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An Investigation to Establish the Impact of Synthetic Phonics on Teaching Children with English as an Additional Language to Read

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AN INVESTIGATION TO ESTABLISH THE IMPACT OF SYNTHETIC PHONICS ON TEACHING CHILDREN WITH ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE TO READ

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the impact of synthetic phonics on teaching learners with English as an Additional language (EAL) to read. Synthetic phonics involves children learning phoneme-grapheme correspondences and then blending phonemes to decode words when reading. The aim of the study is to evaluate how effective this strategy is in teaching these children to learn to read and whether it has application for other learners of English.

Existing literature indicates that synthetic phonics is the mandatory approach to teaching reading in English primary schools where the first language of learners is normally English. However, studies of how this approach helps EAL learners seem to be rare.

This research into synthetic phonics and EAL learners took the form of a qualitative case study. The case studies involved four EAL children aged between six and ten years old who attended a primary school in the south-east of England. The children were from the Czech and Slovak Roma community who resided in the area. The study also involved adult participants who worked as teachers or teaching assistants in the school.

The research methods used included semi-structured interviews with the adults, structured interviews with the children, miscue analyses to identify the children's reading strategies, and lesson observations.

The results appeared to indicate that synthetic phonics was useful in teaching children to decode and provided them with a useful strategy when they already understood the meaning of the decoded word. However, the evidence also suggested that the children's

limited lexical knowledge impeded their comprehension. Furthermore, it showed that recalling the correspondence between phonemes and graphemes could be challenging. The conclusion reached is that the needs of EAL children learning to read are complex and that the development of their lexical knowledge is paramount if they are to be enabled to become successful readers. However, if taught in conjunction with a language rich curriculum, this systematic strategy could be useful in developing reading skills for the growing number of young learners of English attending language schools around the world.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Over the last twenty years, successive governments in the United Kingdom have been attempting to address literacy underachievement amongst certain groups at school. However, the number of children leaving primary school with poor literacy skills has remained at around 16% (Department for Education, 2011: 3). This statistic is even worse for children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) (Overington, 2012). Following a review on the teaching and learning of reading by Rose (2006), the government decided to accept his recommendation that synthetic phonics should be taught to all children in their early stages of reading and this policy continues today.

The Department for Education in England (2011: 24) uses the following definition of synthetic phonics taken from the National Literacy Trust website (May 2010). It states that synthetic phonics:

> [R}efers to an approach associated with the teaching of reading in which phonemes (sounds) associated with particular graphemes (letters) are pronounced in isolation and blended together (synthesised). For example, children are taught to take a single-syllable word such as *cat* apart into its three letters, pronounce a phoneme for each letter in turn, and blend the phonemes together to form a word.

There has been a wealth of research on the favourable impact of this approach on learners with English as a first language (National Reading Panel 2000, Johnston and Watson, 2005) but little on how this method supports EAL learners (Torgerson 2006, Purewal, 2008). Thus

it was this research deficit that created the rationale for my research which I undertook in a primary school in a town in the south-east of England. 30% of the children attending the primary school speak English as an additional language and most of these children are from the Czech and Slovak Roma community that now resides in the town.

There are well documented reasons for this group to come to live in England. In their native countries, the Roma are viewed negatively and there are few prospects. Indeed, educational attainment and unemployment amongst Roma is considerably worse compared to other groups (European Roma Rights Centre, 2007, Amnesty International, 2012). The Roma have an oral culture and strong family links. However, other characteristics include poor school attendance, low expectations and the absence of a literature rich background (*Bolton Community Cohesion and Traveller Support Pamphlet*, no date). The child participants in my research were from this community and the adult participants worked in the school as teachers and teaching assistants.

My research was designed and conducted to establish the impact of synthetic phonics in teaching these young learners to learn to read.

In order to ascertain the answer, I investigated the following research questions:

1. What are the views of teachers and teaching assistants on the impact of synthetic phonics on teaching these children to learn to read?

2. What strategies do the children use when reading individually?

3. What are the views of the children on synthetic phonics and how it helps them to learn to read?

This dissertation has been organised as follows:

Chapter 2 reviews the literature relating to this study. I begin with an overview of why the teaching of synthetic phonics has become the mandatory method to teach reading in English primary schools. Next, I discuss national and international research on effective reading programmes for second language learners and I also describe the skills that facilitate the acquisition of reading for EAL children.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology that I used to conduct my research. I describe the tools that I used, the ethical considerations due to the age of the participants, and the limitations of my study.

Chapter 4 involves a presentation and discussion of my findings. I present interview evidence both from adults working in the school and the child participants. I also include an excerpt from a lesson observation and analyses on what the children do when they read.

In Chapter 5, I conclude with a discussion of the implications of my research findings for professionals teaching English to speakers of other languages.

CHAPTER 2

Literature review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I provide the conceptual background to the study. I firstly examine why
synthetic phonics has become the obligatory approach to teach reading in English primary
schools to all children including those with English as an Additional Language (EAL) (2.2).
Next, I discuss other research, both national and international, on whether or not synthetic
phonics has a role in the teaching of reading (2. 3. 1 - 2. 3. 9). I also investigate the
possibility that government policies could create a more restricted reading curriculum (2. 4).
I then examine research and literature on how children learn to read, with a focus on
second language learners (2. 5. 1 - 2. 5. 3). I conclude with a summary of this review (2. 6).

2.2 The reasons why synthetic phonics is taught in English primary schools

In 2006, Sir Jim Rose produced an independent review for the British government which
examined the teaching of reading in English primary schools. The review scrutinized reports
by Ofsted, (the official body authorised by government to inspect schools) and other
research on teaching and learning that dated from the introduction of the National
Curriculum in 1989.

The National Curriculum had been introduced to raise attainment in English. However, Rose
asserted that for the first nine years of the National Curriculum, reading standards had not
improved. Phonics was a statutory element but evidence from school inspectors

demonstrated that the teaching of phonics was 'neglected or a weak feature' (Rose, 2006: 3). Attainment in reading rose following the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy in 1998. Rose believed this was because the '[s]trategy engaged schools in developing a structured teaching programme of literacy that included not only what phonic content should be taught but also how to teach it' (ibid: 3). The recommended approach to the teaching of reading at the time of Rose's review was the *searchlights model.* This model was based on 'a view of what constitutes a 'skilled reader' and the processes which support a child moving to such a position' (ibid.: 35, author's quotation marks). It used multiple strategies such as whole word recognition, knowledge of context and grammatical knowledge. However, Rose used evidence from inspection results to demonstrate that the *searchlights* method was inappropriate for beginner readers as it was too complicated. In addition, Rose asserted that beginner readers were not provided with sufficient work on phonics and therefore had insecure skills in word recognition (ibid). He advocated abandoning the *searchlights model* and replacing it with the '*simple model of reading'* (ibid.: 38, my italics). In his opinion, children would make greater progress if reading was taught through 'the two components of reading, word recognition skills and language comprehension processes' (ibid.: 38). Rose opined that 'the practice seen shows that the systematic approach, which is generally understood as 'synthetic' phonics, offers the vast majority of young children the best and most direct route to becoming skilled readers and writers' (ibid.: 4, author's quotation marks).

Rose's review based its findings on longitudinal research by Johnston and Watson (2005) on the effects of different approaches to the teaching of reading on first language learners in Scotland. Johnston and Watson concluded that 'a synthetic phonics programme, as a part of the reading curriculum, has a major and long lasting effect on children's reading and

spelling attainment' (2005: 69). Johnston and Watson believed that their research demonstrated that 'these skills were found to be increasing many years after the end of the programme. It is evident that the children have learnt a technique that they can use for themselves, that they have learnt a self-teaching technique' (2005: 69).

The relevance of Johnston and Watson's work to my research is that it did not involve children with English as an additional language (EAL). However in his review, Rose (2006) quoted from inspection evidence from a school with a high proportion of EAL children that used synthetic phonics to teach reading. The evidence indicated increased numbers of children learning to read by the age of seven following the purchase of a commercial phonics programme. The improved results were attributed to 'systematic, high quality teaching, detailed assessment and early intervention' (ibid.: 25).

Rose advocated 'fidelity to a programme' to ensure that schools taught synthetic phonics in a systematic way (ibid.: 21). Match-funding was offered by the coalition government in 2011 in order for schools to purchase phonic schemes from a list of approved providers (Department for Education: 2011).

In the same year, the government piloted a phonics screening test for children at the end of Year 1 when they are about six years old. This was because of disappointing results in both Key Stage 1 assessments (taken by children at the end of Year 2 when most children are seven years old), and Key Stage 2 tests (taken by children in their final year of primary education when they are about eleven years old). End of Key Stage 1 results in 2010 revealed that 15% of pupils had still not achieved the expected level in reading. Moreover, at the end of Key Stage 2, 16% of pupils were below level 4, the expected standard for ten year olds (ibid). Nick Gibb, the Minister of State for Schools stated: 'the evidence shows

that systematic teaching of synthetic phonics is the best way to drive up standards in reading' (ibid: 3). Since 2012 therefore, all schools have been obliged to use the phonics screening test for children in Year 1 and report results to government. Those children who perform badly in Year 1 retake the test one year later.

