

Reading in colour

The paper I presented at the UKLA conference in Chester in 2011 on using a colour-coded grapheme system forms part of some wider work on the introduction of Modern Foreign Languages at Primary level in English schools from 2011. The work examines the government's case for re-introducing Primary Languages in 2011, which is based on economic and social as much as academic imperatives (Low, L. in Driscoll, P. and Fox, D. 1999:50); and aims to examine the challenges it poses teachers to achieve a competence in their pupils at reading in French, the language chosen by over 90% of primary English schools (NFER, 2009). It critically examines the processes by which an English child between the ages of five and seven acquires a mastery of the reading process in his first language and contrasts the time and effort involved in this with the same child learning how to read in French between the ages of seven to eleven. A comparison of a French child learning to read French in France provides a useful foil to highlight the government's incorrect assumption that acquiring a second language is an extension of the process of acquiring a first language (Grenfell, 2007:12). A study of the literature allows for a discussion of the 'younger is better' argument and shows that, even though a secondary school pupil is more cognitively advantaged than a primary child to acquire a foreign language, overall exposure time to learning a foreign language is a major factor supporting the introduction of Primary Languages (Martin, C., 2000). Despite making this case, competence in reading and writing in secondary aged pupils in a foreign language is unacceptably low due to a historical move away from a literacy-supported approach to communicative language teaching (Erlar, 2007). The paper presented at Chester looks at the progress made by a group of Y6 English children using Facilecture©, a colour-coded grapheme system, to read French, compared with a group of Y6 English children using ordinary black and white text. The children's views of the process of learning to read using Facilecture© are discussed as well as those of the teachers using Facilecture© to teach children to read. The children using Facilecture© over 14 sessions made slightly more progress in reading in French than their peers.

This is a competency in decoding and accuracy of pronunciation but does not measure comprehension of the text, which, although the ultimate purpose of reading, can only be achieved through far longer exposure to French than the primary model offers.

Facilecture©

Facilecture© is a colour-coded grapheme system devised by M. Francis Ribano. Facilecture© employs 11 colours to indicate the pronunciation of the vowel sounds by colouring the different graphemes that represent the same phoneme. Thus the nasalized [ã] sound can be represented orthographically as 'an' as in (orange) 'en' as in (dent) 'am' as in (jambe) and 'em' as in (décembre) but by a single colour, orange. Unlike all the 11 other colours in Facilecture© which are used to indicate only vowel pronunciation, the use of the colour grey neither refers to vowels nor to sound but rather to the lack of it, for example 'ils parlent'. Additional guidance is given for the pronunciation of certain consonant sounds using italics. Although Facilecture© was originally designed to help native French speakers learn to read French, it has been trialed in two primary schools in England with Y6 native English speakers to see how effective it is in helping them decode French. Reading in French, rather than, say, German or Spanish, presents pupils with decoding a language whose pronunciation rules are as illogical as those of English and only mastered after many years of study and living in a French-speaking country. Probably the most challenging aspect of reading in French for both native and non-native speakers is that there is no systematic correspondence between orthography and pronunciation. Because of this, I use phonetic transcriptions that follow the system devised by the International Phonetic Association (Appendix 1). This lack of GPC is most noticeable in vowels and vowel clusters, where the sound [j] can be represented, for example, by 'i' 'y' 'ill' and 'il' (as in avion, yaourt, paille and soleil). For further examples, see Code Facilecture on Ribano's website,

<http://www.facilecture.fr/>, which is a very useful source of information and examples, all in French.

