

The design of a Maltese Literacy Programme for the Early Years

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Abstract: This paper explains the process of developing a Maltese reading scheme which also involved the implementation of a teaching programme. The scheme is intended for five to six-year old children at Year One Primary school level, that is, at the stage when they are introduced to literacy. Until this project came into being there had never been any scientific studies that provided a sound linguistic basis for the development of reading schemes in Maltese. On the other hand, there were a couple of psycholinguistic investigations and classroom observation studies that gave us basic background information about the acquisition of literacy in Maltese. In the Maltese context this research study is unique and provides a road-map for the further elaboration of initial reading material. It brings together two fundamental strands: approaches to literacy; and the choice of vocabulary that is most suitable for this purpose. This article describes the linguistic spade work that was necessary for the structured build-up of syllabification, word and sentence reading, and illustrates the pedagogical approaches to literacy, such as storytelling and multi-sensory activities, all of them being an integral part of the reading programme.

Keywords: Maltese, reading scheme, literacy, Early Childhood Education

The rational

Reading is an essential tool by which we access information and increase our knowledge of the world around us. Additionally, for school age children, the ability to read determines their academic success. In any subject matter, reading and comprehension are fundamental skills. Therefore, it is very important that educators (and parents/carers) provide the right conditions for children to learn to read confidently and fluently, and to read with understanding. The development of literacy can be achieved through guided practice, through apprenticeship with an adult, in a rich literacy environment

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where children meet different books and are involved in various literacy activities.

When children attend Maltese kindergartens (age 3-5), they learn to recognise the letters of the alphabet and they also practise writing a certain number of letters which usually are straight-lined like for example 'i', 'l', 't' and 'v'. Reading skills start being taught formally in the first year of the Primary school and it is expected that by the end of that scholastic year the children will be able to read words and even sentences. Therefore, in this particular period, children go through a lot of literacy development and the literacy skills acquired at this time will serve as the basis for further learning across the curriculum. Thus, it is essential that the methods used to teach children to read be in parallel with their psychological and intellectual development. They also need to be gradual and systematic, in order for the children to acquire confidence in reading.

Studies on the methodology of teaching early literacy in Malta (Firman, 2007; Spiteri, 1998; Cini & Dimech, 1995) have shown that the reading books that are being used in class are affecting to a great extent the way reading is presented to the children. As the Maltese readers are not graded linguistically, and are not based on a reading scheme, this may result in children not being taught reading skills in a gradual and systematic way. In Maltese reading lessons, children are mostly required to make use of their visual and auditory senses. However, there are children who learn better when they also make use of the sense of touch, and when movement is included in the reading activity. Therefore, such children may not be benefitting fully from the current methodology.

These factors have driven me to carry out a research project on the teaching of reading in the first year of Primary school. This article is extracted from that study, whereby I developed a Maltese reading scheme based on teaching children to read through graded steps of syllabification. My project also involved the creation of resources such as books, worksheets and games to be used in the reading lessons (Sammut, 2009).

The ability to read

Reading is more than simply recognising letters and words. Making sense of a text involves complex control by both reader and writer of how language works and how texts are constructed. Reading is a process of making sense from print, and involves language and thinking (Reardon, Valentino & Shores, 2012; Massaro 2012). Children are equipped for learning to produce and comprehend spoken language, but they are not equipped for learning to decode written language easily, and educators need to understand the

complexities and processes involved in acquiring reading ability (Massaro, 2012; Risse, 2014).

In her seminal work on reading, Ehri (1991) identifies five different ways which children use to read words during their literacy development. These are: sounding out and blending letters; pronouncing and blending familiar spelling patterns; sight word reading; the use of analogy; and the use of context cues.

Indeed, one way to read words is **sight reading**. When readers read words by sight, they access information stored in their memory from previous experiences of reading those words (Ehri, 1992). Sight word reading enables children to recognise the pronunciation and meaning of words automatically, that is, without any need for decoding. In the classroom, some ways of doing this are more effective than others (Kupzyk, Daly & Anderson, 2011).

People also read words by **analogy**. Readers may read a new word by recognising how its spelling is similar to a word they already know as a sight word (Ehri, 1998). For example, they read *coat* by analogy to *goat*. Goswami (1990; 2012) and Holopainen, Ahonen and Lyytinen (2002) found that beginning readers can use their knowledge of rhyming words to read words by analogy.

