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Near-beginner learners of French are reading at a disability level

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ABSTRACT

In this article I present empirical data which were part of the findings from an ESRC-funded research project investigating Year 7 learners' experiences of reading in French as a foreign language. I first make an argument for the key role which being able to decode from written French to the spoken sounds of the words plays in reading. I then describe the pupils involved in the research, the research question and the data-collecting tools which I used. The findings from the research are discussed along with the learners' self-reports on their attitudes toward decoding in French. The implications of the findings are discussed in the light of what is known about reading impairment.

INTRODUCTION

In the spring 2001 issue of *Francophonie*, Siddons pointed to a connection between the approaches for teaching sound-spelling relationships in French as a *first* language and improvements which could be made for teaching these relationships to learners of French as a *foreign* language in the UK. Siddons also suggested that materials for this teaching could be drawn from work that is done with children who have difficulties when reading in *English* as their *first* language. This article reinforces the three connections Siddons (*ibid*) made by presenting data from empirical research with Year 7 learners of French in two comprehensive schools in England. As part of the investigations into these pupils' experiences of reading French as a foreign language their knowledge of the grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPC), or spelling-sound rules, in French was tested. The results of the test were placed alongside what the pupils reported about their feelings when they were decoding and spelling French. The implications of these findings fit the connections which Siddons (*ibid*) made. Before describing the project and its findings I will set the context for my research project by taking a brief look at the wider background of research into reading.

RESEARCH INTO READING AND READING PROCESSES

Over the last two decades there has been a great deal of research into reading in a first language, particularly in trying to understand the processes involved in learning to read. Much research has been done with children learning to read in English as their mother tongue, but insights into actual reading processes regardless of language or level of reading ability have come from research by cognitive psychologists studying various forms of reading impairment.

Cognitive psychologists and neuro-psychologists studying patients and children who experience impairment or lack of progress in their reading skills of English as their first language (EL1), or mother tongue, have found that a common symptom is a problem with decoding words from their written to their spoken forms (e.g. Patterson, Marshall and Coltheart, 1985; Fawcett, ed. 2001; Funnell, 2000). Knowledge of the spelling-sound

relationships in a language, that is, the GPC, is also called "phonological awareness" in some of the research literature. With regard to developing readers in EL1 Stanovich (1980: 64) reported that "good readers appear to have superior phonetic segmentation and recoding abilities [from print to sounds] so that they can rapidly decode [the meaning of] a word". A seminal work published in 1983 by Bryant and Bradley showed a causal link between a child's early knowledge of phonological awareness - how letters and strings of letters (like "th") are related to sounds - and the child's ability to learn to read. Stanovich (1986) pointed out that poor early readers who could not decode from print to sound remained poor readers later on. Goswami and Bryant (1990) also argued that children needed to be able to decode from graphemes (writing) to phonemes (pronunciation) in EL1 for their reading development to progress. They promoted that phonological knowledge can be tested in beginner readers of English as a first language by seeing whether they can recognise the rhyming sounds at the ends of words, often nonsense words. In addition to research done with children's ability to read, Gathercole and Baddeley (2001) have argued that a mechanism which they call the phonological loop processes written language into sounds as part of working (or short-term) memory. The phonological loop is active during all reading, whether the reader is aware of it or not. It enables the activation of long-term phonological memory of language during the process of reading and so is instrumental in accessing the meanings from memory of words and of chunks of language.

Research done in other countries has shown the same need for first language phonological awareness and phonological decoding ability for the successful development of reading skills in the mother tongue. Of particular interest for those of us researching learning to read in French as a foreign language are the experiments of Sprenger-Charolles and Casalis (1995) who carried out research with 40 native-speaker French children which showed that learning to read in French as a first language also necessitates phonological mediation, that is, the decoding of graphemes (written letters and strings of letters) to sounds and to syllables.

Muter and Diethelm (2001) recently argued that before a word can be decoded into phonological units such as its rime (end-of-word sounds), the reader must be able to parse or separate the word into syllables. Muter *et al.* (*ibid*) tested children learning French as a foreign language, and found that the syllabic parsing ability (i.e. being able to tell where the syllable begins and ends) played a significant role in reading proficiency in FFL (French as a foreign language). Cognitive psychologists Derouesné and Beauvois (1985) had already determined that the key factor in their brain-damaged French patient's form of reading impairment in French was the inability to distinguish letter strings that formed syllables. In other words, for instance, knowing that "eaux" is pronounced "oh" and constitutes one syllable, not two or more.

