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English Orthography and the Phonics Screening Check



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Introduction

The term orthography refers to the way in which script represents the spoken language of a country. However, this representation is not always straightforward, since many sounds (phonemes) have got multiple spellings, and, conversely, many letters have multiple pronunciations, depending on their position and function in the word. In fact, many poems, jokes and online “challenges” revolve around these discrepancies. In 1855, in a letter exchange between Charles Ollier (publisher and author), and Leigh Hunt (a poet), Ollier states that his son has found a new way to spell “fish”, taking the “f” sound from “enough”, the “i” sound from “women”, and the “sh” sound from “nation”. According to this, a reasonable spelling of “fish” would be “ghoti”.

While this story is amusing, it illustrates the real difficulties faced by children when learning to read and write in English, since each letter must be learnt both on its own (e.g. “a”), and as its possible permutations (“nation”, “sad”, “matter”). Similarly, phonemes must be learnt with their possible spellings (to stay with the “a” sound, try “neighbour”). Many of these discrepancies come from loan words the English language “borrowed” from other languages, others come from inconsistent spelling changes over centuries. Original scribes seeking to put English spoken language into writing in the 700s were Roman, and trained in Latin, so they attempted to fit the sounds they heard with the language system they knew, despite there being a number of sounds in the English language that Latin did not contain. Subsequent invasions meant that Saxon and Norman words were introduced. Today, we rarely question the origin of words we use on a daily basis, but understanding where words come from can help with understanding orthography: French words, for example, typically spell “sh” sounds as “ch” – charme, crochet, etc.

This article briefly introduces some key aspects of reading and writing acquisition in the English language, before moving on to discussing the experiences of multilingual children seeking to acquire multiple orthographies. Finally, the article looks briefly at assessment of reading, specifically through the Phonics Screening Check.

Teaching Reading and Writing

Most children in England learn to read through the phonics system, understanding (and sometimes learning by rote) the phoneme/grapheme relationships. This will include, for example, standard graphemes (e.g. “s+h” = “sh”, as a single phoneme), and rules which guide changes in pronunciation (e.g. the difference between the vowel sound in “bit” and “bite”, through the addition of the “-e”). The phonics system dates back all the way to the 19th Century (Mortimer, 1857), with ongoing debates about the most appropriate way to teach and learn orthography in English. Some schools additionally support the rote learning of high-frequency words as “sight words”, which are intended to be learnt as visual cues, while the main focus of literacy development in phonics is through decoding, or sub-lexical reading. In general, most schools in England today adopt a blended approach for literacy instruction, based on phonics, but supported by whole-language methods, although the Rose Review (Department for Education and Skills, 2006) was criticised for a lack of balanced, research-based reporting on the issue of which approach may be most beneficial.

From English Orthography to Multilingual Orthography

Research in orthography has been dominated by anglophone scholars, in fact, it has only been over the last few decades that we have developed a better understanding on how orthography links to literacy development across different languages (Malatesha Joshi and Aaron, 2006). It is easy to see that a clear, structured visual representation of spoken language into a writing system assists literacy development, and that having multiple possible graphemic representations for a single phoneme can lead to confusion. Multilingual students, in turn, have to navigate multiple writing systems and orthographies, many of which come with their own historical evolution (Lo Bianco, 2000). For those charged with helping children to learn how to read and write, an understanding of orthography across various national and linguistic contexts can be extremely beneficial in developing a holistic understanding of literacy development. The Handbook of Orthography and Literacy (Malatesha Joshi and Aaron, 2006) contains 43 chapters of both international monolingual, and cross-lingual literacy development.

In general, multilingual learners have a more advanced cognitive understanding, phonological awareness, and working memory (Geva, Wade-Woolley & Shany 1993). This gives bilingual children an advantage in literacy development, even if the two languages are not necessarily related (August and Shanahan, 2006), and Sneddon (2000) shows that multilingual children often end up overtaking their monolingual peers in the educational contexts by age 11. Unfortunately, the education system is not set up to facilitate such long-term development, instead tying teachers, children, and their families to short-term goals which multilingual children may struggle to achieve as they negotiate multiple orthographies.

The Phonics Screening Check

One of the first formal tests in literacy development in England is the Phonics Screening Check, completed at the end of Year 1 (typically at age 5). The test was originally introduced in 2012 as a 'light touch' assessment, and combines both English language words and nonsense words. At the time of writing, the test provides a percentage result which is used both to grade children, and which reflects on the school's national standing through the national Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Clark and Glazzard (2018) published an independent enquiry into the Phonics Screening Check, based on a survey with 230 Head Teachers, 1,348 teachers and 419 parents. The results question the suitability not only of the test itself, but also the teaching of synthetic phonics for literacy development. The report highlights particular shortcomings of the test for pupils with special education needs, who are highly able, and/or who are multilingual.

Summary

The orthography of the English language supports a considerable number of inconsistent phoneme/grapheme pairings, requiring children to learn and adopt multiple possible interpretations of spellings as they learn to read and write. What is complex enough for monolingual learners gets compounded by multilingual children who seek to synthesise two or more writing systems, which will likely have different rules and interpretations to the English system. Formal examinations at an early stage of schooling adds pressure on both children and schools, while the inclusion of nonsense words in the phonics test can be particularly confusing to multilingual children.

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