

Daniela Sorádová

Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra
daniela.soradova@ukf.sk

Strategies for teaching English spelling and reading

Summary

Learning English reading and spelling in a non-native speaking environment is generally practised through drill, repetition and learning by heart. However, in the native speaking environment, there are different approaches applied in order to teach English to beginning learners. Based on the continuous one-month observation of the native English learners and their teachers in Northern Ireland and the non-native English young learners and their teachers in Slovakia, we are going to highlight the main differences in teaching how to read and write between native and non-native English learners from various points of view and suggest accommodations that may be beneficial for non-native learners and their teachers. We are predominantly going to focus on the approach “Phonics” used for teaching young learners how to read and write in the native English speaking environment. Furthermore, we are going to stress the importance of the teaching practice by novice teachers as we consider it the first step in their early teaching career.

Keywords: teaching and learning English, method “Phonics”

Introduction

Teaching English reading and spelling skills differs understandably in Slovak and English-speaking classrooms. While in an English-speaking classroom students come across English language on a daily basis, Slovak students have a couple of hours a week to practise these skills. In this paper, we are going to describe procedures and approaches of teaching English reading and spelling in year 2 and 3 in an English-speaking country and in year 3 in Slovakia, as these are the years when pupils learn to read and write in the English language. Although reading and spelling are usually presented together or at least they follow each other at the lesson, we are going to describe them separately, but at the same time we are going to point out the connections between them.

We are going to present the notes of the participant observation. The observation took place in both native and non-native English classes. The observer is a qualified teacher of English, but at the same time a novice in teaching practice. Therefore, when we got the opportunity to gain new knowledge as an assistant of a teacher in a primary school in Northern Ireland, we decided to compare the teaching process of native English-speaking environment with the non-native one in order to enrich our skills that could be later applied in future teaching practice. For a month, we observed a class of 26 pupils in Belfast (an English-speaking country) and two classes of 14 and 13 pupils in Nitra (non-English-speaking country).

Practiacally, we could observe methods of teaching English and at the same time be a part of the everyday teaching process. We are aware that the record of this observation does not reflect the general reality, but it brings new ideas and may help foreign language teacher trainees understand better how the teaching practice works in the native environment compared to a non-native one.

Observation of class in English speaking country

Teaching and learning. Learners study subjects such as Language and Literacy, Mathematics and Numeracy, World around us, The Arts, Physical education, Religious education and Spanish or another foreign language. Subjects like Language and Literacy and Mathematics are on a daily basis, but in the following lines we are going to describe in more details how the English reading and spelling are taught.

Language and Literacy. Language and literacy lessons usually start with reading a big-sized book. Students sit on the carpet and the teacher reads for the whole class. Before the reading itself, the teacher lets the children describe the pictures and guess the story. It is very interesting, because it supports children's imagination, each one comes with their own story and they complement one another's ideas. Generally, they also contribute with their own experiences which evokes discussion. After the pre-reading part, the teacher starts to read the story, stopping on each page giving learners additional comprehension questions. Sometimes, if the teacher comes across words that are made of the sounds that children have learnt, she points out the word and asks them to read it aloud. In the same way, if they come across the sound they are just learning, they read it together, or she asks individual students to read the word and they also write it on the board. Further, they move to writing tasks. Students usually create sentences to sum up the story they have just heard. As students in this year already know some phonics, they can also write some words and combine them into sentences. There were, however, words consisting of sounds that children did not know. In that case, the teacher let them guess how the word or that sound was written, and she only corrected those words or sounds they had already managed to learn. The teacher did not correct the sounds children did not know, so that they would not feel like failing in writing. From our personal experience, we are going to give more details on Linguistic Phonics, which the teacher followed in order to teach young learners how to read and write in English.

Linguistic Phonics

The aim of the Linguistic Phonics is to make children understand the relationship between their spoken and written word. The emphasis is put on listening skills, phonological awareness and oral language. Compared to traditional phonic programmes, Linguistic Phonics does not teach letter names, rules, exceptions, does not refer to silent letters, word families or long and short vowels. It tries to reduce unnecessary memorising and focuses

more on interacting with text. Learning takes place within meaningful context: sounds within words and words within texts (Linguistic Phonics 2009).

