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Reading and Vocabulary Focus 3

Jessica Williams

Boston, MA: National Geographic Learning, 2014.

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Reading and Vocabulary Focus 3 is ideal for EFL and ESL students who seek to improve their academic reading skills. It specifically concentrates on three types of vocabulary, making it easier for students to increase their vocabulary depth and read authentic texts on their own. Jessica Williams, the *Focus 3* author, presents prereading, during-reading, and postreading strategies for each section, a teaching method recommended by the California State University Expository Reading and Writing Task Force (2008). Overall, *Focus 3* is well written and reasonably priced, with few drawbacks.

Aimed at intermediate learners, the textbook is divided into nine units: The Body in Motion, Time, Water, Travel, Human-Animal Relationships, Architecture, Genetics and the Environment, Inventions, and Robotics. Within the units, each reading hones in on a specific reading skill and focuses on three types of vocabulary: academic, multiword, and topic. “Academic vocabulary” targets lower-frequency words that students are likely to encounter in academic texts. “Multiword vocabulary” includes common phrases and idiomatic expressions such as “to play a role in” or “to make up for lost time.” Finally, “topic vocabulary” focuses on key words that are necessary for comprehension of the particular text in question. A Unit Review provided at the end of each unit reviews new vocabulary and encourages students to compare and contrast the individual readings.

The textbook comes with an audio CD containing an audio recording of each reading. The exercises do not require the CD, and the textbook can easily be used without it. However, the CD may be helpful if students wish to review the reading material on their own.

Focus 3 comes with various additional materials. The Teacher’s Guide features specific instructions for each reading and highlights the underlying philosophy of the textbook. Williams notes that through

communication-oriented strategies, the text aims to help students read to learn “instead of reading for its own sake,” providing “a real reason to read” (p. i). The guide includes additional authentic sources on each topic from well-respected publications such as *National Geographic*, the *New York Times*, and *Scientific American*. In addition, the guide provides an answer key for the exercises and general timing instructions, which may be particularly useful for novice teachers.

Published by National Geographic Learning, the layout of *Focus 3* is attractive and laden with beautiful color photos. Teachers are encouraged to use the photos as points of conversation in order to further the communicative skills of their students. Interesting and varied reading topics, such as “Extreme Diving” and “Epigenetics,” are sure to spark conversation among student readers. Each reading is genuinely interesting and does not feel oversimplified or unnatural. Rather, the readings are styled as articles and present multifaceted and complex topics, giving students practical and relevant reading experience.

However, because readings and suggested additional sources are all articles, teachers will need to supplement the text with other materials such as novels or poems if they want to introduce students to a variety of literary genres. While fascinating, the readings are very information dense, which could be daunting for students who do not have extensive reading experience.

In short, *Reading and Vocabulary Focus 3* is an excellent choice for educated adult intermediate-level EFL or ESL learners. Students and teachers alike will enjoy learning about the various topics introduced, and students will benefit from the intensive, three-pronged vocabulary approach. Although *Focus 3* does not represent a wide range of genres, it would be easy to supplement with outside texts or videos. All in all, Williams’s textbook offers a pedagogically sound approach to reading combined with an attractive layout and interesting reading material.

Reference

California State University Expository Reading and Writing Task Force. (2008). *Expository reading and writing course: Semester one and semester two*. Long Beach: California State University.

Pronunciation Myths: Applying Second Language Research to Classroom Teaching

Linda Grant (Ed.)

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014.

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In communicative language teaching (CLT), in which meaning often takes precedence over accuracy, where does pronunciation instruction stand? With the many misconceptions that exist regarding pronunciation instruction and a relative paucity of pronunciation research compared to other language skills, language teachers must address pronunciation issues without much training or understanding of those issues.

Pronunciation Myths: Applying Second Language Research to Classroom Teaching is the latest volume of a series of books published by University of Michigan Press that attempt to dispel popular, yet often fictitious, beliefs about language teaching and learning. The editor, Linda Grant (author of the *Well Said* pronunciation book series), organizes the book around seven myths regarding second language (L2) pronunciation. The contributing authors are pronunciation experts who write with preservice and in-service L2 teachers, administrators, and researchers in mind by employing an easy-to-digest style that effectively bridges the gap between pronunciation research and classroom application.

