

How can you learn a language through reading?

There is very good research showing that it is possible to learn a lot of a language through reading. If you want to use **reading as a way of developing language proficiency**, what should you do?

Research has shown that through reading we learn vocabulary, word groups, grammatical features and improve our reading skill. Reading can also result in feelings of success; it is not enormously time consuming, and can be very enjoyable.

Narrow reading

Staying within a single topic or subject area is sometimes called narrow reading. It has three major positive effects on language learning. Its strongest effect is to reduce the total number of different words that you meet. Having a lot of different topics results in a very diverse vocabulary, and in many more words that will occur only once in the texts.

In addition by staying within the same subject area you build up a lot of useful content knowledge that will make reading easier and so will make guessing unknown words from context easier.

You can do narrow reading by (1) reading within a specialist area of knowledge, preferably one that you already know a lot about, (2) following the same story or general topic area when reading newspapers.

However, if you already have a rather large vocabulary, over 6,000 or 7,000 words, it may be more useful for you to read widely so that you can meet more unknown words that you can learn. Reading across a range of different topics greatly increases the number of different words that you meet. You need to consider whether this is a good thing or a bad thing for you at your present level of proficiency.

Struggling through a book

Is it a good idea to choose a book that interests you and read it from the beginning to the end learning all the new words you meet?

Generally this is not a good idea if the book is not written in a controlled vocabulary, or if the book is not on a topic that you already know a lot about. The main reason why it is not a good idea is that it will contain a large number of unknown words (possibly more than 1000), most of which will be well outside your current knowledge and which will not be repeated in the book or even in the next book you read. Around half of the different words in any text occur only once. You are likely to meet an unknown word in every line of the text.

However, it is **worth struggling** through a book if one or more of the following conditions apply:

- 1 The book is a set text for your course.
- 2 The book is an important text in the academic field that you are studying. It will help you learn the technical vocabulary of your field.
- 3 The subject matter of the book is very familiar to you and the technical terms are similar to those in your L1.
- 4 It is a novel that you have already read in your first language so you can easily guess or skip a lot of the unknown words.

You can make reading such a book easier if you buy an electronic version of the text or scan it to make an electronic version. If you put the text in an electronic reader like Kindle or Kobo, you can get easy dictionary look-up. A useful alternative to reading a long text is to do narrow reading of a variety of short texts on the same topic.

In the early stages of language learning your goal should be to spend at least around a half an hour to an hour per week doing meaningful listening and reading. You need to increase this time as proficiency develops.

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