

What theories influenced your practice in order to improve the learning of two students with similar specific educational needs? Critically evaluate and analyse the contribution of these theories and their application to students' learning

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1. Introduction

In 2003 one in six of the adult population of Great Britain lacked the functional literacy needed to get by in life at work (Ofsted 2011:9). Modern foreign languages (MFL) should play a key role in developing the ability to communicate effectively in their own language. It allows exploration of the similarities and differences between languages and also of how language can be manipulated and applied in different ways (QCA 2009). As a Head of Equal Opportunities and MFL in a secondary school states, “Starting from scratch in another language might well ... lead to an improvement in their mother tongue performance”.¹ This research intends to use theory to help two students with low levels of literacy to be able to better access MFL. As they are two in a class of twenty, which has a wide range of ability including the very able, it is important to recognize the challenge of personalizing learning in a whole class environment. My reading and reflections led me to conclude that the best way to improve the learning of these two pupils, and indeed of the whole class, was to teach phonics.

The research shows that whilst the multisensory phonetics approach appears beneficial and worth pursuing; pupils with low literacy will still require oral exposure at word level to be able to pronounce written Spanish.

The following section briefly touches upon the ‘inclusion’ agenda before considering school X’s provision for students with special educational needs (SEN) and the whole school approach to literacy. Section 3 looks at the two pupils I have chosen and then details the research design and methods adopted. The final part builds upon the previous sections by looking at the implications of the research and provides an action plan.

1.2 The context of the placement school

School X is an 11-16 mixed community secondary school. Based in a deprived ward of North East London, it has 790 students. It has recently witnessed a rapid turn reversal of fortunes. In 2005 it went into special measures with a prevailing culture of fear and intimidation, according to the headmaster (Guardian 2007). By September 2009 Ofsted stated that it provides its students with a “satisfactory and improving education with good elements” (Ofsted 2009). Despite this the school maintains a poor reputation in the local area and remains undersubscribed.

¹ (Wilson, cited in McKeown (2004), cited in TDA (2009).

The school serves a severely deprived community, with its deprivation indicator sitting at 0.62 and Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility resting at 52.5%. 90% of the students are from ethnic minority groups, the largest being those of Asian/British Asian – Bangladeshi origin (43%) (SEF 2009). In addition the first language for 72% of the students is not English. The gender make up is more than two thirds boys and the school has an extremely high level of student mobility. In addition there is a higher than average number of students listed on the SEN register (SEF 2009).

2.1 Placement schools inclusion provision for pupils with low levels of literacy and areas for development

The National Curriculum for England and Wales is based on “the recognition of everything that diversity of learners brings to a school community” (Peacey 2009:235). The principle of inclusion is based on this, which has the aim of “increasing the participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from, the cultures, curricula and communities of local schools”². Whilst the drive towards inclusion had many causes, the 1994 UNESCO Salamanca Statement was central, in calling on all governments to give it the highest priority. Pupils with SEN are defined as those who require something ‘additional to’ or ‘different from’ that offered to other pupils (Peacey 2009: 234)³. Whilst critics state this places too much emphasis on locating the difficulty within the individual, it is the prevailing SEN model (ibid). It is worth noting that in the context of limited resources, the requirements of inclusion and SEN provision exist in perpetual tension with the aim of raising standards. Whilst in theory the (now less prominent) Every Child Matters agenda understands achievement as more than test scores, school X is in practice still judged on the extent to which pupils achieve national benchmarks. This helps to explain why the school expends significant resources on interventions for students on the D/C grade borderline when approaching GCSE exams.⁴

The School operates what Frank (2005) considers a ‘partial inclusion’ policy, as opposed to ‘full inclusion’. As such, pupils with SEN are in mainstream classes for at least half the school day and whenever possible receive additional help or instruction in the classroom. In line with the SEN code of practice, the school adopts a graduated response to meeting SEN’s. One of the possible criteria for placing a student at School Action level is “continued difficulty in developing literacy or numeracy skills” (School X 2009:3). A yardstick for being

² (Centre for Studies in Inclusion in Education (CSIE), 2000, as cited in Capel et al. 2009:227).

³ There are multiple perspectives on how to understand inclusion, see Grimes and Ekins 2009 (8-9).