In the prologue, Grant presents a brief history of the past 40 years of pronunciation teaching within the context of popular L2 pedagogical approaches, spanning from the audiolingual method (ALM) with the popular but often decontextualized minimal-pair drills to the more recent CLT framework, which has largely neglected explicit pronunciation teaching. The seven chapters that follow are organized into three sections: “In the Real World,” detailing firsthand experiences of contributing authors relevant to the pronunciation myth; “What the Research Says,” presenting research that addresses the myth; and “What We Can Do,” offering pedagogical tips gleaned from research findings.

Tracey Derwing and Murray Munro, two often-cited L2 pronunciation researchers, discuss the first myth, “Once you have been speaking a second language for years, it’s too late to change your pronunciation.” The authors highlight several studies showing that through explicit pronunciation instruction, L2 learners with years of experience using the L2 made improvements in their intelligibility.

The second myth, “Pronunciation instruction is not appropriate for beginning-level learners,” is addressed by Beth Zielinski and Lynda Yates. Despite the L2 learner level, the authors stress that L2 speakers can be misunderstood because of their pronunciation. Zielinski and Yates also point out that most students want to receive pronunciation feedback, and, without it, they might become reluctant to speak and, as a result, face language fossilization. Pronunciation, just like grammar and vocabulary, should be embedded into language-learning classrooms from the very beginning levels to the most advanced levels.

John Fields looks into the third myth, “Pronunciation teaching has to establish in the minds of language learners a set of distinct consonant and vowel sounds.” He argues that phonemes are realized differently in speech than when they are in isolation. Because of such phoneme variability, attention should instead be given to suprasegmental elements, the ear training of lexical chunks, and exposure to a variety of accents in the language.

The fourth myth, “Intonation is hard to teach,” is appropriately debunked by Judy Gilbert, author of the best-selling *Clear Speech* pronunciation book series. The author highlights several studies demonstrating the importance of prosodic instruction on intelligibility and gives suggestions for teaching intonation. Using dialogues, kazoo, and rubber bands, she illustrates the importance of sentence and word stress and demonstrates rhythm and syllable length in more kinesthetic ways.

Linda Grant discusses the fifth myth, “Students would make better progress in pronunciation if they just practiced more.” Grant gives an overview of learner variables such as age, first language, motivation, and identity that play a role in the effectiveness of pronunciation instruction and help to explain why some adult learners make more progress in pronunciation accuracy and intelligibility than others.

The sixth myth, “Accent reduction and pronunciation instruction are the same thing,” is addressed by Ron Thomson, who begins the chapter by comparing accent reduction, accent modification, and pronunciation-instruction courses in regard to their delivery methods, instructor credentials, and costs. Thomson concludes that there is little to no research that proves that speaking a foreign language without an accent is necessary for intelligibility.

Finally, John Murphy writes about the seventh myth, “Teacher training programs provide adequate preparation in how to teach pronunciation.” Examining 18 research reports on teacher preparedness for pronunciation teaching, Murphy finds that many teachers express a lack of confidence in teaching pronunciation, have not obtained formal training on pronunciation teaching, and participate in MA TE-

SOL programs that lack a specific phonology course. In her prologue, Grant appropriately states the following: “Ultimately, if pronunciation is to be a priority to learners, then it must also be a priority to teachers” (p. 155).

The greatest strength of this book is its readability. Often pronunciation books are dense, go deep into phonology, and are not practical for typical language teachers who desire to incorporate pronunciation instruction into their classrooms. Simply, the very idea of dispelling myths entices the reader to keep reading. In addition to being easy to read, it is quite resourceful with useful charts and practical tips inside each chapter to assist pronunciation teachers or researchers. Finally, the epilogue offers an excellent summary of the many important research findings presented in all of the chapters.

One shortcoming of the book is that some chapters are organized differently from others, as often happens with edited works, giving it a somewhat disconnected feel. Some chapters are heavier in research, while others focus more on pedagogy. In addition, some of the research (such as that provided for Myth 4) fails to actually disprove the myth yet offers a solution in its pedagogical section. Despite these weaknesses, the book’s organization permits it to be used as a reference guide, in which readers can select any chapter and are provided with enough support to fill in their gaps in understanding.

All in all, this book is a very practical guide for research-based ways to incorporate pronunciation teaching into communicative classrooms. It does not bog down the teacher with too much pronunciation research or theory and it provides insight into often-misunderstood perceptions about pronunciation that still prevail in ESL and EFL classrooms today. It is a worthy, relevant, and interesting read.

