Flippin' phonics - principles and practice with profoundly deaf pupils

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The current situation
At the time of writing this article, phonics is a 'hot' topic with the recent report of the Rose Review of the Teaching of Early Reading (Rose 2006). This draws on a range of evidence including school visits, research evidence, contributions from those with acknowledged expertise, Ofsted reports and data and the views of parents.

Behind the debate between 'synthetic' and 'analytic' phonics there are identified issues still to be resolved.

- Acknowledged inadequacies in recent research and an identification of other research issues still not addressed (Brooks 2003).
- Inconsistencies about the terminology used (Brooks 2003).
- A query as to whether word recognition is the underlying problem behind the slow-down in reading improvement or whether the problem is reading comprehension and, if so, how this can best be addressed (Stuart 2003).

Nevertheless, the government has accepted the main recommendations of the Rose Report (Kelly 2006) and, at about the time you receive this magazine, a new version of the NLS will be made available incorporating the recommendations of the Rose Report. This will be a revision rather than a total redirection of the National Literacy Strategy, although there is no intention to teach phonic skills any earlier.

- There will be more emphasis on discrete phonic work within literacy teaching.
- The order in which sounds are taught will be reviewed and there will be a faster pace and earlier, systematic work on blending.
- The ‘search lights’ model will be reconstructed to separate and clarify the two components of reading ie word recognition and language comprehension.

The scope of the review precluded detailed attention to the specialist requirements of those with severe auditory impairment but states that ‘some modifications to the phonic programme may be beneficial’ and that ‘a wide range of expert help is available to help settings and schools match provision to need’. Furthermore, ‘the introduction of phonic work should always be a matter for professional judgment’. It is clear, therefore, that we, Teachers of the Deaf, should ensure that phonics teaching matches the needs of profoundly deaf pupils and that we have the expertise to provide high quality, clearly focussed advice and teaching that is based on assessed levels of functioning and is regularly reviewed and evaluated.

The report emphasises the importance of speaking and listening in the development of literacy skills both for word recognition and comprehension; word recognition is seen as a 'time limited' means to an end, with reading comprehension the ultimate goal.

So, given that decoding skills are seen as essential, though not sufficient, for fluent reading with understanding, what do we need to consider in order to implement an effective approach to developing phonic skills with profoundly deaf pupils?

Remember that profoundly deaf pupils need to develop the same knowledge, skills and understanding as hearing pupils and there is evidence that they will follow the same sequence as hearing pupils (James 2005).

They need:

- to know the correspondences between English phonemes and graphemes
- to identify sounds in words
- to be able to blend sounds to read and segment words to spell
- to combine these skills along with other strategies to read with comprehension.

To achieve this we must take account of audiological factors.

Profoundly deaf children may have limited access to speech sounds. However prescriptive hearing aid fitting and the increased use of cochlear implants makes effective access to most of the speech spectrum a reality for most deaf children. Nevertheless, profoundly deaf children may have less experience of listening to a wide range of sounds, so their phonic development may take longer than for hearing pupils.

Listening skills may be delayed. ‘Playing with Sounds - A Supplement to Progression in Phonics’ (DfES 2001) emphasises the early stages of listening skills from ‘can hear and discriminate general sounds, speech sounds and patterns’ (Step 1) to ‘develops and understanding that words are composed of sounds phonemes’ (Step 2). These early skills provide the foundation for later phonic skills to be built on - a firm foundation is essential to
later proficiency. Whilst NHSP may mean that fewer deaf children have considerable delay in these areas, ToDs must always take account of the pupil's current stage of development. (James 2005).

What will characterise a learning environment that takes account of the needs that arise from this?
- Strong audiological support to facilitate consistent effective amplification and hence optimum use of residual hearing. The use of Auditory Training Units (hard-wire amplification devices) should also be considered when necessary.
- A clear expectation that as well as learning to listen pupils can listen to learn.
- Proactive support for listening skills.
- Additional opportunities for listening in good acoustic conditions.
- Focussed as well as incidental listening experiences.