⁴ This view was espoused by the School X SENCO (2011) but is also widely accepted amongst staff

placed on School Action Plus is “continued difficulty in developing literacy and numeracy skills despite considerable in-school support” (ibid: 4).

Provision/action that is additional to that which is provided to all students is recorded in individual education plans (IEPs). An issue with the IEPs is that whilst the SEN policy of school X (2010:4) states IEP targets will be “reviewed every term and the outcomes will be recorded”, in reality this process takes place yearly (School X SENCO 2011). School X Senco (2011) says “it is hard to provide regular input due to a lack of time” . This is an example of the discrepancy between stated policy and practice, due to the limited resources with which the SEN department manage. The SEN policy does not state the frequency with which pupils should have the support of teaching assistants (TA’s), but the SENCO reports that the school has the lowest TA per pupil ratio in the borough (School X Senco 2011)⁵. This backs up my own experiences in the current year, where there is virtually no TA support in my classes, despite the fact several students have statements.

In terms of direct intervention for SEN pupils with low literacy, School X has a system in place whereby students are withdrawn for up to 5 lessons per week in a small group, mainly in key stage 3 classes. These sessions go on for 5 weeks. Again however, The SENCO states that he would run more literacy groups if the resources were available (School X Senco 2011).

Whilst literacy groups are to be welcomed, the sessions pupils are withdrawn from include Spanish (or French). This appears to be a questionable approach in light of the importance of language learning. As the KS3 MFL program of study (QCA 2009) states, “language learning gives pupils opportunities to develop their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills ... they explore the similarities and differences between other languages and English and learn how language can be manipulated and applied in different ways.” Based on this, it is clear that the choice of lesson pupils requiring extra literacy support miss is a decision that should be problematized. It is arguably counterproductive to withdraw such pupils from a class aimed at learning about language, for example by seeing links between English and the target language.

2.2 The whole school approach to literacy and areas for development

Beyond the SEN department's role in supporting those with low levels of literacy, the whole school approach to the issue is also relevant. After all, pupils X and H spend virtually all their time within mainstream lessons, so it is here that they can be supported to improve their literacy. A recent Ofsted survey (2011) identified good practice to support learners in reaching this goal. The results are especially pertinent to my school context because of the schools surveyed. These were selected according to whether they had strong provision but also on the basis of a high proportion of FSM pupils. As noted above, the latter is the case for school X. Overall the research found that the approaches used by successful schools were "straightforward and could be replicated by any other school" (ibid: 17). As such it is pertinent to audit my own schools provision against what the report considers practice that works. I have completed this through an interview (LC 2011) with the literacy coordinator (LC) for the school.

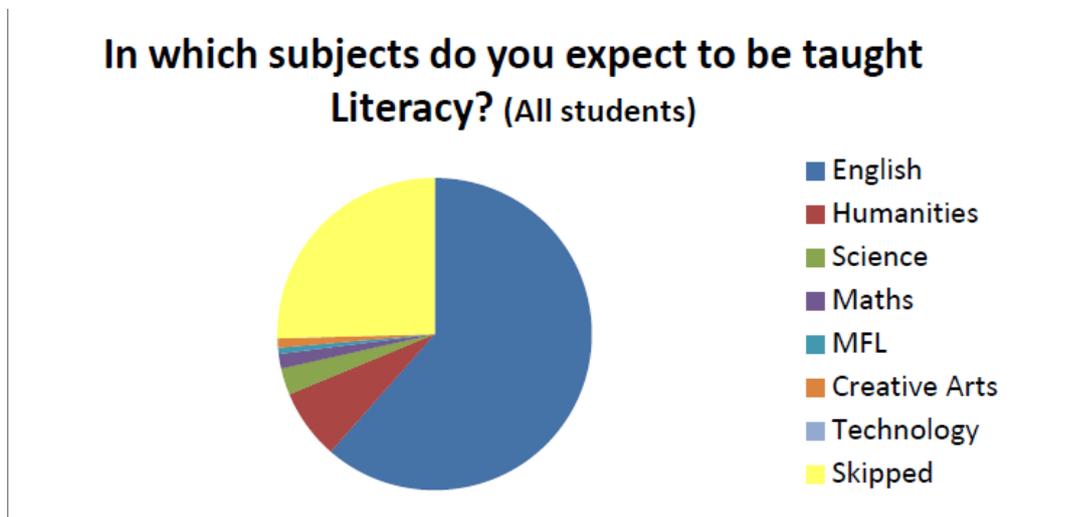
In several areas the LC feels that the school is moving closer to the best practice set out by Ofsted. For example she says there are high expectations for literacy amongst the senior leadership team (SLT), albeit less so amongst department heads. Literacy is increasingly promoted in all subjects, thanks to work with the EAL coordinator. In addition the LC has a budget and feels she has influence. Ofsted also note that a high quality English department is important, and this is present in school X, as evidenced by KS4 exam results. The school also pushes innovative pedagogy such as philosophy for children and shared writing to boost speaking and listening skills. There is also regular assessment of pupils' literacy progress at the end of each year (LC 2011). In addition the school provides phonics classes for year 7 pupils arriving with low literacy.

