

Issues for Teaching Phonics in a Multilingual Context: A Brunei Perspective

Mark B. Smith

Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Abstract

The vast array of research evidence supporting the inclusion of phonics in early reading programmes suggests that its use should be beyond question. Indeed, phonics is now a compulsory component in the UK Primary English curriculum and increasingly important in other Western and Eastern countries. Brunei Darussalam also now includes phonics instruction as part of its new National Education curriculum (SPN 21). What remains a crucial question is just 'how best' to implement phonics to ensure maximum learning outcomes for our students. To achieve a best practice scenario it is essential that schools examine the myriad of factors essential for successful implementation. This article examines many of the key aspects necessary in developing a successful phonics programme, including: basic approaches, progression, assessment and teacher preparation. In examining this research it will also reflect periodically on how a young South East Asian country, Brunei Darussalam, is coping with its own implementation of phonics for its bilingual learners. It is hoped that his analysis may provide some guidelines to assist teachers and educational authorities, especially those involved with young ESL learners.

Background

The method of reading by matching the sounds of a language (phonemes) with the letters of the alphabet (graphemes) is not new. Indeed, we have a long tradition of teaching children letter-sound correspondences and then giving them passages to read that use these correspondences (Moustafa, 2000). This approach was widely used prior to the whole language approaches of the 1970s and in fact dates back to the 1st Century AD, when a Roman educator, Quintilian, used tables with letters on them to teach children to read (Smith, 1965). Its re-emergence in the UK, however, can be attributed to a backlash against the perceived failings of whole-language approaches. After strong media promotion of the Clackmannanshire approach to phonics instruction, the Rose Report (Rose, 2006) commissioned by the UK Government firmly established mandatory phonics instruction in England. Elsewhere, especially in the USA, New Zealand and Australia, phonics instruction has become an essential part of early reading programmes.

In fact, prior to the Clackmannanshire study in Scotland, teachers in the UK were using both analytic and synthetic approaches. However, in a background of growing resentment towards whole-language approaches and buoyed by the publicity surrounding the Clackmannanshire study, conservative politicians wanted a synthetic phonics approach, and their wish was granted in the form of the Rose Report.

It should be noted that both the Clackmannanshire study and the Rose Report were dogged by a certain degree of controversy, especially related to its strong synthetic stance. Particularly critical were Wyse and Styles (2007), who point to a lack of research justification in the Clackmannanshire study and the highly politicized nature of the enquiry alluding to the commercial interests of several of the proponents of synthetic phonics. They also argue that the advocacy of discrete and isolated synthetic phonics

contradicts the Rose Report's own recommendation that phonics instruction should be 'securely embedded within a broad and rich language curriculum' (Rose, 2006, p. 15). Their scepticism is supported by a review of the research on phonics by Torgeson, Brooks and Hall (2006) which found no statistically significant differences in effectiveness between synthetic and analytic phonics instruction.

Despite the opposition from these and other prominent scholars in reading, synthetic phonics programmes are now a compulsory component of all reading programmes in the UK. Recently, other Western countries, and also developing countries such as Brunei Darussalam, have incorporated various phonics programmes into their curricula. Brunei, for instance, has been using a synthetic phonics programme in all government schools since the start of 2009.

This paper will offer an overview of the use of phonics and also its implementation in Brunei.

Approaches to Phonics Instruction

The two main approaches to phonics instruction are synthetic (as recommended by the Rose Report) and analytic. While the synthetic approach emphasizes sounding out and blending each individual phoneme, so that *cat* is sounded out as /k/ /æ/ /t/, analytic phonics places emphasis on inferring sound-symbol relationships, so with *cat*, the teacher may ask the children what other words they know that end with the /æt/ rime (where possible responses might include *bat*, *hat*, *flat*, *mat* and *rat*).

Despite synthetic phonics being virtually mandated by the Rose Report, its position is still under debate. Davies and Ritchie (2003) sensibly argue that both approaches are necessary. The synthetic, or part-to-whole process, enables children to blend (synthesize) the letter sounds to create words (wholes), whereas the whole-to-part learning in analytic phonics assists children in the process of spelling. Torgeson, Brooks and Hall (2006) supports this view, concluding that *systematic* phonics instruction (note: not synthetic) within a broad literacy curriculum was found to have a statistically significant positive effect on reading accuracy. This view is supported by prominent early writers on literacy, such as Nicholson (1991) and Stanovich (1991, 1994).

It is interesting to note, that like England, Brunei has also now chosen a synthetic programme (Read-Write-Inc, henceforth RWI) to replace its predominantly whole-language Reading and English Language Acquisition (RELA) programme which had been in existence since 1989.

Systematic versus Implicit

One of the main recommendations of the Rose Report was that phonics be taught systematically. A systematic approach to phonics provides teachers with lessons that teach a set of phonic elements in a particular order, based on linguistic factors about which sounds are easiest for students to produce at an early age (Mullins, 2009).

