Teaching phonics in Languages: why, what and how?

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1. Introduction

Teaching phonics – understood in this paper to mean explicit instruction in the systematic relationships between written symbols and the sounds they represent – has a controversial history. In anglophone countries, its role in teaching young children to read and write in their first language (L1) has been fiercely debated over decades. As noted by Castles, Rastle & Nation (2018) in their commentary on these 'reading wars', research evidence indicates a clear consensus that 'coming to appreciate the relationship between letters and sounds is necessary and non-negotiable when learning to read in alphabetic writing systems and that this is most successfully achieved through phonics instruction' (page 5). Government-commissioned reviews of evidence in the US, UK and Australia, conducted in the 2000s, reached similar conclusions, and in recent years, phonics has been heavily pushed at a policy level. However, this orthodoxy remains contested. Concerns have been raised over an imbalanced curriculum, in which an excessive focus on phonics risks squeezing out opportunities to engage with 'real books' and stifling children's enjoyment of reading.

Perhaps influenced by the emphasis on phonics in teaching early English literacy, phonics instruction has also gained momentum in second language (L2) classrooms around the world, from kindergartens to universities. In England, the *Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review* (TSC, 2016) advocated the 'direct and systematic teaching of phonics' in languages with an alphabetic writing system (p. 12); more recently, Ofsted (2021) included phonics as one of three 'pillars' of language teaching in schools, alongside vocabulary and grammar. Again, however, the degree of emphasis placed on these three linguistic dimensions has not met with universal approval in the Languages community.

This paper offers a brief, critical exploration of L2 phonics instruction. It asks:

- What is the rationale for teaching phonics?
- Is teaching phonics effective – and is it a good use of lesson time?
- What approaches to teaching phonics might be most effective?

2. Prior language experience

When children are taught English (L1) phonics at primary school, most have well developed oral language skills, but literacy is a new concept that they are beginning to explore. By contrast, learners in a Language classroom (particularly in secondary schools) typically bring with them considerable prior experience of literacy – in English and possibly other languages, too. This gives them several important advantages when they encounter written forms in the new language: for example, they understand that written text represents spoken language; that, in an alphabetic system, individual letters or combinations of letters (graphemes) represent individual sounds of the language (phonemes); and that these graphemes are sequentially ordered. Where the target language uses the same alphabetic script as the learners' L1 (e.g., German, Spanish and French are all based on the same Roman alphabet as English), they will also know the shapes of the letters themselves. Further, many of these letters share similar phonological values across languages: for example, the letter <d> sounds similar in English, Spanish, French, German and Chinese *pinyin*[1].

It is widely accepted that reading comprehension involves not the 'extraction' of a fixed meaning from a text, but rather the 'construction' of meaning, based on the interaction of information drawn from the text on the one hand, and the reader's prior knowledge on the other. For example, if you read that 'The dog ran towards me', you may have a different breed of dog in mind, and interpret its action differently, than other readers, depending on your prior experiences with dogs.

I propose that readers also 'construct' the sounds of written words, based on the interaction of written marks on the page (which carry what we might call 'phonological potential') and readers' prior knowledge of writing systems. To explain what I mean, let's look at Figure 1 below.

1	2	3
汪汪	ワンワン	гав гав
4	5	6
هاو هاو	wau wau	woof woof

Figure 1. Some words in different languages and writing systems.

[1] *Pinyin* is a Roman alphabetic representation of the Chinese language.

The words in (6) will be instantly familiar to any fluent reader of English. If you can read Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Arabic and German, you will recognize that (1) to (5) are also onomatopoeic words for a dog's barking. However, if you cannot read these languages, then you may generate a range of phonological representations from these words.

