

Newsletter June 2016

Department of Psychology
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At the Language and Reading Acquisition (LARA) lab, we are interested in oral language and literacy development in childhood and adolescence. We work with children with and without reading and language difficulties and use longitudinal and experimental designs as well as eye tracking methodology in our research. The lab is directed by Dr Jessie Ricketts.

We are currently working with a number of secondary schools and primary schools whose help and involvement are invaluable to us. In addition to this vital contribution to our research, schools and pupils have found it interesting to take part. It is anticipated that findings from our research will have implications for professionals working in the field of education by informing theories of reading and oral vocabulary development.

Website: www.pc.rhul.ac.uk/sites/lara/
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Vocabulary and Reading in Secondary Schools (VaRiSS)

One of our current studies, the Vocabulary and Reading in Secondary School (VaRiSS) project, is examining reciprocal relationships between oral vocabulary and reading in secondary school pupils. Learning to read and acquiring a rich and varied vocabulary are among the most important skills that a child will develop. Furthermore, there are well-established links between the two areas: good vocabulary knowledge supports reading comprehension, while the process of reading provides opportunities for acquiring new vocabulary. Up until now, research (and educational policy) has tended to focus on the relationship between oral vocabulary and reading comprehension in primary school children, neglecting its importance for pupils at secondary school level. The Reading and Vocabulary in Secondary Schools (VaRiSS) project aims to address this lack of research.

We have seen around 200 students, following them through years 7, 8 and 9 to look at how their oral vocabulary and reading comprehension abilities develop.

The findings from our study will not only contribute to existing theories of reading and language, but will have implications for the ways in which new words are taught in schools. We hope that our research will highlight the continuing importance of reading and vocabulary skills for adolescents as they become increasingly independent in their learning.

To find out more about the VaRiSS project:

Website: variss.org
Twitter: @varissproject
Facebook: facebook.com/varissproject/



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The Lab Team



Dr Jessie Ricketts: I am interested in reading and oral language development in childhood and adolescence, particularly in the role of vocabulary in reading (both word-level reading and reading comprehension), and reciprocally, the role of reading in oral vocabulary acquisition. My research adopts a range of methodological approaches including longitudinal, cross-sectional and word learning studies to investigate acquisition, development and causal hypotheses, working with typically developing children and children with developmental disorders such as poor reading comprehension, dyslexia, specific language impairment and autism spectrum disorders. I aim to collect data that address questions of theoretical importance that have practical implications for policy and practice.



Mrs Lucy Taylor: I am working as a Research Assistant, primarily collecting data for the VaRiSS project, which aims to investigate how vocabulary knowledge and reading develop and change as pupils move from Year 7 to Year 9 of secondary school. I am also working on a project looking at comparing objective measures of spelling and grammar with performance on the 2016 Year 6 SATS Spelling Punctuation and Grammar Test (SPAG).



Miss Katie Whiteside: My PhD research explores language and cognitive development in children who are learning English as an additional language (EAL). The main aim of my research is to identify potential markers of language impairment in children with EAL. This is an important topic as children with EAL are at risk of being both under-identified and over-identified with language impairment. This is due to a lack of data regarding language development in children with EAL and a lack of appropriate measures to identify language impairment in these children. My research also explores relationships between executive functioning, language impairment, and learning EAL.



Miss Gabbie May: My research is exploring whether the consumption of wild blueberries can improve memory, attention and reading ability in 7-10 year olds. Wild blueberries are a fruit high in flavonoids, a micronutrient previously found to benefit cognition across the human lifespan. Most recently, research from the University of Reading found that children who consumed a wild blueberry drink high in flavonoids improved their performance on memory and attention tasks up to 6 hrs post-consumption; a novel finding with potential educational implications, such as for reading. Reading relies upon multiple aspects of cognition, such as memory and attention, therefore I hope that the previous effects of flavonoids observed from the child literature will extend to aiding reading ability.



Miss Nicola Dawson: My research explores the role of morphological knowledge in vocabulary acquisition, with a particular focus on word learning in adolescence. The words that pupils encounter as they move through the education system are increasingly complex, and much of this complexity is driven by morphological structure. My aim is to investigate whether adolescents are sensitive to the morphological structure of words, the extent to which they use their existing knowledge of morphology to learn new words, and the potential benefits of morphological instruction on vocabulary acquisition. I am also interested in extending this work to children and adolescents with language difficulties.



Alessandra Valentini: My PhD research is investigating how children learn new words when they are listening to and/or reading stories. I am particularly interested in comparing learning following listening, reading and combined reading and listening conditions to see which mode of presentation best promotes learning of word meaning, oral and written forms. I have conducted research in collaboration with teachers in the classroom as well as working individually with children myself. I have been assessing learning using computer based tasks, as well as eye movement measures. My main finding so far has been that the most beneficial mode of presentation depends on the aspect of learning assessed.

Thanks to all our undergraduate research assistants who contribute to the work of the LARA Lab: Natascha Ahmed, Keely Pridden, Rosie McGuire, Grace Pocock, Eva Dvorakova, Sophie Groosman and Emily Crosby.

Thanks also to all the schools that help us with our research, we are incredibly grateful for their support: Emmbrook School in Wokingham, Cox Green School in Maidenhead, Garth Hill College in Bracknell, St Crispin's School in Wokingham, Ranelagh School in Bracknell, and Meadow Primary School in Stoneleigh.

If you are interested in hearing more about our research and/or in taking part, please send your contact details to jessie.ricketts@rhul.ac.uk.