‘Real reading’ for young learners

Paul Shipton shows how important it is for young learners to catch the ‘reading bug’ and offers some ways of encouraging them.

There’s only one thing I like better than slumping on the sofa with a good novel, and that’s slumping on the sofa with a good novel and a cup of tea. I love books. I love browsing in libraries and bookshops. I even like the smell of books! (Is that just me?)

My work revolves around books, too. I used to be an English teacher, then an editor of books for UK and US schools. Now all I do is write stories – at the last count, almost 300 books (OK, some are very short!). I’ve written so-called ‘real books’ for the bookshop market, but I also write for reading programmes such as Oxford Reading Tree. And I write stories for children learning English as a Foreign Language.

I used to mentally separate out these areas, thinking that the language controls in EFL stories involved very different considerations. I no longer believe this – the various areas now feel like aspects of the same overall aim: creating stories that readers will enjoy.

Why read?

It’s always nice when another study comes out extolling the benefits of reading for pleasure: young learners who read for enjoyment go on to perform better academically and achieve more professionally. The evidence is clear: reading for pleasure is good for you.

Plenty of studies support the value of early reading in a second language, also. As well as the benefits listed above, such reading exposes learners to lots of English, thereby improving all language skills: speaking, writing and listening, as well as reading. If they enjoy text, learners acquire vocabulary and grammar items without even noticing it. (And, of course, you the teacher can go on to use any text as a springboard for more explicit instruction.)

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I don’t want to downplay the challenge of encouraging readers. Recent studies found that only 3 in 10 UK children read in their own time every day. For EFL learners, this reluctance can be made worse by lack of confidence – ‘I can’t read a book in English!’ However, this reluctance can be overcome. We just have to help learners catch the ‘reading bug’, and that involves selecting the right materials.

What to read?

The benefits of reading apply to a range of text types, but there’s a good reason why fiction predominates. I won’t wax lyrical about the universal nature of stories in human history (phew!), but stories clearly tap into something deep within us. To put it another way – everyone likes a good story. Of course, there are lots of definitions of ‘story’, but I think we all know a good one when we see it. At its core, a story includes:

- a **character / characters** whose fate readers care about
- a **plot** showing what happens to those characters

Typically, a plot presents characters with a problem to overcome. Will they succeed? Story action escalates to a **climax**, and then a **resolution** that answers our question. The more stories learners encounter, the more familiar they become with this framework and the better they can anticipate story outcomes. For very young learners this is a matter of identifying the repetition of clear story patterns. Whatever the level, a satisfying story balances predictability and surprise: there’s no fun in an entirely predictable story, but nor is there any in one that drops in random, unexpected elements. Find materials that strike the right balance for your students and you have instant motivation.

In the following discussion, I refer to picking ‘books’. Most coursebooks are full of stories, many of which do their job of language presentation and revision

admirably. However, there's little to match the satisfaction of finishing a whole book (hard copy or digital) – 'Look. I can read a book in English!' Of course, not all teachers have access to such resources, and much of the following applies to all narrative stories.

The main criteria must be choosing stories that your students will:

- *want* to read
- be able to read

When evaluating a book's language level, bear in mind how you intend to use it. If you're planning activities with greater teacher support or more holistic goals, such as reading for gist or particular content (e.g. CLIL), you can choose more challenging texts. If you're planning more independent reading or explicit language extension, a less challenging level is preferable.