Vilaume and Brabham (2003) break down the notion of systematic into three distinct parts, all equally important. These are: systematic progression; systematic materials and activities; and a systematic schedule. A systematic approach firstly implies an orderly progression for introducing letter-sound correspondences. Here, the authors suggest that schools need to adopt an agreed-upon progression that clearly maps out the teaching of letter-sound correspondences across the early grades. It follows then that teachers need to have systematic activities and materials so that teachers can introduce each targeted letter-sound correspondence. With such materials, teachers can then engage students in coordinated activities that ensure sufficient practice in reading and spelling words with the

targeted correspondence. Thirdly, it is important that teachers have an individualized, systematically planned schedule for their phonics lesson.

So, how does Brunei's new phonics programme fare in its systematic nature? Like most synthetic phonics programmes, the RWI programme through its orderly progression is certainly systematic. However, as a mandated programme, it lacks the traits of agreed progression proposed by Vilaume and Brabham (2003). Furthermore, current research by Smith, Malai Hayati and Rohaniah (in prep) indicate that many teachers are dissatisfied with the variety of resources available for them to use in their phonics instruction. This lack of consensus among teachers as well as the reported scarcity of resources may well undermine the programme's effectiveness.

An alternative approach to systematic phonics instruction is the implicit or incidental approach. Here, teachers do not follow a pre-planned sequence of lessons to teach sounds but make their own decisions as to what phonic elements to teach based on the opportunities the texts presents. This opportunist approach is a common skill of experienced teachers but may be inappropriate for beginner or inexperienced teachers who feel more secure with the support of a sequential programme. This view is consistent with Vilaume and Brabham (2003), who observe that current research is inconclusive about what approach is best and suggest that choice depends on the stage of a teacher's professional development. For instance, systematic, scripted programmes might be better suited to new teachers or those that have not yet acquired the expertise required, leaving the incidental approach to more experienced teachers who possess the instructional flexibility and responsiveness required to address confusion, and are thereby able to clarify or modify a lesson.

This eclectic stance suggests that a one-size-fits-all mentality is not appropriate and proposes instead that explicit understanding emerges from an approach that integrates aspects of direct, part-to-whole instruction and embedded whole-to-part instruction. An example of embedded instruction may involve teachers developing explicit understandings of the alphabetic principle through guided discovery of Big Books or the children's own stories. Once the letter-sound correspondences are 'discovered' by the teacher and children, active engagement in reading and spelling words which contain the target sounds or letters can be carried out. Vilaume and Brabham (2003) believe that it is these multiple approaches, not just simply the use of synthetic or analytic approaches, that can best help children develop explicit and systematic knowledge of the alphabetic principle. Consequently, instead of adopting a pure 'synthetic' or 'analytic' approach, perhaps it is better to think about how best phonics instruction can be planned, prepared, and delivered to arouse the curiosity of pupils about words, foster self-extending, and provide a love of reading.

Progression and Implementation

Implementing a phonics programme successfully requires teachers to consider a variety of issues. As well as deciding on an appropriate approach and programme suited to their individual contexts, teachers need also to consider aspects such as:

- When will the programme commence?
- Will it be bilingual?
- How much phonics should be implemented?
- What sequence should be used?
- What strategies should be used?

Sequence

Whether a commercial phonics programme is used or not, a clear systematic progression is vital to success in any reading programme. In fact a systematic approach is one of the few recommendations of the Rose Report that all parties seem to agree on. Ironically, the starting point should not be with phonics, as children who have not yet learned to read have difficulty consciously analysing spoken words into their constituent phonemes (Ehri & Wilce, 1980; Mann, 1986; Treiman, 1983, 1985, 1986). Children can, however, analyse words into larger units of speech such as syllables or onsets and rimes (Goswami & Bryant, 1990).

Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) state that children are not at the point of phonics instruction until they are capable of analysing language in terms of words, syllables and phonemes within syllables. This is consistent with the research that shows that children with strong phonological and phonemic awareness skills typically make a smooth transition into phonics because they can easily convert their understanding of speech sounds into letter-sound knowledge and decoding skills (Goswami & East, 2000). Children who lack this phonological understanding will struggle with phonics instruction and decoding, specifically in sounding and blending letters to form new words. Hence, it is vital to first develop oral language skills (without print) before the more difficult skill of phonics decoding.

This 'phonological awareness first' approach is supported by the UK curriculum, where Phase 1 of the reading programme focuses on awareness of rhyme and alliteration, distinguishing between sounds in the environment, and discriminating speech sounds in words. Only then do blending and segmenting begin.

Consequently, a suggested schedule to teach phonics in a kindergarten or preschool as proposed by Lane, Pullen, Eisele and Jordan (2002) would look something like this:



Under a phonological awareness first approach, graphemes (letters) are not introduced until children have had undergone oral and auditory discrimination, thereby developing their phonological skills. In first grade, the authors believe that students require:

- opportunities to listen for sounds in words as letter sounds are taught.
- listening for all the sounds in words before they are spelt.
- explicit instruction and practice in blending activities.
- review of oral language activities used in preschool for children lagging behind.

Letter progression will vary from programme to programme. Generally, however, continuous sounds are taught first as they are the easiest and can be stretched, e.g. /s/ /m/ and /f/. Stop sounds such as /p/ /b/ and /k/ are recommended to be taught later as they are more difficult for the children.

