

*Journal of Trainee Teacher Education Research***“I have no clue how to pronounce that”: The impact of introducing a systematic phonics teaching initiative on Year 8 Italian students’ reading aloud skills and attitudes****Hannah Crossman**

(PGCE Modern Foreign Languages, 2021-2022)

email: hrc40@cantab.ac.uk

Abstract

Phonological awareness is increasingly important in educational policy in England, with research revealing benefits for second language learning and beyond. However, studies have found that foreign language “decoding” ability, that is the ability to convert written language into its spoken sounds, is limited and negatively perceived amongst secondary school students in England. Phonological development in modern foreign language classrooms in England is widely approached implicitly. This study aimed to analyse the impact of an alternate, explicit, systematic phonics teaching intervention on a KS3 Italian class’s reading aloud ability and attitudes. Research was conducted using a reading aloud assessment, questionnaires, teacher observations and semi-structured interviews. The findings suggest that systematic, explicit phonics teaching may have a positive impact on student decoding ability, perception of that ability, and confidence.

© Hannah Crossman, 2023

“I have no clue how to pronounce that”: The impact of introducing a systematic phonics teaching initiative on Year 8 Italian students’ reading aloud skills and attitudes

Hannah Crossman

Introduction

“Knowledge of phonics allows students to take off in second language learning”. This emphatic statement is how a modern foreign language (MFL) teacher colleague described the learning potential of strong phonological awareness amongst second language students. A second language (L2) is here defined as a foreign language being learnt in addition to a first language (L1), meaning the first language learned naturally as a child, often referred to as the mother tongue. And she was not alone in extolling its benefits. When asked, more colleagues shared beliefs on the positive impact on student confidence and independence to name a few. Furthermore, empirical research suggests that decoding ability, described as “converting the written symbols (or graphemes) of an alphabetical writing system into the sounds (or phonemes) they represent, using knowledge of the language’s symbol/sound correspondences (SSC)” (Woore, 2010, p.3), may support wider language learning, including reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (Erler, 2004; Janczukowicz, 2014; Woore, 2007, 2009).

Belief in the importance of phonological awareness in L2 learning is increasingly reflected in educational policy in England. Whilst the 2013 Key Stage 3 (KS3) National Curriculum lightly states a languages programme aim as “continually improving the accuracy of their pronunciation and intonation” (DfE, 2013, p.1), more recent policy publications are much stronger in their positioning. Phonics now represents one of three core language learning strands across many policy publications; the new French, German and Spanish GCSE subject content specifies that students must “learn and apply the principles by which spelling represents sounds...and use clear and comprehensible pronunciation when speaking the language” (DfE, 2022a); awarding organisations will even require students to read aloud small written texts to assess this ability (DfE, 2022a). Ofsted similarly elevates the position of phonics in its 2021 research review series: Languages, stressing how progressive

understanding of phonics, vocabulary, grammar, and their interaction is a requirement in L2 learning (Ofsted, 2021). In policy terms, phonological awareness is a non-negotiable in L2 learning at English secondary schools.

The elevated position of phonics has repercussions for language learning across key stages. Despite the new GCSE subject content's decoding requirements claiming to reflect natural progression from the KS3 curriculum (DfE, 2022a), my school experiences and wider literature suggest that this may not be the case. Instead, classroom-based research has found that students may have limited L2 understanding of how written symbols link to their spoken forms (Erler, 2004; Erler & Macaro, 2011; Woore, 2009), and have negative attitudes towards reading aloud in TL (Erler, 2004; Erler & Macaro, 2011). Furthermore, it is suggested that limitations are due to phonological neglect in the MFL classroom which instead favours a more inductive approach (Janczukowicz, 2014; Woore, 2007, 2010) in aiming to meet the KS3 curriculum aim of improving pronunciation (DfE, 2013). Therefore, it might be suggested that current approaches to developing decoding ability are not adequately preparing students to succeed against new GCSE requirements, as they are currently claimed to do (DfE, 2022a), and in wider L2 learning.

The National Centre for Excellence for Language Pedagogy (NCELP) takes a different approach to phonological development. Established in 2018 and funded by the DfE, NCELP works with experts to implement recommendations made in the Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review including how pupils should “gain systematic knowledge of the ... sound and spelling systems (phonics) of their new language” (Teaching Schools Councils, 2016, p.3). My current professional school placement is one of NCELP's Language Hub schools, where, rather than neglected, phonics is systematically taught in KS3 French, Spanish and German classes. Despite some evidence suggesting the benefits of this approach versus the more widespread inductive approach, it is, however, limited in quantity and scope (Woore, 2022).

2024 is fast approaching, when the revised GCSE syllabus will first be taught (DfE, 2022b). There is pressing interest from teachers at my current placement school, and the wider MFL teacher community, to understand firstly whether a systematic approach to phonics might indeed represent a more effective method of developing decoding proficiency, and secondly what further student outcomes might result from this approach.

In this study I aim to explore the impact of introducing a systematic phonics teaching initiative on a Year 8 Italian class's reading aloud skills (specifically, decoding ability from written to spoken language, and pronunciation) and attitudes, (specifically, confidence and feelings towards reading aloud). To begin, I will conduct a literature review that examines the benefits of decoding for L2 learning, the current state of decoding ability amongst MFL students in England, and different approaches to developing phonological awareness in the classroom. Secondly, I will outline my research methodology including intervention details. Next, I will present and discuss my findings. Finally, I will conclude with reflections and recommendations.

Literature review

The benefits of decoding written into spoken language in L2 learning

Before considering *how* to develop phonological awareness amongst students, examination of the reasons *why* it is a key consideration in L2 learning, the MFL classroom, and increasingly in English educational policy is important.

Despite the lack of evidence cited in the Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review (2016) supporting its phonological recommendations, research has, in fact, revealed the benefits of decoding for beginner learners (Erler, 2004; Erler & Macaro, 2011). Specifically, links have been found between grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPC) knowledge, defined here as the ability to link the written symbols such as a letter or small sequence of letters (graphemes), to the spoken sounds they represent (phonemes), and L1 and L2 reading ability (Erler, 2004). Conversely, Erler (2004) raises the point that decoding *inability* can signify learner reading difficulties. Gathercole and Baddeley describe this link as a process they call the 'phonological loop' that creates a short-term memory loop linking written forms and sound (as cited in Erler, 2004). They argue that is an instrumental process in reading comprehension, as phonological awareness unlocks long-term memory on language's meaning (as cited in Erler, 2004). Developing decoding skills that allow students to create these short- and long- term links between writing and sound, therefore, may be argued as crucial in L2 learning to unlock meaning when reading.

Furthermore, it can be argued that GPC knowledge is crucial not just in *understanding* meaning when reading, but also in *communicating* meaning to others when reading aloud. Hawkins argues that spoken communication is efficient:

“when the message (M) intended by the speaker (S) is calibrated to the hearer’s (H) mental model in such a way as to achieve accurate comprehension of M with rapid speed and the least processing effort compatible with H’s mental model.”

(as cited in Janczukowicz, 2014, p.9).

If one facet of the hearer’s mental model includes the sounds, or pronunciation, that allow for successful communication of meaning in spoken language, then it could be suggested that an ability to decode effectively when reading aloud in L2 is crucial for effective communication. Furthermore, it could be argued that the stronger the decoding ability, the less processing effort is needed by the hearer, thus furthering communication efficiency. In this way, phonological awareness is arguably essential for transmitting meaning to others in L2 reading aloud.

Taking this further, and as Woore (2007, 2009) raises, if decoding is crucial to understand meaning when reading (Erler, 2004) and communicate efficiently when reading aloud (Janczukowicz, 2014), then it is arguably fundamental for learner autonomy. Woore argues that if students cannot pronounce unfamiliar words through decoding, they may feel less confident in approaching unknown material (Woore, 2007) or acquiring new vocabulary through reading (Woore, 2009) and may remain reliant on teachers or native speakers to communicate effectively. It might be suggested, therefore, that phonological awareness plays a key role in supporting learner independence in using, understanding, and progressing in L2 within the classroom and beyond.

