

THRASS - whole-picture keyword phonics

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THRASS (Alan Davies & Denyse Ritchie, 2003) stands for Teaching Handwriting Reading And Spelling Skills. THRASS helps children to understand the relationships between the forty-four phonemes (speech sounds) of spoken English and the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, which are the key to successful reading and writing. It concentrates on the word level but recognises the importance of the other two levels: sentence and text levels. It is part of a balanced literacy programme. Educators, classroom assistants and parents can teach THRASS.

Research is showing that compared to the letter-sound approach of the 'old phonics' programmes this 'new phonics' approach improves teacher subject knowledge, pupil progress in reading and spelling, and the efficient acquisition of life-long word solving skills (phonographic metacognition). THRASS is being used with children learning to read, write and spell, with children learning English as a second or foreign language, with dyslexic children and as a catch-up intervention for children who are falling behind in their reading, writing and spelling.

A rationale for using THRASS with deaf children is that the present Sign Bilingual model indicates that we need to think in broader terms about phonological skills for deaf children and include visual perception as well as spoken language skills. Acquisition of phonological knowledge does not depend exclusively on hearing. Deaf children can use information provided by lip-reading, cued speech, finger-spelling, and the written alphabet to develop knowledge of the sound system of English. Deaf children can build up a visual knowledge of spelling patterns to make predictions about words. A visual knowledge of phonology will help them to decode unfamiliar texts.

There is a range of materials to use including a rap routine that the children love. Target 1, Picture Location, increases the children's vocabulary, develops their attention, sequential skills, identification skills, cognitive transfer skills, and spatial-awareness skills. The opportunities for language development are varied: the children learn to make compound words, to describe, categorise, discuss and make up stories about the pictures. They extend their vocabulary and the length and complexity of their sentences, explore words and learn that meaning can change in context. Their receptive and expressive language is extended in the THRASS activities.

In March 2003, Alan Davies was one of the keynote speakers at the invitation seminar 'Teaching Phonics in the National Literacy Strategy', organised by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The following extract from Alan's paper, 'Why All Teachers of English Should Be Trained To Use The THRASS Periodic Table of Phonics': Davies & Ritchie (2003) lists the main distinguishing features of the THRASS program:

- ♦ essential speaking and listening skills are taught, from the outset, using integral pictures and keywords on 'whole-picture' charts - not a separate resource or another program;
- ♦ the units of the program are the 44 phonemes (speech sounds) and the 120 key graphemes (spelling choices) of English - not the artificial and restrictive 'letter sounds' of 'Old Phonics' programs;
- ♦ the program teaches life-long word solving skills (Phonographic Metacognition);
- ♦ the program can be taught to learners of all ages and abilities.

Recent results in England, with a group of Y8 dyslexic children (30 months' progress in spelling in just 5 months) and a group of Y7 dyslexic children (20 months' progress in spelling in 5 months), who received between ten and thirty minutes of THRASS-related tuition each day, indicate that THRASS has good potential. Early anecdotal evidence, from teachers working in London and Leeds, suggests that THRASS may also have good potential for helping children with high-frequency loss or cochlear implants.

It will be interesting to see, over the years, what impact the THRASS programme has, both in the UK and overseas, for those working in deaf education.

References

THRASS website www.thrass.co.uk

Pickersgill, M and Gregory, S (1998), *Sign bilingualism: a model*, London. Adept Press.

Knight, P and Swanwick, R (2002), *Working with deaf pupils: sign bilingualism into practice*, David Fulton.

Davies & Ritchie (2003)

Why all teachers of English should be trained to use the THRASS periodic table of phonics THRASS



Sun Ice City
Outline drawings used to show 'where sounds live'.