Transcript: Why Teach Phonics?

Length of Talk: 47:00

Presenter: Robert Woore

# Slide 1 (0:35):

Hello, my name is Robert Woore. I’m one of the research specialists working with NCELP. One of the key areas that I research is reading in a foreign language and the teaching of phonics in foreign languages. In this presentation I want to outline some of the research which underpins the NCELP approach to teaching phonics in French, German and Spanish. The presentation is aimed at teachers in hub schools working with NCELP and I hope you find it interesting and useful.

# Slide 2 (1:50):

Just before we start, we’d like to invite you to reflect on these four questions:

First of all, in your opinion is it important to teach phonics? By phonics we mean the relationship between letters and their sounds in an MFL context. Why do you think that, or why not?

Secondly, is phonics currently being taught explicitly in your school? If so, how effectively and in what ways?

Thirdly, thinking about student outcomes: how accurately, how fluently can students currently pronounce written words or read aloud written words? We’d like you to think about both words they know, familiar words, and words they don’t know, so unfamiliar/unknown words. It might also be useful to think about that question broken down by language, because the outcomes may differ between French, German and Spanish, because those languages differ in terms of the consistency of the symbol-sound mappings.

And finally, how much progress do students make? Not only how accurately, how fluently students currently can pronounce written words in the foreign language, but does that change much over time? So, if we think of Year 7s, Year 9s, Year 11s, what kind of progress is being made there?

If we were doing this as a whole group session, we would invite you to discuss these things in groups, but it may be that you are watching this on your own, in which case please just take a few moments and reflect on these questions before we kick off.

# Slide 3 (0:11):

Here’s an outline of what this presentation will cover, which I’ll just leave you to read through in your own time.

# Slide 4 (2:34):

We’ll start off with some definitions.

A simple definition of phonics would be the explicit teaching of the relationships between letters and their sounds, their pronunciations in written words. A more technical term, that people may be familiar with and which is quite widely used, is the idea of Grapheme-Phoneme Correspondences, or GPC. In other words, the systematic relationships between graphemes and phonemes in a given writing system, where a phoneme is a minimal unit of sound which is capable of contrasting word meanings.

We can think for example of the English word ‘bat’, as in a cricket bat. We know the /b/ at the beginning is a phoneme, because if we swap it for another phoneme, we change the meaning. So, <bat>, <cat>, <sat>, <pat>, <mat>. And we know that the /a/ in the middle is a phoneme, because if we swap that for another phoneme, we change the meaning: <bat>, <bet>, <bit>, <but>. And we know the /t/ at the end is a phoneme, because if we change that from <bat> to <ban> or <bag>, we also change the meaning.

A frequently used definition of a grapheme would be the written unit corresponding to a phoneme. So, if we think of the French word here <bonjour>. At the bottom there you’ve got the phonemic transcription and those are the five phonemes comprising that word /bõʒuʁ/. And then above we have the graphemes corresponding to those phonemes. We can immediately see from this that graphemes are not the same as letters, because here we’ve got a grapheme composed of two letters, so a digraph, and there are also, in French, trigraphs like <eau> for <beau>.

In the work of NCELP, we’re actually preferring, instead of Grapheme-Phoneme Correspondences or GPC, we’re preferring the term Symbol-Sound Correspondences or SSC, by which we mean the systematic relationships between the written symbols and sounds, at any unit of size, in a given writing system. In other words, this is to allow for the fact that learners may make connections between say all of this ‘our’ and the sound /uʁ/, so we think that the term SSC is more flexible. There will be more about that a bit later on in the presentation.

# Slide 5 (1:29):

Okay, sticking with definitions for a moment.

The term phonological decoding, or sometimes recoding can be defined as the ability to convert visual print into its corresponding spoken form. So, an example would be we see the written form <cat> with the angled brackets there conventionally being used to represent an orthographic form of a word. And we can convert that into its spoken form here, the phonemic transcription /kat/.

That can be distinguished from word recognition or word identification, which is the skill with which we process visual symbols in the print in order to recognize and access meaning. So that’s making the link then to the idea or concept of a cat. That may be done from the basis of the spoken form or perhaps directly from the written form to the meaning. But as we become more proficient in a language, and more fluent in reading that language, we would expect the interconnections between these three components of word knowledge to become strong and automatic.

