

BOOK REVIEWS

NEW ENGLISH 900

Mary Hines, Editor

Collier Macmillan International, New York. 1977 (Books 1 & 2)
1978 (Books 3 - 6)

A recently-published series from Collier Macmillan is both a delight and a disappointment. It is New English 900, the up-dated version of the original English 900 first published in 1965.

The new series is attractively presented in six basic textbooks with accompanying workbooks, teacher's manuals, and tapes. The drawings in each text are realistic and illustrate the dialogues and readings. The type and layout are clear and easy-to-read.

As to content, this is a structural syllabus. As such, each lesson deals with a particular grammar point- one of the 900 base sentences. Two lessons comprise each unit; all units have an identical organization. A lesson starts with a dialogue followed by a grammatical preview, substitution drills, connected drills, and "exercises" (more mechanical drills). Periodically, a unit is dedicated to reading and "refocus" which is a section explaining minor grammatical and stylistic points. Skill development in listening, speaking, reading, and writing is secondary.

The workbooks have the same structural focus but also include some pronunciation, vocabulary, and spelling activities. Likewise, the tapes continue with the same emphasis on structure and actually follow the textbooks word-for-word with time provided for student repetition and manipulation of the exercises. No provision is made for listening comprehension practice though the recordings do provide models of native American English speakers.

The teacher's manuals reproduce each student text and include detailed, tightly organized lesson plans. The "presentation" sections have analytical grammatical explanations which seem to be more benefit to teachers than to students. Few contextualized presentations are suggested outside of the opening dialogue of each lesson. The cultural notes and expressions explained in the teacher's manuals refer to the dialogues and readings and are interesting and especially worthwhile for the non-native teacher.

While all structures are initially presented within natural contexts (in the dialogues), the drills lack contextualization. This goes against recently developed and accepted classroom techniques which stress meaningful communication while learning. In addition, all the drills are mechanical and definitely need to be supplemented by more meaningful activities.

All of the exercises very clearly reflect the philosophy of language teaching and learning so popular in the 1950's and 60's--Skinnerian Behavioristic Psychology and Audio-Lingual Methodology. The focus is on the manipulation of language patterns in "pattern practice drills", and this presents the biggest disappointment and weakness of this new series.

If the practices are the weakness, the dialogues are the strength. They are lively and interesting. The language is natural, and the characters have personalities. A realistic story line with New York and the World's Fair as the backdrop run throughout the six books. This plot involves pleasant as well as rather unpleasant, but universal, situations such as divorce, jealousy, and alienation. Much could be done with these dialogues in terms of role play, discussion topics, and the analysis of functions and interpersonal relations. Yet the teacher needs to supply these extension activities since the book does not suggest them.

The readings are also interesting and natural. The comprehension questions do go beyond the mechanical level in asking for inferences and opinions. These readings and their exercises are another strength of the series.

In summary, the serious weaknesses of New English 900 are the lack of meaningful, contextualized exercises, the lack of expansion activities, the shortage of skill development exercises, and the conservative handling of a structural text. The strengths lie in the dialogues, readings, and the reading comprehension sections as well as in the completeness of the program in terms of number of books and support materials. Even less-experienced teachers could teach a fairly effective structural course using this series; however, much more planning and supplementing would be necessary for a course emphasizing communication and meaningful use of language.

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