

•E.P.E.R. EDINBURGH PROJECT ON EXTENSIVE READING

‘Reading: how to enjoy yourself and improve your English at the same time’

by David R. Hill

David R. Hill taught English in East Africa, the UK and Malaysia. He was especially interested in graded readers and became the Director of EPER (Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading) when he joined the University of Edinburgh in the 1980s. He has collected all the graded readers published since 1960, read them all (over four thousand!) and entered their details on a database. His main work is helping teachers make good use of graded readers in their classes.

One student I knew in Tanzania was the daughter of a school teacher. On the first day of the long school holidays, a complete library of graded readers arrived at her house. Her mother had bought them for use in school the following term. Her daughter read them all, starting from the easiest and working up to the most difficult. The holidays passed quickly and when the new school term started, she was far ahead of her classmates in English.

What lessons does this story teach us? I think there are three. The first is that learning a new language takes time and constant practice. It is the same with any skill, like carving wood or kicking penalties in football. There are no shortcuts.

The second is that successful learning means moving from the easy to the difficult. This is especially true when learning to play a musical instrument. You first have to play very simple tunes before you move on, step by step, to more complex ones.

The third lesson is that reading stories in a new language is enjoyable. The student was not trying to improve her English, though her English did improve. She liked the stories and was using them to pass the time. She became better at English without thinking about it. Her brain was learning the language while she was concentrating on the stories.

Many people have found that reading stories has helped them learn a language. Some teachers of English I knew in Malaysia said they had learned English by reading popular love stories. So why don't students read more?

Students give two main reasons for not reading. One is that they have no time. I am afraid that this reason is very weak and simply not true. If you say you do not have time, you really mean that all your other activities are more important than reading English. I suggest that you make a list of all these activities and the time you spend on them. I think you will easily find bits of time each day which you could spend reading English, especially during the holidays.

The other reason students give is that they do not enjoy it. This reason is stronger. In fact it can be divided into two. You may not enjoy reading because either the language is difficult, or the stories are boring.

It is certainly no fun to read when the language is difficult and you have to keep looking words up in a dictionary. But that is why graded readers are so helpful. Their language is graded to different levels, from beginner to advanced, and there is sure to be a level where you can read easily and quickly.

When you have practised reading at that level until you can read a page a minute, then you can move onto the next stage. Graded readers are like a set of steps. Each level is a new step.

And how can stories be boring? We all like stories! Think how many films we watch on TV or at the cinema! They are all stories. We may not like the same stories but fortunately there are many different types of story written for people of different ages, with different interests. The editors of graded readers take care to include different genres (eg romance, adventure, thriller, crime, spy, science fiction), different settings (eg 19th century Britain, 20th century China, modern France), different ages of characters (eg primary school, teenage, adult) and different themes (eg marriage, the environment, different cultures). Many of the stories have been made into films. Some stories are based on films. There has to be a story for you.

When you have found the right book and enjoyed it, tell your friends about it. When they have read it, discuss it with them. Use this website to give your opinions. Or write a review. These are all ways of practising the language you have met while reading and they will help you to improve your level of English. Try the exercises or keep a record of each book by using the worksheets. You will find that they help your reading.

One last suggestion. Keep a notebook. Write a record of the books you read, the time it takes to read each one, and your opinion of it. By the end of the year you will be surprised and pleased to see how many steps you have climbed.

David R. Hill