

Porter, A.M. (2014). An early start to French literacy: Teaching the spoken and written word simultaneously in English Primary School Classrooms. Unpublished PhD thesis. University of Southampton <https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/374731/>

The effects of phonics instruction on primary school learners' French reading aloud

What this research was about and why it is important

The Primary National Curriculum recommends that learners should be able to make links between the sounds, spelling and meaning of words (DfE, 2014). Research has shown that word recognition is a foundational skill in learning to read an alphabetic language. Teachers of foreign languages are often encouraged to incorporate FL phonics instruction into their teaching. However, little is known about the *effectiveness* of FL phonics instruction on FL reading aloud or the *process* of learning FL sound/spelling links in primary school classrooms.

What the researcher did

- The teacher/researcher taught a programme of French oracy and literacy for 24 weeks in two primary school classrooms (learners aged 9-11).
- The literacy instruction comprised weekly French phonics sessions alongside reading/writing for meaning including some incidental reading strategy awareness-raising.
- There was a fortnightly planning cycle: each week there was either a phonics focus or a phonics boost session.
- The phonics instruction was multimodal: the teacher/researcher used exemplar words (e.g. “cochon” – pig to model the spelling ON and its corresponding sound) with pictures and gestures.
- The teacher/researcher measured the children's reading aloud (print to sound) performance with two tests a) reading whole sentences (RAS) and b) reading aloud word cards (RAWC) with exemplar and unfamiliar words.
- The teacher/researcher also collected weekly written work to see how the children were recoding when writing (i.e. sound to print).
- The children were tested at the beginning of the teaching programme (pre-test) and at the end (post-test). They were also tested seven weeks after the teaching finished (delayed post-test) to see whether any learning was long-term.

What the researcher found

- The children improved at RAS between pre- (m=2.64, sd=1.525) and post-test (m=3.67, sd=1.871), $t(44)=-3.886$, $p<.0005$; small effect size (.25).
- However, by delayed post-test, the children's RAS scores decreased (m=3.09, sd=1.781, $t(44)=2.357$, $p=.023$) so it seemed the learning was short-term. Again the effect size (.11) was small.
- The children read familiar words on word cards better than unfamiliar words. For example, 28 out of 45 children read “cochon” (familiar) in a target-like manner at post-test. However, only 12 out of 45 children read “ongle”(unfamiliar) using French sound/spelling links.
- The children's performance varied depending on specific sound/spelling links. IN and ON (familiar words) performed the best in the RAWC test. These were the most reliable 1:1 mappings but also had been practiced the longest.
- Different sound/spellings links were better remembered in the RAS task: connU and AU scored highest at post-test.
- L1 sound/spelling links were still dominant, even after 24 weeks of instruction. In other words, they still pronounced and wrote many words as if they were English words.

Things to consider

- The teacher/researcher cannot say that phonics instruction alone improved reading aloud or reading comprehension because there was no control group so all participants experienced the same teaching programme.
- Accurate French reading aloud seems to depend on regular opportunities to practice learning sound/spelling links.
- It appeared that French reading aloud performances could depend on the transparency of links plus the kinds of tests used to elicit children's performances.
- Retrospectively, the teacher/researcher noted that developing FL sound/spelling links should involve regular opportunities to practice reading aloud skills. This was not done systematically during the teaching programme.
- In this study, the learners developed knowledge of French sound/spelling links slowly and their reading aloud performance tended to be disrupted by their knowledge of English phonics.