Obviously, there’s more to knowing a word than those three basic components, but we could think of them as three core components of word knowledge: orthographic form, spoken form, and meaning.

# Slide 6 (2:24):

Okay, so when thinking about phonological decoding, I think it’s important to distinguish between, on the one hand familiar words, so words we know and which we may have pre-stored phonological forms for in our mental lexicon, in our long-term memory. That would be for example like we just saw the word <cat> and we can link it to a pre-stored spoken form /kat/. And on the other hand, unfamiliar words, words we’ve not seen before, maybe pseudowords, so words that could be words of a language but for whatever reason happen not to be. For example, in English <swook> would be a pseudoword. Also, names, if you’re reading the paper and you come across the name of a politician or a celebrity and you’ve not encountered that name before, if you pronounce that word, if you read that name aloud. Clearly in all those cases unfamiliar words, pseudowords, unfamiliar names, we haven’t encountered them before, we haven’t got a pre-stored phonological form, so we must be generating that form at the point of reading the word, at the point of naming. We therefore must be using our knowledge of the orthographic system to do that, in other words using our knowledge of that language’s symbol-sound correspondences.

So, to demonstrate this, I tried to think of some words which even expert speakers of French might not know, so I came up with this one here, so if you just read that aloud. So, for me that says <un crinoïde> and the fact that I can pronounce that, even though I might not have seen it before, shows that I know something about the language’s symbol-sound correspondences. And here’s another word here, so read that one <l’ulmaire>. And actually, in French, the system when going from written symbols to the sound is actually more consistent than English, in many cases there’s only one way to pronounce a word. We’ll talk more about that later on.

And underneath there, there’s a couple of French pseudowords. So, again we can pronounce them, we can read them out loud, we may do so automatically, even though we’ve not seen them before <jerette>, <tirôt>.

# Slide 7 (1:32):

If we move on to the rationale for teaching phonics now, and perhaps it’s useful to start by thinking about the role of phonics in learning to read in the first language. You will know that there’s been a big emphasis on phonics in primary schools for the teaching of early reading in English.

In 2006, the Rose Review published their Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading, and that concluded that the case for systematic phonic work is overwhelming and much strengthened by a synthetic approach. More about defining a synthetic approach in a moment.

But that conclusion fed into then government reforms, when Michael Gove was at the Department for Education. The DfE said at that time “we will improve early literacy by promoting systematic synthetic phonics and also assess reading at age six” and hence the Phonics Screening Check.

This photo here is a still from the training video for the Phonics Screening Check and actually it’s interesting this ties back to the previous discussion about unfamiliar versus familiar words, because you can see here to assess whether children have mastered the symbol-sound correspondences of English, they’re being asked to read pseudowords. Here, for example, <sheb>.

# Slide 8 (2:30):

Okay, just to come back to that terminology of synthetic phonics. Phonics teaching can be divided into two kinds; synthetic phonics on the one hand and analytic phonics on the other, or of course a combination of those two approaches.

So, synthetic phonics, which is being pushed in primary schools, starts at the level of individual graphemes and learning their phonic values or sounds. For example, that this curly <c> here says /k/, and that this here says /a/, and then blending them together, so you can then blend c-a-t into /kat/. Of course, you also have to teach common exception words because for example here if not, children might sound them out and say ‘off’ instead of ‘of’.

On the other hand, analytic phonics starts with teaching children to recognise whole words and then encourages them to look for patterns and recognise patterns within them. So, for example, <cat>, <cake>, <car>, <cup>, they all start with <c>, they all start with the sound /k/. So, we look for patterns within words that we know.

It’s fair to say that the emphasis that’s being put on synthetic phonics is controversial. For example, Wyse and Styles here, in their critique, say “the available evidence supports systematic tuition in phonics” but “at a variety of levels”, so not just individual grapheme-phoneme correspondences, and combining that with “meaningful experiences with print”.

The NCELP core phonics approach, as we’ll go on to see later, is essentially a synthetic approach, in that it’s looking at the individual graphemes or symbols and then how they’re pronounced. But, at the same time thinking about secondary school age learners in particular, we think there is still a value in analytic phonics. That children can look at words that they know how to pronounce even before they’ve covered the individual graphemes systematically, they can still look for patterns in words that they know and say ‘ah yes, these letters, this group of letters is consistently pronounced in that way’. So, I think actually that a combination of the two approaches will probably be fruitful.

