

VENNER DE CORTEZ: CAN THE REGULAR USE OF TARGET LANGUAGE PHONICS REDUCE THE DEPENDENCE ON CLASS TEACHERS IN MFL AND THEREFORE LEAD TO GREATER INDEPENDENCE IN LEARNING WITHOUT COMPROMISING THE QUALITY OF NEW LANGUAGE ACQUISITION?

Can the regular use of target language phonics reduce the dependence on class teachers in MFL and therefore lead to greater independence in learning without compromising the quality of new language acquisition?

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Abstract

This research considered whether the regular use of target language phonics reduces the dependence on class teachers in MFL (modern foreign languages) and therefore lead to greater independence in learning without compromising the quality of new language acquisition? In applying qualitative (questionnaires) and quantitative (testing) research methods to an in-class study I was able to identify how phonics can positively impact upon the student's ability to identify, understand and pronounce new sounds in a language (in this case French) and how this affects their overall confidence in their use of a language. The findings of my research would support the inclusion of explicitly taught phonics in MFL as it can enable greater autonomy in language learning as the student gains confidence and proficiency in the sounds and can therefore learn new words and use them without recourse to their teacher.

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to test the hypothesis that the regular use of target language phonics can reduce the dependence on class teachers in Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), thus encouraging greater independence without compromising language acquisition quality. The underpinning assumption being that greater ability to recognise and use sounds requires less modeling by the teacher. This hypothesis was generated from extensive research in the field of MFL phonics and independent learning and from feedback from teachers in my two placement schools.

The context

I am researching independence in MFL (modern foreign languages) and the application of phonics. If students are not confident or sufficiently skilled to reproduce and experiment with the language then it is very difficult to engage them in independent learning as they will constantly return to the teacher for new language and teach them the patterns that they need. One method that the team in my first placement school found improves independence and language quality is phonics but they have found it difficult to implement due to competing pressures on delivery.

Capel et al (2013, p356) state: 'it is very hard to use 'discovery' in languages unless you give them [the pupils] the building bricks of the language', which supports the experience of the 7 language teachers I spoke to and my own observations. I extended my reading beyond MFL and consider how the research applies to my own subject. I hope that my research will benefit my own practice and that of the teams with which I am working, but that it may also contribute to the wider debate about the usage of phonics in MFL and ways to facilitate independent learning. Most importantly, I hope that it will encourage improved learning strategies for students, which Jones (2000, p2) states will

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lead to 'greater understanding and accuracy in the productive use of language' and increase 'the willingness of students to work independently' (ibid, p.2).

Literature on independent learning

There are many definitions of independent learning, the most common being 'self-regulated learning' (Meyer et al, 2008, p8). I would extrapolate this to mean greater autonomy, confidence and creativity in learning for the purpose of my research. Capel et al (2013, p221) state: 'common to all learners...is that it is the personal need to make sense of and make sense in the target language that drives the acquisition process forward'. However, I find the position can become extreme as with Dam (1990, p18) who states that 'the aim is learner autonomy – learner autonomy is the only means possible' which, particularly in MFL, I consider unrealistic and unhelpful as I do not believe there is the class contact time required to facilitate this autonomy.

Meyer et al (2008, p7) found 'a consensus in the literature that independent learning does not involve pupils merely working alone. Instead, the important role teachers can play in enabling and supporting independent learning is stressed', which is supported by other literature. They highlight that 'the successful promotion of independent learning will require careful attention to the learning environment' (ibid, p5). Pachler, Barnes and Field (2009, p229) add that teachers 'need to teach strategies for independent learning'. Based on my own experience and discussions with teachers, these claims are supported but are easier said than done. There does appear to be a mood of caution in writing about independent learning in the more general pedagogical texts which I believe reflects the difficulty of implementation and the relative modernity of the ideology in this incarnation.

Literature on MFL phonics

I was not able to find much literature that considers specifically the use of phonics in MFL but there is much about its use in English/literacy which I consider very useful, particularly as my research language shares the same alphabet, something that Sze (2008, p6) felt makes phonics directly transferrable.

Phonics is described by Stahl (1992, p1) as the 'systematic attention to decoding in a context of a programme stressing comprehension and interpretation', enabling the ability to 'analyse and manipulate phonemes in speech' (Ehri, 1992, p1), who adds that 'unfamiliar words may be read by decoding, that is, by converting letters into sounds and blending them to form recognizable word'.

Ehri (1992) and Rack, Snowling and Olson (1992) believe that guessing words based on partial letters is less reliable and often less accurate than processing letters fully to identify words. Guppy and Hughes (1999, p8) state that 'in order to develop more sophisticated skills in a language you need to be able to decode it'. Bald (2007, p1) believes that phonics are crucial because 'the majority of the information conveyed by letters concerns sounds' whilst Rose (2006, p18) states that 'the more children see, understand and practise the regular patterns in the language, the more oddities stick out'. Macaro (2000, p136) links phonics directly to independence: 'they nurture independent learners: learners increase their sensitivity to sound-spelling correspondence so that on their own, they can (a) sound out a new word from its spelling, (b) spell a word from its pronunciation'.

In the National Reading Review of 38 robust academic studies Ehri et al (2006, p7) found that phonics (in English learning) has a significant impact upon learning, particularly: decoding regularly and irregularly spelled words; comprehending text; reading connected text orally; spelling words correctly. The study did not note a difference in impact between phonics teaching systems (Ehri, 2006, p8). Rose's review of research (2008, p18) found that there is significant evidence that

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'systematic phonics instruction produced superior performance in reading compared to all types of unsystematic or no phonics instruction. However, Stahl et al (1998, p12) found that 'there is very little/nothing about how phonics impacts upon pronunciation', but Hawkes (2011) and Miskin (2011) disagree and from my reading I consider Stahl's finding a representation of a gap rather than a failure in methodology.