On the other hand school X does not offer the excellent pastoral system supporting literacy targets which Ofsted found to be best practice. There is general agreement that pastoral time of fifteen minutes (5-10 once in classroom) is insufficient. Furthermore, Ofsted (2011:42) state that the "secondary schools visited emphasized the school library as contributing markedly to improving literacy skills". School X has lacked a functioning library for three quarters of a year due to a change of system and coordinator. The school also does not provide resources to provide for full time English teaching assistants, which Ofsted consider best practice. This is a reminder of the ongoing tension between achievement and inclusion.

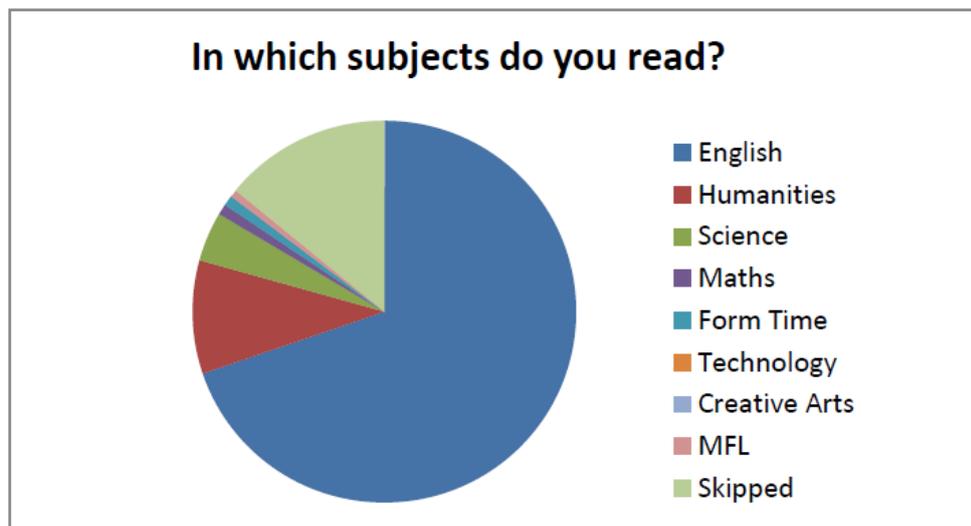
As well as comparing school X to Ofsted's stated good practice, it is worthwhile to consider the results of a recent student literacy survey carried out by the LC (School X 2011). This shed light upon pupil perceptions of their literacy and learning. It shows pupils, in contrast to

the LC, actually do not consider literacy to be promoted across subjects. This is seen in graph A, in which a significant majority of students feel that English is the only subject in which they should be taught literacy, with only 13% of students expecting to be taught literacy in other subjects, particularly in humanities and science. This shows there needs to be greater focus on literacy marking and signposting in lessons across subject areas. In a similar vein, graph B shows that students do not recognize reading activities in the majority of subjects (students were allowed to check more than one subject in their answer). 69% of students said they read in English, 10% in humanities and 5% in science. As a staff, we need to improve the provision and signposting of reading activities in all subjects.