# Slide 9 (1:33):

We just wanted to mention also, that the emphasis on phonics in primary schools has also been controversial in terms of a worry that there might be an over-emphasis on sounding out decode-able words. Whilst there is lots of evidence to support the teaching of phonics, we have to also remember, as this quotation from the UK Literacy Association says, we want children to enjoy reading and to see the benefit of reading. So, I’ll just read out a bit of this quotation “if we want England’s children to get better at reading and to do more of it, we have to give them a diet [of reading] that is attractive, nutritious and satisfying […] Children certainly need instruction in the techniques, but they only become effective and committed readers through reading texts that interest them”. So, we just wanted to note that we think this does also apply in an MFL context. So, yes, we certainly think an emphasis on phonics is really important and we want to equip children with the tools to decode the language and to practise it and become automatic at it and become fluent decoders. But, at the same time we want to give them stuff to read that is enjoyable and interesting, we think that’s important too. Otherwise they will think ‘well what’s the point of learning to read in a foreign language, if all I read about is trivial, small-scale stuff’.

# Slide 10 (2:21):

Let’s just think about the theoretical underpinnings of phonics teaching and we’ll stick for the moment with first language reading, learning to read in your first language.

One of the key theoretical underpinnings of phonics would be the so-called ‘Simple View of Reading’. It’s simple in the sense that it’s a simple model, reading is obviously an immensely complex cognitive set of processes, but it’s a simple view in that it sees reading as the product of two things. On the one hand, your ability to phonologically decode and access the meaning of written words, and on the other hand, language comprehension, so your general skill in comprehending language across modalities, for example including spoken language.

Sounding words out, for a beginner reader in this model, is important. It’s been called in fact the *sine qua non* of reading acquisition. So, in an alphabetic language, sounding a word out allows children to discover the meaning of a word. Sorry to keep coming back to this same old example, but this child here sees this and sounds it out <cat>. ‘Ah this says cat, ah I know the meaning of cat; it’s one of those furry things that goes meow’. So, it allows children to discover maybe a written form they’ve not seen before, but they can sound it out and work out what it means. At the same time, this provides them feedback on the individual Symbol-Sound Correspondences because when they see that ‘cat’ makes sense in the context, they’re getting feedback, for example that this letter here does indeed have the value /k/ and that this in the middle here does indeed say /a/ and this does indeed say /t/. So, it’s a self-teaching mechanism in that sense.

We can immediately see a difference here between first language and foreign language context, because this child here who’s learning to read in his/her first language has a large bank of oral language knowledge to draw upon already. So, children typically start to learn to read already knowing lots of language and being able to communicate orally in that language. So, we need to think about how well this applies to a foreign language context.

# Slide 11 (1:01):

We’ll come back to that though in a moment, but for now let’s explore the notion of orthographic depth, which is a measure of how consistent and transparent the mappings are between graphemes and phonemes in a given writing system.

As we know, European languages differ in their orthographic depth.

Spanish would be at the highly transparent, shallow end of the orthographic depth continuum because generally each written symbol, each grapheme has one way of pronouncing it and generally each sound has one way of writing it. It’s not entirely transparent and consistent but it’s pretty much so. So, it’s a highly shallow orthography. So, I quite like the visual analogies for orthographic depth. I’ve used this image of parallel train tracks to represent the links between graphemes and phonemes in Spanish.

# Slide 12 (1:27):

But sadly, English is not very much like that, and in fact is at the extreme other end of the orthographic depth continuum in the sense that it is inconsistent and not very transparent at all in its Symbol-Sound Correspondences. So, I’ve not got the animations on this slide here, but this is an activity which I think is good to do with children in class. You pick a sound, and this is a good one to start with /u/ and you invite them to think of all the different ways they can think of for spelling the sound /u/. They may come up with a list a bit like this on the left here. Then I’d pick one of those written forms and ask them to think of all the different ways that this string of letters can be pronounced. So, obviously we’ve got ‘through’, ‘cough’, ‘though’, ‘thought’, ‘bough’, ‘thorough’, ‘lough’. This is a good way, I think, of raising children’s awareness of the nature of English orthography and to compare and contrast it with the foreign orthographies, which they’re learning in MFL. It will help them to see that they’re learning a system, which is easier than the one they’ve already learnt. So, if Spanish is a bit like the parallel train tracks, I’m afraid my analogy for English is a cat’s cradle because you’ve got this complex web of mappings going from symbols to sounds.

