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BRAVING PHONICS AT THE NEWCASTLE ESOL SERVICE: SHARING PRACTICE

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1 Introduction

The Newcastle ESOL Service is a community provider of English language learning in Newcastle upon Tyne in the UK, and it mainly works with hard to reach learners not confident to attend the large further education (FE) colleges in the city. Up to 40 learners who enroll each year have had no formal schooling at all, and a large proportion of these learners are women from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. Very few of these learners were progressing beyond beginner levels, to elementary and intermediate.

In 2007, the service felt it necessary to set up a programme of learning that included a structured course in phonics for those people who have had no schooling at all. The course would focus primarily on developing student oral skills relating to their needs as the starting point for their literacy programme. Whole text approaches would be combined with a rigorous foundation in phonics to build phonological awareness and develop phonic skills of blending and segmenting systematically.

Until 2007, we had no clear programme of learning for people who cannot read and write. Some teachers followed the whole text approach, the main emphasis being on meaning and some whole word recognition. Any phonics work done consisted primarily of attending to initial sounds and occasional dips into analytic phonics, but the main strategy was whole word recognition, focusing on the visual appearance of words. The teachers occasionally did language experience with students and trained learners to use the 'look, say, cover, write, check' method for independent writing of new words; although straight copying 'busy work' was very prevalent. The strategies used are emphasized in the minimal training input (three three-hour input sessions and a project) on the ESOL specialism qualification required by ESOL teachers in the UK.

Because in our service there were more learners than available teachers, learners were, in fact, often placed in open learning, a self study learning facility, which we have now scrapped. These students were given letter formation worksheets without any context or reference to the sounds they represented. They were also given some decontextualised consonant vowel consonant (CVC) words such as 'pin', 'pen', 'dog' and 'win' and even non-words such as 'pon'. Some whole texts were provided with tapes and while it was possible for students to pick up 'reading' skills from these, it was equally possible for them to simply memorize the text from the tape. Most of the reading books were poorly written and badly illustrated and the quality had further deteriorated with over photocopying. This input hardly helped students who had had

no schooling to learn to read in a meaningful engaged way. For students to learn to read and write in a new language and a new script through self study, in the author's view was absurd.

In this paper the problems we have encountered will be outlined; the theory we have used to inform our curriculum decision making will be argued; the practices we follow described; and the outcomes briefly summarised.

2 Problems

The main problem was that there had been no co-ordinated strategy to deal with a sizeable low educated second language and literacy acquisition (LESLLA) student demand. Furthermore, the Newcastle ESOL Service, like most ESOL providing institutions in the UK in 2007, was beginning to feel squeezed financially because the UK government's funding system altered so that success in exams became the primary qualifier for receiving funding, and not attendance. Given that the Cambridge ESOL exams start at a level that is too high for learners who have had no schooling, this placed our community based service with its high proportion of low educated learners in a difficult financial position. The bottom line was that too many of our students could not achieve exam success and progress to higher levels without systematic literacy support, but without their success we could not fund their support. Basically, a substantial number of people with no prior experience of reading and writing, many of whom are permanently settled in the UK, were becoming a financial burden on the service because of the new funding structure in the UK.

A pressing problem related to these new funding constraints was that there was no end point in the so called 'pre-entry' classes and no course outcomes against which to measure progress, so teachers had nothing clearly defined to work towards. Some learners remained for years in a pre-entry class. Since funding is now based on progression and exam success, and a substantial number of students were not progressing, it was becoming difficult to justify having classes for such people.

In addition, the few LESLLA students with no schooling who progressed to Entry 1, which is the beginner English qualification in the Skills for Life English programme in the UK, seemed to reach a ceiling with reading and writing by Entry 2 which is the elementary course. They did not have the capacity to go on memorizing words without effective independent decoding skills. Thus they could not cope with the higher classes, and so teachers would transfer these students into open learning.

In the classroom itself, it was becoming apparent that heavy reliance on the strategy of looking at words as whole visual features and shapes with some attention to initial sounds was inadequate. A number of students were over reliant on initial sounds, making wildly inaccurate guesses, such as 'th' always being 'Thursday' whatever the context and could only read a 'limiting' range of whole words presented by the teacher. These students were not developing *independent* decoding or comprehension skills and relied too heavily on teacher input. The goal of autonomy was not being reached.