Having established that programmes such as the one in the Johnston and Watson study (2005) indicated that synthetic phonics apparently helps children with English as their first language learn to read, I will now examine what evidence there is to support the view that synthetic phonics helps EAL children learn to read.

2.3.1 An examination of research into effective reading programmes for EAL children

As stated in my introduction, research into how synthetic phonics supports EAL children in learning to read has been limited to date. Moreover, not everyone is convinced by the conclusions of the Rose review. For example, *The National Association for Language Development in Children* (NALDIC: 2006) which promotes the effective education of children with EAL in the United Kingdom, detail their reservations on the use of synthetic phonics as the main approach in teaching EAL children to read. They recognise the contribution that phonics teaching and phonological awareness make towards learners' development in the English language. However, they believe that phonics should not be taught in isolation. This is because the ability to decode 'is often not accompanied by the comprehension skills necessary for achievement within the educational system' (ibid.: 1). Citing Leung (2004), NALDIC state that an emphasis on decoding alone would limit children's ability in comprehension if aspects such as clause and sentence level grammar, and developing an awareness of genres were neglected (ibid). Indeed as Lenters (2004: 335) cautions 'important discoveries in first-language reading research and their applicability to

second-language reading acquisition should not undercut or circumvent what we know about how to help young bilingual children become successful and proficient in both of their languages'.

In view of these caveats, I shall now examine some national and international research that has been conducted into effective reading programmes for EAL children. I include large scale reviews of research that have been conducted since the Rose review (2006). I commence with two reviews by researchers based in the United Kingdom. I next describe three reviews of research from the United States where synthetic phonics is widely used to teach reading. I also include two individual studies which investigated the effects of teaching reading through synthetic phonics to EAL children in schools. I conclude with a study that offers an alternative conclusion on what constitutes an effective reading programme.

2.3.2 Torgerson et al 2006

A cautious verdict on the efficacy of synthetic phonics has been offered by Torgerson et al (2006). This review analysed a range of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in the United Kingdom and other English speaking countries, where different approaches to the teaching of reading were compared on progress in reading accuracy and comprehension. 'The studies included were RCTs which focused on the use of phonics instruction in English, in order to ensure a fair comparison between the effectiveness of systematic phonics and of alternative approaches to reading instruction' (ibid.: 9). The review revealed that learners who were taught systematic phonics read with more accuracy than those taught using other methods. The learners were predominantly children with English as a first language. 'However, the weight of evidence (from RCTs) on reading *comprehension* was weak, and no

significant effect was found for reading comprehension' (ibid.: 10, authors' italics). Furthermore, the authors state that 'it is also unclear whether systematic phonics teaching was beneficial to all children with different learner characteristics, as for example very few trials included English speakers of other languages' (ibid.: 48).

2.3.3 Purewal 2008

A similar conclusion has been reached by Purewal in her analysis of research in the United States and the United Kingdom. Purewal's literature review of literacy ideologies, policies and research on synthetic phonics and the literacy development of second language young learners accepts that 'a sample of research studies selected for analysis in this critical study indicate that synthetic phonics instruction is effective in terms of individual word identification and word reading: however, the effects on reading comprehension are not found to be statistically significant' (2008: vii). Purewal cautions that there has been a 'lack of research done in relation to second language learners and synthetic phonics' (ibid.: 48). Indeed Purewal says that she has not able to find studies with 'a sufficiently long period of intervention' (ibid.: 48).

2.3.4 Cheung and Slavin (2005)

Cheung and Slavin investigated research into effective reading interventions principally in the United States. They concluded that structured phonetic programmes which supported the development of language in the children's first language as well as English and second languages were the most effective.

2.3.5 August et al (2008)

August et al reviewed research on literacy teaching in the United States. They were able to base their findings on only a limited quantity of research but concluded that results demonstrated that English language learners benefited from explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics teaching in the same way that first language learners did. They concluded that:

> [p]honics shows students how to decode, which helps them as long as the words they are trying to decode are in their oral language repertoire. English-language learners may lack oral counterparts for the words they decode; under such circumstances, the impact of phonics on text comprehension will be more variable and less certain (ibid: 146).

2.3.6 Calderón et al (2011)

Research in 2011 by Calderón et al on children with English as an Additional Language investigated the provision offered by schools in the United States. They wanted to identify which programmes provided effective instruction in order for children's language, literacy and academic needs to be addressed. One conclusion reached was that effective schools were those that provided systematic phonics at an early stage alongside comprehension and vocabulary work at all grades.

2.3.7 Kwan and Willows (1998)

Lenters (2004) cites a study by Kwan and Willows (1998) where young second language learners were taught English sounds and symbols using a commercial phonics scheme. These children had not been taught to read in their first language and had limited experiences of English at that point. However, in spite of these challenges, the children

performed better than the first language children who had received no instruction in auditory discrimination and phoneme blending and both groups were able to segment phonemes with equal ability.

2.3.8 Stuart (2006)

Stuart asserts that a programme of phoneme awareness and phonics should be used for all children learning to read. She cites her research (1999, 2004) into the impact of phonological awareness and phonics on inner-city children as justification for her views. The vast majority in her study were learning English as an additional language. She concludes that 'children who were given one term of systematic phonics and phonemic awareness teaching in their second term in Reception were significantly better readers and spellers of words at the end of Year 1 than children not taught in this way' (2006: 32). Moreover, these children were still stronger at reading and spelling a year later than the children who had not been instructed using this approach. However, Cheung and Slavin (2005) argue that although there were some encouraging results among the children in Stuart's 1999 study, it lacked sufficient methodological validity.

2.3.9 Slavin et al (2009)

  In an investigation into effective reading programmes for monolingual children and English language learners in the United States by Slavin et al, the conclusion reached was that phonics was not the determiner as to whether a programme was effective or not. Effective programmes were 'characterized by extensive professional development in classroom strategies intended to maximize students' participation and engagement, give them

effective metacognitive strategies for comprehending text, and strengthen their phonics skills' (ibid.: 1453).

In conclusion, the research I have discussed recognises the role of synthetic phonics as a reading strategy, but identifies other significant factors such as developing children's language skills.

I shall now review an additional issue that has arisen following the introduction of the synthetic phonics method in the United States which has relevance to my study. This research demonstrates that the reading curriculum could be becoming more restricted.

2.4 A more restricted reading curriculum

Some research indicates that the reading curriculum may become more constricted as schools place greater emphasis and resources on synthetic phonics. This is because determining a child's ability in synthetic phonics is easier to measure than other reading skills.

Research in Californian schools by Pacheco (2010: 314) investigated the influence of 'policy mandates, commercial reading programs, institutional policies and practices, and standardized testing outcomes' on how teachers defined reading. Pacheco asserts that 'teachers aimed their practices at a narrow conceptualization of reading achievement as defined by a host of institutionalized testing apparatuses …, rather than learning aimed at students' still-undetermined potential' (2010: 314).

Duke and Block (2012) opine that state policies in the United States have led to schools adopting measures in order to show reading improvements over a short period of time. Schools have therefore focused on teaching phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge,

and word reading, as improvements for most learners in these areas can generally be achieved easily and quickly. However, they assert that 'gains in comprehension, vocabulary, and conceptual knowledge are harder to measure, at least in young children, and harder to achieve' (ibid.: 65). They warn that if these areas are neglected, there will be negative consequences in the long term.

Furthermore, NALDIC (2006) argue that 'a narrow building blocks' approach negates the influence and value of other affective factors in children's learning and literacy development including other contexts and situations; the home and other languages other than English' (ibid.: 5, authors' quotation marks). Hall (2007: 89) concurs, arguing that 'there is an assumption that children will follow a uniform developmental trajectory'.

With regard to these arguments, I shall now discuss the literature and research relating to the skills that monolinguals and second language learners need in order to learn to read successfully.

2.5.1 The skills that assist learners in becoming literate

Gregory (2008) argues that there are three critical factors that need to be understood about children learning to read in a new language. Firstly, learning to read in a new language depends on the children's 'first language itself, their level of oral understanding of the new language, their literacy level in the first language, their ability to relate positively to the activity and the text provided and whether they see people like themselves reflected positively in the text' (ibid.: 214). Furthermore, Gregory opines that learning to read in a new language differs from learning to read in one's first language as new language learners may lack knowledge of the syntax and thus cannot predict words in the same way as their

monolingual peers. In addition, they may not be able to 'relate the text to their own experiences of life (ibid.: 215). However, there are certain advantages according to Gregory. These learners may have a greater ability at memorizing words or sounds. They also may be aware that an object is symbolised by the written word and that the name of an object depends on what language is used (ibid). Gregory concludes that learning to read in a new language is 'quintessentially about making 'sense' of what reading is all about; not just making sense of the words but of the activity itself and the 'world' it reflects and in which it occurs' (ibid.: 215, author's quotation marks).