Graph A: Student perception of when literacy should be taught

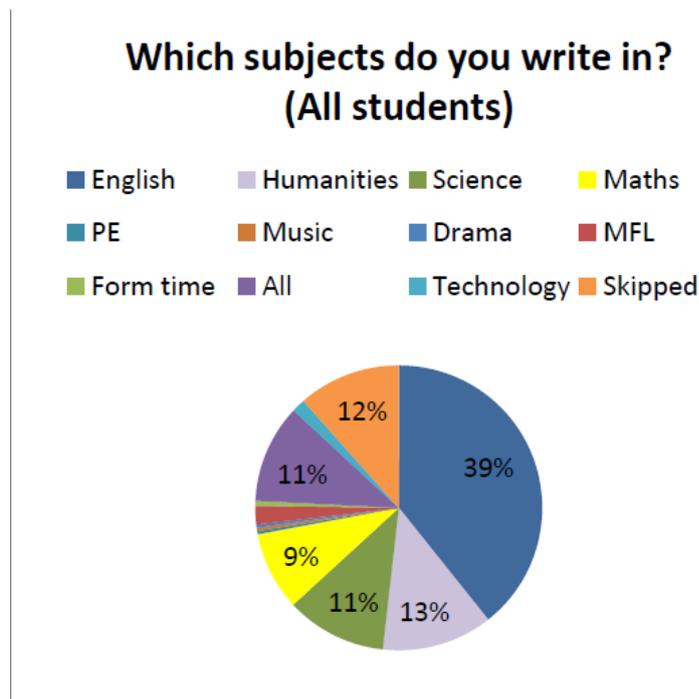


Graph B: Student perception of which subjects they read in



Graph C shows a similar story for writing, as across all year groups English is overwhelmingly perceived as the writing subject, followed by humanities and science. It would appear that students (particularly years 7 and 10) feel there is relatively little writing in some subjects. Again this points to the importance of literacy marking and showing all subjects offer a chance to progress writing skills.

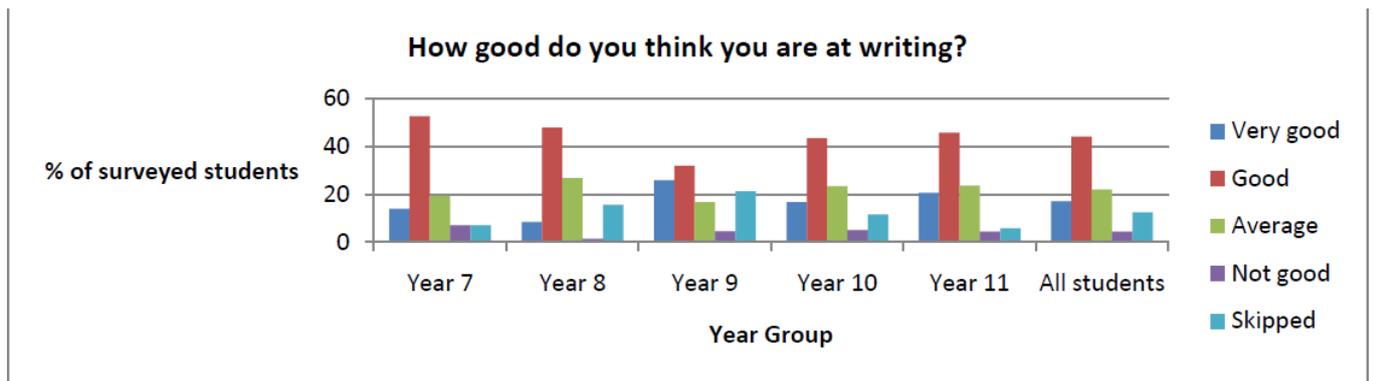
Graph C: Student perception of subjects they write in



The survey also revealed that students overestimate their own writing ability, with graph D showing that over 60% of students believe they are above average at writing. In year 7, 67% believe they are above average and in Year 8 54%. In fact, 31% of Year 7 and 30% of Year 8 are below the level they should be on entry to secondary school⁶. This suggests that students (particularly in years 7 and 8) are not sufficiently informed about their progress in literacy.

Graph D: Student self-perception of writing ability

⁶Based on school X English DEP 2010 students at or below NC level 3



3 Write a critical narrative based on your own professional practice that explores links between theory and practice in your chosen area

3.1 Pupil H and Pupil X

I have selected these pupils because they are not EAL learners, but do have low levels of literacy. This makes them interesting foci because due to the demographics that the school serves, English as an Additional Language (EAL) provision is of vital importance to both students and teachers. However it is important not to pass over the challenges which British pupils face who arrive at secondary school with low literacy.

