

## Touch Type Read and Spell

Teaching phonics to adult non-readers using a culturally-neutral and age-appropriate computer based literacy course.

Research conducted in Casuarina Prison, Perth WA

Sally Topley

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Title:           Returning to Phonics without losing face.  
                  An initial report on the findings of an evaluation of Touch-  
Type Read and Spell in improving the spelling and reading  
attainments of prisoners in WA

Author:         Sally Topley  
                  Master Special Education student at UWA

Supervisors   Dr Steve Houghton, Graduate School of Education, UWA  
                  Dr Graham Douglas, Graduate School of Education, UWA

**Abstract:**

**The Problem: Making Phonics Attractive**

It is widely accepted that an understanding of phonics is necessary to learn to read. In the author's experience of teaching reading to adults and children with Specific Learning Difficulties/Dyslexia, the most comprehensive and logical presentation of phonics is "From Alpha to Omega" by Beve Hornsby and Frula Shear.

As a teacher, the challenge has always been to take their content and present it in such a way that it is appealing and relevant to the age and maturity of the student.

**A Possible Solution? TTRS**

TouchType Read and Spell (TTRS) is an interactive computer course developed in the UK by Philip Alexandre, It was designed to help develop literacy skills through the process of learning to touch-type. It has a multi-sensory approach and is used widely in the UK in schools, colleges and prisons. Its content is based firmly on "From Alpha to Omega": the process of learning to touch-type takes the emphasis off returning to phonics, and on to the learning of a new (higher status) skill. In this way, TTRS is especially suited to adult literacy students who may otherwise feel a loss of face for yet another return to phonics.

**An Evaluation of TTRS**

The author will report on findings of her research which is currently evaluating TTRS as a literacy tool. The study is measuring reading and spelling improvements over a period of 10 weeks, with 8 adult male offenders from Casuarina Prison in WA. Testing is due to be completed in June, with initial findings ready in August.

## **Problem**

How can we make yet another attempt to master phonics seem attractive and relevant to our adult learners? Why is this of so much importance to the undiagnosed dyslexics in our prisons?

## **Solution**

Touch Type Read and Spell : A return to phonics with no loss of face? Can this really help reducing recidivism rates?

I have a 30 minute opportunity to share with you the findings of my ongoing research at Casuarina Prison, together with some thoughts for the future. Due to the time limitations, I shall present this as a problem – solution scenario, effectively taking an idea and following it through in a practical sense, leaving it to my thesis due for completion in November to give the full academic justification necessary.

I have included photocopies of many sources in this handout, and I'll refer to them as I progress. I'd like to point out that it is only a Master's thesis, the thornier aspects of which deserve further research. Please bear with me if my enthusiasm has appeared to lessen the quality of my scholarship.

If we are in the business of adult illiteracy, we can assume that in most cases, there will have been earlier attempts to teach our students to read and write. Such attempts may have failed for as many reasons as there are students. My personal interest has always been with underachievers, those whose low literacy levels are not caused solely by low intellectual ability, but rather by one or both of the following :

- Incomplete education, due to school exclusion, school avoidance, or other non-attendance.
- Inappropriate teaching: ignoring the special needs of a student, or their particular learning style, teaching reading to the class rather than teaching a child to read by the most appropriate method.

I believe that it is likely that undiagnosed dyslexia (or Specific Learning Difficulty) is likely to be at the root of both of the above. Any self-respecting child or adolescent would rather be in trouble for being naughty than for being stupid, so behaviours leading to school avoidance and exclusion are more likely. The working definition of dyslexia that I shall use here is one of discrepancy; the otherwise unexplained discrepancy between ability and attainment. In my

opinion, it is vital that this problem of diagnosing and teaching for dyslexia is tackled at primary school level. An efficient screening for dyslexia in the early years, coupled with appropriate teaching could halt the discrepancy before the cycle of failure starts. Until this particular nettle is grasped by policy makers, we as teachers of adult literacy are going to find many students whose experience of failure is magnified. This may well result in an adult attitude not conducive to a keen return to the sense of failure experienced earlier in their school career. We know as literacy professionals, that whatever the student's learning style may be, in order to become a competent and independent reader and speller, an understanding of phonics, segmentation and blending is necessary. We know that is the desired content we need to facilitate mastery of in our students. However, we also know that yet another return to phonics is not an attractive one. The challenge becomes to find a process by which the study of phonics can be attractive and relevant to all learning styles found in a group of adult literacy students. I believe Touch-Type Read and Spell could be such a process, and in the hands of skilled professionals it can become a powerful tool for the benefit of our students.

These, then, are the premises of my argument-

- That adult illiteracy is a problem worthy of solution.
- That adult illiteracy can be caused by one or more variables, including incomplete or inadequate early literacy, and dyslexia.
- That adult illiteracy is a problem in our prisons worthy of solution, as education is believed to reduce recidivism.

My position is that the first twenty years as a student and teacher of literacy was in the UK, where dyslexia is a well recognised learning difficulty. There have been successful court cases taken out against education authorities, notably the London Borough of Hillingdon, for failing to diagnose and appropriately teach dyslexic students. DYSPEL, an educational charity in London is researching the link between undiagnosed dyslexia and offending. This is discussed in the attached extract from HANSARD.