As examined, these arguments suggest the importance of phonological awareness in L2 learning. The role of decoding in autonomous reading comprehension and independent communication when reading aloud support its position as a foundational pillar in effective language-learning and associated educational policy (Teaching Schools Council, 2016; Ofsted, 2021; DfE, 2022a).

L2 decoding ability amongst English MFL students

Despite its arguably fundamental role in language learning, research reveals that an ability to link written to spoken L2 may be startlingly low amongst English MFL students (Erler, 2004; Erler & Macaro, 2011; Woore, 2009).

In 2004, Erler conducted a study to assess the decoding ability of 359 Year 7 French pupils. Using a written rhyme test where students must convert print to sound in their heads, she assessed their understanding of specific French GPCs following one year of learning French at secondary school. Results revealed that, on average, students responded accurately in only a fifth of instances. She argues that this low success rate exposes a substantial lack of decoding ability. Erler goes further suggesting that the findings reveal a level of decoding ability that is equivalent to Ellis' (as cited by Erler, 2004) description of 'phonological dyslexia', an almost complete inability to read unknown words aloud suggesting impaired print to sound conversion. Erler acknowledges that the study cannot be entirely representative of the wider population due to its relatively small size and demographic and, furthermore, notes that a spoken test would have been a more accurate measure of decoding ability. Furthermore, lack of baseline data ahead of the year of language instruction means that progress in decoding ability cannot be accurately assessed. Despite these limitations, however, the study does suggest that phonological awareness amongst English MFL students may be poor, even after a year of language instruction.

This perspective is strengthened by Woore's study (2009) that corroborates these findings, but with a focus on *progress* of decoding ability. Here, longitudinal data aimed to investigate the decoding ability development amongst 94 L2 French students across their *second* year of language learning. Pupils completed a reading aloud test to assess their knowledge of key GPCs at the end of Year 7, and then again at the end of Year 8 using the same assessment. Similarly to Erler's findings, results revealed limited decoding ability, but also that students had made almost "no discernible progress" (Woore, 2009, p.14) despite the additional year of learning. Although this study is on a smaller scale than Erler's (2004) and cannot be deemed entirely generalisable to the wider population by taking place in only one school, it does add evidence to suggest poor decoding ability amongst students. Furthermore, it provides additional insight suggesting a lack of progress made in student phonological awareness across years of language instruction.

Erler and Macaro's (2011) mixed-methods study further supports and extends these findings, aiming to assess written to spoken decoding ability throughout and after *three* years of learning French. After extensive piloting, 1,735 pupils from Years 7, 8 and 9 completed a questionnaire containing two decoding tests to assess ability progress. Evidence again suggested that there was significantly little progress in KS3 students' decoding ability from text to sound. Despite, as with Erler's (2004) study, the larger size of the sample requiring the use of a written rather than spoken assessment, the large

scale of this study together with its commitment to ensure the study was representative of the wider population of KS3 French learners at English comprehensive schools mean that it can be more strongly argued to reflect the wider population. And its findings suggest that this view is of a population of limited ability and inertia in written to spoken decoding in L2 learning.

Whilst they differ in size and the extent to which they are generalisable, each study contributes towards a concerning picture of decoding ability amongst English MFL students. Phonological awareness appears limited, and progress looks stagnant across years of learning at KS3. When considering its argued importance, these findings are worrying for effective L2 learning. Furthermore, there are concerning implications for language learning into KS4. With a new core phonological pillar of *French, German and Spanish GCSE subject content* (DfE, 2022a) that claims to build on foundations established at KS3, it might be argued that today's students in fact *do not* have the assumed decoding ability required to succeed against new GCSE requirements. It must be noted, however, that these studies are over a decade old and so must be approached with a degree of caution when considering how accurately they reflect current MFL student decoding ability.

Attitudes towards L2 decoding amongst English MFL students

A further consideration of phonological awareness at KS3 is its impact on student confidence and attitudes. This is an area of consideration as if, as Woore (2007, 2009) argues, it is crucial for autonomy in approaching unknown material, apparent poor decoding ability suggests *dependence* and *lack* of confidence amongst L2 learners.

Erler and Macaro's (2011) study supports this position. When asked to reflect on their ability and attitudes towards French after completing the decoding test, the study found a link between poor decoding proficiency and negative attitudes towards French. These reports of negative attitudes immediately following the decoding test suggest that students lack confidence in L2 decoding.

Erler's (2004) study corroborates these findings. When asked how they felt about reading aloud and French pronunciation before their phonological test, almost half of students reported that they felt negatively. This reinforces the suggestion that students feel negatively and lack confidence in decoding from written to spoken L2.

This presents an interesting challenge. The *Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review's* recommendation is that “the vast majority of young people should study a modern foreign language up to the age of 16 and take a GCSE in it” (Teaching Schools Councils, 2016, p.3). The DfE’s 2017 *Plan for improving social mobility through education* shares this objective, claiming to prioritise ensuring that all pupils can access languages as one of the “core academic subjects that unlock opportunity” (DfE, 2017, p.22). But the DfE also positions decoding as a core component of the new *GCSE French, German and Spanish content* requirement, an area where KS3 students have negative attitudes and low confidence perhaps due to limited ability. It is possible that attitudes towards phonological awareness might present a barrier to language uptake and access at GCSE, which is at odds with current policy aims.

The neglect of phonics in the MFL classroom

Given apparent poor decoding ability and confidence amongst students, examination of current approaches to development of phonological awareness in English MFL classrooms must be considered to understand why this might be the case.

Woore (2007, 2010) argues that amongst MFL teaching practice there is an assumption that learners will implicitly learn to decode inductively, through ongoing exposure to L2. This means, he raises, that there is very little explicit, systematic GPC teaching. He suggests that this assumption arises from the belief that most L2 learners will have an existing understanding of how to decode in L1 and will bring these principles and processes naturally to their L2. However, he argues that learners risk applying L1 decoding rules to generate incorrect L2 pronunciation. It might be suggested, therefore, that limited phonological ability at KS3 is arising due a lack of explicit teaching.

Taking this further, Janczukowicz (2014) argues that the popularity of the “communicative approach” in MFL classrooms might also contribute to the apparent lack of decoding ability amongst beginner L2 learners. This approach’s focus on the communicative aims of language learning has similarly meant a reliance on implicit acquisition of GPC knowledge. Krashen (as cited in Janczukowicz, 2014) argues that the prevalence of this approach may contribute to the limited decoding ability of students as it neglects to consider that unlike younger children, older learners have greater facility with strategizing in language-learning and therefore may benefit from an explicit teaching approach. Although it is not possible here to assess the strength with which MFL teachers in England wholly commit to a communicative approach despite its widespread popularity, poor phonological awareness

amongst MFL students suggests that current approaches are not proving effective in developing decoding ability.

Finally, Woore (2007) also suggests that a largely implicit approach to phonological development may be preferable in today's MFL classroom as explicit instruction may be perceived negatively as difficult and demotivating. He argues that explicit teaching of GPC rules may highlight learners' inability to accurately pronounce words, making them acutely aware of their beginner learner status. Janczukowicz supports this argument, raising that the conscious-raising process of explicit phonics teaching can be "a very unpleasant one" (Janczukowicz, 2014, p.107) as students are made aware of phonological misconceptions. As a result of this negative perception, rather than tackle decoding inability head on, phonological teaching may be further neglected.

The widespread largely implicit approach to phonological development alongside research evidencing a lack of phonological awareness amongst students ultimately suggests, however, that decoding ability is not being implicitly adopted.

An opportunity for systematic phonological instruction

Despite the suggestion of initial discomfort in systematic phonological instruction (Janczukowicz, 2014), given the apparent ineffectiveness of the widespread implicit approach, it may represent an opportunity to improve L2 learner decoding ability, attitudes, and confidence.

