

A Review of a Reading Textbook: Reading First

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This article is a review of a reading textbook. It examines and comments on Reading First, a textbook on reading by Robertshaw et al, as concerns the form, the content, the level and goal it is intended for, as well as its overall organization: textbook, texts, skills, tasks. These points are discussed in relation to issues and principles in reading.

The textbook examined is intended for foreign students at beginners' level of English as a second language (ESL) at an English speaking university. It seems, however, that the term 'beginners' is not clear, does it refer to low-beginners, high-beginners, low-intermediate, intermediate ? The use of these terms, to mean different things by different people, is relative.

However, from the kind of texts and activities offered in the book, it seems that the students it is intended for are not 'real' beginners but rather high/upper beginners or low-intermediate / pre-intermediate entering an American university. It is assumed for instance that they already possess the basic grammatical notions.

The topics dealt with seem to respond to students' needs in an academic life at an American university and in their social everyday life. It offers a variety of topics which would allow them to interact with native speakers in everyday situations: housing, money, studying, time, health, weather, telephones, shopping, buses, police, restaurants, driving and some optional readings on cultural issues.

These topics of immediate interest to foreign students would help them to adjust to different situations and perform everyday activities, at the same time they would get acquainted with the culture. This is one of the positive aspects of this textbook.

To start with the general organization of the textbook, it appears, as the title of the book seems to suggest, that emphasis is put on 'learning to read by reading'. Each chapter contains one long reading text and two or three shorter ones (sometimes also vocabulary review readings). The texts are of expository, narrative and informative type. Emphasis is also put on vocabulary and comprehension (as we will see from the activities described further).

As concerns the texts, we notice that the long readings are presented in short, neat, clearly distinguished paragraphs, containing short sentences and very simple vocabulary. The lack of cohesive devices and discourse markers (coordinators, sentences connectors...) is probably intended to make readings easier, this however, is a negative aspect as EFL and ESL students are generally badly in need of learning / reinforcing these items.

The texts are, furthermore, noticeably printed in smaller characters than the exercises, which would, probably, render the reading tiresome for the eyes.

As for the short readings that follow the long one in each chapter, they are all related to the main topic of the chapter and the theme of the long text, they either review the vocabulary or introduce new but related words.

It seems that the aim of this way of presentation is to develop both *narrow* and *broad* reading (and *intensive* - *extensive* reading), as there are different readings related to one topic (in each chapter) and a variety of topics dealt with in the different chapters. The appendix itself

contains additional readings (and questions) which are intended for optional use to meet the students' needs concerning cultural matters (such as thanksgiving etc...). In relation to the latter point, there does not seem to be any cultural bias to the text, or if there is, it is only to get the students acquainted with the culture of the target language, which would help them in their academic and social life.

Before examining and commenting on the activities provided in the textbook and the reading skills it aims to develop, we have to note that grammar is rather minimized, and writing rather non-existent. The grammar exercises supplied relate some forms to vocabulary and reading such as: adjectives with -ed versus -ing, homonyms, suffixes and prefixes, comparatives with irregular forms: eg, good-better-best... So it is assumed that students have already acquired the basic grammar necessary for 'beginners'.

So we can notice from the first glance at the organization of the textbook that focus is put on reading tasks and vocabulary. And this confirms the goal stated in the preface, which is to "provide a fundamental knowledge of vital vocabulary and reading skills".

The activities seem to focus more on receptive (than productive) vocabulary through context based exercises. This is a favorable training for the students so that they do not become dependent on the dictionary.

Most of the activities which accompany the texts are of the same form in most chapters, for instance, the 'pre-reading' exercise to stimulate group work and interaction between students and between students and teacher or 'vocabulary in context' exercise or 'post-reading comprehension exercise'.

Some chapters contain also additional tasks designed to reinforce a given reading skill when the latter is first introduced in the chapter and the subsequent chapters (as we will see further, some reading skills like scanning and skimming are not introduced from the first chapter). So the chapters do not all have the same, uniform format).

The pictures on the first page of each chapter (though small and colorless) may be used also for warm up through discussion, but no activity based on them is presented in the book.

How the activities should be carried out is clearly stated with some explanation about the reading skill aimed at. However, some of the exercises seem to be too long at times, for instance, the pre-reading discussion exercise contains an average of three questions. The teacher would have to set up a time for the discussion, though this activity is very much related to the topic of the reading texts of the chapter and is an important task in the reading process (as we will see further).

There is also a great variety of vocabulary exercises including self-check and vocabulary checklist. Word attack process is also strongly emphasized through the context-guessing and implication exercises, which will train students not to stop at every new word they encounter to look it up in the dictionary. Difficult words, in this way, may be ignored or guessed from context.