Key principles of Linguistic Phonics are (Linguistic Phonics 2009):

- sounds are represented by letters,
- sounds can be represented by one or more letters,
- longer words are made up of syllables (blocks of sound),
- the same sound can be represented in different ways,
- the same grapheme may represent more than one sound.

Although these principles are not presented to learners before teaching Phonics, they are integrated in the process of learning Phonics itself. Even the skills necessary for working with Phonics are integrated into the process of learning without making learners realize it.

Phonological skills needed when teaching and learning Phonics are (Linguistic Phonics 2009):

- Segmenting- ability to access the individual sounds in words,
- Blending- the ability to push sounds together in words,
- Phoneme manipulation- the ability to omit or substitute sounds in words to generate new words.

To develop skills of segmenting, blending and phoneme manipulation towards automaticity, children should be provided with a range of multisensory experiences, e.g. word building, generating new words, sentence dictation and a wide range of texts.

The Phonics Approach, for first language learners, is divided into 6 stages, each stage is divided into weeks, and each week is devoted to a sound or a couple of sounds to be taught. With direct or explicit Phonics, the 44 sounds and 200 spelling patterns are learnt at the time and gradually combined into words and sentences (Hiskes 2011).

The sounds are organised in the recommended teaching order, but if students draw attention to words with unfamiliar spelling, investigation should be encouraged. As pupils begin to understand orthographic diversity, they will work out much of the print code by themselves. They will make connections and unveil new spellings of particular sounds even before being introduced. Moreover, learners should not be given words to learn by heart (Linguistic Phonics 2009).

At stages 1–3, sample words are given to learners that may be used for word-building lessons. Teachers work with suggested word banks and there is an expectation that, once pupils are familiar with most common letter-sound correspondence, they will be able to read and spell any of the words in the bank.

The following table describes the procedure of teaching Phonics at first 3 stages. Stages 1 and 2 teach only one syllable words, where one letter represents one sound. At stage 3, multi-syllable words are incorporated but still one letter represents one sound.

At stage 4, variations, such as double letters and alternative spelling are introduced. At this stage pupils learn to recognise the variation in the code and are encouraged to use words containing different spellings of the same sound.

At stages 5–6, single-syllable and multi-syllable words containing a sound which can be represented in different ways are introduced. A selection of words is provided for each target sound, including Latin endings.

Table 1. Stages of Linguistic Phonics

Stages	Features
Stage 1	One letter/ one sound Consonant-vowel-consonant words e.g. can, pin, sun vowel-consonant words e.g. on, in
Stage 2	Single syllable One letter/ one sound Longer words e.g. flag, stand Vowel-consonant- consonant words e.g. and, end
Stage 3	Multi-syllable One letter- one sound e.g. robin, sunset, dentist
Stage 4	Single-syllable or multi-syllable Words containing sound represented by more than one letter e.g. hill, shell, thing
Stage 5	Single syllable Words containing a sound which can be represented in different ways e.g. go, coat, low, note
Stage 6	Multi-syllable Words containing a sound which can be represented in different ways e.g. going, floated, window

At each stage pupils also learn different strategies in order to remember the right spelling or pronunciation of the letter and their combinations. In the initial stages they learn to recognise words logographically, they use picture clues and context to help them to work out unfamiliar words. Gradually, they learn to rely less and less on early reading clues and are given strategies to cope with the orthographic diversity of the English language. A range of multi-sensory activities are used to embed vocabulary in their long-term memory and are encouraged to use all their knowledge and skills in order to decode words properly.

Reading. As we have mentioned above, the first step in teaching how to read was listening to the big-sized book, reading together and later write. Every week, students were given two or three little books to read at home with their parents. The books were

telling a simple story containing vocabulary appropriate for the students's knowledge and vocabulary. Learners who struggled with reading were supposed to read every morning under the guidance of the assistant in order to improve their reading skills.

