BOOK REVIEW


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Lorraine C. Smith and Nancy Nici Mare's Insights for Today provides high-beginning ESL/EFL students with essential practice for improving their reading skills. To do this, the book presents the well-organized framework that includes sophisticated pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities on the various topics. The diverse topics of the book might be practical information for students in the real world. It is another excellent aspect of the book that it grants internet activities designed to encourage students to learn more about the topic they have read out of class.

I don't think the authors adopted any specific teaching approaches or methods in writing the book. I think they organized the framework of the book for practical use in ESL/EFL classes. The authors might intend to show a model of teaching reading based on their teaching experience. One distinctive thing I noted is that the authors designed the book using a bottom-up model of reading. Different exercises in the book illustrate how a bottom-up model of reading promotes comprehending the text. Brown (1994, p. 246) states "bottom-up processing proceeds from sounds to words to grammatical relationships to lexical meanings, etc., to a final message." Using bottom-up activities, students can learn vocabulary, grammar, and reading skills section by section, and could be able to arrive at the general comprehension of the text. For example, students get main points of the text through Fact-Finding Exercise, find a main idea and the content of text through Reading Analysis, and learn new vocabulary through Dictionary Skills. Working with these sections, students can connect different text elements and draw a general picture of the text.
The book is made up of six units that have two chapters respectively: *Today's Travelers, Family Life, Technology in Our Everyday Lives, Healthy Living, International Scientists,* and *The Earth's Resources and Dangers.* At the end of each unit, three more sections are added: *Discussion, Video Report* that includes CNN video clips on the theme of each unit, and *Surfing the Internet* that encourages students to learn more about the topic they have read. Each chapter contains *Pre-reading Preparation, Reading Passages, Fact-Finding Exercise, Skimming and Scanning Exercise, Reading Analysis, Think about it, Dictionary Skills, Word Forms, Another Look, Follow-up Activities, Topics for Discussion and Writing, Word Search, Crossword Puzzle,* and *Grammar Cloze Quiz.* Following each section, students are able to practice writing, speaking, and listening as well as reading. Through *Think about it, Topics for Discussion and Discussion* and *Follow-up Activities,* students have opportunities to write and make interactions in English. Based on the linguistic and technical information that students learned in each chapter, they listen to a CNN report at the end of each unit.

For understanding the structure of the book in detail, chapter 4, *The Search for Happiness through Adoption,* could be taken as an example. After brainstorming on the topic of adoption, students read the main text. For comprehension check-up, students are told to read statements and check whether they are true or false. The next section is on reading skills. Using skimming or scanning skills, students answer several questions. After practicing reading skills, students find the main idea and details of the text. An activity that provides students with an opportunity to develop critical thinking skills comes next, and the activity is followed by vocabulary and grammar learning sections. As follow-up activities, additional reading text that is related with the topic of the chapter are given. Finally discussion and writing tasks are presented.

As I mentioned above, the book is constructed with three stages of reading: pre-reading, during reading, post-reading. Cao (2008, p. 46) suggests "the aims of the pre-reading phase are three-fold: (a) arousing the students' interest in the topic or type of text; (b) motivating students to read the text by providing a purpose for reading; (c) activating students' existing background knowledge in relation to the topic and getting familiar with some language in the text." While-reading skills could be skimming, scanning, reading for details, and drawing author's purpose, and in post-reading activities students check and discuss what they did while-reading.
and use what they learned for meaningful purpose (Cao, 2008). As a pre-reading activity, the book activates background knowledge with Prereading Preparation. Fact-Finding Exercise, Skimming and Scanning Exercise; and Reading Analysis can be while-reading activities. In post-reading activities, students make use of what they learned in the sections of Think about it, Word Forms, Another Look, Follow-up Activities, and Topics for Discussion and Writing. Those different activities can help students build up abilities to understand the text.

One conspicuous characteristic of the book is that the authors lay emphasis on explicit learning. Hulstijn (2005, p. 131) suggests that "explicit learning is input processing with the conscious intention to find out whether the input information contains regularities and, if so, to work out the concepts and rules with which these regularities can be captured." Following different exercises and activities such as Reading Analysis, Dictionary Skills, Crossword Puzzle, and Word Search, students can learn vocabulary and phrases’ meaning in context explicitly. Grammar and reading skills are also presented explicitly under the section titles of Word Forms, Grammar Close Quiz and Skimming and Scanning Exercise. The authors intend to develop students’ reading skills and English proficiency skills by letting them analyze text explicitly and by giving them information of regularities. I think explicit instruction that the authors use is especially effective for EFL students who are exposed to the target language for a limited time.

It appears that the authors used form-focused instruction in most of sections. Ellis (2001, pp. 1–2) suggests “the term form–focused instruction (FFT) is used to refer to any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form.” The authors let students pay attention to vocabulary and grammar. Much of the vocabulary is recycled throughout each chapter and grammar is presented under the tile of Grammar Cloze Quiz. The authors say that “Experience has shown that low level students especially need a lot of exposure to the same vocabulary and word forms. Repetition of vocabulary in varied contexts helps the students not only understand the new vocabulary better, but also help them remember it” (p. viii). I absolutely agree with that. For EFL students whose main source of input is reading, vocabulary and grammar is very important to make sense of text. More often than not, meaning–focused instruction and encouraging implicit learning are time consuming and ineffective ways to teach for EFL learners who have only several
hours of language class in a week as main source of input and almost only chance of output.

In general, the book concentrates on analyzing the text and offers a lot of opportunities to learn vocabulary and grammar. Although the exercises are necessary for ESL/EFL students to develop language proficiency, more activities that allow students to become engaged in interaction are needed. Gass and Mackey (2007, p. 176) states “the interaction approach attempts to account for learning through the learner’s exposure to language, production of language, and feedback on that production.” In the sections like Topics for Discussion and Writing, students are able to interact in pairs or in small groups using the information and vocabulary from the text, but the book has few activities that encourage interactions. If the authors had added some activities that make students interact such as information gap activity, the book could have been more communicative and interactive.

The book has excellent pre-reading and post-reading activities, but more while reading activities need to be built up. While reading, students guess the meaning of words or phrases from context and use some strategies to make up failure in understanding. Hong-Nam and Leavella (2006, p. 400) suggest “learning strategies, therefore, not only help learners become efficient in learning and using a language, but also contribute to increasing learners’ self-directed learning.” As students practice a wide range of learning strategies, they come to know how to learn by themselves.

Although explicit teaching increases students’ attention to the linguistic features in a highly organized setting, implicit teaching can allow students to figure out rules by themselves instead of memorizing rules. The book could present grammatical points implicitly in the stage of while reading, depending on the topics. For example, in the chapter of A Family Sees America Together, past tense could be introduced implicitly through input flooding. The past tense presented more dominantly, students could learn the use of past tense form implicitly while reading the text.

Despite its limitations, the book is still one of best books for EFL students that I have ever read. I think the authors know what is needed for high-beginning students to improve their English proficiency. Depending on the class environment, teachers can choose some sections and customize the book for their purposes.
would like to recommend the book for high-beginning or low-intermediate students.

REFERENCES


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