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A class library project in Italy

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↓ BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Read On! is an Italy-wide class library project inaugurated in 2011. Promoting inclusive, collaborative, creative, and student-centred learning, it trains teachers to use a lively selection of age-appropriate, graded readers from Oxford University Press to build an active classroom community. Students become protagonists. They manage the libraries, choose what to read, how to respond, and then peer-review their efforts. Teachers collaborate: reading alongside their students, sharing conversations about books, and facilitating student responses to reading.

Recent international surveys rank Italy in last place in literacy (OECD 2013) and penultimate in Europe in English proficiency (EF: EPI 2014). There is also a sharp north-south divide in literacy and English language skills, with southern Italian regions weakest in both competences (ISTAT 2014).

To address these problems, the Italian Ministry of Education has launched numerous initiatives to improve outcomes for students: promoting e-textbooks, digitizing classrooms, and retraining teachers. Other strands of Italian educational reform include introducing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) into the final year of some secondary schools, adopting CLIL approaches in lower secondary classes and legislating for inclusion for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Despite these efforts, Italian students are not acquiring the 21st-century skills necessary for the workplace such as collaboration, problem solving, creativity, life-long learning, and mobility.

Many Italian teachers of English still rely heavily on content-based, grammar translation approaches. Frequent testing confines students' learning to the test topics rather than promoting effective communication in English. Poor outcomes in school often oblige parents to pay for extra tuition or trips abroad to improve their children's level of English and to acquire internationally recognized language certifications.

↓ WHY CHOOSE *READ ON!*?

Students who read extensively acquire skills and competences which help to bypass ineffectual teaching and poor use of time or resources in school. It also gives teachers fresh input and innovative approaches to teaching to help them change and grow as educators. Most importantly, it gives everyone a chance to learn, whatever their circumstances or ability.

Read On! has the following six main objectives.

- **Offering students the opportunity to become motivated autonomous learners:** Most Italians are not readers and the dislike of reading starts in school where it's a compulsory and heavily evaluated activity involving difficult texts chosen by teachers or by textbook authors. Unsurprisingly, students associate reading with obligation, difficulty, and testing. Instead, a *Read On!* class library offers a varied and level-appropriate choice of texts and promotes the idea that reading for pleasure can be a powerful driver of learning. Choice is motivating and students discover that they can learn painlessly without drills, comprehension exercises, or formal evaluation. Encouraged to respond as they wish to their reading, students learn to communicate, collaborate, and problem-solve creatively.
- **Promoting critical reading and thinking skills for the 21st century:** Decoding text is only the first step on the long road to becoming an effective reader. Genuine critical literacy involves dedicated practice and traditional reading at school rarely supplies it. By contrast, access to a *Read On!* library allows students to appreciate the pleasures of reading through choice, discussion, and research interests. As they become more confident, learners' use of grammar, structures, and vocabulary become fluent. Learners then have more mental capacity to engage in higher levels of critical literacy: the ability to use, talk, and think about text.
- **Developing students' and teachers' awareness of digital citizenship and academic responsibility:** Responses to the class library often involve researching both online and offline to produce a range of products – traditional and digital. Italian students and their teachers have relatively little awareness of effective web search skills, the rules of copyright or digital responsibility. The project educates students and teachers to become more mindful of these issues. All competitions and submissions require students to acknowledge sources, cite correctly, and avoid plagiarism and illegal downloads.
- **Promoting inclusion:** In recent years the Italian Ministry of Education has legislated extensively to promote inclusion, focussing on SEN. Many parts of the country have growing immigrant populations with children learning English as an additional language in school. Despite the legislation, there is little support for teachers tackling these issues. A graded class library provides teacher training and differentiated resources for students in any classroom, whatever their needs or abilities. Reading for pleasure gives every child the opportunity to learn without fear of failure.
- **Supporting effective CLIL teaching:** The Italian Ministry of Education has adopted CLIL methodology but many teachers involved in the initiative are struggling to implement it successfully. The *Read On!* project became involved in CLIL at the Ministry's request and has designed an extensive reading scheme with a focus on English skills and digital skills for cross-curricular learning. Rather than simply reading CLIL subject-focussed textbooks, students are encouraged to link whatever text they may be reading for pleasure from their class library to their CLIL subject, follow up with web-based research and then present the link to their fellow students or post online to the larger CLIL community.

