



## **An Introduction to Penguin Kids Readers**

### **Including: Ten Top Tips for using Graded Readers with Young Learners**

*What a start to 2012! **Pearson** has teamed up with **Disney** to bring the most exciting new list of Graded Readers for Young Learners the World of English Language Teaching has ever seen. We are starting with 23 titles, with more to come next year. By way of introduction we have had a chat with the Series Editor, Melanie Williams, to ask for her insight in to these superb new titles.*

- **When did you start writing ELT materials?**

Well, I started out as a teacher and so I could say I've always written my own materials for the classroom – adapting and creating activities and things like that. I was no different from any teacher. Then, it seemed like a natural progression to move into published ELT materials. The first things I published were tips and short, practical articles for teachers. That was back in the 1980s! Then, about ten years ago I started writing Teachers' Books to be used alongside Course Books. The first ones I wrote were for *Excellent* and *New Let's Learn English*. I've written lots more since then!

- **How did you get involved with the Penguin Kids project?**

Penguin Kids aren't the first series of ELT readers for Young Learners that Pearson have done. Before that there were the *Penguin Young Readers* and I was Series Editor of these with Annie Hughes. More than 10 years ago now, we developed a unique concept for the series. Nearly 100 were published and some are still selling well. I think it was this different approach to ELT readers for young learners that made the *Penguin Young Readers* stand out. You'll find this original approach in the *Penguin Kids* series too.

- **Do you think teaching YL to read in a second language is particularly difficult, as they are still learning to read in their native language?**

No, I don't think it is intrinsically difficult to teach young learners to read in a second or subsequent language. But I do think it's important to adopt the right approach. By that I mean the approach which is appropriate for the context (the age, the situation, the languages already known and used). There isn't a single approach that works everywhere! We might use one approach, say in Spain, where Spanish and English use the same script, but we can't use the same approach say in China where the mother tongue script is different from English. Those are only two examples: there are lots of others we could think of if we had time!

From my perspective the important thing to remember is that children are very good learners, they want to learn and they are able to make sense of the world around them. Many children grow up learning and using several languages:



think of parts of India or Africa for example. I think if we help children to learn to read in the way that is natural to them then there shouldn't be any problems. We need to start where the children are!

- **What makes a good Graded Reader for Young Learners?**

Good question! Let's think about the learners first. Above all the topic or the story has to be suitable for the age group. Learners read because they want to read. We can't force them to read something they don't want to – and if we do there's a danger we could put them off reading altogether. Not all learners are going to be interested in the same things. So my number two would be variety: something for everyone. Three: the reader needs to look attractive with large colourful illustrations. And I suppose the other thing is that the reader shouldn't be too long and, at low levels, shouldn't have too much text on the page.

Now let's consider this question from the point of view of the teachers. First the grading system has to be clear, has to have a principled basis and has to link clearly to Course Books, Tests (such as CYLET) and international frameworks (such as the CEFR). Then, teachers want a variety of interesting titles, both fiction and non-fiction, which will appeal to their learners and to the teachers' themselves. Teachers will be looking for readers that fit with the Syllabus, and / or Course Book and / or classroom topics such as Science or Animals. And, because teachers are very busy people, they'll be looking for a range of activities and ideas for exploiting the readers, both in-reader activities and downloadable materials.

The Penguin Kids series does all these things!

We mustn't forget technology. Readers don't have to be traditional books, though in my view there will always be a place for these. Many children learn to read via computer screens and use this medium for learning as well as for fun. So for both teachers and learners it's important that readers are also available as e-books and there is a range of accompanying downloadable and interactive material.

- **What are the benefits to Young Learners using *Disney* titles they know or have knowledge of?**

Even if learners haven't seen the *Disney* film or know the characters, the vibrant illustrations in the readers, all *Disney* materials by the way, bring the story to life. And teachers can show their learners parts of or even all of the *Disney* film after they've finished the reader. It's even better if the learners recognise the story or characters in the book from the *Disney* film and it doesn't matter if the learners have already seen the film or know the story – in fact that's a bonus! Children love to hear and read their favourite stories over and over again! These are just some of the things which make the *Disney* titles particularly motivating for young learners.



- **Do you think Readers should standalone as teaching aids or be integrated in to the curriculum?**

I think they can be used in lots of different ways depending on the teacher and the context. They're very flexible. I mentioned above about there not being a single way of teaching reading. I'd say the same for using the Readers. The real plus of the Penguin Kids series is that teachers can use them in their classrooms in whatever way is appropriate. Here are a few examples. Sometimes, a reader might fit really well with the topic the class is studying. Sometimes, a teacher might choose a reader for her class because she knows they will really like the story. Sometimes, teachers might have the readers available in a self-access 'reading box' for learners to choose from and take home to read.

- **What's your favourite classroom activity associated with graded Readers?**

What a question! There are lots. If I had to chose, I suppose it's buddy reading. This is where children read in pairs or small groups, often with a stronger reader helping a reader who is having difficulty with reading. I like this because the emphasis is on the process of reading and on enjoying reading and on learners working together.

- **...and outside the classroom?**

I think this has to be self-access activities. There's a 'reading box' with 'reading cards' for each learner in the classroom. Learners choose the books they want to read. They take them home and then, when they bring them back, they or the teacher keep a record of what's been read on the 'reading card'. This encourages love of reading, helps build bridges between school and home and encourages learners to become more independent.

- **Which is your favourite Penguin Kids title and why?**

It has to be *Nemo in School*, because that's one of the titles I adapted – and it's my granddaughter's favourite!

- **Is there any advice you would give to a new teacher when using Readers with their students?**

Don't destroy the story or the joy of reading by doing too many activities! Yes, it's important to do some activities to check learners understand the Reader. But make sure these are fun ones – there are lots of ideas in the online *Penguin Kids Factsheets*.



## • Top ten tips for using Graded Readers with Young Learners?

It's hard to limit it to 10 tips – but here they are!

- 1 Choose a reader or readers that you know your class will like, not just ones that you like!
- 2 Use the illustrations to encourage learners to predict what the story is going to be about.
- 3 Encourage learners to talk about their predictions as well as to share what they know about the story.
- 4 Use the '**Before you read**' activities in the reader to check learners know key vocabulary before they start reading.
- 5 If you read the book aloud to the class, make your reading interactive: point at the pictures as you read, give the learners thinking and processing time before moving on to the next page and comment on what you've just read e.g. "Look, this is the space ranger toy."
- 6 Have learners do the '**After you read**' activities in the reader in pairs or small groups. Encourage learners to look back in the book to find or check their answers (it isn't a test!).
- 7 With lower level / younger students, read a reader to the class several times before learners read it on their own or in pairs. With higher level / older students, let them read sections of the reader themselves and discuss it in small groups or as a class.
- 8 Make use of the interactive materials.
- 9 Do silent reading in class.
- 10 Encourage learners to respond to the content of what they have read e.g. by making their own mini books of the story, by acting it out with puppets, by choosing their favourite part of the story, by doing their own experiments (with the CLIL Readers) and so on.



Melanie Williams specialises in the field of young learners and has worked in many parts of the world as a teacher trainer and educational consultant. She also writes coursebooks and resource materials for teachers and young learners. In 2000 she created and was Series Editor of the original Penguin Young Readers series, together with Annie Hughes. Melanie is Series Editor of Penguin Kids. In her spare time she is a keen potter.