

SHAPING SUCCESS ACTION RESEARCH PROJECTS

**FINAL REPORT ON THE SHAPING SUCCESS AR PROJECT –
DID YOU FINISH THAT SANDWICH? USING STRUCTURED
SEQUENTIAL PHONICS WITH ADULT LITERACY LEARNERS
Islington ACL**

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For further information regarding the Shaping Success Action Research programme and this project go to <https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-7/>.

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Final report - Did you finish that sandwich? Using structured sequential phonics with adult literacy learners

Islington ACL

This project tested the use of That Reading Thing (Millar, 2020), a linguistic phonics literacy intervention for teens and adults, in one-to-one sessions with Entry Level 2 literacy learners during the COVID-19 pandemic, both online and face to face. It demonstrated that adults with reading and spelling challenges made more progress using this approach than we would normally see in a group class context.

Summary

This project had an initial aim of developing a range of phonics-based resources using the ETF Phonics Toolkit (UCL/CCC, 2019) but the COVID-19 pandemic forced a re-evaluation both in the project and the way that we delivered the lessons for learners studying Functional Skills English at Entry Level 2.

I am a Curriculum Manager and literacy teacher at Islington Adult Community Learning, the adult learning department within Islington Council in London. We serve the multi-cultural inner London borough with a range of adult learning programmes including ESOL, English, Maths, Family Learning, Digital Skills and Employability. We have approximately 2000 enrolments per year and deliver with a range of partners and from a range of community venues throughout the borough.

I trialled the That Reading Thing (TRT) phonics programme initially face to face in one-to-one sessions with a number of my learners, all at Entry level 2, some with formal diagnoses of dyslexia but all with spelling challenges that seem to be consistent with what I recognise as dyslexia.

I had first encountered TRT at the launch of the ETF Phonics Toolkit but it didn't seem to be compatible with the class-based delivery model that most organisations use at Entry Level for literacy learners. The pandemic made it impossible to meet as a group so it was an ideal opportunity to trial using TRT and TST (the related spelling approach) with the appropriate learners.

Rationale

We wanted to support these learners to make progress with reading and spelling and to feel more confident in their abilities.

Many of our adult learners have significant literacy difficulties, such that their level of reading and spelling seriously impacts their everyday lives. Most of the learners I use TRT with had stronger reading than writing skills, and all avoided writing if they could help it. Some had created their own coping and masking strategies, for example using voice notes instead of WhatsApp.

We wanted to see how our learners progressed using TRT and TST in one-to-one sessions, in comparison to regular group classes.

It had long been a frustration as a teacher of Functional Skills Entry Level 2 classes that learners with spelling challenges (some with diagnosed dyslexia, some not) did not thrive in class settings. I have always taught in London and my classes were often a 50:50 split between learners that I think were dyslexic and second language learners who definitely were not. The learners in most Entry Level 2 groups were all quite different in terms of their prior knowledge of phonics strategies for reading and spelling and therefore a completely phonics approach would not have been appropriate for the whole group, but I knew that for these dyslexic learners to make progress they would need some structured way of attacking spelling.

Spelling and reading improve at a similar rate during the early levels of TRT making the method suitable for these dyslexic learners.

Approach

The launch of the ETF Phonics Toolkit provided a clear structure for using phonics with our learners and TRT is underpinned by the same linguistic phonics principles. However, it was only when we were not allowed to meet as a group during the COVID-19 pandemic that I was able to put it into practice and see the progress that learners made.

My time with the learners using TRT was determined by the various lockdowns during 2020 and 2021. I first started using TRT in hourly one-to-one meetings in a community centre in Islington in October 2020. From the end of the Christmas term in December 2020 we were unable to meet in person. Of the group of six learners in this study four were able to get online and classes continued for them. The other two didn't have the skills or hardware to get online so I didn't meet them again until May 2021, although we stayed in touch using phone, SMS and WhatsApp.

Delivery of the sessions followed the TRT programme (see Appendix 4), albeit my learners needed a noticeably slower pace than the young people for whom it was developed. TRT is tightly structured so a learner takes in only a little of new information at each of the 30 levels and the words get a bit more complex with each level. The starting level includes multisyllabic words like 'upset', 'rapid' and 'fantastic' so adult learners do not feel patronised by the vocabulary.

