

Making an impact: accelerated learning through phonics

Phonics has become for me the point of departure for language learning whether introducing KS2 learners to a foreign language for the first time, beginning with an ab initio KS4 GCSE class or teaching adults. What I mean by phonics is teaching the key sounds of the foreign language (and by 'key' I mean those sounds that are written the same but differently pronounced in English) and fixing them in long-term memory by embedding them in words, often nouns but not always.

The words are learnt in a multi-layered way through seeing a vivid image, hearing and repeating the sound of the word and doing an accompanying gesture. The three strands of this VAK approach strengthen memory, making the knowledge robust and secure enough for easy retrieval at any time, and more importantly, for application to new words in new contexts. The intended outcome is a learner who can be 'trusted' with the written text in the foreign language without the teacher having to present and pronounce the new language first, lest they should 'manglicise' (that is to say, mangle the pronunciation of a foreign language word by applying English patterns of pronunciation to it!) its pronunciation.

The consequence is also a learner who is able to understand more text containing unfamiliar language, a learner who is more confident in speaking and reading out loud in the foreign language, and a more autonomous learner who is able to make links between words and apply patterns.

So the 'phonics' lesson is the first lesson we teach to our language learners in year 7. In future years, it's unlikely that we will be teaching it though, as our 9 feeder primary schools are gradually introducing Spanish themselves and are taking on our skills-based approach, including the teaching of phonics. This one lesson does more than teach the key sounds of the language through 16 new Spanish words; it also provides a kinaesthetic 'metalanguage' that the teacher can produce in all subsequent lessons as and when necessary to cue the learner into a particular sound as it appears in a new word.

For example, if a student is struggling with the pronunciation of a particular new word, the teacher can, simply by using the relevant gesture that was linked to the word with that sound, elicit the correct sound for the student and cue him/her in to the link. The use of gesture is a very powerful element within the classroom discourse as it is quick and effective, doesn't slow up the pace of the lesson like a wordy explanation would, and is very visual and therefore accessible to all the other learners in the room too, so that they can share in the learning moment.

Of course, one lesson is not sufficient for learners to take on correct pronunciation of the foreign language. It is simply a starting point. As well as the teacher's recourse to the gestures to embed the knowledge further, there are also many ways in which this phonetic learning can be further developed in subsequent lessons. These activities can be very valuable starters, plenaries, mid-lesson tasks and they can also be very motivating. For example, one simple inclusion in a lesson would be a short comic

strip in the foreign language, containing some familiar and unfamiliar language. Students pronounce it first in pairs and then offer suggestions as to its meaning. There are many cartoons freely available on the internet that can be copied and pasted into PowerPoint presentations. I have used Garfield, Mafalda, Calvin and Hobbs and El Mago de Oz in this way but I'm sure there are a lot more out there to be found.

A further source of material for pronunciation and comprehension development is a news or current affairs website. It is very easy to take headlines or opening summaries of stories and the accompanying photo and copy and paste those to your lesson material. With international news items, there is the advantage that the context is often familiar to the students so that more work can be done orally to follow up, using a simple routine of What? Who? Where? Why? How? questioning. From the earliest stage it is possible to model the skill of making meaning with very few words using this kind of activity. Tongue twisters work equally well for pronunciation, although they don't offer quite so much opportunity for comprehension!

Finally, I'd like to mention the newest recipients of Spanish phonics. For the past 3 years I have run a one hour evening session with parents of year 7, in which I make the rather bold claim that I can teach them to pronounce Spanish accurately in one hour and leave them able to support their child's learning effectively right up to GCSE. More than 90 parents came this year and I taught them the same phonics lesson that we teach to students. As well as being a lot of fun, the outcome has been that many more parents are getting involved with supporting Spanish learning at home - not bad for an hour's work!

To sum up, phonics is the cornerstone of the approach to language teaching in my school and it works. If you would like to try out the approach and get hold of the materials we have produced to teach phonics in French, German and Spanish, you can download them from this site.

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