Once a few letters are known, simple two- and three-letter words can be introduced. Letter charts are an ideal way for children to learn and consolidate their word building skills. The traditional progression for word difficulty is to start with consonant vowels and vowel consonants, then CVC words followed by VCC, progressively increasing the number of letters. Carnine & Silbert et.al (1997), however, believe that progression should be based on the usefulness of the grapheme-phoneme correspondences and not in the order they appear to be acquired. Consequently, the following sequence: VC, CVC, CVCC, CCVC and CCVCC is said to maximize generalisation and minimise what children need to remember, a salient point when considering beginning readers.

In summary then, it is recommended that the following guidelines set by Barclay (2009) be used by teachers for a sequenced progression of phonics instruction:

- start with phonemes – link to graphemes
- follow a planned sequence
- teach concepts explicitly (model)
- use engaging multi-sensory activities
- move from simple to abstract
- provide ample practice, including the words in controlled text

The Role of Vocabulary

Lenters (2004) believes that young second language children can successfully learn to read in a new language, but this is conditional upon them reaching an oral language level that enables them to handle the vocabulary of simple text geared towards young emergent readers. Hence, whether it is a first or second language, oral reading proficiency is dependent upon oral knowledge of the language, as one cannot read with comprehension a language one cannot speak and understand. Brunei seems to be following this approach as its new consultancy-based curriculum now places a high importance on listening and speaking skills before formal phonics instruction.

The role of vocabulary then becomes increasingly important, especially in a second language context. A recent article by Yesil-Dagli (2011) observes that the usual predictors of reading success for native English speakers, particularly alphabetic knowledge and phonological awareness, differ for English language learners. Her study of 2481 elementary students found that vocabulary was the second highest predictor of reading fluency after letter naming. Consequently, it can be argued that a greater emphasis on vocabulary training is crucial for efficient second language reading instruction.

Droop & Verhoeven (2003) claim that deep understanding of vocabulary must be fostered on the semantic level through multiple exposures to words in a variety of genres, subject areas and contexts. They argue that effective phonics instruction requires teachers to provide students with ample opportunities to work with words and make the vitally important connection to reading and writing. Phonics should not be isolated but taught within a meaningful context. For example, children can enjoy a poem or story and then be taught the target skill. This approach contrasts greatly with the current Brunei programme which accentuates bottom-up skills and lacks rich and meaningful literature to support children's phonological skills.

Multilingual Considerations

There is a lack of detailed longitudinal research about just when a reading or phonics programme should be introduced, and the issue is surrounded by much debate. Lenters (2004) notes that some contend that second language reading instruction must be delayed

until first language reading is firmly established (Weber, 1991; Wong-Fillmore & Valdez, 1986, as cited in Anderson & Riot, 1996). Others question the validity of waiting that long (Fitzgerald & Noblit, 1999). More recently, Manyak & Bauer (2008) found no evidence that phonemic awareness and phonics instruction needs to be delayed until a certain level of English oral language proficiency is attained. In the absence of detailed research on this topic, Lenters suggests that a first-principles approach is necessary and stresses the importance of noting the age and literacy background of second language learners. She adds that second language learners have unique needs which have to be addressed, so one approach does not fit all.

In Brunei for instance, two major factors hinder positive transference from the native language to English. Firstly, although the languages share the same Latin-based alphabetic script (Winskel, 2010), Malay has a high degree of orthographic transparency while English does not. Secondly, Brunei students are not familiar with the English language prior to their schooling. Typically they learn their native or Brunei Malay at home and then go to school to learn not one but two other languages – Standard Malay and English. Few people realize that the dominant local variety of Malay in Brunei differs substantially from standard Malay in terms of phonology, grammar and lexis (Clynes & Deterding, 2011). One major difference lies in the vowels, as Brunei Malay has only three vowels /i, a, u/ compared to the six vowels of standard Malay /i, e, a, o, u, ə/. Added to this already cognitively demanding schedule is the need for students to learn the Arabic-based Jawi writing script from year 1. So in fact it can be argued that Brunei students undergo not sequential bilingualism but sequential multilingualism.

It is vital then, that teachers assess how children cope cognitively with more than one language in their lives and consider the ‘interdependence’ theory (Cummins, 1979). This theory states that the development of competence in a second language is partially a function of the level of competence already developed in the first language at the time when exposure to the second language begins. Consequently, a bilingual approach to reading and phonics instruction only works when both languages develop to a point of proficiency where transfer can take place between the two.

An added concern for Brunei is just what other language do we support? Do we support the nationally proclaimed language of standard Malay which most Bruneians will admit openly that they find difficult and do not enjoy? Or do we support the colloquial language that most of them are exposed to from birth – Brunei Malay? Or both? Answers to this question are best found by examining what factors are more likely to bring about positive transference. Winskel (2010) observes that transference is more likely to occur if: firstly, orthographies are similar and share common grain sizes such as syllables, and phonemes; and secondly, if the children are already familiar with the language they are learning to read.