The programme allows learners to progress as quickly as they can until they get stuck, then the teacher uses consistent prompts to help them become unstuck in that moment. The hope is that they internalise the prompt as a tool for reading and spelling unfamiliar words.

When we went online, I had to develop resources that could be shared on screen via Zoom but some of the activities were not possible (primarily using 'puzzle pieces' for the learners to build words) owing to software restrictions on our laptops. These kinaesthetic activities were certainly missed online but learners appreciated the opportunity to continue their studies even in this restricted form.

Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices

The takeaway for me as an Entry Level 2 literacy teacher has been unlearning everything I had been trying with these learners. No more clever mnemonics (which I now understand adds pressure to working memory), no more 'helpful' shortcuts to spelling. What made the biggest difference to my learners is adherence to the prompts thus ensuring learners were consistently practising saying the sounds associated with the graphemes they were seeing (for reading) and breaking words down into their component syllables and sounds for spelling.

I also learned the value of being consistent in asking learners to say the sounds and not letter names so that they stopped the habit of using only visual strategies and instead engaged both their ears and their eyes for spelling and reading.

Learners that previously had no real plan or tools to help them read or spell were now very quickly able to attack words and have a fighting chance of spelling them correctly, regardless of a word's length.

Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices

Our usual delivery model at this level is one or two classroom sessions per week with relatively small class sizes (10 typically) held in a community venue such as a library. We would usually follow the Functional Skills curriculum and I would normally do some class-based phonics but keep it very general as certain things would not be relevant to all learners in the group.

However, following the success of TRT I am proposing a change to the delivery model for Functional Skills Entry Level 1 and Entry Level 2. We will now offer TRT one-to-one sessions for selected learners that have spelling challenges to run alongside the normal classes. We will fund these sessions as Additional Learning Support rather than teaching.

Two colleagues at Islington ACL have taken the TRT training course and see the value of the approach and are incorporating it in their practice. One colleague said they "found it easy to follow and probably, with a bit of practice, looks to be very effective". Another fed back that "even after one session, [their learners were] beginning to get it." One is incorporating phonological awareness activities alongside TRT due to her learners' needs (see Appendix 2).

I also delivered an online inset day session to the whole staff team which was well received and raised awareness of dyslexia and memory-friendly strategies to support spelling.

Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression

TRT begins with an initial assessment to determine at what pace you should proceed through the course. It consists of three pages of word lists, increasing in complexity. There are 15 words on each page and the learner reads the words as the teacher

records their responses, stopping if they make three errors in a row. None of my learners managed to continue beyond the first page. I re-did the assessment with all six of the learners some weeks into the course to check on their progress, because one learner still doubted whether he was getting better.

The table below shows the learners' progress using TRT. It struck me that when using my previous spelling strategies (such as words within words and mnemonics) I would not have seen such fast progress.

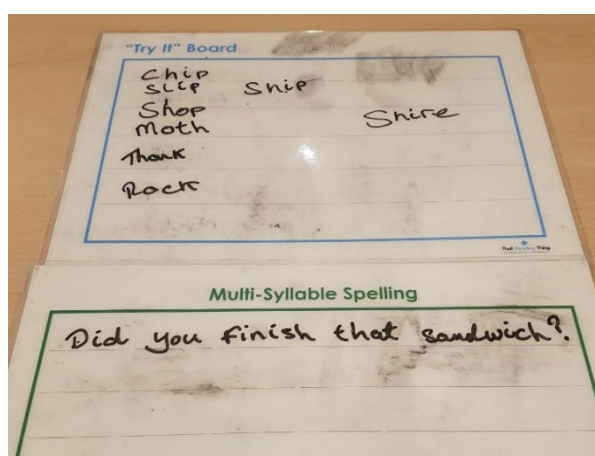
Learner	Date / session of 1 st assessment	Number of words read correctly	Date / session of 2 nd assessment	Number of words read correctly
M	23.11.20	7 out of 15	10.5.21 3 rd session	15 out of 15 + 9 out of 15 on the 2 nd page
P	12.2.21	6 out of 15	10.5.21 7 th session	14 out of 15
C	16.3.21	2 out of 15	10.5.21 6 th session	14 out of 15
B	23.10.20	7 out of 15	7.5.21 10 th session	15 out of 15
E	9.11.20	1 out of 15	20.11.20 3 rd session	10 out of 15
N	16.11.20	4 out of 15	7.5.21 10 th session	13 out of 15

