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REVIEWS

Strategic Reading: Building Effective Reading Skills (Volumes 1 and 2)

Jack C. Richards and Samuela Eskstut-Didier
Hong Kong: Cambridge University Press,
2003.

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A key focus of *Strategic Reading* is to expose students at the intermediate level to readings on a wide variety of topics from different genres. Young adults and adults are cited as the main audience for the texts with articles as various as “Love on the Internet” and “Are Athletes Worth Heroes?” Each book consists of 16 separate units that contain three articles on the same topic approached from different perspectives and written in different registers. The articles are all authentic, but they are adapted for this level of reader from newspapers, magazines, and the Internet. Works of fiction, nonfiction, and even poetry are included for the stated goal of maximizing the learners’ exposure to a “wide range of writing styles” (p. 4).

Every unit begins with a brief description of the three articles to follow and several questions about each reading’s main ideas, which are designed to activate background knowledge and pique students’ interest in the upcoming readings. Before each reading are prereading activities such as skimming or scanning exercises that focus students’ attention on key ideas in the text. These include prediction activities, matching exercises, and questions that explore the readers’ opinion on the topic. During-reading activities mostly involve verifying prereading predictions. All chapters have both traditional postreading activities such as comprehension checks (fill-in-the-blank questions), as well as awareness-

raising exercises, including recognizing the intended audience for the text and guessing the writer’s main purpose for writing the text. For example, after an article about “Movie Extras,” there is a question about the likely source of the text (newspaper, encyclopedia, etc.) followed by multiple-choice questions for which students simply circle the answer that is not true based on the information they have read. Additionally, each reading attempts to further involve the students by concluding with questions that “relate reading to personal experience” (p. 5). In the aforementioned article, for instance, one question is: “If you got a job as an extra, what parts would you like to play?” All units conclude with a game or group activity focusing on key vocabulary and grammar points.

These textbooks’ main strength is their variety. With such a wide range of readings offered, students will be able to approach a topic from many angles, increasing the likelihood that they will find topics that resonate with them personally and are both memorable and engaging. Some of the unit headings in *Strategic Reading* are very typical of ESL books—movies, loves, and so on. However, more often than not, the articles themselves take a familiar subject and present it in a new light. For example, in the unit covering movies—arguably an overdone subject for many ESL students—the article titles are unexpected: “Stunt School,” “Movie Extras,” and “The Storyteller.” These texts challenge students to explore familiar concepts using somewhat novel content. The authenticity of the content is evident in its pacing and tone, and even the readings in Volume 1 (designed for low-intermediate-level English learners) are skillfully adapted in such a way that even native speakers are unlikely to notice any obvious substitutions or rephrasings. The vocabulary used is level-appropriate but still challenging and realistic, with the inclusion of some slang (“telephone yakkers”) and native turns of phrase (“random acts of kindness”). Although an overabundance of such terms would likely confuse and frustrate beginning students, those capable of completing the

readings will be familiarizing themselves with idiomatic, naturalistic English.

While the variety of readings is a major strength of these volumes, a major weakness is a lack of variety in terms of exercises. Although content comprehension is checked in many different ways, almost every prereading activity involves making predictions and then finding the answers in the text. Additionally, the questions relating content to personal experience are effective and well written, but it seems monotonous to end all 96 articles with somewhat predictable discussion questions.

In spite of these shortcomings, the books are very engaging and the content that has been gathered is very impressive. These texts could be used quite effectively in both the ESL and EFL classroom, providing learners with cultural information from a wide variety of genres.

Sound Bites: Pronunciation Activities

Joann Rishel Kozyrev

Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

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Learners who struggle with intelligibility in real-life situations often cite pronunciation as the main source of their woes. Clearly, speakers whose pronunciation of sounds deviates from natively like speech are not likely to get their point across with ease, yet lacking a command of suprasegmental features such as intonation, stress, or rhythm is an equally likely culprit. To improve their speaking skills, learners require an increased awareness of those micro- and macrofeatures that are interfering with effective communication, regardless of the segmental/suprasegmental divide by which instructors typically classify their teaching points. *Sound Bites* is a new textbook that offers a more balanced and sensible approach to pronunciation instruction in the lower-level ESL classroom.

