Review of *Reading Explorer 2*

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Reading comprehension is described by Goodman as an "… active process of comprehending [where] students need to be taught strategies to read more efficiently (e.g., guess from context, define expectations, make inferences about the text, skim ahead to fill in the context, etc." (cited in Grabe, 1991, p. 377). It is obvious that the author, Paul MacIntyre, considered these strategies when designing the reading activities for his textbook, *Reading Explorer 2*. For readers to become fluent, they need to interact with the text (Alyousef, 2005). Furthermore, for readers to be effective, they have to be able to combine information from the text and from previous knowledge in order to be able to build meaning and to use different strategies when facing problems. This textbook provides learners with the necessary tools to become both effective and skillful readers. The author also considered learners' previous knowledge to be interwoven with the text in the process of making meaning (Anderson, 2003). All these features were highly considered by Paul MacIntyre when writing this textbook. Designed to develop reading skills, *Reading Explorer 2* presents a wide variety of interesting thematic passages allowing the learner to master reading comprehension using authentic content. At the same time, the wide variety of activities allows learners to activate schemata, which makes it easier to understand unknown reading passages. Finally, these activities enable learners to build vocabulary, which is presented in context.

Reading Explorer is a six-level series of intensive reading texts and *Reading Explorer 2* is one level in that series. It uses articles from National Geographic Magazine to promote reading comprehension and to develop the vocabulary skills of ESL young adults and adult learners. The length of the reading passages, vocabulary presented, level of difficulty of texts, and comprehension questions make *Reading Explorer 2* a textbook suitable for learners whose proficiency ranges from upper-basic to low-intermediate. The textbook contains twelve units, and each unit has two reading passages whose topics are related. For instance, in lesson 4A students read about the "Grand Central Terminal" in Manhattan, and in lesson 4B they read about "Mumbai: City of Dreams."

The textbook begins with an *Explore the World* section, which presents the topics that are going to be explored. In these two pages, students can see the world map and the exact location where the events described in the reading passages take place. At the end of each unit there is an interactive CD-ROM video activity section called *Explore More* which

reviews the vocabulary learned in the unit. In the first Explore More section of the book, the author introduces a preview activity about "Greek Olives." Learners are asked to decide if the statements are true or false based on their previous knowledge. After doing so, they can check their answers as they watch a video. Finally, learners have to complete a summary using vocabulary from presented to them.

After every three units there is a *Review* section that reinforces the vocabulary presented. For example, Review 2 has two sections; in section A there is a crossword, and in section B students are required to complete notes the with vocabulary used on preceeding pages. Following the *Review*, there is a section called *World Heritage Spotlight* containing readings about UNESCO's World Heritage sites and tackling world issues. One World Heritage Spotlight called "Underwater Wonders" describes the Great Barrier Reef in Queensland, Australia. Another World Heritage Spotlight introduces one of the United States of America's National Parks, "The Grand Canyon."

The reading passages contain meaningful and interesting L2 realia, allowing learners to have a better understanding of the world we live in, explore different cultures around the globe, learn science facts, while simultaneously reflecting on social issues. By providing authentic readings, the textbook allows learners to "build language competence, progress in their reading ability, become more independent in their studies, acquire cultural knowledge, and develop confidence and motivation to carry on learning" (Hedge, 2003, pp. 204-205). *Reading Explorer 2* comes with: a teacher's manual, text/audio CD package,

classroom audio CD, assessment CD-Rom with Exam View Pro test-generating software, and also quizzes and activities which can be accessed at a supplementary website.

Each unit begins with a warm-up activity, which is commendable because according to Nation (2009), warm-up activities activate learners' prior knowledge and get students interested in the topic. For instance, the warm-up activity of Unit 8A encourages students to discuss some great explorers from history and the places these explorers visited. Then the learners are directed to imagine themselves as explorers. Afterwards they have the opportunity to discuss with their groups their imaginary role of being an explorer. Activities for the texts are offered pre-, during, and post reading. It allows learners to interact dynamically with the text and later leads them to become fluent readers (Alyousef, 2005). The pre-reading activities facilitate comprehension by activating learners' schemata, encouraging readers to make predictions, and at the same time motivating them (Alyousef, 2005; Chen & Graves, 1998; Drucker, 2003). For example, to activate learners' schemata, in Unit 6A the book requires learners to correct true or false statements. To do so, learners need to look at the map at the top of the page, and then read the first four sentences of the text. After that, students are required to make predictions by reading the title, headings, and captions, and by looking at the photos. Another example is found in Unit 9B, where learners are asked to look at the photos and captions, and compare weddings in Italy, India, and Alaska, USA with weddings in their own countries. Next, the book asks learners to skim for the main idea of the

text by looking at the title, photos, and captions. Comprehension is facilitated when schemata are introduced explicitly because this helps activate the relevant schema. According to schema theory, in order for learners to comprehend a text, there must exist an interaction between the reader's background knowledge and the text itself (Drucker, 2003). When learners' schema is activated during the pre-reading activities, they are able to recognize the knowledge they already have about the topic of a text, which simultaneously provides context (Alyousef, 2005; Drucker, 2003).