Pupil H is School Action Plus (SAP) and considered to have BESD and SpLD. In terms of the four categories of SEN, he is an example of the many children which “have inter-related needs which encompass more than one of these areas” (DfEE 2001: 62). He has low CATs scores; his verbal reasoning is 75, non-verbal is 78 and quantitative is 74. This places him in the bottom quartile of students for whom CATs data exists in the class. He also has a low reading age of 8 year and 6 months, which puts him in the bottom quartile within the class. In year 7, this advanced by a year which represents good progress, in comparison with previous years. As pupils H’s IEP (Student H IEP 2010) attests, he also suffers from ADHD and so ‘does not find it easy to focus on a task’. The pupil IEP also clarifies that he has as a target to improve his reading and spelling skills. His latest English level was 3c which represents satisfactory progress. In the two Spanish assessments completed at the end of term 1 and 2, pupil H achieved a level 3b and 3c.

Pupil X is also SAP and is categorized as having a specific learning disorder. There are not CATs scores available but her reading age is 8y 1month. Her latest English level was 4a which represents satisfactory progress. Pupils X’s IEP states that her “literacy still has some weaknesses and she lacks confidence in this area”. One of her targets is to improve her

spelling skills, and in particular to learn 4 difficult words a week and to underline 4 new words a lesson and learn their meanings. Pupil X got a level 2a in both the Spanish assessments held this term.

An obvious challenge for both pupils is their propensity to get into arguments with other pupils, which spiral out of control. This can lead to pupil H leaving the room on his own will to calm down, and pupil X becoming introverted and refraining from working. Both students evidently find reading and writing difficult and they find pronunciation of the written word challenging.

3.2 Research design

I use a research model inspired by action research⁷. This is a complex and multifaceted approach but one definition is of a “form of disciplined enquiry, in which a personal attempt is made to understand, improve and reform practice”⁸. Whilst I would already consider myself to be a reflective teacher, action research will allow me to “plan, act, observe and reflect more carefully, more systematically and more rigorously than one usually does in everyday life”.⁹ It differs from other research in that it involves problem-posing, not just problem-solving (Cohen 2007:298). In addition, I am not researching pupil X and pupil H, but rather I am researching my own work, to help me improve what I do and help others. In line with this approach, my work is collaborative. I have planned my approach in tandem with Rachel Hawkes (referred to below), and will share my results amongst the department.

My methodology stemmed from the principles underpinning the research design. I needed to get baseline evidence on pupil X and pupil h’s ability to read and pronounce Spanish words they had not encountered before. As such I recorded the pupils pronouncing a list of unseen vocabulary. These words were carefully selected so each word included a key phoneme which they would be taught during the unit of work. This served as baseline evidence of their ability to turn the written word into speech. I then used my diary entries made after each class; an analysis of pupil work and a rerecording of the pupils reading the same words after the five lessons to analyze the worth of the phonics method.

⁷ Although of course this approach has a multifaceted and complex nature so can’t be understood as one method of enquiry (Cohen et al 2007:297)

⁸ Hopkins (1985:32) cited in Cohen et al 2007:297)

⁹ Kemmis & McTaggart (1992:10) cited in Cohen et al (2007:298).

I also implemented spelling and writing strategies to help pupils X and H overcome their barriers to learning in these fields. Their effectiveness was assessed by an analysis of pupil work and reflecting on my diary entries made after each class.

The names of students and the school have been anonymised in line with the Canterbury Christ Church University ethical guidelines (Canterbury Christ Church 2006). The pupils gave their free and informed consent to be recorded and the mp3's have been stored in a safe place and will be deleted.

3.3 Phonics

The current prevailing perspective on MFL teaching is Communicative language teaching (CLT), which arose in the early 1980's. This has many aspects but important here is the emphasis it gives to being able to use the target language (TL) to communicate personal meaning. CLT arose when phonics was not present in first language (L1) learning, and so makes no mention of what has been obligatory in primary schools in Britain since the Rose Review of 2006. Recent research of beginner learners of French in English MFL classrooms provides theoretical and empirical support for the view that decoding proficiency is an important ingredient in second language learning (L2) (Woore 2009: 3). It is argued that decoding is key to various aspects of L2, including reading comprehension, vocabulary learning and motivation (ibid). Indeed with a focus on Spanish, after reviewing the literature, Morin (2007:345) argues that "that the facilitation of some target language pronunciation instruction should be actualized at a cognitively appropriate level even for very young learners".