***Teaching L2 Composition: Purpose, Process, and Practice* (3rd ed.)**

Dana R. Ferris and John S. Hedgcock

New York, NY: Routledge, 2014.

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Many books on educational theory fail to provide practical instruction for teachers, relying heavily on theory and research. However, Dana R. Ferris and John S. Hedgcock, in *Teaching L2 Composition: Purpose, Process and Practice*, not only provide an overview of theory and research in the field of L2 composition, but also a variety of activities, questions, and practical examples that teachers in L2

classroom settings can easily adapt to their own teaching practices. In this third edition, the authors have rearranged the book “in an effort to have the text move more methodically through instructional principles and practices” (p. xv).

The first chapter opens with an overview of the concepts of writing and learning to write in a second language. Providing insight into current theories in the field of second language writing, the authors emphasize their “practical utility,” claiming that “without the knowledge provided by theoretical principles, we lose sight of crucial tools for responsible instructional planning, effective classroom decision making, productive expert response, and meaningful assessment” (p. 4). The chapter proceeds to review notions of writing systems and the history of written languages, and it closes by offering a consideration of the prior knowledge of students, or knowledge shaped by experiences that students bring to the composition classroom. The most significant shortcoming apparent in the chapter was the density of some sections, which might lead to readers’ skimming the surface of valuable material.

Chapter 2 discusses student populations and instructional texts, with a focus on challenges faced by L2 writers as well as relevant teacher preparation, including selecting texts and preparing lessons. According to the authors, there is a large variance in L2 student populations, with an increasing number of L2 students in mainstream classrooms and “sometimes several distinct groups of L2 writers in the same classroom” (p. 30). Ferris and Hedgcock further expound upon each common category of L2 learner—including international students, EFL students, and resident immigrants—giving the general characteristics of each group, along with definitions and relevant statistics. For a teacher new to the L2 community, these explanations may prove useful in helping to identify the L2 student population and planning classroom activities accordingly. They also explore the various contexts for L2 learning, emphasizing the nonacademic settings. However, in focusing on the narrow notion of “resident immigrants,” part of the recently arrived or undocumented immigrant population remains unnamed and unrecognized for the reader.

While Chapter 3 provides a thorough analysis of various composition pedagogies, theory, and principles, bolstered by questions designed to prompt self-analysis, it is in the remaining chapters, 4 through 9, that the authors lay open the practicalities of teaching L2 composition. Chapter 4 focuses on reading skills and awareness, genre theory, and access points to literacies, including “print and digital texts” (p. 93). The underlying connection between reading and writing tasks is explored at length, supplemented with charts of possible

competencies, guidelines for integrating reading and writing tasks, and definitions of various genres.

The focus of Chapter 5 is on designing a course, placing emphasis on a survey of the needs-assessment process, which Ferris and Hedgcock see as an integral part of instructional planning. Providing tools and checklists along the way, the section titled “Nuts and Bolts: Prioritizing, Sequencing, and Planning for Writing” is particularly useful in that it explores common methods of planning, with samples of course outlines, a writing-process schema, and hints for identifying lesson objectives. This may be particularly valuable for teachers in training or those newer to the profession.

Chapters 6 through 8 focus on assessment, error correction, and facilitating feedback. One concern mentioned, in Chapter 7, is whether “feedback over which [teachers] labor so diligently actually promotes writing development” (p. 239), which the authors then address by suggesting principles for written teacher feedback/commentary, guidelines for teacher-student conferences, and strategies for effective integration of peer review. Error treatment is given a chapter of its own, as this seems to be a somewhat contentious subject. Ferris and Hedgcock directly address the issues surrounding error feedback in regard to grammar and style, and whether “such forms should more properly be considered to be natural consequences of the evolving stages of learner interlanguage” (p. 282). The authors offer practical suggestions such as selective corrective-feedback exercises for identifying error patterns and self-editing strategies for students. Despite the explicit focus on error treatment, Ferris and Hedgcock carefully assert that they “definitely do *not* wish to argue that error treatment should be the only or primary concern of an L2 writing course” (p. 281).

The final chapter discusses the “why, what, how, and who” of L2 writing instruction, or the “continued development of students’ language proficiency in the writing or literacy course” (p. 309). Each question—why, what, how, and who—is given its own section, encouraging teachers to carefully consider student needs when selecting instructional structures and strategies for the classroom. They close by recommending that teachers provide a “reading-rich classroom with frequent source-based writing tasks” (p. 318).

