Transcript: Phonics TRG Part 1

Length of Talk: 26 minutes

Presenter: Robert Woore

# Slide 1 (0.22):

Hi, my name is Robert Woore and I am working with NCELP as one of the research specialist focusing in particular on phonics. What I am going to do here is just run through this phonics Teacher Research Group (TRG) presentation, particularly for people who are new to the TRG or who may have missed the original presentations for whatever reason.

# Slide 2 (0.35):

The aims of this session are to: develop an understanding of the rationale for phonics teaching in MFL (modern foreign languages); look at some of the research evidence underpinning this; to think of a range of ways in which phonics teaching might be put into practice in your own school context; and also just to understand the ways in which the Hub schools and the Lead schools will work together to develop practice in this area. There are also parallel presentations for anyone who missed them on [Grammar](https://resources.ncelp.org/concern/resources/fb4948446?locale=en), [Vocabulary](https://resources.ncelp.org/concern/resources/ng451h52r?locale=en), and [Meaningful Practice](https://resources.ncelp.org/concern/resources/q237hr920?locale=en).

# Slide 3 (0.43):

There is a session outline here which I’ll just let you read through. But for the first bullet point–Research evidence relating to the teaching of phonics in MFL–there is a separate presentation on that and I have also done a voiceover for that with some commentary. So please have a look at that, there is a separate presentation.

The other bullet points will be covered in this presentation and what I think I’ll do for some of the points it is perhaps easiest for you to read through the slides yourselves in your own time and for some of the others I’ll provide a bit of commentary as a voiceover on the slides.

# Slide 4 (0.38):

At this point please have a look at the other presentation which has a title: “[Why Teach Phonics](https://resources.ncelp.org/concern/resources/gb19f609g?locale=en)”. It looks at some of the research that has been conducted, particularly in the MFL context in the U.K, looking at phonological decoding, the progress that learners make in phonological decoding, and the teaching of phonics. Then, as a follow-up to that video presentation, there is also this handout called [Rationale for Teaching Phonics](https://resources.ncelp.org/concern/resources/5t34sj80w?locale=en), which will cover or re-cap some of the main points covered in that presentation.

# Slide 5 (4.06):

When we originally did these presentations, they were obviously done in a group context and at this point we invited people to reflect on their own experiences and to share their experiences with other people around them, thinking in particular about concerns people might have about teaching phonics in MLF. We followed that up by looking at these speech bubbles which were objections or concerns which we anticipated people might raise or which people had indeed raised to us in the past.

We then talked through some of these, let me just see if I can get a marker pen up here. So, looking at the first one, if I just go through these in turn, looking at the first one: “I think it will confuse my lower attaining learners”. We think that the evidence really suggests that learners, in particularly lower attaining learners, will be more confused if they are not taught the writing system of the Symbol Sound Correspondences (SSCs). For this one we have quite a lot of evidence that actually in the absence of explicit instruction, so without being taught phonics, many learners–not all–but many don’t pick it up on their own. They don’t implicitly learn the SSC system of the foreign language, certainly in French the evidence suggests that, there is less research in Spanish and German.

This one: “there is no time.” Obviously, there is now the NCELP Scheme of Work where phonics is integrated into that Scheme of Work. I can see that objection that there is a lot to cover in other schemes of work but we would see the mastering of the writing system, being able to phonologically decode the language. In other words, read words aloud with accuracy and ultimately fluently, we would see that as a foundation skill so we think we have to try to find time to cover that within the Scheme of Work.

This one down here: “I can see the point in Spanish and German but in French it is too complicated”. I think there we would say actually it is particularly necessary in French because it is a more complicated system but we think also valuable in Spanish and German.

The next one suggesting that students would find this boring or babyish, I think that is just a matter of approach. There are different approaches that could be used and it is a matter of finding the one that works contextually for your own learners. Incidentally, I have just started learning a new language. I have started a Mandarin course and in the first lesson the tutor went through the system of SSC for pinyin, the Romanised representation of the language. That was something that we did as adult learners and it was essential for us to know to equip us to be able to learn the language and to be able to learn characters in the future.

