
New Publications ... Nuwe Publikasies

Reviews

Mike and Glenda Smith

A study skills handbook. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990 (Second Edition). (229 pp.)

Every student requires a knowledge of language and how it is used to present information and to explain concepts, in order to succeed in his/her studies. This is all the more true of students who are studying through the medium of a language other than their mother tongue. For this reason, any text on study skills must necessarily focus on basic language skills. This publication has been designed for non-mother tongue speakers of English, studying at institutions where English is the medium of instruction. It is pitched at an intermediate to advanced level.

The book is easy on the eye and pleasant to handle. The layout, size of print, quality of paper, and the variety of the text presentation, all appeal - important factors in assessing the reactions of students who are likely to use it as a self-study or reference tool. A perusal of its contents suggests a logical and sensible sub-division of material : eight units are presented in three sections : *Before you start* discusses the correct use of time, and dictionary skills; *Gathering your information* concerns library skills, reading skills, and note-taking skills; *Presenting your information* focuses on writing skills, quoting skills, and examination skills. This clear organization facilitates use by both student and teacher.

The book is ideally suited for use as the basis of an independent course, or as a resource book in the language class. It has been designed as a workbook to provide practice in basic study techniques. Not only are the skills presented and explained, but they are supplemented by a wide variety of challenging exercises and activities, designed to illustrate how these skills can and should be used in various subject fields - in other words, attention has been paid in the set assignments to **transference** of skills from one course to another.

Unit 1: *Using your time* discusses the importance of establishing a study routine within the framework of easily attainable goals. The second unit is devoted to the correct use of the dictionary, and particularly to using abbreviations and punctuation in the dictionary, as well as its lexical, grammatical, and stylistic information.

Unit 3 deals with library skills and focuses on understanding the front pages of books and journals, finding sources in a library, and using the subject catalogue to find out more about your topic. Up to this point, the units have concentrated on supplying information, rather than practising skills, but Unit 5: *Reading skills*, is far more challenging. It addresses aspects such as scanning, and poses the question: "How much do you have to read?" By explaining ideas such as 'key words' and 'key terms', and how to identify them, it invites students to scan efficiently. Other aspects covered include how to use titles to anticipate the contents of a reading passage; how to find out the content of a text by looking at the first sentence of each paragraph; how to read for an essay, and how to use worksheets. This is followed by a unit on note-taking which introduces six successful ways of mastering this skill (e.g. clarifying your purpose, layout of notes, identifying main ideas, and summarising).

The last three units concern ways in which students should present their information in the form of written essays and examination answers. The chapter on writing skills helps students analyse essay titles and decide what to include and what to omit when writing essays. It also stresses a sense of audience when writing. The focus then shifts to writing descriptive and argumentative essays, with the emphasis on structure (introduction, body, conclusion), and the use of supporting arguments in presenting a point of view. The seventh unit explains various ways of using quotations in an essay, and of compiling a bibliography. The final unit supplies advice on how to write examinations successfully.

It is obvious that this book has been compiled by experienced ESL teachers. They anticipate the problems that students are likely to experience and give clear guidance and assistance. Most of the material was tried out on foreign language students of English, and the feedback thus gained has been used to shape and adapt the approach followed. I feel the book could be used independently by students, for its explanations and guidelines are consistently clear and relevant.

The level at which the book has been pitched would, however, make it inaccessible to students who do not already have a reasonable working knowledge of English. Many of the passages and topics chosen to practise, particularly the reading skills, are very specialised (e.g. fishing in Asia, the effects of logging on world ecology, and immunization in Africa). Passages with wider appeal would have been preferable if the book is, as the authors claim, to be considered "suitable for a wide range of students with different backgrounds". Also, there is little doubt that the key to successful study lies in the mastery of especially reading and writing skills. While the other sections of the book are useful and practical, I feel that the two units on reading and writing need to be extended. Expository writing ought to be an additional focus in the writing skills component.

These criticisms aside, the lasting impression one gets of the book is extremely positive. It functions equally well as a resource book for language teachers, and as a practical self-study text to promote learner independence. For these reasons it is likely to appeal to students and teachers alike - and that alone is a very powerful recommendation.

Susan Sheerin

Self-access. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. (200 pages).

