

EARLY READING AND WRITING IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM – MAYBE NOT AS CONTROVERSIAL AS ONE MIGHT THINK

Es gibt offenbar keinen Grund, warum man Erstklässler (6-7-Jährige) nicht im Schreiben in der Fremdsprache, insbesondere in Rechtschreibung, unterrichten sollte. Tatsächlich kann ein Fokus auf orthographische Strukturen und das einfache Bewusstsein der Idee, dass die deutsche und die englische/französische Rechtschreibung sich unterscheiden, Lernen vereinfachen und Grundkenntnisse zu einem Zeitpunkt vermitteln, zu dem Lernende extrem motiviert sind. Der Artikel berichtet über Forschungsergebnisse aus Deutschland und ermutigt Lehrkräfte mit dem Schreiben und der Rechtschreibung direkt zu Anfang des Fremdsprachenunterrichts zu beginnen.

When early literacy acquisition in the foreign language classroom was discussed in Germany about ten years ago, one usually heard opposing voices. At the beginning there were mostly those (parents and teachers alike) who believed that the children would be asked too much of, that it was hard enough for many children to learn German orthography, and that, consequently, the young learners would end up overtaxed and confused. This opinion was especially held in those federal states (e.g. Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate) where English and French classes started right at the beginning, in grade 1. However, you also found some voices, researchers mainly, who took a rather sceptical stance towards two years of oral instruction only which was the educational policy in those states. These researchers were convinced that the children would want to read and even to write in the foreign language, too, as soon as they started their literacy classes in the language of schooling in the first grade (cf. Rymarczyk, 2008). In the years to follow, more and more teachers became qualified to teach for-

eign languages at primary level, and with the resulting more professional mindsets, expectations and conceptions changed as far as the character and goals of foreign language learning outcomes at primary level were concerned. It was realized and appreciated that primary school learners were able and willing to do more in the English or French classroom than to colour in mandalas in order to learn some colour terms or to learn some basic phrases to tell their names and how old they were. Teachers started to have children work on their language awareness, encouraged them to expand their vocabulary knowledge and allowed them to tackle the foreign language in a more analytical way every now and again as the situation arose (cf. Diehr & Rymarczyk, 2012). As more research on the process of simultaneous literacy acquisition in German and English or French in the first two years of schooling was conducted, it became obvious that even children who were considered poor learners transferred their knowledge of how to read and write in German onto their ideas of how to do

Jutta Rymarczyk | ●
Heidelberg, DE

teaches at Heidelberg University of Education, Germany, in the Department of English as a Foreign Language. Her current research interests focus on early literacy development and diagnostics, immersion programmes at primary and secondary level (Bilingualer Sachfachunterricht/CLIL) and the role of visual literacy in this context.



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this in the foreign language. While this is basically a positive finding, it followed that the children need support in their transfer so that the results correspond to the orthographic norms of the target language English or French (cf. Rymarczyk, 2010).

Survey findings: Nothing wrong with writing

In order to find out how widespread the change of paradigms in primary foreign language classrooms actually was and whether educational policies corresponded to experts' conviction of what was beneficial for the young learners, two surveys were carried out in Germany in 2015. Experts working e.g. at various institutes for school education and advanced teacher training (so-called "Landesinstitute") or at universities and representing all 16 German federal states were first asked to report on how (among other issues) early literacy was dealt with in their state, and in a second survey they were then asked which of the ways of proceeding, which had been reported to be the *modus operandi* in one or more of the various states, they would actually want to implement or continue to use, as the case may be (cf. Hempel, Kötter, Rymarczyk & Steinlen, forthcoming).