Finally, the sixth bullet point here: “this is not my priority—my students are already OK at reading.” Here we would distinguish between reading and phonologically decoding, it is possible to read with some comprehension without necessarily being able to pronounce the words that you are reading. We would see the ability to read words aloud, to sound them out, to pronounce them accurately, as a foundation skill. Of course, it may be that your students are already accurate and fluent at reading aloud in which case it is not a priority but the evidence suggests to us that actually many students in many classrooms don’t have that skill well-developed so it is important to focus upon.

# Slide 6 (1.42):

We have had to make a decision about which SSCs to teach explicitly in the Scheme of Work over time, that was harder to do in French than in German and Spanish because in French there are many SSCs which may be problematic for English-speaking learners so there is more to cover. We need to think about which should we prioritize. We have thought about this quite carefully thinking about difficulty, so how hard it is for students, particularly English-speaking students to decode these foreign SSCs. We’ve based that on some empirical evidence of the SSCs that learners most frequently mispronounce.

We’ve also thought about frequency which we will go through in some subsequent slides, so thinking about how often these SSCs occur in the language. So as with the vocabulary strand of NCELP, we’ve thought here about a bang-for-buck principle so we don’t want to spend ages teaching SSCs that hardly ever occur. We want to think about the ones that occur most often. We’ve also drawn on teacher expertise and judgment and we’ve made a working selection and we’ve ordered them but it is a work-in-progress. So, as people use the Scheme of Work and as people teach these SSCs we welcome feedback and we will think about perhaps refining the selection or the ordering over time.

# Slide 7 (0.33):

At this point we’d invite you to think about your own learners and think about which SSCs, particularly in French but you could also do this is in Spanish or German, which ones they struggle with most. If you were to make your own selection based on difficulty and frequency of occurrence, which ones do you think would be the priority to teach. So if you just reflect on that and in the following slides we will present some empirical data.

# Slide 8 (1.44):

It might be interesting now to compare your own judgements and intuitions with this empirical evidence. So, this is data from a reading aloud task which was completed by 188 students in Year 7 and Year 9 learning French, with the inclusion criterion was that they must speak English as a first language and no other languages. In other words, there were no EAL learners included in this sample.

The reading aloud task included all of these graphemes listed here and the graphemes were scored individually to see which ones learners most often pronounced accurately or inaccurately. Then they were put in rank order. You can see right up here, rank order number 51, is the –er ending for infinitive verbs as in “aller” or “marcher”. Only in 4% of cases was that pronounced accurately. Also featuring high on the list, you’ve got –e as in “une fille”, -in as in “du vin”, again around 4% accuracy. So it might be interesting to just look through that list and see whether this matches what you would have expected. Coming right to the end of the list we have ‘m’ as in “maman”, number 1 rank ordering pronounced accurately over 99% of times. Here, you can see there are a lot of these consonants here which have a similar pronunciation in English and French and which were pronounced on the whole very accurately as one would have expected.

# Slide 9 (1.07):

That covers the difficultly of individual SSCs for learners so thinking then about frequency of occurrence in the language. We have done an admittedly fairly small-scale analysis for this and when we have time it would be good to do a more complete analysis based on a bigger corpus. What we have done so far is that we have taken two kinds of analysis for this, first of all we took six texts from this young people’s reading magazine online [Geoado](http://www.geoado.com/) and we took the first 200 words of each of those texts and broke them down into graphemes to see how many times each grapheme occurred.

Secondly, we did something similar with a smaller corpus of words from a French textbook. On the following slide, you will see a list of graphemes by their frequency of their occurrence in the [Geoado](http://www.geoado.com/) corpus and on the slide after that you will see a comparison of both of those two analyses: a and b.

# Slide 10:

No audio.

# Slide 11 (0.30):

What you see on this slide is a comparison of the two rankings that we obtained from those two analyses that I mentioned a moment ago and I think the thing that we want to highlight on this slide is that if you compare these two columns, the two sets of rankings that we obtained, it is just noteworthy how similar they are. They come out with a very similar order. So we do feel some confidence in that frequency analysis.

# Slide 12 (1.25):

What you can see in this slide is a plot, we have taken individual graphemes and we have plotted their difficultly on the y-axis as obtained from that data which I showed you just a few slides ago. On the x-axis we have their frequency of occurrence as derived from the Geoado corpus. We just wanted to show you this so that you could see the kinds of analyses we had done. Of course, what we were looking for were things up here [top-right], if we had lots of graphemes up here we would know they would be high priorities to teach because they would be both highly frequent and highly difficult for learners.

