

Guessing words from context is not reading.

Written by Faye Tran

Whole Language has been the dominant method of teaching reading for more than twenty years, in spite of overwhelming evidence that direct instruction of phonics and other decoding skills is the method that ensures that all children learn to read well. Whole Language is based on the belief that children can learn literacy skills the same way that they learn language, through plenty of exposure and interaction. The main feature of the approach, encouragement to guess words from context, rather than use phonics skills to decode them, is also the main reason why it has failed so many children.

Since Whole Language invaded early primary classrooms, at least half of my work as a learning support teacher was rescuing children who came from other schools with already established reading failure. Without exception, regardless of underlying learning difficulties, those children responded to direct instruction and practice in phonics skills and spelling rules, starting right from the basic level. Reminding a child to sound out a new word rather than guess from context is a very simple way of making a huge difference to the development of their reading and spelling. While it was very rewarding to put these children back on track and know that their futures would no longer be limited by illiteracy, I became increasingly concerned that what was happening at our school was quite unusual and that thousands of children across the country were being deprived of the opportunity to develop literacy skills.

The problem is that children who don't develop efficient literacy skills at school are not just disadvantaged but are seriously traumatized and often damaged for life, and this starts very early on. Let's not beat about the bush here. Functional literacy is absolutely essential in today's society and without it, people are at serious risk of a dismal future. If you don't believe me, ask a social worker. Even the child who falls behind his friends by the end of the first year develops negative attitudes to his or her learning ability and by the third year any child who is struggling to read is likely to have written themselves off academically. These children develop either avoidance strategies where they work so slowly that they never complete tasks or behave in a disruptive manner so that the teacher focuses on their behaviour rather than their learning problems. Some manage to conceal their problems by copying friends' work and learning their take-home readers by heart.

Amazingly many of the children who enrolled at my school with significant reading and spelling problems came with reports showing at least average performance with no hint of difficulties. But their mums knew. Other parents told me that their children's teachers had told them not to worry as the problems were transitory and would eventually go away. Nothing could be further from the truth, as learning difficulties do not just go away. Children with learning difficulties need good teaching, involving direct and systematic instruction in the basic skills.

This situation is unfathomable in our wealthy, educated and technologically advanced country. I simply do not understand why every primary school cannot teach every child to read and spell to a functional level in the seven years of attendance. We knew how to teach literacy skills back when I first trained about 50 years ago, and now we have the evidence from neuroscience to validate the direct instruction of phonics skills and spelling patterns that worked then and still work today, given the chance.

There are three questions to be answered. Firstly, why did the Whole Language method become so powerful that it took over the teaching of reading in almost every school and teacher training department in Australia, the US, England and even France? Secondly, why was it so disastrous for so many children? Thirdly, why did many children learn to read in spite of Whole Language. I will try to answer the first and third questions before addressing the second in more detail.

The answer to the first question, why did the Whole Language method become so powerful, is a mystery to me. I know that careers were built on introducing the method and fortunes were made by book publishers, but I can't believe that those who promoted Whole Language knew the damage it would do to all the children who failed to learn to read because they weren't taught how to do it. Of course it is possible that they didn't know the method was failing, because at around the same time as it was introduced, formal and standardized testing of literacy was also virtually banned, just like phonics. So until the AIM and NAPLAN testing was introduced by government, even the schools were not aware of the reading standards or problems of their children. It is also possible that schools assumed that Reading Recovery would rescue any children who fell behind, but we now know that that didn't work either, because it was based on the same methodology. But I knew there were serious problems and so did many parents, tutors and academics in the learning difficulties area.

Throughout all those years, university cognitive psychologists and learning difficulties experts and organizations around the world were saying that there was overwhelming evidence that phonics and direct instruction was the method that worked best and in fact was essential for most children, and somehow the message didn't get through to the curriculum decision makers and teacher trainers. Maybe the possibility that they were all wrong was too much to even consider. Now we have the knowledge, small classes, teacher aids and technology to ensure that every child learns to read and write. If the Whole Language disaster hadn't come along at the wrong moment in time, I am sure that we would be now attaining that goal.

The answer to the third question, why did many children still manage to learn to read, has become clearer recently, mainly through responses to my book. Of course many children did what the whole language method requires them to do and figure out how to read by themselves, developing the required decoding skills without help from their teachers. A few schools, continued to teach phonics skills and gradually a few more, like John Fleming's Bellfields Primary joined the rebels.

