



## ***Reading Recovery in the Classroom***

***By***

***Susan Moskowitz***

***Elsternwick Primary School***

***August 2006***

**Susan Moskowitz** is a primary school teacher with 20 years of teaching experience. Susan has a Master of Education, a Diploma of teaching English as a second language and a Diploma of teaching primary. Susan has published three literacy books with Hawker Brownlow. While Susan is currently a prep teacher, she has had a wide variety of teaching experiences including:

- Reading Recovery/literacy support coordinator
- Grade teacher (Prep to Year 2)
- Maths tutor
- ESL teacher
- Performing Arts and Art teacher

**Contact details:**

Sue Moskowitz  
[moskowitz.susan.s@edumail.vic.gov.au](mailto:moskowitz.susan.s@edumail.vic.gov.au)  
Elsterwick Primary School  
Murphy Street  
Elsterwick VIC 3185

---

## Reading Recovery Program

Reading Recovery is a short-term, early literacy intervention, which provides an opportunity for students in Year 1 who have not yet established effective reading and writing processes. Students receive a series of daily, individual, thirty minute Reading Recovery lessons from a specially trained teacher in addition to the regular classroom reading and writing program. The intervention builds on students' strengths, encouraging success and independence, strengthens self esteem and students' natural desire to learn. Students continue until they have developed strategies that will allow them to participate in the reading and writing activities in their classroom, usually between twelve to twenty weeks.

More information on the Reading Recovery Program can be found at:

<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/eyes/rr/guidelines.htm>

I consider myself to be a Reading Recovery teacher. I was trained in 1999 and worked for four years as a Reading Recovery/literacy support coordinator. During that time I worked with teachers and gave tips on how they could use Reading Recovery techniques in the classroom. I was very proud of the fact I could teach them how to use running records and sound boxes. I devised a whole list of activities that could be done in the classroom. All of this had merit, but I think I missed the bigger picture of what Reading Recovery is about. It is about looking at the children and thinking of what I can do to help them understand the reading process. It is about being explicit, not wasting time and getting the most out of them as learners. The other things are the tools we use in order to achieve our aims.

This year I have returned to the classroom. I was a bit worried as it had been a long time, and I was given a prep grade. It is funny with classroom teaching, when you are doing all the things necessary to run a class you just do it, but on reflection you think about the lunchboxes, the meetings, the parents, the 'I want to go home', 'he won't play with me', 'she took my lunch' and you wonder: how did I do it all? Anyway, being a positive person, I decided if other people could manage, I could manage too.

My year started this year as most prep grades do. The children would come in to school, there would be activities on the tables and the children would move around the room as they pleased. As a Reading Recovery teacher I was very mindful about introducing them to their books, so I took the opportunity while they were playing to select a book for them that would match their needs. I was amazed at the rapid improvement in their reading levels. I was treating each child as a Reading Recovery student, introducing them to a new book and prompting them according to their needs.

I began to wonder, was it the time the children were allowed to develop or was it the explicit teaching or was it both?

So I thought I would analyse what else has changed.

### *Things I used to do that I am no longer doing*

- 1 I used to ask parents to listen to the children read and change their take home books. I would grab any books off the shelf at the right level and assume they would be appropriate***

Now I spend a long time selecting books that are much more in line with the strengths and needs of individual readers. I think about what type of book and text would this child manage well and which books would take them further. I also listen to the child read the book, and if they have less than 95% (or so) accuracy I will change the book, until I get it right.



*Louca, Amy, Maddison and Layla making play dough animals*

**2 *I used to separate reading activities and writing activities***

Now I think very carefully about what message I am trying to convey. What is the point of my lesson and how can we practise the learning in meaningful and interesting ways? I cross-reference all the time, making connections to past activities and lessons. I believe as Marie Clay says 'that you learn writing from your reading and reading from your writing'.



*Tom, Dillon and Duncan on the computer*

**3 *I used to stop a perfectly good activity because it was time for reading***

Now I think if it is a worthwhile activity and the children are learning and engaged, we will do the other activity later. It is frustrating to begin something only to be stopped half way.



*Max and Louis with their pictures.*

**4 *I used to teach isolated lessons***

Now I plan a sequence of lessons that build on past lessons. I often revisit and practise things we have already learnt and use these as a starting point for the next lesson. I am always thinking about what the children have in place and what will take them further.