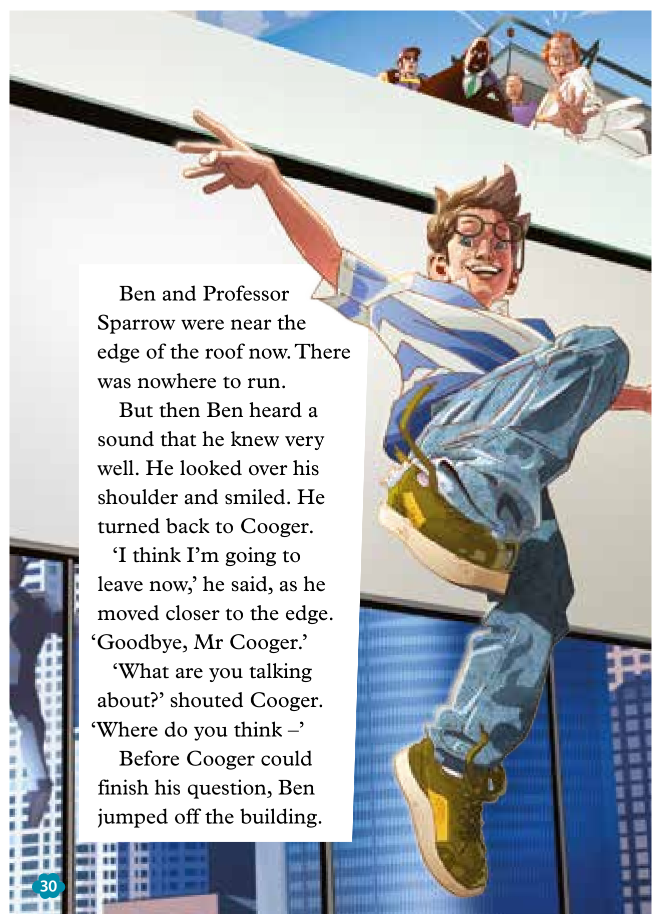
Just as importantly, you will know your students' interests. Will they identify with the characters? Will the subject matter appeal? (Many children like reading about characters slightly older than them. Younger children love animal characters, but be sensitive to the point when they begin to consider such books 'babyish'.)

'Real' books vs. language-graded stories

I sometimes hear people say we should only give students 'real' or 'authentic' books – 'high-quality' books (usually picture books) written for native speakers without any regard for language learning. Such 'real book' advocates sometimes warn against books specially written for language learners, presumably believing that these lack the motivating qualities of 'proper' stories.

Well … as a writer of both kinds of books – real and, er, *unreal?* – I'm not convinced. It's no surprise that stories not written for language learners often contain difficult and idiomatic vocabulary and grammar. Even when the language is appropriate for EFL learners, the cognitive level and subject matter of books intended for younger readers may be too low. (In such cases, 'real books' fail on both counts: not only hard to read, but also a bit babyish and so not motivating!) This isn't to say you shouldn't use 'real books'; just that you should select them carefully in terms of linguistic, cognitive and interest level. They may require more teacher preparation and input.

On the other hand, I'd like to say a word in support of books written specifically for language learners: the days are gone when these were merely vehicles for language presentation. There's a wide range of such books that meet our criteria of a successful story, and plenty of students who enjoy them. The crucial element is reader **comfort** – learners must enjoy a book, and they won't enjoy one written at the wrong level. The surest way to ensure a good match-up is with material that's graded to suit their needs. (After all, *every* text for young readers is



Pages from *Oxford Read and Imagine* titles at level 1 and level 6. A broad premise allows a wide range of scenarios. At higher levels, the subject matter and cognitive level are pitched to more sophisticated readers.

For students reading *Danger! Bugs!* (*Oxford Read and Imagine*, level 3) you could ask the following questions about the cover: Where are Grandpa and the children? What are they doing? Why? What animals can you see? What's going to happen?

Most students can guess what's about to appear in the next chapter of *Danger! Bugs!*

graded in some way – what varies is the method of grading. Some of Dr Seuss's most celebrated books were written for language-graded reading programmes!) Furthermore, the scope and organization of reading programmes offer a motivating sense of progression and achievement as students move up the levels from book to book.

Another motivating factor is the use of series with recurring characters and plot elements. My most recent project, *Oxford Read and Imagine* (OUP), is a nine-level series with a consistent premise and set of characters – siblings Ben and Rosie, their friends, and their Grandpa, who is a brilliant inventor. The intentionally broad premise for these stand-alone stories centres on Grandpa's amazing van: it may look like a worn-out campervan, but it can whizz our characters anywhere in the world, shrink down to tiny size and even (at higher-levels) travel in time! Students who've enjoyed other titles are motivated to read new ones without having to get to grips with all-new premises or characters. Familiarity with the series feeds into the selection, comprehension and enjoyment of the book.

It's best to expose your students to as wide a range of texts and reading purposes as possible. What I'm suggesting is a change of focus: instead of fixating on 'real books', we should aim to create 'real reading' experiences – ones in which learners are motivated to read and can enjoy all sorts of books in and out of the classroom.