For most hearing children the early stages of 'Playing with Sounds' will be undertaken during the Foundation Stage; however, it is essential to build on what the children know and progress from where they are, so, this may take longer. Pupils will need the experience of listening to a wide range of sounds, learning to recognise syllables and rhyme and then to identify what it is that is similar or different between words. For this they need strong support from an adult who can scaffold their learning by:
- a clear explanation of the task required
- sensitive modelling to demonstrate what is needed
- discussion to provide the required vocabulary
- appropriate feedback on the pupil's contributions to enable learning
- participating rather than supervising games and activities.

Supporting early listening skills will involve adults who help to foster an interest in sounds, helping children to identify and sometimes to record them eg through listening walks and producing books such as 'Sounds I can hear', 'Voices I can recognise' to share with others. Discussion will provide the vocabulary needed for describing sounds. Families should continue to receive support so that they can continue to contribute to this development.

Listening skills resources
'Playing with Sounds' provides many examples of child initiated learning as well as group and individual activities and games. These include:
- music - multi-cultural
- clapping games
- dance eg 'In and out the woods and bluebells'
- rhymes
- play sounds eg animal and vehicle noises.

Also:
- books with a range of traditional rhymes and alliterative stories and poems such as Collins Fun Phonics Big Books
- games which can be undertaken in small groups eg Rhyming Lotto; Pairs Games, Onset and Rime cards (Collins Fun Phonics)
- My Soft Letter Book (Smart Kids).

Remember, interactive learning will be more effective than worksheets (Ehri 2003).

We must also take account of acoustic phonetics and developmental phonology.
- Profoundly deaf pupils may not have access to the total speech spectrum and their discrimination ability may be limited.
- Profoundly deaf pupils may have delayed phonological awareness and production.

To ensure that strategies and activities are appropriate Teachers of the Deaf should have:
- a clear understanding of pupils' sound discrimination and their phonic awareness. Pupils cannot be expected to segment words and identify phonemes they cannot yet discriminate;
- a clear picture of the pupils' phonological production and how that fits into a normal developmental sequence; teachers may find it useful to use The Monitoring Protocol along with the Level 2 Materials (DfES) or HARPA (Keen). Pupils cannot be expected to blend sounds they are not yet able to produce;
- a thorough understanding of acoustic phonetics including transitions. This will inform the sequence and the way in which sounds are learnt. Once pupils start to identify individual phonemes in words, the sequence of sounds used initially may differ from that in Progression in Phonics. Sounds chosen should be those that are more easily discriminated. It might also be useful to start with sounds that can be lip-read to further support the skill acquisition. Hence /m/ is suitable as it contains frequencies from 250 Hz to 3 KHz, is one of the most intense sounds in English and is lip-readable. It is also one of the earliest sounds to be produced.

If precise, accurate advice is to be given and individual learning programmes developed, Teachers of the Deaf may need to further extend and deepen their knowledge and understanding in these areas.
Resources

‘Progression in Phonics’ and ‘Playing with Sounds’ provide numerous ideas for activities and games. When starting to identify individual phonemes in words, a key resource is an adult providing sensitive support through modelling, explaining and providing feedback for learning. Puppets can be used to model skills and also make mistakes which the children can notice, correct and learn.

Other resources include:
- Collins Fun Phonics Big Books, Letter/Picture Cards
- Smart Kids - Alliteration books and Poetry cards;
- Foam magnetic letters.

Finally, we must take account of language development. The Rose Report states clearly that ‘phonic work should be set within a broad and rich language curriculum’. Reading comprehension, ie language comprehension, is the aim and phonics is a means to an end. (Brooks 2003; Stuart 2003)

However, profoundly deaf children may have delayed language comprehension.
- This will have significant implications for reading comprehension and also the balance of skills which contribute to fluent reading (James 2005).
- Being able to blend sounds to read a word will not necessarily mean that it is understood as would generally be the case for hearing pupils.
- Limited vocabulary may mean difficulties in choosing suitable words to practise skills.

Teachers of the Deaf must ensure that:
- there is a suitable balance between phonics development and other reading activities so that spoken language can be developed as well as the skills necessary for comprehension eg inferencing, using background knowledge and linking it to new information, establishing causal links and poor knowledge of story structure;
- when developing phonological awareness, words are chosen which are within the pupil’s vocabulary. This may also affect the sounds which are initially used to establish the skill of identifying individual phonemes in words; /m/, which is suitable acoustically and phonologically, is the initial sound in many commonly known words eg ‘man; mouse; milk’; /b/ is another example which has similar attributes and is the initial sound for ‘baby; ball; bike; book; boy’ - words which are likely to be known by a deaf pupil with delayed language development.