Some teachers, especially in my age group or a bit younger, have confided that they continued to teach phonics behind closed doors and even whispered the banned words 'sound it out' in their student's ears. Speech therapists continued to teach phonemic awareness and many added direct instruction in phonics to their treatments. Many students were rescued by SPELD, LDA and other private tutors and still more were taught the essential skills by their parents and grandparents. One father told me that he listened to his child's teacher explain how she intended to teach his child to read and bluntly told her that that was not how his child was going to learn and made sure that his child learnt his phonics skills at home. Another child, now a successful accountant, was taken away by his grandmother for the school holidays and drilled (his words) every day for six weeks.

The answer to the second question, why it was all such a disaster, is now clear to me and here is my theory. Guessing words from context is not reading. Furthermore, training children to guess from context after noticing just the first letter of a word is not teaching them to read at all. In fact it actually prevents children from developing the skills they need to become accurate and fluent readers. Even if they are introduced to phonics incidentally, they are taught to use this knowledge only as a last resort, if guessing from context does not help. This is why so many children that I have had to teach over the years had no underlying learning difficulty and responded quickly to instruction and practice in the basic reading skills.

When a child reads a word by sounding it out he or she can be pretty sure that the decision is correct. Some words are not easy to determine even when sounded out, but most of these are the high frequency words that are quickly learnt in the first year of school and I have no quarrel with children using context to help when sounding out a words like 'pour' (p-o-u-r), or 'once'. It is fine for children to use context to facilitate their decoding skills. However if the word is guessed from the first letter only, then there is no way of knowing if it is actually correct or not. 'D-o-g' can't be anything else than 'dog' regardless of the context, but reading 'dog' for 'dogs' can change the whole meaning of the sentence without the reader being aware of the error.

Mandy is a year 2 student that I am helping with reading and spelling. The other day she argued with me about the word 'tent' in her Fitzroy reader. She is quite capable of sounding the word out but she said it had to be 'trunk' or 'stump' because there was no tent in the picture and there was an old tree. Even when I insisted that she sound the word out and she conceded that it did sound like 'tent', she wasn't happy and blamed the book for confusing her. If not checked at every word, Mandy will confidently and fluently read a sentence with more than half the words and the entire meaning incorrect. It is very hard to replace faulty strategies with more effective ones, especially when you only have the children for one hour a week.

Having unknowingly read one word incorrectly, the child is likely to make further mistakes to maintain the meaning of the sentence.

Wally is a boy in year 3 who came to me at the beginning of the year barely reading at all, because he had not been taught decoding skills by any of his three previous class teachers. He is now reading at about year 2 level and his skills are developing. The other day, he was reading a sentence which started with 'They could' but read 'The colour'. This illustrates how one mistake leads to another, which happens all the time with guessers. By just glancing at the first letter or two of the first word, he read 'The' for 'They' and this lead to him reading 'could' as 'colour' even though he was able to read both 'They' and 'could' as soon as I asked him to have another look at each word.

Another problem that I see involves memory and the learning process. The aim of reading practice is to develop accuracy and fluency. This involves using decoding skills with increasing speed and efficiency, but also involves the quick recall of known words and parts of words from memory. Every time a word is sounded out or synthesised from its syllables or phonograms, it is actively processed by the brain and thus likely to be stored in memory for future recall. This cannot happen when a word is guessed, because there is nothing to remember except perhaps the first letter and the sentence it occurred in. So no useful learning occurs.

We know that focussed attention is vital for learning to take place, but if the child's attention is focussed on predicting what the next word might be and not on the structure of each word, his or her skills are not advanced by the experience and again, no useful learning occurs.

It is good that the high frequency words, like 'was' and 'where' which are often difficult to sound out, are being directly taught in most, if not all, beginners classes. All the Prep/Kindergarten children I know bring home lists of these magic or golden words to practise. The danger is that if this whole word reading is the only strategy apart from guessing that is taught, some children rely on it too much. They appear to thrive at first but lose momentum and then fail around year three when the memory load becomes too great. Often it is the bright child with a good visual memory that has this problem.

When masses of little books replaced the use of graded readers I was not overly concerned. I knew that children with learning difficulties needed controlled vocabulary books to provide them with the systematic practice of sight words and phonics skills and continued to use them for my students. I did not realize the harm that the books could do, if they used predictive text, as they mostly do now, which train the children to use the title of the book and the pictures to guess the words.