# Slide 13 (1:07):

Okay and that brings us to French. My visual analogy for French is that it’s like a tree, at least as seen above the ground.

For any given spoken form, so here we’ve got the spoken form /vɛʁ/, there are a number of different ways this can be spelt or represented in written form. We’ve got these real words here ‘vair’, ‘vert’, ‘verts’ and more besides. And we’ve also got, denoted by the asterisks here, pseudowords which could also be pronounced /vɛʁ/.

So, in other words, if you go from a spoken form there are many different ways of writing it. But, I think I’m right in saying, that if you go from any of these written forms, which are the leaves on the tree if you’d like, if you work back from that leaf, you’ll always end up back at the bottom of the trunk with the one spoken form. So, that provides a visual representation of the nature of French orthography.

# Slide 14 (0:26):

The reason I wanted to show you those visual analogies and activities is I think it can be useful to do those kinds of awareness raising tasks with pupils in class to help them understand the nature of the writing system they’re trying to learn, and how it relates to English.

# Slide 15 (1:07):

Just building on that idea of orthographic depth, because French is not right down at the shallow end and individual graphemes may be pronounced in more than one way, we think it might sometimes be useful to teach children blocks of letters. So, an example here would be ‘tion’ because if we start trying to do that on an individual grapheme basis, things would get pretty confusing. We’d say <t> is sometimes /t/, but sometimes /s/ like it is here. And the letter <i> is sometimes the vowel /i/, but sometimes the glide ‘y’. And so, it’s simpler to say ‘-tion’. And that is one reason why we’ve decided to use the term SSC in NCELP, rather than individual GPC, because sometimes we might be teaching larger orthographic units rather than individual graphemes.

# Slide 16 (0:52):

Okay, we’ve ticked off a few of the points that we said we would cover – points 1-3 there. We’re going to move on now to looking at the role of phonics in MFL teaching. Looking at first of all, whether or to what extent phonological decoding is important and why. Secondly, looking at what evidence there is that teaching phonics in an L2, second language or foreign language can be effective. But also, then thinking about effective in what ways? So, what are the outcomes that phonics teaching affects? Because as we already hinted at a few slides ago, the rationale for teaching phonics in a second language may be quite different to the rationale for teaching phonics in the first language setting.

# Slide 17 (1:31):

Let’s look then at the importance of phonological decoding in L2 learning. So, we looked a few slides ago at the rationale for phonics teaching in L1, in a first language setting, and we talked about children who would meet unfamiliar written forms, sound them out using their phonic knowledge, and thus discover their meaning. I’ve put here, it’s all about reading comprehension, which I think is an overstatement, but we could certainly say that reading comprehension and discovering the meaning of words orally is a key part of the rationale for phonics teaching in a first language setting.

But, of course, if we think of our own classrooms, as in many other instructed contexts around the world, so classroom foreign language contexts around the world, learners start to encounter the written language pretty much at the same time as they start to learn the language itself.

If you think of a learner encountering the French word <chat>. Even if they could sound that out, even if they have secure phonic knowledge and can pronounce ‘chat’. If they don’t know ‘chat’ orally, then sounding that word out is not going to help them in terms of understanding or comprehension.

# Slide 18 (3:33):

That point is summed up in this quotation which I’ve taken from this book by Grabe and Stoller, so if I just let you read through that top speech bubble.

And on that basis, some people might argue that there’s no point in teaching phonics in a foreign language. But we would strongly disagree with that view for several reasons.

Firstly, in a large-scale study by Erler and Macaro looking at MFL learners in England learning French, they found that many learners did actually say that they try to sound out words they don’t know in written texts. There may be some words which they do know, it’s possible that there are some words that they know orally, and that by sounding them out they could discover the meaning. But that will only work obviously if they have the secure phonic knowledge to sound the word out accurately. Otherwise that strategy will misfire.

Beyond thinking about reading comprehension, there is evidence that accurate decoding in a foreign language may have a positive impact on various other aspects of language learning.

