

Unlocking the Reader in Every Child

SECOND EDITION

by **SUSAN ELKIN**

NEW!
Updated
2020
edition



“This book should find a place on every parent’s bookshelf and in every school’s staff library.”

Bev Humphrey, Literacy Consultant

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About the author

Susan Elkin is an education journalist, former secondary school English teacher and author of 25 books. She has worked for many years to promote and develop pupils' reading at all levels.

What they said about this book

“... exactly what teachers (and parents) should have on their bookshelf.”

Sylvia Kent, writer

“... a truly comprehensive, fresh and lively approach to helping children to become good readers ... well laid out and carefully organised. It is packed with ideas for games and entertaining ways to promote the different skills needed for good reading, and the resources section is especially helpful. The sensible and encouraging advice would provide invaluable reassurance for parents who are worried about their child's progress. Susan Elkin's common sense, humour, sympathy and sound knowledge are evident in this well researched and empowering guide to the teaching of reading.”

Home Education Advisory Service Bulletin, Autumn 2010

“... a very easy to read and straightforward text for students who have to take in a lot very quickly on a PGCE route. It strikes a good balance between outlining the current synthetic phonics approach and also discussing other important reading strategies.”

*Helen Hendry, Senior Lecturer, Primary PGCE,
Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln*

“The book is written in a very easy to read style and is suited to dipping in and out of when inspiration is needed. It would make a useful addition to any school library staff section but would also be invaluable for parents or anyone else with an interest in encouraging youngsters to read for pleasure.”

Bev Humphrey – Literacy and School Libraries Consultant

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THE book of practical ideas for teaching reading

Susan Elkin



Unlocking the Reader in Every Child

by Susan Elkin

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Preface to this New Edition

It's been ten years since the first edition of this book was published, and that useful milestone has prompted me to produce a new edition.

Of course much has changed in these past ten years, but in terms of improving our children's literacy, I am glad to see that most of what I said in the original edition remains just as valid today.

This is, I think, largely because – old-fashioned as I may be – the focus in the original book was on what *actually works* in developing children's literacy, rather than on what is currently fashionable. And, broadly speaking, what actually worked then continues to work today.

Ten years ago, synthetic phonics was relatively new to many teachers, the UK government having made structured phonics teaching compulsory in English schools from 2007. This widespread adoption of phonics did lead to some exaggerated claims being made about what it could achieve, with some experts even asserting that phonics could, on its own, teach children to become *real* readers.

I resisted that view then, and in the intervening time I think I have been proved right. Let me be clear: I am a genuine (and vocal) supporter of using synthetic phonics in teaching literacy. A good foundation in phonics is vitally important and is an essential prerequisite to creating effective readers, but it's not enough in itself to create *real* readers.

I am heartened also to see that in the past few years there has been a resurgence in the use of book bands for guided reading in schools (particularly in the UK). The book bands system had previously rather fallen from favour, despite offering a robust (and largely successful) approach to

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teaching children the broader skills involved in becoming real readers. Combined with phonics, this two-pronged approach offers the best pedagogies for teaching literacy effectively.

For that reason I have added a section in this edition that provides an outline of how book bands for guided reading is structured. In order to keep the flow of the original book, I have added this as a separate appendix at the back. Those of you familiar with book bands will of course recognise much of the theory and practise in the main text as coming from a guided reading point of view.

Finally, I'd like to add that the first edition of this book has been adopted as required reading for the Times Educational Supplement (TES) continuing professional development courses in literacy. My thanks go to the TES for seeing the value of this book (and of the approaches it recommends) in training teachers.

Susan Elkin
November 2019

A note

In this book I sometimes talk about letters we read on the page (such as the letters *oa* in ‘boat’, as well as letter sounds that we make (such as the *sh* sound in ‘shop’).

To avoid confusion, I have adopted the following convention throughout the book:

Letters and combinations of letters (i.e. *as written*) are shown in single apostrophes – ‘o’, ‘oa’, ‘ing’, and so on.