I noticed that the strategy most of these learners had when faced with spelling a new word was to look up and to the left, as if trying to 'see' the word or to create a blank canvas where the word may appear. All my learners have a bank of words they can spell depending on their experiences. Most have family names they can rattle off easily, addresses, some learners that work have complex vocational vocabularies and some have words associated with hobbies or interests. Learner B knows how to spell the names of all the racecourses in the country but was delighted to find that the 'th' in Bath could help him spell Smithsonian (as in the museum!) I noticed that any words outside of their bank of familiar words were disconnected from the rest of the language. They had simply memorised strings of letter names. TRT starts to

convert the sounds they hear into letters and gives them a strategy to turn the squiggles on a page into sounds.

Learner	Description	Number of sessions	Comments
Learner B	Older, retired, male learner. Undiagnosed dyslexic. Has attended literacy classes previously at various times. Never writes, reads paper regularly for betting and news.	10 sessions	Always met face to face. Unable to get online between Christmas 2020 and May 2021.

Learner B said to me very early on in the classes that he didn't think he would ever be able to write a sentence. A few weeks later he wrote (and spelt perfectly) the sentence 'Did you finish that sandwich?' and included the question mark correctly. He was absolutely delighted, took a picture of the board to show his family and has agreed that I can buy him an exercise book so he can keep a weekly diary.



Learner N	Female, not working. Home schooling her daughter for a period. Has been told previously she is dyslexic. Undertaking other courses and finds studying and writing a challenge.	10 sessions	Initially face to face, went online from February. Had a period in December and January when her housing was disrupted and unable to attend classes. Came back face to face in May 2021.
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Learner N is doing a mentoring course and needs to write short essays. Her spelling is a challenge but she also gets confused by full stops and capital letters and says that thinking about spelling and sentences means she gets everything confused. Her confidence in her spelling has now improved and, perhaps because this has freed up working memory, it has allowed her to work on her punctuation. She recently managed to correctly spell and punctuate the sentence 'I hate this job. I want to quit.' She is much more confident and says she is now able sometimes to help her Year 5 (aged 10) daughter with her homework.

Two learners also sent me some text they had written, one for another course they were doing and one for a report at work. Both texts demonstrated some issues with grammar and punctuation that you might expect at Entry Level 2 but the spelling was excellent (see Appendix 3).

I would also highlight learner M who had previously tried many times to improve her spelling with little success but had done so after only three hours with TRT. She has a long way to go but was encouraged by the improvement.

Learning from this project

I am completely converted to using TRT as a one-to-one tool to improve spelling at Entry Level 1 and 2. Alongside the usual literacy classes I think it will allow learners to address their main challenges and enable them to progress into better jobs, help their kids at school and make smarter choices in the betting shop. Adult literacy is about so much more than passing exams and these examples remind us of the importance of literacy for social inclusion.

I have certainly found that the pace I need to work at may be different with my older learners than the TRT programme recommends, but they need more recap and reassurance that they are improving. They would see more of a tangible improvement if they were also attending group classes at the same time because they would be putting their new skills into practice with peers.

The model of running one-to-one sessions alongside group classes is one that I will champion and look forward to monitoring next year. I certainly feel that these six learners I have worked with would struggle with the new Entry Level 2 Functional Skills spelling assessment without the intervention of TRT.

References

Millar, T., (2020). *That Reading Thing: a complete course for teaching young people and adults to read*. 4th ed. Stalashen Press.

UCL IoE & ccConsultancy (2019) *Post – 16 Phonics Approaches: A Toolkit*, London: ETF.

