

Woore, R., Graham, S., Porter, A., Courtney, L. & Savory, C. (2018). Foreign language education: unlocking reading (FLEUR): A study into the teaching of reading to beginner learners of French in secondary school. Funded by The Nuffield Foundation.

Teaching reading to beginner learners of French in secondary school

What this research was about and why it is important

Though motivation towards language learning is often high at the transition from primary to secondary schooling in England, there is a documented dip towards the end of the first year in secondary school. Previous research suggests that a combination of **phonics** (teaching how to sound out words) and **reading strategy instruction** (e.g., teaching ways of inferring the meaning of unknown words from the context) increases reading proficiency in this age group, providing a sense of progress, a likely factor in increasing pupil confidence and motivation. This study aimed to identify the contribution of each element by examining to what extent pupils' reading skills, confidence and attitudes towards the subject benefitted from: (a) phonics instruction accompanied by challenging French texts; (b) reading strategy instruction accompanied by the same texts; and (c) exposure to the challenging texts alone. All approaches were equally beneficial for reading comprehension overall, though particular teaching approaches developed other learner outcomes to varying extents.

What the researchers did

- 36 classes of pupils in their first year of secondary education (aged 11-12 years) took part in the study. All groups were assessed (a) before (b) immediately after and (c) 6 months after the teaching intervention.
- Each class was assigned to one of 3 groups, who all read challenging texts designed to allow practice of the phonics or strategy work featured in the study : (1) phonics instruction plus reading the challenging texts with phonics practice; (2) reading strategy instruction and reading the same texts for strategy practice; (3) reading the same texts as groups 1 and 2, but without any phonics or strategy instruction/practice. Groups spent 20-30 minutes per week over a 16-week period on the programme.
- To assess pupils' **reading comprehension**, they read short French texts, answered comprehension questions and completed translation tasks. Pupils' ability to **sound out words** was assessed through a 'Sound-Alike Test' (SALT). For each item, they saw three French 'pseudowords' (permissible word forms that are not actual words, such as 'flête') and decided which, if any, sounded the same. **Vocabulary knowledge** was assessed by indicating whether or not they knew a selection of French words. Pupils' level of **confidence** in understanding the texts, their reading **strategy use**, their **motivation** and their **views on the instructional programme** were all also assessed via a short questionnaire and interviews.

What the researchers found

- All three groups made progress in their reading comprehension skills over the duration of the study; no one approach seemed to offer an advantage over the others in this respect (either in the short or long term).
- All three groups also made progress in their ability to sound out unknown words correctly when reading; the phonics instruction group enjoyed an advantage over the other groups in this respect, however.
- The strategies and, especially, Phonics group made greater gains in vocabulary than the Texts Only group.
- There was most evidence for the development of reading strategy use in the strategy instruction group.
- All groups' confidence increased with the strategy instruction group showing the greatest gains.
- None of the approaches appeared to confer an advantage over the others with regard to maintaining pupils' motivation; the familiar 'dip' at the end of the first year of secondary school still occurred, though was small.
- Learners (and teachers) responded very positively towards the instructional materials, particularly the challenging texts used for all groups. They enjoyed engaging with the cultural content of these texts.

Things to consider

- The researchers conclude that beginner learners of French of this age can tackle reading texts of a more challenging nature than are usually used for this age group, with benefits to their learning.
- Combining approaches is likely to be more beneficial than using any one approach in isolation. Phonics instruction may be particularly important in vocabulary learning, which underpins all language learning.
- These approaches need to be maintained over the long term for benefits to persist.

How to cite this summary: Owen, S., & Woore, R. (2019). Teaching reading to beginner learners of French in secondary school.

OASIS Summary of Woore, Graham, Porter, Courtney, & Savory (2018) London: Nuffield Foundation. <https://oasis-database.org>

This summary has a [CC BY-NC-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) license.