From a Brunei perspective, the challenge to achieve positive transfer between languages is immense. Firstly, both new languages are unfamiliar to young Bruneian learners; and secondly, apart from a common Latin script, both English and standard Malay vary considerably in terms of grain size and phonology.

Grain size or granularity refers to the size of the phonological or orthographic units. A synthetic approach to phonics for example relies considerably on the smallest grain size of phonemes whilst the common grain size in Bahasa Melayu are the larger syllable grains. Because of its greater orthographic transparency, individual grain sizes pose few problems for students learning Malay. However, in learning English where the smallest grain sizes are unreliable students need to access larger grain sizes such as syllables and onset-rimes for word recognition. Ziegler & Goswami (2006) suggest that in learning to read inconsistent orthographies like English, children need to develop large-unit (whole word

and rhyme analogy) in tandem with small unit (grapheme-phonemes). Clearly this is not possible under a single, rigidly prescribed approach to instruction.

In an attempt to overcome these differences, the Brunei government has availed the services of an Oxford consultant professor to try and streamline the learning of the languages so that they can support each other and achieve transference. While this action may be commended, the sheer complexity of the situation means success is not guaranteed.

Commercial Phonics Programmes

Phonics is now a multi-million dollar business. A simple *google* search unveils literally hundreds of phonics programmes, most proclaiming the Rose standards of being synthetic, systematic and explicit. As mentioned earlier in this article, systematic refers to a curriculum which contains a specified, sequential set of phonics elements. Explicit, on the other hand, refers to lesson delivery where the teachers tell the children directly what they are trying to teach. Clearly both are essential components of any reading programme.

Lenters (2004) believes that programmes that experience the greatest success not only promote literacy in the home, but also recognise the first language literacy practices of the children's families. It has been shown (e.g. Anderson & Roit 1996; Au 2000) that when parents believe that their literacy beliefs and practices are being respected and upheld, they become strong supporters of the second language school practices and effective allies for their children in negotiating meaning between the two languages. Lenters suggests that to facilitate this process, parents should be encouraged to engage in meaningful conversation, and read in the first language with their children. She also recommends that schools purchase first language texts to match the second language texts being used.

Commercial programmes available can range from handbooks to comprehensive technology-based programmes offering everything from built-in assessment, engaging activities, to complete lesson plans. As with approaches to phonics, it is emphasized that one size does not fit all, and intended users need to carefully match the resources with their intended student needs, and indeed, their ability to pay.

Despite the abundance of excellent commercial phonics programmes on the market, there are still some who would rather spend money on books. Hornsby and Wilson (2009) for instance, believe that programmes are a waste of money and that money is better sent on buying authentic reading material.

Instead of programmes, Hornsby and Wilson recommend an embedded approach and point to the plethora of evidence supporting the view that phonics is best learned when taught in the context of learning to read and write. The authors cite Freppon's research (1991) which showed that students who were taught phonics in context could apply their knowledge and sound out words more successfully than students who were taught phonics in isolation. A further study by Stice and Bertrand (1990) compared 'at risk' first graders from whole-language classrooms where phonics was taught in context with at risk students from traditional classrooms in which phonics was taught explicitly. Comparisons after two years showed that the whole-language children showed greater gains and better performance on virtually all measures.

Whether one spends money on books or programmes, it is perhaps timely to reflect on the view of Davies and Ritchie (2003) who believe that one of the biggest lessons to be learned from heavily funded national initiatives is that there is considerable opportunity for large sums of money to be spent on 'misguided' resources and courses. In this case, he is referring to the British government's support for the artificial letter-sounds of 'old phonics' rather than the natural phonemes and graphemes of new phonics.

Like many countries worldwide, Brunei chose a phonics programme exhibiting the Rose standards of being synthetic, systematic and explicit. Given the current needs of teachers in Brunei, the decision to utilise a commercial programme is a reasonable one. Whether it will ultimately succeed, however, will depend on adequate resources, and more importantly, ongoing in-service provision so that local teachers are able to provide the explicit instruction that is so vital for success.

The Role of Teachers

The teacher's role in phonics instruction is critical. In order to be explicit with instructions, as recommended by the Rose Report, Leters (2004) recommends an "*I do, we do, you do*" approach. That is, the teacher as "*I*" firstly explains and models; "*we*" (the children) then have guided practice; "*I*" (the teacher) then provides corrective feedback; finally, "*you*" (individual students) have extended practice with the teacher finishing the cycle by checking for understanding. Ruth Miskin's Read-Write-Inc programme (2006) with its 'my turn', 'your turn' terminology is a variation of this approach. Of course, its success is highly dependent on accurate and explicit teacher instruction, something we cannot take for granted in multilingual contexts where the teachers' own phonological awareness, knowledge and skills may be low.

Fluency

In addition to phonics being an essential ingredient in learning to read, Rasinski, Rupley and Nichols (2008) point to the importance of fluency. They believe that the crucial question is not whether phonics and fluency are of great concern in learning to read but rather, how should they be taught in ways that are natural, authentic, synergistic, effective and engaging? Their solution is through the use of rhyming poetry.

