

IMPROVE READING SKILLS THOROUGH NOVELS

Aliqulova Feruza O'ktam qizi

Lecturer, Termez state pedagogical institute

Annotation

This is something that I always suggest to my students, and is so often met with groans and excuses of why it's not possible. Students say to me "but it takes too long" or "I don't understand over half of the words they use".

Keywords: novel, reading technique, tip, way, language

But for me, with a little perseverance, it opens so many doors to reading and experiencing English in a new way! And there's plenty of ways to help yourself with a novel in English. Here are my top 5 tips to help:

1. Use a book you've already read in your own language so you're familiar with the story. This frees you up to relax a little and enjoy the story, without worrying about needing to understand every word.
2. Use audiobooks or film adaptations to help you get the sense/tone of the book first before delving in.
3. Choose an illustrated children's book. Some people may say it's patronising, I say it's magical! Pictures and illustrations can go such a long way to understanding the story without turning to your dictionary every two seconds. Not to mention some absolutely beautifully written children's books out there. Think Roald Dahl, J K Rowling, Julia Donaldson (author of *The Gruffalo*) and so many more.
4. Allow yourself to read a whole page of the novel first before turning to that dictionary. Reading a novel in this way is a perfect exercise in reading for gist – something nearly all coursebooks out there want you to practise! Be patient and let yourself read to the end of the page/section before stopping and thinking about what you've just read. Can you follow the main line of the story? Which are the main words acting as a barrier if not? Then and only then, allow yourself to go your dictionary to help with these words.
5. Use a Kindle app (or something similar) to help you. E-readers often have inbuilt dictionaries which can make it so much faster to quickly look up a word you don't know. It saves a lot of time and helps you keep a steady pace in your reading.

Just don't forget – when you find a new, interesting or useful word in your reading, write it down! See if you can use it in your next speaking or writing task.

As a child, I absolutely hated reading from basal readers. I found it very frustrating to get into a story and then never find out the ending. I hated reading only those excerpts. So often, I

could tell it was just a small part of a larger story. I wanted to read the entire novel and find out how the story ended.

As a teacher, I always worked in novels as part of my language arts program. In my opinion, novels are an important part of reading instruction. Granted, I don't think they are the only reading you do in your curriculum - you need primary-source documents, poems, short stories, and other texts. However, I believe novels help foster a love of reading, as well as build reading stamina.

In addition, research has shown that teaching reading strategies in isolation doesn't work. Readers best learn to read by *reading* (imagine that.) Providing students with many rich and varied reading experiences improves students' reading comprehension (when coupled with targeted phonics and morphology lessons.)

Although I love reading novels with students, I believe some teachers make a few critical errors when using them. Over the years, I have developed a few "Best Practices" based on the experiences of my students and my children. In this post, I will share with you my strategies for using novels effectively in your classroom.

Leveled Groups

I know many teachers have abandoned restricting students to reading specific text levels, but if you haven't, you should. It isn't that leveled texts aren't useful, but that students should not be so restricted in their reading choices.

A student's reading level might vary depending on different factors. For instance, if a student has background knowledge on baseball, they will probably be able to read a book related to baseball on a higher level than a book on a topic they know nothing about.

Also, choice plays an important role in students' motivation to read. Students will be more apt to read a book, even if it is difficult, if they are interested than one they aren't. Granted, sometimes students need to read books and texts they don't necessarily find interesting, but choice should have a place in your reading curriculum.

I mixed selecting books with allowing students to choose books. Also, I usually had the class vote on books, both for novel studies and read-alouds.

Teach Phonics

Not everything can be taught through a novel. The Science of Reading has shown that it is important to teach phonics and morphology. Teachers should not skip these lessons in favor of a novel - they should both be used in addition to a novel.

If you have read my other posts, you know that I am a strong proponent of teaching phonics - even in secondary grades - to students who need more support with those skills. Many students need more exposure to basic phonics in order to read independently.

Some experts have said that students with dyslexia and vision processing issues don't need different instruction from other readers, they just need more of it. This has been true for my son. We finally hired a dyslexia-trained tutor because the same strategies also would help with his processing issues. In the beginning, he could not read independently or create pictures of what he read. After only three months, he was able to sound out words and remember what he read. It wasn't that he needed different reading lessons, he just needed a lot more of them.

Pre-read Novels

If you want to get the most out of your lessons, you need to read novels before using them with your students. Teachers need to model thinking skills, including visualization and inference. Identifying which skills can be modeled or practiced needs to be done before starting the book. Also, I have found I get ideas for literacy activities as I read the book. Usually, I find a novel lends itself to one or two specific skills, such as characterization or author's purpose. Language and grammar patterns in the novel will also pop out, and you can decide which ones to emphasize based on your standards and student needs.

Although I may review different skills as we read, I try to focus on specific ones so that we can practice them multiple times throughout the novel.

Teach Vocab - But Don't Overwhelm

Students need explicit instruction in vocabulary. When you pre-read the book, identify the words you think students won't know. Plan to teach those words to your students before they read.

Sometimes, there are a ton of difficult words in a chapter. Expecting students to learn twenty words per chapter will end badly.

Instead, trim your list down to a reasonable amount. I usually divide the book into chunks - sometimes by chapter but more often by a rough number of pages. I never assign more than ten words for each "chunk." My goal is for students to learn and use the words, and that is more likely to happen if I limit the number of new words.

Once you have the vocabulary planned out for the book, plan a practice activity for each section. Within those activities, continue to review words from earlier sections - you don't want students to "memorize and dump" the previous words.

Focus Your Comprehension Activities

In my opinion, the best way to improve reading skills is to get students to love reading. You know what makes students hate reading? Reading logs and a ridiculous number of reading comprehension questions.

Back in the day (I am dating myself), I used to buy premade novel studies at the teacher store and just copy the activities for my class. Often, those units had 10 or more comprehension questions for each chapter. I cringe just thinking about it. (Apologies to all my former students.) When I started making my own units, I asked myself what I wanted students to know about the plot or characters at the end of each chapter. Usually, I found there were only one or two really important points - and if students knew those, they probably understood what they read. In my novel units, I never give students more than three or four questions per reading "chunk" (okay, maybe once in a while there are five.) It may not seem like much, but students also have targeted vocab and reading skill activities in addition to the short response questions. I also expect students to be able to give the text evidence that supports their answers.

Strong readers might be able to zip through those assignments, but your weaker readers need time. *A lot* of time - more than you might imagine. For the latter, a giant list of comprehension questions that require text evidence is soul crushing.

When writing your comprehension questions, remember to:

- Ask questions at different levels of complexity.
- Include opinion questions that make students justify their answers.
- Ask questions that help them understand how an author builds the plot.
- Include questions about why the author selected certain words or phrases or how those words influence the meaning of the text.

List of used literature

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