclusive interpretation of bilingualism does not adequately address the students’ language proficiency skills in this study. Were ‘bilingual’ to be interpreted as a spectrum, the students there are bilingual in the sense that they are still
developing proficiency in their own language and the language of instruction at their school, that is English. In as far as developing proficiency in literacy in two or more languages, these EAL pupils were as bilingual as they could be at early primary school level.

BICS/ CALP

Jim Cummins (2008) defines stages of BICS (basic interpersonal communication skills) and CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency) in terms of gaining proficiency in a second language. Cummins says it takes up to three years to gain BICS in a second language, and an additional five years to gain CALP. The students in the study, at their respective stages and according to this theory, were only just developing their BICS alongside their emerging CALP, due to most of them beginning school with little or no English at age 4 (RAISE Online report, 2011). These students are tested at the ages of 7 and 11 years. The standardised tests used to gain these results were a ‘read only’ test, dependent on students’ ability to read, understand and produce the language independently (the students were required to read and respond in writing independently), thus demanding a more sophisticated level of CALP beyond their respective age-related development.

Coercive and Collaborative Relations of Power

The demands of these measuring instruments on student’s abilities, as well as the ways they were prepared for, contributed to what Cummins (1996, 2000) calls the ‘coercive relations of power’, in which the students’ language acquisition stages were not synonymous with the ability to succeed and truly display their cognitive language abilities in the tests. Rather, their stages of language proficiency, as part of their learner identities, were not acknowledged in this process and the resultant low scores could be a superficial outcome. The negative effects of this ‘tested’ outcome on a student’s sense of cultural self and agency could lead to a tendency to resist acquiring language skills and partaking in the culture in which the education was happening to them, thus developing into the ‘illiteracy of resistance’ (Wagner 1991), defined as the preservation of one language and culture at the expense of partaking in another.

‘Collaborative relations of power’, in contrast to ‘coercive relations of power’ can be worked towards, according to Cummins (1996, 2000) by acknowledging the stages at which students are in their language acquisition, and providing learning activities that are context embedded and cognitively demanding. Whilst standardized tests could be interpreted as cognitively demanding, the preparation for them and conducting of them are not always context embedded. Rote phonics instruction, for example, can be skills-focussed, but the application of such skills may not be reinforced in ‘real’ life literacy exercises, and therefore this type of practice is neither context embedded nor cognitively demanding. The cognitive abilities of students could be reconciled and acknowledged by providing demanding enough activities alongside sufficient contextual scaffolding and support. This could ensure the cognitive demands of the literacy work are supported by parallel skills support that meet students’ intellectual capabilities without coercing them into a simplistic, rote and assessment-driven model that teaches skills in isolation from their intended ‘real’ contexts.

In addition to acknowledging and building on the identities of the students, providing motivating and engaging work for those students could also be an effective and complementary method of engaging students in the task of writing in another language or dialect that is not familiar to them. Whilst the emphasis of this work covers written language as a way to promote achievement, I will be addressing that first, and discuss the impact of spoken language proficiency on this achievement.

Motivation

Motivational aspects of writing in the digital age outlined by Magnifico (2010) can be drawn upon to inform ‘real’ life literacy applications. The changing nature of audience for today’s students can reinforce the relevance of using literacy skills to communicate, possibly only at a ‘BICS’ level, but via mobile devices and
on social media. The written form of this type of communication can push literacy into a more CALP oriented style as it demands more than just oral communication and requires some application of writing skills. This could be said to be a motivator for students as they come to see the relevance of learning to cultivate more than basic interpersonal communication proficiency.

Bruning and Horn’s (2010) four motivational clusters also suggest these types of authentic, ‘real’ life experiences to make relevant the literacy learning for students. The clusters are: 1) cultivating functional beliefs about writing, 2) providing a supportive context in which to develop skills, 3) providing authentic goals and contexts for writing skill development, and 4) providing a positive emotional environment. To see that writing has a purpose and function in many contexts can serve as a motivator for students’ uptake of skill development. Allowing for purposeful writing experiences that have an authentic outcome for the students, not just the assessments, can meet cluster 1 in this regard. An example would be to map the required skills from the curriculum to a project which is relevant to students’ lives, such as writing about their environments or concerns they have about playground interactions. This would necessitate a relationship with students that extends beyond superficial knowledge transmission and reveals an investment on behalf of the teacher to engage with learner identities.

Supporting students in the skills associated with learning writing skills so that they apply the skills in their writing can lead to more successful attempts at using such skills. Authentic and ‘real’ contexts and goals that are in line with where students’ skills can progress to next are also motivating in that they make relevant the purpose for the skills; the skills are not isolated and a discrete ‘thing’ to be learned for their own sake (such as rote phonics teaching); they have a purpose which is to communicate about something that has authentic meaning for the students. A supportive emotional environment can also add to motivation. For students for whom writing demands risk-taking and confidence, this collaborative relationship between teacher and student, and amongst students, can add to positive outcomes.

Questions and Methodology

Having reviewed this literature, the questions which arose from it were: how do we best acknowledge and support progression, through the stages at which EAL students are, in their English language acquisition? To what extent do we motivate students to develop their writing in English?

A pragmatic case study approach was taken (Creswell, 2009), as the school’s writing results had until this point posed the problem of underachievement, yet no exploration had investigated the reasons for the underachievement. This was more suitable an approach to get a perspective of what was or wasn’t working. Had this perspective already been gained, an action research cycle would have been a fruitful study option. A variety of perspectives on the issue of low writing results was required in order to depict as many possible contributing factors, given the unique complexity of the school and regional context. The research undertaken attempted to address the issue from a range of angles, and for these reasons, the data collection methods were as follows:

Curriculum documents collected included: The values statement, writing and inclusion sections of the UK National Curriculum, exemplar plans issued by the local education authority, assessment forms from the qualification and curriculum authority (QCA), teachers’ planning documents, assessment tasks from standardized assessment tests (SATS), and the manual for assessment of EAL students. Semi structured interviews (45 minutes each) with two teachers of early years and key stage 1 classes were also conducted and transcribed. It was hoped that this collection of documents would provide enough triangulation, reliability and validity to embody the pragmatic approach to the problem and answer the sub questions. Having government/official curriculum, assessment, and teacher—generated materials was helpful in portraying the situation and highlighting any discrepancies between what was mandated by the authorities and the practitioners’ experience.