It is also possible to read words by **using context cues** such as pictures, and the preceding text, to predict upcoming words. Readers can use their knowledge about language, their knowledge of the world, and their memory for the text already read to guess the identities of some words. Studies conducted by Perfetti (1985) and Kotchoubey and El-Khoury (2014) have shown that context exerts a much stronger effect on word identification performance of younger and less skilled readers. It helps to reduce the time and effort that they must invest in orthographically difficult words, and thus it significantly increases their capacity for comprehending the text. But Adams (1990) warns that over-reliance on contextual clues should be a source of concern rather than pride for the educator for it is a strong sign that the reader's orthographic knowledge and skills have not been properly developed.

Reading is assisted also by the meaning, or **semantic structure** (Yang, Cheng & Yang, 2014) of the material, and also by its **syntactic or grammatical structure**. Meaning establishes expectancy on the part of the reader, defining the contents of the material. Knowledge of the syntactic structure will affect expectancy as to what type of words is likely to appear, and in what order, and this will enable the child to read correctly (Funke & Sieger, 2012).

Several studies (Ball & Blachman, 1991; Bradley and Bryant, 1985; Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1990) have shown that **spelling** helps reading because of the fact that spelling instruction helps to cultivate students' knowledge of the alphabetic system which benefits processes used in reading. Foorman, Francis, Novy, and Liberman (1991) found that students who were taught to sound out and blend during first grade exhibited superior spelling ability at the end of the year when compared with students who were not taught explicit decoding but received other forms of letter-sound training. Therefore, the way students practise reading words can influence their ability to spell the words. Instruction that improves students' general knowledge of the alphabetic system through reading benefits their spelling ability as well (Ehri, 1997; Ehri 2014).

Although there is currently no consensual model of spelling development, much research indicates that children use both phonological and orthographic strategies with an age-related progression from phonological strategies toward orthographic strategies (e.g., Goswami, 2012; Stage & Wagner, 1992; Varnhagen, Boechler & Steffler, 1999; Ehri 2014). Children progress in their ability to spell from a stage of over-reliance on sound to strategies that incorporate sound, spelling patterns, and semantics (Templeton, 2003).

Good spellers use a larger number of strategies (Ouellette, 2010; Narter, 2013; Sadana, 2013). Good spellers are more likely to spell polysyllabic words by breaking them into parts and applying spelling patterns rather than into a sequence of sounds, and they used more visual mental imagery. Sadoski (2004) found that increasing student awareness of grapheme-phoneme relationships and syllable structure should be effective in learning to spell. This has been substantiated by Cardoso-Martins, Mesquita and Ehri (2010).

When it comes to poor readers, Adams (1990) says that their difficulty may be due most of all to a poorly developed knowledge of spelling patterns. She adds that if a reader tries to identify a long word by sounding out its individual letters, he or she would run out of memory space long before he or she was done. For the skilled reader, the perception of words and syllables is effortless, and automatically driven by the associative connections among letters in their memory. Unless unskilled readers are wholly familiar with the identities of individual letters and encouraged to attend to the spellings of words, they may not develop the orthographic knowledge on which this system depends (Adams, 1990).

Systematic Phonics

As we have seen from the literature review so far, it is important that children learn effective sounding-out strategies that will allow them to decode words

they have never seen in print. Efficient decoding strategies permit readers to quickly and automatically translate the letters or spelling patterns of written words into speech sounds so that they can identify words and gain rapid access to their meanings. Children must learn to identify words quickly and effortlessly, so that they can focus on the meaning of what they are reading (Texas Reading Initiative, 2002). Torgerson, Brooks & Hull (2006) recommend that since there is evidence that teaching systematic phonics benefits children's reading accuracy, it should be part of every literacy teacher's repertoire and a routine part of literacy teaching.

Gates & Yale (2011) found that programmes that included systematic phonics resulted in significantly better word recognition, better spelling, better vocabulary, and better reading comprehension at least through the third grade (where the availability of any data tapered off). The advantage of systematic phonics was just as great and perhaps greater with children of lower entry abilities or socio-economic backgrounds as it was with readier and more privileged children. De Graaff, Bosman, Hasselman & Verhoeven (2009) found that where explicit, systematic phonics was used, the gains were significantly larger than any of the other instructional methods.

