

Project title: I can hear what you saying but I can't understand a word of what you have written. Ways of increasing spelling and literacy skills amongst not native UK citizens.

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Abstract

The aim of this project is to explore learning strategies for improving the spelling abilities in none native English language students resident in the UK for some time and who have had difficulty in achieving certification in writing. The objective is to facilitate a student to pass an entry two writing certificate. I will discuss the nature of immigration into the UK for the past fifteen years; explore some of its background and some of the issues it has raised particularly around employment and educational skills. I will argue that a failure to spell correctly leads to an inability to pass written exams and progress up the levels of English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) qualifications. This in turn inhibits the achievement of vocational qualifications and advancement into permanent and well paid employment. I will present research that suggests spelling and hence writing is the most difficult of the ESOL qualifications to achieve and will argue that there is little published research on the subject of literacy problems in second language learners. I will propose that a “glue “is needed to help some students hold the spelling of words together I will explore some possible methods of improving spelling in none native speakers who have a history of issues with literacy in the UK and that the solution could take the form of phonetic based learning. I will suggest that many of those born outside of the EU that are currently in receipt of Jobseekers Allowance need new strategies in order to engage them and progress their basic skills.

Keywords

Education. None native speakers. Literacy. Esol. Phonetic Learning

Background to this Research Issue.

Issues around achievement, of lack of it, in the skills of literacy and numeracy concerned the incoming Labour government of 1997. The Moser Report published in 1999 identified problems with literacy and numeracy in the UK's adult population. Part of its recommendations reads “

Something like one adult in five in this country is not functionally literate and far more people have problems with numeracy. This is a shocking situation and a sad reflection on past decades of schooling. It is one of the reasons for relatively low productivity in our economy, and it cramps the lives of millions of people. Moser Group (1999)

Since 2000 there has been an increasing level of immigration into the United Kingdom. Much of this is from inside the European Union, from countries that have a history of universal education and high literacy rates. However there has also been an influx from nations outside of the EU that do not always share these characteristics. I have been unable to find reliable figures for immigration into the UK for the 15 years since 2012. However a guesstimate for the year 2000 suggests around 100 000 asylum seekers from outside of the EU, many from countries such as Kurdistan which have or have had literacy problems. According to the Office of National Statistics, between the years 2000 and 2009 there were over 250,000 migrants into the UK from the African continent, where illiteracy is rife. While many will have gone on to achieve fluency in the speaking and literacy skills, this study is aimed at new UK citizens who have been enrolled on UK basic skills (English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)) education programmes but have had been unable to progress to higher levels because they are unable to correctly spell everyday words.

In 2001, the former Department for Education and Skills launched the Skills for Life strategy with the aim of helping 2.25 million adults improve their basic skills by 2010. At that time, the OECD ranked the UK 14th in its international literacy and numeracy league tables. However looking back from the time of writing (2012) the effectiveness of the Skills for Life strategy is debatable. Ten years later the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee report for the 2008–09 session opened its report with the words;

Although the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, and its predecessor, the Department for Education and Skills, spent around £5 billion on basic skills courses between 2001 and 2007 (£9 billion by 2011), large numbers of the adult working population of England remain functionally illiterate and innumerate. Tackling poor literacy, language and numeracy skills is essential if more people are to realise their full potential and the country is to remain competitive in an increasingly global economy. House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2009)

The report addressed problems of native born citizens in achieving literacy and numeracy whilst in schools and also their problems if they did not achieve it in later life. There was little focus on non native born citizens' literacy skills. Section thirteen denoted that Esol was now seen as less of a priority.

Funding for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) training has been refocused in order to target resources on those people with the greatest need. Since August 2007, free English for Speakers of Other Languages courses have only been available to people receiving certain benefits, with those who can afford to pay contributing up to

37.5% towards the cost of provision. The impact of these changes is not yet known. The Department wants English for Speakers of Other Languages provision to be more specifically targeted to foster community cohesion and integration, and has recently consulted widely on these issues. House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2009)

A Witness called to the committee was Mr Stephen Marston, Director General of the Further Education and Skills, Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills He commented that

“Up until last year (ESOL courses were) free. Last year we took the decision that we should apply the same principle to ESOL as we applied to pretty much all other provision, which was that those who are capable of paying for it should pay, while having very large, generous exemptions for those who cannot pay. The further step then that John Denham took, and we consulted on in January through to April, was to raise the debate around what our top priorities should be for giving people support with ESOL. His very firm view was that it would be right to prioritise those who are long-term resident in this country over potentially short-term economic migrants because we had been spending a lot of money on ESOL for short-term economic migrants. House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2009)

It should be noted that at this point there were a high number of failed asylum seekers in the UK who had not been removed by the UK Border Agency and were supporting themselves by a variety of means including working on the black market in fast food outlets and other low skilled low paid environments. From around January 2011 the UK government began granting permanent residency status to many failed asylum seekers. Estimates suggest this number may be around 400 000. Although official figures seem difficult to find many of these new citizens will have literacy problems.