Although research is limited into the impact of systematic instruction on decoding ability, some studies suggest potential benefits of this approach. Sturm's (2013) study into the impact of explicit phonics instruction on advanced L2 French learners in the US provides some compelling findings. The pronunciation of 11 students who experienced explicit phonics teaching in a dedicated French phonetics course improved considerably in comparison with 11 control group students whose phonological awareness was only able to develop through implicit acquisition through enrolment in French-taught courses, such as *French Civilization and Culture*. Although this study is limited by small participant numbers, and its focus on advanced L2 learners, it does suggest potential decoding ability and pronunciation benefits through explicit phonics teaching.

Furthermore, Woore's (2022) thematic examination of empirical studies on the impact of explicit phonics teaching corroborates Sturm's findings. He summarises the findings of several studies to

suggest that phonics instruction may have a positive effect on L2 decoding (ibid.). However, he acknowledges that studies in this space are limited in number and scope, and that more research is required to understand the impact of systematic GPC instruction on student decoding ability (ibid.). He and colleagues are currently conducting a systematic review of experimental studies of explicit phonics instruction in MFL to further these aims (ibid.).

Research questions

Following this literature review and to contribute to Woore's (2022) call for research into the impact of systematic decoding instruction, in this study I aim to address this through the following research questions (RQ), as seen in Table 1. Alongside ability and perceptions of ability, I have included a question on the impact of systematic phonics instruction on student confidence and attitudes; with changing GCSE requirements and apparent negative decoding perceptions, I believe these are important levers that must be considered alongside performance.

RQ1	How does introduction of systematic, explicit phonics teaching impact student decoding skills and pronunciation?
RQ2	How does introduction of systematic, explicit phonics teaching impact students' perception of their decoding skills and pronunciation?
RQ3	How do learners perceive the utility of explicit phonics study for their decoding skills and pronunciation?
RQ4	How does the introduction of regular explicit phonics teaching impact on student attitudes and confidence in reading aloud in the target language (TL)?

Table 1: Research Questions

Research Design

Research strategy

This study was conducted with a Year 8 class at an all-girl comprehensive school in the southeast of England. The class might be described as low to middle prior attainment. Of the 26 students, 18 are grouped in the 'middle' attainment band, tracking in line with Age-Related Expectations at KS3 of grades 4-6. Seven are in the 'lower' attainment band, tracking in line with Below Age-Related Expectations of grades 1-3. One student is in the 'higher' attainment band, tracking in line with Above

Age-Related Expectations of grades 7-9. Of the 26 pupils, 10 have a diagnosed special educational need (SEN) that may require special educational support, and four are in the Pupil Premium category (two students are in both categories).

The research was conducted with a beginner Italian class whose prior learning consisted of a year of instruction in Year 7. Italian was selected as the focus language because, as a non-NCELP language, there is not currently a systematic approach to phonics teaching in this language at the school. This is unlike French, German and Spanish which follow the NCELP schemes of work including explicit GPC teaching. Instead, in conversation with the class teacher and my own observations, phonics teaching in this class had until now broadly followed the communication-led, largely implicit approach, as discussed above. Given the prevalence of explicit phonics instruction in other languages at the school, however, there was high interest from the MFL department to conduct research into the impact of an explicit approach, and as a result, this Italian class presented a compelling opportunity to investigate this impact. I understand that Italian is considered a ‘phonetic language’, where there is a direct relationship between spelling and sound and as a result understand that findings cannot be found as truly generalizable across other languages, for example with French which has a “relative opaqueness of correspondence between its spoken system and its written system” (Erler & Macaro, 2011, p.497). However, the school context meant that Italian was the only option to assess the impact of *introducing* a systematic approach to phonics.

This consideration highlights that the study fits the category of action research as it reflects the four defining characteristics defined by Denscombe (2017). The study aims to assess the *practical change* to current practice by introducing an explicit phonics teaching initiative to a class considering evidence supporting the benefits of decoding in L2 learning and the imminent changes to the GCSE specification. Its *cyclical process* aims to inform possibilities for future practice change and investigation, and it is driven by active *participation* of myself as the research practitioner. Furthermore, as Koshy (2010) describes a further action research aim, the study contributes towards my professional development, allowing me to reflect on and make changes to my practice based on findings.

To ensure that my research was ethical I adhered to the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education’s ethics checklist and BERA’s Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018). All participants, including parents and guardians, were informed of the study and their right to withdraw

consent at any point. Furthermore, individual students in this study have been assigned with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

The intervention

The intervention took place over a sequence of six 50-minute lessons and involved the introduction of a systematic phonics teaching initiative. This consisted of a 10-to-15-minute explicit phonics teaching segment in each lesson. The phonics segment in each lesson was structured, as presented in Table 2.

1	Students asked to volunteer to read aloud a short sentence in front of the class including multiple instances of the lesson's target SSC
2	Whole-class choral repetition of the target SSC and SSC anchor word (meaning elicited)
3	Whole-class choral repetition of five cluster words containing the target SSC (meanings elicited)
4	Student activity with the aim of "aural recognition of the SSC", where students would relate the target phonemes to graphemes
5	Student activity with the aim of "practicing oral pronunciation of the SSC", where students would relate the target graphemes to phonemes
6	Students re-asked for volunteers to read aloud the same short sentence in front of the class including multiple instances of the lesson's target SSC. Students read aloud sentence in pairs

Table 2: Phonics intervention in-lesson sequence

Due to time constraints, three target graphemes were selected for systematic instruction. In discussion with the class teacher, the graphemes [uo], [ch], [sci/e] were chosen as they had presented decoding challenges during preparation for recent speaking assessments. They also differ significantly from English pronunciation.

Furthermore, these graphemes were selected as they appeared in core topic vocabulary for the sequence of lessons in which the intervention would take place. This was important for several reasons. Firstly, Woore (2022) argues that an important part of explicit phonics teaching may involve providing students with opportunities to revisit and practice the GPCs that they have been taught. I reasoned that contextualizing the target GPCs within topic vocabulary would allow students more opportunity to recognise and practice them beyond the short phonics segment. The six-lesson sequence meant that each SSC could be introduced and then revisited in a subsequent lesson.

Secondly, for ethical reasons, it would ensure that the intervention supported the wider lesson objectives and not detract from core learning. Thirdly, Woore (2007) argues that building GPC training into the “fabric of teaching” (p.180) rather than as one-off interventions can be more successful. Using SSCs from the topic context ensured that phonics segments were embedded into the ‘fabric’ of lessons, taking place at the point in the lesson that was most appropriate, for example after introduction of new vocabulary, or before a speaking activity. Finally, I aimed to support the development of the “referring back” strategy that Woore (2007) found was popular for decoding with students during his own research. He defines this strategy as ‘referring back’ to known words when justifying the pronunciation of unknown L2 words. In anchoring the target GPC in a familiar topic-based word, I hoped to support the use of this strategy amongst students.

Data collection

To address each RQ I used data collection methods summarised in Table 3 below.

