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Reviewed work:

*Strategic Reading 1: Building Effective Reading Skills*. (2003). Jack C. Richards & Samuela Eckstut-Didier. Hong Kong: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 143. ISBN 0521555809. \$23.00

Reviewed by  
Rachel Castleton  
Brigham Young University at Provo  
United States

Since the purpose for reading is to comprehend, teachers and researchers continue to investigate better ways to help students achieve this objective. As we read, we utilize a variety of lower-level and higher-level processes to understand the text. According to Grabe and Stoller (2002), “The higher-level processes generally represent comprehension processes that make much more use of the reader’s background knowledge and inferencing skills” (p. 20). Although the lower-level decoding is necessary for readers, it is evident that this must be combined with higher-level activation of background knowledge to contribute to overall comprehension. *Strategic Reading 1: Building Effective Reading Skills* is a book which activates background knowledge in a way that will connect the activities and tasks to the lives and experiences of the readers. In addition, in each chapter, a variety of skills for understanding other aspects of a text (such as purpose, tone, details, and organization) are practiced along with strategies such as predicting and scanning to increase overall comprehension.

As stated on the cover, this book is part of a three-book series that targets young adults to adult learners and focuses on developing skills for reading, vocabulary-building, and critical thinking. As the first level in the series, this book uses a variety of texts that were adapted from authentic sources and intended for low-intermediate to intermediate learners. However, because of the length and vocabulary usage in some of the readings, it could easily benefit students of higher proficiency levels as well.

The book's structure is laid out in a simple table of contents (p. iii), showing 16 units of various topics with three different readings for each. Shortly after the table of contents, a valuable "Scope and Sequence" table breaks the units down into the titles of each reading, the skills, and the type of target vocabulary. Each unit begins with a preview page that activates students' prior knowledge and introduces new vocabulary used in its three readings. These readings are from a variety of genres (novels, websites, poetry, newspapers, etc.) and increase in difficulty with each ensuing unit. For each reading, there are prediction activities involving either scanning or skimming which prepare students before they read. A variety of tasks following the readings help students develop and practice specific skills for comprehension. This diversity of activities follows Anderson's (1999) suggestion to "make sure that readers have a variety in the kinds of texts they read as well as the kinds of skills and strategies that we cover" (p. 114). At the end of each unit, a wrap-up page reinforces newly learned vocabulary and provides a final project or discussion for students to review and apply what they have learned in the unit.

As mentioned previously, each unit begins with a preview page including questions to connect each reading to the students' background knowledge and to help them develop critical thinking skills as they express what they think about a topic. Although the questions are stimulating and the vocabulary introduction activity is helpful, the activities on this page may be overshooting the capabilities of second language learners at this level by trying to incorporate too much. For example, in the first unit, the preview page asks questions specific to "Music and Moods," "Louis Armstrong," and "The Biology of Music," which are the three different readings in the unit. An intermediate or even advanced reader of English would have a difficult time getting through all three of these readings and the activities in one session. After completing the *Before you read* activities included with each reading, my class of low intermediate learners took a long time to finish just one reading from a unit. This did not allow them to start the follow-up skill development activities in class which they instead did for homework. After trialing these activities with my learners, I would suggest reading the questions in the preview page specific to each text before doing the *Before you read* section so that students have a greater opportunity to draw on their experiences and connect them with what they read.

It is very helpful to have *Before you read* sections included with each reading, because it helps students use the title and pictures to guess about the text and its content. One of the most valuable strategies for learners of any language to utilize is guessing meaning from clues they find in and associated with the text. Also, the skimming and scanning exercises not only help them check their predictions (which is another important strategy for readers) but also prepare them for other types of reading they will do in the future. The only negative aspect of the *Before you read* tasks in these units is that they are located *after* the reading. I had my students make predictions from a picture I brought into class to accompany the title and pictures for the reading, but they were still confused about what they were supposed to read because the placement of the *before* activities was *after* the reading. Perhaps the activities are placed in this way in order to organize these units in the most economic way. Many student books for lower reading levels consist of chapters that can be used in any order. This can be beneficial for the teacher as the chapters can then be utilized according to the teacher's own curriculum. However, this arrangement may make it difficult for a teacher to find chapters that develop a certain skill because the readings are usually listed by topics. *Strategic Reading 1* avoids this problem. Although the readings can be used out of sequence, the readings in a particular unit support one

another and become increasingly difficult as the book continues. Also, the “Scope and Sequence” (p. vi) section clearly delineates the skills and focus of each unit, and for each activity helpful subtitles in the margin describe the skill or strategy being focused on. In my class, these subtitles made it very easy for me to plan the lesson as well as to help students understand and remember the various skills they practiced.

Any reading textbook must be evaluated by the way it deals with vocabulary. Nation (1990) encourages teachers to use “a systematic and principled approach to vocabulary” (p. 1) and later states that vocabulary is considered an extremely important “if not the most important, element in language learning” (p. 2). A strength of this book is that it introduces new vocabulary required for the readings through different activities at the beginning of each unit. These activities aid students in guessing the meanings of these words in the context of the readings. Then, the newly learned words are reinforced in various vocabulary expansion activities in the wrap-up section of each unit. This recycling of new words is essential for retention, and the variety of activities ensures that students are practicing different skills to acquire new terms.

One drawback of this book is that it has no reading rate or fluency objectives for students. Although the accompanying *Teacher’s Manual* contains helpful lesson plans, definitions, quizzes, and answers to activities and quizzes, it does not explicitly state how it attends to the development of reading fluency or the students’ progress in this area. Other books often include reading rates and comprehension charts, along with suggestions for the teacher of ways to best utilize them in the classroom to motivate and evaluate progress. It would have been helpful to see them included in this book. Another limitation of this book is that it does not include opportunities for metacognitive reflection by students about the strategies taught in the chapters. Teachers who use this book should plan to incorporate into their lessons other activities or discussions about these strategies to help students determine which ones are actually helping them comprehend more effectively.

Overall, this book is recommended to teachers who want to give their students opportunities to practice activities for building background knowledge and developing other useful strategies in their reading. It also aids comprehension through its attention to vocabulary, and it provides opportunities for students to apply what they have learned in extension activities. However, as with any book that focuses on reading strategies, no teacher should feel confined to teach the activities as they are presented. Because there are so many variables involved in teaching reading, teachers should find ways to adapt the contents of this book to the individual needs of students, while also adhering to theoretical support from current research.

## References

- Anderson, N. (1999). *Exploring second language reading: Issues and strategies*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. (2002). *Teaching and researching reading*. New York: Longman.
- Nation, I. S. P. (1990). *Teaching and learning vocabulary*. New York: Newbury House.

### **About the Reviewer**

Rachel Castleton is a graduate student in the TESOL Certificate Program at Brigham Young University. She completed her undergraduate degree in linguistics with specific focus in TESOL, Spanish, and Russian. Her experience in teaching English involves international volunteering in Russia, community ESL classes, and student teaching in the University's intensive English program. E-mail: [littlecas@yahoo.com](mailto:littlecas@yahoo.com)