

BOOK REVIEWS

READING AND THINKING IN ENGLISH. The British Council, María Mercedes Molina L., Teresa Munevar M., Dora Bunnet de Salgado, John Moore. Edited by H. Widdowson. Oxford University Press. 1979.

The ability to read English prose of an academic, scientific, or technical nature rates high on the list of foreign language needs for many Mexican students. The last few years, particularly with the rise to prominence of ESP, have witnessed the appearance of a growing body of course materials aimed primarily at helping students acquire the skills needed to deal with such types of written discourse. Nevertheless, the growth in quantity and availability of ESP reading materials has rarely been matched by increasing quality or appropriateness. The publication of Reading and Thinking in English takes a major step in that direction. Not only does it promise to be the first truly comprehensive course (i.e. taking the student from near beginner through to an advanced level), but it represents a significant advance in terms of incorporating what is presently known about the reading process and the nature of written discourse within a solid pedagogical framework.

Originally developed by a team of teachers at the University of Los Andes in Bogotá, the course was later revised and expanded by two members of that team under the general editorship of Henry Widdowson. Of the series of four, three books: Concepts in Use, the first, Exploring Functions, the second, and the third, Discovering Discourse, with their respective teachers' editions are presently available.

*The other book in the series, No. 4 Discourse in Action, will be published by the end of this year.

Reading and Thinking in English is intended for use by pre-university, university, and professional students who need to handle written English for their studies or work. Each book contains work to cover about 60 class periods of 50 minutes, with 20 homework assignments, so that the entire course can be covered in four semesters. The teachers' editions provide ample guidance as to the philosophy behind the course and the

exercises, as well as methodological suggestions which are clear and useful without overly restricting individual teaching styles. The series can be used with large or small groups and specific suggestions as to classroom management for each activity are included. A nice "extra" is the recommended bibliography for teachers who may wish to extend their understanding of the theoretical foundations of the course.

The materials are based on a functional approach whereby the formal devices of language are treated in terms of their relation to discoursal or communicative properties. That is, use takes precedence over usage, function over form. The first unit in each book is devoted to orienting the student by making explicit the basic properties of written discourse he or she will need to be aware of, as well as the strategies which will be developed throughout the course. For example, Unit 1 of Exploring Functions introduces the student to the relationship between grammar and communicative function, presents two different reading strategies, and looks at the organization of information in written passages. In the following units the students develop this awareness and practice these strategies by looking at how concepts are expressed in such functions of discourse as following instructions, describing, generalizing, making comparisons, etc.

While the topics of the readings have been chosen to appeal to a wide range of academic interests, one might question whether in fact the content is sufficiently challenging or stimulating for advanced university or post-graduate level professionals. However, as the authors themselves point out, the course is aimed at establishing "a basic reading competence which can then be brought into more specific focus as it is applied to more specialist uses of English". The texts are adapted according to Widdowson's philosophy of "gradual approximation", and the longest continuous text in Discovering Discourse is about 1666 words. One would hope, however, that by the time the students reach the last book in the series they will be presented with authentic texts, as bridging the gap between simplified and authentic discourse is perhaps the most difficult step in designing a reading comprehension course.

The exercises and activities involving or based on the readings are pertinent and varied, taking into account such aspects of the reading process as predicting, hypothesis forming, and getting at meaning through context. Study

skills such as note taking, summary writing, etc. are presented as reinforcement for the reading process. An awareness of the need to exploit or develop different levels of cognitive skills is also evident in exercises which range from extracting explicit information to inferring, criticizing, and evaluating.

It should probably be mentioned that while review chapters are included in each of the books, there are no "evaluation" sections per se for those who work in institutions where formal examinations are required. While the designing and administering of tests is specified as properly part of the teacher's role, this remains a formidable task given the fact that "objective" testing of reading comprehension is as yet a highly speculative area and may actually be impossible if, as Halliday claims, meaning is to be found in the mind of the reader and not on the written page. Likewise, while the authors claim that each of the books may be used separately, they provide no placement tests which would facilitate the integration of intermediate or advanced students should an institution wish to adopt the course. A final question has to do with the claim that the teacher's editions could be used by the learners in a self-study program. It would seem that at least periodic access to a tutor would be necessary to assure that the learner fully understood the what and why of the tasks involved.

Of course, any final judgement of these materials must await not only publication of the complete series, but the results obtained from actual classroom use within the Mexican context. Nevertheless, Reading and Thinking in English looks to be one of the best risks a groping teacher could take!

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