Spelling. As regards spelling, it was practised throughout the writing simple sentences, for example after reading activities. As we have highlighted above, if the learners did not know how to write the sound, they were asked to guess, based on their knowledge or just write it as they thought it would look alright. When new Phonics were introduced, the learners were asked to brainstorm and come up with as many words as possible with the sound learnt. They were eliciting the right spelling patterns, highlighting the exception and incorporating phonological skills. Segmenting and blending played an important role when practising spelling, as students had to cut the word into individual sounds and later blend them or substitute one sound for another in order to practise how manipulating sounds may change the whole meaning of the word.

Although it may look chaotic and without any proper system, the students get enough practice of both reading and spelling and are constantly challenged to apply their knowledge about phonics, manipulate the sounds and bridge the sounds with their printed form.

The whole process of Linguistic Phonics lasts about two years and it is aimed for learners, whose first language is English. The vocabulary they have when they come to school helps them to work with Phonics as they know the names of the objects around, they are able to name the visuals in books to help them understand the context. Linguistic Phonics is more explicit, i.e. teaching separate phonic elements of the word. On the contrary, Whole Language Approach a.k.a. Whole Word Approach is more implicit, i.e. teaching to read the whole word without dividing it into separate sounds. On the one hand, Whole Language Approach exposes children to the whole text letting them take the meaning from language contextually without focusing on a structure and decoding (Piper 2003). Wray (2002) agrees with this approach explaining that it supports comprehension. On the other hand, learners exposed just to Whole Language Approach find it more difficult to decode individual words and read them properly and struggle with everyday writing (Nicholson 1991).

Almost everyone would agree that “reading for meaning” should be the primary objective of any method. However, could be that achieved without proper decoding? Hiskes (2011) further explains that students need to be able to effortlessly decode their comprehension vocabulary and then they are free to “read for meaning” instead of struggling while “meaning to read”. After the mechanics of sound-to-word has been mastered, the focus can be fully put on meaning.

From our personal experience, the teacher we cooperated with in primary school in Northern Ireland explained that Linguistic Phonics has replaced older teaching approaches like Whole Language Approach in order to teach English reading and spelling explicitly and improve literacy from the very beginning.

Observation of Classes in Nitra

In primary school in Nitra we have observed 2 classes in the year 3, 3.A. and 3.B. Both classes followed the same curriculum and the same lesson plan. The classes had 45-minute English lessons 3 times a week in the same language classroom with the same teacher. Pupils already knew to read and write in the Slovak language and they had learnt English since the year 1 in primary school, and few learners had come across English in the kindergarten as well. However, the proper reading and spelling in English starts in year 3.

Teaching and learning. We have noticed that there are many TPR activities, for example when pupils learn to name activities (e.g. jump, sit down, touch sth.) or parts of the body. At each lesson pupils were doing listening activities followed by writing and speaking activities. In the activity book, pupils did many matching exercises, crosswords or filling in exercises.

Listening. Before listening, the teacher always let the pupils look at the pictures and guess what was going to happen in the text or describe the pictures. When children were guessing they usually answered in the Slovak language, because they did not know the words in English yet, but many times when they knew at least a word or a phrase in English, they answered in English or the teacher helped them to remember and answer properly in English. Listening usually served as the introduction to the new vocabulary. Pupils listened to the text part by part and repeated what they had heard. In the activities such as “listen and number” or “listen and draw” pupils listened to the text at least 2 times. Listening to songs or chants was very popular among children. The rhythm of the songs and the rhymes were entertaining and helpful for children, because they learnt the right pronunciation of the words. The recordings of songs or activities were recorded by native speakers, so pupils could listen to the authentic pronunciation.

TPR activities. Many listening activities were accompanied or followed by TPR activities. They listened to the text and acted out what they had heard. For example, at one lesson, pupils were learning phrases such as “take off your shoes, put on your sweater, look into the mirror, put on your mask etc.” Firstly, pupils listened to the text, numbered the pictures and then they had to act out the actions. The activity was repeated at least twice, so that the students remembered the phrases.

In this case, TPR activity served as a feedback to the teacher whether pupils had understood and learnt the phrases properly.

Pronunciation and speaking. After pupils understood the meaning of the words, they tried to pronounce the words. Pupils repeated either after the teacher or they were listening to a text. Speaking was an essential part of the lesson and every time a pupil mispronounced the word, the teacher immediately corrected the pupil and asked them to repeat it after her correctly.

