

5. Developing a Phonics Programme in Irish for the Teaching of Reading in the Gaeltacht

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The New Revised Curriculum encourages the acquisition of literacy through the teaching of phonics. How then was this advice, which was recommended for the acquisition of first language literacy learning in English, to be followed when faced with the task of developing a literacy programme in Irish in the West Waterford Gaeltacht? This paper will consider an attempt to develop a programme based on a range of regular phonic clusters or phonemes, which aimed to bring about fluency in Irish reading as quickly as possible. Computer activities were designed in order to enhance the children's learning. Some of the issues dealt with during the design of the programme are considered, such as how to deal with exceptions to phonic rules, differences between dialectical changes and standardised spelling, and what learning should be prioritised.

Introduction

The New Revised Curriculum promotes the acquisition of literacy in English as a first language through the teaching of phonics. Although not a new concept, the emphasis on phonics is strong and clear – right down to the printing of a basic list of rimes on which to base a large body of phonic work. There is fairly general agreement regarding the value of the phonic approach, at least as one part of an approach to the teaching of reading. This, however, raises questions for the Learning Support Teacher working in Gaeltacht areas with children whose first language is Irish, the situation in which I found myself when I moved to such a post. This paper will

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therefore discuss the approach adopted by one teacher in trying to tackle the issues involved with supporting reading in Irish as a first language. The strategies devised are, however, likely to be of relevance to teachers interested in using a phonics approach with learners of Irish also.

The challenge

How are Gaeltacht teachers to follow the Revised Curriculum's advice and direction regarding the acquisition of first language literacy in English, when faced with the task of developing a literacy programme for L1 readers of Irish? The Revised Curriculum does not appear to have the same emphasis on phonics in its approach to reading in Irish as a first language as the English curriculum does. Some of the phonic clusters, vowels and aspirated consonants are mentioned as part of a section titled *Ag Tuiscint Teanga* or 'Understanding Language' (Dept. of Education and Science, 1999:122) but they are not presented in schematic form or as part of a major approach to tackling the task of teaching the child to read. This absence of any recommended list of clusters or phonemes leaves teachers of first language speakers of Irish with the task of identifying the important sounds that need to be learned.

Reading in An Rinn Gaeltacht

Although classed as one of the smaller *Gaeltachtaí*, *An Rinn* (or, as it is known in English, 'Ring') has a mixture of language backgrounds: Irish is the first language of some children, but it is a second language with quite high levels of fluency for a larger group of children; finally there is a group, newly resident in the area, for whom Irish is a second language only begun in school, just as is the case in non-Gaeltacht schools. The local primary school follows the model of total immersion, with Irish being used exclusively in the infant classes. English literacy and English oral language development are not introduced until Rang I (First Class). So, despite the range of linguistic backgrounds, this school is considered to have Irish as the 'first language' as defined by the Revised Curriculum. It appeared that a good grounding in Irish phonics would be of benefit to all the pupils who came under my care.

The emphasis on phonics was not new to my own style of literacy teaching, so I therefore set about designing a programme based on, firstly, any materials or programmes which were already available, and then secondly (and more importantly) focusing on a group of phonic clusters which would bring about fluency in reading Irish as quickly as possible. Existing programmes catered for the long vowels and initial consonants, but a wider and more extensive group of sounds began to appear once I set about gleaning common sounds from age-appropriate reading material. A good deal of these sounds had not formed part of any existing reading programme. There seemed to be some general omissions in the literature. The teaching of reading in Irish has had a tradition of using primarily the ‘look and say’ method with a large portion of contextual reading thrown in for good measure. Teachers with experience of teaching English reading using a phonics approach are aware of many schemes and books which identify sounds and clusters given in the form of lists to be presented to pupils so that new words can be read by bringing in to use the already learned clusters. In Irish a new word had to be heard before it could be read or perhaps the pictures at the top of the reader aided the apparent guesswork which the pupils used to decipher the text. This gave rise to a lack of clarity or structure which left the weaker pupil struggling with word identification and the more advanced pupil with difficulties in reading outside a very narrow curriculum.

The primary sounds addressed in the programme were:

1. Short vowel sounds,
2. Long vowel sounds,
3. Diphthongs or double vowel sounds,
4. Aspirated consonants,
5. Another group of regular phonic clusters.

The entire range of the sounds to be taught suddenly appeared to make up a relatively small group of sounds which could be addressed and memorized over a short period of time. These sounds are (laid out below in a rough ‘order of learning’ curve):

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- a, e, í, o, u,
- á, é, í, ó, ú,
- -ia, -ua-, -ae-, -ao-, -oi-, -ea-, -ui-, -aoi-, -eo
- bh, ch, dh, gh, fh, mh, ph, sh, th
- faidh, fídh.

These were the sounds that were targeted for teaching, in the belief that their acquisition would bring about a high level of proficiency in reading. The other sounds were, of course, the 14 consonant sounds which are identical to their English sounds.

Teaching methodology

The methodology adopted in this programme included

1. Cluster recognition games on the computer,
2. Examples from the child's oral vocabulary,
3. Word lists of similar sounds
4. Practice of non-word clusters similar to consonant-vowel-consonant practice in English.