The results of the first survey drew a very heterogeneous picture which is still valid at present: While the majority of states (ten) started to teach reading and writing in grade 3, there are also four (from 2016 on, five) states with an immediate start in grade 1 and one state (Bremen) where reading and writing is not taught before grade 4. As far as the methods are concerned, there are also differences among the states due to the individual state curricula: Whereas some states use a holistic approach, the so-called whole-word method, and employ the visibility of written forms as a mnemonic device only, there are other states which first import orthographic rules, i.e. make use of the so-called phonics approach. Further regional differences are found in the levels of difficulty and complexity of what the children are expected to write. Here we find the full range from one-word text productions to complete sentences and from copying from text models to the free production of complete sentences without any models (*ibid.*).

Interestingly, the results of the second survey showed a far more homogeneous picture than the first survey. The discrepancies between educational policies and individual

votes were e.g. striking in reply to the question on the start of literacy teaching. While the curricula of eleven states prescribe a late start in grade 3 or even 4, with 66 % the majority of experts (23

out of a total of 35), voted for the earliest start possible, namely to start reading and writing instruction in grade 1.

As far as the expected goals are concerned, there was an even more homogeneous outcome. 77% of the experts opted for the most demanding goal to be set, namely

that children should be expected to write complete sentences by the end of grade 4 and that these text productions should be used for assessment.

The strongest agreement, however, was found in the answer to the question of whether one should use a phonics approach by pointing out differences in the German and English sound-letter-relationships and thus foster the children's orthographic awareness. 88% of the experts agreed that children should be made aware of the differences between the English and German orthography. It is to be noted, however, that a gentle way of using the phonics approach is favoured as there

were comments added like "only as discovery learning"; "not systematically" (*ibid.*). In order to take a stance in the debate about early reading and writing and to inform about findings of current research on early literacy acquisition, the following pages take up some central issues of the topic and finally present two ways of how children can assess their own spelling skills and practice reading and writing at an early level.

Should reading and writing instruction begin in grade 1?

Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
15	8	2	7	3

Should complete sentences be copied and written without any models at the end of grade 4 and be assessed?

Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
13	10	2	7	2

Should learners be made aware of sound-letter-relationships which differ between German and the L2?

Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
19	11	1	2	1

Arguments for an early start

First, we want to refer to the still wide-spread notion that reading and writing should not be taught before the children master these skills in the language of schooling. There are strong arguments against such a delayed start of reading and writing instruction. The grapheme-phoneme-correspondences of both English and French are not overly transparent and very irregular. Because of this there is a long so-called logographic phase (cf. Frith, 1998) at the beginning of learners' literacy acquisition process, especially in English where orthography is particularly irregular. In this phase, the learners perceive the words as a whole, similar to how they see a picture, i.e. they do not connect the letters to sounds. They do not really read the word but rather recognize a given picture. As it is, the whole idea of teaching sight words at the beginning of the literacy acquisition process is based on this "reading" strategy.

In contrast to this, German has a transparent and regular grapheme-phoneme-correspondence. This enables the learners to link the letters to the corresponding sounds fairly easily. Because of this learners reach the next phase of the literacy acquisition process, the so-called alphabetic phase (cf. Frith, 1998), relatively early. They are able to assign the individual letters or letter groups to sounds.

Most young children who mainly learn how to read and write in their German classrooms readily transfer their knowledge about German orthography to English as they are generally very eager to write in the foreign language, too. Of course, this transfer leads to mistakes in most cases due to the differences between the German so-called shallow orthography and the English deep orthography. Erroneous spellings like the following are typical for children who apply the German sound-letter correspondence to the English system.

Teachers should be aware that the children who make mistakes like this are by no means at the beginning of their literacy acquisition. To produce spellings like the ones in the example, they need to be in

the alphabetic phase of their literacy acquisition in German, the second phase of the acquisition process. Actually, the mistakes prove that the children can already do quite a lot. Instead of regarding their spellings as flawed, teachers might rather want to appreciate the children's achievements:

1. The children are able to hear all sounds that are contained in the word, i.e. their phonemic awareness seems to be high.
2. They know that these sounds need to be linked to letters – they just choose the wrong ones, namely the German set.
3. Children who write words like <Kwin> (green) and <Jelou> (yellow) link all of the sounds to letters. This proves that they are already at an advanced stage of the alphabetic phase as there is also an earlier stage when learners just write some of the letters that are contained in a word, the so-called "partial alphabetic phase" (cf. Ehri, 1999). Often, these letters are the consonants of the word as they are more salient. The vowels are missing – or to take up the metaphor of the technical term of this phenomenon, "skeleton writing" – there is no flesh on the bones so to speak: "My Mt Bt" for "my motor boat" (cf. Gentry, 2006) or "HS" for "Haus" (cf. Scheerer-Neumann, 2003).
4. They know that capital letters are used for objects and colours (in their nominal forms), however, they wrongly transferred the rule from German to English.

Of course, looking at the achievements of a young writer does not mean that teachers should restrain themselves from correcting the children's mistakes. A positive stance which appreciates the child's efforts rather than just looking out for deficits allows the teacher to diagnose the texts in a more differentiated way. Only such a close diagnosis enables the teacher to distinguish children whose mistakes are based on transference from German (which testifies the achievements 1-4 mentioned above) from those children who lag behind, make random mistakes or might actually suffer from dyslexia.



First grader, 6 years old.

Literature

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Logographic strategies (e.g. word-picture cards, picture cards, and word cards attached to realia) can be used in the foreign language classroom, even though the alphabetic phase for German might not be completed and alphabetic strategies might not be coped with completely, respectively. Children at this stage might e.g. still produce the so-called skeleton-writing in German (<HS> for *Haus*), but be absolutely capable of assigning English word cards to pictures or realia. (Cf. Activity 1a.)

There will not be any disturbances by such holistically oriented, logographic exercises as first graders will be leaving behind the logographic phase in German after only a few weeks of instruction. As it is, many first graders are already in the alphabetic phase in German upon entering school due to story reading at home or kindergarten and print in their daily environment.

Second, children have to be made aware of the differences between the grapheme-phoneme-correspondences between German and English or French and be able to recognize them. The creation and usage of idiosyncratic orthographic rules ("invented spelling") turn out less severe if children are aware of the differences. Please note that the children do not have to know any explicit phonics rules at first. They just need to be alert, i.e. know that they cannot simply transfer everything they learned about letters and sounds from writing in German to writing in English or French.

Third, young learners need orthographically correct input which allows them to see possible differences between their hypotheses as far as the assumed writing of a word is concerned and its actual spelling. The input corrects the mistakes in the invented spelling and helps the children to write the words according to the orthographic norm. No child can be kept away from his or her own ideas about written forms – including poor learners. The later children become acquainted with the written forms of the foreign language, the greater is the danger of the fossilization of these mostly inevitably wrong forms. Also, the loss of motivation when the children are to learn the orthographically correct forms as late as grade three or even four can be enormous as the children happily and also effectively used their idiosyncratic rules up to this point in time. An informed and professional use of early literacy certainly serves the children best in

their actual phase of language acquisition and facilitates smoother roads later on.

Activities to practice and (self-)assess spelling competence with young learners

Both activities (1+2) can be used in such a way that they either support learners in their logographic phase, i.e. at the very beginning of their literacy acquisition process when they still perceive words as a whole, or at the alphabetic stage, the more advanced stage, when learners already work with the connections between sounds and letters.