- For the Chinese characters in (1), you will likely generate no phonological representation at all; nor is it possible to 'decode' the pronunciation of these characters as 'wāng wāng', since they are not phonographic (sound-based). Similarly, the shapes in (2) may look like an uninterpretable visual pattern, whereas for a reader of Japanese, they say 'wan wan'.
- Sometimes, there are misleading similarities between letters in different alphabets. For example, to English readers, (3) may look like 'rab rab', but in Russian's Cyrillic alphabet, it actually says 'gav gav'. In a similar way, (4) may look a bit like 'glo glo' unless you are familiar with Arabic script. In fact – read from right to left – it says 'how how'.
- In other cases, the letters are completely familiar, but they have different phonological values. For example, English readers might pronounce the German in (5) as 'waugh waugh', unless they apply German symbol-sound mappings to read it as 'vow vow'. If you happen to be Polish, however, you might pronounce the German in (5) fairly accurately, even without any knowledge of that language.

This exercise highlights that the nature of the challenge, when learning symbol-sound correspondences (SSC) in an L2, depends on both (a) the nature of the target writing system, and (b) the existing language and literacy experiences that the learner brings to the task.

A second important point is that, if you are a fluent reader of any of the languages in Figure 1, then the sounds of the relevant words will be activated *automatically* – i.e., very rapidly and subconsciously. Further, as a reader of English, it is very hard not to 'hear' number (3) as 'rab rab' or (5) as 'waugh waugh'. As a beginner learner of these languages, you would need to make a conscious effort to interrupt your automatic L1-based symbol-sound correspondences, and to use your newly learnt L2 ones in their place. This is presumably why researchers have found that, amongst beginner L2 learners, those who read written words aloud more accurately also do so more slowly: they are thinking about it!

Reflective question 1: Which other languages do pupils in your classrooms speak, besides English? Can they also read and write in those languages? How might their knowledge of other writing systems affect their phonics learning in the language you are teaching them?

3. Why do the sounds of written words matter?

In L1 contexts, phonics instruction is a tool for teaching children to read and spell (with policy and research focussing particularly on the former). It equips children to 'sound out' words and thus 'discover' their meanings: for example, they see the word 'dog', sound out the letters based on the grapheme-phoneme correspondences they have learnt (D – O – G), blend the sounds together and thus recognize the word they already know orally as representing 🐕.

In L2 contexts, however, things are different: pupils usually encounter the written forms of the language at the same time as starting to learn the language itself. They do not have a large bank of existing oral knowledge of the language; therefore, sounding out a word may not leave them any the wiser as to its meaning.

I would argue that the ability to pronounce written words accurately – the skill of phonological decoding – is nonetheless valuable for L2 learners. First, there is evidence from English secondary schools that learners of French do, in fact, regularly sound out L2 words they don't recognize – even though they may not do so accurately (Erler & Macaro, 2012). Second, there is evidence that phonological decoding may impact on various other aspects of L2 learning, most significantly the development of vocabulary knowledge as well as motivation (see Woore, 2021).

Reflective question 2: Ofsted's (2021) Curriculum Research Review in Languages states: 'There are similarities between learning to read and to write in our first language and learning to do so in another language. Some of the concepts that lie behind early reading and early writing (and in particular, systematic synthetic phonics) are also relevant in the languages curriculum' (page 11). To what extent do you agree with this statement?

4. What happens without phonics instruction?

Do L2 learners 'pick up' the ability to pronounce written words accurately (and ultimately, fluently) by themselves, simply through exposure to the spoken and written forms of the language? Research conducted in Languages classrooms in England suggests that, for many learners, the answer to this question is 'no', at least

for French. Pupils tend to persistently read the L2 as if it were English, giving rise to anglicized pronunciations (e.g., *c'est nul* pronounced as 'sest null'). Similarly stubborn problems of inaccurate decoding have also been found by researchers in Chinese and Arabic learners of English, despite having had extensive exposure to the target language.

There is less evidence available on other languages, certainly in UK classrooms. However, Spanish, German and Chinese *pinyin* all have more straightforward symbol-sound mappings than French and English, and so may be easier to acquire. Ultimately, however, the question of 'what happens without phonics instruction' is one which needs to be addressed by teachers in their own classrooms, based on diagnostic assessment of their pupils' needs. (Some ideas for how to do this are given below). There is no point teaching phonics if it is not needed!

