

Teaching
KIDS
to Read

Basic skills for Australian & New Zealand
parents and teachers

Fay Tran

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Foreword

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It is refreshing to find a book by an Australian author that reflects real depth of teaching experience in applying methods of instruction that research has shown to be the most effective for teaching early reading and spelling. I found myself agreeing with every point that Fay Tran makes in this helpful text.

By using an anecdotal style, the author has brought to life in these pages a wide range of children with learning problems and associated difficulties. Her approach to their problems reveals a thorough understanding of how children learn, the obstacles that some children may encounter, and the most effective ways of overcoming their difficulties.

The results from research conducted in many English-speaking countries have indicated very clearly that the early stages of teaching reading and spelling must include an emphasis on explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and letter-to-sound relationships, because both are necessary for decoding or writing unfamiliar words. This method is exemplified here through the structured use of a phonogram approach. In addition, the author stresses the importance of teaching all skills and strategies to the point of mastery by providing abundant practice and the opportunity to apply new learning. The role of assessment in monitoring children's progress is also well illustrated.

But the book is really about very much more than simply teaching phonics. The author touches on many symptoms of learning difficulties, and suggests how these difficulties may be addressed appropriately in the classroom and at home.

Peter Westwood

Associate Professor (Special Education), now retired

About the Author

Fay Tran is a specialist literacy teacher with over 25 years' experience in helping children of all abilities with their learning difficulties, mostly recently at one of Victoria's top educational institutions, Geelong Grammar School.

Fay has a Bachelor of Education degree from Deakin University and a Bachelor of Special Education degree from Flinders University, and has considerable experience as both a teacher and teacher-librarian. She has authored papers on children's learning difficulties, and is a member of Learning Difficulties Australia and Support for Dyslexia and other Learning Difficulties (SPELD).

Fay retired from full-time work in 2010. Teaching Kids to Read represents the fruit of a lifetime's passion for literacy.

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Glossary

Here below are definitions of some of the key technical terms used in this book. Where terms appear in bold throughout the book, their definitions can be found in this glossary.

- alliteration** Using words starting with the same sound; for example, ‘greedy green gremlins’
- blending** Combining speech sounds into a word; for example, the sounds /c/-/a/-/t/ can be blended to make ‘cat’
- cued articulation** A technique recommended by speech therapists to introduce letter sounds to school beginners, using hand signs for each letter
- digraph** Two letters representing a single sound; for example, ‘sh’, ‘ch’, ‘ay’.
- dyslexia** A difficulty in learning to read and spell that is not related to intelligence
- expressive language** Speech
- grapheme** The written equivalent of a speech sound (phoneme); for example, t, th, tch
- homophones** Words that sound the same but are spelled differently and have different meanings
- learning support teacher** Formally called the ‘Special Education Teacher’, this teacher provides support for children experiencing learning difficulties, including assessment, advice to teachers and parents, and individual teaching.
- literacy** The skills of reading, writing and spelling
- morpheme** The smallest unit of meaning within a word; for example, ‘help’ comprises a single morpheme; ‘helping’ has two morphemes; ‘helplessly’ has three morphemes
- number facts** Addition, subtraction, multiplication and division facts such as $4+5=9$ or $6 \times 7=42$
- numeracy** The skills involved in using mathematics to solve problems
- onset and rime** ‘Onset’ is the first consonant or group of consonants in a single-syllable a word; ‘rime’ is the remaining part of the

word, including the vowel and last consonant or consonants; for example, in ‘black’, ‘bl’ is the onset and ‘ack’ is the ‘rime’

- phoneme** A unit of sound within a word; ‘cat’ has three phonemes and so has ‘moon’
- phonics** Applying a knowledge of letter-to-sound correspondence in order to read unfamiliar words, and using the same knowledge in order to spell words
- phonemic awareness** Understanding that words consist of discrete sounds, and being able mentally to isolate and identify those sounds in words and recognise words that start or end with the same sound, and words that rhyme. Children need phonemic awareness in order to understand and learn phonics
- phonogram** The written equivalent of a sound unit using either a single letter or small group of letters to represent each pronounceable part of a word (for example, p, ch, tch and ea). Programs based on the Spalding Method use ‘phonogram’ when referring to both phonemes and graphemes
- phonological processing** The skill of identifying discrete sounds in words and blending sounds to make words
- receptive language** Listening to and understanding language
- rhyme** Usually applies to words that have the same ending; ‘song’ and ‘long’ are words that rhyme
- rime** The vowel and final consonant (or group of consonants) in a single-syllable word; for example, in ‘song’, ‘ong’ is the rime; in ‘block’, ‘ock’ is the rime. Each syllable in a complex (multisyllabic) word also has an onset and rime (for example, ‘fantastic’: /f/ -/an/ /t-/ /as/ /t/- /ic/)
- rote learning** Learning something by repeating it until it becomes automatic
- syllabication (or syllabification)** The process of dividing a word into syllables; a syllable is a part of a word that has a vowel and can be pronounced separately. ‘Garden’ has two syllables: ‘gar’ and ‘den’.
- trigraph** A grapheme that has three letters, such as ‘igh’ or ‘tch’
- word identification** Reading a word not recognised automatically, using skills such as phonics to decode the word

