

Literacy, Synthetic Phonics and Cued Speech

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Literacy – for hearing children – is very much in the news. Synthetic Phonics, a relatively new technique for teaching, is being used to improve low literacy rates amongst hearing children. Research showing a high level of success for Synthetic Phonics has convinced the government to promote it within schools.

Unlike most deaf children, those brought up with Cued Speech are just as able to benefit from this method as hearing children. But what is synthetic phonics? And how can it be used with deaf children?

Many people are familiar with the old phonetic method used for teaching reading: a child would be taught to associate a letter with a sound ('a is for apple') then look at a word like 'cat' and 'sound it out' c – a – t. This technique worked for regular words (words which sound how they are spelt) but had inherent problems because English is so irregular. A single letter can represent several sounds (e.g. the letter 'c' sounds like 'k' in the word cat but like 's' in the word city) and some sounds have many different ways of been represented (for example /aw/ /ough/ /oor/ /ore/ all can be used for the same sound).

Like the old phonetics system Synthetic Phonics also teaches children to associate sounds with letters or combinations of letters but it approaches the issue from the opposite direction. Synthetic Phonics teaches children to recognise the sounds first and then teaches the many different ways in which these sounds can be spelt. For example the children will be taught that the 'aw' sound can be represented by many different spellings. When taught in this way children who are trying to read a new word will have in their minds a selection of possibilities. The irregularities of English spelling – which damages the confidence of so many – are specifically taught and can thus be mastered.

But how can deaf children be taught to read by identifying the individual sounds within words if they cannot hear those sounds?

For many deaf children this is unfeasible. However Cued Speech can make this possible for two different groups of deaf children.

1. The first group, who have access to Cued Speech prior to learning to read, are in the most advantageous position. There are a number of pieces of international research and many case studies which show that children who have had early and consistent access to Cued Speech can understand sound-based language. When learning to read they can use exactly the same techniques as hearing children. Cued Speech children are familiar with each of the 44 'sounds' combined into words. Several pieces of research demonstrate that children with access to Cued Speech have reading ages which equal those of their hearing peers. These children are using their previous knowledge of sound-based language (but accessed visually through Cued Speech) to learn to read in the same way as hearing children.

2. The second group of children who can benefit from the combination of synthetic phonics and Cued Speech are those who do not have access to Cued Speech before school. Pioneering work at the Exeter Royal Academy for Deaf Education has introduced cued English to sign-using secondary-age pupils using adapted Synthetic Phonics materials. The use of Cued Speech simultaneously with Synthetic Phonics is giving pupils a real understanding of how spoken languages work and of the relationship between spoken and written English.

The following story illustrates students' leap in understanding through Cued Speech. Prior to the introduction of Cued Speech last year the group of secondary-age pupils at Exeter were asked how many sounds they thought made up the English language. Astonishingly, estimates varied from one million to several hundreds. When it was explained, using BSL,

and then demonstrated through Cued Speech, that there were only 44 sounds pupils expressed great surprise – and said that therefore English was ‘do-able’.

The following article, contained in the same newsletter, gives an update on work at the Exeter Royal Academy for Deaf Education, where Cued Speech is used with the Synthetic Phonics system ‘THRASS’.

Exeter School Up-date

The use of cued English at the newly named Exeter Royal Academy for Deaf Education continues to grow with innovative work by Cate Calder, the Cued Speech Association’s part-time information officer, and Academy staff. Building on the success of an initial pilot study which ran from November 06 to July 07 the use of Cued Speech has now become a more established part of the curriculum and enjoys the privilege of a dedicated classroom!

Cate, pictured below, writes:



‘Since the start of this academic year, my work has increased to 4 mornings a week in school and one afternoon dedicated to college age students. The main focus is on a core group of mixed age and ability students who attend a cued English session 3 days a week. All of these students were keen to continue the work after their involvement in the pilot study. The idea of mixing ages in one group was a new one and has proved very successful so far – the older students are excellent at coaching the younger ones and keeping them in line!’

‘We are using the THRASS (Teaching Handwriting Reading and Spelling Skills) system to work on literacy levels. Thrass is a synthetic phonics system which gives students a ‘map’ of the phonemes and their main spelling choices. This will give them a base of 120 key words grouped into Vowel and Consonant maps. Students are learning their way around the map with impressive speed, they are able to sign, cue and cue-read (without lip-patterns!) about 50 of the words so far. They analyse each word and break it down into the consonant and vowel sounds. The concept that each sound has one cue but may have many different spellings has been a revelation.’

‘Two Teachers at the school and two Speech and Language Therapists are also working with other students to introduce CE and THRASS. And in addition to my core group, a few school students (ranging in age from six to sixteen) receive one-to-one sessions once a week from me.’

‘In addition a small number of college students receive a weekly session to help with vocabulary, lip-patterns and phonemic awareness. They all enjoy cue-reading and it would be so good to be able to give them more exposure. College staff are very supportive and 14 signed up to learn to cue, but sadly their time-table pressures have prevented this from happening so far.’

Research

‘Another exciting development is the assignment of Laura Gratton as a researcher. Laura’s assessment of the pilot study formed part of the final year of her degree in Speech and Language Therapy. Her remit is to closely follow the students’ progress in four main areas:

- 1. Receptive skills - lipreading with and without cues*
- 2. Expressive skills - ability to cue words and show lip-patterns*
- 3. Relationship to English – confidence and attitude*
- 4. Literacy levels – individual phoneme awareness, ability to build up whole words from phonemes and break whole words down into phonemes, make appropriate spelling choices and widen their vocabulary.*

'Six students are involved with this study, four at primary age and two at secondary age. Baseline assessments were carried out in September 07 and the first batch of progress assessments will be done in early December 07. The outcome of this work will inform the decision to continue with cued English at the school in the future and it is expected that an academic paper will be published detailing the results. It has been difficult to find space in the students' already overburdened time-tables for cued English and progress is heartening considering the limited exposure they get.'

Current policy at the Academy is to aim for excellence in both English and British Sign Language. The goal for the students who are part of the cued English programme is for them to have access to unambiguous English through Cued Speech.

What do the students think? Quotes include:

"Why didn't I get this (cued English) when I was little? I used to watch people talking to me all day and it just went over my head. With Cueing I can see that the words are different."
Ahmed aged 20.

"I am good at this, it is easy!" 9-year old pupil.