

One size fits all, or does it?

Abstract

Our research focus evolved from a problematic issue around a number of learners in ESOL provision from September 2015. As an ESOL provider we were faced with a challenging requirement to both demonstrate progress and prove achievement. Looking specifically at the cohort, we ascertained that we had a group of learners who were illiterate in their first language. In order to address this need, we decided to implement a reading strategy that would advance learners' reading skills. We were fully aware that having tried and tested various reading classroom approaches, none had been successful in terms of accelerating progress in reading. Having previously experimented with teaching phonics to illiterate learners, we decided that this would be the most effective method to adopt.

We have based our research upon the findings of Maxine Burton (2011) and Spiegel and Sunderland (2006). Because of lack of credible research in this field, and because of the resources commercially available are aimed at primary aged children, we had elements of doubts whether the approach would achieve its objectives. We devised the following question "What is the impact of synthetic phonics based approach when teaching literacy to emerging ESOL adults."

Our preliminary findings have revealed that the use of systematic synthetic phonics will work in conjunction with regular ESOL provision, which justifies Burton's claim. It has accelerated learners' ability to take small steps in reading whole words and sentences through blending and segmenting. This is an ongoing process. We support the fact that this strategy is of interest to ESOL practitioners who are faced with the challenges of non-readers.

Literature review

Drawing on the findings of Spiegel and Sunderland 'We understand a basic literacy learner to be someone who is still learning to read a short simple text and struggles to write a simple sentence independently.' (Spiegel and Sunderland 2006: 15) They also provide the readers with a more detailed description on various types of ESOL learners and continue, 'some learners may be able to copy in English but not write independently beyond a few words, while others may be able to read simple texts or just make out some key signs but not write at all.' They also offer a number of classroom approaches to teaching reading, such as language experience, paired reading, whole word recognition or phonics. Spiegel and Sunderland (2006) As stated earlier by the authors, when we talk about learners with a basic level of English literacy, we

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potentially mean learners that can be enrolled on a wide range of ESOL and mainstream classes. Spiegel and Sunderland (2006) A vast majority of learners are enrolled on funded programmes with prescribed syllabus. A course used widely is English My Way. The main definition of English My Way says 'it is a programme designed specifically for people living in the UK, whose English language abilities are below Entry Level 1 of the Adult ESOL Curriculum.' (www.englishmyway.co.uk/find-out-more) Although the

programme is of high standard and much time has been invested into its development,

implementing a variety of above mentioned approaches, it still addresses ESOL learners with low literacy. This means, some literacy is a prerequisite. Following the programme was addressing some needs, for example speaking but this gave little progress when reading and writing were concerned.

In chapter four Spiegel and Sunderland look at Uta Frith's model of reading acquisition that aims to explain how children acquire the ability to read. They also stress that 'very little research has been conducted into how bilingual adults learn to read.' Spiegel and Sunderland (2006) 'ESOL teachers working with beginner readers thus have few research based models of reading acquisition to directly inform or critique their practice against, and must look to theoretical models based on studies conducted mainly with non-bilingual children.' (Spiegel and Sunderland 2006: 55)

According to Frith's model, 'children learning to read pass through an identifiable series of stages on route to becoming fluent readers.' (Spiegel and Sunderland 2006: 56)

We wanted to break the mould where we see ESOL learners placed in mainstream classes making very little progress especially with reading. Whilst we supported the findings of Spiegel and Sunderland, we actually needed something that would address the problem. We decided to

implement some intervention in order to address this need. A phonics based approach that offered flexibility and rigor was required.