INTRODUCTION

The learning journey



assistance at some time in their school careers. This assistance could range from diagnostic assessment followed by discussions with parents/carers, teachers and the child, through to short-term individual or small group tuition, to individual tuition over a longer period of time. I concluded by urging parents to discuss with the class teacher any concerns about their child's learning as soon as they perceive a possible problem, and not to wait until a formal parent-teacher interview.

Children need to develop skills and learn to use strategies that maximise their progress towards literacy and numeracy. Very few children are not naturally equipped to become good readers, writers and mathematicians, but some have individual characteristics that may affect how easily and how quickly they learn.

Children who are encouraged to read by noticing one or two letters of a word and then guessing the whole word from the context or accompanying illustration, or who rely on visual memory to remember whole words, are being set along a path that is unlikely to lead them to literacy success. On the other hand, research has shown conclusively that children who are taught to use word-analysis and synthesis skills, particularly phonics, as their primary reading strategy are at least directed along the correct path toward literacy. Once they start on their journey, it is essential to monitor their progress and to return them to the correct path should they stray.

Children learn language by working very hard at it, every waking moment from babyhood. They listen to the language of their family, copy it, make connections with meaning and grammatical patterns and, most of all, they practise and practise and practise. Little children depend heavily on their primary carer/s and other family members to provide the feedback that guides them in making language decisions.

Last weekend I listened to my three-year-old grandson talking to his mother. The conversation went like this:

Mother (about to throw the ball): Here, Oliver, can you catch the ball?

Hold your arms out.

Oliver: I did! I caught the ball! I caught the ball!

Mother: Clever boy! You caught it. You caught the ball.

Oliver: Grandma, I caught the ball. I caught it!

Mother: Now throw it back to me and see if I can catch it, too.

Oliver (throwing the ball): Catch it! Catch it!

Mother: I caught it.

Oliver: Mummy caught it, too.

Last night, at our school's parent information night, I had two minutes to explain my role as a **learning support teacher**.

I likened the learning process to embarking on a journey to a fairly vague destination, by means of a poorly mapped road. Regardless of how well the traveller is prepared at the start, there are likely to be confusions and wrong turns along the way. Those who start the journey with even the slightest problem with their equipment are likely to need extra assistance at some time.

Instruction in the necessary skills, support and guidance along the learning journey is provided mainly by teachers, but also by parents/carers, other family members and friends. In addition, to make any progress at all, the child must be actively involved in the learning process. I see a three-way relationship between the child, the school and the home as essential for the successful development of **literacy** and **numeracy** skills.

My role as a learning support teacher is to monitor the progress of all the travellers along the learning journey, to make sure they are well equipped for the trip and to direct them back onto the correct path should they make wrong turn or fall behind. I pointed out to parents and carers that difficulties in acquiring literacy and numeracy usually are not related to intelligence, and that most of their children would need some extra advice or individual

Oliver's mother did not tell him that he had used the correct or incorrect words, but by repeating his correct statements, she confirmed that he had used the correct words, and by changing the incorrect statements, she gave him guidance. Oliver then used the corrected statements and received the appropriate feedback that he had used the right words. This conversation was probably repeated many times over a few days until Oliver was confident in using the words. I remember a time at dinner, when Oliver was learning to use the words, 'you' and 'your'. There were several people at the table and he engaged each one in turn with almost identical questions and statements, 'What are **you** eating?' 'There is **your** corn' 'There is **your** meat'. Oliver instinctively saw the family occasion as an opportunity to practise his language, and all the adults indulged him with amusement.

Unfortunately, while language is an essential base for the development of literacy, reading and writing are not acquired by instinct – they must be taught. It is only in recent history that everyone was expected to acquire literacy skills, but now everyone must be able to read and write to a certain level to be able to participate in the modern world. Unless children are taught the required skills early at school, they will experience difficulties, especially if they have an individual area of weakness, such as a limited short-term memory, that makes the acquisition of skills more challenging than for other children.

Learning literacy skills requires a level of effort and practice similar to that naturally used by the child in learning a first language. Small children spend many hours a day practising language and building up their general knowledge. It is very important to encourage children to maintain this drive for learning, so that they can continue to be active learners and practise literacy skills beyond the formal lesson. The way to do this is to make learning personally rewarding and fun. Nothing spurs children on to further effort more than seeing their own progress – and nothing discourages them more than repeated failure.