Research has shown that a language of regular orthography like Maltese tends to give rise to higher levels of phonological awareness (Cossu, Shankweiler, Liberman, Katz & Tola, 1988; Richards, Bernenger & Fayol, 2008). Firman (2007), who looked at the initial stages of literacy in Maltese/English bilingual children confirms this. Martinelli (1996) even suggests that Maltese children come to school with a pre-existing, if rudimentary, explicit phonemic awareness. This awareness then undergoes considerable development through the formal teaching processes that take place in the first year of schooling.

The in-depth studies by Martinelli (1996), and Firman (2007), show that awareness of the phoneme is central for attainment in Maltese word reading. In Martinelli's study (1996) a good explicit phonemic representation was shown to be largely sufficient for beginning reading and spelling ability in Maltese. Decoding skills related to the ability to break up words into phonological components, particularly at the level of the phoneme, are the strongest contributor to reading development across both English and Maltese (Firman, 2007). Furthermore, in Martinelli's (1996) study, knowledge of letter names with phoneme segmentation ability were more significant than measures of intelligence and language ability (vocabulary and sentence comprehension). This indicated the importance of early experience of print and knowledge about phonemes for the Maltese child when he or she comes to read and spell in the early years of school. A good grasp of letter-sound knowledge not only aids children to decode words in Maltese but may also help them to encode words and build sentences (Martinelli, 1996).

Firman (2007) says that “the nature of the orthography also appears to facilitate the spelling of Maltese regular words” (p. 251). Her study has shown that spelling is a strong contributor for reading and therefore it provides support for a reciprocal relationship between reading and spelling. Maltese being a language of regular orthography also makes it easier to segment than a language of less transparent orthography (Firman, 2007).

Spiteri (1998) investigated the methods teachers were using to introduce literacy in Maltese to children in kindergarten and in year one classes. He found that the phonics method was the most frequently used, followed by the look-and-say method. However these methods were being used out of any context and spelling was not being taught in relation to any other literacy activity.

Pace Gellel’s study (2004) was aimed at devising and validating a phonological awareness programme for Maltese pre-school children. From its implementation and evaluation it resulted that the most effective sections of the programme were related to syllable segmentation, phoneme segmentation at the word initial position, phoneme segmentation at the word final position and alliteration. On the other hand, syllable blending, verbal memory and rhyme were not found to be very significant in the programme.

Firman (2007) expresses her preoccupation that “children experiencing reading and writing difficulties might not be given all the necessary opportunities to develop literacy skills” (p. 25). In a multi-sensory teaching approach pupils use their kinesthetic and tactile senses to reinforce auditory and visual senses. The kinesthetic sense involves the movement of any part of the body while the tactile sense is used in an activity which involves the sense of touch. Therefore, for example, in addition to hearing and seeing the names of the letters of the alphabet, pupils say them and so get kinesthetic input and feedback and trace them, which provides tactile input and feedback (Gunning, 2006). In fact, a multidimensional approach to reading has been shown to benefit vocabulary acquisition when the internet is used (Ebner & Ehri, 2013).

With the background knowledge provided by the above-mentioned studies I was in an advantageous position to plan a reading programme, and I felt that I could embark on the next stage of the project: the linguistic analysis of the vocabulary on which the reading could be based.

Linguistic material in context

Maltese has its roots in languages of Semitic and Latin origins and thus words of Italian, Arabic and to some degree English origin are found side by side in

common Maltese usage. In spite of the diverse origins of the first two language families in particular, these being Italian and Arabic, Maltese retains a system of orthography which is remarkably regular. As described by an English language adviser in the teaching of English in multilingual settings, “Maltese is about putting sounds together and English is not” (Garvie, 1992, p.6). This quotation highlights the main difference between the two languages and places Maltese in a situation more akin to Italian. Like Italian it is phonetically regular with regular spelling-to-sound correspondences. Farrell (1995) too claims that “Maltese has only one letter for any one sound and no letter can represent more than one sound...” (p. 15); this makes Maltese a graphophonemically regular language.