'If we take Frith's model into consideration, phonics is a skill that links to the alphabetic stage of reading acquisition. In this approach, the sounds of the letters of the alphabet are taught, and the correspondences between letters and groups of letters and their pronunciation are learnt.' (Adams 1990) in (Spiegel and Sunderland 2006: 65)

You may ask the same question as Maxine Burton does in her first chapter: 'Why phonics for adults?' Maxine Burton (2011) By drawing on the research project conducted by The National

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Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC), she says 'there is strong research evidence that systematic phonics instruction, within broad and rich literacy

curriculum, enables children to make better progress in word identification than unsystematic or no phonics instruction.' (Burton 2011: 7) She claims it is the most reliable method of word

identification. Maxine Burton (2011)

'Adults who have learnt to recite the letters of the alphabet may still have failed to make the vital connection between the marks on the page and the sounds they represent, despite perhaps having memorised a good stock of sight vocabulary. She continues 'even learners who are able to 'sound out' the letters, in the sense of connecting certain letters with certain sounds, may still struggle to blend these sounds into words. This is a very specific skill and to the beginner reader it is not immediately obvious.' (Burton 2011: 8)

There was analytic versus synthetic approach conducted in Scotland with primary aged,

non-bilingual children. The research strongly recommends the synthetic phonics approach.

Within the analytic phonics, letter sounds are taught after reading has already begun, children

initially learning to read some words by sight, often in the context of meaningful text. Children

thus learn about letter sound in the context of whole words. Synthetic phonics, on the other hand, begins from sounds prior to the children being able to read whole words. Spiegel and Sunderland (2006) Our learners were missing what the analytic approach needed - the context. The latter does not need it.

Our starting point for the intervention was born - Synthetic phonics intervention outside the

mainstream class in order to emerge reading skills.

It is, however, vital to mention that in Spiegel and Sunderland's experience, 'adult bilingual learners who have successfully used phonic strategies have been taught using an analytic phonics

approach, embedded in a clear and meaningful context.' (Spiegel and Sunderland 2006: 68)

We would like to oppose to their statement, we believe a synthetic approach is a suitable phonics method to the type of our learners' profiles.

Based on their recommendation, we chose 'A procedure for teaching phonics', which has several stages, a procedure for teaching phonics, assess learner's level of spoken English (initial PL

assessment), assess learner's previous learning experience in L1 literacy. (App.3 - learner

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questionnaire), (App.4 - learners' answered questionnaire), asses learner's ability to read and write in English. (App.5 - EMW initial assessment) (App.6 - EMW students' assessment) - for re/wr. Spiegel and Sunderland (2006)

The rest of the points suggested by the authors are not relevant to our learners, their knowledge of English was none at the starting point.

Methodology

In terms of timescales, we had worked out that we had around nine months to implement the approach and measure progress. We identified a cohort of nine students but this diminished to five due to external factors.

It is best to record a timeline of events to shows the steps we took

Time	Participants
01/10/15	9 students identified
15/10/15	9 students identified
01/11/15	9 students identified
01/11/15	5 students identified
07/11/15	Tutor and research associates
01/12/15	Tutor and interpreter
01/12/15	Tutor and research associates
15/12/15	Tutor, students and research associa
01/01/16-01/04/16	Tutor, students and research associa
01/04/16-15/7/16	Tutor, students and research associa

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Both qualitative and quantitative were collected both in the form of scores collated on the phonics screen and the number of words that could be correctly decoded. The general pattern was an upward trend but with some inconsistencies in the quantitative data. This is still ongoing. As a starting point we looked at the EMW assessments again analysing the qualitative data to see what students could complete. The learners' responses were very similar in the fact that they could do very little and their graphology was consistent with that of someone who was illiterate in their first language. Another qualitative method was the first language questionnaire. We designed this with open questions in mind so that we could gain a richer picture of the learners' experiences with education and schooling and to see if we could establish any links or patterns. This was extremely helpful in building up a learner profile and there was strong correlation between the lack of experience in education and the challenges they faced acquiring skills in a second language.

Intervention

Our participants are self referring but we were seeing a common trend from September 2015 of a large number of illiterate students in L1 coming through. We anticipated a problem for the new academic year and so decided at some point to implement a discrete reading class to help support their needs further. We identified a cohort of ten students that needed extra support and after six weeks we decided that something further needed to be done. We took the decision to implement a small group for further discrete provision where a phonic based approach would be implemented. This consisted of five to six students who attended for two hours per week for a planned nine months of the year. We followed an adapted scheme of work created by us from the Letters and Sounds programme. Students move through the phases at a rigorous pace in order to keep progress moving. Throughout the programme students are tested on a termly basis to check for progress and any catch up where required. The participants are currently half way through the programme and are at the end of phase three. We intend for them to continue until the end of the programme.