	Research Question	Data Collection
RQ1	How does introduction of systematic, explicit phonics teaching impact student decoding skills and pronunciation?	Pre- and post-intervention reading aloud assessment
RQ2	How does introduction of systematic, explicit phonics teaching impact students’ perception of their decoding skills and pronunciation?	Pre- and post- intervention questionnaires Teacher observations
RQ3	How do learners perceive the utility of systematic, explicit phonics teaching for their decoding and pronunciation skills?	Post-intervention questionnaire Post-intervention interviews
RQ4	How does the introduction of systematic, explicit phonics teaching impact on student attitudes and confidence in reading aloud in the target language?	Pre- and post- intervention questionnaires

Table 3: Research Questions & Data Collection Methods

Reading aloud assessment

To assess pupils’ ability to correctly pronounce target graphemes before and after the intervention for RQ1 I used a reading aloud test. Larger scale studies might require the use of written tests for practical reasons however the small study sample meant that reading aloud tests were possible, which might be argued as a more accurate method of assessing decoding ability from print to sound (Erler, 2004;

Erler & Macaro, 2011). To gather baseline data before the intervention, for homework students were asked to record themselves reading aloud a short Italian text containing five instances of each target grapheme using the website Vocaroo.com. These instances were within words that, upon consultation with the class teacher, were either entirely new or not explicitly taught to students in the classroom context. As Woore (2022) argues, this ensures a more accurate assessment of the pupils' ability to decode the words and pronounce target graphemes, rather than recall words from memory. With the aim of supporting the wider sequence's objectives, the text took the form of a postcard describing a holiday to Italy last weekend. I explicitly asked students not to check pronunciation ahead of recording, however this possibility cannot be entirely discounted. I listened closely to the recordings and assessed pronunciation accuracy of individual graphemes as either correct, for a score of 1, or incorrect for a score of zero. Post-intervention, students were asked to record themselves reading the same text again. I listened to recordings and assessed accuracy again using the same approach. Given that a measure of subjectivity is involved in accurate pronunciation assessment, it might have been beneficial to use a second scorer to ensure greater reliability of results, however due to time constraints this was not possible. I removed any students from the data who had not submitted one or both recordings. I used Excel to create some basic charts to examine any change in students' decoding ability before and after the intervention.

Questionnaires

To address RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4, pre- and post-interview questionnaires were employed to gain insights into students' decoding ability perceptions, utility assessment, and attitudes. To support questionnaire response and completion rates, as Denscombe (2017) raises, I carefully considered respondent capabilities, motivation, and burden. I used accessible language (for example, 'reading aloud' instead of 'decoding'), visually engaging icons, and shortened questionnaires to essential questions only. To increase motivation, I included a covering statement on the questionnaire's purpose, which reiterated the anonymization of responses, and encouraged honesty to support response validity.

Furthermore, to reduce respondents' "mental effort" (Denscombe, 2017, p.188) all questions (except one) required a selection from a simple 4-point Likert Scale indicating strength of feeling relating to a question. A 4-point scale removed the option for students to select a neutral 'middle' stance, for example 'neither agree nor disagree'. This aimed to encourage thoughtful, potentially more valid,

reflection rather than fast but unreflective completion that a neutral position might have offered students. It could be suggested this has ethical implications as students are forced to take stance where they might not have one, however, to mitigate this risk the questionnaire's covering statement indicated that students could miss questions they were not comfortable answering. Furthermore, I understand that choosing a 4-point scale does not automatically ensure students will respond accurately (Denscombe, 2017), however, I believe that the efforts made in considering respondent motivation and capabilities should have helped to limit that risk.

Students completed the questionnaire before the intervention to gather baseline data. They completed a further questionnaire after the intervention containing some of the same questions. I used some basic Excel charts and tables to analyse any change across the intervention. The post-intervention questionnaire contained three additional questions explicitly asking students to reflect on the impact of the phonics initiative.

One open 'list' question could be argued to have increased respondents' mental effort. However, in constraining this more open question to a list format requiring only three words, I aimed to reduce additional effort. I coded responses to whether they were broadly 'positive', 'neutral', or 'negative', and created an Excel chart to understand any change across the intervention.

Interviews

To enrich quantitative findings in addressing RQ3, I interviewed 16 students after the intervention to gain qualitative insights on perceptions of the utility of the intervention. Students were chosen in discussion with the class teacher to represent a range of prior attainment levels within the class. The interviews were short and semi-structured; whilst I had key areas to discuss with students, I stayed flexible as discussions developed (Denscombe, 2017). Having taught this class for a term, I observed them to be a broadly quiet and introverted group. I decided to conduct interviews in six small groups of two to four students to encourage contributions as I was concerned that students might be nervous and less forthcoming in one-to-one settings. Interviews took place during form-time to avoid a negative perception of participation if they had taken place during breaktime or lunch. At the start of interviews, I explained the context of the project, encouraged students to answer honestly, and assured that responses would be anonymised. I transcribed the interviews, and coded and categorised the data to identify key concepts (Denscombe, 2017). Despite efforts to encourage student engagement,

interviews still found students to be hesitant in responding therefore I will include findings where they provide additional insights, however I will not use them as primary data in my discussion.

Teacher observations

To address RQ2 on student decoding ability perception and if this changed across the intervention, I also gathered data in the form of systematic observation (Denscombe, 2017). During the lesson, the class teacher observed and logged the frequency with which students volunteered to read aloud a sentence containing multiple instances of the target grapheme immediately before and after the lesson's phonics segment. This measure is not entirely reliable due to potential observer effect when students become aware that they are the focus of research observation and may change behaviour as a result (Denscombe, 2017). Furthermore, to prompt the observable behaviour I framed the class question as "who can volunteer to read this sentence out in front of the class?"; there is a risk here that this potentially frames the results more as a measure of student reading aloud confidence in front of the class rather than ability perception. I used an Excel chart to analyse any change across the phonics segment. I will include these findings where they provide useful insights, however I will not consider them a primary data source.

Findings

RQ1: How does the introduction of systematic, explicit phonics teaching impact student decoding skills and pronunciation?

To address RQ1 the primary data source was pre- and post-intervention student reading aloud tests. These allowed for comparison of baseline data on students' accuracy in decoding target SSCs before and after the intervention to analyse any change. Of a class of 26 students, 19 submitted both a pre- and post-intervention recording that will be analysed in these findings. Nine of these students have a diagnosed SEN.

The findings, as visualised in Figure 1, show a notable improvement in student pronunciation across target graphemes following the intervention. On average, pre-intervention the sample pronounced the [uo] grapheme correctly in less than half of instances, however post-intervention they pronounced the [uo] grapheme accurately in just over three quarters of cases. This represents a significant increase

of 36%. Similarly, for the [ch] grapheme the pre-intervention sample collectively demonstrated accurate pronunciation just under half of instances. Following the intervention, this rose to an average accurate pronunciation rate of just over half of instances. This represents an increase of 10%, which, whilst smaller than the improvement with the [uo] grapheme, is an increase of note. Finally, baseline data showed that the average pronunciation accuracy rate of the [sci/e] grapheme was considerably the lowest ahead of the intervention, at around a fifth of instances. The post intervention assessment found this increase to collective accuracy in almost two fifths of instances. This represents an increase of 21%. These improvement rates demonstrate that across target graphemes, there was an improvement in pupil's decoding ability and pronunciation following the intervention.

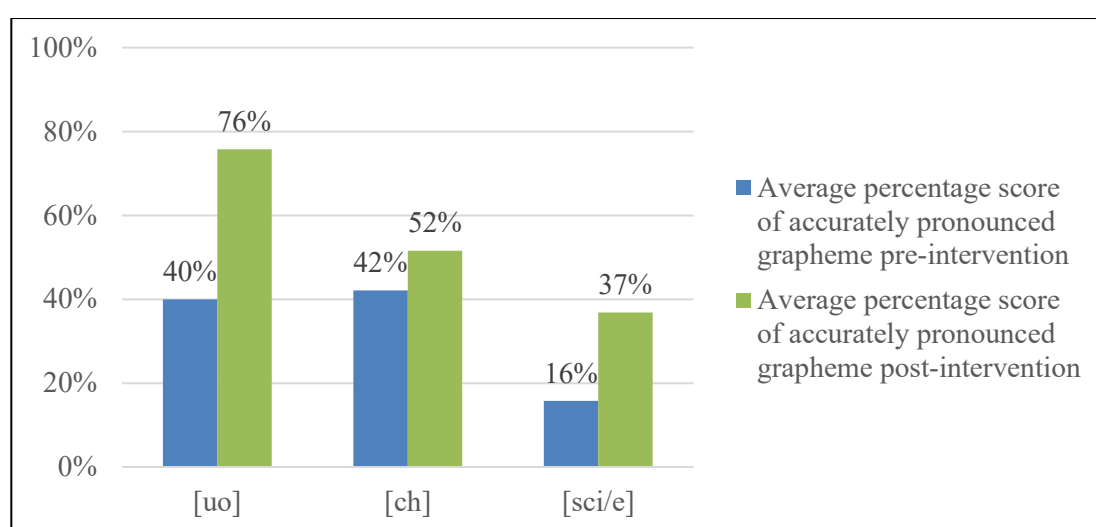


Figure 1: A chart showing average pupil progress in decoding target graphemes [uo], [ch], [sci/e]

Given the high number of SEN students in the sample, at almost half the sample, as a further consideration I compared the difference between progress made in SEN students' decoding ability and non-SEN students, as presented in Figure 2. Interestingly, whilst the average correct pronunciation rate of SEN students before and after the intervention was lower than non-SEN students, the percentage increase of accurately pronounced graphemes was similar across groups. Collectively, the average correct pronunciation rate of non-SEN students increased by 24%, and SEN students increased by 20%. This suggests that across both groups, students' ability to correctly pronounce target graphemes improved at a similar rate following the intervention.