Hawkes (2011, p1) regards MFL phonics as 'teaching the key sounds of the foreign language and fixing them in long-term memory' where the outcome is 'a learner who can be 'trusted' in the foreign language without the teacher having to present all new language first' (ibid, p1). The value being 'learners who are able to understand more text containing unfamiliar language...more confident in speaking and reading out loud in the foreign language...more autonomous' (ibid, p1). Hawkes is something of a missionary for phonics in MFL and bases the bulk of her assertions on her own practice and that of her peers, which I consider very useful but to be used with caution as it is not formally peer reviewed and could self-fulfilling. Sprenger-Charolles and Casalis (1995, p46) affirm that learning to read in French needs phonological mediation and Erler (2003, p5) found pupils had little idea, after one year of learning French without phonics, about spelling-sound rules. The DfE (2011, p3) highlights the importance of 'the interrelationship between sounds and writing in the target language'. Guppy and Hughes (2009, p108) state that pupils 'need to feel that manipulating and playing with sounds is fun, enjoyable and interesting' which 'once established, that attitude and that flexibility will be brought into the later stages of word study'. Meanwhile, Le Manuel Phonique (Lloyd and Molzan, 2001, p12) coyly allows that 'for some children it is helpful to connect an action to the sound', perhaps reflecting the apparent scarcity of relevant research evidence.

There is criticism of phonics that Rose (2008, p20) identifies: that children are seen to be 'barking at print without fully understanding' but his review found that 'such behaviour is usually transitional' (ibid, p20). Ehri (1992, p14) states that opponents of 'synthetic phonics voice concern that it encourages a focus on the mechanics of reading words rather than understanding them' and adds that 'phonics instruction by itself does not help students acquire all the processes they need' (ibid, p14). Rose (2008, p22) emphasises that effective phonics programmes must be followed consistently, something that I have found MFL teachers are struggling with. However, I find the case made by Ehri(1992) and Rose (2008) to be academically sound and compelling; heeding the guidance from Rose (ibid), Miskin (2011), Macaro (2000), Erler (2003) and Sze (2008) to proceed with care.

Conclusion

Having carried out extensive reading on barriers to learning, independent learning and phonics I am impressed by the case for phonics and can see that there are clear benefits for independent learning. There is much good practice in phonics that I can use to test my hypothesis and hopefully contribute my findings to the limited field of independence in MFL.

Research methodology

Overview

For this research I utilised a mixed methods approach, a paradigm that involves 'collecting, analysing, and interpreting quantitative and qualitative data in a single study' (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2005, p8). Silverman (2010, p119) considers that this can provide 'greater depth' whilst Denscombe (2008) believes that it can 'increase accuracy of data and provide a more complete picture of the issue and Denzin (1997, p318) recognises that it 'allows for methodological triangulation'.

I must recognise that there is some suspicion of mixed methods, mainly that it is 'sitting on the fence' (Cohen, 2011, p19) and Silverman (2010, p134) warns that one must be careful that it doesn't lead to 'scrappy research based on under-analysed data' and I must be careful that by combining

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two methodologies (i.e. questionnaire and testing) that I fully consider weighting, validity and accuracy, amongst other aspects. However, given the nature of my research I believe that it is an excellent fit, reinforced by Cohen, 2011, p195): 'exclusive reliance on one method...may bias or distort the researcher's picture of the particular slice of reality she is investigating'.

I have chosen to start with an 'alternative hypothesis' (Cohen, 2011, p609), rather than a 'null hypothesis' (ibid, p609), as this supposed that there will be a connection between the usage of phonics and improved acquisition and ultimately independence.

Implementation

To carry out the mixed methods approach I utilised testing (quantitative) and a questionnaire (qualitative, in this case) (see Appendix 1a/b and 2) at the start and end of a 6 week period during which I taught 15-20 minutes of phonics at the start of the weekly class. In doing so my intention was to triangulate the measurement of progress in phoneme recognition gathered with tests with the perceived progress in language acquisition as self-reported by students in questionnaires. It was my expectation that from this I would obtain data pertaining to:

1. The effectiveness of phonics on phoneme recognition
2. The effectiveness of phonics on confidence in language acquisition
3. The impact of any improvement in phoneme recognition on perceived independence.
4. The impact of any improvement in confidence in language acquisition on perceived independence.

The purpose of triangulation in this research is to better understand whether any improvement in phoneme recognition has resulted in any perceived improvement in language acquisition, and if not, why not. Equally, it should assist in identifying possible causes if there is no improvement in phoneme acquisition. Additionally, Leech and Onwuegbuzie, (2005, p23) consider that triangulation 'reduces errors', something I am keen to do as this is a small sample group and there are other possible factors which can influence the outcomes.

The testing itself was divided into two parts, one testing aural recognition of sounds in words and the second, testing visual sound spelling matching; therefore testing both understanding of spoken words and of ability to reproduce written words orally.

Validity

In 'blending numeric and narrative approaches' (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2005, p23), there is a dual validity. Quantitative research (i.e. testing) has enhanced 'controllability, replicability, predictability... and objectivity' (Cohen, 2011, p180) whilst qualitative testing (i.e. a questionnaire) is 'context-bound, descriptive and [provides insight into] meaning and intention' (ibid, p180). By mixing open and closed questions in the questionnaire I was able to gather both ranked and descriptive data which 'makes analysis more straight-forward' (Munn and Driver, 2004, p2). The robustness of the test data is given depth by the questionnaire responses and enables me to better understand individual results and better interpret possible trends and therefore make predictions and implement appropriate change in my practice.

For diagnostic testing, 'measuring achievement and aptitude' (Cohen, 2011, p481), the pre and post-tests must 'test the same content' (ibid, p293), which is what I did. I also did all that I could to control other factors that might affect the test, i.e. I did the test at the same point in the lesson at the same time of day, at the same point in the term (a week before the end of term); the weather conditions were very similar; the explanation of purpose was the same; and the same degree of

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formality was given. The main factors still significantly evident were the fact that they had seen the test before; I had taught them for longer and they were more aware of the use of phonics in French. I could not mitigate these factors but do not consider them to be sufficient to skew results.