Written specifically with the low-intermediate student in mind, *Sound Bites* recognizes

the necessity for less proficient speakers to reach beyond the level of individual sounds that undermine their ability to communicate. Instructors face a formidable challenge in addressing the pronunciation needs of the intermediate learner; *Sound Bites* is a welcome contribution to the collection of materials that allow the instructor to present the sound system of English not in the traditional bottom-up fashion but as the learner truly experiences it. *Sound Bites* can be used to raise awareness on an array of issues and provides ample opportunities for practicing multiple aspects of pronunciation—intonation, rhythm, stresses, or individual sounds.

Sound Bites is organized around five main pronunciation features: stress and rhythm, intonation, vowels, consonants, and sounds in context (“putting it together”). Each section consists of 10 one-page chapters that can be taught in a single class session. Thus, *Sound Bites* can be used as a stand-alone text or as a useful supplement in the multiskills classroom. The introduction includes a reflective goals survey designed to help students establish their own pronunciation improvement plans and a brief yet useful review of dictionary use. After the preface, the book establishes a logical pedagogical sequence that is followed throughout the book.

Each chapter of *Sound Bites* begins with a description and analysis of a pronunciation feature to increase learner awareness. Novice and experienced teachers alike should be very satisfied with the accessible explanations presented in each chapter. Presentations of teaching points are reinforced by a series of controlled listening discrimination tasks, ensuring that recognition precedes oral production. It may be of interest to note that recordings of the listening tasks are available on audiotape and CD. Guided practice exercises then follow; they are typically structured communication exercises designed to encourage peer monitoring. Teachers will be pleased to find that minimal pair activities have been embedded in contextualized sentences and are accompanied by meaningful rejoinders. The author has also included a number of problem-

solving activities that will engage students in meaningful speaking practice while maintaining their focus on the specified feature. Each chapter concludes with a more open-ended “focused speaking” activity that requires learners to produce language using that feature and thus simultaneously attend to form as well as meaning.

It is very important to address such global aspects at the intermediate level. As indicated above, the first 13 chapters of *Sound Bites* have been devoted to the suprasegmental level of English, featuring aspects of natural discourse such as focal stress in sentences, reduced vowels in unstressed syllables, the chunking of words into thought groups, and a variety of common intonation contours. For problematic issues at the microlevel, parts 3 and 4 of the book (Chapters 14-35) provide comprehensive coverage of vowels and consonants. Moreover, the author has been mindful to highlight those individual and consonant sounds most often confused at the low-intermediate level.

To maximize the textbook’s potential, users would be wise to note the author’s suggestions to the instructor. Rather than proceeding straight through the book from beginning to end, the author strongly recommends that teachers take the time to select the chapters that their students need most. A needs analysis can be conducted with the help of diagnostic quizzes available on the instructors’ Web site. It makes sense to focus on those features that contribute most to the lack of intelligibility, or on those that will be most useful in the communicative situations that students are most likely to encounter. Teachers will welcome the freedom to design the best syllabus for their classrooms with the help of sample syllabi provided on the textbook’s Web site. The author further recommends alternating between teaching suprasegmental features and covering the individual sounds. If an instructor adopts this approach, students have a much better chance of recognizing that all features of the sound system work in tandem, not in isolation.

Instructors familiar with pronunciation textbooks geared for the upper-intermediate

and advanced level may desire more opportunity for learners to incorporate pronunciation concepts into contextualized speaking tasks. Moreover, those teachers who wish to integrate samples of authentic communication into their curriculum will find it necessary to supplement from other sources. Then again, the appropriateness of tasks that expose students to extended discourse or lengthy, unscripted listening passages is questionable at the low-intermediate level.

The author welcomes students to enhance their learning experience with technology and additional practice exercises available on the textbook’s Web site. Tests and other teaching aids are also available to instructors on the book’s Web site. Access to the instructor’s site, however, requires a bit of busywork online, since instructors must wait for a password before viewing any of the supplemental materials.

Despite its minor shortcomings, *Sound Bites* is an effective learning tool that low-intermediate students will find suitably challenging and engaging. It is one of those rare textbooks written for lower levels for which accessibility does not come at the expense of clarity, precision, or appeal. Simply put, *Sound Bites* offers something for everybody in the notoriously diverse ESL classroom. Teachers of intermediate learners from all language backgrounds will find *Sound Bites* to be an invaluable addition to their curriculum.

Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment (DIWE 7)

The Daedalus Group
Austin, TX: The Daedalus Group, 2003.

