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THE IMPACT OF AN EXPLICIT PHONICS PROGRAMME ON READING ALOUD SKILLS AND DICTATION IN KS3 MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES (MFL)

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Introduction

Working in a setting with evolving curriculum and assessments can be simultaneously challenging and exciting for educators. The recent changes to the GCSE Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) assessment, with the first cohort sitting the new specification exam in 2026, have prompted me as a middle leader, and classroom teacher, to question why the change, and why now? As professionals, I believe we have a moral duty to question and understand changes within our curriculum area, and to be able to effectively implement the changes to ensure the most impactful outcomes for our pupils. The changes to the assessment include the addition of a read-aloud task (speaking) and dictation (listening); suggesting the importance of developing our pupils' encoding and decoding skills by teaching phonics and Sound-Symbol-Correspondences (SSC). SSC refers to the relationship between the sounds we hear (phonemes), and the letters or combinations (known as graphemes) that are representative of those sounds in writing. This action research investigates the impact of a more systematic, explicit approach to phonics instruction on Key Stage 3 (KS3) pupils' confidence and progress with read-aloud (decoding) and dictation (encoding) activities. Exploring this area of research will allow me to lead my department more effectively, explore different approaches to embedding phonics within the curriculum and consider the long-term implications for pupils within the languages classroom.

Background

Ofsted signpost phonics, grammar and vocabulary as the three pillars of a successful MFL curriculum, and recognise that phonics teaching, which commonly becomes implicitly taught in language classrooms, should be explicitly delivered, particularly for novice learners (Ofsted 2021). Moreover, without explicit teaching, language learners can fall back on first language decoding strategies, leading to errors (Sparks, 2015). "Knowledge of the sound-spelling relations is one of the building blocks of learning a language" (Ofsted, 2021), yet from personal experience, and the reflections drawn on by other language teachers, it appears that phonics has been addressed as an area to cover at the start of Year 7 or only at the beginning of a student's language journey (Kate Languages, 2024). This area of second-language acquisition, although not a new area of discussion, certainly holds a renewed importance with the significant changes brought about with the UK MFL curriculum reform.

Literature Review

There is a wealth of existing research to support the cause for phonics when learning a language, however, many of these studies predominantly look at first language acquisition, not additional or second languages (Muijselaar & de Bree, 2022). Although research into phonics and second language learning remains under-researched, there are several studies I have explored to gain a better understanding of my research question. Existing research considers the significant role of phonics teaching for improved language skills in MFL, particularly in settings where pupils are not immersed in the language, such as in the United Kingdom (UK) where exposure to the language may be low. Existing evidence from both the FLEUR Project (Woore et al, 2018) and Ofsted (2021) emphasise how pronunciation and fluency can be supported through systematic synthetic phonics (SSP). SSP refers to explicitly and systematically "teaching pupils to identify the smallest units of sound in speech and how these sounds are represented in letters, so they can blend them to read words and segment them to spell."

This suggests a systematic approach to teaching phonics should lead to a direct positive impact on reading aloud performance. Moreover, Marsden and Kasproszyc's (2017a) study further emphasises that the ability for pupils to decode effectively impacts their fluency and the bridge between written and

spoken forms; both of which are crucial for dictation and reading aloud activities. Woore (2011) and Stanovich (1980) argue that a lack of phonics instruction increases cognitive load, impairing decoding and reading fluency. This aligns with findings from Hamada and Koda (2008), who report that explicit phonics instruction improves fluency in second language learners, while Woore (2018) asserts that a phonic focused approach in French specifically attributes to pronunciation improvements. In terms of encoding and spelling, dictation studies (Dherbey Chapuis & Berthele, 2024; Marsden & Kasprówicz, 2017b) demonstrate that phoneme-grapheme mapping through dictation tasks significantly enhances spelling accuracy and pronunciation, supporting the place of dictation in phonics programmes.

Confidence and learner autonomy are also positively impacted by phonics-based instruction. Erler and Macaro (2011), as well as Koda (2007), found that phonics builds speaking confidence and reduces anxiety, an effect documented by Ofsted (2021), which notes increased learner autonomy through pronunciation work. This aligns with the theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) which highlights the role of scaffolding and structured support as keys to learning and independence.