After reading and reflecting on my own experiences this year about how to support pupil X and pupil H in speaking a foreign language, I decided that a focus on phonics could benefit not only these pupils, but in fact all students in my class. Considering the spectrum of ability in the class (e.g. reading ages ranging from 7 years 8 months to 13 year 9 months), I felt I would be personalizing learning for pupils H and X, but also offering whole class teaching of real benefit to all pupils. A focus on phonics would also directly respond to the MFL key stage 3 programme of study requirement that the 'interrelationship between sounds and writing in the target language' be taught.

I thus followed the practical approach offered by Rachel Hawkes¹⁰ of teaching the key sounds of the foreign language (key means those phonemes written the same but differently pronounced in English) and fixing them in the long-term memory by embedding them in words (Hawkes 2010). The words are learnt through a visual, auditory and kinesthetic method: seeing a vivid image, hearing and repeating the sound of the word and doing an accompanying gesture (see appendix 6 which shows the phonemes embedded in words). I was further convinced of the worth of this approach due to its multisensory nature. As Deane (1992:44) notes, 'activities encouraging a physical response should prove very useful for pupils with SEN'. My journal entry after the first lesson shows that the pupils did indeed really respond to the activity¹¹. The idea was that this should make the knowledge secure enough for retrieval at any time and more importantly, for application to new words in new contexts.

The aim of lesson one was to do more than teach the key sounds of the language through 16 new Spanish words; it also provided a kinesthetic 'metalanguage' that I used throughout the unit of work. This can cue the learner into a particular sound as it appears in a new word. The intended goal is for pupils to be able to read and pronounce the foreign language without me having to present, pronounce and drill the language first. This is especially important for pupils such as H who have little patience and for whom teacher-led activities seem especially difficult.

The syllable squares activity in lesson's one and two were designed to practice the sounds of the phonemes we had been practicing. In line with personalized learning, these squares were differentiated down to account for pupil H and X's lower literacy levels. As such I provided several syllables which other pupils did not have. As appendix 3 demonstrates, both pupils were able to complete the activity and were also enthusiastic about providing answers.

3.3 Other strategies

I also attempted to help pupils X and H to overcome the difficulty they have in expressing their ideas in written form. In this regard I was inspired by the work of Lunzer and Gardner whose book, "The effective use of reading (1979) proposed a number of ways to assist readers to engage with a text. These are referred to using the acronym DARTS (Directed

¹⁰ Director of Language College at Comberton Village College, a comprehensive secondary school in Cambridgeshire. She is currently completing her PHD on spontaneous talk and presents her work widely at conferences. See www.rachelhawkes.com

¹¹ See highlighted text in appendix 1, diary entry for 29/03/11

activities relating to texts). In lesson four I wanted pupils X and H to be able to show they could understand information from a text about a person's daily routine. The exercise was to show recognition of different daily activities and also of the timings. As such I created a worksheet which had a short true or false exercise and was followed by a drawing grid in which pupils with lower literacy could show the activities and timings in the form of a drawing.

The Key Stage 3 national strategy literacy across the curriculum series (DFES 2004) inspired me to start teaching pupil X and H skills to improve their spelling and vocabulary. While these are useful for MFL they are also pertinent for English and across subjects, as I made clear. In addition, both pupils' IEP's have as targets learning four new words each week. So in lesson two of the UOW I taught pupils a strategy called 'look, say, cover, write' for practicing spellings, as suggested by the DFES (2004:6). I modelled this for the class with a word I didn't know how to spell, and then they practised with new vocab we had just encountered.

3.4 Validity of the research

The research I have carried out is internally valid because: it is clear that the cause (my teaching of phonics) precedes the effect (pupils self-correcting to pronounce phonemes correctly); the cause and the effect are related; and there are no other possible alternative explanations for this link. The research does not however have external validity, because I can't generalize the effects on pupil X and H to other populations of students in other classes. This is due to the small sample of pupils but also because the class context is highly specific.

It would also have been beneficial for me to have a wider knowledge of linguistics, so I could better analyze (and present) the voice recordings of pupils (appendices 4 and 5).

