

# LSIS Practitioner Enquiry: Supporting ESOL learners with spelling

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## LSIS Research

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### Background

Birmingham Metropolitan College is a large FE organisation offering a variety of learning provision to a diverse range of learners across north and central Birmingham. The Directorate of Skills for Life and ESOL comprises nearly 3,500 learners and offers provision on six main campuses plus a host of community and outreach venues. Following the successful piloting of Supported Experiments in 2011-12, leading to a week's worth of teaching and learning experimentation, it was decided to formalise the process in the form of an enquiry and, by working with CUREE, produce reports and case studies on our findings.

A core of 9-10 staff members were involved in the process from start to finish, but the entire Directorate were

involved in 'Something New Week' 2013, in which teaching and learning strategies formulated as a result of the enquiries were uploaded to a centralised database for tutors to experiment with themselves during the designated week and beyond. The focus of the enquiries was generated from key identified areas for development for the Directorate, and also from our own experiences as tutors.

For our enquiry, we explored a slightly different approach to supporting our students with their spelling to the usual 'Look, cover, write and check' strategy, to provide teachers with a new activity which they could add to their teaching repertoire. The new strategy involved raising students' awareness of homophones (similar sounding words). A study (Punyapet and Laohawiryanon, 2012) carried

out with second language learners in Thailand indicated that this approach improved spelling outcomes, as well as pronunciation and reading comprehension.

### Starting point

We have noticed that non-native speakers of English find the irregular/erratic patterns of English spelling a stumbling block in written work. There is often confusion between short vowel sounds and a failure to distinguish between long and short vowels. Particular problems are the short vowel sounds found in 'bit', 'bet' and 'bait' etc.

Before offering our students spelling strategies that might help them, we felt it important to find out what the students' current habits regarding spelling strategies were. We found that three-quarters of

them (75%) predominantly used the 'Look, cover, write, check' method; the remaining quarter (25%) favoured learning homophones and similar sounding words together and none of them used the phonetic alphabet as an aid to pronunciation and spelling. (We had included the phonetic alphabet as an option because we have observed that certain groups of learners – particularly Hungarians – do use it as an aid to spelling).

As we felt that learning the phonetic alphabet would be too challenging for the majority of our students due to their low levels of literacy in their mother tongue, and in the light of the results of the aforementioned study (Punyapet and Laohawiriyanon, 2012), we decided to investigate whether raising students' awareness of using homophones as a spelling aid would improve their overall spelling competence and provide them with another useful tool in this area of language acquisition. We therefore devised some activities to encourage students to be able to use sounds as an aid to spelling and to train them to categorise spelling patterns with sounds. In addition, we considered whether tasks involving creativity and personalisation, such as getting students to use the target lexis (vocabulary) in their own stories, would further reinforce learning.

## Teaching and learning process

To start with, the teacher demonstrated the particular sound for study and elicited words from the students with this sound. For example, the sound 'o' can be found in words such as: so, doe, though and slow. These were written on the board and any mistakes were corrected. In cases where two similar sounds were causing confusion, students were asked to identify 'sound 1' or 'sound 2', using pairs of similar sounds. For example, the sounds 'o' and 'or' are frequently confused, such as in 'boat' and 'bought' and 'coat' and 'caught'. The students were asked to categorize the different spellings of a particular sound. Picture prompts were then used to encourage students to categorize spelling patterns of these words, after which students made a list and were instructed to learn them for homework.

In the following lesson, the students were asked to use the words to make their own stories in groups. The emphasis was on fun and using as many of the words as possible. The language (grammar, spelling and punctuation) was checked by the teacher at this stage to ensure accuracy. Students from different groups then dictated stories to each other and checked each other's spelling. It should be emphasised that grammar was not the focus of this exercise, hence only serious grammatical errors were addressed.

This process was repeated with the consonant clusters spr-, str- and spl- the following week to further address Arabic speakers' particular needs. A substantial number of our students are Arabic speakers, and we have noticed that they find three-segment consonant clusters particularly difficult. However, our research included a range of learners with various mother tongues, as our classes are multilingual.