Many of these people, have been in the UK for around five to ten years and have often been granted UK citizenship only after lengthy dismissals and appeals of asylum cases. Many have archived some education in English language during this process. However this learning has often been disrupted by events such as forced moving of accommodation and withdrawal of financial support. During this time it speaking and listening skills may have developed while reading and writing have lagged behind.

When these students return to education there are issues that confront the learning institution. While Esol classes often include students from a wide range of non UK countries and backgrounds such classes tend to be streamed or if mixed ability have students studying for certification at one level. The governments “Success for All” agenda penalises providers whose students who do not achieve and an achievement at is only registered who the student passes qualification in reading writing and speaking together. It is difficult for students to take qualifications at mixed levels.

If a student cannot achieve one of the units they cannot progress to the next level. Students can be enrolled onto speaking units that are below their real ability because colleges cannot move them on.

Research Literature on Literacy Acquisition for Second Language Learners

There seems to be little research literature around on spelling problem of adult second language learners, particularly those who may be illiterate in their own language.

The acquisition of a second language seems to run in the attainment order of listening, speaking reading and then writing. Indeed we seem to attach the greatest importance to spoken communication as we always talk of *speakers* of other languages.

Although it is tempting to think of reading and spelling as simply the two sides of the same coin they are two very different processes. Bosman and Van Orden (1997) argue that an asymmetry between spelling and reading is evident at all levels of literacy with skilled readers reading more words correctly than they can spell, and children's spelling and reading skills diverge soon after the onset of formal instruction as was found by Mommers, 1987 and Seymour and Porpodas, 1980. (Cited in Bosman and Van Orden page 1). Frith found it is relatively easy to find children whose reading performance meets the required level, but whose performance on a spelling test is below average, whereas the opposite pattern is much rarer (Frith, 1980). Additionally spelling problems of dyslexic readers also prove to be more persistent than reading problems (Frith, 1984, 1985; Nicolson & Fawcett, 1994; Thomson, 1984). (all cCited in Bosman and Van Orden page 1)

In English words are always spelled consistently making them reliable units for the reading mechanism to process. The process of writing sound on paper is much less straightforward as grapheme–phoneme correspondences vary considerably. The same phoneme may be spelled more than one way, and the same letter may stand for more than one phoneme. Moreover, written words activate meanings for the reader whereas single graphemes do not. Thus, words are the basic units that readers' eyes pick up and process to construct meaning out of print. (

Vise (1996) looked at native English speakers He found that there are three features in which significant differences were found between the learning of spellings between children and adults. He writes they “were all errors in correct phonetic representation of the word as in omissions, substitutions and erroneous additions to suffixes, (*plaining* for *plain*), substitution of one word for another (*breath* for *brave*) and misspellings that shared some but no more than half of the correct phonemes with the target word (*sloret* for *smoke*) (Vise, page 564.)

Anna Bosman and Guy Van Orden propose the existence of a dynamic systems framework for reading and spelling They argue that

“Spelling is more difficult than reading because phoneme-letter relations are more inconsistent than letter-phoneme relations, and because the phoneme-letter inconsistencies must be resolved by the relatively weak semantic-letter dynamic, whereas, in reading, letter-phoneme inconsistencies are resolved by the stronger semantic-phoneme dynamic.” (Bosman and Van Orden ,page 9)

