

Extracts from:

Practical reflections on the sound/spelling link

by Llewelin Siddons

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Introduction

In the last few years, the sound/spelling link has started to receive more attention from policy makers and MFL teachers. 'Pupils should be taught ... the principles and interrelationship of sounds and writing in the target language' according to the National Curriculum (1999, 18). Textbooks have started to include ideas for teaching pronunciation, for example, rather than assuming that pupils will improve by practice alone (Pilette, 2000, 34). The sound/spelling link is a large but relatively neglected area of language study, which can provide solutions to many difficulties encountered by learners in all four skills. I aim to draw readers' attention to some teaching techniques based on this concept, which is likely to gain increasing currency in the future, to judge by present trends.

One of the clearest tendencies in the last ten or so years in language teaching has been a revision of 'communicative' methods to ensure clarity and accuracy of communication. It is no longer unorthodox to use a more analytical approach which refers explicitly to linguistic structures, whether grammatical or phonological. The same is true of the teaching of reading in primary schools, where the 'Look and Say' and 'Whole Sentence' methods have been re-evaluated and there has been greater use of Phonics. Now, the literacy hour in primary schools is encouraging the teaching of grammatical terminology. This is good news for Modern Foreign Languages; in fact, I hope to show that we have much to learn from English teachers, specifically in connection with pupils with Special Learning Difficulties.

The term 'sound/spelling link' describes the relationship between the spoken sounds of a language and their representation on paper, otherwise known as the field of phonology. Some of the techniques discussed here are not new, but I hope that bringing them together will demonstrate the potential of this approach, which will be seen to be relevant to pupils of all levels and abilities.

Beginners

If we consider first how school children are taught their mother tongue, we often find that they are given lists of spellings to learn grouped by sound or spelling, in English, for example:

rough
tough
enough

Children also learn how a single sound can be represented by different letter combinations, as in the following example from a French text book for the *Cours Préparatoire* (six-year-olds):

'Le son "é" peut s'écrire de différentes façons:

é as in Jérémie
et as in papa et maman
es as in les accompagnent
er as in goûter
ez as in chez'

(Colcy et al., 1999, 14)

On the other hand, we expect children learning a second language to assimilate a list of words with no sound/spelling pattern, such as the following:

un/une enfant
une femme
une fille
un garçon
un homme
maman
papa

This short list taken from the very early stages of a French course contains a number of sound/spelling difficulties which are left unexplained (Honnor et al., 1992, 11).

Now, lists such as this one reflect the topic-based nature of most courses at the moment. Furthermore, second-language courses are introducing vocabulary, while mother-tongue textbooks are drawing on vocabulary absorbed conversationally. However, if it is necessary for sound patterns to be pointed out in the mother-tongue, I would argue that they are even more relevant with a second language as soon as the written language is introduced. Within the overall scheme of work, a new sound/spelling pattern can easily be presented every week.

To aid assimilation, exercises such as the following can be used:

- a) Trouvez l'intrus: le mot qui ne contient pas le son "on": mon, téléphone, bonjour, bonbon
- b) Soulignez les mots où le son "é" ne s'écrit pas é: regardez, télé, vélo, allez
- c) Make up a sentence with as many words from a single group as possible.
- d) Such groups of words can be set for vocabulary learning. This will be seen to help spelling, since the use of the written word is linked in the learner's mind to its pronunciation.

Dyslexic pupils

Learning words according to spelling patterns... is one technique often recommended in the teaching of dyslexic pupils. Dyslexia is a complex condition which takes many forms, to the extent that some writers prefer to refer to it under the term of Specific Learning Difficulties. There is some disagreement about certain aspects of this field, and a detailed treatment is beyond the scope of this article, but 'the predominant view of the researchers as to the underlying cause of Specific Learning Difficulties has been described as "the phonological deficit hypothesis", which ... means an inability to analyse speech into the sound that it is made from', (Ott, 1997) and consequent difficulties with associating sounds and spelling, the subject of this article.

One recommended technique is the 'Multisensory method', which teaches the pupil to 'see, hear and feel' letters and sounds simultaneously. Essentially the teacher writes a word on the board, one letter at a time, saying the letter name, for the pupils to repeat orally and write down at the same time: 'b-o-n-j-o-u-r'. The pupils thus hear and repeat the sounds while seeing and writing the spellings. This technique exists in many forms: words can be broken up into sound units ('b-on-j-ou-r') or syllables ('bon-jour').

Finally, the sounds are 'blended' and the entire word is pronounced. Words for practice are selected, in the early stages, for example, according to the particular sound being taught. Spelling and Reading exercises are devised to give intensive practice of the sound patterns in question (see Ganschow, Sparks and Schneider (1995)).

It enables pupils to assimilate new vocabulary more effectively, by engaging all their senses in the task: not only is spelling being learnt, but the all-important link between the spelling and the sounds represented. The method can be extended to word-building techniques, grammatical structures (with colour-coding of endings or genders) and explicit teaching of grammar.

A systematic approach is especially necessary when teaching dyslexic pupils. Repeated presentations of material according to the Multi-sensory method may be necessary for them to assimilate the sound/spelling correspondences. Suggestions on further reading on the wider aspects of teaching dyslexic pupils can be found in the bibliography.

As described by Ganschow, Sparks and Schneider (1995), the method suggests a style of teaching that is radically different from the usual practice in the UK. However, its principles can be adapted for a wide range of ability, alongside the spelling patterns discussed above, given the inherent difficulties for English pupils of

learning the phonological system of French. In addition, the appeal to the visual, auditory, oral and motor capacities caters for the different learning styles pupils may employ.

It follows from what has been said that any activity that draws attention to the link between sound and spelling will be helpful, such as the following, which may be useful for students who are not severely affected by dyslexia.

According to some estimates, as many as 10% of the population have at least some dyslexic tendencies (Ott, 1997, p.12), their needs are not always taken into account in the modern language classroom. The techniques discussed above can help dyslexic pupils while benefiting the whole range of ability.

NOTE

Further sections and practical illustrations follow, covering:

- *Borderline GCSE candidates*
- *A Level candidates*
- *Pronunciation skills*
- *Listening skills*
- *Bibliography*

Conclusion

Language teachers are recognising that explicit teaching of linguistic structures is needed to correct the defects of the communicative approach and to facilitate clear and skilful communication. Teachers may therefore find it profitable to give more attention to the phonological aspect of language, that is the interface between the spoken and the written word. I have suggested that such an approach will help pupils of all abilities to relate the manifestations of the language in the four skill areas and thereby significantly improve their ability all-round.

As vocabulary topic areas become less central to the conception of language enshrined in the National Curriculum, textbooks will no doubt give greater space to explicit analysis and practice of phonological structures. Nowhere would this be more beneficial than in a coursebook that drew upon the research available on dyslexia.