



Reviewed work:

*Reading Skills for Success: A Guide to Academic Texts.* (2004). Thomas A. Upton. The University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, Michigan. <http://www.press.umich.edu/> Pp. 166. ISBN 0472089137. \$19.95

Reviewed by:

Averil Coxhead  
Massey University, New Zealand

The gap between assisted or scaffolded reading materials for English as a second language (ESL) learners preparing for higher education at university or college and authentic academic textbooks is a particular challenge to teachers and learners alike. Why does this discrepancy exist? There are a number of possible reasons: learners come from a variety of educational backgrounds, speak and read many different languages at different levels, may not have much experience with written academic texts and, while they share a similar goal in terms of matriculation and success at higher learning, they are preparing for study in different subject areas. Add to this the complexity of the task of considering the many aspects of L2 reading and readers (Grabe & Stoller, 2002) and for some learners and teachers the gap is practically a chasm.

*Reading skills for success* by Thomas A. Upton is a textbook that attempts to go some way towards bridging this gap. Upton aims to have the textbook used "as an adjunct text to assist learners in comprehending the materials they are expected to read in college 'content' classes" (p. iii). The book presupposes that readers and teachers are aware of the current view of reading being "an interactive and constructive process in which the reader uses personal and cultural knowledge to interpret the information presented in a text in order to 'create' meaning" (p. iv).

The book is organised into three distinct parts. Part One contains *Word-level clues to meaning* including a focus on context clues, a 300-word list extracted from the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000), ways to develop awareness of technical terms in text, and to identify continuous ideas through pronoun use. Part Two, *Understanding expository structures*, focuses on *connectors, main ideas, enumeration, classification, comparison and contrast, time order, and cause and effect*. Part Three is called *Reading to study* and focuses on reading strategies, SQ3R (S = Survey, Q = Question, R = Read, R = Recite, R = Review) and notetaking when reading using the Cornell method. Each part is introduced by a short overview describing the focus and goals of each chapter.

An important innovation in *Reading skills for success* is the inclusion of two chapters from published North American textbooks in their original format. The first chapter is on *ecosystems*

and is from environmental science textbook by B. J. Nebel, published in 1998. The second chapter is on *language diffusion* from a textbook on human geography by H. J. de Blij and A. B. Murphy, published in 1999. These chapters are important because they provide authentic academic reading practice in a supportive environment. Learners are asked to examine these chapters using many of the skills introduced in this book as a step towards dealing with their own academic textbooks.

Another feature of the book is the inclusion of short supplements comprising several pages each that follow after the two textbook chapters. The supplements contain extra activities for reading for pleasure, exercises on affixes, the remaining 270 words from the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) and word card practice, as well as additional main ideas and organisational structure practice.

Let's now look at the chapters in *Reading skills for success* in general. Each chapter begins with a brief explanation of its focus, that is, a particular strategy, text structure or skills. Key terms such as *enumeration*, *technical terms* and *cause-and-effect relationship* are described in these sections, for example. This introduction is followed by explanation and examples where the writer expands on the main focus of the chapter and provides instances from academic textbooks to exemplify the main points. The explanations on the whole are clearly presented and well-written with examples for support. In some instances, the information is put forward in a non-linear way to good effect, as in Chapter Six where enumeration and classification are presented and practised.

One of the major strengths of this book is the inclusion of excerpts from academic textbooks in each chapter that are drawn on for analyses and examples. Most of these extracts come from a variety of arts and sciences textbooks published recently in North America. They represent reading for academic purposes in disciplines such as Biology, Human Geography, Anthropology, and Environmental Sciences. There are a small number of business-based texts, in Economics and Business Communication. The exercises based on the skills that are highlighted and these textbooks snippets are varied in each chapter, ranging from Chapter Two where learners practise recognising definitions of technical terms in textbooks, to Chapter Eleven where they practise taking notes from a textbook chapter included at the end of the book. The activities and texts appear to be graded for difficulty at times, for example in Chapter Three where learners are encouraged to deal with increasingly difficult examples and to process larger chunks of text while identifying continuing ideas in texts (pp. 21-22). In addition, answer keys are provided at the end of the textbook and are easy to use.

The final exercise for each chapter is to apply the reading skill or strategy in focus to a wider context – that of the learner themselves in their own academic study. In Chapter Three, for example, learners are asked to scan a chapter of a textbook they are using and find examples of writers' use of pronouns in texts so as to restate ideas in several ways. Upton carefully manages the workload in a chapter to ensure that learners are not overloaded and attempts to ensure that each learning point is carefully practised.

