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Tracking progress in beginner language learners' ability to sound out new words

What this research was about and why it is important

Research has found that beginner learners of French as a foreign language in English schools are not good at sounding out unknown French words when reading. This is thought to have negative implications for the learning of new vocabulary, pupils' understanding of reading material and, as a result, their motivation to continue with the study of the language. This study examined learners' *progress* in sounding out unknown French words correctly over the period of their second year of learning the language. Overall, no real improvement was seen in learners' sounding-out skills when reading aloud, in the absence of explicit instruction in this area. The author suggested that the ability to sound out unfamiliar words is an important but neglected skill in the teaching of French as a foreign language in English schools.

What the researchers did

- 85 pupils were drawn randomly from 5 mixed-attainment teaching groups in an English secondary school.
- At the end of their first year of learning the language (aged 11-12) and again at the end of their second year (aged 12-13), pupils were given a [Read Aloud Test](#) consisting of words unlikely to have been encountered previously, meaning that they could not draw upon previously-stored knowledge of the words' pronunciations.
- The tests were recorded and scored according to how accurately the pupils pronounced each grapheme (letter or letter combination) associated with a distinct sound within each word, e.g. the letter combinations *-oin* (wē) or *-on* (ō).
- The same test was used on both occasions to ensure comparability of results. (The pupils would have been unlikely to remember the correct pronunciations over the one-year intervening period, and in any case received no feedback on their pronunciations on the first occasion).

What the researchers found

- The mean score on the Read Aloud Test at the end of the pupils' second year of learning the language was almost identical to that at the end of their first year. This suggests that pupils had made no progress over the twelve-month period in their ability to sound out unknown words correctly.
- To rule out the possibility that the average score had remained static through some pupils' performing better in the second test whilst others had performed correspondingly worse, the similarity between the first and second test scores for each individual was examined. This confirmed a genuine lack of progress at the individual level, and also showed that this lack of progress was fairly uniform across the group.
- Likewise, it was not the case that the pronunciation of some graphemes improved whilst others deteriorated. There was also no real change on the whole in the way that sounds for individual letters or letter combinations were pronounced: those that were pronounced well in the first test were those that were pronounced well in the second; and those that were pronounced poorly in the first test were those that were pronounced poorly in the second.

Things to consider

- The study was conducted in a single school, which was perhaps not representative of English schools more widely. (For example, it had lower than average proportions of pupils entitled to free school meals and with English as an additional language). However, the findings of the study reflect those of previous, larger-scale, cross-sectional research in this area.
- Though the teaching methodology used in the study school was not a focus of examination in the study (and thus we cannot rule out the possibility that atypical teaching methods had an adverse effect on pupil progress), there was no systematic instruction in how to sound out unknown French words correctly from their written forms. It seems clear that, in the absence of any such systematic instruction, students were not able to pick up the correct pronunciations through their normal studies of French.
- Explicit instruction in phonological decoding is thus recommended, though of course this needs to be fitted in to the wider curriculum and this could be difficult in view of the limited lesson time available.

Materials available on <https://iris-database.org>

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