Terminology

Phoneme: 'a perceptually distinct unit of sound in a specified language that distinguishes one word from another' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2014).

Phonics: Phonics is described by Stahl (1992, p1) as the 'systematic attention to decoding in a context of a programme stressing comprehension and interpretation', enabling the ability to 'analyse and manipulate phonemes in speech' (Ehri, 1992, p1), who adds that 'unfamiliar words may be read by decoding, that is, by converting letters into sounds and blending them to form recognisable word'.

Independent Learning: There are many definitions of independent learning, the most common being 'self-regulated learning' (Meyer et al, 2008, p8).

Ethics in research

The planning, implementation and writing up of this research needed to comply with the BERA guidelines (2011). I used Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988, p24) guidelines for planning action research and Bell's (1993, p84) checklist for negotiating access. As Cohen (2011, p84) states, 'social researchers must take into account the effects of the research on participants' in order to 'do no harm' (Simons, 2009, p.96). I had to 'consider anonymity', confidentiality and consent (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1992, p92), all of which are internationally accepted and necessary concerns for research. I obtained explicit consent from the Professional Tutor, the class teacher and the Head of Department, as expected by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, p23) and made clear to the students what would be done and why, thus 'informing' (ibid, p23) them. I also, as Bell (1993, p83) recommends, made clear that anonymised findings would be shared and was confident that the research would be 'of benefit to the school and participants', thus meeting a key tenet of Bell's ethical research guidelines (1993, p83).

In considering the potential impact of the research, I identified four key risks. Firstly, I, as mentioned earlier, took advice not to use a control group as this was considered unfair on another class that might benefit from the focused implementation of phonics. I also worked closely with the class teacher to review all content prior to teaching to check that she was happy with it and that it would not negatively impact upon the progress of students. A third risk was undue stress for students due to additional testing, which I minimised by clearly explaining the purpose being to practice sounds rather than test and did not give scores/graded work but gave consistent verbal feedback and enabled them to check their answers, thus enabling them to reflect on progress without adding test stress. Finally, good practice in ethical research emphasises 'choice to participate' (Bell, 1991, p83), something that is harder to avoid as the very status of teacher creates an implied 'coercion' (Cohen, 2011, p377) and non-participation would be viewed potentially by the student and the school as non-compliance. This is an issue which I do not feel I could fully satisfactorily resolve beyond minimising as far as possible the importance of the testing and questionnaire in terms of results; focusing more on the process as a development activity. Upon reflection, if I had carried out this research on a wider scale I would have preferred to give students the opportunity to opt out but this was not viable in a study of this size.

Participants

For this research I opted to work with a top-set Year 7 French class for these reasons:

1. I saw them weekly and would teach the whole term.

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2. They are more able and thus probably better able to progress in phonics whilst simultaneously progressing in the scheme of work.
3. There was little range in KS2 level attainment, nor their Year 7 target grades, thus reducing the need for differentiation and providing a more standardized baseline.
4. Year 7 are at the start of their secondary language journey and are unlikely to have done any French phonics and are likely to have minimal French knowledge generally.
5. Year 7 have most recently been taught using English phonics.
6. The class size of 28 was one of the largest and would allow for greater loss of participants, i.e. through sickness, without compromising the research.

The research

What did I do?

Please see Appendix 3 for detail of the activities implemented and Appendix 4 for my research diary.

In summary, I carried out phoneme recognition tests (Appendix 1a/b) aurally and read; and then gave the students a questionnaire (Appendix 2) that asked questions about how they learn and how confident they are in French. Then in this lesson and the five that followed, I spent 15-20 minutes at the start of their weekly lesson practising sounds and then doing some activities focusing on a specific series of sounds (Appendix 6 and 7) shows a sample PowerPoint and resources for a lesson). In the sixth lesson I asked them to complete the test and questionnaire again. Throughout they had access to laminated phoneme cards on their desks.

The results

How did I analyse the data?

As previously stated, I decided to approach the research using a mixed-methods approach. This approach generated two sets of data, one from the tests and the other from the questionnaires. As Cohen (2011, p54) states, 'there is often more than a single cause at work in any effect' and in order to best assess impact and identify patterns I chose to triangulate data, cross-referencing the two sets of data to better understand the results whilst also compiling, presenting and analyzing the data sets separately. By triangulating I could better isolate 'counter-factuals' (ibid, 2011, p55), i.e. the extent to which I could attribute effects to other causes (e.g. existing knowledge and behaviour), in order to hopefully draw more accurate and useful findings from the research. Ultimately, as Cohen advises, 'in abiding by the principle of fitness for purpose, the researcher must be clear what s/he wants the data analysis to do' (2011, p558) and it is this ability to draw valid conclusions and better understand students that lead me to analyse the data accordingly. My aspiration being that I would be able to refine a model for phonics implementation that would work for the students, the school and me.

Comparability

In order to be able to fully compare results I only used the results from those students that completed the before and after tests. I do not feel that attendance significantly affected the results, having cross-referenced attendance with progress; therefore, I did not exclude student results unless they missed the testing lessons (1 and 6).

Phonics tests results

Reading phoneme recognition

Table 1 shows that 66% of students increased the number of read phonemes they could recognise and 50% increased by at least 30%.