The during- and post-reading exercises are designed for students to develop reading strategies which enable learners to reason, think critically, and reflect on what they are doing while reading. This is achieved when students work through various tasks, such as predicting, skimming, making inferences, raising reference questions, and scanning. Other examples include making references between sentences and putting events in order (Dole, Dufft, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991). One example is found in unit 4A, where students have to answer five multiple choice questions. There are two questions regarding details, one inference, one vocabulary, and one purpose question. After that, learners are required to complete a cloze section based on the Grand Central Terminal reading passage. Additionally, the author provided different types of questions, written on the left side of each one. By doing so, learners are able to recognize the questions they are to answer. For example, in Unit 6A, the multiple-choice questions include the following types: gist, detail, inference, and main idea, followed by a completion exercise. In Unit 12 A, the types of

questions are gist, inference, detail, vocabulary, and sequence.

Throughout the textbook, learners are exposed to a variety of reading passages accompanied by full color images from the National Geographic Magazine. These images are highly engaging and help get the readers' interest as well as develop visual literacy (Avgerinou & Ericson, 1997; Chalin, 1998).

Vocabulary building is a large focus in *Reading Explorer 2*, and vocabulary is presented in context. Words of related meaning are not presented together. Through the entire textbook, the author used the criteria of *usefulness* and *normal use*. High-frequency words are presented as they occur in normal situations. This, helps students avoid interference, and eases vocabulary learning (Nation, 2000). It does not mean that lower frequency words are not considered; on the contrary, they are glossed in footnotes in every text. In Unit 9B, the words nomads, mosque, fierce, cousin, and warrior are presented. Unit 10B allows learners to get familiarized with the words fjord, harpoon, scowls, and gem.

Along the reading passages, key words are found in red; this makes learners aware of the new vocabulary that is being introduced. At the end of every unit, there is a Vocabulary Practice section in which the author provided various exercises giving students the opportunity to learn vocabulary in context. For example, learners need to place words in context and provide definitions; they also have to match words with their definitions and complete sentences and paragraphs with the words provided. Additional vocabulary practice is also found in the four Review sections and in the Vocabulary Building sections.

To help learners improve their vocabulary, the author included vocabulary building boxes, which aim to highlight and draw readers' attention to common collocations, affixes, and usage to promote their acquisition (Dole et al., 1991). For instance, by introducing the collocation of the verb "obtain" in Unit 7 B, learners are aware that "obtain" is placed after an adjective and an infinitive; at the same time it could be placed before a noun. Another example is introduced in Unit 10B, in which students learn about the usage of the informal expression "I'm starving!" The way the author presents these vocabulary building boxes helps learners find explicit explanation of useful collocations and constructions that help them increase their vocabulary. The *Reading Explorer 2* interactive CD-ROM helps learners improve their reading skills, and concurrently reinforces learning both high-frequency and low-frequency words. The CD-ROM contains twelve video clips from National Geographic Digital Media. For instance, in Unit 2 the video is called *Man's Best Friend*, and in Unit 11 learners can watch a video called *Kenya Butterflies*. These short videos, which motivate students and aid in visual learning, are related to the topics covered in every unit of the book. Additionally this multimedia tool provides twenty-four additional reading passages for learners to continue practicing their reading skills and forty-eight vocabulary activities with self-scoring exercises, which is ideal for learners to review the vocabulary they have learned throughout the units. The CD-ROM enables learners to have extra language support and to practice in class or at home.

Reading Explorer 2 is a textbook suitable for learners who intend to focus on vocabulary and academic reading in intensive reading courses because it helps students increase the use of learning strategies throughout the units. This is a key element which enhances language acquisition. I strongly recommend *Reading Explorer 2* to ESL instructors who seek to promote more active readers through authentic reading materials. *Reading Explorer 2* provides meaningful context, enhancing readers' knowledge in various topics of interest. This is an excellent textbook for promoting learners' independence and autonomy through incorporating essential reading skills and vocabulary learning tasks. It helps students develop fluency and effective reading comprehension skills, as well as achieve lexical competence.

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