Teachers themselves were not consciously aware of how an orthographically opaque language like English actually works and found it difficult to identify phonic and spelling patterns in an informed way. This meant that if they took up analytic phonics their coverage was patchy and sometimes misinformed. By way of example, a worksheet on /o/ from the *Literacy Resource Pack* (Karlsen, 2004) includes the word 'oil',

indicating insufficient knowledge of the phonemes of English. In addition to this knowledge gap, systematic tracking of sounds, if taught analytically, was not happening, resulting in inadequate coverage.

Another thing that seemed troubling was that words drawn only from context, make it difficult to show the patterns and systems of English spelling, as complex as these are. How does one explicitly demonstrate the systems that do exist if words are only tackled within topics?

The problems outlined above prompted the beginning of a focused exploration into language and literacy at the Newcastle ESOL Service. This is an ongoing project with a long term aim of resolving the literacy side of our language teaching practices at all levels. Our practices are evolving out of struggles, failures and successes.

The project was started with the development of a structured phonics course for people with little or not schooling and setting up a qualification framework for these students. Given the minefield of literacy politics in UK academic circles, this move had to be in a spirit of a brave, expansive adventure for us teachers at the chalk face, and it must remain an open ended journey as we use what we learn about literacy to develop the curriculum at higher levels where there are students who need explicit teaching and support. It is hoped that this continuous approach will enable our service to improve learning and progress rates amongst learners who have had low levels of schooling.

3 Theory informing our practice

To develop a co-ordinated strategy to address the literacy challenges that face the Newcastle ESOL Service, a number of theoretical frameworks have informed our choices so far. These have been drawn from language acquisition theory, reading theory, learning theory, and from theory relating to power and pedagogy.

3.1 Language learning theory

The language learning theory informing our course derives in part from Lewis (1993) who argues for a greater focus on vocabulary learning and on listening at the early stages without pressure on learners to speak until they feel ready. Vocabulary knowledge is seen as vital. Krashen's (1982) concept of the learner's current language level+1 (i.e. language of a slightly higher level) allows teachers to pitch the level at a roughly comprehensible level. The importance of comprehensible input and meaning making is the leading concept, and the vocabulary is largely introduced in topics that relate to the lives of learners, past and present. This allows us to set up small exchanges in which students use their vocabulary to ask simple questions or make requests and respond. Thus the language in year 1 is taught lexically and in holophrastic chunks such as 'What's your name?' and/or functions, and not as analysed grammatical structures. This provides a wealth of material for developing aural phonological awareness whereby the teacher uses new lexis for building student's sensitivity to sounds. For example, after a topic in classroom language, it is possible to play phonics games orally, by giving words students now know, such as 'paper, pen, file and punch' and ask for the odd one out, or to ask them for words beginning with /p/. This has the dual value of providing language to work with when the literacy programme begins at a later stage,

and for year 2 when students begin to engage in some formal analyzed grammar learning.

Having experienced learners making no progress with literacy in self study classes, we are very clear that the particular value of the classroom setting is to provide a place for students to interact and develop their oral language skills, thus building a resource on which to develop their literacy skills. This approach is affirmed in the research by Condelli & Wrigley (2002) where it was found that there was more growth in classes where teachers 'explicitly emphasized oral English communication skills' (p. 14).

3.2 *Reading theory*

The literature on reading theory reveals just what a complex cognitive, psychological, cultural skill this is, and each model or theory throws additional light on what goes on when people read. In our practice we make use of a variety of models, but here only some considerations will be focused on.

At the beginning of our literacy programme, when students have very few decoding skills, we generate language experience texts that draw on top down guessing skills. LESLLA students with no prior schooling mostly rely on their memory of what was elicited and written down by the teacher, on some rudimentary decoding skills, and on the teacher's decoding and drilling skills. We have found that many students pretend read at this stage, taking their texts home to get help from family members so they can memorise each word and demonstrate 'so called' reading to the teacher the next day. This is not unlike the behaviour of young children who know the words of a book that has been read to them. The value of producing language experience texts, as Spiegel and Sunderland argue, is to give 'voice, value and status to learner's experience, opinions and use of language', (2006:32) and to demonstrate to students that print carries meaning. This gives students an early sense of achievement, enjoyment, and a sense of what print does.