Reading. The most common method used to teach pupils read was “look and say”, i.e. look at the word and repeat the pronunciation of the teacher. When pupils were listening to

songs, the teacher asked them to follow the text in the book in order to connect the heard text with the written text. Then, pupils were reading aloud together or individually. The teacher stopped the listening part by part and asked students to repeat, but at the same time follow the text in the book. Pupils had to read the text more times in order to learn how to read it correctly.

In the case of misreading, pupils were corrected, but they were not given any rules or suggestions on how *sh* or *al* are read in the word. We have realized that pupils are able to read only the known words, but they are not able to guess the pronunciation of the unknown word. We assume that it is because they still do not have enough experience with the language and vocabulary.

Writing. The types of writing done at the lesson were mostly controlled and guided. Many times pupils copied the words, phrases or sentences in order to learn to write them properly. For example, in the activity book, there was a follow-up writing activity to the phrases mentioned above. According to pictures, pupils had to put the sentences into the right order and then copy the sentences and write them to the particular picture. In another activity, they had to put the words into the correct order. It was a type of a guided activity, because they had to figure out the word order, but on the other hand, they used the words written in the activity. However, sometimes they had to create their own sentences after they had learnt the necessary vocabulary. These types of activities were free, although pupils could help themselves with the examples prescribed in the book.

Writing was usually the last skill to be practised. The teacher focused firstly on the right pronunciation and the understanding the meaning and after that they started to practice spelling. Writing of the given words was learnt throughout many different opportunities to write, such as writing for homework, writing at the lesson into the notebook or activity book, or collective writing or writing on the blackboard. Drilling was the most typical method for teaching the correct spelling.

To learn the vocabulary properly, the words appeared in many different activities many times with minor variations. Naturally, the vocabulary of non-native learners is restricted, so activities like reading from a big-sized book would require pre-teaching more vocabulary and generally it would take more time. What is more, skills like listening and reading tend to blend as these skills are trained almost at the same time. Similarly, reading is often directly followed by spelling activities in order to learn how to write the words that have been read. As learners do not learn only how to spell a word, but they learn how to read in and its meaning at the same time, most of the skills are incorporated into teaching and learning at the same time.

Summary

There are different ways how to teach learners to read and write in English and it is natural, that the teaching techniques in native speaking classes vary from non-native speaking classes from various reasons. The aim of the observation of both classes was to present the

differences in teaching procedures and get inspired by native speaking classes in order to enrich non-native speaking classes of new techniques.

All the students who study to be teachers go through more types of teaching practice during their studies. Their purpose is to help students bridge the theoretical knowledge they gained at the university with the real-life teaching experience and get the overall picture of the teachers' profession. During the practice, students update their portfolio which contains information about the students themselves, the practice institution and the data about the observation, own lesson plans, analysis of the teaching practice from the practice teacher's point of view and their own reflection. The portfolio can later serve a novice teacher in their first years of teaching (Kováčiková & Veselá 2016). As further Ivanovičová (2007: 167) highlights, the students acquire diagnostic and autodiagnostic capabilities and basic competences such as planning the lesson and managing the class.

The above written lines were predominantly our personal experience during our studies at the universities in Belfast and Nitra that complemented our portfolio of new methods and ideas. Understandably, the classrooms, teachers, pupils and methods vary across the schools either in the UK or Slovakia. However, our point was to emphasize that even short teaching practice can enrich young teachers with many useful methods, fresh ideas and keep them motivated in improving their teaching skills. And what is more, teaching a foreign language requires not only good teaching skills, but also sufficient foreign language skills.

Implications

In spite of the fact that different strategies are used either in native speaking or non-native environment to teach English reading and spelling because of the level of language and the volume of vocabulary, there might be some ideas that could be implemented from native to non-native teaching. Phonics, for instance, which is not a very commonly used method in Slovak schools may bring more logic into English reading and spelling. Although the method is very complex, its systematic and cumulative character might help learners think more about reading and spelling, see the logic, where mostly drill has been used. What is more, thinking about language and its structure supports learners' metacognitive skills which is beneficial even for later studies.

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