Bernard Tranel devotes 232 pages of his book 'The Sounds of French' (1998) to explaining how to pronounce French correctly. Correct pronunciation allows a learner to produce French that is intelligible to another French speaker and to understand them when they speak French. It allows the learner to write correctly, drawing on auditory memory to recall how to say the words and the correct visual memory match to write them. *Ils se ressemblent comme deux gouttes d'eau* (literally they look like two drops of water or like two peas in a pod) is not written or pronounced like and does not mean the same as *ils se ressemblent comme deux couteaux* (they look like two knives). Reading and writing are what Vygotsky (1978) called two *halves of the same process*: the skills needed to write, blending sounds to form a word, mirror those used to segment the sounds to be able to read a word. Although Y6 English pupils have well developed reading and writing skills, these are transferable only up to a point when reading a foreign language like French. The learner knows about how print, books and stories work and has a GPC system in place that can interpret many of the GPCs that are common to French and English – most of the consonants and some of the vowels. By Y6 a child has in place a metalinguistic awareness and learning strategies that can be applied to the new language. A comparison of a native French child learning to read French in France with a native English child learning to read French in England highlights the challenges this poses. The French Y6 child has been surrounded for ten years by the spoken sounds of French and has a clear idea of what the French word 'chat' sounds like [**ʃa**] and means. The child will have seen it written often and has a clear GPC for the word. The English beginner learner must initially shake off the English GPC interference that leads him to want to say [**tʃæt**] with all the semantic associations that go with the word. He must learn new pronunciation rules ('ch' says [**ʃ**] 'a' says [**a**] a pure and long sound and the final [**t**] is not pronounced. He must learn the meaning of the word and develop both a

visual and auditory recognition as well as a visual/auditory association that allows him to be able to recall how to read, pronounce and spell 'chat' correctly.

The French child is at a distinct advantage for he will not only hear the word 'chat' hundreds of times but will read it too. His world of phonemes and graphemes and GPC reinforcement comes from his family, school, TV, books and printed matter and the wider environment. The English child could count himself lucky to hear or read any French outside the one hour at school. So whereas a Y6 French child can pick up a French book and reading for meaning and pleasure, the English Y6 child, who also reads for pleasure and meaning in his own language, can only see a French book initially as a decoding exercise.

There are both major differences and major similarities in reading in French and English. We share the same 26 letters of the Latin alphabet (contrast this with Arabic or Russian script). In addition French uses 5 diacritic marks (supplementary signs that combine with letters) to form 12 new graphic symbols - the cedilla, acute, grave and circumflex accent and the diaeresis. Most of the consonants make similar or identical sounds. In fact English has 22 consonant sounds compared to 17 in French (see Tranel, 1998, Chapter 8 for a comparison of the consonantal systems). We share some vowel sounds but French always uses pure vowels, monophthongs, whose quality is constant throughout their production, and English a mixture of monophthongs and diphthongs, whose quality is not constant and changes from one vowel to the other during production. In addition French uses 4 nasal vowels [ã, õ, õ̃, œ̃] (un bon vin blanc [œ̃bõvõ̃blã]) that do not exist in English. Finally the French always place a grammatical stress on the final syllable (cultúre, culturél, culturellemént), whereas English stresses vary and may fall on for instance the last, second to last or third to last syllables (Japán, Scótlánd, Amérića).

Facilecture© is best understood by looking at a copy of a script that has been encoded (see the attached example of 'Petit Cochon est Coincé' and examples

from Ribano's website.) There is evidence (see Ribano's website) that Facilecture is an effective system for scaffolding the decoding process in French. He has begun exploratory work on a similar system for the English language, which is more complicated because of its use of monophthongs and diphthongs. The question needs to be asked, given the opacity of the English grapheme system, whether a colour-coded system could be developed and taught alongside traditional print, as a useful form of scaffolding for those children who always have and always will find decoding English print a major challenge.

Petit Cochon est Coincé

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Petit cochon est coincé.

Voici la ferme des pommiers. Madame Dupré est fermière. Elle a deux enfants, Julie et Marc et un chien, Caramel.

À la ferme il y a six cochons. Les cochons vivent dans un enclos, où ils ont une petite cabane. Le plus petit cochon s'appelle Tire-Bouchon.

C'est l'heure de manger. Madame Dupré donne à manger aux cochons. Mais Tire-Bouchon est si petit qu'il n'a jamais rien.

Tire-Bouchon a faim. Il fait le tour de l'enclos à

la recherche de quelque chose à manger. Il découvre une petite ouverture sous le grillage.

Tire-Bouchon est dehors. Il s'est glissé sous le grillage. Le voilà dans la cour de la ferme.

Il se promène dans la cour et observe tous les animaux. Quel repas va-t-il choisir ?

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