

Case Study: ESOL reading group; Newham Adult Learning Service (NALS)

The ESOL reading group was set up to promote extensive reading amongst ESOL learners and provide a bridge to the independent selection of reading matter and into, or back into, more formal learning. It was prompted and supported by the offer of resources from the British Council's ESOL Nexus project.

The group ran for ten weeks from January 2013, meeting once a week for two hours in the afternoon at Stratford Library, a central and easily accessible location in the London Borough of Newham. In total eleven readers took part in the group: five women and six men, coming from Columbia, the Czech Republic, Ghana, Morocco, Italy and Spain. Ages ranged from mid twenties to mid fifties. Some readers are established in the UK, while nearly half are recent arrivals. Most are not in employment; some have part-time or intermittent work.

How it works

Resources available were a range of Quick Reads books, including sets of two titles, one fiction and one non-fiction. Readers were also signposted to the Quick Reads and English language learning books in the library.

At the outset it was anticipated that all members of the group would read the same book, though provision was made for any readers who had a strong preference to read a different book. We started by reading *How to change your life in 7 steps* by John Bird. As well as reading the book independently, activities included reading biographical information about the author, discussion of the self-help genre, listening, reading aloud, comprehension, writing summaries, as well as work on pronunciation, lexis and idioms.

As the composition of the group varied from week to week, it became difficult to sustain this approach and more bite-sized activities were undertaken. These included using ESOL Nexus; Quick Reads activities; discussion of reading habits in English and readers' own languages; book browsing and selection, with discussion of why certain books were selected; oral reviews of books read independently; and discussion of film adaptations of novels. A post-plan was written after the session to record new words, new phrases, language forms and topics discussed; and this was reviewed at the beginning of the next session.

Successes and barriers

Flexibility in the facilitation of the group enabled it to keep running successfully, with activities being chosen to match the interests and motivations of readers present from week to week.

The main barriers to the successful running the group were the staggered recruitment of readers and uncertain attendance. This made it difficult to facilitate a sense of shared community and to use activities that relied on previous attendance.

The concept of the Quick Reads books provides an attractive and seemingly achievable read for ESOL learners. For many it is, but for some the high number of

unknown words and idioms in Quick Reads is a barrier. For some readers, and some facilitators, the frequent occurrence of slang in Quick Reads may be uncomfortable.

Outcomes

Reasons given by readers for joining the group included:

- *I live close to Stratford and it's a good opportunity to improve my English*
- *I want to improve my English literacy skills*
- *improving my English and speak with people in English more often*
- *to improve reading and speaking in English and to learn some new vocabulary as well*
- *improve my English over all understanding and pronunciation*
- *to improve my reading skills*

As attendance was fluid it was not possible to conduct a coherent end-of-term survey. However, some reader feedback was gathered:

- *I can discuss with some other people about quick reading books, get more confidence reading when I don't understand and talk about everyday English through books and its contents.*
- *I would like to do more reading aloud.*
- *I like this course a lot and I find it useful to get into a good English reading routine, get some ESOL material and know little by little more English.*

Evaluation

For a small number of readers the aims of the group matched their needs. One reader came with the express wish of developing her reading in English and attended seven of the ten sessions (having joined in week 3). Two readers attended regularly before transferring to mainstream Level 1 ESOL Reading and Writing courses. A number of readers took books out of the library, relating both to learning English and their own leisure activities.

The group has been transient in nature. Some readers have dropped in to see what the group is like, some would rather be in mainstream ESOL classes, and others are picking up whatever is offered for free. Despite the low attendance, a decision has been made by NALS to continue the group for another term.

Some thoughts and suggestions for further development include:

- improve local publicity;
- consider online publicity, e.g. at <http://readinggroups.org>;
- add graded readers to resources available, e.g. Cambridge English Readers;
- learn from / make contact with existing ESOL reading groups;
- integrate a reading group approach into mainstream ESOL classes;
- is there a case for setting up a regular ESOL workshop/drop-in session, where it is acceptable for learners to come as and when they want to, yet where useful learning is still possible?