According to Lenters (2004: 331), there are similarities and differences between the skills required by first and second language learners when learning to read in English. Both groups need to develop an understanding of the alphabetic system. They also need to be able to decode, develop a sight vocabulary, read appropriately matched texts and have the metacognitive strategies to support fluency. Second language learners encounter the additional challenges of differences between sound and symbols between the new language and their existing one; insufficient oral vocabulary, lack of knowledge of context, and issues with text structure (ibid). Indeed, the influence of linguistic resources in the learner's first language is expounded by Grabe (2009). He asserts that these influences may interfere when the learner is reading in the new language. The second language may differ considerably in areas such as phonology, orthography, morphology and grammar and discourse structures. Furthermore, the use of idioms and metaphors may be different in both languages and some lexical items may not exist in either of the languages (ibid).

Bialystok (2007) explains that there are three skills that enable both monolingual and bilingual children to become literate. The first is oral proficiency. The second is an

awareness of what writing represents and the third factor is metalinguistic awareness.

Grabe (2009: 225) defines metalinguistic awareness as the ability 'to reflect on language knowledge and structure and being able to act on or manipulate that knowledge consciously'.

I shall now explain these in further detail with reference to second language learners.

2.5.2 Oral proficiency

Lesaux et al (2008) opine that oral language proficiency plays an important role in the acquisition of skilled reading for language learners. Indeed, Bialystok (2007) argues that the reading ability of bilingual learners is limited if they lack sufficient oral proficiency in the new language. Grabe (2009: 130) concurs explaining 'the abilities of L2 learners when they are just beginning to read, do not match their L1 beginner counterparts. L2 learners with a vocabulary of 5,000 to 8,000 words would be considered as quite advanced learners'.

Furthermore, Grabe asserts that second language learners require several years at least to 'develop strong implicit knowledge of the morphology, syntax, and the sound combinations allowable in the L2' (ibid.: 130). The role of morphological awareness on word recognition is addressed by Harrison (2010: 216) citing research by Nagy et al (2006). This research was conducted on monolingual children but has implications for children with EAL as morphological awareness is less likely to be developed. The researchers discovered that morphological awareness affected both accuracy and speed of word reading. The research also demonstrated a relationship between morphological awareness and comprehension because it influenced vocabulary development. Indeed, Harrison criticises the *simple view of reading* as defined by Rose (2006) because he believes other factors such as morphological awareness may have an equal or greater influence on reading ability.

The conclusion reached by Verhoeven (1990) from research into reading acquisition by Turkish children attending school in the Netherlands, is that oral skills should be developed before reading instruction commences. Verhoeven opines that if children develop better language skills, they are more likely to make correct inferences in reading. He believes that the texts should correspond to the children's oral skills so they are able to 'use syntactic and semantic constraints when reading in a second language' (ibid.: 110). Verhoeven advocates pre-teaching vocabulary and story content before children are presented with text.

There is however some evidence of the benefit of learning to read in a second language as a means of developing oral skills in that language. Długosz (2000) in his study of Polish children learning English, postulates that by presenting children 'with a word, or a phrase, in both their phonic and graphic forms, we engage their two channels of perception' (ibid.: 228). Długosz believes this facilitates quicker learning and additionally, words are retained in the long term memory due to the use of 'an additional channel of perception' (ibid.: 288). Furthermore, children are able to notice how words are organised to create sentences, and understanding the patterns of sentence construction supports children with listening comprehension and language production (ibid).

2.5.3 Orthographic awareness

Both monolingual children and EAL children may confront difficulties with the English writing system. Dombey (2006) compares the orthography of English with other language systems and concludes that learning to read in English is difficult because 'some 461 *graphemes* represent 40 to 50 phonemes' (ibid.: 95, author's italics). This means English orthography can be classed as deep or opaque whereas the orthography of a language such as Italian is shallow or transparent as each written sound represents a speech sound.

Dombey asserts that it takes six months for a child to learn the basics of word recognition in Italian whereas learning the correspondence of phonemes to graphemes in English may take two or three years (ibid).

Hall (2006) concludes from Dombey's research that due to the complexities of English orthography, reliance on one teaching method is insufficient. Indeed, certain English words should be learned as 'distinct patterns' as they contain no similarities in their sound letter representations to other words (ibid.: 16).

2.5.4 Metalinguistic awareness

Bialystok (1997) states that metalinguistic awareness supports the literacy acquisition of both monolingual and bilingual children. Bialystok asserts that '[f]or monolingual children, the primary challenge for metalinguistic understanding is in phonological awareness (ibid.: 52). This is also the case for children who need to develop phonological awareness in more than one language. Lesaux et al (2008: 29) define phonological awareness as 'the ability to consciously attend to the sounds of language as distinct from its meaning'. Lesaux et al cite Adams (1990) in explaining that there is a strong correlation between ability in phonological awareness and early reading skills such as decoding for first-language learners. Goswami (2010) agrees, asserting that 'pre-reading phonological awareness is important because it is the best predictor we have of how easily a child will be able to learn about how letters correspond to phonemes' (2010: 113).

Results of a longitudinal study into predominantly monolingual English speaking children by Roth et al (2002) established that ability in phonological awareness of children in pre-school settings had a positive correlation on word reading ability when they reached school age.

A similar conclusion has been reached by Lesaux et al (2008) following an analysis of research into the phonological processing of English language learners. They assert that it is 'an important precursor to word reading ability' (ibid.: 29).

According to the literature and research I have examined, the skills that second language learners require in order to learn to read are therefore complex. Oral proficiency, orthographic awareness and metalinguistic awareness facilitate children in learning to read. How these are utilised in the synthetic phonics teaching approach will be addressed in my study.

2.6 Conclusion

This literature review demonstrates that synthetic phonics appears to have a role in the teaching of reading to English language learners. However, there is little research on whether or not EAL children benefit from learning to read using this method. Furthermore as I have recorded in this chapter, there are criticisms concerning this method for second language learners and children with EAL (Grabe, 2009, NALDIC, 2006). Grabe, for example, argues that the *simple view of reading* is flawed as second language learners 'seldom achieve word recognition fluency levels evident among good L1 readers' (2009: 98). This means they are unlikely to have the same level of comprehension in the new language as their monolingual peers (ibid).

August et al (2008) agree, asserting that instructional approaches should be adjusted for the needs of English language learners, for example, this might involve focusing on sounds that do not exist in the child's first language in order to develop auditory discrimination. They

conclude that 'EAL children are not a homogenous group' and that their individual needs

should be catered for' (ibid.: 156).

With these conclusions in mind, in the next chapter I describe how I undertook the research

to investigate the impact of the synthetic phonics method on a group of EAL children

learning to read.

CHAPTER 3

Research methodology

3.1 Chapter overview

This chapter presents a framework of the methodology used to conduct my research.

Firstly, I explain the research paradigm (3.2). Next I describe the participants (3.3). I then

describe the research process (3.4), the tools that I used (3.5.1 - 3.5.5) and how I analysed

the data (3.6). Following this, I discuss the ethical considerations (3.7) and limitations of my

study (3.8). A summary concludes the chapter (3.9).

3.2 Research paradigm

Because my study concerned the usefulness or not of synthetic phonics in helping a small

community of Czech and Slovak Roma children learn to read in an English primary school, I

chose to undertake a qualitative case study. Yin (2009: 18) defines case study as an

empirical method of enquiry that investigates 'a real-life phenomenon in depth' which

encompasses 'important contextual conditions'. The case study was qualitative because my

focus was on how the participants interact with the phenomenon and the multiple

meanings they construct from it (Croker, 2009).

I decided on a case study approach as I believed that more could be learned from analysis of

individual cases than larger studies (Jiménez, García, and Pearson, 1995 citing Cziko (1992)).

This is because in a case study the researcher can use a wide range of data such as

interviews, observations, documents and artefacts (Croker, 2009, Yin, 2009). A case study

was therefore appropriate for my small-scale research as I used a number of these data

gathering tools. In fact, a key tool that I used was miscue analysis, which involved the

researcher, in observation mode, listening to the children read and analysing both their errors and their strategies that resulted in accurate reading. This qualitative analysis allowed me to evaluate the reading process as experienced by the children (Goodman, 1987). This differs from quantitative research which may involve the collection of numerical data to show children's progress or otherwise over time, but does not offer an insight into strategies and behaviours that the children demonstrate when reading.