All documents were then read for any inductively identified themes that appeared. The next stage of analysis then focused on the identification and coding references to theories from the literature review (Creswell, 2007).
Findings from data analysis and discussion

Initial inductive reading of the interviews revealed a lack of autonomy felt by the teachers. Teachers interviewed felt limited in their ability to go ‘off piste’ and plan for the students’ language needs (particularly in terms of oral language) and provide alternative activities which they saw as more motivating than what planning exemplars ‘advised’. Additional coding also highlighted much reference to motivation;

...’I let them write about something they did on the weekend...I’m such a rebel...and they drew a picture about it...this is anonymous, right’? Teacher 1

The sense of assumed compliance with what constituted ‘good’ practice instructionally was a force that teachers noted as in conflict with what they would prefer to provide students, given their thorough and instinctive knowledge of their students’ abilities and stages of language proficiency. Teachers’ expressed experiencing this ‘compliance pressure’ due to the requirement to provide evidence of student progress. This finding has been reflected in Korkeama¨ki and Dreher’s 2011 study of National Curricula in Finland, where the new core curriculum emphasised teachers’ professional skills more so than the UK curriculum, despite there being similar low level results on standardised tests conducted there. Inconsistencies in interpretation of the curriculum, though, displayed that despite the high level qualifications and enabling curricular structures for teachers to adapt provision for local needs, provision remained focused on the use of textbooks and teacher guides (Korkeama¨ki and Dreher, 2011). This could suggest that although less compliance to a curriculum that was intended to be professionally interpreted was expected; teachers’ adherence to methods of teacher-centred instruction and use of teacher guides could be due to concern for improving test results. This undermining of professional confidence was also highlighted by Au (2011) in his study of how standardized testing affected practice in the US...’such testing is promoting the standardization of teaching that both disempowers and desksills teachers.’ (Au, 2011, p.30)

Teachers in the present study also referenced the BICS / CALP distinction in interview transcripts;

‘I think we need to be spending a lot more time on oral language than we do. I think we push through literacy and we push through reading but we don’t push enough oral language....but if the children can’t speak it how can they write it ’? Teacher 1.

The pressure to be accountable, whilst justified on some levels, also led to teachers feeling they were required to evidence the skills linked to those in the planning documents prescribed for their year groups. While evidence and accountability are paramount responsibilities for education professionals, the profession also promotes the needs of the students in terms of language acquisition and motivation. This second set of responsibilities is not necessarily met through the channels through which accountability is manifested.

....’what I’ve noticed... is there’s a lot of unit outcomes based on what a teacher wants to see from the children and I think you can do that skills wise, but not product wise .They should be making unit outcomes that improve the children’s learning...and I don’t think any teacher would necessarily do that morally...I just think there’s a lot of pressure on them to show an outcome ....in the form of a product....and it’s not a product it’s a process’... Teacher 2.

Teacher awareness of the need for motivating and context-embedded writing tasks was also a strong feature in interviews. The reference above to the domination of unit outcomes in contrast to what alternative provision could yield is expanded on below.

...’these guys don’t have enough chance to write about themselves because it’s expected that all they’re going to write about is “I’m going to my cousin’s house” or “I went to the chicken and chip store” and to me, if they write that three times in two weeks....so? Why is that a problem? ...we get too caught up in what’s a unit outcome for a unit plan....well no... are they confident and can they write more than they could three weeks ago is probably all I care about’. Teacher 1.
The assumptions made by dominating unit outcomes over what students would prefer to write about are the value judgements on what is considered ‘interesting’ writing. It is at this juncture that suggesting that a student who has only been exposed to English outside the home for three years should know what a teacher would find interesting is a clear example of coercive relations of power. Should a student at this stage in their English acquisition demonstrate motivation to write in a language foreign to them, it could be well advised that a teacher would see this as an opportunity for nurturing positive writing experiences, not a challenge to overcome.

Curriculum document analysis yielded limited reference to BICS/CALP stages or motivation. Very little specific reference to EAL pupils’ stages were reflected in unit outcomes or planning exemplars.

‘The ability of pupils for whom English is an additional language to take part in the National Curriculum may be ahead of their communication skills in English’. (QCA, 1999, p.37)

Yet the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (OFSTED) guidance for school inspectors makes a clear reference to the BICS/CALP distinction:

‘It takes on five–seven years to become fully competent in a second language, although individuals will vary in the speed with which they acquire this competence. Fluency in spoken English is usually achieved within two years, but the ability to read and understand more complex texts containing unfamiliar cultural references and write the academic English needed for success in examinations takes much longer’. (INSPECTING SUBJECTS 3-11: guidance for inspectors and schools, p. 27)

The irony here is that despite teachers’ inherent desire to provide students with authentic, motivating and cognitively appropriate learning, in addition to the OFSTED guidance for inspectors’ clarity on the stages of EAL proficiency (above), the emphasis on assessment results that act as a driving force for schools undermines professional drive and accountability for developing proficiency. Instead, it pressures schools to produce results from assessments that don’t meet the values statements or requirements of the curriculum.

This could suggest that the function of the school system (according to assessments that would indicate its success) is not to necessarily...

‘prepare(s) pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life’ (DfE, 2013),

but to provide evidence that they can successfully write a test.

In terms of providing motivating literacy experience for students, schools would need to embed the skill development in real contexts that were relevant to students’ lives (such as writing about visiting the chicken and chip store), provide skills development alongside or within such experiences, acknowledge the stages each student was at in their proficiency and determine appropriate goals based on these stages, not necessarily the expected outcomes determined by the state. This is in line with Cummins’ suggestion that context-embedded and cognitively demanding activities contribute to collaborative relations of power with students and more effective language acquisition. It could be argued that by virtue of acknowledging student’s first language and culture by engaging with students in this way, collaborative relations of power could be worked towards; just as Cummins asserts that actively suppressing students’ language and culture could contribute to coercive power relations (Cummins, 2009, p.262).

It should be made clear here that these proposed adaptations are not necessarily in direct contrast to what the current system is doing, yet the motivations of ‘meeting standards’ which are predetermined for a nation-wide assessment structure do not take into account the near-on 20% of primary school students in the UK that speak English as another language (NALDIC, 2013). Assessment structures such as the standardised testing regime in the UK and other places are therefore perpetuating a coercive, unmotivating and exclusive definition of language proficiency that isolates skills in discrete sections. The application of those skills, however, is what the education system would seemingly prefer;

‘Every state-funded school must offer a curriculum which is balanced and broadly based and which:
• promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, (DfE, 2013).

This emphasis on assessment rather than teaching guidance is evidenced in the abundance of assessment materials available under the ‘supporting materials’ link of DfE’s website. Much of the materials emphasise how to assess and mark progress, but provide little guidance for teachers on how to enable this progression. Cummins (1996) cites unethical referral to special needs-type interventions as a serious possibility should schools not have the mechanisms and procedures outlined for appropriate provision for EAL pupils. The lack of ‘labels’ to give students in a label-dominated system could lead to teachers giving students that don’t fit the mould a label that forces them into a wrongly appointed group, as illustrated by the following;

T1: ‘Children that have high enough needs get specialist help … the children that don’t get put in a folder…
R: what’s the specialist help you’re referring to?
T1; I think someone does a referral for a speech and language therapist? (SALT)
R: do you think SALT is going to address the fact that they don’t know how to speak English?
T1: no….I don’t know enough about SALT but I do kind of feel that one person isn’t going to provide them with the exposure to vocab in a way that they need it….they need saturation and half an hour of how to say something properly a week is not going to fix the problem…it’ll mean that the words that they learn they will say well’. Teacher 1.

The lack of alternatives for some teachers in this situation leads to more coercive relations of power and ‘blaming the victim’ (Cummins 1996), when students that don’t fit the assessment paradigm get assigned to special needs booster groups. Speaking English as an additional language or dialect being treated in a similar way to cognitive challenges experienced on a physiological level does call into question how collaborative the systemic view of this cohort actually is.

In not acknowledging the stages at which students are at in their language acquisition, the assessment – driven models of instructional practice can contribute to coercive relations of power (Cummins, 1996, 2000) that lead to low test scores, but also to a more insipid and deeply entrenched oppressive force that doesn’t acknowledge the students’ learner identities themselves. These forces could potentially lead to oppressive systemic relations of power with students and ineffective and obstructive educational practice that does the opposite to what it originally and altruistically sets out to do.