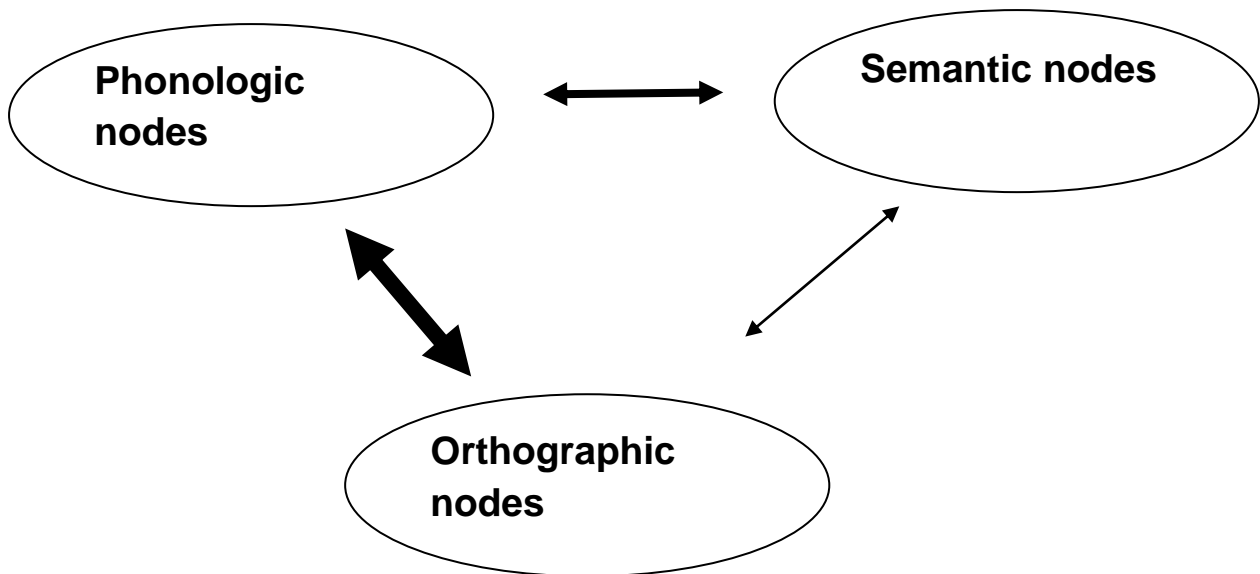


Diagram from Bosman A and Van Orden G. 1997 page five.

Their proposal is derived from a framework for word perception which is rooted in dynamical systems theory and supplies a new metaphor for cognitive systems. The illustration above is taken from Bosman and Van Orden's paper shows the macro-dynamic of word perception. Three families of fully interdependent nodes are assumed for a recurrent network model.

The overall strength of the relations between the respective node families is indicated by the boldness of the arrows. Bosman and Van Orden write,

“Overall, the relations between letters and phonemes in alphabetic languages support the most powerful bi-directional correlations. The same letters and phonemes occur together in very many words. Phoneme-semantic relations and letter-semantic relations are less strongly correlated. Phonemes and semantic features, and letters and semantic features covary much less systematically. However, phoneme-semantic relations support stronger correlations than letter-semantic relations. This is true because, essentially, we speak before and more often than we read.” (Bosman A and Van Orden G. 1997. P 5.)

In this model, the presentation of a printed word to the subject activates letter nodes which, in turn, activate phoneme and semantic nodes. Then following initial activation, recurrent feedback dynamics begin between all these node families.

As i became aware of the spelling issues experienced by my students I noticed that some of them would have difficulties with recalling different sections of the same words at different times. Spelling is not just about recall, the graphemic elements of a word need to be recalled in a specific serial order. Ariel M. Goldberg and Brenda Rapp have written on the nature of this serial recall. They write that,

“the production of a sequence ultimately comes down to a problem of cue ordering—a serial-order system must supply the proper cue at the proper time. How exactly (is) this cue

ordering is accomplished. Two main classes of theories have been proposed—positional theories and chaining theories. (221)

Ethics

The project involved dealing with unpaid subjects who may not fully appreciate what is being asked of them and offered to them. I was keen that they understand that this was to be largely exploratory research not an established course of study. I wanted to make them aware of the benefits it could bring to them personally, but not to oversell them. I also wanted them to be prepared for the disappointment if it failed.

Research reading indicated identified an ethical framework for approaching and working with the subjects. Bassey identifies the following criteria to test the trustworthiness of case structures.

- Has there been prolonged engagement with data sources?
- Has there been persistent observation of emerging issues?
- Have raw data been adequately checked with their sources?
- Has there been sufficient triangulation of raw data leading to analytical statements?
- Has the working hypothesis, or evaluation, or emerging story, been systematically tested against the analytical statements?
- Has a critical friend thoroughly tried to challenge the findings?
- Is the account of the research sufficiently detailed to give the reader confidence in the findings?

To address these points I have been aware of this issue around spelling for some time as both a lecture delivering a learning problem and being responsible for its outcomes and also as an additional support staff member attempting to address individual learner's needs. I have seen that some learners were able to develop, if sometimes at a speed that was uncomfortably slow but also had students known to me where a lack of ability to spell words correctly was seriously inhibiting their progress, reducing their self esteem and causing them to drop of programmes without achieving skills to a level that would help them in employment. There was very little data available on this issue as student who dropped out just often dropped off the radar. While putting the research project together I also spoke to other members of my team and they also felt that they had encountered students that had just not been able to progress due to spelling issues.