Through the use of rimes or word families (as referred to by older generations of teachers), beginning readers can use their knowledge of spelling patterns in other words they encounter in their reading. For example, knowledge of the rime /æt/ can help a reader decipher many other words such as *cat*, *bat*, and *mat*. The argument is that students who can recognise the many hundreds of word families have the ability to process such words accurately and efficiently. Knowledge of Fry's list of the most common phonograms, for instance, allows the children to decode and spell over six hundred one syllable words simply by adding a consonant, consonant blend or consonant digraph to the beginning of the word family (Fry, 1998).

Key methods for teaching reading fluency are the repeated oral reading of texts with teachers modeling fluent reading, and supporting students while reading orally by reading with them (Kuhn & Stahl, 2000; NICHD 2000). However, continuous repetition may easily lead to boredom. To enable the repeated readings to be authentic and engaging, Leters (2004) suggests the following procedure:

Step 1: Identify the word family

- The teacher identifies a target word family, demonstrates its spelling and sound, and then brainstorms with students words that belong to that family.
- For example, if the word family being taught is /est/ the teacher and children may brainstorm words such as *best*, *pest*, *Chester*, *guest* and *rest*.

Step 2: Working with the word family

- The teacher and students can then easily write a poem based on the words, for example:

*My best friend Chester is a real pest.
He pesters his sister and his sister's guest.
He thinks he's a jester, never gives them any rest.
Oh my friend Chester is a real pest.*

This example contains nine instances of the *_est* word family (though some of the words are bisyllabic) and naturally, young children love playful poems such as this.

Step 3: Follow-up activities for word mastery.

Having re-read the poems in a variety of ways, the teacher then guides the students in selecting interesting words from the poem. Students can categorise the words into various structural features: for example, sorting words according to presence or absence of a certain rime; words that have one or more than one syllable; words that contain the /s/ sound and words that do not. The above example shows clearly how teachers can blend together the crucial skills of phonics and fluency in fun and authentic ways.

Assessment

One of the key findings of the Rose Report (2006) pertaining to success of schools with large numbers of ESL students was the use of diagnostic and on-going assessment. This is supported by the longitudinal study of Lesaux and Siegel (2003) whose findings demonstrated that a model of early identification and intervention for children at risk is also beneficial for ESL learners. Mesmer and Griffith (2005) go one step further by stating that good phonics instruction must be linked with on-going assessment which should be used to shape teacher instruction. It is imperative, then, that teachers of phonics are familiar with possible assessment tools and use these to shape their teaching rather than just for accountability purposes found in much high-stakes testing.

Some reliable tests of phonological awareness recommended by Chard and Dickson (1999) include: the *Test of Phonological Awareness – Kindergarten* (Torgeson & Bryant, 1993); *The Digit Naming Rate* (Torgeson & Davis, 1996), *Bruce Phoneme Deletion Test* (Bruce, 1964) and the *Yopp-Singer Test of Phoneme Segmentation* (Yopp, 1995). Further, a comprehensive array of tests can be obtained from the *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills* (DIBELS) website (Good & Kaminski, 2007). Not only are these tests sequenced and related to the key elements of reading (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), but they may be downloaded for use without cost from the DIBELS website.

It is accepted that in using tests such as those mentioned above, we are actually comparing our students against monolingual norms. Winskel (2010) suggests that we should test multilingual children against multilingual developed norms. Unfortunately there is a scarcity of testing instruments used to assess phonological awareness levels of students from multilingual backgrounds. Furthermore, designing accurate instruments is a complex process. What we can do, though, is to investigate how particular grain sizes (Ziegler & Goswami, 2005) contribute to learning to read and write. In Brunei for instance, it would appear that letter knowledge and syllables are key indicators of reading success in standard Malay. Tests and consequently instruction, therefore, needs to reflect these variables rather than using variables traditionally used to evaluate monolingual speakers.

Teacher Preparation

After an examination of many of the issues which teachers face with phonics instruction, it is perhaps fitting that this article concludes by examining what requirements teachers need in order to successfully implement phonics instruction.

To assist this, it may be pertinent to examine just what good teachers do. According to Vilaume and Brabham (2003), exemplary teachers have ‘moved beyond the instructional debate’ (p. 478). That is they do not accord with only one phonics strategy. Instead, they have an in-depth and explicit understanding of the phonological system enabling them to integrate direct and embedded approaches easily. Their instruction includes aspects of ‘direct instruction’ that feature teacher explanations, isolation of sounds in words, blending of sounds into words, and supervised practice in reading and spelling words. However, their practices also include aspects of embedded instruction that feature application of word-attack strategies in authentic reading and writing events, as well as guiding the discovery of unfamiliar or unusual letter-sound correspondences. This integration of instruction provides multiple and varied opportunities for students to develop clear understandings of the alphabetic principle, and it fosters an active learning stance, promotes self-regulating behaviours, and engenders a fascination for uncovering phonics patterns. Understandably, such an integrated approach requires high levels of engagement, thinking and learning. This point is not overlooked by the authors who claim that teacher expertise is critical in combined approaches, and well-honed conversational and management skills are essential.