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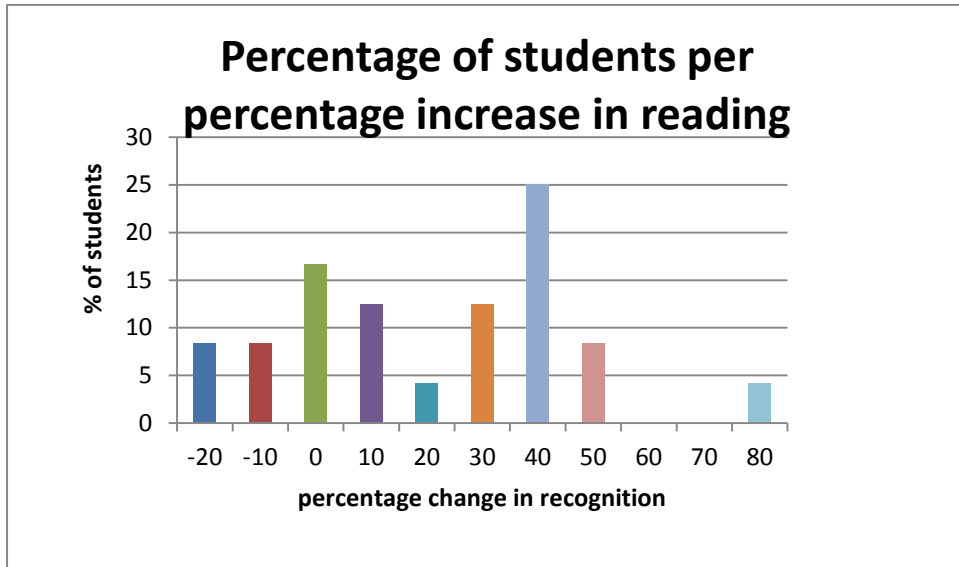


Table 1

Note on Table 1: 17% of students recognised less phonemes in the second test. I suggest that this is because of a degree of guessing/luck in responses and therefore, I have allowed for 20% variation, either side of 0% improvement to allow for this, hence 50% increase is more reflective of actual improvement.

The results in Table 2 show improvement in read phoneme recognition across all phonemes; the most significant, up to 54%, of nasal sounds (en, an, im).

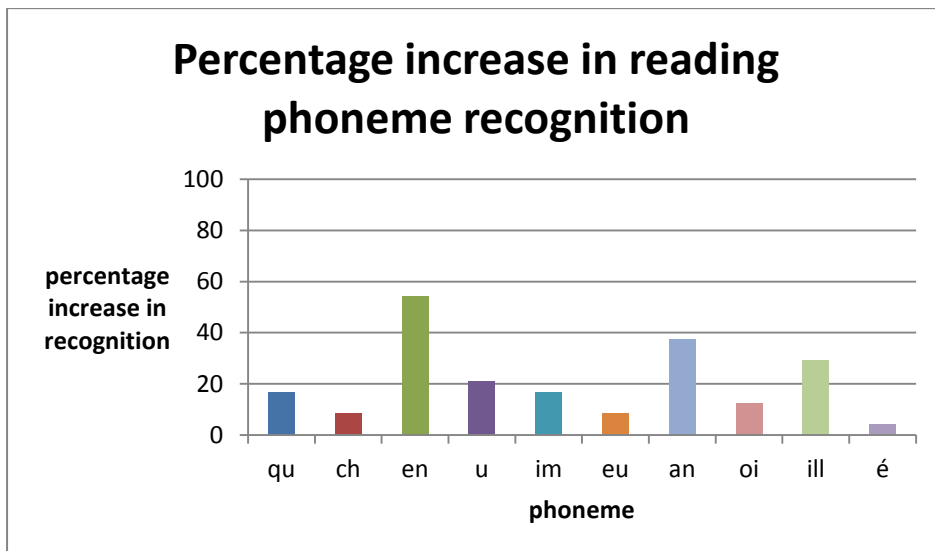


Table 2

Table 3 reinforces that there was improvement across all read phonemes but better shows that the lesser improvement in some sounds was fairly attributable to high levels of existing phoneme recognition for some sounds, i.e. 'ch', 'eu' and 'é'.

This table also enables me to identify specific sounds of which recognition is still weak, i.e. 'qu', 'oi' and 'ill' and I could focus on these in future lessons.

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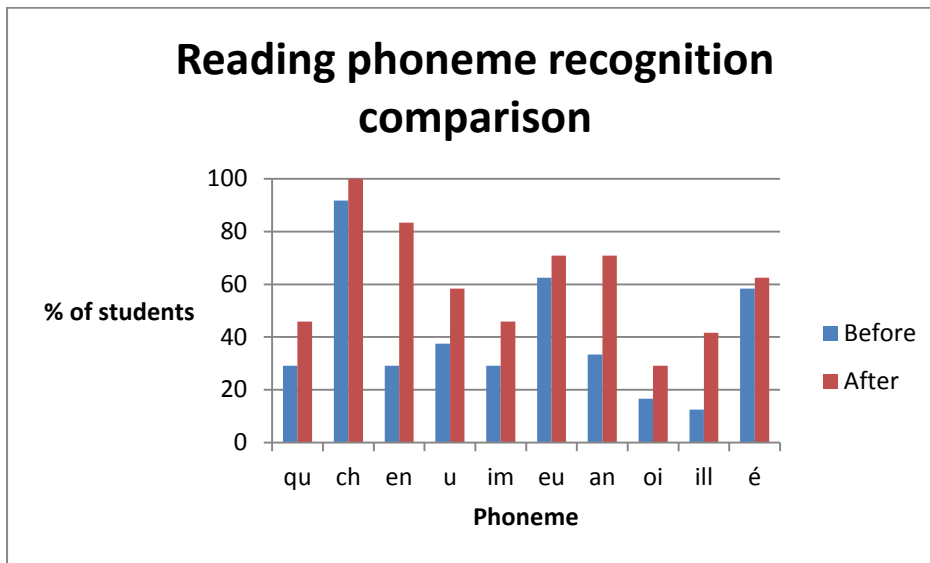


Table 3

In summary, I can fairly conclude that the phonics intervention did have a positive impact upon read phonics recognition for at least 50% of students. It was successful to varying degrees according to individual phonemes but further intervention/reinforcement would be required.

Aural phoneme recognition

Table 4 shows that 79% of students increased their aural phoneme recognition, with at least 56% of students improving by at least 20%.