The Maltese language is composed of words with different syllabic structures (Camilleri, ed., 1995). However, the books available for the Early Years do not take this into consideration (Spiteri, 1998; Firman, 2007). In the first page of two books which were used with pupils in a Year One class when this study was carried out, one finds the sentences ‘Il-mamà tixtri flokk’ [Mum buys a sweater.] and ‘David ċempel lil Mark’ [David phoned Mark]. These sentences are made up of words which have different syllabic structures and therefore each word has to be syllabified in a different way; for example we syllabify ‘mama’ as ‘ma / ma’ while ‘tixtri’ as ‘tix / tri’; David as Da / vid while ‘ċempel’ as ‘ċem / pel’. The fact that the children will not be trained how they should tackle each word may make it difficult for them to decode these words. This was observed by Spiteri (1998) who says that the difficulty of spelling the word ‘ballun’ [a ball] lies in the fact that the word *ballun* contains two three-letter word syllables, whereas children are accustomed to spell two two-letter syllables. In his account one can find a lesson where six words which the children had to spell out were written on the whiteboard. These were taken from the textbook and they were: ‘ballun’ [ball], ‘vapur’ [ship], ‘rota’ [bike], ‘pupa’ [doll] and ‘tajra’ [kite]. One can note that these words are made up of different syllabic structures and thus have to be syllabified in different ways.

Spiteri (1998) also noted that the majority of words that teachers used on flashcards, in charts and during spelling lessons were mostly those found in the textbooks. This was also reported by Cini and Dimech (1995). In order for the children to learn how to spell these words and consequently read them automatically, a substantial amount of drilling and memorisation took place. This happened so that, according to the teacher, the children become accustomed to these words as this facilitates their reading progress (Spiteri, 1998). Therefore, it looks as if the reading material available for early literacy development is dictating the way teachers teach children to read words, and also which words to teach.

Thus, improvement could be made by developing a reading scheme on the basis of which lessons and resources could be planned. The lessons and the resources used therein would be based on the idea that syllabification skills are taught gradually and systematically in a way that one skill builds on the previously learned one. The material that children read must give them the possibility of practising what they have learned because if students read materials that contain elements they have been taught, they will learn the elements better and also be better at applying them to new words.

Furthermore, the fact that skills in syllabifying and spelling out words are not being taught in a context may be leading to a situation where the children are not seeing any value in these drilled and sometimes monotonous exercises (Spiteri, 1998). Improvement can be made in the methodology of teaching early literacy by adding the kinesthetic-tactile approach to the auditory and visual teaching methods already being widely used to teach syllabification. We will come back to this later.

The linguistic spadework

The Maltese syllabic structures vary from monosyllabic words to words made up of five syllables (Camilleri, ed., 1995). Each syllable can itself have a different structure like, for example CV, CVC, CVCC, CCVC, etc. where C stands for consonant, and V for vowel. There is a lack of scientific analysis of syllables in Maltese and there exists no detailed research on syllabification with a view to teaching reading, on which I could develop the reading scheme. Therefore, the first step that I took was to make lists of words belonging to each syllabic structure. These word lists were to help me plan the lessons and develop stories, multi-sensory activities and books for the classroom.

It was a major challenge to make these word lists. I identified all the words that I needed from *Id-Dizzjunarju Malti u Teżawru ta' Malti Mhaddem* (2nd ed.) (Serracino-Inglott, 2003). The choice of words depended on a number of criteria as follows:

- (i) Words with 'gh' and 'h' had to be left out because in Year One children are not taught such orthographic forms. So, I left out words like, for example, 'gheneb' [grapes] and 'deheb' [gold].
- (ii) Technical words also had to be eliminated, like for example, 'litru' [a litre], 'kalandra' [a bird], 'marra' [an agricultural tool] and 'pulmun' [lung] because they were considered to be beyond the language knowledge of the children at this age (Gatt & Muscat, 1997).
- (iii) Archaic words or words are no longer in use were also left out. These included, for example, words like 'loqma' [a piece of bread], 'nassàr' [missionary] and 'mikteb' [office, desk].

- (iv) Other words that normally do not form part of the vocabularies of children were not included even though their syllabic form was going to be tackled in the reading scheme. These are words like for example 'kalċi' [chalice], 'laqam' [nickname], 'sing' [an underline], 'ġablow' [jablo], 'margerin' [margarine] and 'hakem' [governor].
- (v) Words with a complex syllabic structure were not selected even though the children may have known their meaning. These included words like for example 'president' [president], 'indirizz' [address] and 'fortunatament' [fortunately], as they were beyond the objectives of this reading scheme.
- (vi) Abstract words were also left out because at this age children are not able to grasp abstract words (Rubin, 2002). These included words like for example 'futur' [future], ferh [happiness] and 'hazen' [wickedness].