Ehri et al. (2001) add concerns about teacher competence by referring to studies that show teachers are not well prepared to teach reading as many lack sufficient knowledge about the alphabetic system and phonemic awareness. They add the proviso, however, that if teachers are given proper training they can learn to teach phonemic awareness adequately.

A further study by Tibi (2005) of 145 teachers in the United Arab Emirates found that they were inadequately prepared in the important area of phonological awareness, demonstrating low levels of knowledge and skills in this area regardless of their training. However, it is not just non-native teachers who are struggling. Stainthorp’s UK study (2003) on well educated ‘beginner trainee teachers’ found that only sixteen out of thirty-eight subjects were able to correctly identify and specify phonemes in individual words. Consequently, Stainthorp endorses the National Reading Panel (2000) which states that it is important for teachers to be provided with evidence-based pre-service training and on-going in-service training if they are going to select (or develop) and implement the most appropriate phonics instruction effectively. Through such training, teachers can work out how systematic phonics instruction can be optimally incorporated and integrated in complete and balanced programmes of reading instruction. Teachers must understand that phonics is only one component – albeit a vitally important component of a total reading programme. Systematic phonics instruction should be integrated with other reading instruction in phonemic awareness, fluency and comprehension strategies to create a complete reading programme. This integrated approach is also supported by Torgerson, Brooks and Hall (2006) who recommend that learning to use systematic phonics in a judicious balance with other elements should form part of every teacher’s training.

Assuming teachers have developed their own phonemic awareness proficiency as recommended by the authors above, Hornsby and Wilson (2009) note the following pedagogical skills which all teachers need to know:

1. How to develop the language of instruction and concepts such as first, last, middle letter, word and sound.

2. How to help children experience and understand the various ‘sound units’ of the language: sentences, words, syllables, rhymes, individual sounds i.e. how to develop phonological awareness.
3. How to help children, as they are involved in talking, reading and writing, to link these sound units to our written language i.e. blending and segmenting.
4. How to help children learn the alphabet and concepts of print.
5. How to help children handwrite the letters as they are learning to write.
6. How to help children turn into ‘word watchers’ and become excited about their discoveries.

Acknowledging that phonics is a very new concept for most teachers in Brunei, it is understandable that at this stage few teachers have ‘moved beyond the debate’ (Vilaume & Brabham, 2003). This is perhaps due to the fact that there is no debate for them to be involved in, as the rather prescriptive phonics programme that was chosen for them gives them little leeway for combining direct instruction with creative embedded approaches to reading instruction.

Implications for ESL Learners and Teachers

Most of the preceding discussion on phonics can relate to both monolingual and bilingual contexts. However, what is clearly evident is that bilingual students are different, and a programme aimed at monolingual children is unlikely to be successful in a multilingual context. Consequently what are needed are adaptations to cater for the different needs of second language students and teachers. It is suggested that the following areas require special attention:

Needs analysis

What is perhaps most clear from the analysis in this article is that there is no right or wrong approach to phonics. What is important, however, is that, before a programme is implemented, the whole educational context should be examined via a thorough needs analysis which determines not only student needs but also the needs of our most precious assets, the teachers. Without such an analysis any curriculum reform is doomed to fail.

A commercial programme to support

Likewise, a decision to use a commercial phonics programme should be decided based on the local context. If, for instance, a region has ample phonics resources and reading materials coupled with a high amount of good, experienced teachers, then a programme may be unnecessary. Conversely, if teachers are generally inexperienced and lack proficiency in phonological awareness, a good systematic programme may be a wise investment. We should ensure though that such a programme has a systematic progression ranging from simple activities such as use of rhymes to more complex phonemic awareness activities such as phoneme deletion. It is also imperative that the programme is not taught in isolation, but instead integrated with the development of phonemic awareness, fluency and text reading comprehension skills.

A systematic programme

Although it would be ideal for all teachers to follow an embedded approach to phonics instruction, realism dictates that many non-English speaking background teachers may lack the strong language and management skills required to skillfully blend explicit direct instruction with a more implicit approach. Hence, it is recommended that inexperienced

teachers be supported with a complete sequential programme incorporating direct phonic skill instruction coupled with opportunities to extend these skills in a variety of real language texts.

Start at the phonological level

The research clearly shows that phonological awareness and in particular phonemic awareness is very difficult even for native English speakers. It is crucial, therefore, that any phonics instruction in an ESL context is preceded by systematic and direct instruction in phonological skills such as sound awareness, rhyme, syllables and onset-rime activities. Only when students have demonstrated a high level of phonological awareness should the individual phoneme level of phonics be attempted.

Incorporate regular assessment

Just like any subject area, phonics requires diagnostic and on-going assessment if we want to catch children at risk and provide appropriate instruction. This is especially critical in the ESL context where we would expect many more students to be in the 'at risk' category. Before any phonics programme is implemented, benchmark assessment should be carried out on all students so that teachers have a starting point and goals to work towards. It is recommended also, that schools be provided with a variety of assessment tools so that they can decide as a community which tests to use in their school.