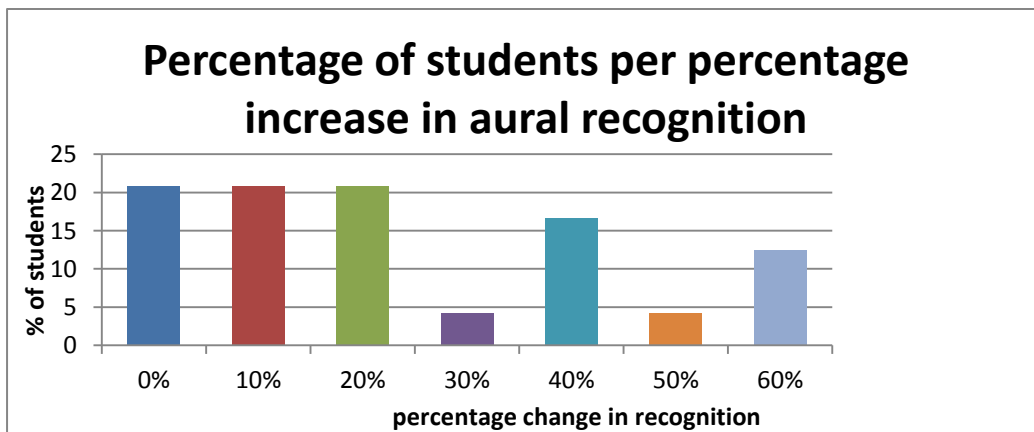


Table 4

Note on Table 4: As per the note on Table 1, I have allowed for guessing/luck up to 20% but this element of the test is much harder to guess correctly and having reviewed responses I do not think a greater allowance for guessing is necessary.

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Table 5 shows an improvement across all phonemes.

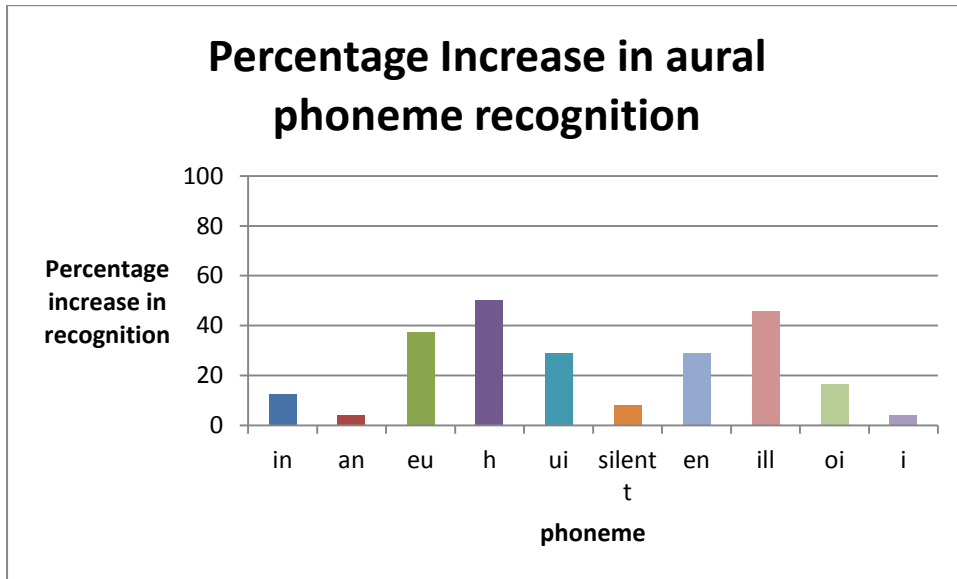


Table 5

Table 6 shows that there was a significant improvement in recognition of the sounds that were least recognised to start with. There is not a pattern to which were most improved although two of the nasals: 'in' and 'an' were commonly recognised.

The results also enable to identify which sounds still cause most difficulty, i.e. the 'silent t', 'ui', 'en' and 'i' and I could focus on these in future lessons.

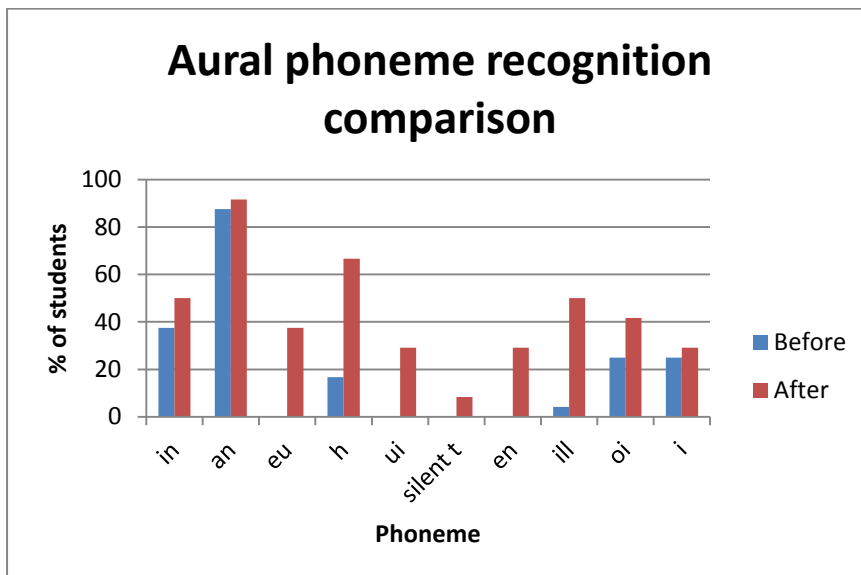


Table 6

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In summary, I can fairly conclude that the phonics intervention did have a positive impact upon aural phonics recognition for at least 56% of students. It was successful to varying degrees according to individual phonemes but further intervention/reinforcement would be required.

Reading and Aural phoneme recognition – comparative

The comparison of data for the two skills in Table 7 shows that there was a modest improvement in recognition and over 50% of students making at least 20% improvement in their phoneme recognition. There is a wider range in the results for reading which is most likely due to a number of factors including the comparative difficulty of reading sounds; the fact that I spent more time on aural practice than reading; and that guessing levels were higher for the reading (based on response patterns).