Using phonics to teach reading and spelling

Ever since the beginnings of mass education, teachers and academics have studied and experimented with various methods of teaching children to read and write. Research has consistently shown that direct instruction in reading and spelling strategies, including systematic **phonics** instruction, is the most effective method of teaching children literacy skills. Other methods have been tried over the years, but all have resulted in a high percentage of failure.

All children benefit from direct instruction in phonics, as it gives them the

'code' with which to unlock the system underpinning our written language. Some children acquire skills quickly and learn to read with a minimum of practice, but others, particularly those who have a learning difficulty, need systematic teaching and practice over an extended period. The children who need phonics teaching the most are often those for whom it is the most difficult. Some children struggle with phonemic awareness in their first and second years of school, while others find it hard to remember the links between letters and sounds. If they are encouraged to compensate for their difficulties by relying on visual memory or guessing from context, then they are likely to be in real trouble later on, when they need phonics skills to be able to read fluently and accurately. What they need is effective phonics instruction in the early stages; more direct and systematic teaching, more practice in an enjoyable form and more encouragement to use their developing skills.

There are many reasons that children experience difficulties with literacy and numeracy, and several are discussed in this book. The most common difficulties are related to problems with short-term auditory memory, speed of processing words, language delay and attention problems – or a combination of these. Some children also experience more subtle difficulties related to memory and processing of information that may be difficult to diagnose accurately, but can make learning in the classroom extremely challenging. The good news is that, no matter what is causing their difficulties, they can all be overcome with good teaching. In fact, there is no reason – or, indeed, excuse – for schools today not to teach *all* children to read and write. All that is needed is systematic, direct instruction of the required skills, particularly phonics, in the classroom, ample opportunity and encouragement to apply the developing skills in reading and writing activities, and individual support in the early years for those who have a special difficulty.

When I first started teaching, nearly 50 years ago, reading was taught by a mixture of phonics and 'sight words', as high-frequency words such as 'said' and 'the' were called, using graded readers, each with a workbook. Normally I would divide the class into three groups, taking a group at a time for direct instruction of a page or two in the book, while the other groups worked on exercises in the workbook or other reading activities. Spelling and mathematics were taught using the blackboard for direct instruction and workbooks for practice, with the mandatory test on Fridays. Individual reading, spelling and maths help was given mostly at my desk during other lessons, which probably meant that subjects such as art, music and nature study (now science) were probably neglected a little.

Because of the direct instruction and the use of graded readers, almost all children learned to read. Of course, there were no learning support teachers, so those children who fell behind due to a learning difficulty (not in my class, of course) repeated a year and sometimes two, and then left school at age 14 to get a job that did not require literacy. I remember as a child how everyone was afraid of failing at the end of the school year, and it must have been devastating for those who did. At the time I – and no doubt other children and parents – thought that those who failed were probably not very bright and therefore not suited to secondary schooling beyond a year or two. Now I know that almost all of them would have been intelligent children with a specific learning difficulty that could have been addressed at school.

Apart from the advent of technology, and the arrival of school libraries and subject specialists, not much changed until the 1980s, when the direct teaching of phonics was declared outdated, unnecessary and even harmful, and the ‘whole language’ movement took over the classrooms.

Anxious to keep up with the trends in curriculum, our school decided to bring the staff up to scratch and train us how to use the whole-language method of reading, writing and spelling. To the surprise of the senior teacher in charge of the operation, another teacher and I mounted a challenge to the idea, and we were supported by a couple of the more experienced early primary teachers. We all knew that the new method, which discouraged instruction in phonics and the use of graded readers and workbooks, would spell disaster for many, if not all, of our students.

There were many meetings and papers presenting opposing views, all backed up by research findings. The main argument of the whole-language movement was that children can learn literacy skills the same way that they learn language, through plenty of exposure to and interaction with good quality text. My opposing camp worked hard to convince the rest of the staff that direct instruction in reading strategies and phonics skills were essential for all children, but particularly for those with learning difficulties, who could not learn by osmosis.

Eventually, common sense prevailed and the most important elements of both methods were retained. Phonics was still to be taught and direct instruction was allowed, but the graded readers were gradually replaced by lots of little books with ungraded vocabulary. Of course, I kept my graded readers in the learning support room, and actually gained some from the classrooms. Spelling and grammar were still to be taught, although the emphasis in written language moved to writing creative and lengthy drafts, which were

to be self-edited. I have to concede that the whole-language method did some good, by stimulating the publication of masses of small story books and the class-sized ‘Big Books’. However, it is a pity that vocabulary controlled, graded readers were discarded altogether, as they can be useful, particularly for use with children who, at first, find the application of phonics skills and the development of automatic recognition of words quite difficult.