Lucy is a little girl in year one with attention and memory difficulties. She learnt almost nothing in her first year at school, but is making at least normal progress working with me twice a week. She is now able to read the first two sets of the Fitzroy readers and can read and write just about any phonetically regular one syllable word. Occasionally she asks me to listen to her read her school take-home reader, which she reads fluently without more than a glance at each page. But this is not reading! Lucy thinks she is reading and no doubt her teacher does too, but I know that most of the words in that book could not be read in isolation, whereas any word she reads in the Fitzroy readers can be read anywhere it occurs.

I have no quarrel with short books with uncontrolled or natural language for children to read as long as they have the decoding skills to read them. The Spalding method recommends children read books with uncontrolled vocabulary, but not until they know enough phonics and decoding rules to read virtually any word. With the little books now available from Dandelion Readers and those from SPELD-SA, children can start reading real books even when they only know a few letter sounds.

Graded decodable books, provide systematic practice of developing skills and can also provide practice of the high frequency words like 'said' and 'they' which must be recognised automatically. The problem with the predictive text books now in proliferation is that they encourage the dreaded guessing and fool both the child and his or her teacher that he or she is actually reading, when the child is just guessing from the pictures and context. This may explain why so many children manage to hide their difficulties until the NAPLAN test in year 3.

A further issue I have with the whole language method is the emphasis, right from the beginning, on fluency rather than accuracy. In my experience, fluency comes naturally when word recognition and decoding skills are automatic. Children can develop fluency by reading very easy books or by repeated reading of the occasional page of a more challenging book. To encourage fluency, Whole Language teachers have been taught not to interrupt a child's reading to correct errors, but to wait until the end of the sentence or paragraph and then discuss one or two, but not more, of the errors made.

In contrast, I find that a very important aspect of effective teaching of reading is to provide instant feedback, which enables a child to quickly correct his errors as they occur. I do this by pointing above each word, stopping when an error is made. The feedback provides a second chance for the child to decode or recall the word from memory while the word is still in the short term memory stage. Learning takes place because the child has recalled or decoded the word correctly and is likely to remember this experience for future reading. If the feedback is not provided until later, or not at all, then incorrect information is likely to be stored in memory, which once again, interferes with learning.

Whole Language reading is supposed to put the emphasis on reading for meaning, but it is probable that reading comprehension is compromised by the concentration on guessing from context at the word level. Reading with 100% accuracy, even if it is slow, ensures better comprehension than reading riddled with mistakes. Even one mistake, like reading 'can' for 'can't' can change the meaning of a sentence without any clue from the context that a mistake has been made. One or two mistakes in a sentence compounded by more in following sentences can mean that the meaning the child gleans from the text is quite different from the meaning intended by the author. On the other hand, when reading by automatic phonics and word recognition skills, the brain is freed to consider the meaning of the text as a separate task.

Whole Language came from the academic discipline of psycholinguistics, and while it is a fine way to develop oral language skills, I believe it should never have crossed the line into written language.

I was heartened in 2009 by the Julia Gillard's announcement, when she was the minister for education, that the teaching of phonics for reading would be included in the national curriculum. Great! I thought. That will help so many children. I have also been pleased to hear of schools introducing phonics programs in the early years for spelling programs. However, when it comes to using phonics skills for reading, it does seem that the necessary revolution is not yet happening. Children are still being taught to use guessing from context as a first strategy and this is reinforced by the predictive text readers that all children take home every day.

I was disappointed and concerned to read that the national curriculum, describing reading skill in the first year of school refers to 'decoding words using context, grammar and phonics'. This must be a mistake. Surely the word 'phonics' should be first.

I feel that we are at a crossroads right now, with the implementation of the National Curriculum starting and schools everywhere deciding how they will respond to it. I know that it is only because LDA and SPELD have been working for years to get phonics back into the curriculum that it is there at all, but I fear that the optimism I felt when the national curriculum details were first announced, will be replaced with disappointment if the Whole Language method continues to be included in the early reading curriculum.

Maybe now is the time to say 'enough is enough'. Enough children have suffered from literacy failure; enough teachers have suffered the frustration of not being able to teach in a way that ensures success; enough parents have suffered the trauma of watching their children disintegrate. The Whole Language method of teaching reading did not work because of faulty methodology and it is now time to acknowledge that and move on to the task of re-educating teachers and saving our children from literacy failure.



Fay Tran receiving the Bruce Wicking award from LDA on 15th October 2011.

The Bruce Wicking Award recognises a practising teacher or other professional who has made a continuing contribution of an innovative nature in the education of Australian children with learning difficulties.