*Ben, Tom and Dillon writing a poem.*

**5 *I used to do busy work that would take the children a long time to complete but without much learning***

Now I am quite particular about the quality of the activity. I consider whether it is relevant and whether it is the best approach for these children. Is it

interesting and accessible? Does it involve thinking skills? Does it cater for a multi-intelligence approach to learning? I often plan a series of related activities which incorporate the new learning in a meaningful and interesting way. I keep busy work for the end of term planning days, when we have all had enough.



*Sue Moskowitz reading with Tom.*

**6 *I used to give my children the first 100 high-frequency words and become frustrated when they continually repeated the same mistakes***

Now I introduce a few words at a time and give the children plenty of opportunity to find, read, write and discuss them. I now believe that more is not better; quality understanding of words, sounds, blends and patterns will be more effective in the long run. Also I continue to practise known words and add to a personal word list.

**7 *I used to think that the more activities I did the better teacher I was***

Now I believe in quality rather than quantity. I continue to carefully match children to their take home books (parents are helping too, but I still select the book, if necessary), but I also continue to let them choose their own activities for the first 30–40 minutes of class while I hear the children read. During that time many children choose to write stories, draw pictures and play Lego. They come into the class relaxed, happy and settle down immediately. I am sure many people would believe we are wasting time, but the results speak for themselves. I have achieved much more by allowing them some space than by directing them to activities.



*Grace and Gaby and the grade dancing.*

**8** *I used to take credit for the high achievers and feel that problems at the lower end of the scale would sort themselves out with a bit more time*

Now I believe that the buck stops here. I am the one who has to help children learn by explicit instructions, close monitoring and creative teaching. The strong learners seem to learn by osmosis. They remember things that you are trying to teach. They understand the letter–sound relationship. They seem to have no trouble remembering high–frequency words and can identify them in their reading and writing. They can identify high frequency words and put the process together quickly. For us Reading Recovery people, it is amazing. It seems to have little to do with good teaching. The weaker children need very careful monitoring and explicit teaching instruction. They are the most challenging and the most at risk. Because these are the hardest students to work with, their achievements reflect good teaching, even though they may not show the strongest results.

**9** *I used to teach a letter a week*

Now I use the initial testing data and the letter identification test results. If the children already know the alphabet, why are we wasting so much time? In my class only 5 children out of 19 had serious problems identifying the alphabet, the next 5 knew about 30/54 of the letter identification test, the rest knew either all the letters or the majority. I initially opted to do a few letters, but then I realised it was only the bottom 5 that needed them, so now I introduce the letters to that group only, during the literacy block and the rest learn something more applicable to them.

**10 *I used to think preps didn't need to worry about their handwriting, that it will come later***

Now I have handwriting lessons. Not that often, but I enjoy teaching the children correct formations. I believe that they do not know how to form their letters at all, so they may as well be introduced to good habits, rather than trying to correct bad habits later. I believe it helps their writing and their reading as it emphasises shape and height and makes them focus on the differences in letters. It is also a good opportunity to talk about sounds and words starting with the sounds. It has not interfered in any way with their enthusiasm for writing. On the contrary, they are proud of their neat writing and beautiful formations. I try not to do too much teaching at one time. I treat handwriting as the lesson itself, with short sharp pieces of information which do not interfere with other learning. When the children are writing words and sentences, there is enough to learn without being interrupted by information about starting points.



*Louca and Tom showing their handwriting.*

**11 *I used to plan my work program weeks in advance and stick to it***

Now I still plan very carefully, but I think much more on the spot. I plan one activity but if I feel something else is more useful I alter the activity. I am constantly thinking: What do they need to learn? Is this the best possible learning for this group or individual? And, depending on what the group has achieved, the activities I planned may no longer be relevant.

Overall, I think the main changes in my thinking and teaching are based on the explicit teaching that I learnt as a Reading Recovery teacher. I have learnt not

to waste time teaching things children already know. I have learnt to be an acute observer and provide the scaffolding needed to progress students from one level to another. But I have also learnt the importance of interesting activities that promote thinking and creativity. These activities allow children to shine and display different strengths. These are luxuries that do not fit in the constraints of a Reading Recovery lesson. This combination of being explicit, creative and developmentally aware has made for very successful and exciting teaching.