How to approach reading?

By 'real reading' I mean more than 'extensive reading' in its purest definition (students read widely and independently without questions, testing or tasks). Rather, I mean that all classroom reading can, in varying degrees, mirror the practice of 'real reading'.

Before reading

How then do we want learners to feel before they read? We should aim to capture the fun of choosing a text, the sense of curiosity about a story, the thrill of anticipation as you settle down to read.

Choosing the book

Letting students choose their own books from a classroom/school library is undeniably motivating. However, such extensive reading depends on your students' abilities and the resources to hand. Nonetheless, there are other ways to give students choice, for example by presenting two or three books and asking them to vote on which to read. Guide them to consider such factors as:

- the title
- the cover artwork
- the back-cover blurb
- (at higher levels) the book's genre.

These factors help students work out what a book is about and activate prior knowledge of the subject matter. Crucially, they also raise an equally important question: Will I enjoy this book?

Getting ready to read

Many of the same strategies for choosing a book also prepare students to read the chosen story. If it has an obvious subject area, discuss that topic and brainstorm relevant vocabulary. Alternatively, show the students the cover image or a picture from the book, and ask them to predict words they think will crop up. Resist the temptation to pre-teach too much vocabulary. A good story should introduce challenging words carefully, providing the context cues – textual and visual – to work out. meaning. If such strategies aren't successful, students can look words up along the way.

While reading

We want students to enjoy reading stories, so they'll want to read more. That means engaging actively with texts: identifying with characters, forming opinions and feelings about events, anticipating plot turns and twists.

Predicting

A well-used strategy is getting students to predict what's going to happen in a story. This opportunity can come early in a story when the problem presents itself. Pause and ask, 'What's going to happen next?' Eventually learners should ask this question constantly while reading. Prediction is much more than a classroom strategy; it's at the very heart of reading fiction. (If a story doesn't make you ask, 'What happens next?' it's not much of a story.)

Asking and answering 'real' questions

In addition to the usual comprehension questions, help learners engage with stories in an authentic way. Guide them to ask questions that require inference:

- Why did X …?
- How does Y feel when …? (For me, this question is more appropriate than 'How would you feel if you were Y?' Identifying with the character is part of what fiction is.)

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Similarly, model questions that elicit personal reactions:

- What was your favourite part?
- What did you think when …?
- Which part is most exciting?

After reading

Whenever I finish a book, I want to discuss it with friends; every so often I'll post an online review; sometimes I bore my wife by reciting the entire plot! Love or hate a story, it's good to share your thoughts. After-reading activities should tap into and develop that feeling.

Logging the book

Students enjoy keeping some record of their reading. At the most basic, they can list in a journal all the books they've read. Such lists promote pride in achievement and trigger discussion with other readers. As children progress, they can record more detail – perhaps giving books a score out of 10, highlighting their favourite story, noting favourite characters or scenes, writing summaries, etc.

Sharing responses to the whole book

Students can share their reading experience in a variety of ways. For example, they might make a poster to review or advertise the story. Such posters could include key words or a drawing of a favourite scene. If students display the posters in the classroom, these will motivate others to read the book.

Returning to the text

Students can select a favourite part and practise reading it aloud. They can then read it to the rest of the class or make an audio recording. Alternatively, small groups can act out parts of the story. Of course, this phase of returning to the text may lead to further explicit language practice. This needn't invalidate the benefits of reading for pleasure!

Inevitably, the above is no more than an outline of how you might encourage 'real reading'. Good teachers mix and match strategies according to the needs of their students and the resources at hand. Creating a 'real reading' environment will help your students experience something both beneficial and truly wonderful – the joy of reading.

OK, I'm off to make a cup of tea and find that book I'm halfway through …

Paul Shipton was born in Manchester and has lived in Turkey and the USA. He taught for several years but is now a full-time writer. He has written an ELT coursebook for young learners, *Chit Chat* (OUP), contributed stories to several other coursebooks and written numerous fiction books – including *Oxford Read and Imagine* – for learners of English. He has also written many children's books for native speakers, winning the Austrian Children's Book of the Year and a Nestlé Book Prize Bronze Award. He now lives in Cambridge.