Ethical considerations

It was important to consider the ethical considerations so we compiled the following:

As a part of this research project we have ensured that:

- Any personal information collected has remained strictly confidential.
- Personal information of the participants have remained anonymous at all times.
- Written permission has been obtained on the usage and sharing of collected data.

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- Compiled audio/video evidence, electronic and paper files for the basis of the project have only been used for research and educational purposes. Where these have been used, written consent has been obtained.
- All participants have the right to access any collected information or data that relates to the individual.
- Educational researchers maintained respect for persons participating in the research.
- Educational researchers ensured a duty of care to vulnerable participants and provided a safe, supportive and secure environment.
- At all stages of the research we have taken the 'learner voice' into consideration.
- We have taken all necessary steps to reduce the sense of intrusion during the research process.
- The researchers complied with legal requirements in relation to working with vulnerable adults.
- Educational researchers recognised the right of any participant to withdraw from the research for any or no reason. The participants have been informed about this right.
- All rights to protect the organisation compiling this research have been taken.
- Teaching and reporting on progress will be necessary to aid planning, amendments and informing best practice.

We hoped that the main focus of the findings and research would help us conclude that a phonics based approach is a tried and tested method in helping ESOL students to read. There is so much gray matter or material covering literacy and ESOL than no one has really ever pinned any concrete data down and said that this actually works. We were not under any illusion though that the process would be slow and at times repetitive. Scholarly literature needs to not only report on suggested approaches but actually need to make reference to this approach being used, tried and tested.

What you found out and recommend

Keyfindings_

One of the key findings of the research is the fact that the learners are applying their phonic knowledge to decode unfamiliar words. Students are able to read simple books based on their phonic knowledge. The provisional indications suggest that systematic use of phonics based approach is beneficial for adult learners. Being at the early stages of reading has seen an increase in their confidence and self-esteem. The biggest transformation is seeing the learners being able to apply reading strategies to unfamiliar texts and being successful. Another key finding is regular

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attendance equates to achievement. The amount of time required for the programme to be implemented needs to be longer because it takes more time to build confidence in adults than children. From a teacher's perspective, it is essential to revisit and recap numerous times because there is a need for constant concept checking. From a linguistic point of view, first language has a great impact on the progress so this makes the delivery more repetitive. One of the biggest successes has been the showing the participants the change which they have undertaken and seeing the difference this has made to their lives. Taking out the first assessment completed and looking at the distance travelled is immense. They almost cannot believe that it was them who completed the work in the early stages. As expected this is a time consuming process that will benefit more work and time in order for the full benefits to be seen.

Recommendations

We would definitely consider a phonics based approach for these types of students. This was only a small scale study looking at a very small cohort and for concrete evidence to show it actually works we would like to see it rolled out into something larger. This would allow the data to be collated and would provide more feasibility in a larger scale study. What we have learnt from this is that you need to believe in something to make it work. You have to have qualified and resilient tutors on board who really want to make a difference to students' lives. The feedback from the participants should be enough to see change. We have discovered that tutors do not challenge the boundaries of what does not work and instead continue with what they have been told to do irrespective of the outcome. This is not sufficient. Again, the literature supports that a phonics based approach can work but avoids committing to how best to do this. One recommendation is read around the subject particularly around second language acquisition and definitely consider the language one interference as this helps make links. You must train staff and ensure that they are following and modelling the sound production and articulation perfectly. It requires lots of monitoring, reviewing and adapting. You will get anomalies in results but rather than get frustrated try and seek answers as to why. Often it is down to carelessness and the students not listening carefully. This is a long slow burn and it certainly does not answer all the questions around phonics. A lot of time needs to be spent on drilling especially pronunciation. You need to be prepared to recap and revisit many times. There will be times when you believe you are going backwards rather than forwards. If you have an idea around phonics then I suggest you try it out but be prepared for some very rewarding outcomes. Certainly, ensure that you use this intervention along side other provision. Do not rely solely on one approach. It is true to say that one size certainly doesn't fit all!

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