

Graded Readers: A survey review

REVIEWED BY FOTINI SIDIROPOULOS

Extensive reading remains a pleasurable and independent way to improve **all** language skills - one which enables learners to learn in their own time, at their own pace and without teachers or schools - a method 'too good to be true'. (www.uk.cambridge.org/elt/readers/about.htm).

As the ILC teacher at Sydney English Language Centre, I see ample evidence of the popularity of the graded reader. With students, it can be observed in the number of borrowings for home reading and in the selection of readers with recordings, (from a range of other materials) in ILC time. With teachers, it can be seen in the advice they give learners about how to learn independently, and in peer discussions about our own 'tried and true' methods of learning other languages.

So, a series of new titles from several publishing houses will all be welcome additions for the ESL/EFL learning environment, to be used either as class readers or as resources in study centres/libraries. They all provide stimulating learning opportunities through a range of approaches. They vary in genre, cultural context and accent, and according to learner and learning exercises. As such, they can be exploited in any number of ways by teachers in both EFL and ESL environments. It's good to see that the Oxford, Penguin and Cambridge sites all have extensive teacher guides for how to do this and some provide answer sheets, so that integration of their materials in ILCs is made easy.

In the *Factfiles Series*, four new readers by P.A. Davies, *Nursing*, *Information Technology*, *Tourism* and *Commerce* extend reading material for Stages 2 and 3. These are non-fiction readers and would appeal to ESP, EFW, EAP and even career classes for high school students. They are successful in their aim to provide 'important, interesting (and current) information to the reader moving enjoyably towards real reading in English'. The word 'real' here I take to mean authentic, dense texts that often confound students in web searches on the same topics.

As such, these readers offer succinct summaries of each field (up to 30 pages) covering recent changes and referencing other contemporary texts. *Nursing*, for example, references the recent film *Nurse Betty*, covers the recent HIV/AIDS epidemic and the area of mental health, and discusses alternative healthcare, such as dance therapy. It

conveys the clear message that, in future, healthcare will be much more technologically based. The other readers in the series have a similar contemporary approach in their respective fields. They all include a useful glossary at the back of each book and an interesting array of comprehension, language and project exercises to assist in engagement with the content.

That said, the graphics and general layout perhaps miss an opportunity to redefine the non-fiction reader as a contemporary and rival source of information to the more modern web search. The font, column layout (which interestingly, did not assist me to follow the message) and visuals all appear 'dated' and don't parallel the updating of the content. Nevertheless, this is a good series of titles, likely to be popular with both teachers and students.

A different approach to reading is taken in two new books in the *Cambridge Reader Series*: *The Sugar Glider* by Rod Neilsen (Level 5) and *Inspector Logan* by Richard MacAndrew (Level 1). These are fiction texts written especially for learners of English. The writers have done well in creating suspense around a murder mystery in *Inspector Logan* and adventure in the *Sugar Glider*; despite the somewhat artificial constraints of a simplified reader. The murder mystery is a well-controlled text covering many aspects of elementary learning e.g. descriptions, the present tense and simple conversational chunks that are particularly useful at beginning stages. A recording is also available, always useful for listening and pronunciation skills development.

The *Sugar Glider* is set in Australia and incorporates many relevant and thought-provoking themes such as family relationships, life in contemporary Australia, indigenous relations, corporate power and much more. As a springboard from which other themes could be explored, it would be a good class reader. Both are accompanied by worksheets (see Cambridge Readers website - www.cambridgereaders.com) and while these are optional, they should, without doubt, motivate learners to continue reading and give them a sense of accomplishment (Anna Dash, *EA Journal* 20,1, p 88).

Macquarie University Readers

Between the Flags and Other Stories by Sheila Duke, for elementary readers.

Paradise Beach by Clare Harris, for pre-intermediate readers.

These readers from Macquarie University, *Between the Flags and Other Stories* and *Paradise Beach* (winner of 1st prize, CLESOL 2002 'Write A Reader Competition') are part of a collection of short stories set in Australia. They follow a similar approach

to the Cambridge readers reviewed above, in that they are written **especially** for language learning purposes and also contain pre- and post-reading activities, answer keys and accompanying recordings which make them easy to use. One difference is that they more obviously target learners in Australia and, possibly, those in initial migration programs. The socio-cultural context in the new land is important here, and the stories are written to raise discussion about this: market day, in the bush, at the beach, at the snow, relationships in a new land, observations about family - all contexts in which new immigrants find themselves.

My only reservation is that the cultural observation may not be as keen on the writer's side and while *Paradise Beach* offers an interesting fictional twist, with much discussion to be had from 'the twist', it is, to my mind at least, culturally 'out of sync' with the values of the character. In the denouement, the 'honour' of the main character is diminished, resulting perhaps in the tale being more easily dismissed by readers, who may feel distanced from this cultural representation of themselves.

Dominoes Readers

The Curse of the Mummy by Joyce Hannam

The Wild West by John Escot

Emma by Jane Austen

The Lost World by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Rip Van Winkle and The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow by Washington Irving

William Tell and Other Stories

Around the World in Eighty Days by Jules Verne

White Fang by Jack London

The Turn of the Screw by Henry James

Sherlock Holmes – The Case of the Blue Diamond by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

The most enjoyable readers for me were those in the *Dominoes Series*, by Oxford University Press. There are a number of reasons for this.

Firstly, they are simplified versions of acclaimed texts such as *Emma* by Jane Austen and *Around the World in Eighty Days* by Jules Verne among many others. These readers are inherently interesting at a literary level, as opposed to being artificially constructed merely to teach language. Many will also be cross-culturally recognisable, and thus an enticement to read.

These readers also work on a number of other levels. They offer a more structured reading approach and there is an obvious effort to achieve clarity. The short chapters,

visuals, sub-headings and vocabulary support on each page, as well as the pre- and post-reading exercises for each chapter, assist the reader/learner all the way. The exercises are varied and the additional project work pages offer extra written work that builds on the main themes (www.oup.esl/readers/dominoes).

Finally, the accompanying cassettes with readings by professional actors engage the reader in the pleasure of hearing a story, and will resonate with the emotional pleasure of our childhood reading experiences. They will also provide opportunities for developing listening and pronunciation skills, points well-documented in research quoted in the *Penguin Reader Series* (www.penguinreaders.com).

These books are also supported with answer sheets and extensive teacher guides on the OUP website: www.oup.com/elt/teachersclub and this further facilitates their use.

The quality of this series, seen in every aspect of the presentation, the covers, the back book summaries, the font; contributes to the 'beauty and pleasure' of the book as a modern tool for learning.

Penguin Readers - Gladiator

Finally, *Gladiator* by Penguin is a classic story popularised by Hollywood and therefore guaranteed to be a popular selection by readers. It's good also to see titles from both Oxford and Penguin that are available in DVD and can therefore be explored by learners through both book and film, either concurrently or as they progress through levels.

To conclude, then, there is a substantial body of research to support the claim that the success of the graded reader in developing all language skills, lies in the enjoyment of reading (www.cambridge.com.) These new titles and the enjoyment they promise will do much to assist many a language learner along their path to proficiency in English.

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