
Reviews/Comptes rendus

The World Around Us: Canadian Social Issues for ESL Students

Christine Hoppenrath and Wendy Royal

Harcourt Brace & Company, Canada, 1997

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The World Around Us: Canadian Social Issues for ESL Students grew out of the idea that motivation is the key to successful language learning and that "motivation comes from work that is interesting and relevant" (p. v). It comprises a variety of articles from Canadian and United States books, newspapers and magazines. What constitutes the content of these articles are contemporary issues many ESL students feel intrigued by and want to find out more about. These issues, as many ESL teachers know, often include such problems as intercultural marriages, poverty in Canada, crime, and euthanasia. The book results from its authors' many years of classroom experience teaching English through social issues.

Aimed at intermediate to advanced students, the book is divided into 10 chapters, as well as introductory and review chapters. Each chapter is divided into three sections: background knowledge, new information, and reflections. The "Background Knowledge" section activates the learners' prior knowledge on a given topic, allows them to talk about a social issue from the perspective of their experiences, and prepares them for new information. Consequently, each chapter offers students the opportunity to participate in cross-cultural comparisons. In the section entitled "New Information," students read three to five articles, which are followed by vocabulary exercises and a variety of communicative activities such as discussions, surveys, debates, and contact assignments. The "Reflections" section provides vocabulary games and reviews and a grid, "Keeping up with the News," which will help students follow the issue in the media.

Each chapter begins with a well-chosen picture that is relevant to the issue to be discussed. The picture stimulates the learners' imagination and engages them in discussions. Each chapter ends with a reminder to the students to keep journals and write about issues they found particularly interesting. As its authors indicate, "The book provides an integrated approach to developing all four language skills ... with an emphasis on speaking" (p. vi). It requires a student-centered, communicative approach to teaching and encourages active student participation.

The introductory chapter begins with communicative activities students can get involved in during the first day in a new class and reviews a number of useful expressions that will facilitate conversations. Students at this point review gambits for agreeing and disagreeing, expressing opinions, interrupting, and closing a conversation. The chapter also offers helpful hints for improving the learner's vocabulary, presents an alphabetical list of prefixes and suffixes, and guidelines for oral presentations and student participation in class.

In Chapter 1, devoted to family issues, students are asked to discuss a variety of issues ranging from dating customs and common-law relationships in their cultures to adoption and working mothers. The reading section includes articles on intercultural marriage, the right of same-sex couples to raise children, and divorce. Chapter 2 discusses problems of today's youth: school violence, youth unemployment, and drug addiction.

Chapter 3, focusing on educational issues, talks about schooling in a multicultural society, co-ed versus single-sex schools, and declining educational standards in Canada. The selection of articles in this chapter is disappointing. Superficial in their analysis and gossipy in tone, the readings tend to confuse the issues, particularly with regard to declining educational standards; for instance, an informative reading on a Canadian educational success story—French Immersion—could have provided more balanced content.

Chapter 4 deals with crime and sets the scene for an all-time favorite student debate: the death penalty. In Chapter 5, students consider the moral questions surrounding euthanasia. Here they examine a number of cases including those of Nancy B. and Sue Rodriguez. At the end of this chapter, the mid-point in the text, students are assigned an oral report on a social issue of their choice. More moral dilemmas come in Chapter 6, focusing on pro-choice and pro-life issues.

The problem of AIDS is discussed in Chapter 7. Students read the diary of Dr. Peter, a Vancouver doctor and AIDS patient who meticulously and with great insight documented his own fatal struggle with AIDS. Students also deal with issues surrounding the contamination of Canada's blood supply in recent years. In Chapter 8 the discussion focuses on urban problems such as panhandling, pollution, and animals in captivity. Readings in this section include an article from *Change*, a newspaper written and published by street people in Vancouver.

In Chapter 9 learners reflect on the power of the media to influence and form public opinion, compare different forms of advertising, and discuss the problem of violence on television. An issue that could have been included in this chapter is that of the Internet and its impact on many aspects of social life.

Chapter 10, entitled "Into the 21st Century," discusses the issues of generational conflict and presents a prognosis for Canadian youth. This chapter also includes two different forecasts for the planet, one optimistic and the other pessimistic, together aimed at stimulating student debate.

"Pulling It All Together," the final chapter, contains vocabulary exercises and reviews the content of the whole text through quizzes and games.