So, vocabulary learning being a key one and learner autonomy and those are linked because a learner who is able to sound out a word accurately and obtain an accurate phonological form for that word, is then less dependent on other spoken models.

Grammar learning. Erler pointed out that if a learner is sounding out the word <je> and <j’ai> and is doing that inaccurately, those two words may sound the same to that learner, making them very difficult to distinguish between. The same with say a present tense and a past participle <parle> versus <parlé>, for some learners if they’re decoding inaccurately, those two words may sound the same, so making it very difficult then for them to distinguish between these two key grammatical forms.

A link has been found between ability to decode accurately and motivation for studying the language and intention to continue studying that language.

Speaking obviously, children often speak from the basis of written models.

Listening because the link between spoken and written forms can help learners to segment the speech stream, which is one of the key challenges of listening comprehension.

And finally writing. Again Macaro did a study of beginner learners’ writing strategies in French in an MFL context and found that when copying down from the board for example, they would as part of that process of copying them down sound words out inaccurately and then would reflect that inaccurate pronunciation in what they wrote down. So, they would not copy what was on the board, but it would be mediated by their decoding and it would lead to errors.

So, we can see here, that the rationale for teaching phonics in an L2 may be different but is nonetheless a really strong one we would argue.

# Slide 19 (2:37):

If phonological decoding is really important in foreign language learning, then it’s important also for us to think about how well learners in our own classrooms are at decoding and how much progress they’re making. So, we would invite you here just to think about your own pupils – different year-groups, different languages, French, German and Spanish – and think about how accurately and fluently they could read aloud texts in the target language. As we said, it’s important to think here about familiar words and unfamiliar words.

We’ve done quite a bit of research in MFL classrooms looking at progress in phonological decoding over time and I would say that there’s fairly strong evidence that in the absence of explicit instruction, so if they’re not taught phonics, on the whole students are not very good at phonological decoding and reading aloud. That’s obviously not to say that no students are any good at it and nobody makes any progress, but thinking about the average classroom, many learners are not very good at it, they don’t seem to make a great deal of progress over the course of Key Stage 3 and somehow they seem to just carry on reading many words as if they were English words, pronouncing them using the heuristic of English SSCs.

Of course, that’s not surprising in a way because think how much MFL exposure they get per week compared to the vast amount of English texts that they are exposed to in a given week. So those English SSCs are continuously being reinforced.

What we also have found is that if you push students, saying come on how do you think this French word should sound, in many cases they do know when they stop to think about it that it should not be pronounced like English but they don’t have that secure phonic knowledge to know how it should be pronounced so they may come up with all kinds of different pronunciations which are incorrect but at least they’re not English. So that’s why we’ve got this analogy, it’s a bit like pin the tail on the donkey, as though they’ve got a blindfold on and they’re trying to think well how should I say this?

# Slide 20 (1:55):

In one study of learners’ progress in phonological decoding in French in KS3, I asked them to read aloud a set of unfamiliar words in French. So, they were real words but words which they hadn’t encountered before and I audio recorded them. In fact, they sat on their own in a quiet place, perhaps in the corner of the classroom and they read through this list onto the audio recorder.

When I came back to listen afterwards to what they had recorded, I found there were these quite entertaining comments muttered under their breath as they went along and there’s just a selection here. Things like “these words are getting more and more ridiculous as we go along” and “they look like gibberish” and these made me laugh. But afterwards I thought that there is actually a serious point embedded in these comments which is to do with their motivation for learning and their attributions to their success or failure. So, about being able to read the words accurately. So, if they believe that they’re not able to pronounce these words well and if they believe that the reason for that is that the system they’re trying to read is ridiculous and gibberish and weird, then they’re going to have little incentive for trying to master that system, a system which cannot be mastered.

And that’s why we talked earlier about those awareness raising exercises because I think it’s important to get learners to understand that the system can be mastered. Okay, it may be difficult and different to English and it may take them some time, but it’s a system that can be mastered with the right levels of focus and effort.

# Slide 21 (0:40):

Okay so, if this is important for learners to master and if without some explicit instruction many learners don’t master it, then we need to look at the effectiveness of phonics teaching in foreign languages.