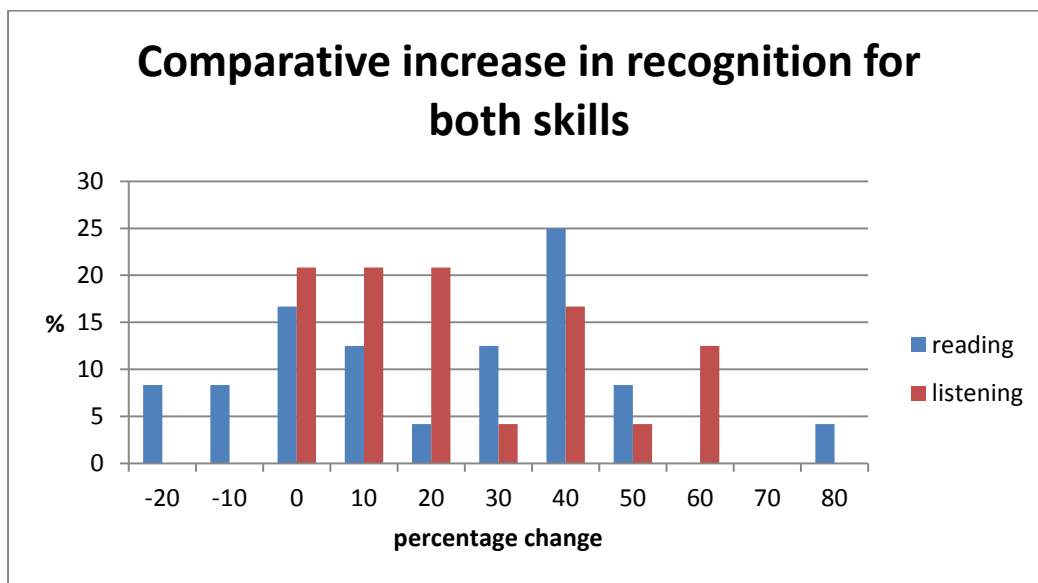


Table 7

Phoneme recognition and influencing variables

This table contextualises the data from testing in relation to attendance, behaviour, aspirational targets and current attainment. This shows that there is a marginal impact of poor behaviour upon results with the worse behaved students less likely to make significant progress. The most common poor behaviour was chatting and this may have reduced the impact of the phonics tuition through reduced concentration.

In regards to attendance there seems little impact.

More able students (i.e. working at Level 5) were marginally more likely to do better, as would reasonable be expected. However, with a data set this size and with the nature of the data I believe that it would be unwise to draw significant conclusions from these, more, it is useful to discount some of Cohen’s isolate ‘counter-factuals’ (Cohen, p55), and enables me to draw sounder conclusions about the impact of the intervention on the barrier.

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Students	Phoneme recognition difference		Possible additional influencing variables			
	Reading	Aural	Attendance score*	Behaviour score**	Target	Current attainment
1	-2	2	6	0	4c	4b
2	-2	0	5	6	3a	4c
3	-1	5	5	0	4b	5c
4	-1	4	5	0	4a	5b
5	0	4	6	0	4b	4a
6	0	3	6	0	4a	4a
7	0	2	6	12	4b	4c
8	0	0	6	11	4b	5b
9	1	2	6	0	4c	4a
10	1	0	4	2	4b	4c
11	1	0	5	0	4b	4a
12	2	2	6	0	4b	5b
13	3	6	6	0	5c	4a
14	3	1	6	0	4a	5c
15	3	2	6	0	4b	4a
16	4	6	6	7	4a	4c
17	4	4	6	0	5b	5b
18	4	1	5	6	4b	4b
19	4	1	6	3	4b	4a
20	4	1	6	4	4b	5c
21	4	0	5	8	4b	4b
22	5	1	6	0	4b	5c
23	5	4	6	2	5c	5c
24	8	6	6	0	4a	5c

Table 8

RAG rating: Red = below average/worse, Amber = average/no change, Green = above average/improved

* Attendance: lessons attended/6 total.

** Behaviour rating: 0 = excellent, 1 = low-level disruption, 2 = regular disruption, 3 = very poor, requires moving or worse. Allocated for each lesson.

Questionnaire results

Please see Appendix 5 for a table showing the survey results.

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Age started learning French

75% of students started French in primary school and 80% of these started in Key Stage 1. Only 25% started in Year 7. For the majority, although it was only their 4th half-term of French at the school, they had nearly all learnt French to some degree for over 5 years. This seems to have little impact upon their progress in phonics, which is positive as it shows that Year 7 is still a good point to start it with all students as, despite entering with varying levels of French skills, they can all benefit from phonics intervention.

Confidence in speaking French

Only 2 students improved their confidence in speaking French over the 6 weeks but none were not very confident after the intervention, which is a positive result. It would be difficult to extrapolate anything significant from this result but does hint towards a greater impact with a longer intervention.

There is a slight correlation between those students currently attaining below average levels and improved confidence in speaking. Interestingly, there is also a slight correlation between those students that improved the least in their tests increasing their confidence in speaking, which could indicate a positive impact of the phonics on their confidence and could encourage greater independence.

Confidence in reading French

5 students stated that they felt more confident in reading French and one felt less confident. Overall more students felt not very confident about reading so the improvement is more significant. There is a correlation between students who increased significantly in their tests already being confident or increasing their confidence whilst those who improved least in the tests also were more likely to increase their confidence. From this I will infer a benefit in terms of encouraging greater independence as both the strongest and weakest students (in terms of testing) felt more able to read French.

Confidence in spelling French

6 students states that they felt more confident in spelling French and one felt less confident, something which key to independence and a key aspect of effective phonics teaching. There is a correlation between students who improved in their reading tests and those that feel more confident in spelling. I would infer that this could be because they are more aware of the 'building blocks' (Rose (2006, p18) of the language, the phonemes. Further intervention would be needed to test the impact long-term but it is potentially a significant benefit to their learning and their ability to engage in independent learning, particularly the written use of new language.