Furthermore the research does not answer the question of the effectiveness of this phonics method on pupils X and H over the long term. The research took place over a short period and doesn't show long term effects.

4. In the light of the research you have undertaken into low levels of literacy write a critical reflection of the impact on your current and future practice

4.1 Personal implications

The main implication from my research comes from a comparison of the recordings made before the UOW and afterwards. As appendices 2 and 3 reveal, both pupils had not improved their independent ability to pronounce the same words after the unit of work, which is not surprising. However this approach was successful in embedding the trigger words into the minds of pupil X and pupil H. This is evidenced by my diary entry from lesson 2¹² and also from pupil's ability to complete the syllable squares (see appendix 4). Furthermore it is shown by the fact that the pupils recognized the majority of actions I made when recorded pronouncing the list of words¹³.

As such when I acted the trigger word during the second recording, they were mostly able to pronounce this reminder word. This then often helped pupils to pronounce the phoneme in the target word correctly. However, and crucially, it did not generally lead to pupils being able to say the entire target word correctly. To provide a concrete example: the word 'copa' (cup) was chosen to test pupil X and H's ability to pronounce the phoneme 'co' correctly. Pupil H pronounced the word 'copa' (cup) incorrectly, as you would pronounce it if read in English. When retested after the unit of work he did the same. However I then made the action for 'coche' (car), which he recognized and said out loud. He then reread 'copa' and pronounced 'co' correctly. He didn't pronounce the word as a whole correctly however.

The reason he didn't is because of his low level of reading in English. I was surprised by how many errors both pupils made when the words were recorded. They mixed up letters (b and d, a and e, etc.), could not bring together two phonemes such as 'e' and 'l' to create 'el', missed out syllables and also created syllables. As such it is understandable why they were able to pronounce the phoneme in question correctly when reminded of the trigger word; but not able to read the word correctly. Thus the first implication which forms the beginning of my action plan is to persist with phonics, while recognizing that weaker students will still need to hear and familiarize themselves with the sound of a whole word. They will likely not be able to pronounce unseen words correctly independently and even with the trigger.

The DARTS activity was revealing as it showed the benefit of pupils demonstrating their understanding without having to write. Appendix 5 shows that pupils H and X correctly completed the worksheet. Past exercises of a similar nature where they needed to write to

¹² See highlighted text in appendix under diary entry for 29/03/11

¹³ See column C in appendices 2 and 3

show comprehension have not been successful. This of course does not mean I should avoid always avoid give pupils chances to work on their writing in Spanish.

The DFES document 'Literacy in Modern Foreign Languages' is a useful resource from where I can draw ideas for teaching pupils skills for spelling and word recognition. As appendix 3 shows¹⁴, pupil X and spelt two of three words correctly in the mini-test which followed the teaching of the 'look, cover, write, say' technique, and pupil H spelt all three correct. The third point in my action plan recognises that different spelling strategies work better for different pupils, and that DFES (2004:7) contains a number of just such strategies which pupils can be taught and then experiment with. DFES (2004) also explains how shared reading and writing techniques used in English can be used in MFL.

4.2 Whole school implications

In terms of implications for the whole school, I believe we need to problematize which classes pupils are withdrawn from for extra reading classes. I have seen how those withdrawn reenter the classroom lacking the knowledge of their classmates, which leads to a fall in confidence and motivation. While this would happen for any classes which pupils miss, languages teaching should be about the nuts and bolts of literacy. With the government's plans for the English Bacallaureate, it may be that languages are now considered important enough by school X to be prioritized again in this regard.

It is clear from the results of the student survey that the whole school needs to act to start marking for literacy and setting literacy targets. In addition, students need to be signposted so they are aware when they are doing activities which further their reading, writing, listening and speaking. Point 5 of the action plan refers to my own plans in this regard.

Action Plan

- 1) Persist with phonics work and provide plenty of engaging opportunities for pupils to practice pronunciation
- 2) Make sure pupils with lower levels of literacy are exposed to the correct pronunciation of words so they become familiar at the word level
- 3) Teach a new strategy for spelling every 2 weeks

¹⁴ See highlighted text in Appendix one under diary entry of class two on the fourth of April 2011

- 4) Begin using communication stickers to come in line with whole school literacy marking
- 5) Have a reading, writing, listening or speaking symbol on every slide to make clearer to pupils the links between MFL and English (literacy)

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