

Activities to Support Students' Out-of-Class Reading

by ELLEN LIPP

After several years of study, many English as a foreign language (EFL) learners have a large enough vocabulary and sufficient reading fluency to silently read English stories and books outside class. Once students have reached this threshold, teachers can introduce and encourage independent reading in EFL courses, as there is rarely time in class for extensive reading. Teachers can select graded readers, printed books or e-books (some of which are available online for free), and shorter readings found on websites. The goal is to help students develop their English vocabulary, reading fluency, and reading comprehension through out-of-class reading. This article offers ideas for locating reading materials and suggests classroom activities to support students' independent reading and help them enjoy reading.

LOCATING MATERIALS TO READ

Many publishers offer graded readers designed for EFL students (<http://erfoundation.org> has a list of publishers and book titles). Additionally, several websites offer collections of free reading texts, and some have a unique content emphasis. Here is a selection of what you can find:

- classic children's stories and fables with illustrations (along with novels, poems, and nonfiction) at <http://www.bygosh.com>
- short biographies at <http://www.manythings.org/voa/people>

- full texts of thousands of classic works for adults and children, including fables, at <http://www.gutenberg.org>
- graded readers at <https://americanenglish.state.gov/four-skills-resources> (see the Reading section)

If learners have access to suitable printed books in English, teachers may be able to create a small classroom library.

After locating appropriate reading materials, instructors can decide which approach they prefer for their students' first experience with out-of-class reading—assigning a short book for the entire class to read or letting each student select a different book from a classroom collection, a library, or a bookstore. Another option is for students to read e-books or other texts from Internet sources that have been evaluated by the teacher. If students do not have Internet access, an instructor might be able to print short readings from the Internet for students' use, and the readings can be exchanged in class.

After students have their books, they are ready for related activities. Note that for some of the activities, students will need a notebook. This notebook will serve as their reading journal; the journal will be used to complete reading or vocabulary activities, log their reading efforts, and capture their reactions to and reflections on what they read.

ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT STUDENTS' READING

Introductory activities: Giving students an overview of the Reading Project

Ideas in this article refer to reading books, short stories, and short biographies. Before the first activity, the teacher can talk enthusiastically about his or her own reading experiences to build students' motivation.

The teacher then shares the Out-of-Class Reading Project Guidelines with students. The next step is to divide the class into seven groups and assign each group one guideline. Group members will discuss the guideline, select key words and phrases, and report the main ideas to the class in their own words. Students can take notes about the guidelines in their reading journals.

Out-of-Class Reading Project Guidelines

- 1. Write down your overall reading goal.** Students often want to read to improve their vocabulary, reading fluency, reading comprehension, and reading speed so that they can pass examinations or use English at work more effectively. Answer this question about your reading goals: What do you want to achieve by reading more in English?
- 2. Answer initial questions.** As you start a new book or story, read for ten minutes. Can you understand what you read? If you cannot, you should pick something else to read. If you can, read more of the book and use your journal to write answers to Wh- questions (who, what, when, where, why/how). For example, What has happened in the story? What makes the book interesting?
- 3. Decide on your weekly reading goal.** How many pages can you read independently in a week? Write the number down in your journal. Decide when you will read the book. You may be busy, so find times during the week when you have 15 minutes or more to read outside your English class. Make a weekly reading schedule.
- 4. Use reading comprehension strategies.** Ask yourself Wh- questions while you read as a way to check that you remember key elements of the story. If you read several pages a day, write down or draw in your journal what you recall about each day's reading or about each chapter. Use a dictionary to look up essential words; try to guess the meaning of new words based on the surrounding information or other clues. Make notes or drawings about vocabulary items that you want to review.
- 5. Keep track of your reading progress.** For each book you read, keep a chart. Include the title and four columns: the date, the time, the number of pages you read, and the place where you read. Notice when and where you are able to read. Find out when and where your classmates do their reading.
- 6. Stay focused on your reading goal.** Leave your book on the table where you eat breakfast or another place where you are certain to see it. Carry your reading materials with you; you can read at meal times, when you are on the bus, or at other times during the day. If you cannot read for a week, don't give up! When you have time, review your reading-journal entries to remind yourself of what has happened in the story and to help you get back into your reading.
- 7. Finish reading your book or pick a different one to read.** Tell your teacher when you have finished reading your book. You may get extra points for reading more than a certain number of books (or pages). If your classroom has a class reading poster, prepare to write information about the book on the poster.