So, current research in the UK suggests that there is an over-representation of undiagnosed dyslexics in our prisons. It is not the appropriate forum to question the possibility of a causal relationship between undiagnosed dyslexia and the path which leads to our

prisons, but I hope to develop research questions in that area as a natural extension to my work at Casuarina.

In the meantime, I wanted to find a method that would effectively teach adult dyslexics. If such a course could be found, then we would be better armed to deal with research findings that suggest our prisons are overly subscribed by undiagnosed dyslexics and others with low literacy levels.

Touch-Type Read and Spell is a computer course developed in the UK. It is multi-sensory in that a student is simultaneously presented on screen with the written word and hears its pronunciation through headphones, responding with his own voice and fingers on the keyboard. There are visual clues to help with the physical placement of fingers until that becomes automatic. The content of the course is based firmly on *From Alpha to Omega* by Beve Hornsby and Frula Shear. It is the process of learning that content which is innovative in approach. The course is finely graded, structured and computerised, with immediate self correction of errors and feedback of results.

The best way to explain how the course works is to demonstrate. I only have an old version available, which doesn't operate in WINDOWS, so as I change systems, I'll talk you through other research in this area.

HMP Pentonville was the first to take the course on board, where it is in its second year of operation. Several UK educational periodicals featured reports, photocopies of which are included. Their report at the end of the first year is included. The education officer in charges of that project was recently given an award at Buckingham Palace!

### **The Research**

I was fortunate to have the full support of Christine Laird, responsible for adult education for the Ministry of Justice, Carol Lee, Senior Education Officer at Casuarina, and Trish Vaughan, education officer, also at Casuarina. Within a very short space of time I had a group of 8 adult male offenders who were keen to improve their literacy skills. Pre testing suggested that only two participants were dyslexic. However, I decided to continue with the original group as they were keen and I believed that a 10 week course of graded phonic practice would benefit any poor reader, whatever the cause. The two dyslexic students showed the greatest improvements, with the lowest level of improvement going

to an individual with a limited intellectual ability. All students completed a ten week course, were pre tested and post tested.

### **The Pretest**

With hindsight, the pretest was not the best choice. I tested their learning style with LASS 11-15, which gave a good indication of dyslexia. My poor choice was Neale Analysis of Reading Ability, as I don't feel that it gave sufficient breadth of testing adults from different cultural backgrounds. All but two were aboriginal, some from Perth metro area, and some from further afield. The two who were from a non-English speaking background had been arrested as they arrived in Australia. All their English had been learnt in prison, which made for some interesting conversations.

### **The Intervention**

Was a 10 week course of TTRS, 3 times a week for an hour and 15 minutes each time.

### **The Post Test**

Having initially tested with Neale, I repeated the test using alternative material. Raw scores show improvements in most areas tested, the most noticeable being in spelling.

### **The Participants**

All participants other than Andy and Clive were aboriginal men aged 18-35. All of their names have been changed.

#### JOHN and STEVE

- both transferred at the end of the ten weeks.

#### BRIAN and LEO

- completed the course, but chose not to continue.
- Both are continuing with education in prison, including a computing course. Their success in TTRS could well have given them the confidence to continue with their education.

#### ANDY and CLIVE

- both ESL
- both continuing with TTRS now completed 20 weeks.
- both continuing with full time education.
- both find their vocabulary has improved markedly as we talk through all the new words encountered.

### SIMON

- is dyslexic.
- Left school in Year 9.
- Continues with TTRS, but it is the only course he does.
- Has EXCELLENT touch-typing skills.
- Has just said that he is now confident enough to think about TAFE courses.

### MATTHEW

- Is dyslexic.
- Left school in Year 9.
- EXCELLENT student.
- He has found that with real persistence he can score 100% on each task, so he repeats each module till he gets 100%. The course developers have never known anyone so committed to perfection.
- He loves being in control of his own progress
- has become a peer tutor for a group of new students.
- He is now a full time student, and is hoping to enrol in TAFE on his release.

Individual results are in the attached Powerpoint

### **Other results**

Many changes were noticed in the demeanour of the participants as the initial course of 10 weeks progressed.

Self esteem.

Personal ambition.

Skill of touch-typing.

Concentration and focus.

## IN RETROSPECT

For the purposes of my further research into the incidence of undiagnosed dyslexics in prison, I should have taken longer setting up my trial so that my participants would have been chosen after diagnosis. However, from the very small sample, as all spelling level and most reading levels improved, it would seem that a professional use of TTRS as a teaching tool is to be recommended.

### Attached notes:

Literacy Boost an Australian First	<i>Inside Out, WA</i>	Sept 2000
Literacy In Prisons	<i>Literacy Today, UK</i>	Sept 1999
Literacy Initiative Put Behind Bars	<i>The Times UK</i>	Dec 1998
Pentonville Prison Dyslexia Project		
Escape From Dyslexia	<i>Times Educational Supplement</i>	Feb 1999
Final Report of the Pentonville		
Prison Dyslexia Project	<i>HMP Pentonville UK</i>	Sept 1999
Dyslexia Among Prisoners	<i>Hansard text, UK</i>	Nov 1998

Sally Topley  
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