This top down approach to reading on its own, however, is not enough when teaching basic reading skills. Eskey & Grabe's (1988) argument for an interactive reading model based on the claim that 'superior perceptual skills are the cause of superior top down strategies' (p.26), has informed the shift in the Newcastle ESOL Service away from using just whole language strategies. Adams & Collins (1979) describe top down and bottom up processes interacting at different levels. At letter level, one letter triggers an expectation for another letter, and one word facilitates the anticipation of other words likely to occur together. At the syntactic level, the top down process means a search for the sentence structure or the completion of a noun phrase when encountering a determiner. At the semantic level a large amount of the reader's world knowledge is invoked to make inferences and expand the meaning prompted by the text. While each of these processes is described individually these 'top down and bottom up processes operate simultaneously at all the different levels' and 'work to pull the various fragments of knowledge and information into a coherent whole' (Adams & Collins, 1979:21). Later on, Adams (1990) argues that 'it is because of their deep knowledge about orthography that skillful readers look and feel as though they recognize words holistically,' (p. 410) and it is this knowledge that allows skilful readers to process text for meaning and together with their syntactic knowledge 'to pause for repair when faced with difficult text' (p. 415). Adam's portrayal of reading skills not only confirms the importance of building vocabulary and oral communication skills

among LESLLA students who have no schooling prior to teaching reading, to give them the linguistic resources in English to draw on, it also suggests that it is useful for learners to have explicit tuition in the patterns of letters and sounds that make up the words in English. Furthermore, that considerable number of words in English have regular phonic, albeit complex patterning, as well as another body of words that are indeed irregular, where the written form bears only a partial relation to the sound symbols used to write them, needs to be made explicitly known to students early on and built into the programme through pronunciation work and appropriate spelling strategies.

3.3 *Genre literacy pedagogy*

Genre literacy pedagogy (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Martin, 1989), wherein teachers bring the format of texts and language appropriate to a particular purpose explicitly to the attention of the learner, was developed within a framework of critical evaluation of the process approach to writing which Boomer (1988) argued ‘failed people from ‘low socio-economic backgrounds ... and certain children from ethnic minorities’ (p. 4). With this in mind, we are aware of the need to enable students to develop the discourses that will allow them to conduct their lives independently and autonomously in the UK. As a result of this, in our beginner literacy classes we aim to introduce students to authentic texts or adapt them appropriately, and to design authentic writing tasks all of which involve genre literacy pedagogy.

3.4 *Learning theory*

Learning to speak in our mother tongue is natural and happens informally, but learning to read requires formal teaching and learning in which solid foundations need to be laid and developed. In terms of the ESOL context, students have the challenge of learning to speak some English and from that base start learning to read and write. Armed with the finding of Condelli & Wrigley (2002) that ‘longer scheduled classes resulted in more growth in reading comprehension and oral communication skills’ (p. 13), our first struggle was to get the same number of hours of instruction as all other learners in the service. Misconceptions in management reinforced by the UK funding framework meant that our students had shorter classes and fewer sessions per week, making it even more difficult for them to achieve. Gaining equal class time was achieved in October 2008.

Although not directly about teaching basic reading and writing at the beginner levels, Delpit’s (1988) expression of frustration on behalf of African American teachers with how the process approach to teaching writing concealed power has informed our practice, echoing Boomer’s (1988) plaintive about that failing writing curriculum. Delpit’s key assertion was ‘that if you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring that power easier’ (p. 287). This, along with Vygotsky’s argument (in Kozulin et al., 2003:16-17) that learning is socio-culturally mediated by teachers and the learning activities they organize, has meant that we consider it important that language and literacy teaching needs to be considered in terms of power, something that, as Delpit argued, was not being consciously acknowledged by mainstream ‘white’ teachers in the US context embedded in a highly literate print rich home and work environment.

Building on this notion of power, literacy, according to Vygotsky (1978) is ‘one of the most powerful of psychological tools’ (cited in Kozulin et al., 2003:16). Kozulin argues that the acquisition of symbolic relationships requires guided experience; it does not appear spontaneously, and ‘the mere availability of signs or texts does not imply that they will be used by students as psychological tools’, (p. 24). In relation to this, he mentions an observation made by DeLoach that:

learning materials for *young children*¹ are often designed in a way that presupposes that *children* have already mastered the symbolic relationships between object symbols and concepts. In reality these relationships do not emerge spontaneously but should be systematically formed.