I also needed an ethical framework to be established with the students before starting with the sessions. Bassey also gives the following tests of respect for the subjects in a case study.

- Has permission been given to conduct the research in terms of the identification of an issue, problems or hypothesis, in this particular setting?
- Have arrangements been agreed for the transferring of ownership of the record of utterances and activities to the researcher, thus enabling the researcher to use them in compiling the case record?

- Have arrangements been agreed for either identifying or concealing the contributing individuals and the particular setting of the research in the case report?
- Have arrangements been agreed for negotiating permission to publish the case report?

As part of the proposals for this research project I looked at the ethical issues and considerations that could affect its conduct and also the dissemination of its findings. Informed consent has been defined by Diener and Crandall (2007 Page 52) as “the procedures in which individuals chose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of the facts that would be likely to influence their decisions” (Choen p52.) The main participant was informed that the tests were largely exploratory and that there was not a guarantee they would improve his spelling. It was apparent that these sessions would be difficult to hold as part of the normal classroom sessions so aiding the anonymity of the subjects. However the first subject contacted from my ongoing entry two class had previously had no problems in discussing his difficulties with other members of the class and was also fine with discussing his progress with his regular the classmates. He fully admitted that issues with his spelling were profoundly limiting his achievement and putting into question his future employment prospects which he saw as a skilled manual job within the local Nissan car factory. He was also prod top discus his progress with fellow class mates and told me he was keeping members of his family up top speed on his progress.

Subjects had also been told that this research could inform the content and structure of future courses and they were fine with the findings being used to identify the problems they had been suffering to “the powers that be.”

Undertaking the Practical Sessions

It is impossible to directly see into someone else’s mind. However a number of factors were identified which could help obtain a positive outcome for the teaching strategy. From a variety of academic sources framework for effective teaching was developed. These are listed below.

- The purpose of the strategy needs to be explained to the student ; for example, to improve your learning and memory of spelling words. In this particular case pathways to employment should also be stressed.
- The strategy should be modelled, including thinking aloud to explain each strategy step.
- The importance of effort and commitment combined with strategy use should be stressed.
- Students should be required to practise naming the strategy steps until they know it.
- The teacher should observe students as they use the strategy, providing relevant feedback, as needed.

- The teacher should instruct students to monitor their strategy use, using checkmarks and a list of steps, if needed.
- The teacher should emphasise the usefulness of the strategy not only in the classroom but also in other appropriate settings (for example, at home, after school care) to facilitate generalisation.

The teaching strategy would be implemented working one to one with a subject in a familiar classroom. With only myself and the subject present I hoped to put the student at ease and that would be able to converse about how the subject felt the session were progressing and the impact they were having. I made them aware that although there would be definite observable output such as correct or incorrect spellings, they would have to tell me about the ease of each method. I wanted them to feel relaxed but I was careful to retain an air of authority as I felt that would make the student feel that the process was structured and build their confidence.

The subject had previously applied for a job at the Nissan factory at Washington a major local employer. He had been turned down because of his limited spelling abilities. He had a strong motivation for the experiment to succeed.

The Learning Sessions

At the start of the first session I informed the subject of the nature of the work we would do. To establish a baseline of the subjects spelling abilities I read out a list of words to the student. For the first session the list of words given to the student appears in the table below. The words were all verbs. The reasoning at that being that action words would be easier for the students to construct active mental pictures with than nouns.

The list was read to the student who wrote the words onto paper. The sheet of student spellings is reproduced in the appendix. The words in brackets are the students spellings.

Check	(<i>Chaky</i>)
Double	(<i>Dabll</i>)
Queue	(<i>aeuy</i>)
Remind	(<i>remade</i>)
Scrub	(<i>Skrap</i>)
Touch	(<i>tak</i>)
Wreck	(<i>Rak</i>)
Manager	(<i>mangr</i>)
Order	(<i>orday</i>)

Puncture	(<i>pular</i>)
Accept	(<i>askp</i>)
Laugh	(<i>lif</i>)
Argue	(<i>argew</i>)

The subject was then given the opportunity to review his spellings alongside the correct spellings. None were spelled correctly.

