

Are Penguin Kids books really literature?

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The purpose of reading is not just discovering meanings and learning new information. A good book should stretch and extend the brain of the reader. A good book should change the reader and make the reader into a different person. We say *Travel broadens the mind*, but reading should broaden the mind in exactly the same way. When we travel, we meet new people, we have new experiences, and we face and solve new problems. The experience of reading a new book should make the reader into a traveller. A book is not just a collection of pages containing text and pictures; it is an invitation to go on a journey. A book is a ticket to travel.

Reading in English

Teachers of literature would agree with my definition of reading. We have this experience when reading great books in our mother tongue, but is it possible to have the same experience when reading in English? Is it possible when we are only beginners in learning English?

The new *Penguin Kids* series show that this higher level *literary* reading is possible, even when learners are in the very early stages of learning.

The mechanics of reading

When children start learning to read in their mother tongue or in English, there is a natural tendency to concentrate on the *mechanics* of reading rather than the *excitement* of reading. The mechanics of reading are chiefly concerned with converting the collections of letter shapes on the page, into sounds and meanings. These mechanical skills are clearly very important but equally important, is the discovery of the excitement of reading.

Discovering books

Let's just remind ourselves about how young children begin to discover books. For the youngest children, books contain pictures and pages. One of the first games we play with babies is 'hide and see'; a book is a 'hide and see' game. As we turn the pages of a book, we hide one picture and



reveal a new picture. The first book discovery which babies make is when they discover that by turning back a page, the hidden picture can be seen again. When Mummy or Daddy begins to read stories to the young child, the child discovers that books contain *voices*; happy voices, angry voices, young voices and old voices. The voices in the book are connected with the characters in the pictures.

We all know that reading aloud is very important for children and parents. By sharing a story, the bond between parent and child is reinforced. This first experience of *listening to books* helps children to discover that books contain pictures, voices and adventures. Children discover that each book contains a different adventure; they can repeat the adventure by choosing the same book for the adult to read.

Discovering letters and words

Children are surrounded by written words. The words are the parts of a book which are not pictures, often lines of black shapes on a white background. Initially, for children, the text is the boring part of books. Gradually, children discover that the voices and adventures are hidden inside these lines of black shapes.

One collection of shapes is the child's name. The first word which the child will begin to recognise will often be their name. This word recognition usually starts with the first letter of the name. If the child's name starts with G, the child will start by thinking that all words which start with G will be his/her name. If the child's name is Gretel, the child will start to look at the length and shape of the word. When Gretel sees Generally, she will realise it is not her name, because the word is too long, because of the 'tail' on the y and because the word does not contain a t in the middle.

Learning to read

So far the child has learnt that books contain voices, adventures and meanings, which are hidden inside the lines of text. The child has learnt to recognise a few words; his/her name, the names of favourite sweets, foods, shops, etc.

At school children will develop their skills in the mechanics of reading. They will learn to recognise more words and they will be introduced to the system of letters and sounds.



Penguin Kids

If we look at the graded books in the *Penguin Kids* series, we can see that they are designed to follow the same pattern of steps in introducing children to the excitement of reading.

- 1. Start with pictures telling the story.
- 2. Use recordings so learners can listen to the story turning the pages as the story develops.
- 3. Give a small amount of text with each picture.
- 4. Learners listen and finger-read the text, following the voice of the recording.
- 5. Learners listen to the text on a page and echo-read the words they have heard.
- 6. Learners examine the pictures and find links between the words and the pictures.

As learners progress from Level 1 to Level 2, they find more text on each page. The story is not told by the pictures alone. The content of the text becomes a more important part of the reading experience. By Level 3, the balance of meaning carried by picture and text has changed again. The text has become more important. The pictures are still very important often presenting ideas which are more complex than the controlled language could communicate.

As learners progress to higher levels, each page contains a larger quantity of text and the pictures become *illustrations* repeating and extending the messages contained in the text.

Language controls

The *Penguin Kids* series are designed to be used alongside a language learning course. Language controls for each level are designed to match the learners' growing competence in the English language. The language controls govern vocabulary, verb grammar, sentence grammar and sentence complexity.

Whilst the language controls govern the language of the text, on each page the text and pictures should be considered as a combined package. Comprehension will be generated through the text and the pictures. Through the combined experience of both the text and pictures, learners will be able to understand the message of the story. Learners should look carefully at facial expressions. These will often communicate the characters' emotions which may not be explained in detail by the text.



Literature?

Each book in the *Penguin Kids* series takes the learners on an emotional journey. The learners not only visit unfamiliar places, the stories contain important messages such as sharing, loyalty, property of ideas and leadership. We have said that literature takes the reader on a journey to unfamiliar places, introduces the reader to new characters and, through engagement with the story, presents the reader with emotional decisions which stretch and extend the reader's emotional intelligence.

Conclusions

Some reading series focus on teaching the mechanics of reading. If they have language controls, these are often linked to the language development of native speakers learners rather than the more systematic controls used for speakers of other languages.

Often these series are designed to reflect the learners' every day experience therefore not taking readers on a journey or giving them new experiences.

The combined package of each *Penguin Kids* book provide for engagement in exciting stories through audio recordings, pictures, controlled language text and exercises.