Activity 1: Wordmonster

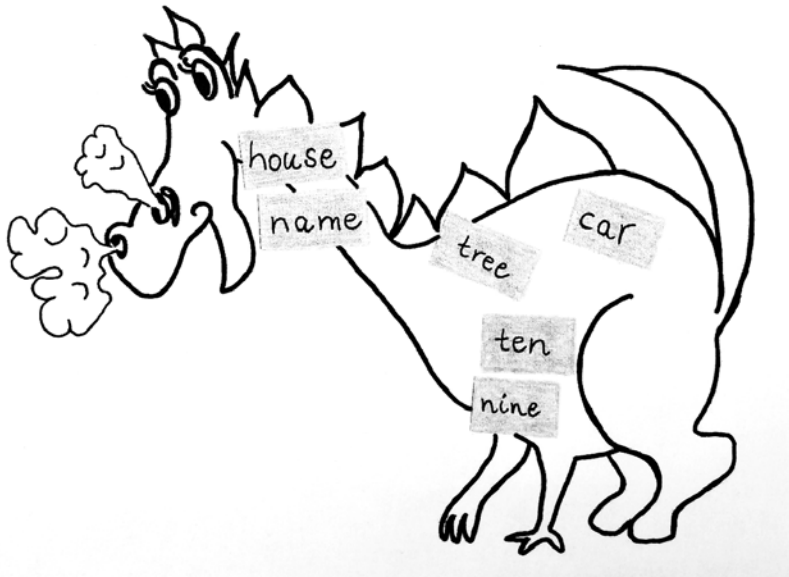
The "Wordmonster" is an animal that lives exclusively on written English words. Put the Wordmonster as a poster on the wall of your classroom. Every day the pupils need to feed it: Words that can be connected with a picture can be put into the monster's mouth. If the pupils still remember a certain word-picture-connection a few days later, the words can be put forward into the monster's belly. Words which seem to be more difficult for the children to remember, stay in the monster's throat (cf. Hägele, 2008).

> a) There are special days on which the monster only wants to eat toys, school things or only round objects, etc. (Holistic activity to be used at the logographic stage.)

> b) There are special days on which the monster only wants to eat words starting with , which have a silent <e>, or which contain the diphthong / aʊ/. (Phonics activity to be used at the alphabetic stage.)

Activity 2: Spelling-Bandolo

The "Spelling-Bandolino" is based on the learning game "Bandolo" (or "Bandolino") and needs to be re-designed by the teacher (or by advanced students!). A "Bandolo" is a fan consisting of about ten cards, each of which presents an activity on its own. A card with a vocabulary activity shows e.g. five pictures of objects on the left side and five words on the right side. There is an indentation next to each picture or word, respectively. The string which is attached at the point where the cards of the fan are held together is wound around the single card (which is fanned out from the stack) in such a way that the pictures get connected to the matching words using the indentations to be fixed.



Wordmonster



The intriguing part is the opportunity for the students to check their solutions easily by themselves: All they have to do is turn around the card and see whether the string is following the trace on the card. If so, they were right, if the string follows a path different from the trace on the card, they were wrong.

When you create your own “Spelling-Bandolo”, the pages of the original fan are pasted over with one’s own sheets which take up items which are of current interest for the students.

> a) You can put together pictures of objects and the corresponding words like e.g.: *cat, duck, banana, bird, apple, orange*. These words can be chosen from the vocabulary a child is struggling with or –as in this example – from an easy reader. (Here: Roderick Hunt and Alex Brychta: *Silly Races*. Oxford Univ. Press, 2005). (Holistic activity to be used at the logographic stage.)

> b) For more advanced and very advanced learners you can focus on orthographic rules like capital letters vs. lower case letters or on particularly complex sound-letter relationships. Again, the words can be chosen freely or be taken from a picture book. The following examples are chosen from Jon Blake and Axel Scheffler: *Daley B.* Walker Books (1994), “Orthographic and phonics activity to be used at the alphabetic stage”.



Original Bandolo game



Spelling-Bandolo: model of front (= exercise) and back (= trace of string to check one’s answers).

This Bandolino template was found here: <http://thomas-ebinger.de/2015/10/water-unser-bandolino-als-bastelvorlage/>



Fold here

Capital or lower case letters?

Start!			
1.	N	aley B.	
2.	n	og	
3.	P	orcupine	
4.	p	ew York	
5.	D	eter	
6.	d	est	

Fold here

Find the matching sounds of the letter $\langle a \rangle$!

Start!			
1.	weasel	ask	
2.	day	head	
3.	rabbit	saw	
4.	was	eat	
5.	answer	Jazzy	
6.	said	face	