So, there’s a couple of quotations here which I’ll just let you read through. One from the [*unintelligible*] review, the Teaching School Council review and secondly one from Rachel Hawkes who is the NCELP co-director and someone who has been teaching phonics successfully in MFL for many years. So if I just let you read those through.

# Slide 22 (0:55):

In terms of research evidence, I think it would be fair to say that we need much more research into the teaching of phonics in foreign language. There’s quite a bit of research into teaching phonics particularly in English as a first language but more research is needed in foreign language contexts because as we’ve seen, actually, the rationale for phonics teaching is quite different between first and foreign language classrooms.

I’ve picked out, in this slide and the following slide, 3 doctoral studies, 2 of which were based in the UK context. I’ll just let you read through the notes on those, and after that I will tell you a little bit about a larger scale study which we completed recently known as the FLEUR project: Foreign Language Education Unlocking Reading.

# Slide 23:

No audio.

# Slide 24 (3:32):

So you’ll have seen from those notes that those 3 studies all were fairly small-scale and all had their own particular limitations, and so this led us to plan the FLEUR study which was an attempt to gather more robust evidence on the effects of phonics teaching in MFL. It was an experimental study, so a design explicitly intended to measure the effects of different teaching approaches. It was a pre-, post-, delayed post- design - in other words, we tested the pupils before they had the teaching, immediately after the teaching, and after a delay of about 6 months to see to what extent any effects were durable over time.

I’ve somehow forgotten to put on this slide but they were Year 7 classes who took park in 36 schools across the country, and there were about 900 students in total, so it was a fairly large-scale study. There were 33 comprehensive schools and 3 grammar schools, and the teaching they received lasted about 16 weeks starting in January of Year 7, lasting about 25 minutes a week. The teaching was delivered by their usual class teachers but we co-planned those interventions with the teachers so it was a collaborative intervention design. Each school was allocated to 1 of 3 different conditions. So 1 group was the comparison group in a way. They read some challenging texts, which we specially created for the project, and those texts were designed to be quite a bit above students’ current productive linguistic level in the foreign language, and were quite a lot harder and longer than the kinds of texts they were routinely meeting in their Year 7 textbooks. Those texts were also designed to contain many examples of particular symbol/sound correspondences and to facilitate the use of particular strategies, but they weren’t given any instruction in either phonics or symbol/sound correspondences or strategies. I was to see what they did just from reading the text. The other 2 groups received explicit instruction, either in phonics with no strategy instruction, or in reading strategies but with no phonics instruction. So, it was an attempt to see what these 2 instructional approaches give pupils over and above simply being exposed to the challenging texts.

We had a range of outcome measures, so reading comprehension was included, but for the reasons we said, we looked at wider outcomes, particularly vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary knowledge is often used as a sort of quick proxy for overall language proficiency, and we’ve already discussed how there’s a link between phonological decoding and vocabulary acquisition, so we wanted to include vocabulary. We also looked at phonological decoding strategic behaviour, obviously to see if the instructional approach has directly impacted on the things they were intended to impact on. Also known as self-efficacy, the extent to which they felt able to tackle reading texts, their motivation for learning the language, and we used questionnaires and interviews to gather their views on the teaching they’d received.

# Slide 25 (3:00):

As this is the phonics presentation, I’m not going to elaborate on what we did in the strategies strand of the study, but I will at least in overview tell you what we did in the phonics strand. So on the left there, you can see the target symbol/sound correspondences. There are many that we could have chosen to focus on in French because there is a large number of SSC in French which are difficult for English-speaking learners, but we didn’t want to try to spread ourselves too thinly, as it were. We wanted students to master the ones that we taught, so rather than going for huge coverage and them not knowing them very well, we decided to focus on this smaller set of SSC. We decided on this list together, us and the teachers who took part, and we looked at, in making that selection, how difficult they were for English speaking learners but also how often they occurred in the language. So a bit like with the vocabulary strand, we wanted to focus on, or be influenced by, bang for buck. In other words, teach ones which would actually come up a lot in the language, and actually the SFC there, the silent final consonants, are immensely frequent in the language so a really key thing to teach early on.