In the most recent OFSTED inspection of the school in the case study, inspectors were highly critical of practice;

‘Over the past three years, attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 in reading, writing and mathematics has been low. This is because pupils, especially in Key Stage 2, have not been taught effectively to sound out individual letters and groups of letters to work out unfamiliar words when reading. They have not been provided with enough opportunities across the curriculum to write at length’ (p.4)

And listed as improvement targets:

‘Raise achievement in reading, writing … to national levels by:
• implementing a systematic programme of phonics (letters and sounds) teaching throughout Key Stage 2
• providing pupils with more opportunities to write across the curriculum...
• increasing the expertise of teaching assistants, especially in Key Stage 2, in phonics and sentence structure to enable them to support pupils effectively’. (p.5)

It would appear that OFSTED’s first impressions of the reading and writing abilities could have been informed by an understanding of how skills could be applied in authentic or ‘real’ contexts, such as reading
or ‘writing across the curriculum’. The assertion, however, that the school’s results would be improved by applying systematic phonics teaching (as opposed to context-embedded instruction) is yet again in conflict with the theories reviewed in this case study and refocusses the output of the school on isolated skills instruction and assessment. However, it criticises it for displaying a lack of application of these skills in such observed activities as reading.

Interestingly, the SATS English test results from the school in the same year as the inspection were up from 56% in 2009, 67% in 2011, to 88% in 2012. The national expectation is 60% and the average is 79% (DfE 2013). This result, although notably very positive in some regards, also evidences that the ability to perform well on a test is not necessarily sufficient in meeting the needs of the curriculum, nor the standards of certain OFSTED inspectors, despite their access to knowledge about how EAL Pupils acquire language proficiency (INSPECTING SUBJECTS 3-11: guidance for inspectors and schools, p. 27).

This also points to the possibility that the assessment regimes of testing and inspection are also questionable in their efficacy in measuring students’ language proficiency. Given previous years’ results, in addition to the data analysis and findings from interviews in this case study, a positive shift in test results does not equate with good EAL-supportive practice (and according to the OFSTED inspector concerned), nor does it indicate provision that is necessarily supportive of that. These test results should therefore be viewed with a level of scepticism, and de-emphasised in terms of their importance or status as indicators. The emphasis of these results on their impact on the future of a school, in addition to the data analysed in this case study suggest that the test results only depict the ability of students to replicate the kind of learning they did when they were preparing for the test. As the tests are not a complete picture of what occurs in a school, they cannot be relied on to depict success or failure. They are one piece of information that assessment regimes and structures struggle to depict through a coercive system that doesn’t acknowledge the identities of those that make a substantial proportion of its constituents.

Recent reforms in the UK national Curriculum and assessment structures

The recent UK review of the National Curriculum has seen a ‘disapplication’ of English programmes of study until the new version of the curriculum is rolled out in 2014. English remains mandatory and the site states that this enables schools to ‘develop their own curriculums for English that best meet the needs of their pupils, in preparation for the introduction of the new national curriculum’... (DfE, 2013). This is with exception to years 1, 2, 5 and 6, where testing in 2014 and 2015 will be ‘underpinned’ by this curriculum. This reinforces the dominance of testing as a force more important, seemingly, than schools’ innovation in curriculum for their students.

Recent reviews of the UK national curriculum has led to developments regarding inclusion of new sections on spoken language and an amended EAL progressions document, discussed below.

A promising factor in the new curriculum has been the inclusion of a spoken language section of the primary literacy curriculum. The amount of documentation dedicated is notional (one page covering years 1-6) in comparison to the specifications in the reading and writing sections (12 pages just for years one and two) which mandate spelling tests and synthetic phonics instruction (DfE, 2013). Guidance documents for EAL reference Cummins’ work, but still focus on assessment. ‘Marking Progress’ being the title, the focus is on assessing and evidencing the stages of the common scale of EAL students, originally defined in ‘A Language in Common’ (QCA, 2000). This latest resource includes a teacher training delivery plan for the introduction of the assessment structures for EAL pupils. Regarding Cummins’ work cited in the document, cognitively demanding tasks are advised for EAL students in the ‘inclusion’ section, but this section omits Cummins ‘context embedded’ as the complementary aspect to promoting development of language proficiency and collaborative relations of power with 20% of the UK’s Primary school population (NALDIC, 2013). This ‘half’ reference to established EAL theory can be seen as an omission that emphasises the DfE’s preference to demand cognitive challenge without embedding it an anything necessarily motivating, contextualised or research-validated for the learners.

These recent developments could be seen as promising in that at least more attention has been given to the presence of a growing EAL pupil population, yet the neglected emphasis on assessment as support and
the defining of what ‘spoken language’ means in the curriculum, in addition to the lack of information about how EAL pupils attain proficiency in supporting and guidance documents is significant.

To illustrate this possibility in a different context, a recent publication of supportive materials in Australia contains detailed guidance documents (114 pages) defining progression stages at which students attain proficiency in English, in addition to assessment descriptors. (ACARA, 2012). This document accompanies the newly published Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2012). While still an example of assessment led instruction, the progression-focussed guidance contrasts with the coercive nature of the UK DfE’s insinuation that assessment and evidence of ‘where the pupils are’ is still the most important factor in education. This is especially pertinent in such regions as the Northern Territory, where 53.4% of year 3 students are from language backgrounds other than English and are below the national average literacy attainment (ACARA, 2012).

Similarly, the ESL Bandscales used to monitor language development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learners (ATSI) in Queensland (DEEET, 2001) are accompanied by a publication on the rationale behind the project (Turnbull, 2002). This document refers thoroughly and directly to Cummins’ work on BICS and CALP, as well as presents the rationale for adapting the original ESL bandscales (NLLIA, 1993) to acknowledge the diversity of language backgrounds of ATSI students.

Practice recommendations in more recent Australian work involve a further acknowledgement of the language diversity of EAL/D students; especially those students from ATSI backgrounds, (some of the 250+ original traditional Indigenous languages have evolved into a variety of creoles and other contact variants) (Angelo, 2013). Understanding the lexical diversity of languages spoken by these cohorts adds more perspective to the use of the detailed assessment documents such as band scales and ACARA descriptors. Angelo promotes the use of a ‘Language awareness continuum’ (Angelo, 2006b) which ranges from noting how different people may have different ways of talking, to being able to ‘explain linguistic; historical and cultural relationship between contact and other non-standard varieties to standard languages.’ (p.76) That is, schools should provide teachers with training to understand the specific dialects of their students’ languages and how they relate to each other, rather than a mere acknowledgement that it may be differently lexified from English. A learner from a European or Asian language background would experience learning English in a different way from a learner from Indigenous language dialect background. Similarly, the distinctions among different ATSI dialects provide for different learning experiences in English. Angelo suggests that should teachers and schools take up this challenge, the efficiency of their planning and provision would increase. This could also increase the collaborative relations of power between assessment structures and learners, as provision would be tailored to students’ language identities, not necessarily adapted for student’s language abilities.

Whilst there are many different contextual features of these substantial cohorts, provision of this kind (for teachers and students) could illustrate the benefits of supportive structures for English language acquisition. This also carries implications for settings in other regions of the world with high levels of diversity in language backgrounds.