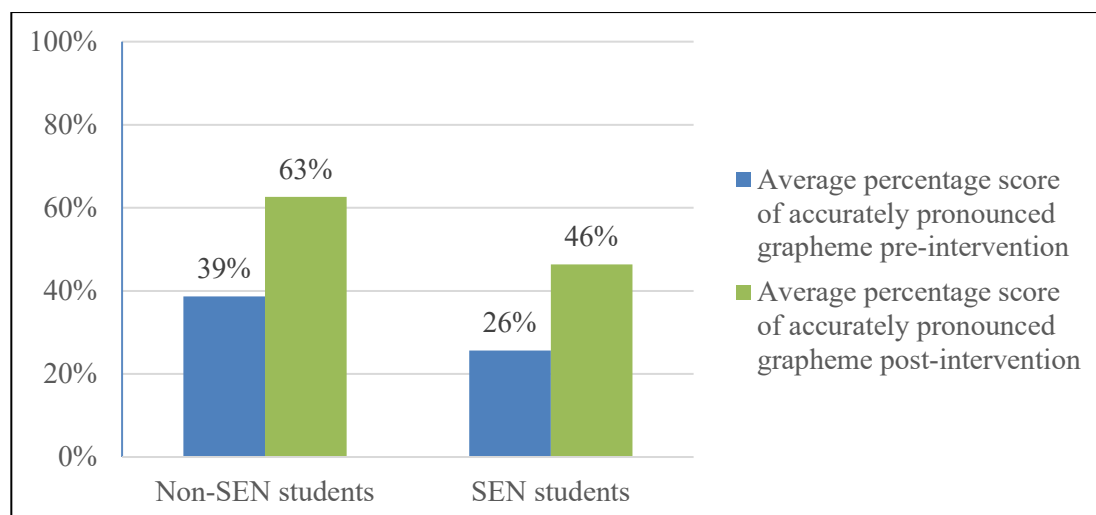


Figure 2: A chart showing average pupil progress of non-SEN and SEN students in decoding target graphemes

RQ2: How does introduction of systematic, explicit phonics teaching impact students' perception of their decoding skills and pronunciation?

A further consideration of the impact of systematic phonics instruction is on students' *perceptions* of their decoding ability and pronunciation. The primary data source to address RQ2 came from comparing responses to pre- and post-intervention questionnaires. Of a class of 26 students, 5 students were absent for either one or both questionnaires. The remaining 21 student responses will be analysed as part of these findings.

In response to the question "How good do you think you are at reading aloud in Italian?", as shown in Figure 3, pre-intervention data revealed that most, 14, students perceived themselves to be "quite good". Five thought they were "quite bad", and "very good" and "very bad" were each selected by one pupil. After the intervention, the number of students who reported that they were 'quite good' increased by three students to a total of 17. Three students now perceived themselves to be 'very good', increasing the total by two following the intervention. No students thought they were 'quite bad', a reduction of five from the baseline data. The same student from the pre-intervention survey reported again their perception of being "very bad" at reading aloud in Italian. From this data, a slight move towards more positive perceptions of student ability to decode following the intervention is apparent.

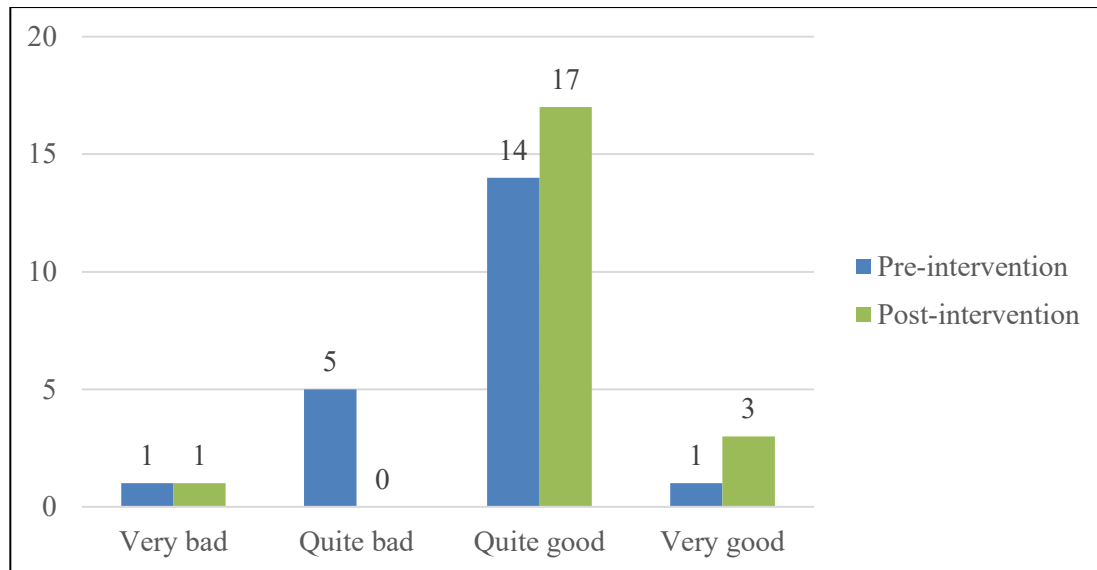


Figure 3: A chart showing student questionnaire responses to the question “How good do you think you are at reading aloud in Italian?”

In response to the question “How good do you think you are at Italian pronunciation?” as shown in Figure 4, pre-intervention data revealed that the vast majority of pupils, 19, thought they were “quite good”. Two thought they were “very good”. For negative perceptions, four reported that they were “quite bad”, and no students selected “very bad”. After the intervention, those reporting to be “quite good” at Italian pronunciation had dropped by 10 to 9 pupils, however the number reporting that they were “very good” increased by five to a total of 7 students. However, the number reporting that they were “quite bad” at pronunciation also increased by one to five students. Again, no students reported that they were “very bad” at pronunciation. Interestingly, only two of the original pupils to have reported themselves to be “quite bad” maintained this stance post-intervention; the two other students had increased their pronunciation perception to “very good”. Furthermore, the additional three post-intervention pupils had felt their perception move from “quite good” to “quite bad” pronunciation after the intervention. To summarise, the data suggest a slight move towards more strongly positive perceptions of pronunciation ability after the intervention. However, the number of students with negative perceptions remained consistent and had seen some students’ pronunciation ability perception become more negative, despite the class’s average positive improvement in performance.



Figure 4: A chart showing student questionnaire responses to the question “How good do you think you are at Italian pronunciation?”

Another data source to address RQ2 during the intervention itself was teacher observations. When asked to read aloud a sentence containing multiple instances of the target grapheme immediately before and after each lesson’s phonics segment, bar one exception in lesson 4, the number of volunteers who felt able to read the sentence aloud increased within each lesson, as shown in Figure 5. This might suggest that some students felt that their decoding ability increased immediately following the explicit phonics teaching segment.