Kozulin et al. (2003:24)

It is against this observation that we have found that the resources developed for ESOL Skills for Life² learners in the UK seem to presuppose that the Roman symbolic system has been internalized prior to arrival in the classroom. We have found that this internalization is not the case with most of our LESLLA learners, and this hinders their progression. As a result, we have introduced a formal phonics program to ‘mediate’ the internalization of the Roman script explicitly, but which is viewed as a resource that must work in service of meaning.

4 Practice

As a result of our understanding of language learning, of reading, of power issues and learning theory, a programme of learning has been devised led by the author but with the participation of two teachers, and the support of the Newcastle ESOL Service coordinator who successfully raised funds for our work. The main focus is on oral skills and whole text work. This means that the first two hours of each two and half hour lesson is devoted to whole language work. The last thirty minutes is given to phonics and or spelling work, using words drawn from the established vocabulary. As students progress, they begin to be able to write dictated captions and sentences, and this is done to encourage writing autonomy. The words are from the student repertoire, but they are selected in terms of sounds and or spelling patterns, and we are comfortable about doing this, based on evidence that our mental lexicon is organized partly by meaning but also by sound (Aitchison, 1994). To establish a reasonable body of language to exploit, the phonics teaching does not start at the beginning of the course but six to twelve weeks into year 1. Every effort is made to link the topics in the language and communication lesson to at least one of the words used in the focus on phonics. For example, the sound /ng/ will be focused on after a lesson on free time activities that may include swimming, visiting friends, sewing, watching television, and so on. The

¹ This reference to young children can be paralleled with adults who have had no schooling.

² Skills for Life is the official government framework within which ESOL provision is delivered in the UK.

model that follows in Figure 1 has been developed by this author to illustrate what we do.

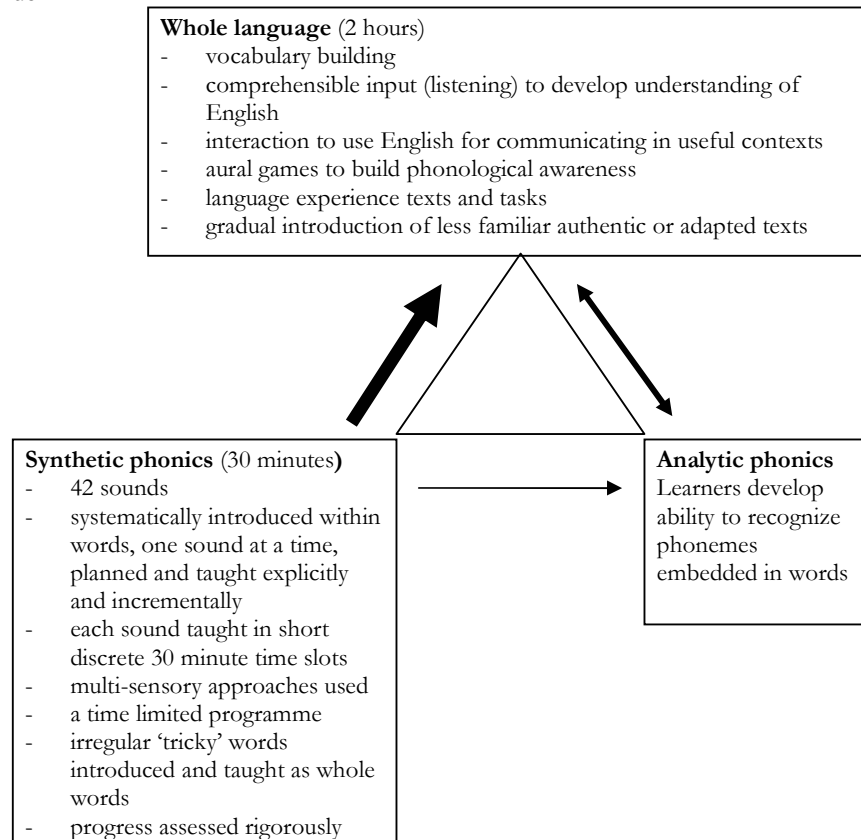


Figure 1: Model of literacy practice

5 Teaching phonics

Given that there are few guidelines for busy ESOL teachers who do not currently receive any substantive training in how to teach phonics to adults, we drew on resources that describe methods and principles of phonics teaching explicitly and practically. Our approach being a practical exploration, has meant that we have found this a good way to start.