Reflection, Recommendations and Conclusion

On reflection, a complication with this case study (and in some ways, a justification) was that the problem of low test results was possibly misrepresented in that it depicted the ability of students to perform in an artificial environment, based on their ability to read and respond appropriately to the test. Despite their language stages not being able to meet this requirement, their cognitive abilities were not honoured by this testing regime, so the results as being ‘low’ are in this way misleading. Were the tests only a measure of the isolated skills, then the results could be interpreted differently. The interpretation that the fault lies with the student’s abilities, not the measuring instrument or system within which the measurement is occurring, leads to an overemphasis on the students’ shortfalls in terms of meeting standards of skills and cognitive abilities. The fact that the test results are a key indicator for the state of a school’s performance, however, is the very catalyst for this case study, as it is the schools that produce low results that are subject to scrutiny, and this in turn leads to more coercive measures taken in an effort to produce results through channels that do not compare fairly to learner identities.
If the test were conducted in a way that met the cognitive abilities but reconciled the BICS/CALP distinctions and levels of proficiency at which the cohort was, then the problem of ‘low test scores’ could potentially be redundant based on the removal of the additional barrier of reading and writing required to display a cognitive understanding of the broader skills the tests were measuring (composition skills students could very easily do orally).

Mechanical reading and writing skills was the filter through which these higher cognitive skills were being tested as well. The delivery of the assessment in this double-edged manner, therefore, could have been the misleading factor in determining further interventions and not using reflexivity to critically assess whether the tests were depicting these particular students’ skills or cognitive processes, or both. The emphasis placed on assessment results in the UK as an indication of schools’ success is the contentious element in this study, as it illustrates the conflict between what the curriculum, school inspection teams, teachers and school management set out to do, yet is used as a punitive instrument for under-performing schools.

Perhaps basing the study of low achievement on the results of a standardised test assumes that the test itself was arbitrarily correct in portraying this perceived weakness, at least, of reading and writing mechanics. The analysis of teachers’ perceptions, planning documents, assessment schemes and mandatory curriculum was an attempt to provide a more triangulated data set, one which required containing in order to fit within the realms of this study. Teacher perspectives on student levels of motivation were also helpful in contextualising the test results and giving the source of the data (the students) the acknowledgement it deserves.

Rather than using the test results to ‘speak for themselves’, the teacher perceptions of the students’ abilities and needs regarding not only the tests but the learning activities which were mandated and advised for them added another perspective on the problem of EAL pupil achievement. In contrast to the opposing yet potentially just as subjective but de-humanised assessment and curriculum documents, the interview data acted as a foil for the de-humanised documents and gave a human voice to the context in which the problem was happening. This also provided a perspective on students’ language backgrounds that curriculum documents offered a perfunctory nod to. More analysis of student or teacher mobility affecting the averages of results over the course of the three years’ data, or interviews with students themselves, would have added more angles from which the overall language proficiency and motivation of the students could be gleaned.

**Recommendations:**

Given the recommendations in the literature in this subject, as well as the gaps in provision discovered in the data analysis, the following are recommendations for progress:

- A systemic acknowledgement and implementation of processes required by EAL students, such as those discussed in Cummins’ work, which are supportive of students’ stages of language development and learner identity.
- Embedding of motivational and developmental aspects of matching delivery to assessment, or at least matching delivery to the student and adapting the assessment as appropriate to the student to ensure assessment meets its desired outcome.
- Motivation Clusters as they apply to teaching and implications for assessment results if assessment doesn’t use the same delivery as instruction.
- Ongoing professional support to develop skills of practitioners in providing progressive support from the existing assessment for learning guidance and language awareness.
- Oral language curricula developed to enhance the foundations of BICS as it progresses towards CALP (Cummins 2008).

As illustrated by the development of in-depth guidance documents and research in Australia, progress is being made to develop more collaborative structures which support progression and acknowledge the language stages of students from language backgrounds other than English. Reliance by governing bodies
on standardised assessments to depict the success of contexts in which a majority of students are from EAL backgrounds leads to the perpetuation of coercive relations of power between students, the school, and the system they are in. While some progress is being made towards collaborating with student realities of language backgrounds, some shifts in how school systems motivate and support students from diverse contexts will benefit their futures as students and participating citizens.

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The Impact of Synthetic Phonics on Teaching Children with English as an Additional Language to Read – a Case Study

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Abstract

This research examines the impact of synthetic phonics on teaching learners with English as an Additional Language (EAL) to read. Synthetic phonics involves children learning phoneme-grapheme correspondences and then blending phonemes to decode words when reading. The aim of the study is to evaluate how effective this strategy is in teaching these children to learn to read and whether it has application for other learners of English.

Synthetic phonics is the mandatory approach to teaching reading in English primary schools. However, studies of how this approach helps EAL learners seem to be rare.

This research into synthetic phonics and EAL learners took the form of a qualitative case study. The case studies involved four EAL children aged between six and ten years old who attended a primary school in the south-east of England. The children were from the Czech and Slovak Roma community who reside in the area. The study also involved adult participants who worked as teachers or teaching assistants in the school.

The research methods used included semi-structured interviews with the adults, structured interviews with the children, miscue analyses of audio recordings to identify the children’s reading strategies when reading aloud, and lesson observations.

The results appeared to indicate that synthetic phonics was useful in teaching children to decode and provided them with a useful strategy, particularly when they already understood the meaning of the decoded word. However, the evidence also suggested that the children’s limited lexical knowledge impeded their comprehension, and the ability to decode did not help. Furthermore, the study illustrated the challenges children encountered when trying to recall the correspondence between phonemes and graphemes.

The conclusion reached is that the needs of EAL children learning to read are complex and that the development of their lexical knowledge is paramount if they are to be enabled to become successful readers. However, if taught in conjunction with a language rich curriculum, this systematic strategy could be useful in developing reading skills for the growing number of young learners of English attending language schools around the world.

Introduction

Over the last twenty years, successive governments in England have been attempting to address literacy underachievement amongst certain groups at school. However, the number of children leaving primary school with poor literacy skills has remained at around 16% (Department for Education, 2011). This statistic is even worse for children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) with 30% not reaching national expectations in English and mathematics combined in 2011 (Overington, 2012). Following a review on the teaching and learning of reading by Rose (2006), the government decided to accept his recommendation that synthetic phonics should be taught to all children in their early stages of reading and this policy continues today.

There has been some research which demonstrates the benefits of this approach on learners with English as a first language (National Reading Panel 2000, Johnston and Watson, 2005). Johnston and Watson’s
study, for example, concluded that ‘a synthetic phonics programme, as a part of the reading curriculum, has a major and long lasting effect on children’s reading and spelling attainment’ (2005: 69). However, a review by Torgerson et al revealed that although learners who were taught systematic phonics read with more accuracy than those taught using other methods ‘no significant effect was found for reading comprehension’ (2006: 10). Furthermore, the authors stated that ‘it is also unclear whether systematic phonics teaching was beneficial to all children with different learner characteristics, as for example very few trials included English speakers of other languages’ (ibid.: 48). Thus it was this research deficit that created the rationale for my research which I undertook in a primary school in a town in the south-east of England. 30% of the children attending the primary school speak English as an additional language and most of these children are from the Czech and Slovak Roma community that now resides in the town.