- **Changing teachers' perceptions of their role in the 21st-century classroom:** *Read On!* focuses on quality training to give teachers the skills to get students reading and learning autonomously. The programme recruits selectively, only issuing libraries to those teachers who commit to the core principles of extensive reading (e.g. choice, autonomy, and freedom from formal evaluations). It then sustains students both online and offline to ensure they feel part of the *Read On!* 'family'. In a country where training tends to be top-down and theoretical, the project provides practical seminars, online support, and student-focussed events to motivate and refresh teachers' commitment to extensive reading and its potential in the classroom.

Libraries

Each level of schooling has its own selection of age-appropriate, graded readers from Oxford University Press which, along with a storage suitcase, can be purchased as a package with its own code or ISBN. There are three different libraries: primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary. Each library contains approximately ninety books chosen by popularity and the availability of an audio CD – an important resource for Italian readers.

Storage

Each library is stored in a lockable trolley suitcase. This solution resolves the problem of security for the books because teachers or students can easily move the trolley from a safe storage area to the classroom and back.

Funding

The *Read On!* project is dedicated to providing opportunities for disadvantaged children with less access to high-quality teaching and educational initiatives, particularly in southern regions. On their behalf, the programme sought support from British companies working in Italy and they provided the initial funding for libraries. More recently, Italian companies have joined the sponsorship scheme for the programme. Since *Read On!* became an accepted methodology, teachers and schools have found it easier to raise funds to finance the libraries from public sources, school administrations or parents.

Training

Teachers' enthusiasm for and commitment to an extensive reading approach are vital for the successful delivery of the programme. *Read On!* trainers continue to refine and adapt the training package to include best practice emerging from the classroom. Regular sessions, the *Read On!* website, and online support allow both trainees and *Read On!* 'veterans' to share success stories, strategies, and concerns.

Guidelines

All teachers joining the project are asked to respect the following guidelines.

Committing to the methodology

Only those teachers who are prepared to commit to the principles of extensive reading are invited to join the programme. Libraries are issued after teachers have attended training and participants are supported as long as they continue to work with the project.

The library belongs to one class for one academic year

For the following important reasons, libraries are never shared with more than one class over a twelve-month period.

- **Borrowing:** When libraries are divided between classes, the borrowing system breaks down and students read significantly fewer books because of lack of choice.
- **Focus:** Knowing that the library is available to their class for only one year prompts students to take maximum advantage of this opportunity 'to read their way to better English'.
- **Ownership:** Students take great pride in having a library available exclusively in their classroom. If the library is shared with more than one group, students lose interest – blaming other classes for reducing the availability of books or for not looking after them properly.
- **'Passing the torch' – the library as a living legacy:** After reading extensively for a year, students hand over the library to their successors in a public ceremony. The veteran class is encouraged to add new books to the original selection as a thank-you for the loan and to update the library with favourite books and resource packs for the upcoming class.

Choice is at the heart of the project

Giving learners the opportunity to decide what to read, how to respond, and how to present their research motivates and stimulates genuine learning and promotes creativity and autonomy.

No formal testing or other traditional evaluations of reading

If we really want students to learn to read for pleasure, then testing, book reports, and comprehension exercises have no place on an extensive reading programme.

Promoting student responsibility and autonomy

Read On! students learn to:

- **manage their libraries independently** by electing librarians, deciding how their borrowing system will work, ensuring that the library is available in every English lesson, and dealing with lost or stolen books.