Where to get help

There was a positive increase in the number of students stating that they would use each form of support but in particular there was a 40% increase in the number of students who would use their book, the internet or a dictionary for support, much greater than the increase in those that would use the teacher, another student or someone at home. This could indicate a greater independence in learning as they are more willing to use key learning resources rather than just ask someone else the answer, although the most popular source of support remains the teacher, so there is not a direct reduction in dependence on the teacher but more a greater willingness to look elsewhere/or as well for help. There is no apparent connection between test results and where a student would prefer to obtain support.

Key findings

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1. The implementation of explicit phonics on a regular basis did appear to have some positive impact for over 50% of students in terms of both aural and read phoneme recognition.
2. 92% of students improved their recognition of phonemes in either reading or listening, further supporting the finding that the phonics intervention had a positive impact.
3. More able students were marginally more likely to do better in recognition tests and the 8% of students who made no improvement in recognition in either skill were all less able, i.e. targeted 4b, thus indicating that ability was also a factor in improvement.
4. The implementation of explicit phonics on a regular basis did appear to have marginal impact upon confidence in French skills, particularly reading and spelling in French, with up to 65% reporting increased confidence in at least one skill.
5. There are clear sets of sounds which students generally find easier or harder to recognise.
6. More students increased their aural recognition of phonemes but there were larger increases in recognition in read phonemes.
7. There was a 40% increase in students opting to use resources intended to enable independent learning, such as dictionaries and their book, for support.
8. There is some evidence that low-level disruptive behavior (chatting) reduced the effectiveness of the phonics intervention.
9. The outcomes were not affected by the age the student started French, i.e. length of study.
10. More able students were marginally more likely to do better in recognition tests.
11. The students really enjoyed the phonics activities, engaging well and remaining attentive and working accurately.

How do these findings fit with:

What I expected to happen? – did it overcome barrier to learning?

The intention of this research was to investigate whether the regular use of target language phonics reduce the dependence on class teachers in MFL and therefore lead to greater independence in learning without compromising the quality of new language acquisition? To measure this I required my data to show the impact upon the following:

1. The effectiveness of phonics on phoneme recognition
2. The effectiveness of phonics on confidence in language acquisition
3. The impact of any improvement in phoneme recognition on perceived independence.
4. The impact of any improvement in confidence in language acquisition on perceived independence.

In summary, my research provided strong 'internal validity: 'seeks to demonstrate that the explanation of a particular event, issue or set of data which a piece of research provides can actually be sustained by the data' (Cohen, 2011, p183) and I found that target language phonics did have a positive effect upon phoneme recognition, confidence in language acquisition and perceived independence. From this and the data generally I can also infer that there was a positive impact upon learning independence and the ability to understand and learn the language without relying always on the teacher. Therefore, what I hoped would happen, did, to a varying degree.

Moving forward, I would be keen to find out if the greater confidence in phoneme recognition translates into an ability to 'convert letters into sounds and blending them to form recognizable words' (Ehri, 1992, p2) and would like to measure the longer-term impact of explicit phonics teaching and embedded phonics (i.e. building it into resources and regular referral back to phoneme recognition skills and resources). Independent learning requires some pre-teaching in the skills and phonics would need to be part of a package to do this.

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Key Recommendations

1. The introduction or continuation of explicit target language phonics for students, particularly at the start of Year 7, to assist in their ability to 'analyse and manipulate the language' (Ehri, 1992, p1) and to encourage greater independence.
2. The provision of phoneme recognition resources to which students can refer throughout their learning, to help them sound out and learn new language more independently (e.g. laminated cards on tables, posters on walls, online sound banks).
3. When using phonics, incorporating phonics recognition and repetition in all new language learning, to reinforce the explicit phonics teaching.

How will my findings affect my practice?

Guppy and Hughes (2009, p108) state that pupils 'need to feel that manipulating and playing with sounds is fun, enjoyable and interesting' which 'once established, that attitude and that flexibility will be brought into the later stages of word study'. As I have found that students did enjoy phonics work as well as it benefitting their language learning I will endeavour to continue to include it in my teaching practice – both explicitly, teaching phonics sounds and activities to classes, particularly year 7, but also ensuring that I increase the focus on sounds throughout the rest of my lessons, using the phoneme recognition skills when introducing new language and reminding them of how they can use them to learn more independently (i.e. questioning: how can you work out how to say this correctly? What sounds are in this word? What other word does this look like? etc.)

Dissemination of findings

According to Ferrance (2000, p23) educational research 'works best on problems that teachers have identified themselves' and as my original idea for the research came from discussions with staff in my placement schools it was with them that I was most keen to share my findings. Both placement schools were very supportive of my research and keen to see the results. Therefore I have shared them with both teams, as well as sharing the resources I used. I have also written to Rachel Hawkes, a key advocate of MFL phonics to thank her for the resources and she has responded requesting that I share my findings with her and the Association for Language Learning as part of a wider programme of collaboration and sharing of research into phonics.

The responses have been very positive from all those to whom I have communicated my findings. My first placement school has said that they will be able to use the research to support their continued emphasis on phonics and to help validate its continued inclusion in the scheme of work. My second placement school said that it would encourage them to start using phonics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have found that there is a direct positive impact on phoneme recognition and to a lesser degree independence in language acquisition from the regular use of target language phonics. Macaro (2000, p136) states that phonics 'nurture independent learners [because] learners increase their sensitivity to sound-spelling correspondence so that on their own, they can (a) sound out a new word from its spelling, (b) spell a word from its pronunciation' and 92% of pupils improved their 'sensitivity' to sounds following my phonics intervention. 65% increased their confidence in at least one language skill and there was a 40% increase in students willing to use resources for independent learning. Therefore, whilst the cohort was small and the intervention only 6 weeks long, I can infer with confidence that target language phonics can encourage greater independence in language learning by improving confidence and the ability to 'analyse and recognize phonemes' (Ehri, 1992, p1) but without long-term interventions and study, I cannot conclude that it definitely reduces dependence in teachers, rather perhaps that it enhances learning.