The growing body of international research into reading processes has shown, therefore, that decoding from print to sound is essential for learning to read and for the successful further development toward becoming a fluent reader in both the mother tongue and in a foreign language such as French. Conversely, the *inability* to decode words from graphemes to phonemes is a typical sign of reading difficulties. Being able to decode print to sound assumes such an important role in reading research that the inability to decode correctly is deemed symptomatic of dyslexic reading impairment based either on developmental anomalies of the brain or on injury to the brain.

Some evidence of the above findings from cognitive psychology and studies of dyslexia can be found in the UK National Literacy Strategy (1998) where pedagogical approaches for teaching reading to children at school include the explicit teaching of phonological awareness, that is, the grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPC) in English. Some emphasis on phonological awareness has filtered into the recent Framework for KS3 MFL (2003). However, no real programme for phonological awareness training has appeared and

certainly was not contained in the National Curriculum for Modern Foreign Languages.

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS AND THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

Phonological awareness in the foreign language has been an area of knowledge which, it was apparently assumed in the National Curriculum, would develop implicitly as pupils learned more and more of the foreign language. At Level 2 of the National Curriculum Attainment Targets (1995) pupils should be able to "match sound to print" but there is no mention of accessing meaning through that activity, indicating that the purposes behind the need to be able to decode words was not clear or made explicit, despite the research findings. Not until Level 5 of the Attainment Targets is it expected that the learner would be "generally confident in reading aloud", in other words would still not know the GPC with secure confidence. The Programme of Study Part 1 (1997: 29, 49) includes several tasks for learning and practising the spelling/sound links of the language but there was no direct guidance to teach the GPC coherently or completely. Although one task is listed under 1i "read hand-written and printed texts of different types and of varying lengths and, where appropriate, read aloud", which implicates decoding in successful reading, it does not hint at its importance or at the reasons for needing to know the GPC in order to progress with reading. Teachers are perhaps expected to understand the GPC role intuitively.

Most textbooks that were based on the National Curriculum adopted a stance that phonology was to be learned implicitly, supported as and when the teacher felt it would be useful to point out spelling-sound correspondences in the target language. This was the approach taken by the teachers in my research project and in the textbooks which they were using: *Avantage 1* (1992), *Route Nationale 1* (1992), and *Métro 1* (1999). None introduce French GPC systematically or thoroughly. Given the importance of knowing how to decode from print to sound as shown from the reading research, it would seem imperative for pupils to know how to decode early in their learning of the foreign language.

In my personal experience of teaching pupils at secondary level I met learners at all stages of their learning of French who were unable to read aloud correctly, even words which they had supposedly learnt well and had had plenty of contact with, like "qui" pronounced "kwee", or "je regarde" decoded as "jay regarday". Nott (1994) made an extensive list of the sounds which he found undergraduate students of French were mispronouncing, including "je regarde" as "jay regarday". Nott suggested that much earlier training be done in French pronunciation. This would mean providing learners with a secure knowledge of the GPC of French long before university.

Given the importance in the literature of being able to decode from print to sound but the apparent neglect of a teaching programme for the GPC within the National Curriculum, I was interested to find out the base of GPC knowledge that learners had gained by the end of their first year of learning French in secondary school, which would serve them in later years as they developed their reading skills in French.

RESEARCH METHOD

The project took place in July 2000 with Year 7 pupils coming to the end of their first year of learning French in secondary school. A total of 359 pupils participated. They were in fourteen teaching groups in two schools located in two different counties in Southern England. The schools were chosen for their proximity to where I lived and because they could be deemed "average" or middle-achieving schools with 50% A-C results in their preceding GCSE exams. The pupils who took part in the research had all had two to two and a half hours of French per week for three terms. By means of a questionnaire I found out

that some pupils had help at home with their French and some had had experience of French in primary school.

I developed a research question which led to the creation of a test for Year 7's GPC knowledge of French. It was:

What do pupils know about certain spelling-sound rules in French as they are coming to the end of Year 7, their first year of learning the foreign language at secondary level?

THE TEST OF PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

A commonly used test for teachers to determine reading impairment in English (EL1) is the nonword decoding test, where the reader must pronounce the printed nonword (e.g. Snowling, Stothard and McLean, 1996) to demonstrate the ability to decode from print to sound. As oral testing was not possible with the whole cohort of 359 pupils, a pen and paper test of phonological awareness was devised to find out whether the pupils could recognise end rime or rhyme, similar to tests used by Bryant, mentioned above.