Develop teacher proficiency

The above discussion clearly shows that lack of language proficiency, including among native English speakers, will be an obstacle to the effective teaching of phonics. As such, it is critical that teachers of phonics from a non-English speaking background receive appropriate training and support. Here, a sequential and explicit programme is recommended for NESB teachers who may lack the language proficiency necessary to teach phonics incidentally. It is also recommended that a course on phonological awareness be conducted by training bodies as a mandatory requirement for anyone teaching phonics. In-service teachers should also be afforded professional development on phonological awareness and relevant phonics skills.

Recognise first literacy practices

Finally, if a bilingual phonics programme is being run, it is essential that both languages are given equal priority so that transfer can take place (Cummins, 1979). Here, parental support is essential if parents are to accept the second language and hence support their child's efforts in literacy.

Implications for ESL Administrators

This article highlights just how complex and controversial, implementing a phonics reading programme can be. There are a number of issues that have important implications for policy and practice. The first issue concerns the continuing controversy over what phonics approach to use. Despite contrary claims by synthetic and analytic proponents, there is no right or wrong approach. Instead, programmes need to develop in light of the specific needs of a community. A phonics programme developed for first language speakers, for example, may not be appropriate for a second language community, whose needs, in terms of teachers and students will obviously vary. It is stressed then, that communities take into account teacher input and provide opportunities for teachers to

think how best phonics instruction can be planned, prepared and delivered to cater for the specific needs of their own communities.

The second issue relates to the unique position of teaching phonics in an ESL context. Second language learners have unique needs which must be addressed. As noted earlier phonemic awareness is difficult, even for native English speakers. It becomes crucial, therefore, that the phonemic competence levels of teachers be addressed before pedagogical aspects are explored. Without good teacher models of phonological awareness to begin with, the value of any phonics pedagogical training will surely be lost.

Finally, to prevent undermining the first language, it is crucial that both languages be given equal priority and that parents become active partners in their children's learning. As evidenced in Brunei, providing equal priority in multilingual situations is often fraught with problems. However, it is only when L1 and L2 support each other that real learning can take place.

References

- Anderson, V., & Roit, M. (1996). Linking reading comprehension to language development of language minority students. *Elementary School Journal*, 95, 295–310.
- Au, K. H. (2000). Literacy instruction for young children of diverse backgrounds. In D. S. Strickland, & L. M. Morrow (Eds.), *Beginning reading and writing* (pp. 35–45). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Barclay, K. (2009). Click, clack, moo: Designing effective reading instruction for children in preschool and early primary grades. *Childhood Education*, 85(3), 167–172.
- Bruce, D. (1964). An analysis of word sounds by young children. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 34, 158–170.
- Carnine, D. W., Silbert, J., & Kameenui, E. J. (1997). *Direct instruction reading*. Upper addle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Chard, D. J., & Dickson, V. (1999). Phonological awareness: Instructional and assessment guidelines, *LD Online*. Retrieved on 14 August, 2010, from <http://www.ldonline.org/article/6254>
- Clynes, A., & Deterding, D. (2011). Standard Malay (Brunei). *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*, 41.
- Cummins, J. (1979). Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children. *Review of Educational Research*, 49, 222–251.
- Davies, A., & Ritchie, D. (2003). Why all teachers of English should be trained to use the THRASS periodic table of phonics. Article presented at the seminar for teaching phonics in the National Literacy Strategy, Dept for Education and Skills, London.
- Droop, M., & Verhoeven, L. (2003). Language proficiency and reading ability in first and second-language learners. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 38, 78–103.
- Ehri, L., Nunes, S., Stahl, S., Willows, D., Schuster, B., Zohreh, Y., & Shanahan, T. (2001) Systematic phonic instruction helps students learn to read: Evidence from the National Reading Panel's meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 71, 393–447.
- Ehri, L. C., & Wilce, L. S. (1980). The influence of orthography on readers' conceptualisation of the phonemic structure of words. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 1, 371–385.
- Fitzgerald, J. (1995). English as-a-second-language reading instruction in the United States: A research review. *Journal of Reading Behaviour*, 27, 115–149.
- Fitzgerald, J., & Noblit, G. W. (1999). About hopes, aspirations and uncertainty: First-grade English-language learners' emergent reading. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 31, 133–182.