This textbook addresses many of the issues related to reading in a second language, such as the need to enlarge one's vocabulary, locate and understand the main idea in a text, develop and

practise strategies and gain a wide exposure to print (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). However, I am concerned about the lack of acknowledgement of what the ESL learner reader brings to this textbook and to L2 reading overall. Grabe and Stoller (2002) describe contextual factors that are important for preparing for L2 teaching. These factors include the knowledge readers bring to bear on texts, their reading ability in their first language, their proficiency and experience in reading in their second language, their background cultural knowledge and L1 influence. An example of Upton's approach is advising learners to focus immediately on content on reading a new text and to first ask the question "Who or what is this about?" (p.34). One way to build on this perfectly good question further might be to ask "What do I want to know? Why am I reading this? What do I know already?" As Alderson (2000: 121) states, "Background knowledge should be recognised as influencing all comprehension."

Similarly, the social nature of reading and the importance of interaction do not seem to filter through the Upton text until Chapter Nine, where learners are asked to discuss their self-awareness and habits as readers. In the earlier chapters, readers are focused on practising skills and strategies such as word cards as individuals dealing directly with text. Furthermore, there are very few direct links between the chapters in *Reading skills for success*. This separation may make it easier for learners and teachers to focus on one particular aspect of reading at a time or for users to dip into the textbook. However, this approach causes some strain as the interactive nature between the different skills in reading is not reinforced. Table 4.1 on relationship connectors (pp. 27-29), for example, is complex and cognitively demanding to work with. The table is difficult to process in a meaningful way in a short amount of time, but would be useful for reference at a later time. Later in the textbook, Upton refers the reader back to Table 4.1 to re-examine this material (p. 52) but this kind of linking is few and far between. Chapter Nine also contains a large table, this time on reading strategies (pp. 66-68). In Chapter Eleven the strategy table is referred to again but this is the only time learners revisit this rich resource.

Another possibly problematic area is how the Academic Word List (AWL) (Coxhead, 2000) is broken into two separate lists for inclusion into this book. The first 300 words (Sublists 1-5 of the AWL) are presented in Chapter One in an alphabetical list (pp. 5-6) while the rest of the arbitrarily divided list is presented in a supplement at the end of the book. The learners are asked to make word cards for any 25 words they do not know from the AWL for studying. Studying from word cards is a well-documented and effective method for learning words (see Nation, 2001). However, in this book the AWL words are presented in a list without the context of the principles of frequency and range that is behind the selection of the words for the list. There is a lack of context surrounding the learning of the words themselves which must beg a number of questions for learners and teachers alike. Why should the learners focus on learning AWL words out of context? Which of the words should learners choose first in the AWL and why? Why combine the ten sublists in the AWL in this way when they were already divided according to frequency in the first place? The original distinction made between the words in the sublists is lost in this textbook.

What are the strengths of this book? First of all, the links to the learners' own reading are well-managed. For example, in Chapter Two where the focus is the strategy of guessing meaning from context, the learner readers are directed to reading a chapter of their own textbook in order to find ten non-technical words and practise the strategy with the words they have found.

Furthermore, I would agree wholeheartedly with Upton when he states that one major strength of this book is the use of authentic materials. He has been very successful in bridging between this reading textbook, the reading from other academic textbooks and the learners' own reading. Another helpful innovation is that in some chapters, learners are encouraged to visualise ideas in texts through developing charts or maps of chapters. This visual interpretation of text allows learners to process their reading in a different way and it also breaks up the somewhat linear nature of the book.

How useful would this textbook be in learning and teaching contexts outside the US? Many of the textbook excerpts used in the book and strategies covered would potentially pertain to many other ESL learners worldwide even though there are several times when specialised background knowledge about North America is needed to unpack examples and explanations. For example, on page 41 the US government system is used as an example and broken down into the legislative, executive and judicial branches.

*Reading skills for success* does not attempt to conceal how difficult academic reading can be and is. Instead it offers techniques for dealing with academic reading in bite-sized chunks, supported by well-chosen examples of authentic texts and links to further reading outside the language classroom. It would serve as a springboard for teachers looking for ways to bring learners, academic reading, skills and practice together.

## References

- Alderson, J. C. (2000). *Assessing reading*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Coxhead, A. (2000). A new academic word list. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34(2), 213-38.
- Grabe, W. & Stoller, F. (2002). *Teaching and researching reading*. Harlow: Longman.
- Hirvela, A. (2001). Incorporating reading into EAP writing courses. In J. Flowerdew and M. Peacock (Eds.), *Research perspectives on English for academic purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Urquart, A. H. & Weir, C. J. (1998). *Reading in a second language: Process, product and practice*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.

## About the Reviewer

Averil Coxhead is a lecturer in English for Academic Purposes, in the School of Language Studies at Massey University, Palmerston North, Aotearoa/New Zealand. She is the author of the Academic Word List. e-mail: a.coxhead@massey.ac.nz