Because the chapters in the book do not have to be followed in any particular order, a teacher using this book might consider starting with Chapter 9, which deals with media bias and distorted portrayal of reality, before learners start discussing other issues. Such order would allow the learners to reflect critically on the articles included in this textbook. Both students and teachers must be aware that most of the articles in the book have been reprinted from the Canadian popular press (e.g., the *Vancouver Sun*, *Maclean's Magazine*, and *Chatelaine*), and are at times heavily biased. Both students and teachers must appreciate that such publications do not present only facts but also the common opinions and beliefs of the readership about the reality in which they live. In my opinion, the book would have been more intellectually stimulating for students if some of the readings had been taken from more reliable sources.

This criticism aside, however, the book is well organized, clearly laid out, and user-friendly. Its learning objectives are explicitly stated and followed through. Students should find the discussions, surveys, debates, and interviews stimulating. A conversation course based on this textbook may not only improve the learners' vocabulary, fluency, and listening skills but might, as the authors surmise, also encourage them to think more critically, form opinions, find solutions to problems, and speak out.

For teachers, *The World Around Us* offers a useful tool for teaching interesting conversation classes without the necessity of spending long hours selecting articles from the press and developing accompanying activities. Consequently, instructors should be able to devote more time to other preparatory work such as planning supplementary activities, selecting useful video materials, and inviting guest speakers.

Kris Mirski

The Reviewer

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Reflecting on Writing: Composing in English for ESL Students in Canada¹

Ernest Hall and Carrie S.Y. Jung

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Relentless optimism in the face of evidence to the contrary may not be considered a mark of intelligence, but it emerges as a pattern for many teachers at the start of a course for which we have selected the text ourselves. Having scanned the publishers' displays and catalogues, we are convinced we finally have just the right book to solve all our problems. By week two, we wonder whatever possessed us to purchase this useless compendium of trash. But relentless optimism keeps us searching and sometimes pays off. For some writing teachers, the search may be over once they encounter *Reflecting on Writing* by Ernest Hall and Carrie Jung.

Both authors have had many years of experience teaching writing to ESL students in Canada and abroad, and one is a former journalist. It is not surprising, then, that one of the outstanding virtues of this text is that the writing techniques and strategies suggested are based on how real writers write, not on how writing is described in books. The pragmatic underpinnings of the text lead to two features that distinguish this book from others in the genre: students learn that their desire to produce a perfect draft in one shot is simply unrealistic because writing is a process, and a process takes place over time. Second, students learn to write their essays from the inside out, beginning with the heart of the material rather than the with the initial introductory handshake. Encouraging students to go directly to the body of the essay results in essays that have substance. It also improves success in timed writing, preventing students from writing lengthy, ill-conceived introductions that are followed by ever-shrinking paragraphs eventually trailing off into nothing.

The text is divided into 10 chapters, but it is highly unlikely that the book could be covered in 10 weeks. The authors are aware of this and have organized the material so that up to a third can be omitted, and yet the student will have visited all 10 chapters, a practical concern that prevents students from complaining, justifiably, that they were asked to purchase a text but didn't finish it in the course. Because the text has three clearly identified foci—composing, composition, and language—presented in an attractive and easy-to-follow layout, the teacher can quickly select from the text what is suitable for the particular group being taught. It is possible to use the text without working through the readings or the grammar exercises and still present a coherent course.

Each chapter begins with pre-reading questions, a reading passage (ranging in length from 800 to 2,000 words), vocabulary activities such as clozes

and crosswords, comprehension questions, and topics for discussion. The rest of the chapter consists of one or more sections entitled "composing" and "composition." The composing sections deal with techniques of writing that students may use in order to help them analyze and revise their own writing both in the course and beyond. One such technique is that of "unwriting," an effective method for both student and instructor to look at content without the distraction of grammar errors. In unwriting, students list all sentences in a paragraph divided into topic (e.g., "Eduardo") and comment ("likes gardening"). Students can easily see what is needed to provide connecting material and whether one or more controlling ideas appear in the paragraph. The composition sections consider the standard rhetorical methods of comparison, contrast, process development, and so on, but also include techniques such as profiling, where students create a visual design that illustrates the relationships of sentences to one another in a paragraph. The third focus is on language encompassing grammatical concerns particularly in relation to issues of unity and coherence. Finally, students are asked to write a "learning record" of the chapter just completed, an effective and indirect way of encouraging review and reflection, helping students to feel pleased with their progress and highlighting for them (and for the instructor) areas that might need further examination.