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Appendix 1 a Phonics

Name: _____

1. Write the word that you hear:

1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	
9	
10	

2. Circle the right pronunciation of these words:

question	kwest e on	kwest yon	kest e on
cheval	tch val	shu val	she vel
vent	vunt	ven	von
lune	loon	lun	luen
important	im por tan	im por tant	am por ton
bleu	bloo	bluh	blee
tante	tant	tont	ton
bois	boise	bwah	boi
famille	fa mee	fam ill	fa mill
joué	jew	joo ay	zoo eh

Phonics Appendix 1b

1. Write the word that you hear:

1	vin
2	mange
3	jeu
4	hôtel
5	fruits
6	sport
7	dents
8	gorille
9	mois
10	lit

2. Circle the right pronunciation of these words:

question	kwest e on	kwest yon	kest e on
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cheval	tch val	shu val	she vel
vent	vunt	ven	von
lune	loon	lun	luen
important	im por tan	im por tant	am por ton
bleu	bloo	bluh	blee
tante	tant	tont	ton
bois	boise	bwah	boi
famille	fa mee	fam ill	fa mill
joué	jew	joo ay	zoo eh

Appendix 2

Name :

1. How old were you when you started learning French?

- 5 years old or younger
- 6-7 years old
- 8-10 years old
- 11 years old

2. How confident do you feel about speaking French?

- very
- a bit
- not very

3. How confident do you feel about reading French?

- very
- a bit
- not very

4. How confident do you feel about spelling words you have heard?

- very
- a bit
- not very

5. What do you find most difficult about speaking French?

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(e.g. confidence, getting it right, new sounds)

- Another student
- Internet
- Book
- Someone at home

7. What helps you most to learn new words in French?

(e.g. games, reading, tests, repetition of words)

8. What do you find most difficult to do in French?

(e.g. speaking, writing, learning new words)

9. What do you find easiest to do in French?

(e.g. speaking, writing, learning new words)

10. What do you think might help you learn French better?

(e.g. more speaking, more dictionary work)

All activities will be implemented within delivery of existing scheme of work,

Week 1 (B) 10/2/14	Week 2 (A) 24/2/14	Week 3 (B) 3/3/14	Week 4 (A) 10/3/14	Week 5 (B) 17/3/14	Week 6 (A) 24/3/14	Duration
Introduction	5 sounds	5 sounds	5 sounds	5 sounds	5 sounds for	5 mins

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to phonics (inc cards)	for today. (use cards)	for today. (use cards)	for today. (use cards).	for today. (use cards)	today. (use cards)	
Phonics test	Revise previous sounds.	Revise previous sounds.	Revise previous sounds.	Revise previous sounds.	Revise previous sounds.	3 mins
Confidence and preferences Questionnaire	Exercise using new sounds – reading aloud (sounding words)	Exercise using new sounds – listening (grouping to same phonic sounds)	Exercise using new sounds – reading	Exercise using new sounds – writing (write the words I say)	Exercise using new sounds – pronunciation challenge (dictating to a partner)	5-10 mins
5 sounds for today.	All new vocab – id phonics.	All new vocab – id phonics.	All new vocab – id phonics.	All new vocab – id phonics.	All new vocab – id phonics.	
Exercise using new sounds – recognition.					Phonics test	
Plenary : what word is this ?					Confidence and preferences Questionnaire	

Key resources :

Phonics laminates for desks.

Phonics workbook for exercises.

Powerpoints for 5 sounds and exercises.

Tests and questionnaires.

Appendix 4 was hand written research diary.

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Appendix 5 Triangulated data sets from tests and surveys

	overall improvement in skills				age	speaking			reading			spelling			variance in choice of support					
	listening	reading	behaviour	level		before	after	variance	before	after	variance	before	after	variance	teacher	student	book	dict	int	home
1	-4	0	0	4b	6	a bit	a bit	none	not very	a bit	positive	a bit	a bit	none						
2	6	3	0	5c	8	a bit	a bit	none	a bit	a bit	none	not very	a bit	positive						
3	1	3	0	4a	8	a bit	a bit	none	not very	a bit	positive	not very	a bit	positive						
4	1	5	0	4b	8	a bit	a bit	none	a bit	very	positive	a bit	a bit	none						
5	4	5	2	5c	5	very	very	none	very	very	none	a bit	a bit	none						
6	6	4	7	4a	11	a bit	a bit	none	not very	not very	none	not very	not very	none						
7	4	4	0	5b	6	very	very	none	very	very	none	not very	a bit	positive						
8	2	1	0	4c	6	a bit	a bit	none	not very	not very	none	not very	not very	none						
9	5	-1	0	4b	11	a bit	very	positive	a bit	very	positive	very	a bit	negative						
10	2	2	0	4b	6	very	very	none	a bit	a bit	none	a bit	a bit	none						
11	1	4	6	4b	11	not very	a bit	positive	not very	not very	none	not very	not very	none						
12	6	8	0	4a	11	a bit	a bit	none	very	very	none	not very	not very	none						
13	1	4	3	4b	6	a bit	a bit	none	a bit	a bit	none	not very	a bit	positive						
14	3	0	12	4b	6	a bit	a bit	none	a bit	a bit	none	not very	a bit	positive						
15	0	0	11	4b	5	a bit	a bit	none	not very	very	positive	a bit	a bit	none						
16	0	4	8	4b	5	a bit	a bit	none	a bit	not very	negative	not very	a bit	positive						
17	2	3	0	4b	11	a bit	a bit	none	a bit	a bit	none	a bit	a bit	none						

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Appendix 6 is a powerpoint example lesson.

Appendix 7: Sample phonics materials

Listen to the text in French, and fill in the gaps using the vowels or combination of letters you have learnt:

a / e / i / o / u / ai / au / eu / ou / oi

J'__ un styl__ n__r, une tr__sse r__ge et __ne
p__re d__ c__se__x.

_l _ un crayon j__ne et un r__se m__s il n'__ p__s
d__ f__tre gr__s __ bl__.