Sounds (*as heard*) are shown in italics, with a single ‘/’ before and after the sound – /*oa*/, /*sh*/, /*th*/, etc.

I hope this will reduce confusion.



Introduction

Dit is een boek over het leren lezen.

Este é um livro sobre ensino leitura.

The first sentence is Dutch. The second is Portuguese. If you happen to know either language you will have read ‘*This is a book about reading.*’

Otherwise you simply saw unfamiliar organisations of letters into words which you couldn’t pronounce, and which had little or no meaning for you, although there is one word – ‘book’ – in the first sentence which is the same in Dutch as in English.

Look very closely at this little rhyme.

Zkk zkk zfkju pwiid

Wkai msn kem lssf?

Mip pvc, mip pvc

Bwci zkhp xfff.

You just might recognise the patterns of *Baa Baa Black Sheep* in code, although I wouldn't blame you if you didn't, because it looks like gibberish. (The encoded alphabet runs K Z J Y I X H W V G U F T E S D R C P B N A L O M Q.)

These are exactly the kind of puzzles we set young children every day when we present them with printed text and expect them to read it.

Reading is a highly sophisticated skill.

First you have to make some sense out of the squiggles on the page. You have to recognise each letter and understand how they are put together to make words. What do these words actually say? How do they sound when spoken aloud?

Second, you have to understand what these words mean in this order and in this context. What is being said?

It's no wonder that so many children find it so difficult.



Psychologists still do not fully understand how children do learn to read. A few children seem to grasp it effortlessly and with very little help, whilst many succeed only after considerable effort.

Others, especially boys, struggle and quickly fall behind.

Learning to read is a chore – and it's not achieved quickly – but reading itself is (for most of us) a pleasure.

So how do we teach children to read without putting them off books and reading in general? It's an age-old problem for which this book tries to suggest some solutions.



Is this book for you?

Many academic books have been written about teaching reading, but this is not one of them.

My aim in this book is twofold:

- 1 to provide a basic, quick-to-read guide to teaching reading. This includes something about how written English is put together, and the difficulties children face in learning to read; and
- 2 to suggest some practical ‘try this’ ideas to help overcome obstacles and perhaps give some fresh perspectives.

So I will be moving (effortlessly!) from quick overviews to very ‘hands on’ things to try out. For this reason, most of the chapters in this book are divided into two parts: first, a quick outline of some of the key issues; followed by a section containing practical teaching ideas.

I hope this book will help teachers, special needs co-ordinators and anyone else working in schools (such as learning support assistants, teaching assistants and volunteers who help with reading and encouraging reading).

But this is not just a book for teachers.

Are you a parent or guardian trying to encourage your children to read? Or are you simply concerned that your children may not be progressing at the rate that they should – and in the right way?



If you are wondering how much books still matter in this digital age, consider this:

In 2003 a study in 37 countries by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) found that the most important factor for academic success was the amount of time pupils spent reading – books, magazines, newspapers and websites. But it’s time spent reading books which makes the biggest difference – according to this and several other studies.

If so, you are probably needing information about how literacy teaching works – in which case this book is for you, too.

We all want to do the best we can to help our children, and developing effective literacy is probably the most important skill they will ever learn.

Remember though that no two children are the same and every teacher is different. One size most definitely does not fit all. That is why it's useful to have plenty of strategies for getting reluctant readers excited by reading. What works for one child in one classroom with a particular teacher or adult won't necessarily work in a different situation.

So we have to find ways of meeting individual needs. And parents, at home, of course are better placed than anyone to do just that. So don't be afraid to get involved if you want to help your own children.



We also have to develop ways of encouraging and developing reading once a child has cracked the code.

That is the moment to turn children into *real readers* as opposed to laborious decipherers who *can* read, but not fluently or fast enough for it yet to have become an established life-long habit.

Part One of this book deals with the mechanics of how children learn – and can be taught – to decode the squiggles they see on the page. Part Two is about helping children grow into effortless readers of everything they need, or want, to read. It also suggests ways of developing specific aspects of literacy, such as poetry and non-fiction.

Let's start with how written English works.