- **track their reading with reading passports** in primary and **reading logs** in secondary. These resources, available on the *Read On!* website, help students to continue reading throughout the academic year. Having regular, achievable goals encourages learners to read up to a million words (approximately 2–2.5 books per week) in that year.
- **work collaboratively** by responding to their reading in groups and working on projects in teams. Developing collaborative skills motivates but also prepares students to face the challenges of the 21st-century workplace where teamwork is the norm.
- **research critically.** *Read On!* students not only learn how to search effectively both online and offline for relevant information, they also develop their ability to evaluate and synthesize their findings to present to the class or the wider community.
- **respond creatively** by producing their own artwork, craft, drama, text, video, and music prompted by their reading experiences. Students are encouraged to avoid ‘ready-made’ platforms and, instead, to learn how to create their own sound, image, and graphics.
- **exercise digital and academic responsibility** when downloading image, sound, or text from the internet. Avoid all acts of plagiarism including ‘cutting and pasting’ and failing to acknowledge and cite sources correctly.
- **practice self- and peer-assessment** as opposed to being subject to the teacher-led evaluative practices which normally occur in Italian language classrooms (e.g. high-stakes testing, exhaustive written book reports and comprehension exercises). Students instead agree on their own assessment criteria for extensive reading activities and then carry out self- or peer- assessment of their work within these frameworks.

Celebrating success

Student effort and achievement are regularly rewarded and celebrated in the classroom. The *Read On!* website offers certificates for all kinds of achievement, and for all kinds of learners. The programme encourages teachers to see success not simply in terms of tests and grades. Instead, they learn to recognize that effort, creativity, and targets reached by all members of the class, whatever their ability, are key outcomes for long-term learning and success.

No orphan libraries

As long as teachers are on the programme, the library remains their property, available for a new class to use every new academic year. If, for whatever reason, a teacher wishes to leave the project, they should make arrangements to ensure that the library goes to another trained and committed teacher within the school or in the area. The library must continue working with new classes, year on year.

The *Read On!* website (www.oup.com/elt/readon) provides a regularly updated platform presenting teacher resources, student output, ideas, and good practice. Teachers and students visit the site to get inspiration to stimulate reading, manage libraries, and produce good-quality responses to reading. Resources available include the following.

- **Teacher-training packs:** As well as receiving training materials when they join the programme, teachers can download these resources as needed from the website.
- **Primary and secondary teacher-training films:** These show how *Read On!* can work successfully in the classroom with different age groups. Separate episodes show teachers how to introduce the library to students, talk about books, exploit the audio CDs, create on-the-spot activities, and use drama as well as other successful approaches.
- **Resources for librarians:** Over the years, student librarians have shared the strategies they have used to manage their libraries effectively. The resources range from simple borrowing logs to complex spreadsheets tracking students' reading, favourite books, and genres over the year by individual, sex, or age.
- **Primary reading passports and secondary logs:** The point of extensive reading is to get students 'hooked on books'. *Read On!* students are challenged to read the whole library in the course of the year. The primary passport and secondary logs divide this reading challenge into manageable targets and allow students to track progress, record likes or dislikes, and celebrate achievement.
- **Downloadable certificates:** These are awarded to students to celebrate achievements and outstanding effort. Teachers are encouraged to reward student success of all kinds and not see achievement only in terms of conventional academic progress and memory skills.
- **Web-search cards:** These have been developed from cross-curricular work with CLIL and offer themed challenges based on different selections of books in the *Read On!* library. Students are encouraged to read the books and then research particular areas of interest both online and offline. Working collaboratively, students present findings to the class in their choice of media with the express aim of developing English communication skills, whatever the subject.
- **Academic responsibility and digital citizenship:** Downloadable resources linked to the research activities teach students (and teachers) to respect copyright, cite correctly, and never download music, images, or video illegally.
- **Anniversary activities:** Both students and teachers are encouraged to celebrate key anniversaries, for example, the bicentenary of the publication of *Pride and Prejudice* produced some outstanding videos. To commemorate the start of the First World War, there is a dedicated web-search card, and a Milan EXPO 2015 card explores the EXPO theme: *Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life*.
- **Innovative responses to reading:** The website also publishes examples of student responses to reading. The range is extraordinary and includes video, dressmaking, puppets, and baking!