Appendix 1 – The project team

Project Role	Name	Job Role
Project Lead	Simon Fuller	Curriculum Manager
Deputy Lead	Anna Ward	Team Leader
Project team	Julie Robinson	Literacy Teacher
	Victoria Creyton	Literacy Teacher
Project Mentor	Kirsty Powell (ccConsultancy)	
Research Group Lead	Tricia Millar (That Reading Thing)	

Appendix 2 – Colleague comments

Teachers' comments

“V”

I have completed the training and found it easy to follow and probably, with a bit of practice, it looks to be very effective. The resources pack was great.

I'd say translating into online learning has been a little tricky as the learners don't also have these resources, so there's some creative problem solving on that. The main issue I have found is that I have two learners that don't know the phonics alphabet and one of them can't read 2 letter words. And where TRT starts is therefore too advanced for this learner. However, I contacted Trish and she sent me the TRT Basics paperwork (attached) to start with that instead. She seems incredibly helpful and thorough. For my own practice I want to compare its effectiveness with Word Wasp so I know which system is most effective. But overall it looks pretty good. There is a report by Greg Brooks where he evaluates its effectiveness.

<https://thatreadingthing.com/about-trt/greg-brooks-evaluation-of-trt/>

“J”

I've done TRT with about 3 of my learners so far (2 x E1 class and 1 x E2/E3 class). I haven't progressed further than Level 2.1 with any yet as most have only had one lesson. The E1 learners also need phonological awareness training alongside as they do struggle with the concept of sound and identifying sounds. So I'm doing a variety of activities in each lesson with them and TRT is just one part.

It is noticeable however that even after one session, they are beginning to get it. I think they just need more “training” in the technique so I think it's worth going slowly initially. The E2/E3 learner got on quicker unsurprisingly.

I think offering TRT alongside classes is a really good idea. TRT may not be suitable for everyone so we may need to think about whether we are **only** offering a 1-1 for TRT, or are we offering every E1/E2 learner a 1-1 even if it's not for TRT. I think the latter is fairer but I realise that doing a group class and a 1-1 session for every E1 and E2 learner will require a lot of time from tutors. I would be happy to spend more time with entry level learners next year.

Appendix 3 – Learner writing

Learner N writing

Sir Captain Tom.

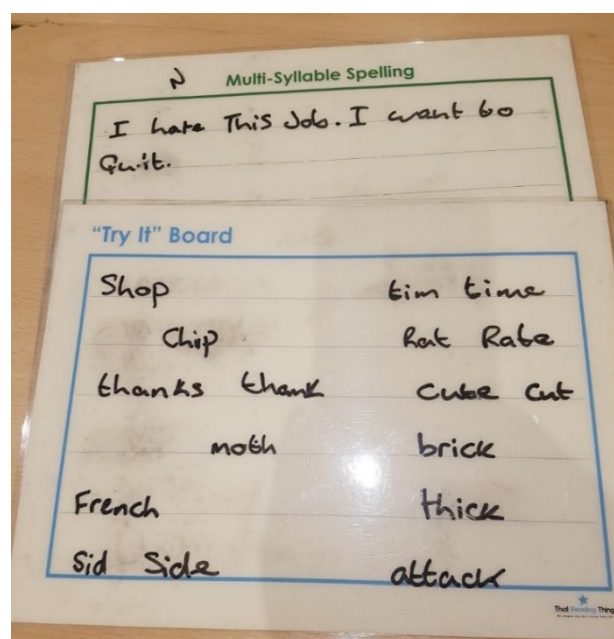
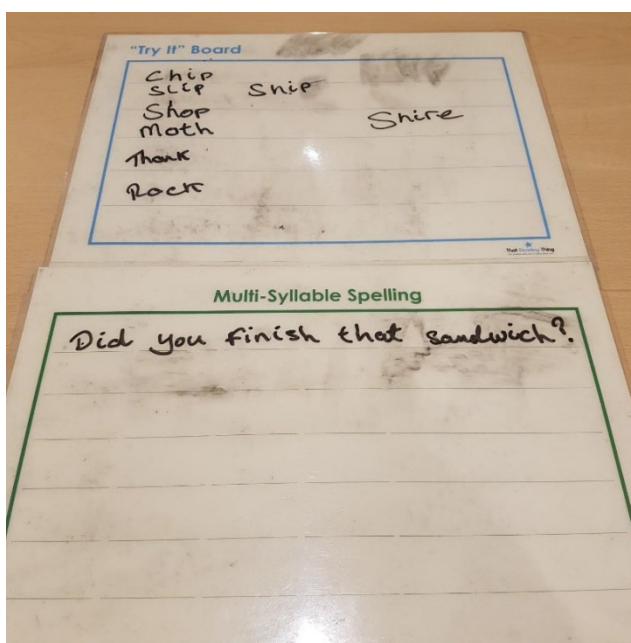
I first heard of the war veteran on the news who had served in the British army in Indian and the Burma campaign during the second world war, on the run-up to his 100th birthday during the covid -19 the amazing Achievements by walking for the NHS and Raising 32,795,065 and received a knighthood from the Queen. you are an inspiration and inspire me and peoples all over the world thank you for all your hard work.