Although the existing research base strongly supports the role of phonics in additional language learning, much of this work is concentrated on French as the target language in UK secondary settings. For instance, the FLEUR Project (Woore et al., 2018) and Woore's earlier work (2011, 2018) focus on beginner learners of French in English secondary schools. Marsden and Kasprówicz's (2017) study also focus on French, exploring how decoding skills improve fluency and comprehension. While studies by Hamada and Koda (2008) and Koda (2007) investigate phonics in broader second language contexts, they are not situated in MFL classrooms nor focused on Spanish. There is a notable absence of research examining the impact of explicit phonics instruction on learners of Spanish in KS3, particularly in low-exposure environments like the UK. The inclusion of Spanish classrooms in this area of research may be understudied due to the greater difficulties faced by students learning French because of the complex range of SSC and letter combinations. However, as a Spanish specialist, and with Spanish surpassing French in popularity in UK schools (British Council, 2023), there is a clear research gap I seek to explore further.

Methods

Data collection and method:

1. Research Question 1 (RQ1): How does phonics-focused instruction impact students' confidence in reading aloud and dictation amongst KS3 learners of French and Spanish?
2. Research Question 2 (RQ2): Does explicit phonics instruction improve students' accuracy and fluency in reading the target language and dictation skills?

To investigate my RQ1, I collected both qualitative and quantitative data for all year groups (KS3) including:

- Microsoft forms survey (see **Figure 1**): To measure perceived confidence with reading aloud and SSC amongst pupils. Survey conducted at start and end of project.
- Teacher and pupils' written reflections and observations at the end of the project.

In order to carry out RQ2, I measured progress through a range of quantitative measures:

- Microsoft teams, reading progress (see **Figure 2**): Numerical data of reading aloud scores for accuracy and fluency. Teachers calculated the %

- of those improved for both fluency and accuracy from the start to the end. We used a reading-age checker to ensure that the difficulty of the text was the same-level both at the start and end of the project to make it more reliable and fair.
- Dictation test (see **Figure 3**): Ten words at the start, middle and end of the programme in which they had been explicitly taught the key sounds by their teacher by the final dictation.

Noteably, from the first data collection to the last, pupils engaged with a systematic phonics programme with a range of activities that practised carefully considered sounds. At the start of the project, staff members participated in training for delivering phonics and planned in their curriculum plans for a sound to be explicitly taught every two weeks. Teachers used a range of activities to present and practise these sounds including; Suno (AI programme producing songs), Dictation whispers, Dictation caterpillars, Back-to back, amongst other tasks all designed to present and practise the chosen sounds (see **Figure 4**).

Figure 1
Forms Quiz: Confidence

1. How confident do you feel about reading aloud in your MFL class? ***

Very confident

Mostly Confident

somewhat confident

slightly confident

not at all confident

2. I feel comfortable pronouncing new words out loud in MFL.

strongly agree

Figure 2
Reading aloud scores for accuracy and fluency

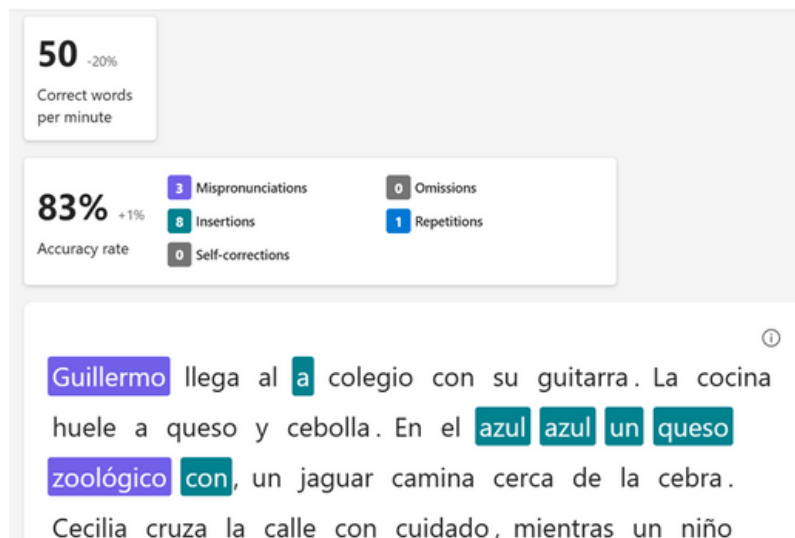


Figure 3
Diction Test

Form	Name	Words per min	Words per min 2	Read Aloud 1	Read Aloud 2	Dictation 1	Dictation 2	Words per min read aloud	accuracy read aloud	dication
9A	Alejandro	25		47		3	5	+	+	+
9A	Ayaana	32	64	38%	76	3	6	+	+	+
9A	Christopher	43	51	62%	66	4	5	+	+	+
9B	Curtis	72	82	83%	89	7	7	+	+	=
9B	Helena	0	23	22%	40	4	6	+	+	+
9B	Jana	0	33	0	59	4	6	+	+	+
9B	Liam	32	79	40%	66	4	5	+	+	+
9B	Maha	70	91	78	77	6	6	+	-	=



Figure 4
Activities and pupils' work (CPD training, Back-to-back, Phonics caterpillars, Trabalenguas (tongue-twisters))



Dictation whispers:
el teléfono escucharrao'



Mañana por la mañana voy a ir al cumpleaños de un niño pequeño que es de España y cumple siete años. Mi hermana me va a acompañar, voy a comprar una muñeca y una pirata, y voy a comer pisa.