Moreover, a case study by definition exists within a 'bounded system' (Hood, 2009: 68). Hood defines a bounded system as one which contains individuals, a site and a context (ibid). In my study, the individuals were some Czech or Slovak Roma children; the site was a primary school; and the context was the impact of synthetic phonics on their reading. The research took place over two months which created a further boundary to the case study.

I worked with a group of children to safeguard me against the possibility of one child being unable to partake for any reason. My case study was also 'exploratory' (Hood, 2009: 70 citing Yin 2003) as little is known about the impact of synthetic phonics on teaching EAL children to read.

3.3.1 The participants: The children

In my study, the children were 'a *homogeneous* sample' as they were members of the same ethnic community (Fraenkel and Wallen 2003: 440, authors' italics). The criteria for the children to participate were firstly they were willing to work with me, and secondly, they had been living in the United Kingdom for three years or fewer. The ages of the children ranged from six to ten years old.

The children's names have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

I worked with: Anna aged 6, Josef aged 7 and Ivan aged 9. In the interviews I have also included Katerina, aged 10, because according to the EAL teacher, her level of English was better than the other children and she had made considerable progress in reading over the course of one year and now no longer required instruction in synthetic phonics. I was keen to discover her opinion on what had enabled her to learn to read so successfully.

I include the local authority assessment levels in speaking for EAL children as evidence that the children were by no means fluent in English. Indeed, the spoken English of Anna, Josef and Ivan had been assessed as at 'Threshold Level' which means:

> Pupils speak about matters of immediate interest in familiar settings. They convey meaning through talk and gesture and can extend what they say with support. Their speech is intelligible, but may be grammatically incorrect. They have sufficient functional vocabulary for everyday needs.

(Kent Steps, 2006: 9)

Katerina's level had been assessed at 'Secure' level therefore she could:

> [S]peak about matters of interest to a range of listeners, use sustained, connected utterances and have a range of longer phrases and sentences drawn from social and curriculum contexts. Their speech shows some grammatical complexity, for example in expressing relationships between ideas and sequences of events.

(ibid.: 9)

3.3.2 The participants: The adults

The adults that I interviewed worked closely with the children either as teachers or teaching assistants. The teachers included the EAL co-ordinator, the EAL teacher, the synthetic phonics programme manager, the specialist reading teacher and two class teachers. All had five or more years of teaching experience apart from one newly qualified teacher. The

three teaching assistants interviewed each had at least three years' experience. I also interviewed a Czech-speaking teaching assistant.

3.4 The research process

I began my research by observing the children in their daily synthetic phonics lessons in the summer of 2013. During this period, I conducted interviews with teachers and teaching assistants. Once the university ethics committee had approved my research proposal, I commenced interviews with the children. In addition, over the course of one month, I listened to each child participant reading twice weekly for fifteen to twenty minutes.

3.5 The research tools

 I shall now describe the research tools which I used to answer my research questions.

3.5.1 Participant observation

The school granted me permission to listen to the children read and work with them on reading activities. Gallagher (2009) explains that this form of observation which is defined as participant observation, allows the observer to explore what children do and say as they carry out their school activities. Furthermore, the researcher has the opportunity to observe whether the children do in practice what they said they did in interviews thus strengthening the reliability of the data (Punch, 2009). The main tool that I used when I was observing was miscue analysis. I shall now discuss this in more detail.

3.5.2 Miscue analysis

Goodman et al (1987: 3, authors' quotation marks) citing K. Goodman (1973), assert that 'listening to students read uninterrupted texts provides a "window on the reading process"'.

This is because 'miscues are never random' (Goodman, 1996: vi). Language cue systems involve the use of graphophonic cues as well as semantic and syntactic cues (ibid). Graphophonic cues involve the reader using the relationship between letters (graphemes) and sounds (phonemes) to decode text. Semantic cues relate to meaning, and syntactic cues concern the way language is structured. Miscue analysis 'evaluates why miscues are made and assumes that they derive from the language and thought that the reader brings to the written material in the attempt to construct meaning from reading' (ibid.: 4).

I expected that the children would decode words because this was the strategy that they had been taught in synthetic phonics lessons. As Allington (2002: 844) argues, '[b]eginning readers seem to differ in their responses to textual cues, depending on the type of instructional program they receive'. The teaching the children were receiving would 'preclude heavy reliance upon semantic and even syntactic cues' (ibid.: 844).

I used a miscue analysis system based on approaches recommended by Goodman et al (1987) and Wilde (2000). This involved copying the text before reading sessions so that I could annotate miscues and note any comments they made. I deviated in one area as I used phonemic transcription to illustrate how the children pronounced each phoneme when they decoded out loud. By using phonemic script to code the sounds the children produced when segmenting, I could identify which phoneme the child had used. If they provided an alternative phoneme to the one that should correspond to the grapheme, I analysed why they may have made that choice.

3.5.3 Structured interviews with the children

Because the children's English was limited, simple questions were planned beforehand to ascertain views on their reading strategies and their opinions on reading (see App. 1). I used '*structured interviewing'* which is defined by Dewalt and Dewalt (2002: 122, authors' italics) as involving scripted questions but allowing for open-ended answers. Gallagher (2009: 75) asserts that an advantage of this is that 'rich and detailed data can be collected about each individual child's opinions and experiences'. Conversely, the richness of the data may create challenges for analysis (ibid). Furthermore, Gallagher opines that some children may dislike working with an adult in a setting on their own. I therefore ensured that interviews took place in quiet open-plan areas. Kellett and Ding (2004) recommend that researchers allow children sufficient time for their responses. Moreover, the importance of developing a rapport between the researcher and the child would be essential if I wanted the children to be as forthcoming as possible in their responses (ibid). Kellett and Ding advise that '[t]he more children are given a primary research voice; the less adults will be required to 'interpret' their worlds' (2004: 173, authors' quotation marks).

3.5.4 Semi-structured interviews with teachers and teaching assistants

The views of teachers and teaching assistants were established via semi-structured interviews (see App 2). This meant the interviews followed the lines of my inquiry on how the adults believed synthetic phonics was impacting on the children's reading, but the questions were open-ended. This enabled me to discover 'the participants' rhetorical construction of their experience' (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002: 173).

3.5.5 Lesson observations and documents

In addition, I was able to observe what happened in synthetic phonics lessons and other lessons. These observations provided me with the opportunity to identify what strategies the children used when reading for a range of purposes. I endeavoured to take sufficient notes on what I saw and heard to offer an '*incontestable description'* of events (Stake, 1995: 62, author's italics).

I also collected assessment data documents. Documents are any written text that the culture has produced (Anderson, 2002). The data included progress reports and test scores. Test scores included National Curriculum assessments in reading and the national phonics screening assessment for 6 year olds. Yin (2009) asserts that collecting a wide range of data corroborates evidence from other areas.

3.6 Data analysis

Holliday (2007: 93, author's italics) advocates establishing themes for the data and asserts that the researcher should follow the '*emerging* patterns of data' that go beyond the initial design. Throughout, I aimed to ensure the process was iterative in order to identify themes and issues and also to reinforce the validity of the research (Yin, 2009). The process of data analysis therefore occurred in tandem with the collection of data.

3.7 Ethical considerations

My research was governed by the following question: '[h]ow might the outcomes inform professional practice and improve the life chances of children or young people?' (Edwards, 2004: 262). As children 'are more vulnerable, have fewer legal rights, and may not understand the language of informed consent' (Fraenkel and Wallen 2003: 63), I followed

the guidelines as defined by the university's ethics committee. This involved gaining consent from parents and assent from the children via support from a Czech-speaking interpreter who worked in the school. I also gained consent from the gatekeepers in the school, for example, senior managers. In order to build up good relationships with the children, I visited the school on a regular basis for several months before I began my research. Once I had begun the reading sessions with the children, they responded positively as I was a familiar presence in the school by this time. Throughout the study, I strove to adhere to Gallagher's advice which was to view ethical practice as 'an ongoing process of questioning, acting and reflecting' (2006: 26).

3.8 Limitations

My role in the school eventually extended to that of a member of staff, therefore the issue of consent changed as the children were required by the school to work with me. I was aware that this might alter the relationship I had forged with the children. Indeed, Robinson and Kellett (2004: 87) argue that 'school is a context where the adult-child power imbalance is particularly acute'. Kellett and Ding (2004: 166) warn that '[i]f a researcher's role becomes blurred with that of a teaching role, children may expect more guidance and direction in their responses'. A further limitation was that the interviews with the children were in English as I did not have access to an interpreter therefore their responses were dependent on their level of English.

Finally, although the miscue analysis provided me with evidence of the reading process as demonstrated by the children, it did not involve quantitative analysis of the children's errors. I could therefore identify strategies and analyse errors, however the frequency of these did not form part of my research.

3.9 Summary

The tools used in my case study enabled me to gather data from a range of sources. This provided me with rich material for analysis. In the next chapter, I shall explain what I discovered from my research and discuss my findings.

CHAPTER 4

Findings and discussion

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present the findings from my study. I commence with interview evidence

from adults working in the school and a discussion of this data (4. 2. 1 - 4. 2. 2). Next, I

include an excerpt from a synthetic phonics lesson to illustrate how the children are taught

to decode and I discuss my observations (4. 3. 1 - 4. 3. 2). Thirdly, I provide some examples

of the children reading with commentaries and discussions on what I discovered (4. 4. 1 - 4.

4. 10). I then present and discuss the outcomes of the interviews that I held with the

children (4. 5. 1 - 4. 5. 2). I conclude with a summary of my findings (4. 6).

4.2.1 Findings from the interviews with adults working in the school

As explained in the research chapter, I was able to interview several members of staff. My

initial interview was with the EAL co-ordinator who explained the rationale for purchasing a

commercial scheme, *Read Write Inc.* to teach synthetic phonics:

> We chose Read Write Inc. as the programme is used in schools with high EAL in
>
> London. Letters and Sounds'[1] was not a full construction. It leaves the teacher to
>
> build the scheme. The range of abilities and EAL meant it would be a big job to
>
> create a scheme. Read Write Inc. breaks it down into levels of attainment and is
>
> packaged for TAs[2] to teach so children move through attainment groups at their
>
> speed of learning. Read Write Inc. is cost effective and people pay more attention to

---

[1] 'Letters and Sounds' refers to the government produced programme for synthetic phonics which is considerably less prescriptive and detailed than Read Write Inc. It does not contain individual lesson plans.

[2] Teaching Assistants.

it as it's bought in. Read Write Inc. is systematic and it worked in other places.

Everyone who'd used it said bring it in.

(See App. 3: Int. 1 T.1)

Furthermore, the EAL co-ordinator explained that 65% of Year 1 children had passed the phonics screening test in 2013, whereas in 2012, only 18% of the children had passed. Of the children in Year 2[3] who retook the test, 80% had now passed. He believed this was attributable to the synthetic phonics lessons which the children had received during the year. The only children who had not passed the test were EAL children who were also on the SEN (Special Educational Needs) register. Results from national reading assessments for year 6 children (SATs) had also increased from the year previously. 89% of the children achieved Level 4 in 2013 (the standard expected for 11 year olds) compared to 77% in 2012. Indeed 60% of the EAL children achieved Level 4 in 2013.

The opinion of the EAL teacher was that:

Phonics gives the children the tools, how to decode and transfer the skills into their own reading and writing. The older ones have difficulty reading and writing because they didn't get the phonics.

The synthetic phonics programme manager asserted that phonics had been less organised before the introduction of *Read Write Inc.* and believed that the systematic teaching of synthetic phonics was the key contributor to the substantial improvement in the phonics screening results in 2013 as mentioned by the EAL co-ordinator. Moreover, she said that

---

[3] Children who fail the phonics screening test in Year 1 are obliged to retake the test a year later when they are in Year 2.

adults involved in the *Better Reading Partnership* and *Reading Recovery*[4] had observed the children using the decoding strategy that they had been taught in synthetic phonics lessons when they encountered unknown words. These adults reported that the children seemed to be more enthusiastic about reading too. In addition, results of regular assessments which tested children's ability to decode, showed the EAL children were making progress each time (see App. 4: Int. 2 T. 2).

One teacher recognised that the phonics scheme was 'good, regular, involves small groups and is assessed regularly'. However, she acknowledged that 'any good phonics scheme done properly will have the same results'. This teacher said that she had noticed children beginning to use phonics in different curriculum areas and 'they are spelling words they shouldn't necessarily have come across'. This included work produced by EAL children.

Another teacher confirmed that the EAL children in her class were making progress with their reading as seven months previously they had not been able to read but now they could read simple texts. She believed this was the result of the daily synthetic phonics lessons.

An interesting anecdote was offered by the specialist reading teacher who told me about a child who had picked up the phonic code very quickly. This child had initially decoded all the nonsense words that have been included in the government phonics assessments for Year 1 children[5]. However, as the child's English had improved, her ability to decode the nonsense words had declined. This seemed to be the result of the child attempting to create meaning

---

[4] 'Reading Partnership' and 'Reading Recovery' are reading programmes to support individual children who are not making sufficient progress.
[5] Nonsense words are included in the phonics screening test to check children's ability to decode solely rather than use other strategies.

from the nonsense words but lacking the lexical knowledge to understand that they were meaningless.

4.2.2 Discussion

It would appear from the interview evidence and test scores that using a synthetics phonics scheme is beneficial for the EAL children in the school. According to the staff interviewed, children are applying what they have learned when reading or writing in other subjects and furthermore, they are able to use the decoding strategy when they read independently.

It is important to note that this programme has high status in the school, for example, it has warranted the appointment of a manager to oversee the teaching and learning of synthetic phonics and to ensure that assessments are carried out frequently. The programme therefore succeeds because the school has invested heavily in it and it is taught systematically and regularly by a workforce who have confidence in it. As discussed in the literature review, research by Slavin et al (2009) identified high quality professional development and training as key indicators of an effective programme and the evidence from the interviews suggests this is the case in this school.

I now report on data gathered from lesson observations and include an example of the teaching and learning that occurs in a synthetic phonics lesson.

4.3.1 Findings from an observation of a synthetic phonics lesson

In the following excerpt, a group of eight children aged between five and six, including Anna, are working with a teaching assistant on the grapheme 'ow' and the sound it represents which in this case is /əʊ/. Anna and Child 4 are the only EAL children in this group. They are now generating words.

1.		The TA shows a large picture of a bear with snow blowing around it.
2.	Child 1	It's a bear with blow the snow!
3.		The TA writes 'ow' in the centre of the white board.
4.	Child 1	Ice pole!
5.	Child 2	Blow
6.	TA	Sometimes you have these stickers above your bed at night and when you turn off the light they…
7.	Children	Glow!
8.	Child 3	I have a spiderman glow in the dark sticker.
9.	TA	You know a snail, Anna, it goes really…
10.	Anna	Slow.
11.	TA	Let's look at our other o-e (pointing to o-e on another large flashcard).
12.		What sound is this?
13.	Children	/əʊ/!
14.	Anna	There's an alien! (pointing to the picture of the alien on the reverse of the flashcard). (The picture is of an alien holding a mobile phone and the caption reads 'phone home').

15. TA	What does this line mean here? (pointing to the line in the middle of the o and the e in 'o-e')
16. Anna	It means they're special friends and they must always stay together.

(See App. 5: Obs. 1)

4.3.2 Commentary and discussion

In this observation I noticed that the teaching assistant familiarises the children with the graphemes on the flashcards focusing on the grapheme 'ow' and its corresponding sound /əʊ/. The children are familiar with the picture and the rhyme associated with the phoneme as a child recalls 'it's a bear with blow the snow' in line 2. This is because the scheme has been designed to teach children phonemes and the corresponding graphemes or groups of graphemes using picture prompts (Miskin, 2005). Through the course of the lesson they learn that the sound can be graphically represented in at least two different ways. The teaching assistant helps the children generate words by describing something and encouraging the children to say what it is (lines 6 and 9). The children learn that the letters in the digraph o-e in 'phone' are connected to make one phoneme through the idea that 'they're best friends and they must always stay together' as Anna says in line 16. Developing children's metalanguage or knowledge about language is thus a principle of the scheme and Anna's explanation demonstrates that she has understood this phoneme-grapheme relationship.

During my lesson observations, I noticed that children with similar reading abilities, including those with EAL, worked daily with an adult on synthetic phonics in groups of about six to eight. Lesson content therefore was matched to the children's reading levels. Moreover, all staff used the detailed lesson plans provided and there were sufficient

resources for the children. This ensured the quality of lessons was consistent throughout the school.

4.4.1 Findings from the miscue analysis with the children: Anna, Ivan and Josef

I now discuss my findings from the miscue analysis. I commence with two extracts from my research into Anna's reading strategies.

4.4.2 Anna (1)

Anna was particularly fond of a set of stories about a mouse and in the following example she was able to read and understand the vast majority of the text.

The original text was as follows:

Brown mouse plays a trick.

Grey Mouse said to Brown Mouse 'I liked your party but I have to go home'.

'I have to go home too' said White Mouse.

Brown Mouse went to the door and looked out.

'You can't go home' he said.

'The cat is outside the door'. (Excerpt from: '*Brown Mouse plays a trick*' by J. Giles, 2001)

Key:

R = the researcher

/ / sound the child produces in phonemic script

---

1. Anna   Brown mouse plays a trick.

2.   Grey Mouse said to Brown Mouse

3.   'I liked you? (self corrects) your party

4.   /b/ʌ/t/ but I have to go home'.

5.   'I have to go home too' said with uh White Mouse.

6.   Brown Mouse went to the do? What's that mean?

7. R   Look at the picture.

8. Anna door and looked out.

9.   'You cat? (self corrects) Can't go home' he said.

10.   'The cat is outsit? Inside, no! (Anna says this word with emphasis then

             self corrects) Outside! (Emphasised) the door.

In order to check Anna's comprehension of the whole story, I asked the following question:

R   Why was Brown Mouse clever?

Anna Because he was clever because he put the toy after the cat. He was run after the

        Brown Mouse not the real mouse, the toy.

4.4.3 Commentary and discussion

Anna self-corrects in lines 3, 5, 9 and 10. In line 3, she initially says 'you', changing it to

'your' to create a syntactically correct sentence, possibly by noticing that the ensuing word

reads 'party'. In synthetic phonics lessons, Anna has learned 'you' and 'your' as words she

needs to recognise by sight. An example of decoding occurs when Anna says each phoneme

to read the word 'but' (line 4). In line 5, Anna initially says 'with' and then corrects herself

and says 'white'. She says 'with' as the word is graphically similar to 'white' but then realises it is not syntactically plausible. In addition, she notices that 'W' is capitalised thus is a name and is followed by the word 'Mouse' which is also capitalised at the start. All the mice in the story have been named in this way and Anna demonstrates here that she recognises the purpose of capitalization. Anna requires support in line 6 when she encounters the word 'door'. She does not use the picture which shows Brown Mouse by the door so I remind her to do so. However, in line 9, when Anna says 'you cat' she is referring to the illustration of the cat outside the door. The intonation of her voice rises in the form of a question as she ponders whether the word indeed reads 'cat'. When she notices the letter 'n', which precedes the apostrophe, she says 'can't'. However, her initial utterance which would have read 'You cat go home' would have shown semantic understanding, because in the story the mice wanted the cat to go away. In line 10, Anna decodes 'outside' as 'outsit'. At this point, she has not decoded the split digraph 'i-e'. She then realizes that 'outsit' is not a word that she recognises so says 'inside' possibly recalling the antonyms 'inside and outside' and then emphasises 'outside' as she knows she has read the word correctly and shows obvious delight in doing so.

I discover from this observation that Anna can use a range of strategies when she reads and is not over-reliant on decoding. Her knowledge of phoneme-grapheme correspondence learned in synthetic phonics lessons supports her reading but it is her knowledge of the lexis and syntax in the story that ultimately enables her to read successfully with understanding. It is Anna's lexical knowledge that enables her to comprehend the story as can be observed in her response to my comprehension question. In Anna's response, she correctly identifies what Brown Mouse did, which was to use a toy mouse as a decoy so he could escape. When

Anna says 'He was run after the Brown Mouse', 'he' is used anaphorically to refer to the cat.

Anna uses the past continuous to describe the cat's action, though omits the 'ing' in

'running'. She reinforces her explanation by saying the mouse the cat was running after was

'not the real mouse' but 'the toy'. Although Anna's response is not entirely syntactically

accurate, she demonstrates that she has understood what she has read. As Goodman et al

(1987: 63) opine '[b]ilingual students … may have greater understanding of what they read

than is evident in their ability to produce syntactically acceptable sentences'.

4.4.4 Anna (2)

In this example, Anna chooses to read a simplified version of 'The ugly duckling' as she

knows the story and says she has read this book before.

The text is as follows:

The ugly duckling

Once upon a time mother duck had some ducklings.

The ducklings grew and grew.

But one duckling grew too big. (Excerpt from: '*The ugly duckling'* by M. Hughes 2004)

    1. Anna The /ʌ/g/l/i:/ ugly d-uckling

    2.   /ɒ/n/k/e/ I dunno

    3. R   Once.

    4. Anna u-pon a t-ime

    5.   Mother duck had some ducklings.

    6.   The duck-lings /g/r/e/eɪ/

7. R grew

8. Anna grew and grew

9.   But one duckling grew too big. What's that mean grew?

4.4.5 Commentary and discussion

Anna decodes 'ugly' and her familiarity with the title enables her to read 'duckling' without needing to decode. Anna is unsure of the word 'once'. She decodes it, segmenting each grapheme, but realises this does not help as she cannot make sense of the word. Once I have told her the word, she recalls the phrase 'upon a time' as she has heard this in fairy tales. When she encounters the word 'grew' (line 6), her choice of phonemes resemble the word 'grey'. It could be that in her search for meaning, she was referring to the picture which showed the grey coloured ugly duckling on the page and had interpreted this to be the subject of the sentence. If this was the case, Anna would need some explanation of how plurals are created in English as 'ducklings' refers to more than one. Indeed, Wallace (1988) posits that letters provide more information than sounds and knowledge of the plural -s on nouns rule would help Anna. Lack of morphological awareness thus impedes her comprehension. Syntactically, colour adjectives precede nouns in English too therefore 'grey' could not be the correct word. Decoding words in this instance does not support Anna because her knowledge of the lexis in the story is insufficient.

4.4.6 Ivan

In this example, Ivan is reading a non-fiction book entitled 'Bug Hunt' (Llewellyn, 2009). There is a photograph of a ladybird on the front cover and a small illustration of a boy with a magnifying glass in the background.

1. R   What's this? (pointing to the ladybird)

2. Ivan   I (pronounces this as /eɪ/) dunno. I (/eɪ/) forget.

3. R   It's a ladybird.

4. Ivan   Ah!

5. R   OK. Can you read this? (pointing to the title)

6. Ivan   /b/u:/g/ /h/u:/n/t/

7. R   This makes an /ʌ/ sound (pointing to the letter 'u' in bug and hunt).

8. Ivan   Ah. /b/ ʌ /g/ bug /h/u:/n/t/?

9. R   Do you know what a bug hunt is?

10. Ivan   I (/eɪ/) dunno.

(See App. 6 Ivan)

4.4.7 Commentary and discussion

This example illustrates the difficulties Ivan has when decoding words he does not understand. Ivan decodes the consonants correctly in the words. He identifies the initial and final consonants in the words 'bug' and 'hunt' but as he does not know what a 'bug' or a 'hunt' is, his awareness of the consonants does not help him to read the words. When decoding in line 6, Ivan pronounces 'u' in 'bug' and 'hunt' as /u:/. Ivan has been taught the phoneme-grapheme relationship of 'u' in his synthetic phonics classes where 'u' makes the sound /ʌ/ and also in words such as 'put' where 'u' makes the sound /ʊ/. My explanation does not support him because when he repeats the words in line 8, he reverts to pronouncing the 'u' in 'hunt' as /u:/. Ivan has become confused with the possible alternative phonemes that correspond to this vowel.

A further explanation I surmised is that some second language learners may not be able to discriminate between certain sounds in their own spoken English and this view is supported by Wallace (1992). This may be the case for Ivan with the sounds /ʌ/, /ʊ/, and /uː/. Ivan's pronunciation of the word 'I' as /eɪ/ is a further example where he does not recognise that the phoneme he produces differs from conventional English pronunciation of the word 'I'. However, in this instance, Ivan understands the meaning of 'I' as he uses it in line 2 for example, to explain that he does not know the answer to my question.

The text in fact was a poor choice on my part as the task of decoding in conjunction with learning new vocabulary was too challenging for Ivan.

4.4.8 Josef

Josef chooses to read a book containing a story and a non-fiction text called 'Trunk Tales' as he says he likes elephants, one of which is pictured on the front cover.

The text in the book reads as follows:

An elephant is bigger than a monster mouse.

An elephant is bigger than a van.

(Excerpt from: '*Trunk Tales*' by D. Reed 2006)

Josef reads:

1.   /æ/n/ an elephant is /b/ɪ/g/ -ger bigger than a /m/ɒ/n/ monster /m/-

      ouse.

2.   An elephant is bigger than a /v/æ/n/ van. What is van? (Josef asks me).

4.4.9 Commentary and discussion

Josef decodes 'an' and 'bigger' in line 1 and recalls them in line 2. He decodes 'van' in line 2. In the book there is a picture of an elephant standing beside a van. However, Josef does not use this information to help him elicit meaning from the word 'van'. This is because he does not know the English word for 'van'. Josef decodes correctly, but his lack of knowledge of the lexis impedes his understanding.

4. 4.10 Discussion of key findings from the miscue analyses

The children demonstrate knowledge of phoneme-grapheme correspondence and they can use this to decode words when reading. They generally identify the phonemes for consonants in words. This is helpful to the children when they already know the name of the word in English as they can decode it quickly and derive its meaning, because as Wilde (2000: 8) states: 'consonants carry the bulk of the meaning load in a written language'. Decoding phonemes which have two or more corresponding graphemes cause more difficulties. Identifying split digraphs and correctly recalling vowel sounds can also be challenging. This is unsurprising given the more complex relationship between vowel sounds and grapheme correspondence (Wilde, 2000). Moreover, unlike monolingual children, EAL children have the additional task of trying to grasp meaning of new vocabulary. On these occasions, they may decode correctly, but they are unable to make sense of the text due to lack of lexical knowledge. In terms of decoding, Anna is working at a similar level to the monolingual children in her class. However, her vocabulary knowledge is not equivalent to L1 learners. Furthermore, Anna has not fully developed her understanding of English morphology. At times, these factors limit her ability to comprehend text. Josef and Ivan have more limited vocabularies therefore reading is even

more challenging for them and ability to decode alone does not enable them to understand text.

I now describe findings from interviews with the children.

4.5.1 Findings from the interviews with the children

I interviewed Anna, Josef, and Ivan, who I read with regularly during my research. I also include Katerina who was a successful reader and no longer required synthetic phonics lessons (see App. 7 Int. 1).

When I asked the children what they learned in synthetic phonics lessons, Josef replied that he did 'writing, drawing'; Anna said 'with Miss C-. writing and working and learning'; and Ivan said 'I do handwriting, speak English and alphabet'.

Katerina explained how she learned to read, asserting that it was practice that helped her:

> How to explain? I went to classes in '5O'. I practice in my home and I practice in school. I practice with Mrs B-. Now I'm in '6B' I practice in home and in school.

The children's views on synthetic phonics classes were as follows: Ivan replied 'like it'; Josef said 'I love writing and drawing' and Anna smiled but made no comment. Katerina could not recall the lessons as she had not needed to go for many months.

On the question of what books the children enjoyed reading, Josef replied 'I like read every books'. Anna said 'Cinderella'; Ivan said 'can't remember', and Katerina answered 'yesterday I finished Skellig. Now I reading 'Boys in the girls' bathroom' '.

Katerina's response to the question 'What do you do when you see a word you don't know?' was initially: 'I know how to read in English. I'm super in reading'.

I asked a follow up question as I wanted to ascertain what strategies she used when she encountered words she did not know. I have written the phonemes she uses in her response in phonemic script to illustrate the exact sounds she made in her response. Her response was:

'If you have a prize I know how to read it because /p/r/ɪ/z/e/. The /ɪ/ is an /aɪ/.'

In answer to the same question, Josef replied 'sound it out', Anna shrugged her shoulders and Ivan said 'I tell my dad'.

4.5.2 Discussion

It is interesting to note that none of the children mention that they learn to read in synthetic phonics lessons. However, the children say they enjoy their classes and the activities that they do there. Katerina demonstrates that she enjoys books and talks about them with confidence. This is unsurprising as she reads fluently. Anna shows a preference for fairy tales and Josef has positive feelings about all books. Only Ivan is unable to think of a title that he has enjoyed reading. His lack of success in reading appears to be affecting his motivation. The books that Katerina and Anna mention are non-reading scheme books thus indicating that the purpose of reading for them is pleasure.

Katerina's explanation on how to decode is relevant to understanding the role of synthetic phonics in learning to read. When Katerina initially started her explanation: 'If you have a prize', I was confused. However, what she was doing was using the word 'prize' to exemplify how to decode. She then decoded each grapheme to create five phonemes. By saying 'The /ɪ/ is an /aɪ/', Katerina demonstrated that /aɪ/ or the third phoneme in the word 'prize' is represented by the split digraph 'i-e' thus reducing the composition of phonemes in

the word to four. Katerina thus provides a genuine example of how to decode using synthetic phonics. I had observed the children using the decoding strategy in their reading but only Katerina and Josef mention this. Katerina's ability in English is more developed than the other children and furthermore, she is older therefore her explanation was more detailed. Ivan's strategy of asking a parent is reasonable too assuming that the parent is sufficiently literate to support the child.

4.6 Summary

The adults interviewed believe that the regular, systematic teaching of synthetic phonics benefits EAL children. From listening to the children read, I discover that decoding provides a useful tool for the children when they already understand the meaning of the word in English. All the children require support, as sometimes they are learning to decode in conjunction with learning the vocabulary. A further issue is that some children may not be aware of the permissible sounds used to pronounce words in English, as is the case with Ivan. From interviewing the children, I gain some insight into what they think they do when they read, and their opinions on reading. Their views towards learning to read are positive and the most confident readers are able to express preferences about what they like to read.

In the next chapter, I discuss the implications of my research findings.

CHAPTER 5

Implications and conclusion

5.1 Introduction

In this concluding chapter, I firstly examine the implications of my findings for schools with EAL learners (5. 2). Next I discuss training implications for teachers and teaching assistants in similar schools (5. 3). I then explain why miscue analysis as used in my research could be used to support learners as they learn to read (5. 4). I next discuss how teaching children to decode using synthetic phonics could support young learners in the context of English language teaching (5. 5). I conclude that I have answered my research questions but explain the limitations of my research and offer suggestions for future research (5. 6).

5.2 Implications for schools

Evidence from the national phonics screening assessment data as discussed in my findings established that the implementation of daily, discrete, synthetic phonics lessons in the school had raised standards in this important skill for EAL children. This is because in this school, management had placed a high priority on the training and development of teachers and teaching assistants so the quality of teaching was consistent across the school. Moreover, from my work with the children, I discovered that they used the decoding strategy when they encountered unknown words and I observed that the strategy was certainly beneficial when they already understood the lexis. Indeed, Menyuk and Brisk (2005: 110) assert that when 'learners know the words they are more likely to sound it out accurately and thus get the appropriate meaning'. However, the major issue for these children and other EAL learners is that they often lack knowledge of lexis in the text

therefore this means that they may read without understanding. This has implications for all elements of their education. Indeed, as discussed in the literature review, NALDIC (2006) caution that decoding without comprehending will not enable EAL learners to be successful at school.

Furthermore, NALDIC assert that '[r]eading for EAL learners needs to involve much more than proficiency in decoding if comprehension and engagement are to be the end result' (ibid.: 6). Teaching children a decoding strategy thus is only one part of the instruction that EAL pupils, including those in my research, require in order to enable them to read and thereby access much of what is offered at school.

A key question therefore, is what could policy makers do to enable EAL children to develop the reading comprehension skills that they need? I have discussed how the children's ability to read was limited by their lack of lexical knowledge. Lack of lexical knowledge has an obvious impact on comprehension therefore children's language development should be a priority. One potential means of facilitating the language development of children such as those in my study would be to provide a bilingual education programme in schools. This means that children are taught a curriculum in both their home language and English. Evidence that demonstrates the benefits of this can be found in research by Cummins (2000) and Thomas and Collier (2001). However, this is not a prospective situation in England as current British Government policy states that 'English should be the medium of instruction in schools' (Overington: 2012: 5).

The obligation is on schools therefore, to support these children in developing their language and literacy skills in English. Moreover, the families of the children in my research lacked the English skills needed to support their children. Additionally, as members of the

Roma community, they have been identified by the Department of Education as one of the groups 'most in need of educational support' (Fremlova and Ureche, 2011: 26). This is in recognition of their disadvantaged socio-economic status and history of low attainment and underachievement at school (ibid). Fremlova and Ureche (ibid) argue that the circumstances of this group will only be improved if a high quality education is offered. This means that teachers and teaching assistants have a crucial and long-term role in supporting the language development of these children, so that they can fully access the curriculum and achieve success at school. As Cummins (2000) opines, EAL children living in an English speaking country need many years of additional adult support if they are to reach a similar standard of literacy as their monolingual peers.

I believe that the most effective support is delivered by adults who have received training in teaching EAL children to read. I shall now explain this further.

5.3 Implications for training

In my findings, I discovered how a learner's limited morphological knowledge affected comprehension. In addition, the inability of another learner to discriminate between sounds in his spoken English was a hindrance both to his decoding and comprehension. Limited lexical knowledge was a feature identified in all the children. Practitioners therefore need to be aware of issues such as these and also the most appropriate strategies on how to assist the children. One area for training should be on language as used by teachers or teaching assistants. Teacher language for example, needs to be unambiguous. Phrasal verbs for instance, which are common in English and widely understood by children with English as a first language, can confuse EAL children. On the other hand, strategies that practitioners could use to clarify new language for EAL children include using visual aids and

realia. The employment of trained professionals who speak the child's home language would also be beneficial.