The test was devised for final vowel sounds which included knowledge of final silent consonants in French. The task was to decode written representations for the vowel sounds of 'a', 'o', 'é', 'i', 'è' and 'eur'.

There were eight cue words, each followed by four choice words, any number of which rhymed with the cue word. The choice words were selected for their spellings which either:

- had an end rhyme which was the same as the cue word, or
- looked similar in some way to the cue word but did not rhyme with it. [see Appendix 1].

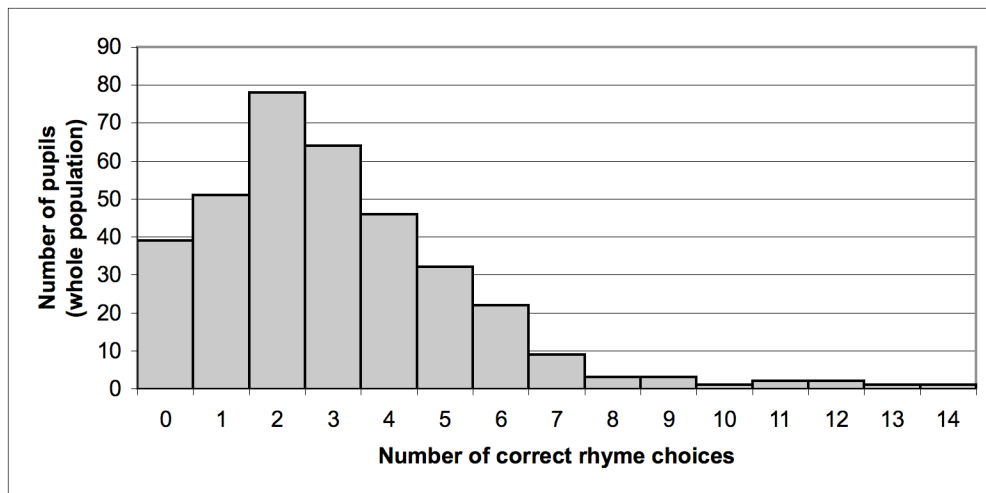
The instructions for the test were to choose the word or words which rhymed with the cue word. The cue words and the option words had been selected so that the learners mostly saw words they did not know and so could not recognise automatically (thereby possibly remembering their pronunciation from the meaning of the word). The learners had all been taught similarly spelled words at some point in the course of their first year of learning, so all the cue words and many of the choice words had end sounds whose written form the learners were likely to have come across in other words during lessons or in their textbooks. Many of the words in the test were nevertheless virtually nonsense words for these Year 7s.

The marking scheme for the test was based on positive choices. If the pupil had underlined or circled a correctly rhyming word he or she was awarded 1 point. The total number of correct positive responses was taken as 15 although technically it was 13 because "jouet" and "et" in numbers 6 and 7 do not rhyme with the cue word. The two sounds for 'e' were conflated here and throughout the task any differences between long and short vowel sounds were ignored.

RESULTS OF THE TEST

The range of results for the whole sample of Year 7 pupils was 0 to 14 correct (Figure 1). The majority of pupils achieved between 1 and 6 choices correct, that is, only between 6.6% and 40% correct. The mean for the whole sample was a little over 3 correct answers, or 20% correct.

Figure 1 Number of correct rhyme choices



Nine pupils achieved between 8 and 14 correct, that is a mark of over 50%. Of these pupils two were bilingual French boys who achieved 13 and 14 respectively. The other seven were all girls who had had some French in the primary and who had help at home with their French. When looking at the whole sample of 359, however, gender did not play a statistically significant role in the results. Neither did prior experience of French in primary school. Help at home, on the other hand, did have a statistical effect throughout the whole sample, but questions arise as to what sort of help and from whom? More research needs to be done on the role of this element in learning French.

An independent sample t-test of the mean results for the two schools showed there was no statistically significant difference between them. With the nine higher scoring pupils removed, both schools had the same mean, 2.75 correct choices, with slightly different standard deviations (School 1: 1.99; School 2: 1.74). The results show that the problem of identifying rhyme sounds in printed words was the same in both schools although different textbooks were being used. The results seem to indicate that, with a few exceptions, pupils had little idea after one year of learning French about spelling-sound rules for principal vowel sounds in the language and for the general rule of silent final consonants. These are key rules for being able to decode from print to sound, and are essential for reading comprehension.