Self-access is a new title in the Oxford series: "Resource Books for Teachers", edited by Alan Maley. The author is an experienced EFL teacher and is currently Director of Studies of the Bell School in Cambridge, where she is responsible for the self-access facility in the school.

This book is based on the premise that it is learners themselves who do the learning, which perception has led to the shift in focus from teachers to learners in the communicative teaching philosophy. Furthermore, as all learners are different, 'lockstep' teaching cannot cater for large classes of language students. Thus the need for learner independence or learner autonomy arises. To achieve this goal, effective mechanisms must be found to offer students the opportunity "to pursue their learning in their own preferred way and at their own pace". One such mechanism is the self-access study centre. It is a highly organized system designed to support independent study, and to integrate work done in the study centre with that done in the classroom. Teachers who are considering setting up such a self-access facility will find this book full of practical advice, supported by examples of materials which could be used at various levels.

The book is clearly written and the contents well organized. It consists of five sections. The first section, "Getting started", describes ways of setting up self-access facilities. Here the focus is on layout (e.g. the library section and the self-access section), equipment (e.g. language laboratory, video, audio-cassettes, computers), use of materials (i.e. self-designed as well as commercially available materials), the classification, storage, and display of materials, and staffing.

The second section is entitled: "Ways in and through". It deals with training and preparing the student for self-access learning. This involves initial orientation to the system, as there are particular skills which the learner must have mastered in order to use the system efficiently. In the end, it is the student's effective use of the system, and not the excellence of the facilities themselves, that will determine success. The student's language proficiency also needs to be assessed by various means in order to place him/her at the correct level in the self-access system.

Section three focuses on listening and reading, and contains many examples of self-access activities designed to practise these receptive skills. At first intensive reading and listening activities are described using short texts, and later longer texts are used. The activities include cloze texts, scrambled texts (where the focus is on text organization), comprehension exercises, information transfer exercises, which require students to transfer written information "into some visual or tabular form", and the reading of graded texts which enable students to evaluate their own progress in reading.

The fourth section contains suggestions for self-access activities in the writing and speaking skills. Such aspects as spelling, punctuation, and pronunciation are dealt with initially, followed by activities which invite free or less controlled production. This constitutes a problem for the self-access system, regarding the provision of feedback for the student. All production activities cannot be controlled, therefore the student has to believe in the value of language use and practice, even when feedback is not provided, as well as learn to self-evaluate.

The final section, entitled "Building blocks", contains activities which focus on grammar, vocabulary, and key functional areas (i.e. social language). Here the accent is on accuracy, and the student is given the opportunity to practise discrete areas of language at his or her own pace. This conscious focus on accuracy is meant to complement work of a freer nature done in the other sections.

What strikes one about this publication is the very practical nature of its contents. Except for section one, each chapter is packed with detailed activities ready for use. Each activity is classified and provides information on level of use, age, language group, topic, and aim. It also gives the student advice on how to prepare for the activity, gives explicit instructions and a task sheet. When the activity has been completed, the student uses a key (answers to questions, solutions to problems) to assess his performance. A "follow-up" section suggests further activities a student should do in the self-access system. The final part of the activity consists of comments directed at the teacher, and includes variations which can be used with students at different levels.

This book contains a wealth of information in the form of concrete ideas and suggestions. Perhaps more reading texts could have been supplied in the receptive skills section, where there appears to be an over-emphasis on listening skills. The book is functionally illustrated, and particularly the productive skills section contains many useful maps and pictures.

Strong evidence exists for the psychological, personality, and motivational differences between learners, which stresses the need for some form of individualized instruction. The author makes it clear that, far from making the teacher's load lighter, providing a self-access facility for students requires "a lot of hard work and effort". The traditional role of the teacher transmitting knowledge and directing activities, and the student as a passive listener in lockstep with others, has changed. Teachers who wish to implement this change, to ensure that students take greater responsibility for their own learning, and

to make language learning an effective, challenging, and satisfying experience, will find this book an invaluable resource. Its activities can be adapted for use at various levels, and can be used to link with work done in the classroom. All in all, the book offers exciting possibilities which should be exploited by all serious second and foreign language teachers.

J.J. Swartz

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