

Book Review Section

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Pyramid

Mary Bowen, Printha Ellis and Len Peterson. 1994. Macmillan Press, LTD. 111 pp. (Series includes a pupil's book and workbook for the six levels of the course plus the teacher's book and cassettes)

Reviewed by Veronica Cordero

In keeping pace with the latest methodologies and theories, mainly the communicative approach, children's ESL books are not far behind. There seems to exist a pressing need to incorporate all novelty so as to come out ahead in the book publishing competition.

Macmillan has turned out yet another ESL six-level children's series called *Pyramid*. It consists of six books and workbooks, teacher's book and cassettes. I had the opportunity of viewing only the first two levels of the book and workbook. They are designed to introduce American English to primary students.

The book is organized into units, each one introducing a new structure. They do so via a combination of ...listen and read, sing and ask/answer activities. At the back is an attractive *word list* in which vocabulary is presented by category with accompanying pictures.

The workbook supplements exercises for each unit along with many fun activities children would surely enjoy. The series name is indicative of its organization of the material: a building upon structures in keeping with how language is acquired.

The grammatical structures begin with the introductions using the verb BE and ascend in difficulty. Book One introduces the modal *can* and auxiliaries *do* and *does*.

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Each unit introduces new structures with a song and later reinforces them with basic repetition of simple questions and answers promoting their use.

One of the series' merits is its visual appeal. The illustrations are brilliant and colorful--a child incentive Macmillan has taken full advantage of. The figures and characters (fantasy animals, humourous extraterrestials) will surely receive the approval of the most discerning child's need for visual stimulus.

Conceptually the series is noteworthy, particularly in regard to the notion of the *pyramid* use of songs which reinforce retention and the interesting activities. However, in the two levels reviewed here, the structures are presented too quickly: introductions, alphabet, colors, numbers, and a lot of new vocabulary as well as formulation of different kinds of questions in the first two units alone. The quick succession is bound to prevent thorough understanding. In addition, neither the book nor the workbook provide sufficient exercises for practicing the target structures. The activities, however fun they may be, do not aid in reinforcing the concepts. Also, there are few opportunities for practicing writing.

While the series claims to offer student activities and exercises which are student-centered, task-based, and which teach the basic functions, I find that its format fails to provide a truly communicative experience for children. In many cases, the vocabulary is introduced by a song followed by a short exercise where the student simply repeats the phrases. When a question is asked, the answer is already given. Students are not given many opportunities to create with the language, test themselves, or communicate amongst themselves.

In sum, the choice of material, its contextual presentation and visual appeal are the merits of the Pyramid Series. However, the weaknesses mentioned above would require an inordinate amount of teacher preparation in order to adequately introduce and reinforce concepts.