There are well documented reasons for this group to come to live in England. In their native countries, the Roma are viewed negatively and there are few prospects. Indeed, educational attainment and unemployment amongst Roma is considerably worse compared to other groups (European Roma Rights Centre, 2007, Amnesty International, 2012). The Roma have an oral culture and strong family links. However, other characteristics include poor school attendance, low expectations and the absence of a literature rich background (Bolton Community Cohesion and Traveller Support Booklet, undated). The child participants in my research were from this community and the adult participants worked in the school as teachers and teaching assistants.

My research was designed and conducted during 2013 to establish the impact of synthetic phonics in teaching these young learners to learn to read.

In order to ascertain the answer, I investigated the following research questions:

1. What are the views of teachers and teaching assistants on the impact of synthetic phonics on teaching these children to learn to read?
2. What strategies do the children use when reading aloud to an adult in school?
3. What are the views of the children on synthetic phonics and how it helps them to learn to read?

Literature review

Research into how synthetic phonics supports EAL children in learning to read has been limited to date. Reviews of research by August et al (2008) and studies on effective provision in the United States by Calderón et al (2011) demonstrate that synthetic phonics appears to have a role in the teaching of reading to English language learners. However, August et al caution that ‘[p]honics shows students how to decode, which helps them as long as the words they are trying to decode are in their oral language repertoire’ (ibid: 146). The importance of developing children’s language is reiterated by Edwards (2012) quoting Hutchinson et al (2003). Edwards argues that if children learning EAL receive insufficient language support in the early stages of their education, their comprehension skills may remain inadequate for success at school.

The limitations of teaching children to decode without attending to their comprehension have also been discussed by NALDIC (2006) and Grabe (2009). Grabe argues that language learners ‘seldom achieve word recognition fluency levels evident among good L1 readers’ which means that they are unlikely to have the same level of comprehension in the new language as their monolingual peers (ibid: 98). August et al (2008) concur, asserting that instructional approaches should be adjusted for the needs of English language learners. They conclude that ‘EAL children are not a homogenous group’ and that their individual needs should be catered for’ (ibid.: 156).

Indeed, the skills both first and second language learners need to acquire in order to learn to read are complex. With regards to orthography for example, a comparison of English with other language systems by Dombey concludes that learning to read in English is difficult because ‘some 461 graphemes represent 40 to 50 phonemes’ (2006: 95, author’s italics). According to Lenters (2004), all learners need to develop
an understanding of the alphabetic system and they also need to be able to decode, develop a sight vocabulary, read appropriately matched texts and possess the metacognitive strategies to support fluency. Bialystok (2007) concludes that both monolingual and bilingual children require oral proficiency, an awareness of what writing represents and metalinguistic awareness.

Second language learners encounter the additional challenges of differences between sound and symbols between the new language and their existing one; insufficient oral vocabulary, lack of knowledge of context, and issues with text structure (Lenters, 2004). A further issue is that the learner’s first language may influence how he or she reads in the new language (Grabe, 2009). This is because the additional language may differ considerably in areas such as phonology, orthography, morphology and grammar and discourse structures. Furthermore, the use of idioms and metaphors may be different in both languages and some lexical items may not exist in either of the languages (ibid).

However, there are certain benefits as Gregory (2008) explains, for example, second language learners may have a greater ability to memorize words or sounds and they may also be aware that an object is symbolised by the written word and that the name of an object depends on what language is used.

In conclusion, learning to read requires a wide range of skills. From my research, I hoped to discover what strategies the children used when reading at whole text level and the role of synthetic phonics in the reading process. I shall now explain how I gained my evidence.

**Research methodology**

A case study was appropriate for my small-scale research as I wished to use a number of data gathering tools including interviews, observations, documents and artefacts (Croker, 2009, Yin, 2009). In fact, a key tool that I used was miscue analysis, which involved the researcher, in observation mode, listening to the children read and analysing both their errors and their strategies that resulted in accurate reading. I used a miscue analysis system based on approaches recommended by Goodman et al (1987) and Wilde (2000). This involved copying the text before reading sessions so that I could annotate miscues and note any comments they made. I deviated in one area as I used symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to illustrate how the children pronounced each phoneme when they decoded out loud. By using phonemic script to code the sounds the children produced when segmenting, I could identify which sound the child had used. If they provided an alternative sound to the one that should correspond to the grapheme, I analysed why they may have made that choice.

This qualitative analysis allowed me to evaluate the reading process as experienced by the children (Goodman et al, 1987). The children I worked with were Anna aged 6, Josef aged 7 and Ivan aged 9. In the interviews I have also included Katerina, aged 10, because according to the EAL teacher, her level of English was better than the other children and she had made considerable progress in reading over the course of one year and now no longer required instruction in synthetic phonics.

In addition, I followed the ethical guidelines as required for such research and gained consent from those involved.

**Findings**

I began my research by observing the children in their daily synthetic phonics lessons in the summer of 2013.

During this period, I conducted interviews with teachers and teaching assistants. The adults that I interviewed worked closely with the children either as teachers or teaching assistants. The teachers included the EAL co-ordinator, the EAL teacher, the synthetic phonics programme manager, the specialist reading teacher and two class teachers. In addition, over the course of one month, I listened to each child participant reading twice weekly for fifteen to twenty minutes.
Throughout the period, I aimed to ensure the process was iterative in order to identify themes and issues and also to reinforce the validity of the research (Yin, 2009). The process of data analysis therefore occurred in tandem with the collection of data.

**Findings from the interviews with adults working in the school**

I interviewed several members of staff during the study. My initial interview was with the EAL co-ordinator who explained the rationale for purchasing a commercial scheme, *Read Write Inc.* to teach synthetic phonics:

> We chose *Read Write Inc.* as the programme is used in schools with high EAL in London. The range of abilities and EAL meant it would be a big job to create a scheme. *Read Write Inc.* breaks it down into levels of attainment and is packaged for Teaching Assistants to teach so children move through attainment groups at their speed of learning. *Read Write Inc.* is cost effective and people pay more attention to it as it’s bought in. *Read Write Inc.* is systematic and it worked in other places. Everyone who’d used it said bring it in.

Furthermore, the EAL co-ordinator believed the recent results of national tests for that year demonstrated that the scheme was already proving effective. He explained that 65% of Year 1 children had passed the phonics screening test in 2013, whereas in 2012, only 18% of the children had passed. Of the children in Year 2 who retook the test, 80% had now passed. He believed this was attributable to the synthetic phonics lessons which the children had received during the year. The only children who had not passed the test were EAL children who were also on the SEN (Special Educational Needs) register. Results from national reading assessments for year 6 children (SATs) had also increased from the year previously. 89% of the children achieved Level 4 in 2013 (the standard expected for 11 year olds) compared to 77% in 2012. Indeed 60% of the EAL children achieved Level 4 in 2013.

The opinion of the EAL teacher was that:

> Phonics gives the children the tools, how to decode and transfer the skills into their own reading and writing. The older ones have difficulty reading and writing because they didn’t get the phonics.

One teacher recognised that the phonics scheme was ‘good, regular, involves small groups and is assessed regularly’. However, she acknowledged that ‘any good phonics scheme done properly will have the same results’. This teacher said that she had noticed children beginning to use phonics in different curriculum areas and ‘they are spelling words they shouldn’t necessarily have come across’. This included work produced by EAL children.