Prior to the session the words had been individually printed on A4 sheets of paper. Three of these were then chosen randomly from the set and were shown to the subject one at a time. The subject was asked to think of a visual image that would remind them of each letter and then chain each of these images together. The subject was encouraged to make each of these images as ridiculous as possible as it was felt that this would aid memory.

The first word chosen was Touch. This was remembered as a series of linked images such as an table for "t" with an orange for the "O" on top of it. The chain was continued for each letter of the word.

The subject was then allowed to check the spelling again on the A4 sheets of paper. The procedure was then repeated with six words this time in the order of Argue queue wreck scrub touch and order. Some issues were again apparent but accuracy and readability were much higher. Another run through in the order of "scrub", "wreck", "touch", "order, queue and argue still produced some errors although encouragingly the student was able to correctly generate the silent w at the start of week and spell query correctly.

Then the A4 sheets were withdrawn from the students site and the student was asked to spell each of these words. They were able to correctly spell touch. Then they were able to write order as "ordre" but soon realised that there was an and were and were correctly able to write "order." They were then able to correctly spell the word "queue." I then returned the A4 sheets of paper to the student who compared their spellings against them. They were visibly surprised by the extent which their spelling had improved.

Twelve words were then committed to memory in this way. At the end of the session spelling had been radically improved with nine of the twelve words spelled correctly.

However at the start of the second session much of the recall had been lost although the students spelling still seemed largely better than before. The student was then given the option of remembering the words with phonetic cues. The words were sounded out as how the student saw it spelt rather than how convention had it pronounced,. It should be noted that the student did not always sound out the words as I suspected an native born English person would. This session seemed to produce similar improvements.

However at the start of the third session it was noted that recall had been improved and the student was much more positive about their spelling.

I then persuaded the student to undertake the third session using phonetic cues. Again a sharp improvement was noted. Nine new words were spelled out correctly by the end of the session with only one minor mistake.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There are a number of non-native born individuals in the UK that have problems with literacy, spelling in particular and are hard to reach. Effort needs to be made to engage them and to improve their skills.

Allowing mature students to phonically sound out words can improve their ability to spell and commit them to memory.

Some of the students seem to react more positively to visual memory aids while others seemed more engaged by those that were based in phonetics.

Problems such as the recall of silent letters seemed to be better tackled by phonetics than visual cues.

Some students may have motivation issues attached to solving these problems. I have found that students do not always act positively when they find the barriers to education being lowered. This may be as a result of them being unwilling to leave their psychological comfort zone.

Opening up a mental picture of the successful future self could change students' self-images. Subjects may feel empowered by the sessions and begin to take ownership working towards their own employment goals.

Students in Skills for Life funded ESOL classes often come from very different cultural backgrounds such as Eastern Europe. I have observed that these students' progress tends to be more even. It may be necessary that students who have spelling difficulties are taught in smaller separate classes. Traditional Additional Learning Support takes place in the same class as the mainstream class.

It may be necessary to amend the qualifications framework to be re-focused from accuracy in writing skills towards reading, speaking and listening skills.

Lack of literacy is still a problem in the UK both for those born in the country that would usually have English as their first language and those who have been born outside its borders and have become permanent residents.

It is a requirement that additional learning support (ALS) takes place in the same classroom. The procedure I have identified is not likely to fit into a classroom as supplementary exercises but rather is likely to be performed as an activity in its own right. ALKLS criteria

may need to be amended to allow for the establishment of separate classes in addition to, not as running at the same time as the students main course.

Evaluation of the project

A soft indicator of the projects impact is that the students I approached seemed to become far more confident about their spelling abilities and their learning abilities in general.

The project seems to have had at least one happy ending. The main student involved has become more confident and as this project comes to a close has made definite progress in his spelling. He is sitting an entry two writing exam in June 2012.

Hard indicators were that it was possible to break the log jam of spelling issues that had been holding some of my past students back. It was possible to demonstrate a clear countable increase in spelling abilities over observable sessions.

I would have preferred a larger group of subjects and with more access to their past written work. Much of this past work has simply been destroyed now. It would be interesting to see how inconsistent they were in their spelling inconsistencies. It seems from the subjects talked to that there was a great deal of inconsistency in the errors they would make. That sometimes the spellings of less frequent words were recalled with greater accuracy than more frequent words. Also those words were not consistently misspelled.

I would also have liked more time to statistically analyse the subjects misspellings. However it does seem that the project has had success.

I would have liked to have run group work to build on the ideas of a community of practice. . However the subjects often seemed to have issues surrounding their employment. And the fact that these sessions needed to be undertaken outside of my timetables session gave scheduling issues.

Dissemination strategy

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