In fact, the /r/ is a bit of a different case because I think that is more to do with pronunciation than decoding in a way but clearly we have got silent final consonants (SFC) up here so they clearly emerge as a priority as being difficult for learners and highly frequent in the language. Elsewhere, the patterns weren’t quite so clear, you can see some here that are highly difficult like “gn” as in “montagne” but actually are very low frequency of occurrence. So, we looked at this analysis but actually it didn’t give us a really strong picture of ones which are both highly frequent and highly difficult.

# Slide 13 (0.33):

Here you can see what we finally came up with, this was the selection that we made of graphemes to teach and in what order and this is the order we are tackling them in the NCELP Scheme of Work, as we said it is a working selection which we may tweak or even change substantially in light of feedback from people as they start to use the Scheme of Work but that is the selection we’ve made for the time being and you have seen now the evidence on which we have based that selection.

# Slide 14 (0.18):

On this slide, you can see our selection for German and on the next slide you’ll see our selection for Spanish. Immediately, you’ll see that it is a slightly less complex picture for German, and particularly for Spanish where there are fewer SSCs to go through.

# Slide 15:

No audio.

# Slide 16 (0.23):

If you do teach any other alphabetic languages in school other than French, German, and Spanish, if you’d like to you might want to pause here and reflect on which the key SSCs to teach are in those languages and why, thinking along similar lines in terms of the difficulty for learners and the frequency of occurrence in the language.

# Slide 17 (0.53):

What we did next in the TRG sessions, in the initial TRG sessions, was to provide people an opportunity to explore different approaches to teaching phonics in MFL. So we began by asking people to think about approaches or resources that they were already using, or that colleagues were already using, and to evaluate those.

If you’d like to do that now for your own practice it would be an opportunity to reflect on current approaches and think about how effective they are and to think, I guess, in particularly about student outcomes and whether the teaching that was being done seemed to have a positive effect on outcomes, thinking about how accurately students were able to read aloud words in the foreign language and how fluently.

# Slide 18 (1.47):

What we did next in the session was to provide people with some time just to browse the phonics teaching resources which are available on the [NCELP website](https://resources.ncelp.org/catalog/facet/area_of_research_sim) through the [Resource Portal](https://resources.ncelp.org/) so please do have a browse now and have a look at some of those resources.

We can put them into these four categories which relate back to the other presentation, the Why Teach Phonics research presentation. The categories are: awareness raising, so resources or tasks designed to help students notice the differences between the English writing system and the target language writing system in terms of the SSCs; secondly, resources and tasks designed to introduce new SSCs so learning, for example, that /qu/ has the value ‘qu’ in French; thirdly, tasks designed to consolidate that knowledge, to practice it, and recap it; and finally, to apply it. At the end of the day, it is important not only that students know that /qu/ says ‘qu’ but also that they are able to read aloud words containing that SSC. So if they see “magnifique” they are able to read it aloud, they are able to apply that knowledge. Ultimately, obviously we want them to be able to do that fluently but the first step is for them to be able to do it accurately.

As you look at the resources please have a think about, in your view, are there key strengths or limitations?, which ones do you think you would be able to use for your classes?, do you think they might need adapting for your own classrooms? So please have a browse and reflect on those key questions.

# Slide 19 (0.59):

We moved on next to thinking about assessing and monitoring progress in phonological decoding, if we are saying that something is important enough to focus on in our teaching then we are also going to need to assess it to evaluate the impact of that teaching, to see how successful it is, but also to ascertain the gaps in students’ knowledge, to see where future teaching will need to be targeted, to see which SSC will need more work, which SSC will need recapping, and so on.

Once again, we’d invite you first to think about any approaches or resources that you currently use to assess your own students’ phonological decoding and to monitor progress over time. Of course, that could be informal, it could be just as easy as just listening to people as they answer in class as they are based on written models. But what approaches do you currently use and what strengths and limitations might those approaches have?

# Slide 20 (2.19):

Thinking from a research point-of-view, two main approaches have been used in research projects to measure phonological decoding. On the one hand, reading aloud measures where students are asked to read aloud individual words or perhaps connected stretches of text. If they are individual words we looked in the other presentation, in the research presentation, about the importance of getting students to read pseudo words or unfamiliar words aloud, which is a bit like what happens within the phonics screening check in primary schools.