Reflective question 3: How accurately do the learners in your classes read aloud in L2? How much progress do they make over time? Is the answer different according to the language in question – e.g., French, German, Spanish, Mandarin?

5. Does teaching L2 phonics work?

Whilst phonics in early L1 literacy instruction has been extensively researched, evidence of its effects in L2 classrooms remains limited in quantity and quality. However, some studies have been conducted across a range of settings, including primary schools, secondary schools and universities. Taken together, the evidence seems to indicate that phonics instruction – as would be expected – has a consistently positive effect on phonological decoding in an L2: in other words, pupils do get better at the specific skill they are taught. However, in contrast to studies with young L1 children, little indication has been found that phonics instruction improves L2 reading comprehension; this reflects the argument made above that L2 learners may be unable to 'discover' the meanings of new words by sounding them out. On the other hand, studies – including one conducted in secondary school French classrooms in England (Woore et al., 2018) – have begun to find evidence that L2 phonics instruction may enhance vocabulary learning. Given the crucial importance of vocabulary knowledge for proficiency in all language skills, this is potentially important.

Clearly, more research is needed in this area, not only to assess the effects of phonics instruction on different aspects of L2 learning, but also to compare different pedagogical approaches. For example, most research into L2 phonics has taken a 'synthetic' approach, which first teaches the sounds of individual graphemes and

then how to 'blend' them together. However, given that L2 learners are often older, cognitively more mature and have prior literacy experience, a more 'analytic' approach may also be appropriate. This encourages learners to spot orthographic patterns and identify symbol-sound correspondences for themselves: for example, noticing that the plural 's' in French is silent. It may also be beneficial to focus on groups of letters, not just individual graphemes – particularly in a language like French, with its complex and inconsistent symbol-sound mappings (e.g., '-tion', '-aille').

Pending further research, I would encourage teachers themselves to act as researchers of their practice, gathering systematic evidence on their own pupils' learning outcomes to evaluate the impact of different phonics approaches in their own classrooms. As with any pedagogical intervention, it is also important to ask whether there is a cost: does phonics instruction take away time from other aspects of language learning and lead to less progress in these areas?

Reflective question 4: Which different approaches to teaching L2 phonics have you experienced, seen or tried out – either as a teacher or as a learner? Which did you find most effective, and why?

6. How should phonics be taught?

As noted above, few studies have compared approaches to teaching L2 phonics and evaluated their effectiveness. However, based on research conducted to date, on my own experiences and on conversations with many Languages teachers, I would suggest the following principles when planning phonics instruction.

a. Phonics instruction should be tailored to learners' needs.

It follows from the exercise in section (2) above that the most efficient programme of L2 phonics instruction will not be 'one size fits all' but will be responsive to the needs of individual learners, capitalizing on their existing knowledge in relation to the particular language they are learning. When teaching early L1 literacy, or when teaching an L2 with an entirely new script (such as Arabic for English speakers), all graphemes and their sound correspondences must be learnt from scratch. However, overlap between L1 and L2 writing systems reduces the learning burden. For example, pupils learning French in an English secondary school will find that many letters have similar pronunciations in the two languages. If they read the French word 'boisson' as if it were English, their pronunciation of the consonants 'b' and 'ss' may sound similar to a French person's, whereas the 'oi' and nasal vowel 'on' would likely sound rather different. It would be redundant to spend much time re-teaching symbol-sound mappings that learners already know from their L1; better to focus on

those which differ. Multilingual learners might also be encouraged to reflect and capitalize on similarities between the writing systems of the target language and any other languages in which they are literate.

Different writing systems themselves have different levels of intrinsic difficulty. For example, French has more complex symbol-sound correspondences than Spanish or German, and so may require a more substantial programme of phonics teaching. In Arabic, letters have different shapes according to their position in a word, creating an additional challenge for learners. Chinese characters are not alphabetic and so will require a different approach entirely.

b. Phonics knowledge should be assessed

One way of gauging the needs of a given classroom (and the individuals within it), and tailoring L2 phonics instruction accordingly, is through assessment of pupils' current knowledge. Dictation and reading aloud are examples of tasks which lend themselves for this purpose. Tasks should include unfamiliar words: this provides insight into learners' knowledge of the language's symbol-sound correspondences, because it prevents them from recognizing familiar words as wholes and retrieving pre-stored pronunciations of them. Assessment also, of course, allows teachers to gauge the effectiveness of their phonics teaching and diagnose where further instruction should be targeted. However, 'assessment' does not necessarily mean 'test': it could be done informally, for example by circulating and eavesdropping on pupils reading words aloud to each other in pairs or small groups.

