

Language Dispatch Interview Series

Hello and welcome to this edition of the Language Dispatch Interview Series. This is issue **number 2**.

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This is a transcript of an interview I completed recently with **Lyn Cottee**, a reading and literacy specialist from Victoria, Australia. Lyn has extensive experience as a linguist and helps children and adults, with dyslexia and language impairment, how to read successfully.

Lyn has recently begun using Fast ForWord computer based software, and I was keen to get her perspective on its usefulness. Lyn runs a literacy clinic in Colac, a small rural community close to the South/West coast of Australia.

David Newman: Hello all, my name is David Newman and today I'm interviewing a friend of mine, Lyn Cottee. Lyn is an expert in teaching literacy to children and adults with reading and language difficulties.

I'd like to start by asking you Lyn to give us a little bit of background about yourself. So, what's your story and how did you come to be a linguist?

Lyn Cottee: Well, I was always a nerd and that helped. I was lucky enough to get one of the last great classical educations in Britain. So, all the core classic subjects really.

David Newman: What are the core classic subjects?

Lyn Cottee: I was thoroughly taught in Maths and English subjects. I mean, everybody does those. But I also studied French, German and Latin. I studied Latin for five years. I also studied Geography, History, Biology, Chemistry and Physics. It was all the core classic subjects. You know how we've lately branched off into subjects like Social Studies and suchlike?

David Newman: That's right

Lyn Cottee: Well there was *nothing* like that back then. They were the classic subjects and I was well grounded in all the classic subjects.

David Newman: So your education was akin to a 19th Century English education?

Lyn Cottee: Not English. It's the Scottish education system. It's very different.

David Newman: How is it different?

Lyn Cottee: Scotland and England have always had two completely different education systems. And Scotland has always been much more advanced with its teaching of literacy and language and those other subjects I've been talking about.

So that was the education I received. Combine that education with a nerd and you get a linguist. I wasn't that good with science; I couldn't hold my head above water after the age of 16 with science, but the arts and literature I loved. Also, and this is important, before the age of 5 I lived in *three* completely different cultures and was immersed in three different languages at a tender age.

David Newman: How was it that you were immersed in three different cultures before the age of 5?

Lyn Cottee: Well my father was a British diplomat so I was born in Singapore. There's the Chinese language script which is completely different from anything else I'd seen or heard. In my first year I was immersed in that language. It was English at home but my nanny was Singaporean and she spoke Cantonese to me. And everywhere you'd look there was Cantonese language and script on the walls.

These were very formative years. After Singapore we went to Poland and they have the **Cyrillic alphabet**. (*Slavic Based Script*). A completely different script and language, and I was immersed in that. And my nannies were Polish and they spoke Polish to me. Then we moved to Egypt. Again, a completely different language and script, with Egyptian nannies who spoke Arabic to me.

So I had four different languages taught to me at a very early age. So how could I not be a linguist? (*Laughs*) It was a natural path for me to become a linguist, and then I went into Special Education because teaching was something I always enjoyed doing.

David Newman: I know that you're writing a new **grammar book**. Tell us a little about that. Why have you decided to write a grammar book?

Lyn Cottee: I've been writing guides to grammar for my students for the last decade or so. I've always felt a need for a grammar book to refer to when helping language impaired students to learn grammar.

So, I'm writing this book because it's necessary. But it has developed from simply just me writing simple definitions for nouns, verbs and adjectives to something completely different. And I've got this urge to model this on a linguistic form of grammar, on one of the foremost grammars in linguistics. There are many ways to define grammar. It's a *huge* area.

David Newman: Grammar is a complex and multifaceted area I think, much like a rabbit warren. It's a difficult area to attempt to define.

Lyn Cottee: It really is. Grammar is like a reflection of the inner workings of our mind. We are never going to truly define that with agreement. My goal is to contribute to creating a workable grammar that can be taught in schools.

We used to be taught grammar. If you look at the expected standard on grammar tests from say, 1916, and then compare that to grammar tests used today it's a completely different ball park. Students today are not expected to learn grammar at the levels they once were. I think a consequence of not being taught grammar properly is that our language and our culture have suffered.

David Newman: I know you work with children with literacy problems. Can you give us an overview of your ideas about literacy, and the way you believe it should be taught in Australian Schools? Does anything need to change?

Lyn Cottee: I have a very strong viewpoint on what should and shouldn't be taught, but only from a humanistic model. I think anything that *works* should be taught. Anything that brings a person to the point where they can understand and be understood in print should be taught.