Trabalenguas
La Cebra come cinco Cerezas y ve quince películas.
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Participants

I was supported in my action research by my department, allowing me to carry out the research on all students in KS3 languages. The number for dictation tasks and read-aloud is different due to not all participants completing the read-aloud task (see **Table 1**).

Table 1
Participants for Read Aloud and Dictation:

No. of participants:	Read aloud	Dictation
All students	84	94
Year 7 Spanish	33	36
Year 8 Spanish	31	38
Year 9 French	20	20

All students participated in the forms survey and three staff members provided diary reflections at the end of the project.

Data Analysis

The findings in relation to RQ1 demonstrate a significant improvement in student confidence following phonics-focused instruction. Survey data revealed a 62% reduction in the number of students reporting low confidence in reading aloud and dictation, with the greatest gains seen among initially lower-confidence learners (see Figure 5). Pronunciation concerns decreased by 63% across the cohort, indicating that explicit phonics helped students feel more secure in their ability to decode spoken language. Notably, all anxiety or socially driven concerns were eliminated by the end of the project, showing strong affective benefits. This finding was strengthened by the outcomes presented in the staff reflections collected. I undertook a thematic analysis of the teacher accounts, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. This included creating a coding system for a range of words and then categorising these words into key, recurring themes. Key themes of improved confidence, better pronunciation and independence all emerged, as well as the need for more practice, from both pupil and teachers' viewpoints.

Additionally, results showed that phonics instruction had a strong positive impact on reading aloud, with 72.6% (fluency, words per minute) and 78.6% (accuracy) of pupils making improvements over the course of the project (see Figure 6). However, a surprising finding was that only 59.6% of pupils made improvements in their dictation results, primarily driven by Year 7 Spanish students where only 37% improved over the course of the project. However, this particular group made the most gains in their read aloud progress highlighting a discrepancy between decoding and encoding skills. Year 8 Spanish students performed less well across both fluency and accuracy, possibly due to first language habits already having an impact, along with other factors such as delivery of the programme, students' efforts and engagement.

In contrast, Year 9 French students demonstrated more balanced outcomes, with high improvement scores in fluency (80%), accuracy (75%), and particularly dictation (85%) (see Figure 3). The high improvements in dictation, is something for our team to reflect on. In upcoming meetings, we will reflect on the approach taken by this teacher when supporting pupils with encoding skills and learn and share best practice.

The comparison between Spanish and French also revealed language-specific patterns. Spanish students excelled in decoding, likely due to the language's phonological transparency, while French students showed stronger encoding ability despite the language's more complex spelling rules. Overall, explicit phonics instruction improves reading aloud, but for spelling to improve, programmes must be sustained, age-appropriate, and adapted to the phonetic structure of the language.

Discussion

My findings closely align with research on phonics in second language learning settings. Like Marsden & Kasprovicz (2017a) and the FLEUR Project (2018), my study showed that explicit phonics instruction improves decoding, fluency, and pronunciation. Confidence gains observed in my students reflect those in Erler & Macaro (2011) and Ofsted (2021), which highlight how systematic instruction reduces anxiety in reading aloud. However, my research revealed a gap in encoding skills (spelling/dictation), and this has prompted me to consider the type of activities we use currently and how these could be improved in the future. While much of the literature focuses on French, my focus on Spanish phonics offers fresh insight into an underrepresented area of study and highlights the importance of a systematic approach to SSC in Spanish classroom settings too.

The findings confirm that explicit phonics instruction enhances reading fluency and accuracy in MFL, particularly in early stages of learning. However, the clear gap between decoding and encoding skills, particularly from Year 7 and Year 8 Spanish, highlighted the need for greater balance in our phonics teaching and delivery. I now recognise the importance of embedding encoding tasks, such as structured dictation, to reinforce spelling and grapheme-phoneme mapping. Notably, students' confidence improved in reading aloud across all groups, even when accuracy was not perfect, suggesting phonics gave them tools to attempt unfamiliar words with less hesitation.

This project has shifted my thinking: I now view phonics as a long-term, developmental process rather than a short-term intervention. My approach now includes revisiting key sounds and patterns regularly, especially for older learners. This research has shown me how action research can drive meaningful, classroom-based change and as a Head of Department I now feel better informed to explain the changes required in our existing schemes of work and the rationale for doing so.

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