These are described below, but an important adjunct to this programme was the reading of a selection of interesting and stimulating texts which was available from the school library. Book fairs were organised and Paired Reading and Shared Reading schemes were set up. The emphasis was placed on reading material other than the class reader as homework, making the child's experience of Irish text richer and more varied.

Computer games

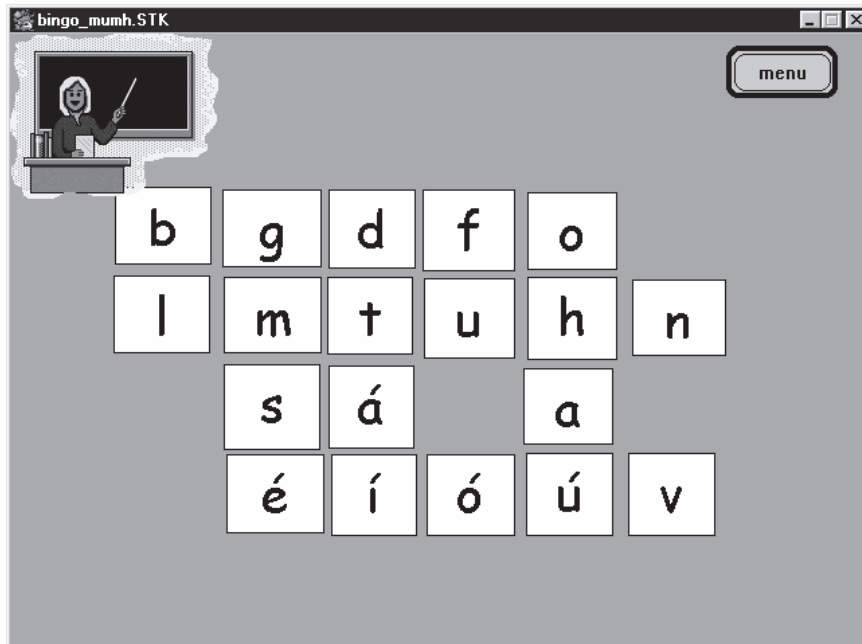
A central part of the implementation of the programme was the use of specially designed computer games or challenges. These were intended to bring about a higher degree of familiarity with the clusters and letters targeted, in as short a time as possible. The attraction of the gaming aspect, together with the simple use of the computer itself seemed to contribute to the successful achievement of that familiarity, and the children engaged in the activities with ease and enjoyment. The games were used in all kinds of

settings – with individuals as well as with groups of two to six children. In the educational context it may be preferable to refer to them as challenges rather than games, as the gaming culture seems to require that each individual or group score against someone or some other team.

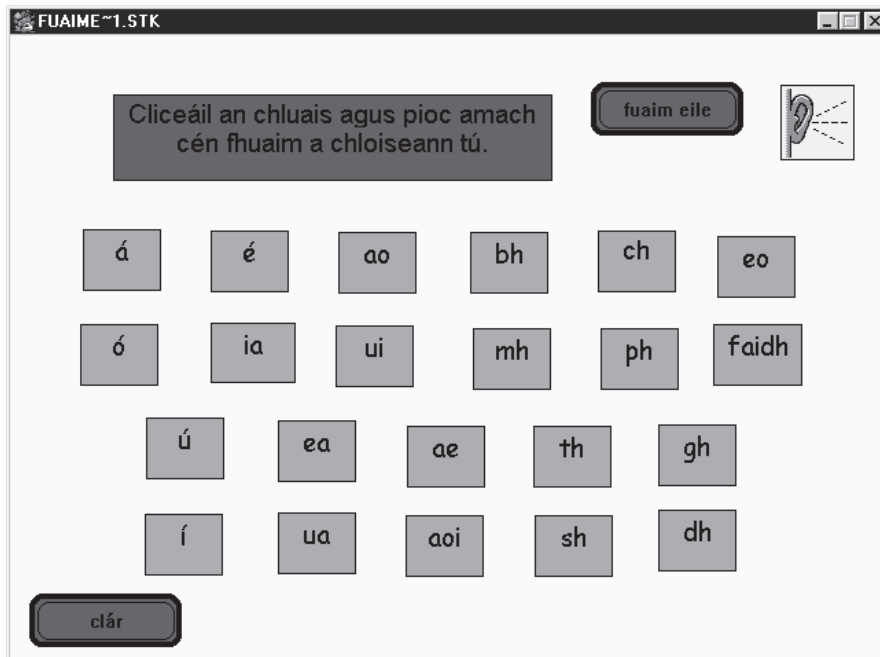
The application program for the design of the challenges was Hyperstudio, which was chosen for its familiarity and ease of use, though it is not without its limitations. Only a minimal amount of programming was required, and this only to introduce random selection of screens as the user went through each challenge. This feature of random selection has given longevity to the challenges, as no two games are identical and the children cannot predict what sounds are next on the challenge list. Random selection did lead to some sounds being repeated within any ‘game’, but from a teaching point of view this was very acceptable, and the pupils seemed to look upon it as a bonus to receive a challenge which had already been answered in the session. Hyperstudio can be closely compared to a PowerPoint presentation, but with extra design features which makes its application more attractive. If a commercial version is produced in the future it may be recommended that the screens be enhanced in any number of ways, but in general the pupils using the software found the look and feel of the screens to be acceptable.