- received a knighthood
- mad honorary colonel of the British army
- raised millions for the NHS

Learner E work report

A disability customer came in with 2 carers. There were sitting down On the gym equipment. I approach the carers saying that they can't sit on the equipment because of the covid-19 and it says on the terms and conditions. he was arguing he didn't want to listen to what I will say. he said he want to speak to the manager and I said I am the manager but he still didn't want to listen to me. I took him to Megan and she told him about the terms and conditions and then he started to listen he went back to the gym and applied by the terms and conditions.

Example sentences from Learner B and Learner N working at TRT Level 5, 'sh/ch/th'.



Appendix 4 – That Reading Thing sequence and lessons

This article is from the blog at thatreadingthing.com

There are 30 Levels in That Reading Thing followed by 20 Levels if needed. Every learner does every Level but works at their own pace because teens and adults struggle with reading for all sorts of reasons. This means that two people might be at Level 25 but one will be reading quite fluently and the other still reading slowly. However, both are successful because they're both many steps ahead of where they started.

Levels 1-13 – The Foundations

Level 1 is the TRT word reading assessment. It is essentially a decoding exercise of real but unfamiliar words which start at 'lot' and become increasingly complex. The first two pages have single syllable words comprised of basic code sounds with the gradual addition of sh, ch, th, ck and ng. The third page of the assessment has multi-syllable words, the last three of which represent the advanced code. It's very common for our learners to refuse to try any of the long words.

The image displays three components of the TRT Foundation Level boards:

- Foundation Sound Chart:** A grid showing basic code sounds and their combinations. The top row lists vowels: a, e, i, o, u. The second row lists consonants: b, d, t, g, k, c, qu, h. The third row lists consonants: m, n, p, f, l, r, s, j. The fourth row lists consonants: v, w, x, y, z, zz, ll, ss. The bottom two rows list digraphs: sh, ch, th, ck, le, y, er, ing, tion, ed.
- Multi-Syllable Spelling:** A grid showing multi-syllable words and their syllables. The words are: rapid, upset, fantastic. The syllables are: ra pid, up set, fan tas tic.
- "Try It" Board:** A large empty grid for writing and reading practice.

Below the boards, the word "fantastic" is shown in a puzzle piece format, with each letter in a separate piece. The letters are: f, a, n, t, a, s, t, i, c. Each letter piece has a small star on the bottom left corner.

TRT Foundation Level boards

For the rest of the Foundation Levels (2 – 13) learners are building, reading and spelling words out of context and then reading them in text. Building is simply spelling with visual clues available – a "sound chart" for single syllable words and puzzle pieces for multisyllable words. Multi-syllable words appear in the first 20 minutes of the first lesson and learners are spelling 'fantastic' by the end of that first session. All work is done on custom dry erase boards so mistakes disappear easily and completely.