We were lucky that, as an independent school, we were allowed to make curriculum decisions like this, as I think most schools had no choice and obediently changed over to the whole-language method. Within a few years, we started getting children enrolled in Years 4 and 5 who had very low literacy skills, and we knew that we had been right to oppose the introduction of this disastrous method of teaching literacy in our school. At about the same time, standardised testing was frowned upon and discarded by most schools, so that many children with difficulties were not identified at all until the government testing program began a few years ago.

Phonics and Australia’s new National Curriculum

Now, however, there is some light at the end of the tunnel with the arrival of the National Curriculum, which will help countless numbers of children if the stated requirement to teach phonics skills for reading and spelling is implemented. The National Curriculum clearly states that children must learn phonemic awareness and phonics skills from the first year of school. In Prep/Kindergarten, letter–sound relations are to be introduced, with the children expected to read and write consonant–vowel–consonant words and some high-frequency words. In Year 1, the requirement is for the children to ‘recognise and write sound–letter correspondences, including some less common sound–letter matches, consonant and vowel **digraphs** and consonant blends’ and also to ‘recognise morphemes in word families’. In Year 2, the children are expected to be able to ‘Use **morphemes** and **syllabification** to break up and read some simple multisyllabic words’ and be aware of ‘Spelling and pronunciation rules including silent letters, vowel–consonant digraphs and many less common sound–letter matches’.

I don’t expect it will happen overnight, but as the teaching of phonics and spelling rules is resumed in classrooms after an absence of many years, there should be a noticeable reduction in the numbers of children struggling to acquire basic literacy.

Identifying a child's learning difficulty

Even when all children have a good grounding in phonics skills, there will still be those who have a learning difficulty and who must have individual attention in order to make progress and achieve their potential. This book is about those children, of whom there are two or three in almost every class and, according to my friends who are grandparents, at least one in every family. The stories of real and fictional children explain how to identify, diagnose and teach children who display a variety of learning difficulties, and how to manage them sympathetically in the classroom and at home.

As with other childhood problems, early identification and intervention ensures the best results and least trauma to the child. In schools where formal screening of children in the first year of school is not routine, parents may be the first to suspect a difficulty. The warning signs are a change in attitude towards school, and towards reading in particular. The child may experience difficulty in coping with the social demands at school, or the teacher may describe him or her as a 'dreamer' or immature or lacking in attention. Some children refuse to read to their parents at all, while others guess and bluff their way through the little books sent home for practice. Others may be tired and grumpy after school for no apparent reason.

If, as a parent, guardian or carer, you notice any of these signs in your child, it is essential that you then look closely at the child's reading strategies to see whether she or he is using phonics as the first attack on unknown words. If mistakes indicate that the child is relying too heavily on context clues and is unable to sound out a word when prompted, then you can assume that the child is experiencing a difficulty. Of course, the problem may be simply a lack of appropriate teaching, but it might also be a specific learning difficulty that needs to be addressed. Whichever is the case, consult the child's teacher without delay, to find out whether he or she is aware of the problem and, if so, how it is being handled in class. The best outcome at this point would be for the school's learning support teacher to carry out a full learning assessment, discuss the results with the class teacher and parents, and then to make recommendations about the best way to handle the difficulties in the classroom and at home. This could (and should) include individual tuition at school for as long as it is needed.

Of course, this is an ideal scenario. It may be that as parent, guardian or carer you may need to consult an educational psychologist or one of the learning difficulties organisations listed on page 174, for diagnosis of the difficulties and recommendations for tuition to overcome the problem.

Using this book

While the best place for individual tuition to take place is in the school, with the student withdrawn from the class for short lessons at least three times a week, a daily lesson at home or a weekly lesson with a tutor, followed up with daily practice at home, can also be very affective. The Onset and Rime word lists (p.122), the Essential Spelling lists (p.135) and sample phonogram templates on pages 121 to 172 provide the teaching materials for an individual program, but a set of graded phonics based readers is also needed (see bibliography, page 173). Of course, all children need access to plenty of easy books that are fun to read as well to ensure that newly acquired skills are practised in context and comprehension skills are developed.

The children's stories that follow provide an understanding of the plight of children who have a learning difficulty and the information you need in order to obtain a diagnosis and remedy for their problems, so that they can achieve literacy just like everyone else. Formal assessment must be carried out by a qualified learning support teacher or psychologist, but anyone with patience and an understanding of children should be able to use the teaching materials provided to tutor a child. Believe me, rescuing a child from reading failure is a most rewarding experience, and can have a huge impact on the child's life.