Two simple styles of challenge were put together. Firstly, a Phonics Bingo was designed for the lower end of the school. This quick and simple game helped to consolidate the entire single letter sounds in Irish, and one screen from this is illustrated in Figure 1. The child is presented with a screen with all the letters, consonants and long and short vowels, and is then asked to click on the picture of the teacher to hear which sound is to be matched with its corresponding letter. A correct answer makes the letter disappear and the pupil is encouraged to click the teacher to hear the next sound. An incorrect choice elicits a sad musical sound which indicates disappointment.

Figure 1. Sample screen from Phonics Bingo



The next challenge, named *Fuaimanna* ('Sounds') was designed to address the needs of children on the next stage of the learning curve. This game concentrated on two main areas. Firstly, there was a path of choices directed at teaching sounds such as aspirated consonants (*Na consain shéimhithe*), the double vowel sounds (*défhoghair*) and some other common clusters. These could be heard and learned before entering the area of the challenge or game. As in the format used in the aforementioned Bingo, an icon of an ear had to be clicked on in order to hear which sound was to be chosen from a list of text boxes presented on the foreground of the screen (see Figure 2). It is here that the random selection of sounds was most useful as a wide range of sounds could be covered in the average session. The pupil needed to commit them to memory in order to achieve success.

Figure 2. Sample screen from *Fuaimanna*

A third challenge is still in the development stage. This will present flash cards of random clusters matched with random initial and final sounds. The pupil will be required to read what appears in front of him using the correct sounds. The involvement of a teacher or a good reader to check the responses is required here, underlining the point that this is not a computer game in the sense that we have become used to. Both real words and non-words are used in this activity, requiring pupils to decode clusters rather than rely on whole word recognition, and it appears like higher order CVC practice. This mirroring of teaching activity can have advantages and the endless supply of examples of words and non-words seemed certainly to improve the pace of the lessons. Syllabic identification begins to become more fluent and therefore the reading and scanning processes of the emergent reader are improved. This would appear to be in line with Ehri's (1995) theory of the development of reading skills discussed in Hickey (this volume).

Issues to be tackled in an Irish Phonics Programme

In deciding the content of the programme, decisions had to be made in relation to the following:

- (i) Exceptions to phonic rules and how they would be dealt with
- (ii) Whether to refer to the slender consonant
- (iii) Differences between dialectical changes and standardised spelling

(i) Regarding exceptions: Irish has fewer exceptions to phonic rules than English and for the most part the pupil was encouraged to bring contextual meaning into play so as to derive the word.

(ii) The decision to exclude any reference to the slender consonant was made from the start. Making a consonant slender seemed to occur naturally once an attempt which approximated the correct sound was made. It appeared that the same mental processes were being utilised by the pupil reading Irish as those used in English to identify, for example, the difference between the sounds represented by 'oo' in 'good' and 'food', or the difference between the voiced /th/ sound in 'this' and the unvoiced /th/ sound in 'thin'.

(iii) Dialectical differences were treated as exceptions to the phonic rules. The word was simply told to the pupil and said in the local dialect.

Reading practice

Some texts or 'stories' were prepared so that the pupils can experience positive reinforcement from the use of the phonic rules. They were written with words made up of the phonic clusters for the most part and provided good practice in word attack skills. A number of examples of these are presented below: some are simple and some more complex but manageable in the context of work done prior to their presentation to the pupils.

Excerpt I – Early Readers (Senior Infants)

....Tá bád ar an trá.
Bád mór atá ann. Ní bád beag é sin.
Tá mo mhamaí ar an mbád.
Bád bán atá ann.....

Excerpt II – First Class and upwards

...Go minic ar maidin, tar éis dom éirí, téim síos go dtí an seomra suite agus lasaim an teilifís. Bíonn na cláracha go maith ag an am sin. Nuair a dhúisíonn mo Dhaid tugann sé greim le hithe isteach chugam...
...Inniu tá na hiascairí ag dul amach ag iascaireacht. Tá an tráiléar réidh acu. Tá na potaí réidh. Potaí portáin is ea iad. Tá siad ar fad ceangailte le chéile le téad fada ag dul ó phota go pota.....

Conclusions

This programme aims to identify the major phonic clusters which are necessary to bring about fluency in reading in Irish. As yet, it cannot be stated that the standards achieved are either better or worse than any other schools in the absence of a formal evaluation, and, indeed, this would be an interesting study in the future. However, the first steps have been taken in developing a programme that gives pupils the ability to develop skills which help equip them for future challenges in reading and literacy in general.

References

Department of Education and Science (DES) (1999) *Curaclam na Bunscoile: Gaeilge agus Treoirínite do Mhúinteoirí*. Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair.