

# DfES Response to the March 2003 Phonics Seminar and Professor Greg Brooks' Report

## 1 Introduction

1.1 We welcome the report on the Phonics Seminar, held in London on 17 March 2003, produced by Professor Greg Brooks.

1.2 The action we have taken in the last 12 months and our proposals for further action in response to the Seminar and to Greg Brooks' report fall into three main areas:

- enhancing the provision of support for phonics teaching;
- proposed research
- developing a better understanding of reading.

1.3 It is important that this response to Greg Brooks' report is read alongside the original National Literacy Strategy paper that was produced for the Phonics Seminar on 17 March, which explained the strategy's approach to the teaching of phonics, developments since the start of the strategy in 1998 and the further support that was planned for teachers.

## 2 Enhancing the provision of support for phonics teaching

### 2.1 Supplement to '*Progression in Phonics*'

Relevant recommendations from Greg Brooks' report include:

- R1 Make it clear that, within the 100 most frequent words, only those that are irregular should be taught as sight words.
- R2 Convene a focused debate between experts to design and mount research on whether grapheme-phoneme translation and blending in reading should be taught with or without hearing the teacher say the word
- R3 Re-organise Steps 2-4 of the sequence for teaching phonics in accordance with the criteria of frequency, regularity and usefulness.
- R4 Tidy up the phonetics..
- R6 Before starting phonics even earlier, check if current initiatives are reducing the gender gap in reading attainment.
- R8 Research which letters and letter-sounds are most useful to beginners.
- R9 Investigate incorporating International Phonetic Alphabet training into initial and continuing teacher education.

2.1.1 The NLS outlined in its paper to the seminar on March 17<sup>th</sup> its concerns about the implementation of the phonics element of the Strategy. *Progression in Phonics* was designed to support phonics teaching and also to accelerate the rate of teaching relative to that specified in the Strategy's *Framework for teaching*. Despite the guidance contained in this publication, Ofsted report that some teachers do not teach phonics on a daily basis and teach the 100 most frequent words in English as though they were all irregular. Clearly there is further clarification needed here.

2.1.2 When compiling *Progression in Phonics* the NLS made decisions based on research and current practice on which phonemes to include (between 42 and 46) and the order in which letters might be introduced to children. Professor Greg Brooks suggests that these decisions be reconsidered in the light of new information and that teachers are informed about the international phonetic alphabet. The seven steps for teaching phonics were dictated by the objectives in the Framework which, in turn, were

based on the considerable research that identified the order in which children were able to segment phonemes in words: initial →final →medial →adjacent consonant.

*Progression in Phonics* introduces letters in groups right from the beginning of teaching segmentation. Teaching blending can only occur when a vowel is introduced. Since the introduction of the NLS Framework and the much more widespread and systematic teaching of phonics which has followed, it has become clear to teachers and researchers that teaching children to segment the medial vowel in a CVC word is much easier than previously thought. Children who are 'untaught' appear to naturally segment in the order set out in *Progression in Phonics*; in the light of further experience, it appears unnecessary to assume that this is the order in which segmentation needs to be taught.

2.1.3 *Progression in Phonics* deliberately relates blending to segmentation in the same way that the NLS relates reading and writing. However, the NLS paper acknowledged that further activities to support children in learning to blend are necessary.

2.1.4 The National Literacy Strategy starts to teach letter identification, segmentation and blending for writing and reading in later Foundation Stage (Reception). The term 'phonics' is also applied to activities appropriate to the early Foundation Stage such as playing with environmental and vocal sounds, rhyme, rhythm and alliteration as these are crucial to nurturing the phonemic awareness which is necessary for learning to read and spell. There is no intention to introduce children to letter identification, segmentation and blending for writing and reading any earlier than the Reception year.

2.1.5 The Primary National Strategy is now working on a supplement to *Progression in Phonics* in which there will be an outline of a core plan for teaching phonics in YR and Y1 conflating the current steps 2 – 4 and including suggestions for teaching early blending.

## **2.2 Phonics in Years 2 and 3**

2.2.1 Dissemination of materials by LEA literacy consultants to support the teaching of guided reading in Years 2 and 3 began in June 2003 and will continue through the school year 2003-04. These materials take a robust line on the searchlight model, reiterating the primacy of phonics in the reading process. They illustrate how children can give the impression of using 'phonics' (e.g. by sounding out words such as 'nicely' letter-by-letter /n//i//c/) when, in fact, they have an incomplete phonic knowledge.

2.2.2 Literacy consultants have been briefed on materials to support teachers in Year 3 with spelling and these materials will be available from September 2003. These materials introduce a sequence for teaching spelling which starts with establishing how words are constructed and allows time for practising and assessing spelling.

2.2.3 A booklet entitled *Planning exemplification for Year 2 and 3* will be available later in the Autumn Term. This will include the existing NLS examples of medium term planning for these year groups as well as an example of how the spelling objectives can be ordered into a 'programme'.

## **2.3 Planning**

2.3.1 An NLS example of medium term planning already exists on the standards website for each year group in Foundation Stage, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. Worked exemplification of one or two units per year are also on the site for Years 2 to 5 and all

units at Y6 have been exemplified. During the autumn of 2003, an exemplified unit for Foundation Stage (Reception) and one for Year 1 will be added.

2.3.2 We do not intend adding further to this exemplification but, rather, to provide support in the form of an interactive CD ROM on planning for teaching English. This CD ROM should be available in the spring of 2004.

## **2.4 LEA and school capacity building**

2.4.1 The Primary National Strategy is committed to an approach which moves away from centralised prescription towards local autonomy. It will continue to fund LEAs to employ local Consultants who will play a key role in running training and supporting schools but the emphasis will shift increasingly to LEAs building local capacity to sustain improvement. Funding can be used to purchase the time of 'Leading Teachers' – expert local practitioners who can spread their good practice both within and beyond their own schools. It is being used to train serving headteachers as 'Consultant Leaders' for the Primary Leadership Programme which begins in the autumn of 2003 and it supports local networks of subject coordinators and other networks of schools working collaboratively to tackle common issues.

2.4.2 The teaching of phonics will remain a key focus of this work. Many LEAs have already identified Leading Teachers with a particular strength in phonics teaching and who offer 'demonstration lessons', visit other teachers to give school-based support and help to run training and local teacher networks.

## **2.5 Partnership with the Teacher Training Agency (TTA)**

The Primary National Strategy has a well-established partnership with TTA. Initial Teacher Training (ITT) providers have automatically received new NLS publications and are invited to regular briefings on their use. Student teachers have full access to materials and, as an element of the National Literacy Strategy, learning how to teach phonics is compulsory in the 2002 Standards for newly qualified teachers.

## **3 Research**

Relevant recommendations from Greg Brooks' report include:

R2 Convene a focused debate between experts to design and mount research on

- The need to differentiate phonics for reading and phonics for spelling
- How much phonics needs to be taught.

R6 Before starting phonics even earlier, check if current initiatives are reducing the gender gap in reading attainment.

R7 Carry out a systematic review and meta-analysis on the relative effectiveness of analytic vs synthetic phonics

### **3.1 Conducting a systematic review and commissioning further research**

We believe that the Phonics Seminar, which was attended by a wide range of experts in this field, and Professor Brooks' report have made a very significant contribution towards ensuring a clearer understanding of the research on phonics and its implications for the National Literacy Strategy. The Department will give further consideration to Professor Brooks' recommendations for additional research, which will be assessed against current Departmental objectives and other research priorities.

The Department will consider, in particular, the possibility of conducting an EPPI-centre systematic review, bringing together previous research conducted on phonics.

### **3.2 Analysing recent patterns of attainment**

The Department will look closely at the outcomes of the first use of the Foundation Stage Profile in 2003 and will also look at patterns of attainment amongst boys and girls at the end of Key Stage 1 in schools where phonics is being taught well. Improvements since 1998 in attainment of children at the age of 7 are encouraging but we cannot be complacent about the small percentage of children who do not make the progress expected during Key Stage 1. If we can show that good teaching in YR means that children get the phonics they need before entering Key Stage 1 then there is clearly no justification to start earlier.

## **4 Developing a better understanding of reading**

Relevant recommendations from Greg Brooks' report include:

R5 Strengthen the explanations of the status and intended application of the searchlights model, adopt Morag Stuart's model alongside it, and add a model of reading comprehension

R10 Move the debate on to researching and improving comprehension.

### **4.1 Reading Models**

4.1.1 The different interpretations of the 'searchlights' model by Ofsted in their evaluation reports of the Literacy Strategy and by Professor Greg Brooks in his report illustrate the need for additional explanation beyond that which is currently contained in the introduction to the NLS *Framework for teaching*. When supporting the development of children's reading, teachers must be clear both about the full range of strategies employed by effective readers and the particular skills which groups and individuals in their class need to apply and strengthen in order to make further progress. Recent Primary Strategy training materials for teachers in Y2/3 and Y3 (see paragraphs 2.1.1 to 2.1.3) begin to address this but the NLS accepts the need to continue to make these points in future training materials and guidance.

4.1.2 The Department welcomes the recommendation of an increased focus on reading comprehension. Many participants in the Seminar emphasised the need to see phonics as a means to an end and not an end in itself. All Literacy Consultants have had a recent professional development day on reading comprehension and this will continue to influence their work in schools. The aim for all of us is to ensure that our young people have access to and gain understanding and pleasure from a wide range of good quality books and other texts. Phonics is an essential component within this pursuit but other aspects of teaching and learning which play an equally critical role must not be neglected.