## Impact

We gave the students a spelling test of ten words appropriate to their level of language proficiency before and after using the new homophone strategy with them. The first group of spellings included a range of words with the sound 'o' (bone, low, coat, so, sew, know, although, show, toe, boat). The second group of spellings included a range of three-segment consonant clusters (price, spring, strong, splendid, through, straight, arranged, months, next, stopped). For all four tests, each word was presented in a phrase or sentence to make the meaning explicit. Eight students participated in the study.

The spelling tests showed a clear improvement in spelling. In the pre-test of spellings that included the 'o' sound, the students spelled an average of five words correctly. The lowest score was two correct spellings (achieved by one student); the highest score was eight correct spellings (achieved by two

students). On the post-test, the average score was six correct spellings. This time, the lowest score was four correct spellings, whilst one student successfully spelled all ten words correctly.

With the spelling test involving three-segment clusters, the improvement was even greater. The students spelled an average of 5.5 words correctly on the pre-test. The lowest score was one correct spelling (one student); the highest score was 10 correct spellings (achieved by one student). The average score for the post-test was eight correct spellings. The lowest score was five correct spellings (two students) and one student spelled all ten words correctly. It was pleasing to see the Arabic students doing well on the second post-test (one Arabic student spelled eight of the words correctly and two of the Arabic students spelled six of the words correctly) as the consonant clusters included in the second spelling test (spl-/spr-/pre-) pose particular difficulties for Arabic speakers. Two of the students (including one Arabic speaker) were unfortunately absent for the second test.

When we asked the students at the end of the intervention about the strategy they would consider using now or in the future for learning spelling, we found a shift in the students' preferred way of working. Over a third (37.5%) compared with a quarter (25%) at the start of the study said that they would use the homophone approach. Correspondingly, just less than two thirds said they would

use the 'Look, cover, write and check' approach compared with three quarters (75%) at the start of the study. However, whilst 37.5% of the students felt that categorising sounds helped a lot, half of the students felt that the strategy had only helped a bit, and 12.5% felt that it hadn't helped at all. Interestingly, nearly all the students (87.5%) felt that using the words in their own stories helped them a lot with learning spelling – none felt that the strategy had not helped at all.

An unpredicted finding was observed in relation to lexis acquisition, specifically in higher level groups, where students found the method beneficial in memorising unfamiliar vocabulary. In particular, the 'make a story' element of the activity, which promoted personalisation, enhanced students' ability to recall new vocabulary at a later stage. In follow-up oral work, students were using the vocabulary naturally in context. For example, the word 'dowry' was one of the words students recalled and explained it to classmates who had not attended the previous lesson. Students also reported a high level of enjoyment in this part of the activity.

## Conclusion

We are conscious that our application of the homophone strategy was quite restricted in terms of both the time devoted to it and the numbers of students involved. But we feel that our pilot study

indicates the approach has much potential for us in the future. As the findings of the aforementioned study (Punyapet and Laohawiryanon, 2012) indicate that this strategy works best when applied regularly over a long period, we would advocate extending this technique to a whole term in order to assess the long-term benefits.

## Further reading

Baker, A. (2006) *Tree or three? An Elementary Pronunciation Course*. 3rd Ed. Cambridge University Press

Baker, A. (2006) *Sheep or Ship? An Intermediate Pronunciation Course*. 3rd Ed. Cambridge University Press

Punyapet, B. & Laohawiryanon, C. (2012) *The Effects of Remedial English Class Using Systemic Phonics to Improve Students' Pronunciation, Spelling and Reading Comprehension*. 4th International Conference on Humanities and Social Sciences. Prince of Songkla University. [online] <http://sv.libarts.psu.ac.th/conference5/proceedings/Proceedings4/article/1pdf/005.pdf> Accessed: 21 March 2013

## Contact

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