When assessing decoding, we need to consider which pronunciations we allow as 'correct'. In my view, the key issue here is the accuracy of symbol-sound correspondences (are graphemes being mapped onto the correct phonemes?) rather than the accuracy of pronunciation *per se* (are those phonemes being articulated 'correctly'?). A related question is which variety (or varieties) of a language we use to benchmark 'correctness'. Do we expect pupils to pronounce a grapheme as it sounds in Paris, or do we also allow pronunciations from, say, Canada or Kinshasa? Do we expect the German word 'schmutzig' to be realized with a palatal fricative at the end, as in Bonn, or with a hard 'k' sound, as in Munich? In these kinds of variations, there are opportunities to use phonics instruction as a vehicle for developing cultural and metalinguistic awareness.

Reflective question 5: Which variety or varieties of the target language do you use as a model of pronunciation for your students? Why? To what extent do you consciously expose them to different varieties and pronunciations, and talk about their origins?

c. Phonics should start with awareness raising

We saw in section (2) that L1 symbol-sound correspondences have – at least for fluent readers – been automatized. This is the result of vast amounts of practice in reading and writing in L1, creating 'habits' that are hard to break. As noted above, I believe that an important first step in L2 phonics instruction (where there is overlap between the L1 and L2 writing systems) is to help pupils to 'disrupt' this entrenched, L1-based processing: they need to think, *Wait! This is not an English word – I may need to pronounce it differently than it first looks!* This creates space for new symbol-sound correspondences – learnt through L2 phonics instruction – to be deployed instead. One initial way of doing this, for example, might be to give pupils a list of words with identical or similar spellings in English and the target language (such as 'chat' in English and French); the teacher reads the words aloud and asks pupils to listen out for, and underline, any letters that are pronounced differently or unexpectedly.

d. Phonics should be sustained and integrated with the wider curriculum

Pupils in a Languages classroom receive only a few drops of L2 input each week, compared to the flood of English in their other lessons and in their lives outside school. The L1 connections are constantly being reinforced. Therefore, we should not expect phonics instruction to have an immediate and permanent effect. A brief burst of L2 phonics at the start of a year is unlikely to be enough: a more sustained programme will likely be needed. One model which appears to have been successful is to have short phonics 'segments' each lesson over a period of weeks or months, alongside plentiful opportunities to revisit and practice the symbol-sound correspondences that have been covered.

Such practice of phonics knowledge can take place in the context of a wider, engaging curriculum which pays attention to sustaining pupils' motivation. For example, in our 'FLEUR' study (Woore et al., 2018), Year 7 pupils read texts which contained many examples of specific French graphemes, complementing the explicit instruction they had received. However, the texts were also linguistically challenging (providing opportunities to develop strategic behaviour) and covered cultural topics – such as footballers, singers and historical figures – which proved popular and engaging for pupils.

7. Conclusions

To summarize, there is evidence that accurate – and eventually, fluent – knowledge of a language's symbol-sound correspondences plays an important role in learning and using an L2. Phonics instruction is likely to be helpful – and in many cases, necessary – for learners to develop this knowledge. In this paper, I have briefly explored some factors to consider when teaching phonics in the Languages

classroom. I have argued in particular that phonics instruction should be tailored to learners' needs, based on the relationship between the target language and any prior literacy experience they have, both in English and in other languages. It is crucial to remember, however, that phonics is not an end in itself: proficiency in L2 decoding and spelling are subskills which serve other aspects of L2 learning, helping learners to develop communicative competence in the new language and to explore its culture(s). These, ultimately, are the aims of Language teaching.

About the author

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