The reading passages need special comment. All are concerned with writing in a cultural/sociological/anthropological context as is apparent from the titles: *How Writing Has Shaped Human History*, *The Origins of Writing*, *The World's Writing Systems*, *Recording Information in Non-literate Societies*, and other intriguing topics. They are provocative essays that encourage reflecting on writing as a cultural phenomenon. The diction and syntax in these passages is at a higher level than that found in the rest of the book, and because of this, some instructors may feel that the text is too difficult for intermediate students. However, the tone created by the readings sets this text apart from others in the genre of texts designed to introduce techniques of academic-professional writing to intermediate students. Because so many texts focus on simplified narrative and descriptive writing as well as student-generated material, learners may feel as if they are being talked down to or that what they are being taught is not relevant to their needs. Such is not the case with *Reflections on Writing*. The reading passages and pre-reading questions in this text are wholly appropriate for adult learners. In addition to providing a good source of academic vocabulary and models of academic discourse, the readings encourage students to reflect on their own experience as well as challenging them to venture into epistemological concerns and to engage in contrastive analysis of writing in their native language and in English. In so doing, the reading selections take into account that in adult language learning, receptive skills are generally more fully developed than productive skills. In the event of a particularly low intermediate class, however, the

reading sections can be omitted without interfering with the composing or composition tasks.

A series of tasks and writing assignments allows students to work together in learning the techniques of writing. The tasks generally allow students to put into practice something they have just read, applying it not to comprehension questions but to their own writing. The text encourages revising, as tasks direct students to return to previous drafts and make specific adjustments to them. For example, after students have written a paragraph about a place to relax, they are asked to make an idea bank (a brainstorming activity students learned earlier) and to perform this activity in the format of a chart asking for sights, sounds, smells, and feelings. No matter how advanced or experienced a writer the student might be, the chart stimulates trains of thought that provide material for development as well as creating new perspectives on the place under discussion. Students are thus learning not only a strategy for developing a writing passage, but a way of analyzing experience.

The text is structured so that students usually have two or three drafts of different writing projects going at the same time. The tasks allow students to leave one draft for some time to work on another. This helps prevent boredom caused by working on something too long and encourages students to think of writing as something always subject to revision based on the writer's new experiences and knowledge.

Constructivism is a word used frequently in discussing collaborative or communicative activities, but it is not often that one finds any more than a vague nod to the concept of students constructing their own learning. But the well-timed return to the same projects throughout this text does allow students to construct their own learning. The tasks and writing activities make it possible to wean students from their dependence on teacher correction, with primary attention to grammar that so often interferes with the attention that needs to be given to development, organization, coherence, and unity on a discourse level beyond sentence grammar.

This is not to say the book is flawless. Some tasks seem quite beyond the students' capabilities. As an example, part of a task devoted to demonstrating the movement from general to more detailed statements asks students to rank the following: "China has a rich tradition of folklore and myths"; "Chinese folktales often teach a lesson about people's relationships or about life"; "Some Chinese folktales can be found in Japanese or Korean storytelling traditions as well." Although finding the most general statement is not a problem, ranking the others is. The Teacher's Manual remarks on this exercise, "Answers may vary depending on the topic content. This potential for variation should be discussed." Although such discussion may be appropriate for an advanced class, it would be beyond most intermediate classes whose listening and speaking skills are also intermediate. Nevertheless,

given the vast array of tasks that are wholly suited to both the students' interests and the demands of academic discourse, the few tasks that seem to miss their mark are negligible.

The authors suggest their text is intended for intermediate to advanced students. Although parts of the text may be useful to advanced students (including native speakers of English), students are not asked to write an essay until Chapter Five; all previous work involves unity and coherence of single paragraphs. Some advanced students may be disgruntled by the amount of time given to working on individual paragraphs. I would recommend the text for an intermediate class of students working toward entrance into an academic or professional setting that requires writing in English.

In addition to helping students develop strategies that will serve them well in future writing tasks, this text conveys a refreshing respect and enthusiasm for the act of writing. In musical circles, conductors often exhort the musicians to "stop reading the notes and get the music off the page." Hall and Jung have managed to take writing "off the page" and display it as an interactive, invigorating process. This spirit, combined with the ingenuity and practicality of the tasks and suggestions, make this a remarkable and useful resource for the writing teacher.

Barbara Siennicki

Note

¹The review of this work was edited by Pat Mathews.

The Reviewer

An ESL instructor for the past 10 years, Barbara Siennicki has taught writing to native and non-native speakers of English at the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria. Her writing has been published in *Harrowsmith Magazine*, *Quarry*, and the *Kingston Whig-Standard* under the name Barbara Keane.