The Rose Report (Rose, 2006) offered us a set of clear principles and guidelines for quality phonics teaching and *The Phonics Handbook* (Lloyd, 2005) that accompanies the *Jolly Phonics* programme, which is a synthetic phonics programme used in the UK, provided process guidelines along with useful resources and ideas which we have

adapted for adult LESLLA users. We view critically the seemingly hard line bottom up approach in *Jolly Phonics* of not giving learners texts to read until they can demonstrate the ability to blend, and we therefore use language experience in the main part of our lessons from early on in our phonics programme because we have found that this is where adult learners can see reading and writing in meaningful use.

I will now expand on the *Rose Report* guidelines, one by one, that have informed our practice.

Be part of a broad and rich curriculum with a range of activities and experiences to develop speaking and listening skills and phonological awareness

As has already been demonstrated in Figure 1, building vocabulary and using this for oral language development is the core focus of the programme. Amongst other things, we use picture cues, jazz chants and verbal dialogues to prompt interactive communication. Students sometimes do short individual and group presentations. We invite people in from the outside when it is appropriate; as for example after a topic on homes, we had a fire safety officer speak to the students. We also take students out to places such as the art gallery and the library, which generates language and texts to read. These activities have a further value in that they prompt real writing events in the form of thank you cards or letters and addressing envelopes, which we teach using a genre approach to writing. Out of the language that students learn, we develop phonological awareness in oral word games, such as identifying initial sounds, making word chains with final sounds as for example 'house > sit > ten > Newcastle > lamb > man', and getting words to rhyme by giving a word such as 'pen' and getting students to come up with words they know such as 'pen', 'hen'³ or 'when'.

Be multi-sensory, encompassing visual, auditory and kinaesthetic activities to enliven core learning

Our challenge has been to keep the 'photocopy' curriculum, whereby teachers organize their courses around photocopied worksheets, to a minimum, and to teach through interactive activities that involve listening, using picture cues, and later word cues (Figure 2), doing flannel board work to set up displays (see Figure 3), human word and sentence making (students have enlarged words or sounds and form words or sentences by moving around), poster making, playing games on the smart board, using tapping and gesture for pronunciation, colour coding and highlighting, and more.

³ Many LESLLA students with no schooling come from villages and have an interest in domesticated farm animals, which we exploit as a base for teaching 'meat' words such as beef, lamb, pork etc.

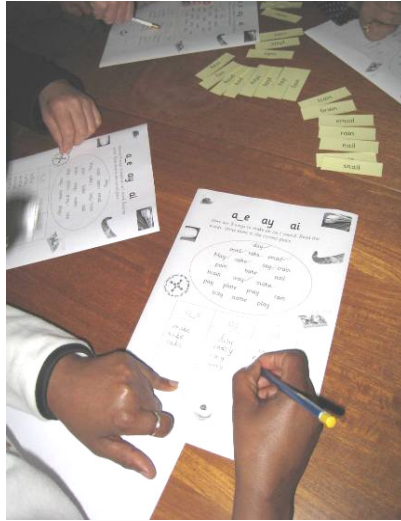


Figure 2: Use of word sorting in combination with a written sorting card.



Figure 3: A flannelboard display put up by students through matching recycling realia with words.

Be time-limited

We have set up a two year course that has an accreditation framework which we have developed together with the Open College Network (OCN), a national awarding body in the UK. The assessment is portfolio based, and is highly flexible, so that students can achieve at the level they have reached. For the portfolio a set of 'I can do' statements have been devised for students to tick as they progress. There are six units overall. Following, is a very general outline of each year and what the students cover.

Year 1

- vocabulary building
- oral language skills focusing on functions and chunks of language
- emphasis on developing listening skills
- language experience texts and tasks
- authentic or adapted texts (e.g. forms, recycling leaflets, fire safety leaflets)
- foundation phonics (42 sounds, developing skills in perception, recognition, letter formation, blending and segmenting)
- irregular 'tricky' words (look, say, cover, write check)
- joined up writing of vowel and consonant digraphs

Accreditation: OCN portfolio Units 1 to 4; and ESB (English Speaking Board) Entry 1 for confident learners⁴

⁴ ESB is a national awarding body in the UK that concentrates on speaking and listening accreditation. Students do not require any literacy skills to achieve.