Before the first activity, the teacher can talk enthusiastically about his or her own reading experiences to build students' motivation.

The second activity helps students understand how they can benefit from out-of-class reading. If students are new to independent reading, teachers can list and discuss benefits: getting additional reading practice, building vocabulary, improving reading speed, improving reading comprehension, and enjoying reading more. Students can supply additional ideas. In their reading journals, students can write the date, then copy and complete the sentence frame: *I will read a book in English because I want to _____ or I will read books in English because I want to _____.*

Answering initial questions. To find basic information about their books and practice applying ideas from Guideline 2 in the Out-of-Class Reading Project Guidelines, students

should spend time in class looking over their books, reading the first few pages, and answering initial questions:

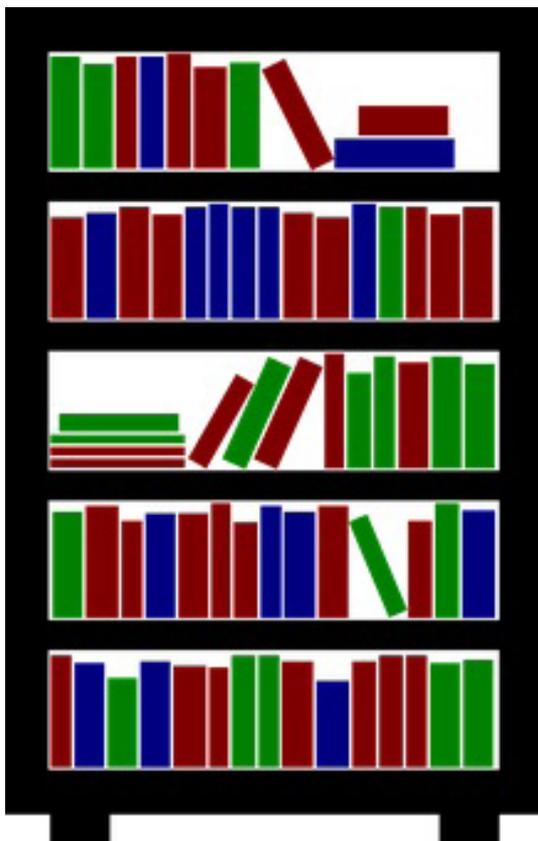
- What is the title? Who is the author? Who is the book about (who are the main characters)?
- When and where are the people (or characters) in the book living (time and setting)?
- Do I understand what I have read?

After reading the beginning of the book, students decide if they can understand it well enough to read it without significant help from the teacher. Students answer questions about their books in their reading journal. They can then ask their classmates questions about their classmates' books.

Completing comprehension activities.

These activities include making a diagram and writing a poem about the main character, taking notes, and making drawings of key scenes. Students can keep the work in their reading journals. Teachers can introduce the reading journal, character diagram, and character poem soon after students have started reading at home.

The diagram-creating and poetry-writing tasks help students visualize the main character(s), and that can help them enjoy the book more. To prepare a diagram, students write the name of the character in the middle of a circle and draw lines extending out from the circle; their diagram, so far, may look like a drawing of the sun. They can add branches to some of the lines. One line with its branches can include words and phrases from the book that describe the character's age, gender, and appearance.



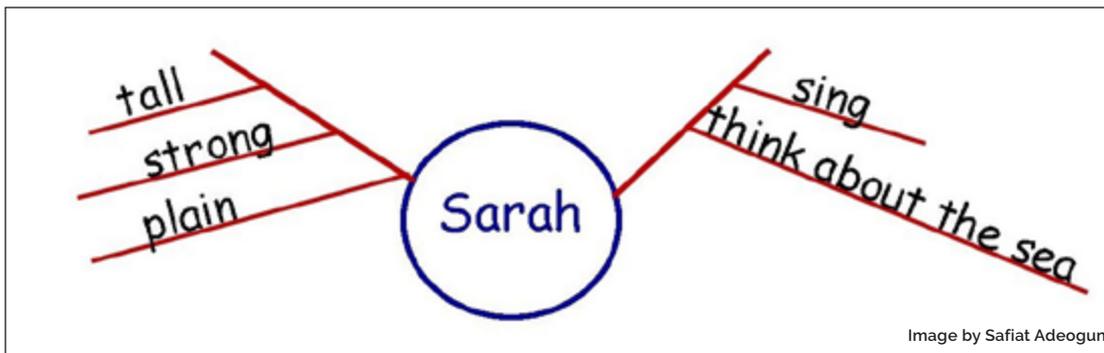


Image by Safiat Adeogun

Figure 1. Sample character diagram for Sarah (*Sarah, Plain and Tall*)

