Report-back on the IDEC/FELA symposium at the Turku/Åbo conference

Greg Brooks, Professor Emeritus, University of Sheffield, 28/8/16

Following an introduction by Professor Emerita Renate Valtin (Humboldt University, Berlin), there were presentations on the initial teaching of literacy in three languages across four countries:

- Dr Mare Müürsepp (Tallinn University) on Estonian
- Ms Suvi Sankinen (Hannunniittu school, Turku) on Finnish
- Ms Monika Sandberg (Cygnaeus school, Åbo) on Swedish in Finland, and
- Dr Ulla-Britt Persson (Linköping University) and Ms Marie K. Fredriksson (Special needs teacher, Stockholm) on Swedish in Sweden.

As will be seen from the presentations, a good deal of fascinating historical and current material was shown and/or mentioned. Particularly striking, indeed odd, to an outsider was the system (now abandoned) by which Estonian children were taught to carry out phonemic analysis of spoken Estonian words for months before encountering any in print. While it is of course essential for teachers of initial literacy to have a thorough understanding of their languages’ phonetics, structure and orthographies (distinctly lacking in English-speaking countries, I fear), this should remain as underpinning knowledge – it is unnecessary, and possibly counter-productive, to teach this to children.

More child-friendly was the time spent in Sweden on teaching phonological awareness before letters were introduced – but the empirical evidence on such approaches in English is that the phonemic awareness needed for learning to read and spell develops more efficiently, and faster, when children are introduced to letters and sounds – in other words, to phonics (see below) – at the outset.

As discussant, I had anticipated that various themes would emerge:

- the degree of regularity of the languages’ orthographies
- the linguistic level on which initial instruction is focused: whole texts, whole words, or the segmental level of graphemes and phonemes
- deriving from those two, the extent to which phonics teaching (focusing mainly on correspondences between graphemes and phonemes) was used
- and, for similar reasons, how the preferred emphases were embodied in the teaching materials, especially the reading books presented to children.

On the last theme all that needs saying here is that yes, the materials did embody the theories and philosophies prevalent at the various epochs, with a strong trend from rather stilted to more realistic language and dialogue as time has passed, and away from ALL CAPITAL LETTERS to the easier-to-read mixed-case form.

Of the languages discussed, Estonian and Finnish have two of the world’s most regular orthographies, partly because they have achieved their current written forms relatively recently in historical terms, but mainly because of their simple syllabic structures: most
syllables are open (consonant-vowel), with few syllable-final consonant possibilities and (apparently) no syllable-initial consonant clusters; however, being also agglutinative and morphologically complex (expressing grammatical relationships predominantly through concatenating suffixes), the languages’ individual words can be many syllables long, and there are very few monosyllables.

Being a Teutonic language, Swedish has (like German and English) a more complex syllabic structure allowing both syllable-initial and syllable-final consonant clusters, but fewer affixes, so that the average word length is shorter and monosyllables are numerous. The orthography is highly regular, though some consonant letters represent different phonemes before front and back vowels, and long and short vowels do not seem to be differentiated in the spelling – but neither of these features should pose any difficulty to children whose mother tongue is Swedish.

(Where regularity is concerned, English is of course a basket case with, by my calculation, only 77% predictability from phonemes to graphemes and from graphemes to phonemes. But it does have over 9,000 monosyllables.)

Given the high degree of regularity in the three languages’ orthographies, it is not surprising that in all cases initial instruction has focused predominantly on the grapheme-phoneme level, and worked upwards through linguistic levels from there (first to syllables in Finnish, straight to whole words in Swedish). Correspondingly, the predominant pedagogy has been phonics. Indeed, given that high degree of regularity, it would seem perverse to adopt any other starting level or method.

Surprisingly, however, there seems to have been some oscillation towards whole-word teaching in Estonian in the past (now abandoned) and increasingly in Swedish in Sweden currently. At a joint seminar of ELINET’s three Finnish partner organisations in Helsinki/Helsingfors in November 2014, I was told that this is currently true also of the teaching of Finnish. Perhaps this has been influenced by fashions in the English-speaking world – yet the experimental evidence shows that even English-speaking children make better progress when teaching includes systematic phonics instruction rather than unsystematic or no phonics instruction.

Suvi Sankinen appeared to suggest that whole-word methods might be more suitable for children for whom Finnish is a second language since they are having to learn the spoken language at the same time; evidence on this point is in short supply, and there was no time to ask about this for the other languages.

Even though phonics was the predominant pedagogy, the pace of teaching seemed slow: one letter, or at most two or three letters, a week. Many teaching schemes for English (at least in the UK) begin with at least four of the six letters <s a t p i n> and their most frequent correspondences, the phonemes /s æ t p ɪ n/ – from this set of letters and phonemes about 50 regular English words can be constructed, thus giving children an early taste of the meaningfulness of text, and of success.
Monika Sandberg mentioned that in her Swedish-medium school in Finland reading and writing are introduced simultaneously at the beginning, and Mare Müürsepp mentioned a multi-sensory aspect akin to the VAKT (visual-auditory-kinaesthetic-tactile) approach of the Orton-Gillingham method once widespread in the United States; again, there was no time to find out more about these ideas.

A topic that would have been highly relevant hardly surfaced, namely how teaching is differentiated for children entering school with differing levels of prior achievement and/or progressing at different rates; both this and all the themes mentioned here (and no doubt others) should be pursued in further iterations of this symposium at European conferences.

For the thinking behind my analysis, and some examples from other languages, see the ELINET literacy glossary at http://www.eli-net.eu/research/terminology/.