

THE CENTER FOR SPEECH EXCELLENCE

“Structure of English” Makes it Difficult to Master

Children take much longer to establish basic reading and writing skills in English than in any other European languages, the British Association science festival in Scotland heard yesterday.

An international study of 700 primary school children in 15 European countries showed that most have “mastered the basic foundation elements of literacy” within a year or less of starting school. But the English-speaking sample – from Dundee in Scotland – took two and a half years.

Phillip Seymour, psychology professor at Dundee University, told the Glasgow meeting: “It seems likely that the main cause of the slow rate of progress in English is linguistic and derives from difficulties created by the complex syllable structure and inconsistent spelling system.”

Professor Seymour, the study director, said groups were matched for general education ability and social background. The results were unlikely to have been influenced significantly by different teaching methods across Europe or by the fact that children started school at the age of five in Britain but at six in most other European countries. The second most difficulty language for native speakers was Danish, followed by French and Portuguese. The remaining languages – Greek, Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch, Norwegian, Icelandic and Finnish – were all mastered easily by schoolchildren within a year.

The survey, which was partly funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, showed that on average the Scottish children had mastered only 30 percent of the basic elements of literacy within a year and 70 percent within two years of starting school.

English presents two linguistic challenges, Professor Seymour said. It has a complex “syllabic structure”, with several consonants often grouped together, as for example in “eight” and “ate”.

Asked whether he would favor a new move to simplify and regularize English spelling, Professor Seymour replied: “I am in two minds about that. It might make English easier to learn but a lot of the richness of the language would be lost.”

By Clive Cookson, Science Editor

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