Another line with its branches can include words and phrases that the author uses to describe the main character. For example, in a diagram about Sarah, a main character in *Sarah, Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan, one branch can be about her appearance with the words *tall*, *plain*, and *strong*. Another branch may include what Sarah likes to do—sing and think about the sea that she left behind. (Figure 1 shows a sample diagram.) After students have finished making a character diagram, they can use it to tell a classmate about the character. Later, students can write a character poem by following the pattern in Figure 2.

If students take several weeks to read a book, they can answer additional questions—What has happened in the story? Why is the story interesting?—in their reading journal so that they can reread their notes to remember the plot and story details. Each entry should include the date and pages the student has read. While many of the entries may be about the plot, students can also reflect on how the story relates to their own experiences. Does the story remind them of someone or something in their lives? Students will enjoy reading more if they can make such connections. While students can write entries outside class, they can also get into groups and read to

classmates about how the stories relate to their lives.

In their reading journals, students can also draw a picture of a part of the book that they find memorable. Then they can write a few sentences about what is happening in the story, based on the picture. Students can give presentations to classmates about memorable parts of the book. All these activities involve comprehending and retelling aspects of what they have read.

Students can be encouraged to guess vocabulary from context and not to look up every new word. In my teaching, I have not emphasized vocabulary-journal pages; students have created tables of new words from their reading and definitions from a dictionary. Preferably, students would read books that are appropriate for their ability level and therefore would encounter few words that they do not know. Graded readers sometimes have glosses for difficult words; hence, students do not need to look them up. If vocabulary learning is an important purpose for students' out-of-class reading, then a part of their reading journal can be set aside as a vocabulary journal. Otherwise, as long as students understand their reading, vocabulary journals can be optional. The teacher can occasionally

**After reading the beginning of the book,
students decide if they can understand it well enough
to read it without significant help from the teacher.**

Sample Pattern	Sample Poem
Line 1: The character's name	Sarah
Line 2: Two to five adjectives about him or her	Kind, plain, tall
Line 3: Who the person is (Describe the person's role in a few words.)	A new mother for Caleb and Anna
Line 4: Three verb <i>+ing</i> words or phrases about what the character does	Singing, drawing, working with Papa
Line 5: Where or when the story takes place	On a farm far from the sea
Line 6: The most important thing to know about the character	Sarah becomes a part of a new family.

Figure 2. Creating a character poem—sample pattern and poem

collect and check reading journals for evidence of students' reading habits and as a basis for conversations with the class about the journals ("Overall, I noticed that you are making connections between the characters and yourselves. Keep up the good work!").

Recognizing completion of reading.

After students have finished their books, the teacher can create a class poster that displays information about books that students have read. Students who complete a book write its title and a brief review or reaction comment about it on the poster. Other students explore the class poster to help themselves select the book they want to read next.

I personally used independent reading for foreign-language learning when I worked abroad and completed a course that included reading a children's chapter book in the target language. The instructor had us read a few pages at home for each class. Initially, I had to look up many words on each page, but after several weeks, I could understand most of what I was reading without looking up words. When the course ended, I had basic reading fluency, and I continued to read children's books in the target language.

I feel confident that by encouraging at-home reading in English, teachers can help EFL students become better readers and language

learners. In addition, the classroom activities described in this article will help students connect personally with their reading and get more satisfaction and enjoyment from the reading they do.

Ellen Lipp, a professor at California State University, Fresno, teaches in the BA and MA programs in Linguistics with a TESL concentration and in the ESL writing program. She has given workshops in South America, Europe, and Asia. Her research interests are L2 reading and writing, methodology, curriculum design, and cultural issues.