

# A Defence Against the Abolition of Reading

**By Stephen Colbourn**

Reading is good for you.

Well, if you're still doing it into this second paragraph there's a chance you might agree. You may as well ask if literacy is a good thing.

Richard Steele, who together with Joseph Addison promoted *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* – the oldest magazines in the English language – declared in the early 18th century, 'Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.' Well, he didn't have a telly or video games to amuse himself with and he did have copies of his magazines to sell, so he would say that wouldn't he? Guinness claims to be good for you too. But is it a con?

Do only teachers read for pleasure?

Is literary fiction of any use or interest to students of technical subjects?

Perhaps these two questions can be asked in a different way:

Do only teachers need to read?

Pleasure is rarely associated with need, except when making necessity a virtue, but those who contend that literacy has no value are unlikely to put it in writing. Why, for that matter, are you reading this article anyway?

Chances are that readers of this article will belong to a constituency of interest. Many of them will be teachers and will face the task of taking books into a classroom full of students and doing something with them. And what do you do?

Readers in the sense of those little books by that name are also carrots of literacy. What's more, the ones we're talking about are written in a foreign language and are meant to promote both reading and language learning.

Teachers, who all agree that reading is a good thing, may wish to incorporate regular times for reading into the teaching week – as long as they are allowed some flexibility over the contents of their courses and lessons. Much depends on resources, naturally. How many of those mini-readers are available? Is there a class set or two of a couple of titles, or do you have a pick n' mix box with a few tasters from the rep?

The publishing rep's job is to interest booksellers and institutions of learning in buying books. The teacher's job is to interest students in reading those books. Online resources allow more of a pre-buy nibble these days in that you can see if the covers are tasty and the postage-stamp synopsis edible. You can even download a free sample extract and attendant exercises with answers to dangle in front of the class.

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Reading is ultimately a private activity. Teachers can prime students with a bit of story and a few questions to think about, but it's up to the students to go off and read on their own. It may sound rather old fashioned or obvious, but it helps if the teacher always has a book and is seen to read at odd moments and smile with apparent pleasure on occasions, though not too loopily.

Questions in the form of how students are getting on with a book are encouraging. What do they like or dislike about it? Questions on the colour of Pip's socks in *Great Expectations* are less helpful.

Readers are portable and pocketable and good for a quick flick in an idle moment. Encourage the portation of these little literacy savers.

Steele's adage of mental and physical exercise is only borne out by individual experience. Reading readers becomes habit forming when students realise they are getting better at it by doing it – and that they can do it.

EFL readers are written to make reading possible, not merely easy. That is perhaps the main hurdle – convincing students that they can indeed read and make sense of a text. Again, stopping to look up every word is not a good idea. Focus questions should be aimed at gist and the details can be filled in later.

The choice of what to read should lie with the students as far as possible. Clearly there will be set books that are mandatory; but may we wish away the old days of 'If you don't behave we're all going to do Heidi again.'