



Going multimodal

There's always been something 'invisible' about reading. We can see learners doing it, but it's hard to be certain exactly *how* they're doing it . . . or how well. It all goes on in the black box of the brain, while the other skills feel more out in the open.

Maybe for this reason, as an ELT teacher, I sometimes approached reading skills lessons as an opportunity to let learners get on with it themselves. This is particularly the case with extensive reading (ER): the practice of learners reading as much as they can over a sustained period. Of course, I set them up for success by recommending texts and stories of sufficient interest and at an appropriate level; apart from checking in with them every so often, there didn't seem that much for me to do. It even felt harsh to hit them with a battery of comprehension questions afterwards. It's supposed to be reading for *pleasure* after all – a way of fostering enjoyment and even a love of English.

The truth is that this approach – and let's not dignify my laid-back teaching with

the term 'methodology'(!) – isn't working as well for today's learners, particularly not teens and young adults. It requires an autonomy and application which is simply less present in Gen-Z and Gen-A learners. At a recent online conference, a large sample of Asia-based teachers estimated that the overwhelming majority of their learners are reading in English for less than 10 minutes a day. In fact, most of them spend longer brushing their teeth than brushing up their reading!

In addition, our learners' attention spans are getting shorter, and the dopamine-driven, digital brain is easily distracted. ER is under threat from TLDR ('Too long

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shows how a new approach could encourage more reading.

didn't read'), with canny learners using AI tools to transform long texts into bite-size summaries and bullet points. For purists and some teachers, this may feel like a sneaky short-cut – or at least an avoidance of the heavy lifting.

AI for reading skills

However, as with the wider debate on AI, there are also opportunities. Many teachers are already using AI to develop reading skills by:

- creating texts of a comfortable language level for a specific class or cohort of learners;





- creating texts which are more aligned with learners' interests, cultural backgrounds or geo-locations;
- creating texts to practise target grammatical structures and/or vocabulary;
- identifying key vocabulary to check or learn before reading – with or without definitions in English or the learners' L1;
- discriminating between high- and low-frequency vocabulary – enabling a focus on the former for coverage, and a focus on the latter for enrichment; and
- creating multichoice questions and short-answer or open-ended questions to use in pre-reading, mid-reading or post-reading phases.

One thing that won't have escaped you is that these approaches are all heavily text focused. Aren't we supposed to be going multimodal? And despite these opportunities for teachers to use AI to create texts for classroom use, it's still a massive moot point – and a legal bone of contention – whether these texts are 'original' and can be widely shared or published at all. There are also question marks over factual accuracy, reliability of sources and inherent bias

in AI-generated texts. Finally, there's a warmth, character and flair for when grading texts or stories to be human researched, authored and edited by humans – qualities currently difficult to equal in AI without inputting a prompt which is as long as the output text itself!

Whether they're AI-generated or human-generated, what texts and stories do today's learners really want? and how do they want to read them?! Let's start by looking at how teen and young adult learners are reading in their L1. It'll come as no surprise that they're reading much shorter texts than ever before. They're also reading for less sustained periods. Quick hits, if you like. The format of the texts and the locations where learners read has also changed. Out with the print book on a hard chair – in with a web-based text on a phone or tablet in a cafe, at the beach, on the bus or in bed.

Learners are also 'reading' video, subtitles, captions, images and infographics on a regular basis, so the requirements for multimodality have increased. Like it or not, we need to acknowledge that our learners may well be doing *other* activities at the same time as reading: listening to music, going somewhere or chatting to friends online. So the kind of reading in English that learners are prepared to engage with needs to factor this in. In other words, it has to be cool and fun and engaging enough to grab hold of them, but short enough to let them go.

As for the topics that teens and young adults want to read about, it seems a kind of democratisation has taken place post-Covid. More teachers are now saying they're prepared to let learners – particularly reluctant readers – choose what they want to read. As long as they're reading something in English, it's got to be a good thing. So instead of slogging through 30,000 words of a book for a whole semester, why not read shorter texts of 500 words a few times a week? As ELT practitioners, we all know 'little and often' is the way to go when it comes to skills practice and improvement. It can still be ER – but with lots of different, shorter texts one after the other. Latitude over longitude perhaps?

What about levels?

And then there's the issue of language level. This is fundamental – and it's still where many practitioners fall down. ER is a low-stakes and low-stress skill. Research has long suggested that learners need to understand at least 98% of a text for a comfortable reading experience. In practice, this means learners should be reading at one CEFR level *below* their classroom or 'test level'.

The graded reader paradigm which has persisted for years is that of a gradually increasing word count, with beginner-level texts of a low word count and advanced-level texts of a much higher one. Logical, no? But if you put 50 words of a CEFR A1 text alongside 50 words of a C1 text, they're both still A1 and C1 respectively. The reality is that a high word count is a *motivational* challenge rather than a level issue. And why shouldn't high-level learners be offered short texts to read if the mood takes them?