After selecting the words that didn't have any of the characteristics mentioned above, the words were separated according to their respective syllabic structure and then put in lists in alphabetical order. Therefore, each list contained words beginning with the different letters of the alphabet but which had the same syllabic form. At this stage I began to identify the various syllabic structures that Maltese words are composed of. I also started to form an idea about which syllabic structures should be included in the reading scheme. I observed that most of the words chosen from the dictionary were made up of a combination of the following two syllables: CV and CVC. Therefore, as the reading scheme had to be implemented over a limited period of time, I decided to include only syllabic forms made up of these syllables and left out words which were made up of others. Therefore words like, for example, 'bandla' [swing] with the syllabic structure CVC CCV, 'skola' [school] with the structure CCV CV, 'anġlu' [angel] with the structure VC CCV and 'dragun' [dragon] having a CCVCVC structure were not included.

After the word lists were completed, I identified the syllabic forms that were going to be tackled in the lessons since the programme was to be delivered in a series of time slots traditionally referred to as lessons. The syllabic forms had to contain only the syllables CV, VC, CVC and CVCC as these are the most basic syllables with which most words are formed, according to my finalised lists.

The order in which I put the syllabic forms was based on the idea that I start with the two most basic syllabic forms which are CV and CVC and then build on them. After the two basic forms, I continued with words whose first syllable is CV and then adding this same syllable one at a time, therefore, CV CV, CV CV CV and CV CV CV CV. Then I continued by introducing words

whose first syllable is CV but now the second syllable is CVC. The order of the syllabic forms is shown in Table 1.

Syllabic Form	Word example
CV	pa [dad]
CVC	dar [house]
CV CV	pala [spade]
CV CV CV	patata [potato]
CV CV CV CV	medicina [medicine]
CV CVC	tagen [pan]
CV CVC CV	familja [family]
VC CV	ilma [water]
VC CVC	aħdar [green]
CVC CV	siġra [tree]
CVC CVC	ballun [ball]
CVC CV CV	bebbuxu [snail]
CVC CVC CV	fantazma [ghost]
CVCC	forn [oven]

Table 1: The syllabic forms

Putting the syllables in a context

As explained above, the teaching of early literacy skills needs to be enhanced by contextualisation. Therefore I planned the scheme in such a way that each session would be introduced by activities such as story-telling or multi-sensory games. These created the context from which I could then extract the words that were going to be tackled in the lesson.



To start with, I designed seven big books. Five of them were about or included animals. This thematic choice was made consciously because studies (Gatt & Muscat, 1997) show that the theme of animals is frequently found in the vocabulary of 5 to 7 year olds. I tried to make each story interesting for the children in different ways. One key element of a good story is that it has a recognisable story structure with a satisfying ending (Fang & Pitcher, 2007).

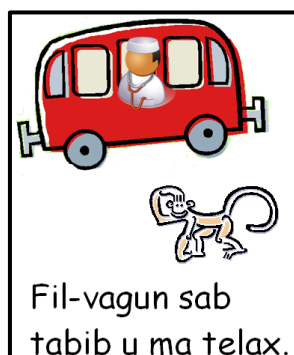
Therefore, I also tried to end each story with an ending that the children would find satisfactory.

An element of mischief was found in the first book “Tip” where Tip the cat stole a fish from the market and went to eat it quietly in a corner (see picture above, and pictures further down).

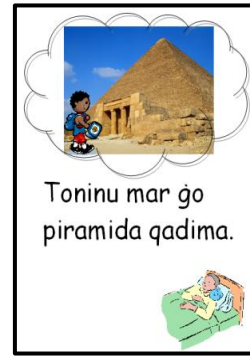
The story “Id-dudu” [The Worm] was about a worm who liked to follow different objects or persons. To make the story more appealing, the children were provided with the opportunity to move the picture of a worm from one page to another. Therefore this movement of the picture was reflecting the movement of the worm in the story (see pictures below).



The story “Xadin” [A monkey] also had a funny element. It is about a monkey who was waiting for this train and when it arrived he found different animals or persons in the carriages and he didn’t manage to get on. This monkey finally gets on a carriage when at the end of the story he finds a monkey like him in the carriage (see pictures below).