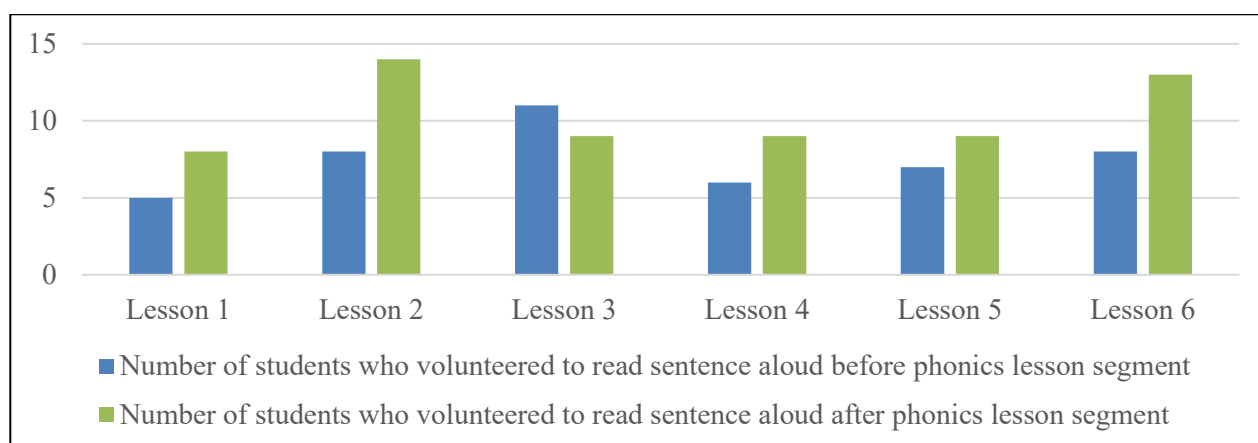


Figure 5: A chart showing the number of students who volunteered to read a sentence containing multiple instances of the lesson’s target grapheme aloud in front of the class immediately before and after that lesson’s phonics sequence

RQ3: How do learners perceive the utility of systematic, explicit phonics teaching for their decoding and pronunciation skills?

The primary data source to address RQ3 was the post-intervention questionnaire which had 21 responses. When asked closed questions to reflect on whether they thought the intervention had been useful for their reading aloud and pronunciation skills, as shown in Figure 6, most students, 17, responded positively. This suggests that most students believed that the systematic phonics teaching had been beneficial for these skills.

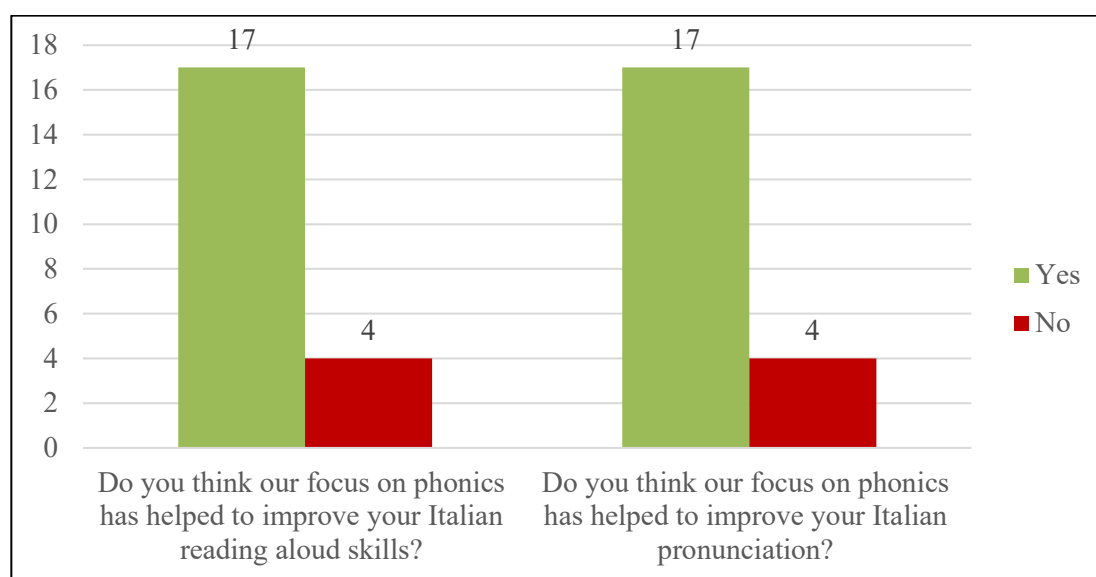


Figure 6: A chart showing student questionnaire responses to questions on their perception of the utility of an explicit phonics initiative

A further source of data to provide more insight into addressing RQ3 came from interview responses. Of the 16 students who were interviewed in 6 small groups, 13 had responded positively that they found the explicit phonics teaching useful. When asked for more detail on the perceived benefits, the most common theme was the initiative's positive impact on confidence. One student said:

Maisy: "The more you do it, the more confident you get over not just the one sound, but across lots of sounds."

The group's three other students agreed with this reflection, and five of the six interview groups raised this theme which the whole group agreed with.

A further perspective on the utility of the intervention was that it gave students more opportunity to practice pronunciation. One student said:

Anika: "Practicing helps you remember it a bit more. You can use that word you've seen in the lesson to remember the sounds in other ones"

The group's three other students agreed with this statement, which was raised in three further groups.

Another student raised the benefits of the contextualisation of target grapheme teaching for learning and memory. One student said:

Syeda: "It's helpful because I know they're sounds and words that I'm going to use rather than words I will probably never see"

The group's two other students agreed with this statement, which was raised in two further groups.

On the other hand, as shown in Figure 6 above, four pupils responded that they had not found the intervention to be helpful for decoding or pronunciation skills. In revisiting these pupils' reading aloud test recordings, collectively (minus one student who was excluded from the sample), their accurate pronunciation rate had increased by 31% from pre- and post-intervention analysis. Interestingly, the four students who reported to find no utility in the phonics initiative all have a diagnosed SEN.

Two students who gave this response were interviewed together to gather additional insights. When asked why they had not found the phonics focus useful for their learning one student raised an interesting perspective that it might be the nature of the activities that were not felt to be helpful:

Amy: "Stuff like this doesn't help. I have to fidget in lessons, and I can't really do that in these activities so it's not helpful".

RQ4: How does the introduction of systematic, explicit phonics teaching impact student attitudes and confidence in reading aloud in the target language?

To address RQ4 the primary source of data was pre- and post-intervention questionnaires.

To understand any change in confidence levels, students were asked to respond to the question "How confident do you feel about reading aloud in Italian?" in the pre- & post-intervention questionnaire. As shown in Figure 7, pre-intervention data found that most students, 11, felt "quite confident" at

reading aloud in Italian. However, only three fewer students, eight, stated that they were ‘not very confident’. Four students claimed to feel ‘very confident, whilst two felt ‘not confident at all’. Following the intervention, the number of students feeling ‘very confident’ rose by five to nine students, which was one more than the eight now reporting to feel ‘quite confident’. The number of pupils feeling ‘not very confident’ reduced by five to three students, and only one reported to feel ‘not confident at all’. These findings suggest a general movement towards more positive feelings of confidence in reading aloud following the phonics intervention.