A way forward

So given all this, what kind of new approach is required? Teachers will continue to experiment, and so they should. Publishers, too, will have to



adapt to suit the changing preferences of English language learners worldwide. For reading, this can be seen in a new series from Oxford University Press: Speedy Readers. What's in a name? Well, in this case quite a lot. These texts and stories are easy to read, super-fast to finish, multimodal and on topics that teens and young adult learners are already reading about in their L1.

There are three word counts available at every CEFR level. These are just 500, 1,000 and 1,500 words. The standard CEFR bands have also been subdivided into ten base and plus levels from A1 through to C1+. This finer gradation, requested by markets, means that if a learner or class fancies a teeny bit more challenge than a title at CEFR A2, they can try one at A2+. To accomplish this gradation, OUP data linguists built and validated natty level-checker tools which can analyse anything from a single word to thousands of words and provide a percentage analysis of the CEFR levels. It also allows the introduction of a select number of above-level items ('Speedy words') to give the authors more flexibility to write interesting texts, and to provide the learners with the takeaway value of new vocabulary.

Now the savvy practitioners among you might be thinking that the shortness of these texts and stories – and associated speediness in reading them – is a clever idea, but it's also something that anyone (including teachers) could provide. Well, here's where it gets a little more involved – and most importantly, where it meets today's learner habits more adeptly. The format of these Speedy Readers is 'reflowable' e-books, which means they auto-resize to work on any device: laptop, tablet or phone. There's also an embedded audio recording of the text and, in addition

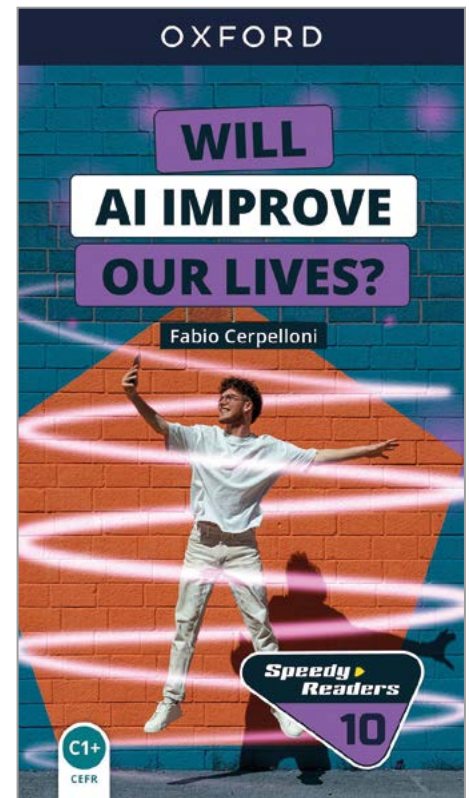
to photos, illustrations and infographics, there are bite-size videos, making the experience truly multimodal.

This e-book format also enables Speedy Readers to be 100% accessible for learners with reading disabilities. Customisation options include different font types and sizes, variable line spacings and coloured background tints (dyslexia-friendly; dark mode). Learners can be more in control of how the product looks and works than ever before – and that's got to be good for encouraging them to read more.

But what about the content?

From research which included 'scraping' existing sources to glean the interests and motivations of global Gen-Z and Gen-A learners to targeted surveys of teachers, parents and caregivers – as well as discussion rooms on the online teachers' forum *Oxford English Learning Exchange* – the result is an evolving bank of topics which would provide the average teacher with enough material for two lifetimes' worth of lessons. And publishing shorter texts means they can be produced in larger numbers – this, in turn, means more of them can focus on topics which reflect the cultural identity of a particular group of learners rather than an international one-size-fits-all. In addition, there's been a big drive to commission more texts authored by L2 speakers of English whose lived experience matches their learners.

Among the first wave of Speedy Readers titles which launched in October are titles about social media; celebrities and influencers; top sports clubs; and globally popular video games, movies and pop songs. There are titles with teen-relevant life-hacks and strategies for learners to realise their future selves. There



are titles with cultural specificity – for learners in countries as distinct as Spain, Turkey, China, Brazil and Japan. At first glance, some of the topics might seem less cognitively demanding, but that's the whole point – they're leaning more readily into the humour and freshness sought out by Gen-Z and Gen-A. At the same time, there are still Speedy Readers on weightier topics like wellbeing and sustainability, as well as the trending issues of phone bans in schools and . . . whether AI will really improve our lives.

Who knows? Future titles in Speedy Readers could even include one on the importance of reading. It's a strangely invisible skill, yes – and how learners are doing it in their L1 and in English is changing fast – but what's crucial is that our approach continues to adapt to meet those habits and needs.



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