

New Orthographies in the Primary Languages Classroom: a Challenge for Teacher Education

What this research was about and why it is important

Within the context of the introduction of primary languages in England in 2014, the pedagogic approach adopted is central to the success of this initiative. Previous research had suggested that oracy tended to predominate over literacy, and while there is no definitive agreement as to the appropriate balance of oracy and literacy in the primary languages classroom, it is likely that a new orthography poses a challenge to learners and teachers alike. This study sought to investigate the experience of primary language student teachers when on school placement, with particular regard to their experience of learning to teach literacy to young foreign language learners. The focus was on FL phonics, given the predominance of this in first language literacy teaching. The findings suggest that they had limited exposure to language teaching, and there was little focus on literacy in general or on phonics in particular.

What the researchers did

- A total of 55 specialist primary trainees were involved in the research project. Of these, 23 were postgraduate who had 2 school placements, and 32 were undergraduates who had had 3 or 4 school placements.
- The data were collected in the spring and summer terms of 2015, and the spring term of 2016.
- This provided a total of 55 questionnaires with both Likert scale responses and some open text questions. Semi-structured interviews with a total of ten student teachers (pairs and individual) were also conducted after they had completed their final placement, in the summer and spring terms of 2015 and 2016.

What the researchers found

- Opportunities to observe MFL teaching were limited: only 33% of the postgraduates and 56% of the undergraduates thought they had sufficient opportunity.
- Opportunities to teach were even more limited: only 17% of the postgraduates and 37% of the undergraduates thought they had sufficient opportunity.
- With specific reference to phonics, only 9 % of the postgraduates and 19 % of the undergraduates had observed this being taught; not a single postgraduate had had the opportunity to teach phonics, although 25% of the undergraduates had, suggesting that they may have been willing to initiate this even if they had not observed any.
- Open text comments and interview findings suggested that: MFL was a low priority in schools; oracy activities dominated; there was a focus on vocabulary; teachers were often perceived to be lacking in subject knowledge and confidence; and some noted the disparity between approaches to phonics in L1 English and in the FL.

Things to consider

- What kind of subject knowledge do teachers and student teachers need to have?
- One important consideration is that when student teachers are on school placement, this is in fact a training context: we need to consider what kind of school-based tasks student teachers and their mentors could engage in together.
- The campus-based part of ITE needs to review the ways in which approaches to L1 teaching and FL teaching are presented, in order to make the links between the two more explicit.