

THE EARLY READING DEVELOPMENT PILOT (ERDP)

Jennifer Chew

This study was announced in the government's response to the parliamentary Education and Skills Committee's April 2005 report on the teaching of reading and has been carried out, under the auspices of the DfES, during the academic year 2005-2006. The final evaluation is due to take place in July 2006. The Rose review took account of findings up to December 2005 – see paragraphs 95-98 of the Rose report.

The project is based on an 'action research' model and has involved teaching Foundation Stage children in about 180 schools a speeded-up version of Playing with Sounds. The teaching of grapheme-phoneme correspondences is still not as fast as in the leading synthetic phonics programmes and there is still some emphasis on awareness of sounds other than phonemes, but the increase in pace has been found quite feasible – see paragraphs 96 and 97 of the Rose report. A welcome feature of the ERDP 'Materials for Practitioners' is the emphasis on letter-sounds rather than letter-names. Much less welcome, however, are suggestions such as the following, which come from the 'Sample direct teaching sessions from a practitioner':

'Explain that when you get stuck reading a word you can use the first sound to help you work it out.... Can the children work out [from the first sound] what word would make sense? This is another reading strategy which is useful to combine with phonics cues' (p.41);

'Ask them if they can remember what they should use if they get stuck reading the word (the first sound). Get the children to identify the first sound of the word. What else could they use to help them work out what the word says (the objects or pictures – this is another reading strategy)' (p.43);

'During guided reading sessions, remind children to use the strategies you have been teaching them, such as using the initial sound of a word and checking that it makes sense'(p.58);

'Regularly start shared reading sessions by asking the children what we do if we can't read a word (strategies covered so far should include using the first sound of a word, looking at the pictures, predicting what would make sense, going back and reading the sentence again' (p. 59).

This kind of advice conflicts with the Rose recommendations. If the effectiveness of the ERDP is evaluated in July 2006 by means of standardised reading and spelling tests, it will be possible to compare the results with (for example) the results in Clackmannanshire, as presumably intended by the Education and Skills Committee.

Objective testing may show us whether it is better to teach beginners to read unfamiliar words solely by all-through-the-word sounding and blending or to teach them to rely on initial letters, pictures and context. If no standardised testing is done, no comparisons will be possible and the ERDP will not have proved its worth in a way which would justify incorporating its approach in the framework for September 2006. This has been pointed out by RRF members to people in senior positions at the DfES. It will be interesting to see what happens next. Will standardised testing be carried out? If so, how will the results compare with those from Clackmannanshire and elsewhere? If not, will the DfES have any justification for allowing the ERDP to influence the new framework?

.....

This article was published in RRF newsletter 58. 2006.