An interesting anecdote was offered by the specialist reading teacher who told me about a child who had picked up the phonics code very quickly. This child had initially decoded all the nonsense words that have been included in the government phonics assessments for Year 1 children. However, as the child’s English had improved, her ability to decode the nonsense words had declined. This seemed to be the result of the child attempting to create meaning from the nonsense words but lacking the lexical knowledge to understand that they were meaningless.

**Discussion**

It would appear from the interview data and results of national tests that some of the staff believed that synthetic phonics is beneficial for the EAL children in the school. According to the staff interviewed, children are applying what they have learned when reading or writing in other subjects and furthermore, they are able to use the decoding strategy when they read independently.

It is important to note that this programme has high status in the school, for example, it has warranted the appointment of a manager to oversee the teaching and learning of synthetic phonics and to ensure that
assessments are carried out frequently. The programme therefore succeeds because the school has invested heavily in it and it is taught systematically and regularly by a workforce who have confidence in it.

I now report on data gathered from lesson observations and include an example of the teaching and learning that occurs in a synthetic phonics lesson.

Findings from an observation of a synthetic phonics lesson

In the following excerpt, a group of eight children aged between five and six, including Anna, are working with a teaching assistant (TA) on the grapheme ‘ow’ and the sound it represents which in this case is pronounced /əʊ/. Anna and Katya are the only EAL children in this group. They are now generating words.

Key:
TA (Teaching Assistant)
// sound spoken by children written in phonemic script

1. The TA shows a large picture of a bear with snow blowing around it.
2. Tom It’s a bear with blow the snow!
3. The TA writes ‘ow’ in the centre of the white board.
4. Tom Ice pole!
5. Katya Blow
6. TA Sometimes you have these stickers above your bed at night and when you turn off the light they...
7. Children Glow!
8. Nate I have a spiderman glow in the dark sticker.
9. TA You know a snail, Anna, it goes really...
10. Anna Slow.
11. TA Let’s look at our other o-e (pointing to o-e on another large flashcard).
12. What sound is this?
13. Children /əʊ/!
14. Anna There’s an alien! (pointing to the picture of the alien on the reverse of the flashcard).
   (The picture is of an alien holding a mobile phone and the caption reads ‘phone home’).
15. TA What does this line mean here? (pointing to the line in the middle of the o and the e in ‘o-e’)
16. Anna It means they’re special friends and they must always stay together.

Commentary and discussion

In this observation I noticed that the teaching assistant familiarises the children with the graphemes on the flashcards focusing on the grapheme ‘ow’ and its corresponding sound, in this case ‘ow’ as in ‘blow’. The children are familiar with the picture and the rhyme associated with the sound as a child recalls ‘it’s a bear with blow the snow’ in line 2. This is because the scheme has been designed to teach children phonemes and the corresponding graphemes or groups of graphemes using picture prompts (Miskin, 2005). Through the course of the lesson they learn that the sound can be graphically represented as ‘ow’ in the words ‘blow’ and ‘snow’, or ‘o-e’ as in ‘phone’ and ‘home’. The teaching assistant helps the children generate words by describing something and encouraging the children to say what it is (lines 6 and 9).

In addition, the children learn that the letters in the digraph o-e in ‘phone’ are connected to make one sound through the idea that ‘they’re best friends and they must always stay together’ as Anna says in line
16. Developing children’s metalanguage or knowledge about language is thus a principle of the scheme and Anna’s explanation demonstrates that she has understood this phoneme-grapheme relationship. During my lesson observations, I noticed that children with a similar knowledge of phoneme-grapheme correspondences, including those with EAL, worked daily with an adult on synthetic phonics in groups of about six to eight. Moreover, all staff used the detailed lesson plans provided and there were sufficient resources for the children. This ensured the quality of lessons was consistent throughout the school.

**Findings from the miscue analysis with the children: Anna, Ivan and Josef**

I now discuss my findings from the miscue analysis. I commence with two extracts from my research into Anna’s reading strategies.

**Anna (1)**

Anna is six years old. She has lived in England for two years and has attended the school since Reception class. Her level of English has been assessed as ‘Threshold’ at school which means she has ‘sufficient functional vocabulary for everyday needs’. (Kent Steps, 2006: 9)

Anna was particularly fond of a set of stories about a mouse and in the following example she was able to read and understand the vast majority of the text.

The original text was as follows:

Brown mouse plays a trick.

Grey Mouse said to Brown Mouse ‘I liked your party but I have to go home’.

‘I have to go home too’ said White Mouse.

Brown Mouse went to the door and looked out.

‘You can’t go home’ he said.

‘The cat is outside the door’. (Excerpt from: ‘Brown Mouse plays a trick’ by J. Giles, 2001)

**Key:**

R = the researcher

// sound the child produces in phonemic script

1. Anna Brown mouse plays a trick.
2. Anna Grey Mouse said to Brown Mouse
3. Anna I liked you? (self corrects) your party
4. Anna /bΛ/t/ but I have to go home’.
5. Anna ‘I have to go home too’ said with uh White Mouse.
6. Anna Brown Mouse went to the do? What’s that mean?
7. R Look at the picture.
8. Anna door and looked out.
10. Anna ‘The cat is outsit? Inside, no! (Anna says this word with emphasis then self corrects) Outside! (Emphasised) the door.
In order to check Anna’s comprehension of the whole story, I asked the following question:

R   Why was Brown Mouse clever?

Anna   Because he was clever because he put the toy after the cat. He was run after the Brown Mouse not the real mouse, the toy.

Commentary and discussion

Anna self-corrects in lines 3, 5, 9 and 10. In line 3, she initially says ‘you’, changing it to ‘your’ to create a syntactically correct sentence, possibly by noticing that the ensuing word reads ‘party’. In synthetic phonics lessons, Anna has learned ‘you’ and ‘your’ as words she needs to recognise by sight. An example of decoding occurs when Anna says each phoneme to read the word ‘but’ (line 4). In line 5, Anna initially says ‘with’ and then corrects herself and says ‘white’. She says ‘with’ as the word is graphically similar to ‘white’ but then realises it is not syntactically plausible. In addition, she notices that ‘W’ is capitalised thus is a name and is followed by the word ‘Mouse’ which is also capitalised at the start. All the mice in the story have been named in this way and Anna demonstrates here that she recognises the purpose of capitalization even though this is not part of phonics teaching. Anna requires support in line 6 when she encounters the word ‘door’. She does not use the picture which shows Brown Mouse by the door so I remind her to do so. However, in line 9, when Anna says ‘you cat’ she is referring to the illustration of the cat outside the door. The intonation of her voice rises in the form of a question as she ponders whether the word indeed reads ‘cat’. When she notices the letter ‘n’, which precedes the apostrophe, she says ‘can’t’, demonstrating either an awareness of phonics or word recognition. However, her initial utterance which would have read ‘You cat go home’ would have shown semantic understanding, because in the story the mice wanted the cat to go away. In line 10, Anna decodes ‘outside’ as ‘outsit’. At this point, she has not decoded the split digraph ‘i-e’. She then realizes that ‘outsit’ is not a word that she recognises so says ‘inside’ possibly recalling the antonyms ‘inside and outside’ and then emphasises ‘outside’ as she knows she has read the word correctly and shows obvious delight in doing so.