5.4 Miscue analysis as a tool to support learners

In the literature review, I discussed the research of Pacheco (2010) and Duke and Block (2012) on the possible problems that arise when schools focus too heavily on methods that are easily measurable and that appear to show improvements. The English national phonics screening test for instance, provides a score on the number of words correctly decoded by a child and it identifies which phoneme-grapheme correspondences the child knows. The regular teaching of synthetic phonics in the school in my research had led to improved scores in this test. However, I would contend that miscue analysis offers far richer data than scores from a phonics decoding test as it identifies the reading process for that child. Even in my limited study, I was able to detect the strategies the children were using in their reading and the problems they encountered. I would like to suggest that the use of miscue analysis might be a regular feature in any assessment of a child's reading as it informs possible action that can be taken to support that child.

5.5 Implications in the context of English language teaching

There are implications too for using synthetic phonics as a method to teach reading to young learners of English in other countries. The young learners' market has increased rapidly in recent years and led to increased demands for appropriate resources to teach this age group. The growth of this market hence has seen the promotion of the use of synthetic phonics as a strategy to teach young learners to read in English. An example of this is can be found on the British Council website which offers resources based on the United Kingdom

phonics programme *Letters and Sounds* (britishcouncil.org). Assuming that teachers in this sector are properly trained, this strategy may be useful in developing the reading skills of young learners. By learning phoneme-grapheme relationships, learners gain a useful resource on how to pronounce, read and spell English words. For example, as discussed in my observation of a synthetic phonics lesson, the children learned two different ways of graphically representing the sound /əʊ/ and Anna was able to explain the rule for the pronunciation of 'o-e'. Moreover, the explicit teaching of rules such as this would support learners who write in non-alphabetic languages because as Goswami and Bryant (1990) explain, research indicates that these learners have less awareness of phonemes than learners with an alphabetic script in their first language.

5.6 Conclusion

In this small scale research, I have investigated how teaching children to decode using synthetic phonics supports a group of EAL learners who are learning to read. My research questions enabled me to establish that this strategy is helpful but that it does not fully meet the complex needs of these children. A limitation of my research was that I did not measure how frequently children used synthetic phonics or other strategies to decode when reading. I solely identified that the children used this strategy and others in their reading. It would be interesting to track these same children over the course of their primary and secondary schooling to discover how their reading ability develops, what strategies they use over time, and whether they eventually make progress on a par with their monolingual peers. It would also be valuable to undertake the same research with a different profile of learners. The children in my study are from an impoverished community and to date their families have had little experience of educational success. A comparative study would be to establish

how children from more affluent backgrounds used the decoding strategy and whether they

encountered similar issues to the children in my research.

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Appendix 1

Interview questions for the children

1. What do you do in Read Write Inc. classes?

2. What do you think of Read Write Inc.?

3. What books do you like reading?

4. What do you do when you see a word you don't know?

Appendix 2

Interview questions for adults

1. How long have you been working at the school and in what capacity?

2. When was synthetic phonics introduced as the main way to teach reading?

3. What impact have you observed?

4. Can you cite any examples, e.g. decoding, knowledge of vocabulary, use of phonic

strategies in other lessons, enthusiasm to read, writing ability, confidence to have a

go?

Appendix 3

Interview 1 Teacher 1

> We chose RWI as the programme was used in schools in London which had a high level of EAL.

> We purchased the scheme as we knew phonics teaching Letters and Sounds was not a full construction. It leaves the teacher to build the scheme. The range of abilities and EAL meant it would be a big job to create a scheme.

> RWI breaks it down into levels of attainment and it is packaged for TAs to teach so children moved through attainment groups at their speed of learning.

> The issue was we had expertise but not the time. RWI is cost effective- people pay more attention to it as it's bought in.

> RWI is systematic and it worked in other places. Everyone who'd used it said bring it in.

> This year, 65% of the children have passed the phonics screening for year 1'S. Last year we only got 18%. And 85% of the year 2's that didn't get it last year got it this time.

Appendix 4

Interview 2 Teacher 2

Researcher's notes of interview:

Current results: Last year: 18% passed the phonics screening, this year 65%

Of retested children (Y2s) 85%

RWInc used for YR to Y2. Y3s who attained 2C or below in Yr 2 also go plus Y4, 5 and 6 new arrivals EAL. Assessed every 8 weeks and improvement shown every time.

Don't mix EAL and SEN - recommend mixing with others to help pick it up.

Adults on Better reading partnership and Reading Recovery say children are using strategies when they read with them.

Writing- they say there is a dip at first- KS1 results are a little lower than before. But lessons observed in YR and Y1 demonstrate that writing is coming along well. The children use secretarial skills - hold a sentence, build a sentence. Show increased vocabulary. The teacher needs to make the links between reading and writing- eg this week we're reading… so children see links between stories and the book they are reading. By the end of each unit there is a task eg make a wanted poster so there is a purpose.

The RWInc teacher believes the children are more confident to have a go- the focus isn't on spelling all words right, only the ones they have learned. She believes you should always get them to talk about what they want to write. The use of Fred fingers, and red and green words helps the children.

There are picture cards for EAL children to aid their understanding.

The activities are intended so children know the book inside out. It should be read in three days- the children read the story three times - so they really understand it.

Appendix 5

Lesson observation 1

> Key:
>
> TA (teaching assistant)
>
> / / sound spoken by children written in phonemic script

1.		The TA shows a large picture of a bear with snow blowing around it.
2.	Child 1	It's a bear with blow the snow!
3.		The TA writes 'ow' in the centre of the white board.
4.	Child 1	Ice pole!
5.	Child 2	Blow
6.	TA	Sometimes you have these stickers above your bed at night and when you turn off the light they…
7.	Children	Glow!
8.	Child 3	I have a spiderman glow in the dark sticker.
9.	TA	You know a snail, Anna, it goes really…
10.	Anna	Slow.
11.	TA	Let's look at our other o-e (pointing to o-e on another large flashcard).
12.		What sound is this?
13.	Children	/əʊ/!
14.	Anna	There's an alien! (pointing to the picture of the alien on the reverse of the flashcard).
		(The picture is of an alien holding a mobile phone and the caption

reads 'phone home').

15. TA	What does this line mean here? (pointing to the line in the middle of the o and the e in 'o-e')
16. Anna	It means they're special friends and they must always stay together.
17. TA	Mole. Do you know what a mole is? An animal that lives underground
18. Child 2	Pole
19. Child 4	nose
20. Anna	I have one! Puts hand up- phone!!
21. Child 5	boat
22. TA	It's our other sound isn't it? good try though!
23. Child 3	cross
24. Anna	home

Appendix 6

In this example, Ivan is reading a non-fiction text called 'Bug Hunt'. There is a photograph of a ladybird on the front cover and a small illustration of a boy with a magnifying glass in the background.

Text:

Bug Hunt

Do you like bugs? (*Bug Hunt*, C Llewellyn , 2009)

Key:
R Researcher
/ / sound spoken by child written in phonemic script

1. R   What's this? (pointing to the ladybird)

2. Ivan   I (pronounces this as /eɪ/) dunno. I (/eɪ/) forget.

3. R   It's a ladybird.

4. Ivan   Ah!

5. R   OK. Can you read this? (pointing to the title)

6. Ivan   /b/u:/g/ /h/u:/n/t/

7. R   This makes an /ʌ/ sound (pointing to the letter 'u' in bug and hunt).

8. Ivan   Ah. /b/ ʌ /g/ bug /h/u:/n/t/?

9. R   Do you know what a bug hunt is?

10. Ivan   I (/eɪ/) dunno.

11. R   This is a bug (pointing to the picture of the ladybird) and so is this (pointing

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to the pictures of the earwig, the ant, the fly, the moth and the spider on the following pages). They are all types of bugs.

12. Ivan   Ah bugs.

13. R   And this boy is looking for or hunting for bugs (pointing to the picture of the boy with the magnifying glass).

14. Ivan   OK.

15. R   Have you ever been on a bug hunt? Maybe with your class?

16. Ivan   I (/eɪ/) think yes.

17. R   Shall we look at the next page? (Ivan turns to the first page of the book).

18. Ivan   Do you /l/ɪ/k/ lick? /b/aɪ/t/s/ bites I (/eɪ/) dunno.

Appendix 7

Interview with Katerina aged 10

Key: R Researcher

    K Katerina

  / / sound spoken by child written in phonemic script

R   What do you like doing at school?

K   Learning numeracy, literacy, times tables, science, nothing more.

R   How did you learn to read so well?

K   How to explain. I went to classes in 5O. I practice in my home and I practice in school. I practice with Mrs B………. Now I'm in 6B I practice in home and in school.

R   What do you think of RWI?

(K can't remember doing it- hasn't been on the programme for some months)

K   Yesterday I finished Skellig.

R   What other books do you read?

K   Now I reading Boys in the girls' bathroom'

R   What do you do when you see a word you don't know?

K   I know how to read in English. I'm super in reading.

R   What if you saw a word you didn't know what would you do to help you read it?

K   If you have a prize I know how to read it because it's p-r-i-z-e. the I is an i.