

Three ways to help your elementary students enjoy extensive reading

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Stephen Krashen claims that 'when second language learners read for pleasure, they can continue to improve in the second language without classes, without teachers, without study and even without people to converse with' (Krashen, 1993). But how can we get our **elementary** students to read for pleasure?

The first way we can help students is to realise that we can do quite a lot with very little language.

I think one of the main issues about reading and elementary students is that of confidence. They think 'I couldn't possibly read a book in English' or 'I haven't got enough grammar, enough vocabulary...' Unfortunately, we teachers sometimes think that too. We also tend to equate 'simple' with 'boring'. What if a book was so clear, so simple and so exciting, that students could just pick it up and read it?

The second way is to choose a story that aims to get the reader involved in the story, rather than 'teach them language'.

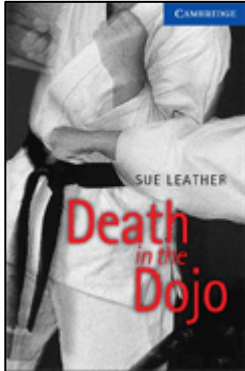
It's this aspect of stories which has the power to 'hook' your students, keep them reading and keep them learning.

Here is a short extract from my Level 1 reader *The Big Picture*. Vocabulary items, such as 'locker', have already been introduced in pictures. My hero, Japanese photographer Ken Harada, has been kidnapped.



The car stopped and the fat man pushed me out. I didn't know where I was. I couldn't hear the city. Now I was very afraid.
 'You're not going to kill me, are you?' I asked.
 The fat man said, 'No noise, OK?' He pushed me into a house. It was cold. Then the fat man looked in my jacket. 'Where's the film?' he asked.
 'What film?' I asked.
 'Ah!' he said. 'What's this?' He found the key. The key for the locker at Tokyo Station. I didn't speak. Then he smiled.
 'I know what this is,' he said. 'It's a key for a Left Luggage locker in Tokyo Station. Tell me the number now, or you're dead.'
 'It's number 42,' I said. The fat man put something over my mouth. I couldn't speak. He tied my arms to the chair with ropes. I couldn't move. Then he left me.

You can see that the language is simple but exciting; it has the elements of a real story.



Our elementary students could read this and enjoy it, but how do we get them into the story in the first place? Building their confidence is crucial. I have a number of activities that I use to entice students into reading. One that I tried recently was playing the audio CD of the first chapter of *Just Like a Movie*, my other Level 1 reader. I gave the students two or three focus questions before listening. The CDs are very well read and offer a variety of voices, and the students really enjoyed listening to them.

My third way is for teachers to get their students into extensive reading with some well-chosen activities.

I always find that if there's a good 'hook' at the end of the first chapter, it's actually very hard to get students to stop reading. When they reach the end of the first chapter, I give them the question: 'What happens next?' and ask them to come up with three ideas with their partner.

Here is a short extract from my Starter level reader *Dirty Money* that you could use for a prediction activity. Sandy and Joe have just moved to a small town in Canada. Everything is very peaceful until Joe hears a noise. Simple language sets the scene clearly, creating the feeling of a beautiful place which is in danger of being disturbed.

'Tomorrow,' says Joe, 'we can have lunch by the water.'

'Mmm.' Sandy smiles.

Joe looks at Sandy and smiles too. 'Thank you for the tea,' he says.

Then Joe hears a noise.

'What's that?' he asks.

'What?' Sandy asks.

'Listen,' Joe says.

Sandy listens.

Drrrr! Drrrr!

'Is it Dan? Is he working on his house?' asks Sandy. Dan lives in the next house.

'No, that isn't Dan,' says Joe. He walks over to the window. He sees nothing. Just the mountains and the flat blue water. But he can hear the noise. A new noise.

Drrrr! Drrrr!

Joe looks up. He looks around. He looks up again. Then he sees it. On the mountain near his house he sees a big machine. It's making a noise: Drrrr! Drrrr! The machine is taking trees down. Behind it there's another big machine. It's digging a hole in the ground.

'Look at this!' Joe says to Sandy.

'What?' Sandy asks.

Near the machines is a big white sign. On the sign, it says PAN GLOBAL.

'What is it?' asks Sandy.

'I don't know, but I'm going to look,' says Joe. He opens the door and runs to the mountain.

Joe stands in front of one of the big machines. The driver sees him and stops.

'What do you want?' the driver asks.

'What's this?' asks Joe. He looks at the big hole in the ground. 'What's Pan Global?'

The man smiles. 'It's a mine,' he says. 'There are diamonds under here!'

For students who are ready for Level 1, *Just Like a Movie* is a thriller set in Toronto, with the first chapter ending on an interesting note that provides good material for a prediction activity.

Here are some more 'enticers':

1. If I have an assortment of readers, I often use 'choose and tell'. This involves the students coming to a desk at the side of the room and choosing a reader that they like the look of. Then they go back to their seats and look at the front cover, the blurb on the back, the pictures inside and the first page. Then they tell their partner why they chose it. Was it the cover picture, the pictures inside, the colours?

2. Matching titles with the descriptions from the backs of readers. Can you match the titles and 'descriptions' of these Level 1 readers?

Titles:

Dirty Money

What a Lottery!

A Death in Oxford

The Girl at the Window

Let Me Out

The Penang File

Descriptions:

Joe and Sandy love their new life in Murray, a small town in Canada. Their new house is near mountains and there's no noise, or dirt. This is a new start for them. But then a big company, Pan Global, comes to town and everything changes. Can Joe find out why the company are there?



Dr Janet Leighton is dead and Frank Williams of the Oxford police wants to know why. Who knows the answer: is it Chris, her son, Simon, her husband, or Dr Collins, who works with Leighton?

John makes a robot and calls him Nolan. Nolan can do anything John wants. But Nolan isn't happy. He doesn't like John's dog and he doesn't like doing things at different times. He doesn't want to be 'just a robot'. He wants to be more important.

The British Prince is in Penang, Malaysia. But so is Sergio. Sergio's job is killing people, and Sergio wants to kill the Prince. Can British agent Ian Munro find Sergio before it is too late?

Rick loves music and he wants to be a rock star. But he has no money and his wife leaves him. Everything looks very bad for Rick. Then he wins the lottery. Is this the start of a new life?



In 1815, Grace has a baby in her house in Norfolk. The baby's father isn't there and some women take the baby away. In 2001, Sue comes to the house with her baby, Sammy. Sue finds an old picture of a girl's face in a window. It's Grace. She's waiting for her baby.

You can make this activity a little more dynamic by giving half the students a title and the other half a description. Each student has to find his or her 'other half' as quickly as possible. After the matching exercise, ask students to choose which reader they'd like to read.

To sum up, there are three simple things you can do to help your elementary students enjoy extensive reading:

Firstly, believe that you can do a lot with very little language.

Secondly, choose interesting and exciting stories that will 'hook' your students.

Thirdly, take the time to 'entice' your students into a story with an activity. This will give them confidence and increase their motivation to read!

Bibliography:

Krashen, S 1993 The Power of Reading Eaglewood Colorado: Libraries Unlimited