AFFECTIVE ISSUES SURROUNDING DECODING FROM PRINT TO SOUND

Before the 359 pupils took the phonological awareness test, they were asked how they felt about pronouncing, reading aloud and spelling in French. To give their response they were offered a choice of "faces" which had been decided upon and drawn by a group of 30 Year 7s during the pilot phase of the research project. In other words, the choices of emotions for the faces were made by Year 7s themselves. The "Faces" section appears in Appendix 2.

Results from the "Faces" section revealed that in total only 7.6% reported they felt 'happy' when reading French out loud in lesson. Comparison of means tests showed there were no significant differences between girls' and boys' responses. There was however a statistically significant difference between the two schools ($p < 0.05$):

Happy reading aloud?

School 1 – 3.5%

School 2 – 9.4%

Two other 'yes' results for the whole sample are very low, with no significant differences between genders or schools:

Happy pronouncing French aloud? – 9.6%

Happy spelling French? – 13.6%

The picture is one of a great number of pupils not feeling very positively about decoding or spelling written French. Altogether, more pupils ticked 'not bothered' than 'yes' but it is not clear what 'not bothered' might mean for them. It is possible that for some, at least, "not bothered" was an attitude that was adopted in order to deal with anxiety or uncertainty.

On the other hand, it might be assumed that 'not bothered' reflected a calm acceptance of the situation. If that were the case, the results for "yes" could be combined with the results for 'not bothered' for each of the questions. Setting this total against the combined negative responses of 'puzzled', 'worried', 'angry' and 'embarrassed' produces the results in Table 1.

Table 1 Affective responses to decoding and encoding French

| Activity | Happy + not bothered | Negative responses |
|-------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Reading aloud | 46.4% | 49.2% |
| Pronouncing aloud | 47.4% | 48.7% |
| Spelling French | 52.3% | 40.9% |

This chart shows that altogether nearly half the Year 7s reported an expressly negative emotion when dealing with written French. In addition, "not bothered" could have subsumed negative feelings for some of those pupils who ticked it. This would raise the number who were expressing unhappiness. Across the whole sample expressly negative responses of 'puzzled', 'worried', 'angry' and 'embarrassed' were approximately similar for both schools and for both boys and girls.

HOW IMPORTANT DID THE LEARNERS THINK GPC KNOWLEDGE WAS FOR LEARNING FRENCH?

Prior to both activities of indicating their feelings in the "Faces" section and of the phonological test, the Year 7s were asked two questions:

- Did they think it was useful to know French pronunciation for reading in French?
- Were they aware of 'hear[ing] words in [their] head' when reading French?

Results showed that 75% of the total sample Year 7s thought it was useful to know pronunciation and 63% of them indicated that they were aware of sub-vocalising to sounds when reading in French. There were no differences between boys and girls or between schools. The responses on these two questions show an overall picture of the importance these Year 7s attached to the sounds of the language for their FL reading, probably from their own personal experience with the language.

DISCUSSION

In view of the findings from my research, questions arise about the pupils' sense of achievement and pleasure with reading in French after one year of learning. Without adequate decoding skills are early readers enjoying the language? Do they feel motivated to make progress in it? Some evidently do, but the findings from my research with these Year 7s hint at the 'Vicious Circle' of non-progression in foreign language reading which has been proposed by Nuttall (2000) who describes the reader who understands little and so reads less, not enjoying any of it. This phenomenon has also been described by cognitive psychologist Stanovich (1986) as the "Matthew effect" (the rich get richer and the poor get poorer) for early learners of reading in English as a first language who struggle with poor decoding skills and make little progress toward fluent reading. The "Matthew effect" has been used in reference to both first and second language reading difficulties.

IMPLICATIONS

Reading impairment

From research done with individuals who were braindamaged or were developmentally dyslexic, cognitive psychologist Ellis (1984) wrote descriptor statements for various types of dyslexia. The description for 'phonological dyslexia' matches the test results of the Year 7s for decoding written French:

"[The patient is] virtually unable to read unfamiliar words or nonwords aloud suggesting impairment of grapheme-phoneme conversion and/or phonemic assembly". (p. 46)

Shaywitz, Pugh, Jenner, Fulbright, Fletcher, Gore and Shaywitz (2000: 244) claim from their review of research into the neurobiological bases for dyslexia, and from their own research using brain imaging, that "brain activation patterns [of patients with dyslexia] provide evidence of an imperfectly functioning system for segmenting words into their phonologic constituents".

It can be said that the Year 7s in my research who could not successfully decode print into sounds were struggling with words as *if* they were dyslexic or brain-impaired.