I discover from this observation that Anna can use a range of strategies when she reads and is not over-reliant on decoding. Her knowledge of phoneme-grapheme correspondence learned in synthetic phonics lessons supports her reading but it is her knowledge of the lexis and syntax in the story that ultimately enables her to read successfully with understanding. It is Anna’s lexical knowledge that enables her to comprehend the story as can be observed in her response to my comprehension question. In Anna’s response, she correctly identifies what Brown Mouse did, which was to use a toy mouse as a decoy so he could escape. When Anna says ‘He was run after the Brown Mouse’, ‘he’ is used anaphorically to refer to the cat. Anna uses the past continuous to describe the cat’s action, though omits the ‘ing’ in ‘running’. She reinforces her explanation by saying the mouse the cat was running after was ‘not the real mouse’ but ‘the toy’. Although Anna’s response is not entirely syntactically accurate, she demonstrates that she has understood what she has read. This corroborates with the opinion of Goodman et al (1987: 63) who argue that ‘[b]ilingual students … may have greater understanding of what they read than is evident in their ability to produce syntactically acceptable sentences’.

Anna (2)

In this example, Anna chooses to read a simplified version of ‘The ugly duckling’ as she knows the story and says she has read this book before.

The text is as follows:

The ugly duckling

Once upon a time mother duck had some ducklings.

The ducklings grew and grew.
But one duckling grew too big. (Excerpt from ‘The ugly duckling’ by M. Hughes 2004)

**Commentary and discussion**

Anna decodes ‘ugly’ and her familiarity with the title enables her to read ‘duckling’ without needing to decode. Anna is unsure of the word ‘once’. She decodes it, segmenting each grapheme, but realises this does not help as she cannot make sense of the word. Once I have told her the word, she recalls the phrase ‘upon a time’ as she has heard this in fairy tales. When she encounters the word ‘grew’ (line 6), her choice of phonemes resemble the word ‘grey’. It could be that in her search for meaning, she was referring to the picture which showed the grey coloured ugly duckling on the page and had interpreted this to be the subject of the sentence. If this was the case, Anna would need some explanation of how plurals are created in English, e.g. the ‘s’ in as ‘ducklings’ refers to more than one. Indeed, Wallace (1988) posits that letters provide more information than sounds and knowledge of the plural –s on nouns rule would help Anna. Lack of morphological awareness thus impedes her comprehension. Syntactically, colour adjectives precede nouns in English too therefore ‘grey’ could not be the correct word. Decoding words in this instance does not support Anna because her knowledge of the lexis in the story is insufficient.

**Ivan**

Ivan is nine years old. He has lived in England for a year. He initially resided in a different county in England and has attended this school for eight months. His level of English has been assessed as ‘Threshold’ at school.

In this example, Ivan is reading a non-fiction book entitled ‘Bug Hunt’ (Llewellyn, 2009). There is a photograph of a ladybird on the front cover and a small illustration of a boy with a magnifying glass in the background.
Commentary and discussion

This example illustrates the difficulties Ivan has when decoding words he does not understand. Ivan decodes the consonants correctly in the words. He identifies the initial and final consonants in the words 'bug' and 'hunt' but as he does not know what a 'bug' or a 'hunt' is, his awareness of the consonants does not help him to read the words. When decoding in line 6, Ivan pronounces ‘u’ in ‘bug’ and ‘hunt’ as /u:/.

Ivan has been taught the phoneme-grapheme relationship of ‘u’ in his synthetic phonics classes where ‘u’ makes the sound /ʌ/ and also in words such as ‘put’ where ‘u’ makes the sound /ʊ/. The researcher’s explanation does not support him because when he repeats the words in line 8, he reverts to pronouncing the ‘u’ in ‘hunt’ as /u:/.

A further explanation I surmised is that some second language learners may not be able to discriminate between certain sounds in their own spoken English and this view is supported by Wallace (1992). This may be the case for Ivan with the sounds /æ/, /ʊ/, and /u:/.

Josef

Josef is seven years old. He has lived in England since he was five. His level of English has been assessed as 'Threshold' at school.

Josef chooses to read a book containing a story and a non-fiction text called ‘Trunk Tales’ as he says he likes elephants, one of which is pictured on the front cover.

The text in the book reads as follows:

An elephant is bigger than a monster mouse.

An elephant is bigger than a van.

(Excerpt from: ‘Trunk Tales’ by D. Reed 2006)

Key:

R = the researcher

/ / sound the child produces in phonemic script

Josef reads:

1. /æ/n/ an elephant /b/ɪg/ -ger bigger than a /m/ɒ/n/ monster /m/-
ouse.

2. An elephant is bigger than a /v/æ/n/ van. What is van? (Josef asks R).

Commentary and discussion
Josef decodes ‘an’ and ‘bigger’ in line 1 and recalls them in line 2. He decodes ‘van’ in line 2. In the book there is a picture of an elephant standing beside a van. However, Josef does not use this information to help him elicit meaning from the word ‘van’. This is because he does not know the English word for ‘van’. Josef decodes correctly, but his lack of knowledge of the lexis impedes his understanding.

**Discussion of key findings from the miscue analyses**

The children demonstrate knowledge of phoneme-grapheme correspondence and they can use this to decode words when reading. They generally identify the phonemes for consonants in words. This is helpful to the children when they already know the name of the word in English as they can decode it quickly and derive its meaning, because as Wilde (2000: 8) states: ‘consonants carry the bulk of the meaning load in a written language’. Decoding phonemes which have two or more corresponding graphemes cause more difficulties. Identifying split digraphs and correctly recalling vowel sounds can also be challenging. This is unsurprising given the more complex relationship between vowel sounds and grapheme correspondence (Wilde, 2000). Moreover, unlike monolingual children, EAL children have the additional task of trying to grasp meaning of new vocabulary. On these occasions, they may decode correctly, but they are unable to make sense of the text due to lack of lexical knowledge. In terms of decoding, Anna is working at a similar level to the monolingual children in her class. However, her vocabulary knowledge is not equivalent to L1 learners. Furthermore, Anna has not fully developed her understanding of English morphology. At times, these factors limit her ability to comprehend text. Josef and Ivan have more limited vocabularies therefore reading is even more challenging for them and ability to decode alone does not enable them to understand text.

**Findings from the interviews with the children**

I interviewed Anna, Josef, and Ivan, who I read with regularly during my research. I also include Katerina who was a successful reader and no longer required synthetic phonics lessons.

When I asked the children what they learned in synthetic phonics lessons, Josef replied that he did ‘writing, drawing’; Anna said ‘with Miss C-. writing and working and learning’; and Ivan said ‘I do handwriting, speak English and alphabet’. Katerina explained how she learned to read, asserting that it was practice that helped her:

> How to explain? I went to classes in ‘5O’. I practice in my home and I practice in school. I practice with Mrs B-. Now I’m in ‘6B’ I practice in home and in school.

The children’s views on synthetic phonics classes were as follows: Ivan replied ‘like it’; Josef said ‘I love writing and drawing’ and Anna smiled but made no comment. Katerina could not recall the lessons as she had not needed to go for many months.


Katerina’s response to the question ‘What do you do when you see a word you don’t know?’ was initially: ‘I know how to read in English. I’m super in reading’.

I asked a follow up question as I wanted to ascertain what strategies she used when she encountered words she did not know. I have written the phonemes she uses in her response in phonemic script to illustrate the exact sounds she made in her response. Her response was:

> ‘If you have a prize I know how to read it because /p/r/ɪ/z/e/. The /j/ is an /aɪ/.’

