

## **Draft- not to be circulated or cited**

# Teaching reading to beginner learners of French in secondary school

## What this research was about and why it is important

Though motivation towards language learning is often high at the transition from primary to secondary schooling in England, there is a documented dip in pupils' motivation towards the end of their first year of learning a language in secondary school. Previous research has shown a combination of phonics and reading strategy instruction to be effective in increasing reading proficiency in this age group (giving a sense of progress, which is thought to be a factor in increasing pupil confidence and motivation), but without identifying the separate contribution of each of these elements. This study aimed to build upon the previous research by examining to what extent pupils' reading skills, confidence and attitudes towards the subject benefit from: (a) phonics instruction (teaching pupils how to sound out words correctly), accompanied by the use of challenging French texts; (b) reading strategy instruction (e.g. teaching pupils ways of inferring the meaning of unknown words from the context), accompanied by the use of the same texts; and (c) exposure to the challenging texts alone. All three approaches were found to be equally beneficial in developing reading comprehension overall, though particular teaching approaches developed other learner outcomes to varying extents, as discussed below.

## What the researchers did

- 36 classes of pupils in their first year of secondary education (aged 11-12 years) took part in the study. All groups were assessed prior to the start of the programme, and again afterwards. The outcome measures included reading comprehension, phonological decoding, vocabulary knowledge, strategic behaviour and self-efficacy for reading and motivation for learning the language. Pupils' and teachers' views on the programmes of instruction were also elicited.
- Each class was assigned to one of 3 groups: (1) receiving phonics instruction and reading challenging texts; (2) receiving reading strategy instruction and reading the same texts; (3) reading the same texts as groups 1 and 2, but without any additional instruction. All groups spent around 20-30 minutes per week on this instruction, over a 16-week period. The challenging texts were 8 specially-written "pedagogical texts", designed to allow practice of the phonics and strategy work featured in the study.
- To assess pupils' reading comprehension, they read short French texts, answered comprehension questions and completed translation tasks.
- Their ability to sound out words was assessed through a specially-developed 'Sound Alike Test' (SALT). For each item in this test, pupils saw three 'pseudowords' and had to decide which ones (if any) sounded the same if read aloud in French. (Pseudowords are permissible word forms in a given language, but they happen not to be real words. Examples of French pseudowords are 'jeau' and 'flête').
- Vocabulary knowledge was assessed by means of a well-established test format, in which they had to indicate whether or not they knew a selection of French words presented to them. Some pseudowords were included in the list to control for guesswork.
- Pupils' level of confidence in understanding the texts, their reading strategy use, their motivation and their views on the instructional programme which they had experienced were all also assessed via a short questionnaire. Some pupils and teachers also took part in interviews to explore their views in greater detail.

## What the researchers found

- All three groups made progress in their reading comprehension skills over the duration of the study; no one approach seemed to offer an advantage over the others in this respect (either in the short or long term).
- All three groups also made progress in their ability to sound out unknown words correctly when reading; the phonics instruction group enjoyed an advantage over the other groups in this respect, however.
- In terms of gains in pupils' vocabulary knowledge, the phonics and strategies groups (especially the former) made greater gains than the Texts Only group.
- There was most evidence for the development of reading strategy use in the strategy instruction group.
- The strategy instruction group showed the greatest gains in confidence; the other groups' confidence also increased.
- None of the approaches appeared to confer an advantage over the others with regard to maintaining pupils' motivation; the familiar 'dip' at the end of the first year of secondary schooling still occurred, though was small.
- Learners (and teachers) showed a very positive attitude in general towards the instructional materials, particularly the challenging texts used for all groups in the study. They enjoyed engaging with the cultural content of these texts.

## Things to consider

- The researchers believe that this study shows that beginner learners of French aged 11-12 years can tackle, with benefits to their learning, reading texts of a more challenging nature than are usually presented to this age group.
- The authors also suggest that combining the use of challenging texts with instruction in both phonics and reading strategies is likely to be more beneficial than using any one approach in isolation. Phonics instruction may be particularly important in facilitating acquisition of new vocabulary, which underpins all language learning.
- These approaches need to be maintained over the long term for benefits to persist.

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