

Helen the hippo is my friend at the moment. My little girl is learning how to read, and Helen is the type of character that is helping her to do so. It has been wonderful and fascinating to see the transition from knowing the alphabet to putting words together. Today, in the car, while we were waiting outside of the music school for my oldest son, Domini picked up some books that we keep in the back. To my amazement she slowly started to spell out the words, reading slowly. Every now and then, she would get a word wrong or guess it, but I noticed that she would recognize the first two letters in each word, and often the last one or two. In English, you have to use tricks like that because we have so many odd spellings: the silent e's, the silent gh's, the ph's, and the wh's that can be anything from 'what' to 'who'. Believe me, native English speakers have a hard enough time learning how to read English, not just the non-natives. My daughter squealed with delight when I would say, "Yep, you got that right." Her sense of satisfaction is tremendous; at last she can tell her brothers, who are all readers, that she too can do what they do. Good for her! Now I can get out the series of beginners books that I have used with the boys, and they can be kept in her room. Helen the hippo comes from this series, along with Olive the octopus, and Suzy the snake. The books work their way through the alphabet, introducing what we call 'sight words', those common English words that have to be memorized because they are essential, and a lot of them are irregular. Some of these words that you will be familiar with are: there, their, who, what, one, two, eight, night, and the list goes on. I've noticed, when I volunteer in Robert's class, that children's books use a lot of patterns, rhyme, and humor or surprise to keep the children's attention, and to make the words memorable. You'll find sentences like:

Zoe the zebra likes to cook,
she gets her instructions from the book. This is a good technique for those of you who are learning English. If you make up some sentences that rhyme and have a pattern or are funny or bizarre, the chances are that you will easily remember all of the vocabulary and how to use it. So:

If you follow these podcasts it will not hurt,
the world will say you're an English expert!

Grammar notes.

Common expressions: at the moment, every now and then, good for (person), the chances are.

1. Professor Penguin is busy at the moment; he will be available shortly.
2. Every now and then, Lucy the lion will visit her neighbor Betty the bear for a cup of tea.
3. David, the doggy detective, cracked the case. He solved the crime, good for him!
4. If you play roughly with the kitten, the chances are you will get bitten.