Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

How to Teach English: An Introduction to the Practice of English Language Teaching.

Jeremy Harmer

Addison Wesley Longman, Harlow, UK, 1998

198 pages

This text offers an introduction to the teaching of English to speakers of other languages, with special emphasis on adult learners. There are 13 chapters: four introducing fundamental concepts about teaching and learning, two looking at language and the pedagogy of language features, one each on the four basic skills, two addressing textbooks and lessons plans, and one final discussion of a range of problem-solution scenarios plausibly relevant to the predictable concerns of novice teachers.

Experienced teachers will doubtless find much to approve in Harmer's advice for beginners. I especially appreciate his encouragement regarding reflective and professional teaching practices: for example, his treatment of such classic dilemmas as the tension between demands for conscientious planning but also for flexibility (pp. 5-6 and then Chapter 12). Similarly, he offers a thoughtful overview of the differences between teaching children and teaching adults (Chapter 2). Throughout he gently but persistently promotes self-awareness: for example, "variety is not the same as anarchy" (p. 5); if a problem arises, "good teachers know what's going wrong ... and how to correct it" (p. 34); and above all, his persuasive argument that effective teaching depends on "overall aims and objectives" as well as "one-off" brilliance (p. 125). Although the book has no substantial section devoted to what is explicitly termed reflective teaching, Harmer plainly focuses on the need for teachers to be not only friendly and creative, but also analytical and self-critical. And in Appendix B, "Notes and Further Reading," he extends that theme by listing not only chapter-by-chapter references, but also information on IATEFL and TESOL (but not TESL Canada) along with several well-chosen journals and World Wide Web resources. Overall, readers may be expected to come away from this book with at least a nascent commitment to lifelong professional development in the TESL/TEFL community, which can only be good.

Still, it is a little difficult to determine exactly who these readers are. In his Introduction, Harmer describes the book as "designed for people ... at the stage where they are just about to do—or have just done—an initial teacher training course" (p. ix), surely a diverse audience. Novice teachers who had

just completed, for example, the TESL Certificate at Brock University would learn little, if anything, from this book, although they might well judge it a valuable handbook-cum-refresher to take with them to their first job. On the other hand, those with no training at all could probably learn quite a lot, but I suspect most of that group would find it difficult to make real sense of the 42-page Task File of example materials near the end of the book, illustrating each of the prior chapters. Of course the Task File section could prove handy if the book were used as the text in an introductory TESL/TEFL course, but then the extremely broad-but-thin nature of the other chapters could be problematic.

At least in North America, my intuition is that the content and level of this book might be most suitable for the growing contingent of energetic retirees now taking an interest in volunteer or semi-volunteer work in ESL or EFL at home or abroad. Especially for members of that group who are teachers with experience in other subject areas, the book could provide an excellent introduction to (a) methods and issues specific to teaching English to speakers of other languages, (b) adult- rather than child-oriented pedagogy, and (c) current educational trends and debates that will in many respects be different from what was recommended 20 or 30 years ago. I could even see the book as a serviceable text in a short career-transition course for such candidates. Although I am certain that most teacher educators would quail at the thought of anyone's entering the profession prepared only by an individual reading of this book, as experienced and authoritative as Harmer is, *How to Teach English* could well be satisfactory when used in the context of such a short course enriched by lectures, discussions, and practical work.

John Sivell

Focusing on IELTS: Reading and Writing Skills

Kerry O'Sullivan and Jeremy Lindeck

National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research, Sydney,
Australia, 2000

139 pages (order from: <http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/publications/>)

Focusing on IELTS: Reading and Writing Skills offers excellent test-taking strategies and practice exercises for both the General and Academic IELTS tests. If its companion volume *Focusing on IELTS: Listening and Speaking Skills* is the same caliber publication, these books together will provide thorough preparation for any test-taker.

IELTS—International English Language Testing System—is a popular English language proficiency exam that tests reading, writing, listening, and speaking. There are two versions of the test: Academic, which can qualify students for university entrance; and General, which can aid immigration.

The speaking and listening components are the same for both Academic and General, but the reading and writing tasks are different.

Focusing on IELTS: Reading and Writing Skills devotes half its space to reading skills, half to writing. The authors carefully indicate whether the tips and practice are for the General or Academic test or useful for both. The book includes a guide to using the book, a summary of exercises that gives the aim of each exercise (skimming, scanning, describing trends, etc.), and an answer key. Each section includes a valuable self-study program. At the end of the reading section are two practice reading tests, one General and one Academic. After the writing section are two writing tests, and again one is General and one Academic. Model essay answers are included in the answer key.

Tips, strategies, skills, practice: these are titles for various chapters, but altogether they provide the student with successful techniques to achieve a good IELTS score. The student must develop speed-reading skills, reading the questions first, then locating the relevant sentences in the passage, then answering the questions. How to do this when faced with unfamiliar vocabulary? Students learn to identify definitions and synonyms in the reading passage; they learn effective guessing skills. The authors claim that students need to know 50% of the vocabulary in a reading passage in order to understand the main points. Suggestions for learning vocabulary are written out clearly for students to understand: look up only those words that are potentially useful; use an English-English dictionary; know approximate meanings.

Each of the various kinds of IELTS questions is examined: multiple-choice, gap-fill, short-answer, matching, true-false-not given, assigning headings, chart filling. Excellent guidelines show how to distinguish "not given" from "false," always a confusing problem for students. Lengthy sections teach how to understand the writer's viewpoint and identify causes and effects, two crucial skills in evaluating the reading passage. IELTS questions require evaluation, not just understanding. For these reasons, IELTS reading is also useful for any academic ESL student.

The writing section is also well organized and filled with skill-enhancing information. There are two tasks in the IELTS writing test. Task 1 is either a letter (General) or a description of a chart, graph, or process (Academic) in 150 words. Task 2 is an essay of 250 words on a topic such as the advantages and disadvantages of cloning humans (General) or agreeing or disagreeing that space exploration is the answer to overpopulation (Academic). The authors share advice on using cohesive devices, organization and development, and essay form. Instruction is also given on stating a viewpoint and writing organized paragraphs.

The authors have a thorough understanding of the IELTS test and what students need to know and practice in order to succeed in the test. O'Sullivan and Lindeck have both published other IELTS books, but *Focusing on IELTS: Reading and Writing Skills* far surpasses their other titles. This book, combined with its companion volume and any book of practice tests, is an excellent resource for sincere IELTS students and enthusiastic teachers. The only disadvantage of this book is that students will not benefit from one third of it; usually students study for either the General or the Academic test, not both. The most cost-effective IELTS books are those with all the components of the Academic test or the General test only.

Well organized and thorough, *Focusing on IELTS: Reading and Writing Skills* is an invaluable book for any IELTS student or teacher, but also for any academically inclined or advanced-level student. The book's reading and writing strategies consolidate the advice reiterated by many ESL teachers into one useful package.

Ellen Pilon