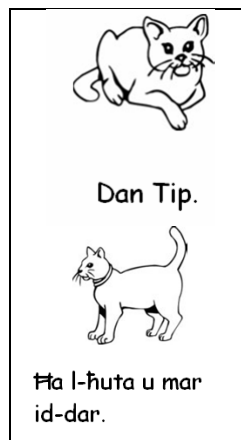
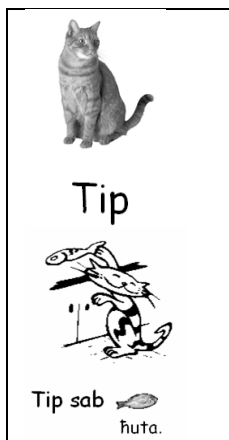
“Toninu” was a book about a boy who had different dreams. In these dreams this boy took bad medicine; he found a necklace on the ground; he went in a pyramid and he also became a policeman. Besides being close to the children’s experience, who surely dream while asleep, the story involves a good element of imagination.



Words with the syllabic form CVC CVC like for example 'sellum' [ladder], 'serduq' [cockerel] and 'qattus' [cat] were introduced in a context by means of a story in which pictures on sticks were used, instead of a book. By changing the way the story was told, I hoped to make it more interesting and appealing to the children. The syllabic form CVCC was introduced in a different way. As this form included words like 'forn' [oven], 'bajd' [eggs], 'dixx' [dish] and 'kejk' [cake] I decided to introduce these words by pretend play. I brought the real objects to school and together we pretended we're going to bake a cake.

To vary the way a lesson started, a story bag was once used to introduce the children to words like 'banana' [banana], 'balena' [whale] and 'lumija' [lemon] which belong to the syllabic form CVCVCV. The story bag consisted of a fabric sack in which I put several objects which represented some of the words that were going to be found in the story to be told. The children were asked to feel what was inside the big bag and guess what the objects were.

The context which was created at the beginning of the lesson was also found in the booklets. These booklets were a mini version of the big books with more or less the same story. In this way the children could now read on their own the words that were tackled in the lesson.



Words of the syllabic form VCCV were introduced by means of a game. These included words like for example 'itfa' [throw], 'ejja' [come], 'erfa' [lift up] and 'igri' [run]. These words are imperative verbs and in the game they were used to give commands. Two children were given roles; one child had to command the other child using the word written on a particular card while the other child had to carry out what he/she was asked to do. In this way the words that they had just learned took a meaningful purpose and were used in a context. Apart from this, the children had the possibility of constructing their own commands by changing the subject in the phrase. Thus, the word 'erfa' [lift up] could be used in 'Erfa' l-basket!' [Lift up the school bag!], or in 'Erfa' l-ktieb!' [Put away the book!].

For the book "Fejn il-baħar" [Near the seaside] I created a context by means of two beach towels, a plastic bucket and a spade, a tub of sun block, a pair of sunglasses and a cap. When the children came into the reading room where the reading session was going to take place, I first had a short conversation with them and then we pretended to be on a beach by sitting on the beach towels and putting on the sunglasses and the cap.

A multi-sensory approach was also adopted when it came to practising syllabification skills. Children used their visual processors when they saw the letters and the words written on the board or on flashcards. The auditory processors were used when the children heard the letters and the words being sounded out by me. On the other hand, when the children were asked to spell out the words themselves, the kinesthetic sense was used. The tactile sense was then used when some children had to come out of their place and either stick the letters to the carriages or else write the letters on the train.

The games used in the programme were intended to reinforce skills in syllabifying and decoding words of the same syllabic structure. They served as means of practising spelling and blending in a way that appealed to the children, thus avoiding monotony and boredom in the learning process. Being actively engaged in the games, the children would not always be conscious that they were actually developing their literacy skills in a reading lesson.

I used both the analytical and the synthetic approach in the games. In a particular game which had the analytical approach, the children were given words which they had to break up in syllables and then write these syllables in the boxes underneath. The process involved that the children first analysed the word visually and then wrote down the syllables. In another analytic game the children were given single words written on a piece of paper. They had to segment the word into syllables using a pair of scissors to cut where they thought the syllables should be separated. In the above two activities the children were using their kinesthetic and tactile senses besides the visual one.

The synthetic approach was adopted in a game where the children were given cards with syllables written on them and they had to use these to form words. In another game the children were given pictures of different objects and several small cards with different syllables on them. The children had to form the words of the objects in the pictures by choosing the right syllables from those given. In two domino games they had to find the second syllable which corresponded with the first one.