Improving the language level of the deaf pupils is vital to improving levels of reading ability and this should remain a key target as long as necessary. The additional time afforded to phonics teaching as well as an increased emphasis on speaking and listening may enable Teachers of the Deaf to take some additional time to support listening and language development.

There are many resources available to support the development of identification, correspondences, blending and segmenting eg Progression in Phonics and Playing with sounds - although this document will be revised, the activities it suggests will continue to be relevant.

Learning Materials Ltd - Phonic Lotto games; Racetrack games;
Fun Phonics - Big Books;
Smart Kids - Chunk Stackers; Spelling board games;
Decodeable books - Songbirds from ORT;
NB ‘real reading experiences’ are also important. There are also complete schemes which use actions or mnemonics to support skill learning such as Jolly Phonics and Letterland; however, adaptations to these should be made in the light of the issues raised above.

For older pupils with significant delay in phonic development ‘Special needs Solutions’ might provide useful materials.

Critical factors in the Learning Environment
- High expectations and challenging but realistic targets.
- Effective consistent amplification and good listening conditions (BB93) ensuring optimum use of residual hearing.
- Proactive development of listening skills.
- Careful assessment of the pupil’s level of phonological awareness and production.
- A clear understanding of the different approaches to the development of phonic skills and an ability to choose between them on the basis of pupil need: ‘Leading edge practice bears no resemblance to a ‘one size fits all’ model of teaching and learning’ (Rose 2006).
- Planning that takes account of the pupil’s phonological development and language development.
- Thorough review of actual learning and evaluation of the suitability of intervention programmes (in their broadest sense).
- Activities that engage and sustain interest, using other senses appropriately to reinforce listening and phonic skills.
- An attitude that sees pupils as active learners rather than passive recipients of knowledge.
- Integration of listening and phonic skills learned in intervention programmes into mainstream learning.
Adults who provide knowledgeable, sensitive support.

Another useful resource is the Ewing Foundation. The Ewing Foundation's consultants (Teachers of the Deaf with additional qualifications including educational audiology and Ofsted) work with Teachers of the Deaf/Learning Support Assistants and other professionals to improve the achievements of deaf pupils through listening and speaking. The consultants are available to help teachers to translate the above principles into practice with individual or groups of pupils. They can also provide training for groups of teachers. Topics include audiological issues, inclusion, language acquisition and literacy development. If you would like to receive further advice then please GET IN TOUCH! www.ewing-foundation.org.uk has the contact details for the consultants and technicians.

References
*Sound Sense: The Phonics Element of the Literacy Strategy: A Report to the Department for Education and Skills*
Ehri, LC (2003)
*Systematic Phonics Instruction: Findings of the National Reading Panel*
James, D (2005)
*Phonological Awareness*
www.BATOD.org.uk follow Publications - On-line Magazine/Focus on Cochlear Implants/Phonological Awareness
Kelly, R (2006)
*Press Notice*
www.dfes.gov.uk/pressnotice
Rose, J (2006)
*Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading*
www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/rosereview/finalreport
Stuart, M (2003)
*Fine tuning the National Literacy Strategy to ensure continuing progress in improving standards of reading in the UK: Some suggestions for change.*

Resources
*Fun Phonics*, www.harpercollins.co.uk
HARPA PO Box 7308, Whitchurch, Hampshire, RG28 7YL

*Jolly Phonics*, www.jollylearning.co.uk
*Learning Materials*, www.learningmaterials.co.uk
*Letterland*, www.letterland.com
*Monitoring Protocol*
DfES Publications ESPP29; Level 2 Materials ESPP31
*Oxford Reading Tree; Songbirds*,
www.OxfordPrimary.co.uk
*Playing with Sounds: A Supplement to Progression in Phonics*
Progression In Phonics, DfES 0604/2001
*Smart Kids*, www.smartkids.co.uk
*Special Needs Solutions*
www.specialneedssolutions.org.uk