The Write Way: Composition Skills for ESL Learners

Sarah V. Bowers and Maggie Warbey

Harcourt Brace & Company, Canada, 1997, ISBN 0-7747-3298-9, 102 pages

When I first picked up *The Write Way*, I thought it looked like every other student composition book. However, as I started to read through it, I was pleasantly surprised. This book has been carefully organized and thoughtfully written. It contains a step-by-step approach to written composition, from defining the topic to revising and proofreading.

The preface states that the text was designed for students at a beginning or preparatory university level. The vocabulary, especially that referring to aspects of writing and the writing process, is quite sophisticated, whereas the sentence structure is kept relatively uncomplicated. I would think students would need to be close to a beginning university level to comprehend the

text without a good deal of help from their teachers. It might be a useful text for native speakers who wish to hone their writing skills, but I would recommend ESL students not try to tackle the text without benefit of an instructor and other classmates. The book is consumable, but the exercises could be written on notepaper, allowing the text to be used again.

The Write Way is organized into seven chapters. The first deals with prewriting strategies, beginning with the all-too-overlooked first step of defining the topic. A number of dictionary activities teach students to ponder more than one meaning of the main words in the topic. Brainstorming is suggested after students paraphrase and ask questions about the topic. Then students are shown how to organize and group their ideas.

The second chapter breaks down the organization of the paragraph into topic sentences and supporting details, and the third deals with the essay form. The essay is compared to the paragraph and is considered to be a similar but extended form. Considerable attention is also paid, in both chapters, to transition structures and ways of connecting ideas. The following three chapters deal with various rhetorical types of essay writing. Chapter four is devoted to narration and description, chapter five to illustration and comparison and contrast, and chapter six to instructions and process description.

Cause and effect are not included. Neither is expository writing. Finally, chapter seven deals, rather summarily in my view, with revising and proofreading. Although revising and proofreading are two of the most important aspects of the writing process, chapter seven is only three and a half pages long. Students are given a checklist of questions to ask themselves about the organization and development of their composition, but little else. There is no procedure given for how to revise. A few common grammar points are listed for students to watch for in their work, and then an essay is provided for students to revise. No model is provided of a well-revised version, and students could be left guessing about how well they did.

Each chapter includes an advance organizer, explanations, and exercises for each section of the chapter and ends with a review and review exercises. The exercises are well thought out, and the example compositions contain interesting information, presented logically and coherently, which captured my attention. On the negative side, there are a few places where I question an ESL student's ability to follow. The answers to exercises are not given anywhere, and I sometimes questioned my own answers. For example, I was puzzled by an exercise using transitions (p. 48). Also, in an exercise where students are to pick the most appropriate topic sentence for various paragraphs (p. 22), it was not stated, and was not obvious to me until after some serious puzzling, that the topic sentences were missing from the paragraphs. In addition, I would have had the students discuss the functions of topic sentences rather than simply stating them.

In an exercise in identifying types of supporting ideas from a paragraph on the influences of weather, examples of facts and figures are given, and it is assumed that students know the difference as these terms are not defined. I am not sure of the difference myself from the examples given. On the next page is a useful table of transition words and their parts of speech. The forms (functions) of these words are given at the top of the chart: for example, emphasizing and specifying, conceding, reversing, summarizing. I question, again, if ESL students would be familiar with these terms and if a fair bit of help from the instructor would be needed for them to understand these terms.

A few other items puzzled me. At the end of chapter four, following the review exercises, is a well-written story entitled "The Vanishing Hitchhiker." The story is never referred to, and there are no exercises given for it. I am not quite sure why it is there. There are other examples of mildly confusing exercises and charts, but before you conclude that confusions abound, let me reassure you that most of the exercises are worthwhile. An example would be the excellent exercise in chapter five on the use of *for example* and *such as*, which would clarify a point that is problematic for many ESL students. I also enjoyed the original opening paragraphs supplied for an exercise in chapter three: Essay Form. I was impressed with some of the practices in analyzing essays and in writing thesis statements. In fact, I was impressed much more often than I was puzzled.

I would have liked to see some diagrams in the text depicting rhetorical organization of essays and paragraphs: venn diagrams, perhaps, for comparison and contrast, or arrows between steps in a process. All the explanations were verbal rather than visual.

Generally, the strengths of the text are in its organization, its excellent exercises and step-by-step tour of the writing process. ESL students would benefit from the guidance of a teacher and collaboration with other students on the exercises. The book would be enhanced by more examples in some of its exercises, an answer key for all exercises, some visual representation of material, and clarification of some structural points. All in all, if you are teaching college preparatory classes, this text is well worth picking up.

Alison Etter

The Reviewer

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