- Freppon, P. (1991). Children's concepts of the nature and purpose of reading in different instructional settings. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 23(2), 139–163.
- Fry, E. (1998). The most common phonograms. *The Reading Teacher*, 51(7), 284–289.
- Good, R. H., & Kaminski, R. A. (2007). *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills* (6th ed.). Eugene, OR: Institute for the Development of Educational Achievement. Retrieved on 14 May, 2010, from <http://dibels.uoregon.edu/>
- Goswami, U., & Bryant, P. (1990). *Phonological skills and learning to read*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Goswami, U., & East, M. (2000). Rhyme and analogy in beginning reading: Conceptual and methodological issues. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 21, 63–93.
- Hornsby, D., & Wilson, L. (2009). Early literacy and phonics. *Practically Primary*, 14(3), 4–8.
- Kuhn, M. R., & Stahl, S. A. (2000). *Fluency: A review of developmental and remedial practices*. (CIERA Rep. No.2 -08). Ann Arbor, MI: Centre for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement.
- Lane, H. B., Pullen, P. C., Eisele, M. R., & Jordan, L. (2002). Phonological awareness assessment & instruction: Preventing reading failure. *Heldref Publications*, 46, 101–110.
- Lenters, K. (2004). No half measures: Reading Instruction for young second language learners. *The Reading Teacher*, 58(4), 328–336.
- Lesaux, N., & Siegel, L. (2003). The development of reading in children who speak English as a second language. *Developmental Psychology*, 39(6), 1005–1019.
- Mann, V. A. (1986). Phonological awareness: The role of reading experience. *Cognition*, 24, 65–92.
- Manyak, P. C., & Baur, E. B. (2008). Explicit code and comprehension instruction for English learners. *The Reading Teacher*, 61(5), 432–434.
- Mesmer, H. A., & Griffith, P. L. (2005). Everybody's selling it – But just what is explicit, systematic phonics instruction? *The Reading Teacher*, 59(4), 366–376.
- Miskin, R. (2006). *Read Write Inc. Phonics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moustafa, M. (2000). Phonics Instruction. In D. Strickland, & L. Morrow (Eds.), *Beginning reading & writing* (pp. 121–133). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Mullins, S. (2009). Synthetic phonics: Vital supplement or sugar pill? *NATE Classroom*, June (3): 56. Retrieved on 10 November, 2010, from <http://findgalegroup.com>.
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: An evidenced-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. NIH publication No. 00-4754.
- Nicholson, T. (1991). Do children read words better in contexts or in lists? A classic study revisited. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 83, 444–450.
- Rasinski, T., Rupley, W. H., & Nichols, W. D. (2008). Two essential ingredients: Phonics and fluency getting to know each other. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(3), 257–260.
- Rose, J. (2006). Independent review of the teaching of early reading. Retrieved on 6 October, 2009, from <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/rosereview>
- Smith, M. B., Malai Hayati S. H., & Pg Hjh Rohaniah bte P. H. M. (in prep). An examination of a synthetic phonics programme in a multi-lingual context: A mixed method study.
- Smith, N. B. (1965). *American reading instruction: Its development and its significance in gaining a perspective on current practices in reading*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

- Stainthorp, R. (2003). Use it or lose it. *Literacy Today*, 34, 16–17.
- Stanovich, K. E. (1991). Word recognition: Changing perspectives . In R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 2) (pp. 418–452). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Stanovich, K. E. (1994). Romance and reality. *The Reading Teacher*, 47, 280–291.
- Stice, C., & Bertrand, N. (1990). *Whole language and the emergent literacy of at risk children: A two year comparative study*. Nashville TN: Centre of Excellence Tennessee State University.
- Tibi, S. (2005). Teachers' knowledge and skills in phonological awareness in the UAE. *The International Journal of Special Education*, 20(1), 60–66.
- Torgeson, C., Brooks, G., & Hall, J. (2006). A systematic review of the research literature on the use of phonics in the teaching of reading and spelling. *Brief: RB711*, January 2006. Nottingham, UK: DfES Publications.
- Torgeson, J. K., & Davis, C. (1996). Individual difference variables that predict response to training in phonological awareness. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 63, 1–21.
- Treiman, R. (1983). The structure of spoken syllables: Evidence from novel word games. *Cognition*, 15, 49–74.
- Treiman, R. (1985). Onsets and rimes as units of spoken syllables: Evidence from children. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 39, 161–181.
- Treiman, R. (1986). The division between onsets and rimes in English syllables. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 25, 476–491.
- Vilaume, S. K., & Brabham, E. G. (2003). Phonics Instruction: beyond the debate. *The Reading Teacher*, 56, 478+. International Reading Association Inc. Retrieved on 30 October, 2006, from <http://www.questia.com>
- Weber, R. (1991). Linguistic diversity and reading in American society. In R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. B. Mosenthal, & P. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (pp. 97–119). White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Winkel, H. (2010). Learning to read in multilingual contexts. In M. Cruz-Ferreira (Ed.). *Multilingual norms* (pp. 237–247). Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Wong-Fillmore, L., & Valdez, C. (1986). Teaching bilingual learners. In M. Wittrock (Ed.). *Handbook of research on teaching* (pp. 630–647). New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Wyse, D., & Styles, M. (2007). Synthetic phonics and the teaching of reading: The debate surrounding England's 'Rose Report'. *UKLA*, 41, 1, April 2007, 35–42.
- Yesil-Dagli, U. (2011). Predicting ELL students' beginning first grade English oral reading fluency from initial kindergarten vocabulary, letter naming, and phonological awareness skills. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 26(1), 15–29
- Yopp, H. K. (1995). A test for assessing phonemic awareness in young children. *The Reading Teacher*, 49, 20–29.
- Ziegler, J. C., & Goswami, U. (2005). Reading acquisition, developmental dyslexia, and skilled reading across languages: a psycholinguistic grain size theory. *Psychological Bulletin*, 131(1), 3–29.
- Ziegler, J. C., & Goswami, U. (2006). Becoming literate in different languages: similar problems, different solutions. *Developmental Science*, 9:5, 429–453.