This variety and lack of uniformity of the exercises is to be considered as a positive point in this textbook, so as to break the routine of doing the same exercises all the time and test the students' skill in different ways. As Silberstein (1994: 11) notes:

- One needs only to consider the monotonous parallelism of most textbook exercises to appreciate the import of this observation. If students are to be
- encouraged to fit reading strategies to text, teachers must not demand the
- same activities for each reading passage. Individual texts will suggest

- particular teaching activities.

The activity that seems to be lacking here, when compared to a lot of other reading textbooks, is writing. Though it is not very important for the goal set in this textbook, a short follow up writing exercise may be helpful for the teacher to assess the students' comprehension skill, use of vocabulary etc...

However, the texts and activities presented in this textbook seem appropriate and sufficient for the goals of the book: to develop reading skills and vocabulary, ie: 'reading first' based on the idea mentioned above and stated by Grabe (1991: 396) as a conclusion or principle: "students learn to read by reading".

In this section we look at the reading skills that the activities proposed are intended to develop. The first reading skill aimed at through some activities is *predicting*. A great emphasis is put on it through different exercises mainly 'pre-reading exercise' in which discussion concerning points related to the topic of the readings in the chapter, permits interaction with the classmates and teacher. This allows building and activating the *schemata*, stimulating and motivating students for reading.

Godman (1988) puts emphasis on active and cognitive processes in reading as background knowledge and experience develop predictions about reading. This involves *top-down* processing in reading because pre-reading helps in activating and building readers' schemata which leads them to predicting and interacting with others as well as with the text. This schema oriented skill facilitates top-down information processing (knowledge based-conceptually driven processing).

Other pre-reading activities are also provided (eg: vocabulary checklist, vocabulary in context) to facilitate *bottom-up* processing which is sustained through the post-reading activities (eg: comprehension questions, fill in exercise, more than one way to say it, word association, word form, implications). By offering both top-down and bottom-up modes of information processing, there is stimulation for an interactive process of reading.

The 'implications' exercises encourage also top-down processing as the answers to the questions are not stated directly. They are implied or suggested. Students develop here the skill of making implications to find information which is not explicit in a text. This skill is only introduced in chapter four, as students need to use prior knowledge to make predictions and knowledge from the text to make these implications (so both top-down and bottom-up processing). Silberstein (1994) notes that top-down processing involves *formal schemata* (rhetorical structures and conventions) and *content schemata* (knowledge of the world beyond the text).

The skill of *scanning* is introduced from chapter three to subsequent chapters to locate specific information quickly. An introduction explaining what scanning is, is first presented (chapter 3 p59). At this stage students have been trained to reading, so they can read faster. 'Finding the main idea' ability is only introduced in chapter five and subsequent chapters following some expository texts (and sometimes narrative ones too). Students are trained to distinguish the main idea from the supporting arguments (chapter 5 p80).

Another important skill which is *skimming* develops in chapter seven with a short introduction again to explain this skill and illustrate it with an example, before students practice with the exercise. Both scanning and skimming exercises are provided in chapter eight (p 117) to train students in both skills.

This chapter (eight) introduces also one more reading skill which is to distinguish between fact and opinion to develop critical reading as it enables students to be able to disagree (they learn that a fact can be proven or disproven, an opinion can be agreed on or disagreed on). The importance of this skill is that it allows students to think for themselves, to be creative, to be competent and proficient readers and learners.

From the above presentation and evaluation of the textbook, we can state that this book has a lot of strengths which lie on the fact that it trains students to develop the necessary reading skills through clear and insightful explanations about the involved skills and the necessary directions of how to use the tasks to achieve this purpose.

The perspective of reading adopted in this book focuses on the cognitive processes and the reading principles established by specialist linguists. It teaches students “to learn to read by reading” and adopts an interactive perspective.

The minor weaknesses briefly mentioned earlier are minimal. What is most significant is that it responds to students’ needs in content (topics) and skills: how to help students become successful readers and learners.

Once students have acquired reading skills, reading becomes their basic means for language development as some reading researchers (such as Krashen, 1986) consider reading as the most important component of language skills.

The most successful result in developing language skills and reading skills for teachers is when students are ‘trained’ to learn, acquire language and information on their own and as the following anaphorism states: students have to learn to say: “give me fish and I eat for a day, teach me to fish, and I eat for a life time”; and because this book teaches how to do this with reading, it certainly is a very useful textbook to use with EF /ESL students to develop reading skills.

References

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