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D*aedalus Integrated Writing Environment (DIWE)* is a series of writing tools that guide students through the writing process and engage them in communicative and collaborative learning. The philosophy that permeates *DIWE* is that a student-centered

approach to the teaching of writing is essential. The software provides numerous benefits to students, especially those who are studying English as a second language. With this software, teachers can see class participation increase significantly as students gain fluency while writing more often, learn to explore topics more deeply, and give and receive feedback from teachers and classmates.

As the full title suggests, *DIWE 7* comprises multiple tools. Six primary features include Invent, Write, Respond, Mail, Interchange, and BiblioCite. Specialized tools for each stage of the writing process include Invent, Write, and Respond. Invent leads students through a set of questions that facilitate brainstorming, developing, and exploring ideas or topics. One of the unique features about Invent is the warm-up text about a topic. This feature allows students to get warmed up in their writing process and helps them to sort out their ideas or topics as they proceed. Write is an easy-to-use word processor, which offers word processing for in-class writing activities and consists of most of the functions of Microsoft Word: font, style, size, align text, paragraph format, document layout, and spell check. One of the specialized functions of the Write tool is a concordance feature, which calculates the frequency of words and word forms, allowing students to be aware of too many repetitive words and word forms.

Respond is a tool that allows students to give effective feedback, critiques, and suggestions during peer review for further revision. Mail and Interchange serve as communication and collaboration tools in the writing process. Mail acts as a bulletin board where students can post messages about course readings, group projects, and other collaborative learning activities. Interchange is used for prewriting, discussions of course content and readings, and peer review workshops. Last, BiblioCite has the function of simplifying the task of documenting sources following MLA and APA guidelines. BiblioCite helps students create the correct format when citing source documents. In addition to these primary features, *DIWE 7* also includes some

other useful tools to enhance the experience of learning in a computer classroom. The tools allow students to manage and exchange documents between peers. Furthermore, they are able to consult a dictionary or thesaurus if they encounter any difficulties during the writing process.

Interchange is one of the features that I have enjoyed the most when using this software. It provides an opportunity for online class discussion or communication, such as analyzing and sharing ideas, and other collaborative in-class activities. Interchange also encourages students to write and participate. The greatest advantage is that it helps students to brainstorm a given topic and analyze their ideas with peers in the class. I also find that all the other features are very useful and practical in a writing class, but I favor the functions that Interchange provides the most.

I have found two weaknesses in using *DIWE*. First, it does not allow users to attach files in Mail, an inconvenience for students and teachers. Second, the software does not have all the features of Microsoft Word such as tracking changes. Without these functions, students are unable to see and keep track of their mistakes.

Overall, I consider the *DIWE* application to be worth implementing in the ESL classroom. Students can benefit from using this software by learning the process of exploring ideas more deeply, gaining fluency in writing, and improving their writing skills by giving and receiving critiques from peers. Therefore, I believe that *DIWE* is one of the best writing tools to engage students in collaborative and communicative language learning.

New Directions: Reading, Writing, and Critical Thinking (2nd ed.)

Peter S. Gardner

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

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Academic writing texts for ESL classes are not in short supply, as evidenced by the ample displays at publisher's booths at conferences related to the field of teaching ESL. As supported by recent research and current best practices, the texts that are available follow a process approach to writing along with the integration of topic-based, high-interest readings from multicultural voices covering a range of genres. Peter Gardner's second edition of *New Directions: Reading, Writing, and Critical Thinking* distinguishes itself in its clearly defined and thoroughly executed purpose of integrating reading, writing, and critical thinking. The text is rich with readings that serve both as models of English language texts and as springboards for getting students to think, explore, and write academically in English.

New Directions was written for students preparing for or studying in an English-speaking college or university. Its five thematically based units are nicely positioned around a writing handbook new to the second edition. This handbook breaks academic writing down into the following three parts: essay structure, the process of writing, and using sources. The handbook is between units 2 and 3 and is a concise reference for students. Its accessibility lies in the fact that it consists of lists of do's and don'ts, examples, checklists, and explanatory graphics.

