
Textbook Review: Real Reading 1

Laura Eickhoff
MA TESOL, Michigan State University
eickh1le@gmail.com

Bonesteel, L. (2011). *Real Reading 1*. White Plains, NY: Pearson Education. US\$45.49 (paperback) ISBN: 9780136066545.

Overview

Real Reading 1 is a beginner-level reading textbook for an adult English language classroom and is the first in a series of four textbooks designed to teach intensive reading skills and develop vocabulary. Each of its twelve units contain two thematically related chapters and target a specific reading skill, vocabulary skill, and vocabulary learning strategy. In addition to the structured units, four reading fluency practice activities are scattered throughout the book, with additional vocabulary practice activities for each unit at the end of the book. Drawing vocabulary from the General Service Word List, the Academic Word List, and the Billuroglu-Neufeld List, the textbook targets high-frequency words while also aiming for controlled vocabulary such that “95-98 percent of the words are likely to be known by a typical learner at each level” (p. viii). Nation and Cheung (2009) have found that such a degree of familiarity with a given text is the amount of comprehension necessary for unassisted reading. Cumulatively, *Real Reading 1* is an accessible, research-based, and level-appropriate textbook to aid in beginner-level reading and vocabulary development, but it is not without its shortcomings.

Format

For the most part, each unit and its two chapters in the textbook follow a very similar pattern of pre-, during, and post-reading activities centered on thematically related reading texts and activities. While the themes are by no means revolutionary, they do provide familiar topics ranging from a unit on humor to one on water sports. Students are accompanied by aesthetically pleasing pictures. Units’ introductions show learners a picture and ask a series of questions to have them start talking about a theme before they are asked to read about it. In the introduction as well as throughout each unit, learners are asked to do a lot of partner work to require output and collaboration and to foster the communicative language teaching and learning that Duff (2014) outlines as an important element of successful language learning. For example, Unit 4, “Funny Business,” shows readers a cartoon and asks them to evaluate and understand it with a partner and then discuss their own habits regarding reading cartoons (p. 46). Chapter 7 in Unit 4, “The Science of Laughter,” begins in the same way that all chapters in the textbook begin — by introducing a list of target vocabulary items and asking students to self-assess their knowledge of the words and then discuss another picture relating to the upcoming reading with a partner.

Unit 7’s targeted reading skill is active reading, so both of its chapters introduce that skill and explain what “good readers” do in regards to reading actively, e.g. “Good readers ask themselves questions as they read” (p. 48). The variety of reading skills targeted in each unit,

including skills such as summarizing and understanding tone, as well as the explicit language with which *Real Reading 1* addresses them, is crucial to what Anderson (2014) describes as an important element in second language learning —students should be “metacognitively aware as they use a variety of reading strategies” (p. 171). Learners are next asked to preview and then read a passage that contains the targeted vocabulary, complete a vocabulary check, such as matching definitions to the words, and then read the passage again. Pertaining to the second time reading, students are given a “Reading Goal” that relates to the targeted reading skill in that chapter. For instance, Chapter 7 asks students to tell a partner what they knew before reading the article, what they learned, and what was interesting as a way to foster the active reading skills targeted (p. 49). This explicit and clear connection is a great way to enhance the metacognitive awareness of the particular skill and ask readers to directly apply it, but it is the only instance in each chapter that this is done.

Chapters are then continued with a multiple-choice comprehension check of the reading, another follow-up activity, such as scanning for specific answers, and a discussion about something in the reading. Each chapter in each unit also contains a vocabulary skill section or a vocabulary strategy section. In Unit 4, for example, Chapter 7 works with parts of speech and using the suffixes “-al” and “-ity” to change words from nouns to adjectives and vice versa (p. 52). Chapter 8 then has a section on dictionary use as a vocabulary strategy section (p. 57-58). Folse (2004) highlights the importance of students being exposed to a variety of vocabulary learning strategies as a way to find ones for which they are best suited, and this is further exemplified by the additional vocabulary learning resources that are present at the end of the book. The balance between integrated and isolated vocabulary learning activities is something that Adams (2010) describe as a way to balance conduciveness to a classroom context and an intensiveness to better focus learners’ attention.