In answer to the same question, Josef replied ‘sound it out’, Anna shrugged her shoulders and Ivan said ‘I tell my dad’.
Discussion

It is interesting to note that none of the children mention that they learn to read in synthetic phonics lessons. However, the children say they enjoy their classes and the activities that they do there. Katerina demonstrates that she enjoys books and talks about them with confidence. This is unsurprising as she reads fluently. Anna shows a preference for fairy tales and Josef has positive feelings about all books. Only Ivan is unable to think of a title that he has enjoyed reading. His lack of success in reading appears to be affecting his motivation. The books that Katerina and Anna mention are non-reading scheme books thus indicating that the purpose of reading for them is pleasure.

Katerina’s explanation on how to decode is relevant to understanding the role of synthetic phonics in learning to read. When Katerina initially started her explanation: ‘If you have a prize’, I was confused. However, what she was doing was using the word ‘prize’ to exemplify how to decode. She then decoded each grapheme to create five phonemes. By saying ‘The /ɪ/ is an /aɪ/’, Katerina demonstrated that /aɪ/ or the third phoneme in the word ‘prize’ is represented by the split digraph ‘i-e’ thus reducing the composition of phonemes in the word to four. Katerina thus provides a genuine example of how to decode using synthetic phonics. I had observed the children using the decoding strategy in their reading but only Katerina and Josef mention this. Katerina’s ability in English is more developed than the other children and furthermore, she is older therefore her explanation was more detailed. Ivan’s strategy of asking a parent is reasonable too assuming that the parent is sufficiently literate to support the child.

Summary

The adults interviewed believe that the regular, systematic teaching of synthetic phonics benefits EAL children. From listening to the children read, I discover that decoding provides a useful tool for the children when they already understand the meaning of the word in English. All the children require support, as sometimes they are learning to decode in conjunction with learning the vocabulary. A further issue is that some children may not be aware of the permissible sounds used to pronounce words in English, as is the case with Ivan. From interviewing the children, I gain some insight into what they think they do when they read, and their opinions on reading. Their views towards learning to read are positive and the most confident readers are able to express preferences about what they like to read.

Implications and conclusions

Implications for schools

Evidence from the national phonics screening assessment data as discussed in my findings established that the implementation of daily, discrete, synthetic phonics lessons in the school had raised standards in this important skill for EAL children. This is because in this school, management had placed a high priority on the training and development of teachers and teaching assistants so the quality of teaching was consistent across the school. Moreover, from my work with the children, I discovered that they used the decoding strategy when they encountered unknown words and I observed that the strategy was certainly beneficial when they already understood the lexis. Indeed, Menyuk and Brisk (2005: 110) assert that when ‘learners know the words they are more likely to sound it out accurately and thus get the appropriate meaning’. However, the major issue for these children and other EAL learners is that they often lack knowledge of lexis in the text therefore this means that they may read without understanding. This has implications for all elements of their education. Indeed, NALDIC (2006) caution that decoding without comprehending will not enable EAL learners to be successful at school.

Furthermore, NALDIC assert that ‘[r]eading for EAL learners needs to involve much more than proficiency in decoding if comprehension and engagement are to be the end result’ (ibid.: 6). Teaching children a decoding strategy thus is only one part of the instruction that EAL pupils, including those in my research, require in order to enable them to read and thereby access much of what is offered at school. A key question therefore, is what could policy makers do to enable EAL children to develop the reading comprehension skills that they need? I have discussed how the children’s ability to read was limited by
their lack of lexical knowledge. Lack of lexical knowledge has an obvious impact on comprehension therefore children’s language development should be a priority. One potential means of facilitating the language development of children such as those in my study would be to provide a bilingual education programme in schools. This means that children are taught a curriculum in both their home language and English. Evidence that demonstrates the benefits of this can be found in research by Cummins (2000) and Thomas and Collier (2002). However, this is not a prospective situation in England as current British Government policy states that ‘English should be the medium of instruction in schools’ (Overington: 2012: 5).

The obligation is on schools therefore, to support these children in developing their language and literacy skills in English. Moreover, the families of the children in my research lacked the English skills needed to support their children. Additionally, as members of the Roma community, they have been identified by the Department of Education as one of the groups ‘most in need of educational support’ (Fremlova and Ureche, 2011: 26). This is in recognition of their disadvantaged socio-economic status and history of low attainment and underachievement at school (ibid). Fremlova and Ureche (ibid) argue that the circumstances of this group will only be improved if a high quality education is offered. This means that teachers and teaching assistants have a crucial and long-term role in supporting the language development of these children, so that they can fully access the curriculum and achieve success at school. As Cummins (2000) opines, EAL children living in an English speaking country need many years of additional adult support if they are to reach a similar standard of literacy as their monolingual peers.

I believe that the most effective support is delivered by adults who have received training in teaching EAL children to read. I shall now explain this further.

Implications for training

In my findings, I discovered how a learner’s limited morphological knowledge affected comprehension. In addition, the inability of another learner to discriminate between sounds in his spoken English was a hindrance both to his decoding and comprehension. Limited lexical knowledge was a feature identified in all the children. Practitioners therefore need to be aware of issues such as these and also the most appropriate strategies on how to assist the children. One area for training should be on language as used by teachers or teaching assistants. Teacher language for example, needs to be unambiguous. Phrasal verbs for instance, which are common in English and widely understood by children with English as a first language, can confuse EAL children. On the other hand, strategies that practitioners could use to clarify new language for EAL children include using visual aids and realia. The employment of trained professionals who speak the child’s home language would also be beneficial.

Miscue analysis as a tool to support learners

Miscue analysis offers rich data for educators as it identifies the reading process for that child. Within my limited study, I was able to detect the strategies the children were using in their reading and the problems they encountered. I would like to suggest that the use of miscue analysis might be a regular feature in any assessment of a child’s reading as it informs possible action that can be taken to support that child.

Implications in the context of English language teaching

There are implications too for using synthetic phonics as a method to teach reading to young learners of English in other countries. The young learners’ market has increased rapidly in recent years and led to increased demands for appropriate resources to teach this age group. The growth of this market hence has seen the promotion of the use of synthetic phonics as a strategy to teach young learners to read in English. Assuming that teachers in this sector are properly trained, this strategy may be useful in developing the reading skills of young learners. By learning phoneme-grapheme relationships, learners gain a useful resource on how to pronounce, read and spell English words. This would support learners who write in non-alphabetic languages because as Goswami and Bryant (1990) explain, research indicates that these learners have less awareness of phonemes than learners with an alphabetic script in their first language.
Conclusion

In this small scale research, I have investigated how teaching children to decode using synthetic phonics supports a group of EAL learners who are learning to read. My research questions enabled me to establish that this strategy is helpful but that it does not fully meet the complex needs of these children. A limitation of my research was that I did not measure how frequently children used synthetic phonics or other strategies to decode when reading. I solely identified that the children used this strategy amongst others in their reading. It would be interesting to track these same children over the course of their primary and secondary schooling to discover how their reading ability develops, what strategies they use over time, and whether they eventually make progress on a par with their monolingual peers. It would also be valuable to undertake the same research with a different profile of learners. The children in my study are from an impoverished community and to date their families have had little experience of educational success. A comparative study would be to establish how children from more affluent backgrounds used the decoding strategy and whether they encountered similar issues to the children in my research.

References


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