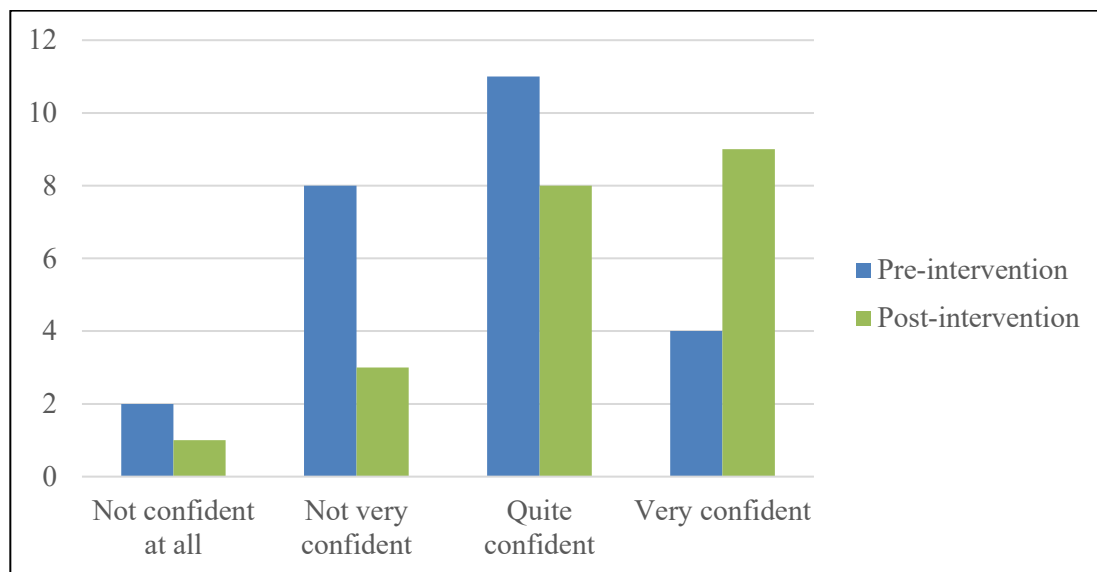


Figure 7: A chart showing student questionnaire responses to the question “How confident do you feel about reading aloud in Italian?”

Further evidence of the impact on attitudes towards reading aloud in TL can be found in comparing pre- and post-intervention questionnaire responses to the open question “Write three words describing how you feel about reading aloud in Italian?”. I have coded responses to whether they suggest positive, neutral, or negative attitudes, as shown in Table 4 (next page). Interestingly, the most popular word used after the intervention was “confident”, further suggesting a positive impact on student attitudes in this regard.

Pre-intervention responses	Post-intervention responses
Positive (17): Confident x 4 Enjoyable x 2 Excited x 2 Fun x 2 Happy x 2 Helpful x 2 Good Interesting Relaxed	Positive (40): Confident x 10 Happy x 5 Understanding x 3 Easy x 2 Fun x 2 Improved x 2 Reassuring x 2 Better Easy to pronounce words Efficient Energetic Enjoyable Excited Focused Good Great Helpful Helps my confidence Rewarding Thankful Understood
Neutral (12): Fine x 5 ok x 5 Normal Reasonable	Neutral (8): Fine x 5 Normal x 2 indifferent
Negative (25): Nervous x 6 Scared x 4 Hard x 2 Worried x 2 Bad Confused Difficult Don't like Hesitant Horrendous Not confident Not existed Not nice Risk-taking Uncomfortable	Negative (9): Scared x 3 Nervous x 2 No Not confidence Not interested Stressful Unhappy Worried

Table 4: student responses to the question “write 3 words describing how you feel about reading aloud in Italian” in pre- & post-intervention questionnaires

In Figure 8 below, I have analysed responses to understand any overarching change in attitude. The number of positive responses more than doubled following the intervention, and the number of negative responses reduced by 16. These findings suggest a general movement towards more positive attitudes towards reading aloud in TL following the intervention.

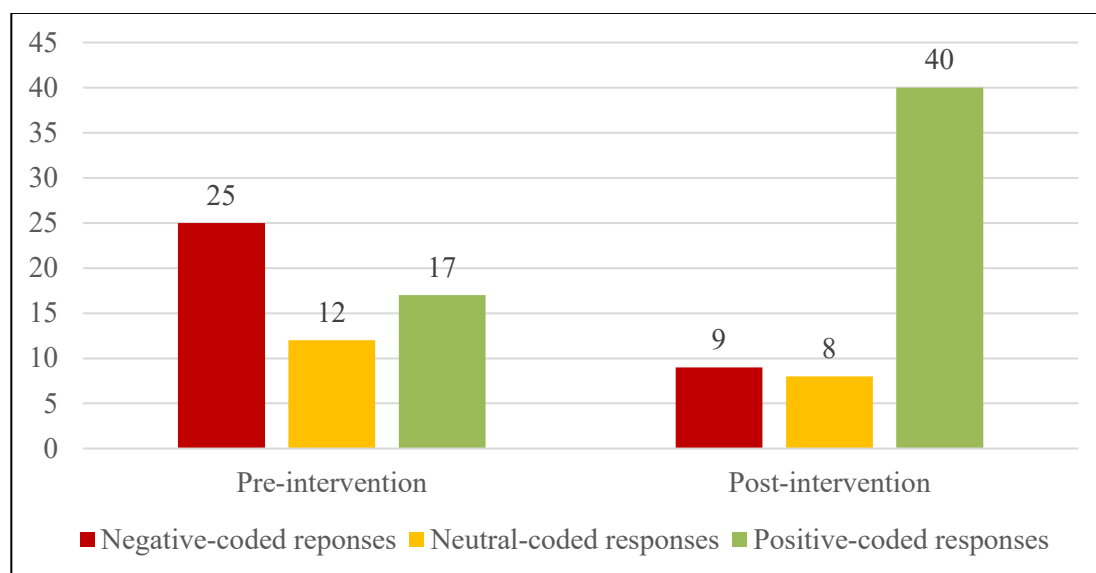


Figure 8: A chart showing student questionnaire responses to the question “write three words describing how you feel about reading aloud in Italian?”, coded by negative, neutral, or positive

Discussion

The collective decoding and pronunciation improvement suggests that, in addressing RQ1, the introduction of a systematic phonics initiative may lead to improvement of these skills. This corroborates the findings of Sturm’s (2013) study and Woore’s (2022) thematic analysis that similarly suggest the potential performance benefits of this approach. Alongside this, in addressing RQ2, findings suggest there may also be a positive correlation between pupil decoding and pronunciation ability and *perception* of that ability, as they collectively both improved significantly following the intervention. These improvements are particularly interesting in the context of English secondary schools where decoding proficiency and progression in KS3 has been found to be limited (Erler, 2004; Erler & Macaro, 2011; Woore, 2009), potentially due to the context of a widespread largely implicit approach to GPC knowledge in the classroom (Janczukowicz, 2014; Woore 2007, 2010). Given the argued importance of phonological awareness in L2 learning (Erler, 2004; Janczukowicz, 2014; Woore, 2007, 2009) and new GCSE languages content requirements (DfE, 2022a), these

findings, therefore, may add some small evidence to support recent policy recommendations, that pupils should gain *systematic* GPC knowledge in their new language (DfE, 2022a; Ofsted, 2021; Teaching Schools Council, 2016). The decoding, pronunciation, and ability perception improvements of this study lend support to the argument that explicit phonological instruction could be beneficial for student decoding ability.

Briefly, however, considering specifically whether a systematic approach at KS3 adequately lays the foundations for new GCSE phonological requirements, the study's findings must be approached with caution. This study's Italian language focus mean that findings cannot be wholly applied to those impacted by changing GCSE content, namely French, Spanish, and German, due to the differing phonological attributes and challenges across these languages. Studies are needed across languages to understand the wider impact of a systematic approach.

There are further limitations in studies of this nature that impact the extent to which it answers RQ1 and RQ2. Firstly, the sample's small size, demographic context, and prior-attainment mix mean that findings are not representative of the wider population.

Furthermore, in using the same text in pre- and post-intervention reading aloud assessments there may be limitations. Unlike Woore (2009) whose study used a same-text decoding assessment that bookended a year, this study's considerably shorter, four-week timescale means that improvement rates from same-text assessments may have benefited from practice effect (*ibid.*); decoding improvement may have been impacted by students having more opportunity to practice reading the same text aloud, rather than wholly because of systematic phonics instruction. A future short study might use texts that are similar in nature (for example, duration, word challenge etc.) but with different target grapheme words to mitigate this risk.