Interest and motivation

It is highly unlikely that my research pupils were aware that their lack of phonological knowledge in French amounted to a clinical description of dyslexia. Common sense does suggest that they could not feel comfortable or pleased with the situation and were probably aware that they were not able to behave like "normal" readers. The responses on the "Faces" reflect that nearly half of the pupils reported negative emotions associated with this situation.

I propose from these findings that there must be negative effects on pupils' motivation and interest in learning French, and on their sense of feeling confident about, and satisfied with, their progress in the language when they are experiencing difficulties with reading it. This negative feeling about achievement could lead to a state of disaffection as has been investigated by Jones, Jones, Rudduck, Demetriou and Downes (2001). The problem of waning interest in MFL learning by Year 8 (Williams, Burden and Lanvers, 2002) might be explained in part by learners' problems with accessing the written word intelligently and successfully.

CONCLUSION

The findings from my research with Year 7s appear to show that while teachers expected pupils to learn the phonological system of French mostly through exposure by listening and repeating words and phrases in French, the pupils had not yet learned the GPC rules after one year of French.

In fact, what most of the pupils were experiencing as they tried to decode written French was comparable to descriptions of phonological dyslexia caused by brain damage or arrested development of neurological connections in the brain. This situation might well have had affective implications for the learners and exerted a negative influence over their learning and their motivation to learn.

However, pupils were aware of the roles which sound and spelling-sound connections had for them when they were reading French. The majority felt pronunciation was important for being able to read and two-thirds of the pupils reported that they 'heard' the words in their heads when they were reading. They were aware of a phenomenon which indicates evidence of the phonological loop in working memory, and cognitive processing.

More than half of the whole sample reported having negative feelings about decoding French in public, including reading aloud. There were few statistically significant differences between schools or between genders, in all the findings about phonological awareness. This leads to the conclusion that these findings were generally true for the whole sample of 359 pupils. It might be true for pupils beyond this sample.

The research described in this article was undertaken two years after the instigation of the National Literacy Strategy in primary schools in England. The Year 7s had had only one year of its input on phonological awareness before coming up to secondary school. Current Year 7s in 2004 have had more exposure to GPC training in English and they are possibly being taught more explicitly the GPC of their modern foreign language, in line with suggestions for teaching at word level in the Framework for KS3 MFL. However, recent further research into reading with current Year 8s (Macaro and Erler, in process) reveal a continuing lack of phonological awareness in French.

In the article referred to earlier, Siddons (2001) pointed to the need for textbooks with explicit GPC training. In this article I have attempted to share the known importance of phonological knowledge for reading and have presented some issues surrounding a group of Year 7's GPC knowledge of French. This includes the implication that due to their poor GPC knowledge these learners were experiencing reading impairment comparable to dyslexia, which could be undermining their pleasure and their progress in learning the language.

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APPENDIX 1: Rhyming words

Sorting out sounds in French: rhymes

Underline all the words which rhyme with the first one. If you are not sure about any word, tick the box marked 'not sure'.

| Example: | <u>frère</u> | poire | <u>mère</u> | lièvre | <u>verre</u> | not sure |
|----------|----------------|---------|-------------|----------|--------------|----------|
| 1. | <u>chat</u> | hate | tracas | rats | chocolat | |
| 2. | <u>chaud</u> | vélos | rode | comment | tôt | |
| 3. | <u>tablier</u> | été | partenaire | Molière | chaussure | |
| 4. | <u>riz</u> | fruits | souris | cerise | tournez | |
| 5. | <u>bateau</u> | canoé | hariots | aux | bleu | |
| 6. | <u>c'est</u> | l'ouest | jouet | très | pattes | |
| 7. | <u>fatigue</u> | plaque | tigre | cheminée | et | |
| 8. | <u>fleurs</u> | feux | bleus | heure | peu | |









APPENDIX 2

Please circle the face that expresses what you feel in the situation.
The feeling words are included.







1. How do you feel when you are asked to read French out loud during lesson?

???

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|-----------------------------------|
|  |  |  |  |  |  | not sure <input type="checkbox"/> |
| not bothered | puzzled | worried | angry | embarrassed | happy | |







2. How do you feel about pronouncing words in French out loud?

???

| | | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|-----------------------------------|
|  |  |  |  |  |  | not sure <input type="checkbox"/> |
| not bothered | puzzled | worried | angry | embarrassed | happy | |

3. How do you feel about the spelling of French words when you have to write?

???

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|-----------------------------------|
|  |  |  |  |  |  | not sure <input type="checkbox"/> |
| not bothered | puzzled | worried | angry | embarrassed | happy | |

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