The five main units contain topics that are relevant and approachable for students and lead easily to discussions and writing assignments. Unit 1 deals with intercultural communication. Unit 2 explores views of education. Unit 3 covers matters surrounding technology and mass media. Unit 4 examines gender roles. Finally, Unit 5 investigates issues related to work. In addition to being organ-

ized thematically, each unit introduces and develops a writing technique. The techniques covered are writing main ideas and supporting details (Unit 1), writing with a purpose and for an audience (Unit 2), using figures of speech (Unit 3), summarizing and paraphrasing (Unit 4), and employing an appropriate tone (Unit 5). The author carefully guides students through the writing techniques by using intensive reading exercises; Kroll (2001) underscores the importance of using readings in teaching writing as a means of increasing genre awareness, practicing distinct writing tasks, and recognizing exceptional writing across disciplines. *New Directions* provides students ample opportunities to interact with the text on many levels through discussion activities, journal-writing activities, vocabulary-development exercises, and note-taking tasks. The culmination of each unit is an essay assignment and as with the journal-writing activities, the many topics provide choices for teachers and students.

New Directions has a number of strengths that illustrate the many angles the author uses to view the task of teaching academic writing through reading and critical thinking. The readings are diverse on a variety of levels. They represent a range of genres from newspaper articles, magazine articles, and college-text excerpts to poems, short stories, and fables. The readings are all original and represent multicultural perspectives, varying in writing style, voice, tone, and purpose. Illustrations, charts, graphs, tables, and actual advertisements from media sources stimulate interest and provide additional sources of information for readers. Throughout the book, questions are raised for students to think about and discuss and quotations are offered as a way to provide students many perspectives to consider as they shape their own opinions. Each unit also ends with a short humor section that includes a comic strip and an anecdote or joke related to the topic. This humor section, an addition to the second edition, gives students another opportunity to explore the theme from a different point of view. Giving the students a chance to

address the topic from a lighter perspective is a very effective way of wrapping up a unit and adding a fun dimension to a class.

I especially like the additional readings section in each unit. The author provides students opportunities to read intensively and extensively. Research in second language reading and writing has emphasized the importance of both intensive reading (reading a limited amount with a specific focus) and extensive reading (reading larger amounts of texts for extended periods of time) for academic skills development (Grabe & Stoller, 2001). The clever use and positioning of graphics throughout the text also sets the book apart from others on the market.

Although *New Directions* is an excellent academic writing text, it lacks peer review activities, which provide emerging writers with a real audience and real feedback. Student guidelines for peer review could have easily been added to the writing process component of the handbook, giving teachers and students an accessible option. *New Directions* successfully integrates reading, writing, and critical thinking, and as previously stated, a number of activities help students interact with readings. However, the process of writing is not clearly broken down into discrete tasks in *New Directions*. Even at advanced levels, students need guidance in fine-tuning their writing skills. The readings provide rich models but practice is sometimes necessary before students can confidently attack lengthy essay tasks. Students do have some hands-on revision practice with tasks such as identifying problems in essays or choosing/creating topic sentences for paragraphs. More of these kinds of exercises would have made a useful addition to this academic writing text.

New Directions is a well-thought-out academic writing text that makes excellent use of reading and critical thinking activities. Gardner has successfully rounded out the text with well-chosen readings, thought-provoking discussion activities, academic vocabulary–development exercises, and several writing activities per unit. I hope to have the opportunity to use this book in future writing

courses and I highly recommend it to those tackling the challenge of teaching academic writing to college and college-bound English language students.

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Creative Poetry Writing

Jane Spiro

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

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Creative Poetry Writing, one of the Resource Books for Teachers from Oxford University Press, provides teachers practical ideas for teaching language through poetry, exploring creative and playful uses of language, and demonstrating how language can be introduced in a pleasurable way. The book consists of a forward by the series editor, Alan Maley, an introduction, 10 chapters, two appendices (one about poetry forms and the other a glossary of key words), and further reading. Each chapter consists of six to eight activities, which are organized according to the following categories: level of learners, time, aims, materials, preparation, procedure, variation, follow-up, and comments.

The text begins with the smallest unit of language (individual sounds). Each chapter moves on to a bigger “chunk” of language: parts of words, whole words, sentences, sentence patterns and types, the way sentences are joined together, texts, and finally, text types. Chapter 1, “Sound Poems,” looks at the

combinations of sounds that make up words in the English language and gives students the chance to express their ideas through sounds. Chapter 2, "Wordplay Poems," introduces students to the building blocks of words (prefixes, suffixes, and morphemes) as well as the meanings embedded in words. Chapter 3, "Wordmixing Poems," shows students how to use words, like colors, to paint pictures of their own. Chapter 4, "Sentence Pattern Poems," looks at different sentence types (simple, complex, questions, exclamation, command, etc.), how sentences can be broken up into chunks, and what happens when these chunks are moved around. Chapter 5, "Time Poems," looks at the way time is expressed in English and explores the language patterns of and the feelings expressed through present, past, and future time frames.