Taking this further, the study's decoding ability and perception findings could be argued to reveal the intervention's impact more specifically on students' short-term memory in decoding rather than longer-term, wider phonological awareness. A future study might look to cover a longer time to specifically look at this impact. However, it can still be argued that the study suggests decoding ability and perception improvement following short-term introduction systematic phonics instruction.

Furthermore, it is possible that the improvement in student decoding performance is not attributable to the explicit phonics teaching initiative alone. Given that key graphemes were specifically selected

from topic vocabulary, it is possible that in the absence of this explicit instruction, students might have ‘inductively’ gained a degree GPC knowledge as part of the usual communicative-led approach. A future study might include a control group who cover the same topic vocabulary but without explicit phonics teaching to understand the impact of the *conscious* phonics instruction intervention against the class’s regular *unconscious* approach. Given the limited decoding progress found amongst students who generally experience this implicit approach, I believe, however, that it can be reasonably argued that the improvement is mostly attributable to the systematic instruction initiative rather than inductive acquisition.

Despite these limitations, the study can be seen to offer some small evidence of the positive impact of a systematic phonics intervention on pupils’ short-term decoding ability, pronunciations, and perceptions. It is apparent, however, that a larger, longer-term, more generalisable study is required to assess its impact more effectively across students and languages.

Considering RQ3, findings suggest that students may perceive systematic phonics teaching as useful for L2 decoding skills and pronunciation. It is notable, however, that the four students who did not perceive any utility all had a diagnosed SEN, despite evidence that their decoding and pronunciation had improved at a similar rate as the non-SEN students in the sample. One student raised that the activities themselves were not felt to be useful. A future study might look to explicitly explore the impact of a systematic phonics initiative, and different activity types, on SEN students’ decoding ability and utility perception to explore this further.

Furthermore, in interviews the primary reason students raised for their perception of the intervention’s utility was its positive impact on their confidence in reading aloud. Alongside questionnaire responses showing a move towards positive attitudes and improvement in feelings of confidence this suggests that, for RQ4, systematic phonics instruction may have a significant positive impact on reading aloud confidence and attitudes. These findings are particularly interesting due to the current tension within educational policy between a drive for language uptake at GCSE (DfE, 2017; Teaching Schools Council, 2016) and the foregrounding of phonics in new GCSE content for French, German and Spanish (DfE, 2022a). These findings suggest that systematic phonics instruction might help to improve attitudes towards reading aloud and help avoid the new phonics GCSE pillar representing a barrier to desired uptake.

The collective positive impact across RQs suggests that even in the face of potential initial discomfort in systematic phonics teaching (Janczukowicz, 2014), it may bring benefits to student decoding ability, pronunciation, confidence, and attitudes that support L2 learning at school and beyond.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study aimed to explore whether systematic phonics teaching might represent an opportunity to improve English secondary school students' skills in and attitudes toward L2 reading aloud. The rationale for this focus was research findings that reveal poor proficiency, progress, and perceptions of decoding from print to sound (Erler, 2004; Erler & Macaro, 2011; Woore, 2009) that, some have argued, may be due to a degree of neglect in the MFL classroom (Janczukowicz, 2014; Woore, 2007, 2010). It aimed to contribute in a small way towards the substantial research called for (Woore, 2022) into the impact of a different, systematic approach to phonics with the aim of supporting development of MFL teaching practice in this area. This is both due to its argued benefits for L1 and L2 acquisition (Erler, 2004; Janczukowicz, 2014; Woore, 2007, 2009), but also changing GCSE requirements (DfE, 2022a) and a policy drive to encourage language learning beyond KS3 (DfE, 2022a; Teaching Schools Councils, 2016).

Despite its limitations, this study can be seen to provide some evidence that corroborate the positive findings of similar studies in this area (Sturm, 2013; Woore, 2022); the introduction of a systematic phonics teaching initiative may have a positive impact on student reading aloud ability, and perception of that ability. I recommend that further research is conducted, of course, to explore the impact of this explicit phonics teaching approach on a much larger scale and in a way that is more generalisable across schools and students to inform future phonics teaching practice with stronger justification.

Furthermore, the findings suggest a positive impact of systematic phonics teaching on confidence and attitudes towards L2 reading aloud. I would tentatively suggest that explicit phonics teaching may be a powerful tool to cultivate the confidence of students in L2 reading aloud which, it would be interesting to consider, could extend to confidence in wider TL use. A further area of study might consider this question; exploring whether a systematic teaching approach to phonics impacts more broadly on student confidence and willingness to use TL.

Furthermore, the study has raised additional considerations that I would recommend for study. This includes the impact of a phonics initiative with a focus on SEN students, and impacts across different time scales, and across languages. I also recommend that detailed research is conducted into the effectiveness of different types of phonics teaching activities to inform practice recommendations in more detail.

As a further outcome from the positive findings of this study, I intend to introduce regular explicit phonics teaching into my own practice to support the phonological development of my students. I also intend to continue to experiment with different types of activity to understand their effectiveness and continually develop my practice in this area. Due to current limited explicit phonics teaching in schools, I would recommend that MFL teacher colleagues similarly experiment with introducing systematic phonics teaching into their practice, and that methods and techniques are shared across the MFL teaching community to support wider practice development.

Finally, as my colleague suggested, although “knowledge of phonics allows students to take off in L2 learning”, today students seem to be stalling in this regard as they lack L2 phonological understanding. However, through the findings of this study and its corroboration of wider research, there is an opportunity through systematic phonological teaching to equip students with the tools they need to take flight.

References

- British Educational Research Association [BERA]. (2018). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (Fourth ed.)*. BERA London.
- Denscombe, M. (2017). *The good research guide: For small-scale social research projects (Sixth ed.)*. Open University Press.
- Department for Education [DfE]. (2013). *The national curriculum in England: framework document*. DfE.
- Department for Education [DfE]. (2017). *Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential: A plan for improving social mobility through education*.
- Department for Education [DfE]. (2022a). *French, German and Spanish GCSE subject content*. DfE.

- Department for Education [DfE]. (2022b, January 14). *Reforms to encourage more students to take up language GCSEs*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/reforms-to-encourage-more-students-to-take-up-language-gcse#:~:text=The%20revised%20GCSEs%20will%20start,families'%20in%20higher%20tier%20GCSE>
- Erler, L. (2004). Near-beginner learners of French are reading at a disability level. *Francophonie*, 30, 9-15.
- Erler, L., & Macaro, E. (2011). Decoding Ability in French as a Foreign Language and Language Learning Motivation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 95(4), 496-518.
- Janczukowicz, K. (2014). *Teaching English pronunciation at the secondary school level*. Peter Lang Edition.
- Koshy, V. (2010). *Action research for improving educational practice a step-by-step guide (2nd ed.)*. SAGE.
- Ofsted. (2021). *Research review series: languages*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-research-review-series-languages/curriculum-research-review-series-languages#pillars-progression>
- Sturm, J. (2013). Explicit phonetics instruction in L2 French: A global analysis of improvement. *System (Linköping)*, 41(3), 654-662.
- Teaching Schools Councils. (2016). *Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review*. Retrieved from https://ncelp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/MFL_Pedagogy_Review_Report_TSC_PUBLISHED_VERSION_Nov_2016_1_.pdf
- Woore, R. (2007). 'Weisse Maus in meinem Haus': using poems and learner strategies to help learners decode the sounds of the L2. *The Language Learning Journal*, 35(2), 175-188.
- Woore, R. (2009). Beginners' progress in decoding L2 French: some longitudinal evidence from English modern foreign languages classrooms. *The Language Learning Journal*, 37(1), 3-18.

- Woore, R. (2010). Thinking aloud about L2 decoding: an exploration of the strategies used by beginner learners when pronouncing unfamiliar French words. *The Language Learning Journal*, 38(1), 3-17.
- Woore, R. (2022). What can second language acquisition research tell us about the phonics 'pillar'?. *The Language Learning Journal*, 1-14.

