

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 soundbased 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 'doable'.