These games required the use of the children's four senses. The children were using their visual sense when seeing the syllables, the word or the picture; they were sounding out the syllables thus they were using the kinesthetic sense. When the children had to move the cards around to form words both the kinesthetic and the tactile senses were being used. To check whether the word was constructed correctly, the children had to blend the syllables; therefore when they heard themselves or other children in the group sounding the word out, they made use of their auditory senses. Visual and auditory processes were used in a bingo game where the children had to visualize the syllable that was drawn up and match it with the syllables on their bingo sheet.

A multi-sensory approach was used in a game where several cards with single words written on them were distributed among the children. The words were names of toys, animals, persons or objects. In the classroom there were four boxes with a picture stuck on them, showing either a toy, an animal, a person or an object. The children had to first read the word, decide to which category the word belonged, and then put it in the right box. Sometimes, in the games, children had to read phrases and not just single words.

Evaluating the Programme

The research questions of my empirical study focused on the effectiveness of contextualisation and the multi-sensory approach, and on the suitability of the gradual and systematic way of presenting the Maltese syllabic forms.

I implemented the Programme in a Year One Primary class that was randomly chosen from a state school. The implementation comprised nineteen sessions of forty-five minutes each, delivered over a period of four months. It was co-evaluated by myself and the class teacher who kindly accepted to observe some of the lessons. The class teacher was interviewed before and after the implementation period. The children's literacy development was tested twice, and I also interviewed them after a number of sessions. In what follows I will outline very briefly the results of the Programme evaluation.

The level of the children's literacy development varied from one child to another from the beginning of the programme till the end. At the beginning of the programme (in January) the majority had reached the alphabetic phase while a few were close to the full alphabetic phase. By the end of the programme (in April), the children had progressed through the alphabetic stage while those few who were already good readers at the beginning, had reached the full alphabetic phase.

Basically the children used two methods to decode words: by sounding out the individual letters in a word or by syllabifying it. But it was noticed that three children resorted to the latter method when they didn't succeed in decoding a multi-syllabic word after using the former method.

The words with the different syllabic structures provided different levels of difficulty for the children. The syllabic forms CV, CVC, CVCV, CVCCV and CVCCVC proved to be relatively easy for the children to syllabify whereas the form CVCC was a bit difficult for some children. Other children continued to syllabify words with the syllabic forms CVCVC wrongly. For example, 'vapur' was syllabified 'vap/ur' instead of 'va/pur'. Some children, especially at the beginning of the programme, had difficulty recognising letters like 'd', 'b' and 'p' or capital letters. Weak readers did not overcome this difficulty till the end of the programme. Such weak readers also found it difficult to remember the syllables read at the beginning of the word, or words read at the beginning of a sentence. This may be due to a short working memory.

The children often self-corrected mistakes they made when reading out aloud or when syllabifying words. Gunning (2006) says that self-correction is a good sign because it means that the reader actively monitors his/her reading to make sure that it makes sense. Self-correction often happened when the children weren't able to decode the word after having syllabified it in a different way from how they were taught. Self-correction also took place when the children realised that in the way they syllabified it, a syllable is going to begin with a vowel and they had learned that this shouldn't occur except if the syllable is the first one in a word.

Children found nouns easier to decode than verbs, both when using the context as well as semantic cues. It seems easier for children to guess a word when it is a noun than when it is a verb. Further investigation into this would be pertinent and useful.

Conclusion

The word lists were essential for creating the reading material to be used in the programme. Such word lists can facilitate the development of other reading material for children. They can also help in creating more graded books in which the vocabulary is specific to the particular literacy skill being learned.

By putting the teaching of reading skills in a context I was able to integrate the teaching of syllabification in a way which appealed to the children. The fact that the words which were to be syllabified had been contextualised in the introductory activity, created a smooth transition between the first part of the lesson and the activity of segmenting, syllabifying and spelling out the words. The idea of using the train with the carriages to introduce the children to the concept of seeing the syllables as chunks was particularly effective and appealing to them. When we were writing the letters on the carriages, we were actually separating one syllable from the other; thus the process of segmentation was presented to the children in a visual and concrete way.

In spite of the limited time and space I had for this project, I can safely conclude that a successful literacy programme needs to be based on both a scientific analysis of syllabification in Maltese, as well as on creative pedagogical approaches that contextualise print and by which the children can practise reading skills at the same time as actively participating in varied multi-sensory activities.

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