In a single TRT Foundation session, the learner reads, writes on the TRT boards, says sounds, moves sounds around and reads and discusses sentences. They might read

small amounts of authentic text depending on need at this stage. In all those activities they are learning an automatic thought process for dealing with unfamiliar words. They are also having conversations about all sorts of topics which is key to developing vocabulary.

The goal is to move from reading and spelling words like 'sap' and 'fax'- words they've never seen before – to reading and spelling 'instructions' and 'conditioning' in 3 to 5 hours. This is possible because we continue to limit the code while introducing endings. We also apply **The Deal** throughout every lesson which means the learner never has to know anything that we haven't done together – nothing. It's in this environment of guaranteed safety that very reluctant learners start to re-envision themselves as belonging in education. They also discover that mistakes are fine – an opportunity to learn rather than a source of shame.

By the end of the Foundation Levels, the learner has developed confidence in word attack and is learning to track through long words from left to right and to read what's in the middle rather than guessing badly. They're learning to check meaning from context in sentences. (Note that this is different from *creating* meaning from context in sentences.)

The Advance Levels 14-30

Sound the Same, Look Different rain table same eight

c	k	ck	ch	cc
cat catch medic connect crash fantastic mechanic fact crack suspect scale	kit kitchen make lake thank strike lick mistake risk	black quick lacking jacket chicken crack kick	Chris school mechanic	tobacco accomplish

Multi-Syllable Spelling

mis take	mistake
to bacc o	tobacco
mech an ic	mechanic

Look the Same, Sound Different cap table father water

C	
cat	city
class fact coffee combine sandal cancer ethnic discover script express factory electric continue resistant	meny decide council cancer except script success centre necessary accident

m e c h a n i c

TRT Advanced Level boards

From Level 14 to 30, the learner discovers both the complexity and the logic of the rest of the code. They are no longer intimidated by long words and they're in the process of learning that reading right through an unfamiliar word is better than guessing when it comes to reading for meaning. With this in mind, they discover that English has symbols that Look the Same but Sound Different (sunny, try, yet, myth) and sound that Sound the Same but Look Different (both, close, grow, coat, soul, toe, though)

They discover this about the English code by sorting words on TRT boards and seeing the patterns of spelling and pronunciation from most to least common. They are also still building with puzzles and spelling – though, from this stage, spelling comes on slower than reading because of the memory it demands.

At the Advanced Levels, reading becomes a much bigger part of the lesson. We encourage use of newspapers, magazines, short stories, non-fiction and even novels. The one requirement is that the reading material must be something that your learner wouldn't be embarrassed to be seen carrying down the street.

If the student needs them, there are 20 more levels available at the tutor support site. However, by this point, most students need to be reading a great deal more and spending less time on TRT Levels.

<https://thatreadingthing.com/about-trt/what-trt-looks-like/>

Appendix 5 – Learners

Learner	Description	First session	Total number of hours / sessions	Comments
B	Older, retired, male learner. Undiagnosed dyslexic. Has attended literacy classes previously at various times. Never writes, reads paper regularly for betting and news.	23.10.20	10	Always met face to face. Unable to get online between Christmas 2020 and May 2021.
E	Male, working in a service industry. Furloughed for a period. Been told he is dyslexic. Has to write at work, very aware of his spelling.	9.11.20	14	Initial 4 sessions were face to face but went online in January and stayed online when he went back to work in April.
N	Female, not working. Home schooling her daughter for a period. Has been told previously she is dyslexic Undertaking other courses and finds studying and writing a challenge.	16.11.20	10	Initially face to face, went online from February. Had a period in December and January when her housing was disrupted and unable to attend classes. Came back face to face in May 2021.
P	Male, working in a service industry. Worked through the pandemic. Undiagnosed dyslexic.	12.2.21	7	Referred to me by another learner, started online and then met face to face when we returned in May 2021.

	Very little writing.			
C	Male, not working. Learning difficulties but has been told he is dyslexic. Hardly ever writes.	16.3.21	6	Joined online with the help of his key worker. Face to face from May 2021.
M	Female, not working. Has been told she is dyslexic. Uses voice notes instead of WhatsApp	23.11.20	3	Started face to face in November but unable to get online so no classes until May 2021.

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<https://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/prep/>