That opens up this huge question of, '*Well how do we know our children are being taught reading correctly?*' So we have literacy enquiries and standards and so on. Accordingly, instead of looking at and instituting things that *do* work we're consistently dropping our standards and settling for what's popular at a given time.

David Newman: What I've noticed as a clinician working in the schools is that children reach about grade 3 and grade 4, and they're decoding well but their comprehension and understanding of what they've read is poor. On examination many of these students have poor grammatical, syntactic awareness, and below average vocabularies. I think your grammar book should be useful in helping kids like this, in regards to their grammar knowledge.

Lyn Cottee: I think so. Most of the students referred to me are the kids with classic phonemic awareness problems. They're the kids with the biggest red light flashing when

it's discovered after a couple of years of school that, 'Oh, my goodness. He's not reading, now I've taken the pictures away.' Comprehension students don't receive as much attention so I don't get referred those students as much. But there is a significant percentage of kids who don't understand what they're reading, you're absolutely correct.

David Newman: Do you have many children with language impairment come into your clinic?

Lyn Cottee: Define language impairment for me.

David Newman: I'm asking about those children with a range of learning problems, either with phonological awareness, poor grammar knowledge or difficulty listening to instructions, or producing complete sentences. Do you get referred any of these students?

Lyn Cottee: I do. I have been referred a number of these kids. They're often the borderline cases. The kids with a high enough IQ or result on a test, so they don't get access to funding, but still struggle with basic learning tasks. But these kids are significantly different from their typically developing peers. I do see those kids quite a lot.

David Newman: I know you've recently begun trialling a computer based literacy program called **Fast ForWord**. Could you give us your impression of the program based on your experience so far?

Lyn Cottee: Well I'm not a fan of computer based learning, especially in this day and age where there is a lot of emphasis on screens in the classroom. But I read *Norman Doidge's, The Brain that Changes Itself*, which had a section dedicated to Fast ForWord and became very interested in it.

I went up to Sydney, and did the training. The people that trained me have three times the experience I have in literacy, which impressed me.

David Newman: What backgrounds did the trainers have?

Lyn Cottee: The speech pathologist who trained me was taught by **Mary North**, who is a peer and colleague of **Romalda Spalding**. (Spalding Program for Reading and Writing). She was also trained in the **Lindamood technique** by **Pat Lindamood**. Her name is **Devon Barnes**. She is amazing. I trusted her because her training and experience was extensive, which encouraged me to take Fast ForWord on. You have to have some trust when taking on something like this.

But I'm so glad I did the training. I have about 11 students doing Fast ForWord now. Although it was a struggle to do the initial set up, especially something of that complexity, it was fairly easy to do. I now can run the program with confidence and ease. I look at my students' progress every day and I'm always in touch with them.

I can see right down to the very last phoneme what they're doing well with and what they're struggling with. I have been able to look at all the different profiles of my students and watched their progress online. And because the program is online I can check the progress of students who live up to 80 kilometres away, every day.

It's a huge advantage. Another advantage is that the program provides the frequency of intervention that I was never able to provide in my clinic, doing therapy one hour a week.

David Newman: I do like the program for that reason: the frequency of intervention. Frequency and intensity of therapy is an area most speech pathologists struggle with I think.

Lyn Cottee: The company, Scientific Learning, which owns Fast ForWord is quite wealthy and has been floated on the stock exchange. But the thing I like about them is that they pump a lot of their money back into research. They're not a bunch of fat cats sitting on their laurels.

My students have only been on the program for a couple of months, so I can't say anecdotally whether the program has worked or not, but I have a strong suspicion it has.

This program doesn't make me a lot of money either. When I started the training my trainer said you're never going to get rich from this. And, again, that impresses me. I *like* that.

David Newman: Final question, do you have a favourite resource you like to use, or is there a favourite way you like to engage your clients?

Lyn Cottee: A resource, or a method?

David Newman: I'll leave it up to you.

Lyn Cottee: The method that always works for me is Socratic questioning. I never *tell* my students anything. I always ask them questions until they arrive at the answer themselves.

I'll give you an example of what *isn't* Socratic questioning. Here's a sentence. The dog sat on the mat. The dog is a noun, sat is a verb and the mat is a noun as well. The mat is the object of the sentence making the verb a transitive verb.

If I were to use Socratic questioning with that example I would allow the student to arrive at the answer that the dog is a noun and sat is a verb by guiding their responses, rather than telling them and just hoping they remember the information.

David Newman: Thanks Lyn for answering these questions for **the Language Dispatch**. It's been fun.

Lyn Cottee: Thanks David.