The thematically related units, short chapters, and predictable pattern create an accessible reading textbook for beginning level students that is manageable without being overly complex. Its exercises, logical progression, and recycling of vocabulary throughout and between units demonstrates its adherence to the conceptual underpinnings and claims that Bonesteel and series consultant Paul Nation made at the beginning of the book and highlights its validity as a language learning resource (Byrd & Schuemann, 2014). Its targeting of several reading skills to build on reading comprehension and fluency, as well as the “Fluency Practice” sections where students keep a record of their reading speeds throughout the book, are important to what Grabe (2009) defines as the multitude of “processing subskills and linguistic knowledge bases” necessary for second language reading development (p. 441). However, in terms of evaluating its claims as an intensive reading textbook, elongating the reading passages may open up the potential for each chapter to give a more comprehensive emphasis on the targeted reading strategy for each unit. Rather than having students simply talk with a partner about what they know from the reading and what they found interesting, as in Chapter 7, perhaps they could write a short summary of these things or have a more robust while-reading activity to enhance the targeted skill of active reading. This may be a good way to accommodate Ellis’s (2014) principle that teachers need to take into account students’ individual learning differences. Having each chapter center largely on partner discussion may isolate some learners who do not thrive in these types of activities and impede their reading skills development.

Reflection

Ironically, one of *Real Reading 1*'s biggest strengths also manifests as one of the potential shortcomings of the book. The amount of effort that went into integrating vocabulary theory and pedagogy, as described in the textbook's introduction, is very evident and is demonstrated in a wide variety of activities throughout the book, as exemplified above. However, by the series title, *Real Reading*, as well as the expressed purpose of the entire intensive reading series, the ratio of reading skills to vocabulary activities seems somewhat disproportionate. There is an undeniable link between intensive reading and vocabulary acquisition, warranting such an emphasis on vocabulary learning and strategies in such a textbook, but space allocated to intensive reading (the expressed purpose of the book) should not be sacrificed in the process. In Chapter 7, for example, only two small boxes throughout the six pages of the chapter specifically target the reading skill for that chapter, whereas about two and a half pages work on vocabulary plus the additional materials at the back of the textbook.

In a similar vein, while the textbook offers a variety of readings with a diversity of topics, the readings themselves are, overall, rather short and do not appear to increase in difficulty or complexity as the book progresses in such a way that would create a higher demand on cognitive reading processes (Grabe, 2009). Although intended for beginners, the relative brevity of the reading passages may be a result of the over-emphasis on vocabulary learning strategies, which thereby seems to sacrifice space that could accommodate longer reading passages and/or more extensive opportunities to work on reading strategies. Rather than removing the vocabulary components, elongating or combining chapters into more robust units may be a better approach.

As stated earlier, the majority of the criticism for *Real Reading 1* is not for what it includes, which is largely well done. Instead, the criticism centers on the relative lack of intensive reading skills focus in an intensive reading textbook in favor of vocabulary materials, which are incredibly valuable in their own right. The textbook is level appropriate and its scope and sequence are indicative of a key element of Kumaravadivelu's (2001) description of a successful post-methods approach and Waller, Wethers, and De Costa's (2016) description of praxis — it is a healthy balance between language theory and classroom practice. Particularly for courses with an emphasis on vocabulary skills and acquisition, *Real Reading 1* and its associated resources has promising classroom potential.

References

- Anderson, N. J. (2014). Developing engaged second language readers. In Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D., & Snow, M.A. (Eds.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (4th ed.) (pp. 170-188). Boston, MA: Heinle.
- Bonesteel, L. (2011). *Real Reading 1*. White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.
- Byrd, P., & Schuemann, C. (2014). English as a second/foreign language textbooks: How to choose them —how to use them. In Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D., & Snow, M.A. (Eds.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (4th ed.) (pp. 380-393). Boston, MA: Heinle.

- Duff, P. A. (2014). Communicative language teaching. In Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D., & Snow, M.A. (Eds.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (4th ed.) (pp. 15-30). Boston, MA: Heinle.
- Ellis, R. (2014). Principles of instructed second language learning. In Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D., & Snow, M.A. (Eds.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (4th ed.) (pp. 31-45). Boston, MA: Heinle.
- File, A. K., & Adams, R. (2010). Should vocabulary instruction be integrated or isolated?. *TESOL Quarterly*, 44(2), 222-249.
- Folse, K.S. (2004). *Vocabulary myths. Applying second language research to classroom teaching*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Grabe, W. (2009). *Reading in a second language: Moving from theory to practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2001). Towards a postmethod pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35(4), 537-560.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2014). Teaching Grammar. In Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D., & Snow, M.A. (Eds.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (4th ed.) (pp. 256-270). Boston, MA: Heinle.
- Nation, P. & Chung, T. (2009). Teaching and testing vocabulary. In M. Long & C. Doughty (Eds.), *The handbook of language teaching* (pp. 543-599). West Sussex, UK: Wiley – Blackwell.
- Waller, L., Wethers, K. & De Costa, P. I. (2016). A critical praxis: Narrowing the gap between identity, theory, and practice. *TESOL Journal*. 1-24.