Chapter 6, "Modal Verb Poems," explains the many meanings conveyed through the use of the modals: *can*, *may*, *might*, *should* and *ought*. Chapter 7, "Language Function Poems," works with language functions—as opposed to forms—for asking for directions, inviting, celebrating, and expressing preferences. Chapter 8, "Genre Poems," looks at poetry as an independent genre or text that sends a clear message about the *who*, *where*, and *why* of a poem. Chapter 9, "Poetry Games," focuses on how to make group poems within a classroom context in which each student contributes to the poem with a line or an idea. It also has activities that experiment with letters, words, and poems as pictures with unusual formations. Finally Chapter 10, "Poems as Stories," invites students to draw on a story's aspects of change, conflict, recognition, or discovery in a poetic way.

Perhaps the main feature of the book is that the activities are very easy to use and can be set up with minimal resources (just a blackboard and paper for students to write on). Another important feature of the book is that the activities offered can support or supplement a course syllabus, be it functional-notional, situational, grammatical, communicative, task-based in nature, or a combination of some or all of these. Also, the activities can be easily tai-

lored to suit different class sizes and contexts. Finally, the activities offer students a structured and nonthreatening approach to using language; at the same time, they are specifically designed to bring students' personal experiences and preferences to bear.

In sum, *Creative Poetry Writing*, like other Oxford University Press Resource Books for Teachers, is written in a reader-friendly and accessible style, which makes it handy for both novice and more experienced teachers. I completely agree with Alan Maley, the series editor, that "teachers will find it easy to use. Students will find it a delight" (p. 3).

Topics in Language and Culture for Teachers

Steven Brown and Jodi Eisterhold
Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press,
2004.

Crossing Cultures in the Language Classroom

Andrea DeCapua and Ann C. Wintergerst
Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press,
2004.

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The U.S. Department of Education's recent decision to destroy 300,000 copies of a new printing of the parent's guide *Helping Your Child Learn History* is telling of the historic moment that we educators find ourselves in and a reminder of the ire that multicultural education still provokes in some quarters. As language teachers, we often find ourselves caught in the cross fire of these cultural wars. The attacks and counterattacks are often based more on political views than on pedagogical inquiry and research. Thankfully, two recent publications from The University of Michigan Press provide language educators, teacher trainers, and students of applied linguistics the theory and relevant research to approach the controversial arena of culture and language instruction on a firm footing.

Placing language at the center of the discussion is *Topics in Language and Culture for Teachers* by Steven Brown and Jodi Eisterhold. It is a well-organized introductory text with a comprehensive yet concise series of chapters addressing a full range of issues in applied linguistics and language education. Any instructor or student of a credentialing or applied linguistics program would welcome its clear explanations of linguistic concepts—from backchannels and speech acts to proxemics and paralanguage. Each chapter consists of short one- to three-page sections with thoughtful follow-up questions. Also included are appendices on world languages, “how languages are put together,” scholarly resources, and a glossary of linguistic terms used in the text.

Crossing Cultures in the Language Classroom by Andrea DeCapua, Ed.D., and Ann C. Wintergerst, Ed.D., presents scenarios and problems encountered when languages and cultures come into contact in the classroom and society. *Crossing Cultures* is organized into six chapters: culture, more culture, culture shock, nonverbal communication, societal roles, pragmatics, and communication. Each chapter is divided into three sections: an anecdote, theory, and practice. The

anecdote provides a real-life scenario that allows readers to reflect on similar scenarios they have encountered. The theory section presents relevant research on the topics covered in the chapter. Educators will find particularly useful each chapter’s practice component, which includes eight to nine lessons for the classroom. Each lesson includes detailed procedure, pacing suggestions, possible adaptations for distinct instructional levels, and graphic organizers and reproducibles. These lessons give the text long-term utility as a teaching resource.

As the titles suggest, *Topics* provides exposure to a full range of issues in applied linguistics while *Crossing Cultures* is focused more singlemindedly on cultural issues in the classroom. Teacher training is certainly the aim of both publications, but *Crossing Cultures* serves as a toolbox of lessons in a way that *Topics* does not. *Topics*, on the other hand, provides more specific discussions and thorough explanations of current linguistic theory. Clearly, the particular context for their use will shape decisions about which better serves the readers’ aims—both are excellent vehicles for deepening educators’ understanding of the intersections of culture and language in our classrooms and in our world.