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The Reading Agency asked us to produce a list of English language readers to support people with ESOL needs in prison who are taking part in the Reading Ahead programme or other reading initiatives. Please see [Resources page for Reading Ahead](https://readingagency.org.uk/resources/?programme=ahead) for the booklist.

We have graded the booklist from Entry 1 to Level 1. We hope that the selected books will be purchased by prison libraries and that the list will be used by librarians and ESOL teachers, volunteers and mentors to help ESOL learners choose reading books. The list includes details of support attached to the book such as audio, vocabulary and language exercises, as well other comments such as about difficulties that might arise for certain readers.

Alongside the booklist, we felt that there would be value in providing further guidance on how to encourage and support ESOL learners to read for pleasure in English while they are in prison.

**Ways of using readers with ESOL learners in prison**Reading in a new language is not easy. Encourage learners to select books that are a level below their assessed reading level. This way they can enjoy reading without having to look up words or struggle to decode language.

**Reading in class**   
For prisoners attending an ESOL class, there is lots of potential for teachers to encourage learners to borrow books from the library, explore a topic further, read the same book together, explore the language and use it as a basis for discussion, and much more.

**Reading circle/Book group**This could be a group where ESOL learners are integrated with native English speakers. However, the choice of book would have to be at a level which the ESOL learners could manage. Alternatively, a group could be formed just for ESOL learners. To find out more about a successful model for an ESOL reading circle, where participants take on roles, such as the ‘word master’ and the ‘passage person’, click [here](https://readingagency.org.uk/resources/2075/).See also a poster by Sarah Peters [here.](http://esol.excellencegateway.org.uk/content/eg6613)

**Reading with another prisoner as a mentor, or with a volunteer**Many prisons have reading mentor schemes supporting emerging readers. The Shannon Trust, for example, trains external volunteers and prisoners to be reading mentors on their Turning Pages scheme. This is an excellent method for prisoners who do not attend a class. For more information, contact the Shannon Trust [here](http://www.shannontrust.org.uk/about-us/our-vision/). See also the ‘paired reading approach’ in ‘useful links’ at the end of this blog.

**Barriers to reading for pleasure**Obviously ESOL learners will take longer to read a book in English than in their main language, which could be off-putting for both reader and mentor, so it is important to understand the barriers and help overcome them.

**Discovering the reading background of the ESOL learner**ESOL learners may not be familiar with the alphabet used in English, nor may they be literate in any language. It’s important to find out how well they read in their main language. If there are books in a learner’s first language in the library, ask them to read to you in that language to get an idea of how fluent they are at reading. Ask about the kind of books they like to read in their own language.

**Difficulties faced by ESOL learners reading books written for native speakers**  
There is a lack of books written for ESOL learners. Although there are numerous English as a Foreign Language graded readers, they may not be relevant to people in prison. Many are simplified versions of British classics or are too centred on young affluent Western interests and lack diversity. It is therefore bound to be the case that many of the reading books available for prisoners with ESOL needs have been written for native speakers of English.

**Slang and idiomatic expressions and vocabulary**  
Expressions that can’t easily be literally translated can be very confusing to speakers of other languages: ‘Can you give your friend a *bell’*? ‘I’ll never take his *dirty money’*. ‘Where the hell did you get a *grand* from’? ‘He didn’t *hang* around and *chit-chat*.

**Phrasal verbs**   
Commonly used in informal English, especially in conversation: ‘He doesn’t *seem up to* *the job.’* ‘She wasn’t *falling for* that trick again.’ Will also be problematic.

**Understanding the story through dialogue/description**Descriptive texts and narratives are more accessible than those where the dialogue moves the plot along, especially if the dialogue contains a lot of idioms and phrasal verbs.

**Cultural understanding**  
Authors writing for native English speakers can assume a shared cultural knowledge with their readers, which is not necessarily accessible to non-native speakers. Social practices such as going to the pub, sexual practices such as *having a fling*, or work-related language such *getting the sack*, *taking French leave* and so on, can be bewildering.

**Overcoming barriers**

**Strategies for guessing unknown words**  
Some ESOL learners enjoy using a dictionary to learn new words as they read. However, unless it’s a key word for the story, it’s not necessary to understand the exact meaning and learners can be encouraged to roughly guess the meaning of the word. They can do this in a number of ways:

* from the context: read the whole sentence, and the previous and following ones if appropriate, to guess. It can help to identify if the unknown word is a noun, verb, adjective, adverb.
* by breaking the word down into parts: identify the prefix, suffix and root- for example un/happi/ness. If the reader learns common prefixes and suffixes the meaning can become clear e g ‘un’ changes the root to a negative. ‘ness’ is a noun ending meaning ‘state of’.
* from knowledge of other languages: many readers will recognise English words that are similar to ones in their own language.
* from knowledge of other similar words in English.

**Encouraging learners to develop their own texts**Creating texts using language they already know removes most of the barriers to reading and is an excellent way of engaging learners. They can write about their experiences and feelings, in prose or poetry, as dialogues or plays. Often it is helpful if the learners start by writing in their own language first of all. Then, when they re-write the text in English they only need to pay attention to the words and grammar, not the content. This also gives recognition and value to their ability in their own language, which is even more impressive to their peers if they have a different script.

**Other sources of inspiration**Learners could also retell stories that they know from earlier reading, either as a summary that they could read to their peers, or their own version of a story or poem that has inspired them. Others may prefer non-fiction, which will give them the opportunity to share knowledge and experience or research a topic that interests them.

**Useful links**

ESOL Nexus lesson plans

[Using books https://esol.britishcouncil.org/content/teachers/teaching-english-work/offender-learning/using-books-learners-prisons-lesson-plan](https://esol.britishcouncil.org/content/teachers/teaching-english-work/offender-learning/using-books-learners-prisons-lesson-plan)

Using the Library in Prison <https://esol.britishcouncil.org/content/teachers/teaching-english-work/offender-learning/using-library-lesson-plan>

Developing reading skills in prison <https://esol.britishcouncil.org/content/teachers/teaching-english-work/offender-learning/developing-reading-skills-prison>

Poetry Lesson Plan <https://esol.britishcouncil.org/content/teachers/teaching-english-work/offender-learning/poetry-prison-lesson-plan>

Writing a letter to Inside Time Lesson Plan <https://esol.britishcouncil.org/content/teachers/teaching-english-work/offender-learning/letter-inside-time-lesson-plan>

Link to more detailed guidance on paired reading and language experience approaches <http://www.englishmyway.co.uk/help/professional-development/5>

and [Teacher Guidance: 2. Literacy](https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/downloads.englishmyway.co.uk/help-and-training/training/section-1--the-english-my-way-programme/resources/Teacher+Guide+-+2.+Literacy.pdf)

**See also the guidance for using the Reading Agency’s Reading Ahead programme with prisoners with ESOL and the general guidance for running Reading Ahead in prisons on the [Resources page for Reading Ahead on the Reading Agency website.](https://readingagency.org.uk/resources/?programme=ahead)**

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