In addition the online resources offered by the *Read On!* project, other successful strategies and important features include the following.

Inclusion

Read On! is dedicated to offering all learners, whatever their circumstances or abilities, the opportunity to make progress in English through extensive reading and associated activities. Teachers ask open questions rather than putting students on the spot. Group activities promoting collaboration and the sharing of students' skills are encouraged. Alternative approaches using audio CDs, drama and illustration aim to give everyone in class a chance to succeed and be valued. Effort is celebrated and rewarded.

CLIL

In 2011, the Italian Ministry of Education commissioned *Read On!* for eCLIL. Paired subject-specialist teachers and English-teaching colleagues started working together in CLIL teams to create cross-curricular learning opportunities. The libraries have proved invaluable for this collaboration by providing a wide variety of differentiated resources that students have been able to use as starting points for a comprehensive range of subject-specific research and presentations. Students have read the Charles Dickens stories and then researched the Industrial Revolution and labour legislation. Others have made thoughtful connections with texts in the library and scientific and mathematical topics. For example, students used *Sherlock Holmes and the Sport of Kings* to look at betting and probability or *The Elephant Man* to research genetically inherited disease, and then employed different digital media to present findings. CLIL strategies are now a part of the mainstream project and the methodology is being practised from primary through to secondary. Additionally, teachers have also found that reading the texts in the libraries alongside the class has not only refreshed their English but also given them real insight into their students as individuals.

End-of-year festivals

Many *Read On!* classes have arranged a festival to celebrate their work and the reading achievements of the year. These can be simple school events, citywide, or even regional occasions. Participating students set up stands to showcase what they have done, which can include artefacts of all kinds from new designs for covers, themed games, and recycled gadgets to sophisticated digital productions. Parents, local authorities, sponsors, and members of the school community visit the stands and talk to students about their reading and responses to the books they have enjoyed. Also on these occasions, downloadable certificates are awarded for effort, creativity, and number of books read. Students and teachers appreciate the opportunity to showcase what they have done during the year and the festival helps promote the idea that books are the best teachers.

Since its launch in 2011, teachers have been overwhelmingly positive about *Read On!* The training, the effect of free choice on student and teacher motivation, the project's capacity to involve all learners and its non-traditional approaches to teaching and learning have all been praised. The following comment is typical of feedback from teachers on the programme.

The most important aspect of the project has been the fact that it is based on the students' interests. They have had the opportunity to choose, experiment, and discover on their own. It has brought the class together as a group and it has enabled us as teachers to learn and experiment together with our students.

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2014–15 Impact study

In view of the quantity and quality of feedback on the programme, it was agreed that it would be useful to measure the impact of *Read On!* on Italian students and teachers in a formal evaluation. During the 2014–15 academic year, 120 teachers and 3,000 students from all over Italy participated in a mixed-methods research efficacy study. The research design included a variety of pre- and post-intervention evaluations as well as classroom observations, teacher and student interviews, and pre- and post-intervention questionnaires for all participants. The qualitative research was led by an independent academic researcher and quantitative data was compiled by cross-referencing results with two established tests from Oxford University Press and Lexile.

Why this works

Teachers, students, and parents in Italy all recognize the importance of good English skills for young people's futures. However, despite reforms, traditional and ineffective ways of teaching and learning are still the norm in Italy. *Read On!* encourages participants to see language learning in terms of choice, self-regulation, collaboration, and creativity rather than drills and testing. Day and Bamford (1998) assert that 'the most essential prerequisite for developing effective, efficient and independent second language readers through extensive reading has always been the individual committed teacher'. *Read On!* recruits teachers who are passionate about teaching and learning. It trains and supports them to transform their classrooms into self-starting communities of learners ready to experiment and explore language through reading, research, and presentation. This extensive reading initiative gives all participants the opportunity and resources to discover that freedom of choice and responsibility create successful life-long learners and citizens.