Obviously, reading aloud tasks are more difficult and time consuming to administer so other projects have developed pen-and-paper tasks as a way of trying to get at the same information but without doing individual reading aloud tasks with learners. Tests that have been used have been things like ‘rhyme judgement tasks’ so getting pairs of words which rhyme but are spelt differently and asking learners to decide which one of these pairs of words rhyme. On the NCELP website through the Resource Portal you can find examples of both of these kinds of tests, we’ve tried to put on there both some reading-aloud-type tests and some pen-and-paper tests but they are all, again, works-in-progress in the sense that we offer them for people to use and try out and give us feedback on.

With respect to reading aloud tasks obviously that can be difficult to do in a whole class context, but we think there are ways of making that easier to do, perhaps for example getting students to work in pairs and the teacher can walk around and eaves-drop on particular pairs. There are also opportunities for speaking homework to be set, there is also a resource on the NCELP Resource Portal looking at speaking homework, by getting students to record themselves reading a passage at home and sending you the recording for you to listen to.

# Slide 21 (0.42):

This slide recaps some of the materials which we covered in the other presentation, the research presentation. So, if you just have a read through of this slide hopefully it will be familiar but essentially it talks about the importance of including unfamiliar words in a decoding task because that is how we will get at learners’ knowledge of individual SSCs because if they are reading or doing a test based on familiar words than they may not actually break that down into its individual SSCs, they may just have retrieved its pronunciation as a pre-stored whole.

# Slide 22 (1.24):

Just to illustrate how learners might process familiar and unfamiliar words differently when reading them aloud, there are some findings here from a research study where I got learners to read aloud a list of words. They were mixed up in random order but the list contained pairs of words with the same ending, here for example “pain” and “grain”. But within each pair one of the pair was a familiar word, like “pain” they knew, and the other word was unfamiliar to them, so “grain”. The interesting thing was, as you can see here, they pronounced familiar words more accurately than unfamiliar words and I focused only on the ending, so the initial consonants were discarded.

You can see that they have pronounced the ends of the words more accurately in the familiar words than the unfamiliar words and that’s what is illustrated, there are a couple of illustrations underneath, that for “pain” they would say it correctly but they knew that word but when they read “grain” they just said it as grain, they just read it as English. So, it shows the importance, if you want to know whether or not they know this grapheme, it shows why it is important to include unfamiliar words in your tests.

# Slide 23 (0.24):

On this slide, there are just a few screenshots from some of the decoding tasks which we have put so far on the NCELP Resource Portal so please do have a look at those and think about how easy and effective they might be to use, and how useful, how they might be used to inform teaching and learning in your own classrooms.

# Slide 24 (1.38):

Finally, here is a screenshot from the observation teaching and discussion sheets relating to phonics so these are for specialist teachers and hub teachers to use in the course of lesson observations which are focusing on phonics. You can see on one side of the sheet, the left-hand side, there is this sort of checklist which allows you to quickly tick off any approaches to phonics teaching that are being used. On the other side, hidden here behind the other sheet, there is space to record any comments, perhaps any things that you think worked particularly well, any questions, any things that you think could be done differently, and we think it is also useful here to record perhaps a brief timeline of what goes on in the lesson on the right-hand side.

The other side of the document has space to make notes about the discussion that takes place. We think that is a really important part of the process is for the observer and the teacher to sit down and discuss what has happened and just briefly record the outcomes of that discussion here. We just really want to highlight that this is part of a collaborative and formative process, it is in no way anything to do with performance management or formal evaluation of one person by another. It is a collaborative discussion focused on the development of approaches to teaching and assessing phonics.

# Slide 25 (0.49):

That just about brings us to the end of the presentation, there is one more slide after this which I’ll just leave you to read through. On the right here, you can see that is what we said we would cover in this talk. If this was a live session we’d ask you if we had missed anything out, whether you had any questions, anything else you wanted to know but as this is a pre-recorded presentation we can’t do that. If you do have any further questions about anything we have covered or anything related to the processes going forward please talk to your specialist teacher in the lead schools or contact NCELP and we will do our best to answer your questions. So I hope that has been useful and thank you very much for listening.

# Slide 26:

No audio.