Can a new app enhance the reading experience?

Reading a book in the old-fashioned way (holding an object made of paper) is a sensuous experience. Books speak. Pages rustle. They smell – sometimes delicious, sometimes of previous owners. Spines creak. And so on. [1]_____ . It's convenient but does not engage all the senses.

Not until now. In America last year, a group of investors launched an app called Booktrack, a 'revolutionary new technology' that dramatically improves the e-reading experience. How? By creating a soundtrack for e-books including music and sound effects. A character knocks on the door: bang, bang, bang. Another puts a slice of bacon in the frying pan: sssssss. Someone kisses someone: well, no, perhaps not. And in between all these bursts of activity: sympathetic music, or weather noises, or (if it's a scene outdoors) a bird singing at the end of the garden.

The American launch was based on *Sherlock Holmes: The Adventure of the Speckled Band*. [2]_____ . But it had a lot of fans too. In its first ten weeks on sale, *The Speckled Band* was downloaded more than 100,000 times. Since then, it has been downloaded in ninety-nine different countries and has been reviewed positively in the press: 'Phenomenal', 'Revolutionary', 'books without soundtracks could some day seem as old-fashioned as silent movies'.

The technology is entertaining and very impressive. How on earth does the page know which line of text our eyes are reading, and therefore when to do the knocking on the door, etc.? Reading in this way is a deeply engaging experience. And I believe that for every reader who prefers to use their imagination, there will be a reader who is grateful for the extra fun.

But it's not just about having fun. Booktrack hired the services of Liel Leibovitz, a professor of communications at New York University, to look into 'the cognitive advantages, if any, to reading accompanied by audio elements'. [3]_____ . The research found that when readers read books with a soundtrack, they not only found them easier to follow than 'silent' books, but also found them easier to remember.

People who took part in the research all came from New York and represented various levels of income and education. [4]_____ . This could suggest that the greatest benefit of the new technology will be to help improve literacy rates and encourage schoolchildren to read.

Our culture is becoming increasingly visual, but the success so far of Booktrack also shows that we're keen to live in an acoustic world. While it is common to complain that computers cut us off from reality, you could also argue that in some ways computers remind us how much we rely on our senses.

COMMENTS

Personally, I prefer reading in silence or with some background music.

I don't mind trying this. Why not?

I like listening to books on the radio and when I'm driving, so I think I'll enjoy this new experience.

I don't think sound effects can add anything to a bo[illegible]

LIVEWORKSHEETS

EXAM FOCUS Gapped text

3 **Read the text again. Complete gaps 1–4 with fragments A–E. There is one extra fragment.**

A There's no information about their backgrounds, ages, reading experience, etc., but it seems reasonable to assume that they were people who don't spend a great deal of time in libraries.

B But reading is a different way of consuming content. I'm not sure a soundtrack can do anything but distract from the reading experience.

C In comparison with this traditional way of reading, one that engages all the senses, the digitally downloaded text can seem dull.

D In other words, can an audio soundtrack help people to understand a book and memorise it? The results were interesting.

E Some people were critical: they felt distracted by things that they would prefer to leave to the imagination.