Year 2

- oral language skills, still using functions and chunks
- continued emphasis on listening
- continued emphasis on vocabulary building
- introduction of formal grammar with speaking as the main supporting skill
- reading stamina developed
- ability to write without copying developed
- review of foundation phonics
- introduction of alternative vowel graphemes
- introduction of more complex phonic knowledge
- introduction of formal spelling learning
- joined up writing taught and encouraged
- start transition to Entry 1 Skills for Life curriculum (UK ESOL qualification framework, B on the European framework).

Accreditation: OCN portfolio Units 5 and 6; and ESB Entry 1

Be systematic ... follow a carefully planned programme with fidelity, reinforcing and building on previous learning to secure progress ... avoiding drawing in too many elements from other programmes

Owing to the fact that we are trying something out in a spirit of learning how it works, we chose the *Jolly Phonics* programme because it explicitly explains how to teach phonics. We have drawn on the principles and methods it clearly describes, using it as the base for our phonics work, and we have developed materials suitable for adults accordingly (Figures 4, 5 and 6). We have found, however, that the kinaesthetic side of the programme, in which there is a movement for every sound is not always appropriate to adult second language learners, as some of the movements have obscure meanings that are not relevant to our learners. By way of example, in *Jolly Phonics* a story about a seal would be followed by 'children' flapping their hands and opening their mouths wide to say 'ah ah ah ah', as if they are seals. We have also used the programme in combination with student generated texts, which appears to break the 'fidelity' principle as the *Jolly Phonics* programme discourages the introduction of texts until learners can decode.

ee

Write ee on the line. Then read the word.

b_ b_f s_
f_t tr_ gr_n
sl_p sh_p kam_z

Look at the pictures. Write the correct word in the box.

Am Macdonald Oct 07

Figure 4: A year 1 phonics worksheet

ee ea

Here are 2 ways to make an /ee/ sound. Read the words. Write them in the correct place.

sleep bee
tea sweets eat feet
clean tree bean team beef
see sheep cheap meal meat
kameez cream peach

ea ee

Developed by Ann Macdonald

Figure 5: A year 2 phonics worksheet

3 X

Our house has three bedrooms.

We have a big kitchen.

There is one bathroom.

There are two toilets.

We have a living room, but no dining room.

We have an old shed.

Figure 6: A sentence reading worksheet in which students cut and paste

Be taught discretely and daily at a brisk pace

In a two and half hour lesson, the last half hour is spent on phonics. In that half hour students:

- perceive a phoneme elicited through pictures of familiar lexical items,
- recognize the letter grapheme(s) that represent that phoneme,

- form the letter(s), joined up when more than one letter represents a sound (digraphs),
- blend / read words by sounding out, all the way through, and blending the sounds into words using visual cues and fingers,
- segment / spell words (hear a dictated word, identify the sounds in it, and write them in the correct sequence).

Once students can blend basic CVC and CCVC words, irregular words are introduced (e.g. the, one, two, etc.) and learned visually, through look, say, cover, write and check because in words like these the pronunciation does not correspond adequately with the written form. These words are posted on the classroom wall with a cloud/flower shape drawn around them so students look at them daily, read them and internalise their visual features.

Provide opportunities to reinforce and apply acquired phonic knowledge and skills in activities such as shared and guided reading.

Our students engage in group reading guided by the teacher and in paired reading. A spirit of community learning is encouraged so that stronger students work supportively with weaker students. Very often students sit together and read while waiting for a class to start.

Progress in developing applying phonic knowledge is carefully assessed and monitored

We have several avenues for monitoring progress:

- continuous oral assessment in class,
- tutorials every four to five months, which are used for one to one discussion about progress and individual assessment,
- learning for homework followed by dictated spelling tests,
- students read and dictate short sentences in pairs,
- a portfolio assessment system, allowing students to take responsibility for their work.

For the portfolio, students keep their checklist of 'can do' statements in a special file and add their work to this file as they progress through the course, ticking the boxes as they go. It includes things like filling in a form to join the local library, writing a thank you letter with the teacher's support after a visit, producing a short text on the computer, and copying a short poem in joined up handwriting.

6 Discussion and conclusion

6.1 Positive outcomes

We have had a number of positive outcomes that we plan to build on.