There were main strands to the phonics instruction. First of all, we began with awareness raising, so we’ve already talked about that, but it was to help learners understand the difference between the English writing system, which to a greater or lesser extent they already knew, and the target language writing system. So, things like the exercises we looked at earlier, but also things like lists of cognates and thinking about how to pronounce them in the 2 languages, and just noticing that the same letter string will be pronounced differently in French versus English.

Then we went through a systematic procedure of introducing new symbol/sound correspondences, giving them words which they’d learned which contained the target SSC which they learned thoroughly and could use as a reference point, and that’s something which we’ll see later in the NCELP resources.

Then they needed opportunities to practice. There was controlled practice, so in sentences saturated with those SSC, but then also more open-ended practice, and that was where the challenging texts came in.

Finally, we built in a systematic recapping. Of course that can also be done incidentally as vocab occurs in the course of the normal scheme of work which contained SSC they covered, and so they could be reminded of it, but we also planned in a systematic recapping.

# Slide 26 (2:28):

Here are some of the key findings of the FLEUR study, or at least relating to phonics. Please do have a look at the full set of findings which you can find in the public report which is freely available online.

First of all, the phonics teaching did lead to significantly greater progress in phonological decoding, at least after controlling for students’ prior attainment. As one would have hoped, they got better at the thing they were taught. We measured decoding using pen and paper decoding tests which we developed for the project, which we think was good but which was certainly less sensitive than a reading aloud task. We think possibly that this graph at the bottom-left underrepresents the real progress made by the phonics group and the difference between the groups, but we just didn’t have time to administer and listen to 900 individual reading aloud tasks.

In terms of reading comprehension, we didn’t find any difference between the groups, and that was as we expected if we think back to what we said about the rationale for phonics teaching in L1 and L2 and the fact that you wouldn’t necessarily expect an immediate payback in an L2. That’s because even if students sound out a word accurately, a new word they’ve not seen before, they probably don’t know that word orally anyway, so that was as we expected. However, the phonics group, this is the graph at the bottom right, did make significantly more gains in vocabulary knowledge. Again that ties in with what we said earlier about the links between phonological decoding and vocab acquisition. Remember this was a fairly short intervention over 16 weeks, so this is important because vocab knowledge is known to be a key factor in performance in all 4 language skills.

So, going back to that previous point about reading, I think over a longer period of time, one would expect phonics instruction to lead to benefits for reading comprehension because of the greater vocabulary knowledge that students would be likely to accrue over time, and that in turn would facilitate their reading comprehension.

# Slide 27 (0:23):

Okay, so that pretty much brings us to the end of the presentation and I think we’ve covered all of the things that we said we wanted to cover and that just brings us now to the summary and key messages which we’ve put on the next couple of slides. So we just invite you to read through those points in the next 2 slides.

# Slide 28:

No audio.

# Slide 29:

No audio.

# Slide 30 (2:13):

When I first did this presentation, or actually a slightly longer version of it up in York at the first NCELP residential, Emma Marsden, who as you know is the centre co-director, kindly distilled my key points into some even more key take-home messages, which we summarise as follows.

First of all, plan and teach it. In other words, we strongly that phonics needs to be planned into a scheme of work and taught systematically because it seems to help a lot of things. The rationale as we’ve seen for teaching phonics in an L2 may be different from the rationale of teaching phonics in an L1 but is nonetheless a strong rationale. Phonological decoding seems to have an impact on a number of different aspects of language learning and so I would see it as a foundation skill.

Secondly, keep going with it. It’s not something you can teach just once at the beginning of the year and move on from, it needs to be continually revisited, reinforced and practiced, and that’s especially the case in French, but also in the other foreign languages. Especially French as it’s a complex system to master, but it’s important for students to realise that it’s nonetheless a system that can be mastered. It not as some of those learners said in those comments “gibberish”, “weird”, “ridiculous” or “impenetrable”.

Thirdly, and this isn’t something which we particularly focused on in this presentation, but we think that it is important to assess phonics knowledge. If you’re going to teach it, we need to know the impact of that teaching, and we need to know where the gaps are and what kind of errors students are making so we know where to focus the teaching next and what gaps need addressing.

We would see those as some of the key principals in relation to phonics in MFL.

So, that’s the end of the presentation. I hope that’s been useful and I hope you have happy phonics teaching in your MFL lessons to come.

# Slide 31:

No audio.

# Slide 32:

No audio.

# Slide 32:

No audio.