In this book, teachers are encouraged to be considerate of their students’ needs and limitations, while providing them with materials that will challenge and enrich their education. The explicit instructions provided will be an asset to any L2 teacher, especially those new to the field. All things considered, this text would be an excellent addition to any graduate-level TESOL course or library for L2 teachers.

NorthStar Listening and Speaking 5 (4th ed.)

Sherry Preiss

New York, NY: Pearson Education, 2014.

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Teaching a listening and speaking class usually requires careful selection of authentic materials. Many teachers want to look for supplemental material that is up-to-date and content rich and that is also level appropriate. With the new fourth edition of the *NorthStar Listening and Speaking* for the advanced student, the author provides authentic and compelling content that will not only help students achieve their academic and personal goals, but that also provides a satisfying solution for teachers to save time from searching for additional material.

The textbook is very thorough and has content that is both interesting and relevant to the intended college-level audience. It contains new and updated themes with current events, explicit skill instruction and practice, and various forms of assessment (diagnostic, formative, and summative). Also, the content allows students to sample a variety of academic subjects (e.g., biology, psychology, art, business, history) and each unit provides learners with authentic material and specific topics to study in depth. For example, the Business unit focuses on corporate culture and the author uses a recording of an authentic interview with Tony Hsieh, the CEO of Zappos, for one of the listening tasks. Then, the students are asked to listen to a short commentary by a Harvard University business professor and author, Teresa Amabile, on what factors motivate employees to perform at their best. After each listening passage, students are asked to complete different tasks, whether they are to discuss the content with a partner, answer comprehension or vocabulary questions, or do a role-play. The specially designed exercises aim to improve critical thinking with thought-provoking content that would spark lots of great discussion among the students.

Also, the author has systematically organized each unit by providing a prelistening activity before each listening passage, along with various practice exercises that cover vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Pronunciation lessons are in the middle of each unit, and rather than focusing on how to improve consonants and vowels in the sound system, each activity focuses on other aspects of pronunciation. In Unit 2, for example, the pronunciation activity focuses on the reduction of the auxiliary *have*. Students are first asked to listen to a

list of modal perfects and repeat them. Then the students will listen to a conversation and fill in the blanks with the correct modal perfect, and they next draw a line through the *ha of have* and use an underline to link the modal and *have*. Afterward, students are asked to practice the conversation with a partner. In another unit, students are asked to listen and repeat words and phrases and to do minimal-pair drills and tongue twisters. Interestingly, the author provides diagrams of the mouth for visual learners, which is not commonly found in other textbooks. Some other examples of pronunciation activities include practicing pauses and intonation with discourse connectors, expressive intonation, and grouping words in phrases or thought groups.

In addition to pronunciation activities, the author provides sufficient grammar practice. For example, in Unit 7, students are asked to study the passive voice and the passive causative and identify the difference. Then the students are asked to complete the given paragraph with the appropriate forms of the verbs provided choosing an active or passive form. In the last activity of the grammar lesson, students work with a partner for a role-play activity while changing the bold-face verbs in the dialogue to the passive voice.

In addition to these activities, the author has provided another construct that is crucial for advanced learners to practice. In every unit, there is a section called “Make Inferences.” Students will make an inference based on the intention, attitude, voice, pausing, and word choices of the speaker in the listening excerpt. Also, in a section called “Express Opinions,” students are asked to discuss a list of questions with a small group. Here is an example of a speaking task:

In this activity, you will have a group discussion to recommend a set of policies in the use of electronic communication in classes at a university. Use the vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and listening and speaking skills that you learned in the unit. (p. 179)

This topic addresses a big issue for teachers who teach at the college level, yet there could be some students who are not aware of this problem in the sense that they do not think it is an issue. Thus, topics such as this not only provide communicative practice, but they also allow students to apply critical-thinking skills.

If there is one drawback of the book, it is the fact that the audio CD must be purchased separately. However, the author has included the audio scripts at the end of the chapter for students to follow along or check answers to some of the exercises. And while the brightly colored photos and pages stand out, those elements will not be sufficient

to engage students; however, the consistent use of earth-tone colors in varying sections is soothing to the eye.

Overall, the fourth and latest edition of *NorthStar Listening and Speaking 5* is a considerable textbook for teachers who want one that integrates all four skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and the author does a pristine job of providing enough meaningful practice across the units for students to master the skills. However, teachers should not become heavily dependent on the textbook but should incorporate supplemental material to add variation when appropriate.