We have set up a curriculum and an assessment framework for learners who have little or no schooling. The topic content of our oral curriculum is flexible so teachers have room to meet the communication needs of students. The phonics curriculum is less flexible but wherever possible teachers make a link between their topics and a

particular sound, and teachers draw on the words from the oral content to teach phonics.

By working with OCN, the outcomes for the portfolio based assessment have been made explicit both to the teachers and to the learners, so they know what they are aiming to achieve. One experimental group has progressed to Entry 1 Skills for Life, and our first round of OCN portfolio based assessments and qualifications will occur in July 2009.

Aligned to the above processes we have generated electronically a bank of adult appropriate topic and phonic resources, for use by all the teachers at year one and year two level, some of which is also proving to be useful in Skills for Life Entry 1 and higher. These resources are visually attractive as we believe learners who experience pleasurable text resources will feel invited to look at them and read them. Remarks from students confirm this view.

Teachers are developing a more in depth, conscious knowledge of the English orthographic system, how and where it is regular and irregular. This is enabling them to do analytic phonics in a more informed way, when appropriate, using the learner generated texts within the topic based part of the lesson; and students themselves are indicating growing ability to recognize letter patterns in words. This staff development is impacting on learners who have literacy difficulties at higher levels, although this second stage impact is only just beginning to happen, and we recognize that there is a large amount of work that still needs to be done to support students with literacy needs at higher levels.

Through regular assessment and tutorials we are able to identify the weaknesses in our teaching. Because we are self training, we have to learn from our mistakes. Weaknesses we have identified are lack of skills in building aural phonological awareness at the outset, and inconsistent attention being paid to teaching irregular 'tricky' words with a result that one or two learners over rely on sounding out. We have also recognized that in class students read better than in tutorials where they do not get as much contextual and peer support. Nonetheless students have reported doing more reading outside the classroom, for example, reading with their children, reading school letters and reading street signs and food labels. Students also borrow books from the small library we have in the classroom and often read in pairs while waiting for class to start. Some of these books and reading cards have been generated in language experience classes.

We have had good retention rates. In the Year 2 class, attendance has been averaging at 88% and we have retained 81%, losing students to child birth and failed asylum. We have noticed a pattern in which certain students would come irregularly at first, and then start coming daily. Students who attend regularly make particularly good progress.

6.2 *Concerns and limitations*

We have some concerns.

Time is a major difficulty. There are not enough adult learning resources for people with little or no schooling. Organizing a course, generating teaching materials, and setting up an accreditation framework has been very taxing on the service in terms of time.

It is appreciated that some of the insights expressed in this paper are based on informal observations. It is recognized that there is a need for rigorous research to confirm findings. Given the time it has taken to put the course together, this has not been possible to date.

Being firmly on the ground, with the unrelenting demands of teaching, means that we as teachers have little time for participation in the academic debates that surround language and literacy, though through every endeavour, we try to follow them. Our broad observation is that opposing theorists (whole language versus synthetic phonics supporters) appear to be engaged in oppositional thinking. They are seemingly locked in an 'either, or' approach to literacy pedagogy when the literature indicates that reading and writing is complex and probably calls for 'and, and' thinking, rather than 'either, or' thinking. At the end of the day, chalk face LESLLA teachers at the Newcastle ESOL Service draw on both approaches, without very much practical support from researchers, whose arguments and knowledge appear to go around internally and oppositionally within their own academic discourse community.

This means that in effect practitioners conduct a considerable amount of their work in isolation, without external critical evaluation and scrutiny. Given that at the ESOL Service we want to be brave, to try things out and be expansive in the strategies we use, this paper is partly written to invite critical evaluation and discussion and possibly real dialogue between interest groups. This will enable us to progress in our aim to deal with the literacy challenges we face in our service.

This paper shares the current literacy and language practice at beginner level at the Newcastle ESOL Service. It demonstrates that we are trying out synthetic phonics teaching with the intention of learning from it, in order to effectively manage the challenges presented to us by a large number of people who enroll in our classes who have little or not schooling. Rather than allowing students to drift around unsuccessfully in low level classes without any measurable progress, we have worked with OCN to set up a portfolio based assessment framework for our LESLLA learners. The first round of assessments will take place in July 2009, but having the framework is already enabling us to teach a carefully considered programme of learning with purpose.

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