

Specific Skills Series: A Brief Evaluation

Book Review by Lorinda Cluff

SPECIFIC SKILLS SERIES. Richard A. Boning. Baldwin, N.Y.: Barnell Lofts, Ltd., 1977.

When teaching English to speakers of other languages, emphasis is usually placed in four different areas—listening, speaking, reading and writing. The purpose of this review is to take a brief look at one series of books designed to help the learner improve his reading skills—the *Specific Skills Series* by Richard A. Boning.

In working with students in the English Skills Laboratory at BYU—HC, I have been very impressed with the effectiveness of this series. Boning has done an excellent job of covering some of the most basic skills necessary for meaningful reading. And he has been able to make the learning of these skills an interesting experience. Perhaps a quick overview of the series as a whole would be appropriate.

The *Specific Skills Series* gives students help in developing their reading skills in eight different areas (which will be discussed later in greater detail). These eight areas are each divided into twelve levels of difficulty—level A for those who are on a basic, primary level, and level L for those who are on a native twelfth grade level, with the other levels at varying degrees between A and L. The material used for reading in all the booklets at all levels (with a few exceptions at the lowest levels) is all factual. Many of the readings give pertinent background material; many of them are culturally oriented; many of them are, simply, fascinating trivia. But the important thing is that they are all factual; the students are continually gaining factual knowledge while acquiring the basic reading skills. Another important aspect of the series is its interest level. I have seen students spend, literally, hours in the lab working on the series. And I have often found that I became very involved in reading the passages and answering the questions myself.

The series has several other important advantages. It is ideal for individualized language lab use. The student can work at his own pace, spending as much time as necessary on each level until he has mastered that level. But perhaps the greatest advantage of the series is the immediate feedback it gives the student. When a student has completed from one to three units, his answers are checked. The "average" student will spend ten to twenty minutes doing a five paragraph unit in *Getting the Main Idea*, level G. After having his work checked (which takes only a few seconds), he can then go back and review any answers he missed. This quick feedback proves very helpful to most students, and it is easy to see if the student has mastered each level. Once this mastery is attained, the student can quickly proceed to the next level of difficulty. This helps to eliminate the frustrations many students acquire when they feel the work they are asked to do is too easy for them.

THREE BASIC SKILLS

John Haskell (1978) mentions three skills as being "basic" to gaining reading skills: "The acquisition of reading skills . . . requires the ability to deal with certain linguistic elements or processes which a writer uses. Basic to these is vocabulary acquisition and includes helping the student to recognize such things as morphological signals (prefixes and suffixes), [and] sequence signals." In the *Specific Skills Series*, Boning provides booklets to help the learner improve his skills in all three of these areas.

Using the Context

These booklets are the vocabulary builders of the series. There are twenty-five units at each level, each unit consisting of ten short paragraphs. In each paragraph, one or two words have been omitted. Using contextual clues (such as word form, language patterns, and grammatical correct-

ness), the students are to choose, from three or four given words, the word which correctly fills the blank.

Working with Sounds

This set has two major purposes: 1) to acquaint the student with the phonemes of English (this is accomplished in the lower levels), and 2) to aid the student in recognition of word meanings through the medium of prefixes, suffixes, and roots. Generally, on the upper levels, the concept of the unit is identified or defined in the first exercises, and is then followed by nine exercises in which the student is able to apply the concept in related words.

Detecting the Sequence

Each booklet in this set contains twenty-five true stories. The student's understanding of the correct time sequence is revealed by his answers to the true/false questions accompanying each story.

COMPREHENSION SKILLS

Of course, basic to reading is comprehension. As a student reads, he should be able to understand the main ideas or concepts given in the reading material. He should be able to go beyond the facts the writer sets forth; and draw conclusions from those facts. But, just as importantly, the student must be able to distinguish the facts the writer has given from any inferences he, the reader, may have drawn. Practice in these three skill areas is also provided by the *Specific Skills Series*.

Getting the Main Idea

This set of booklets is designed to help the student do just that—get the main idea of a short paragraph. Each of the twenty-five units in each book consists of four or five short passages for which three or four possible main ideas are given. The student should be able to choose the correct main idea.

Drawing Conclusions

The idea of this set of booklets is to help the student infer ideas from written passages. These booklets are based on the same format as that used in *Getting the Main Idea*, but the emphasis is on drawing con-

clusions that can be supported by facts found within the written passages.

Getting the Facts

The goal of helping the students develop the skill of recalling specific facts in an article from one reading is accomplished in this set by having the article written on one side of the page and the questions written on the reverse side of the same page.

ADDITIONAL SKILLS

The *Specific Skills Series* affords students practice in two additional skills: locating the answer and following directions. These two skills are especially valuable to people who attend school and have a need to improve their study (as well as their reading) skills.

Locating the Answer

The fundamental purpose of these booklets is to aid the students in, first, clearly understanding the questions that are asked, and, second, developing their skill in locating the answers in a written passage. The student is encouraged to read the questions prior to looking for the answer, and reading the entire written passage first is discouraged.

Following Directions

These booklets help the student to understand that the skill of following directions and instructions requires, first, a careful reading and understanding of the directions. The focus in the set is on four basic types of directions: testing and drilling, experimenting, assembling, and performing.

SUPPORTIVE SKILLS

Boning has also written another series of books which he calls his *Supportive Reading Skills Series*. This series is based on the same general format as his *Specific Skills Series*, but covers such related skills as understanding questions, idioms, and word relationships. The English Skills Laboratory at BYU—HC has two of the *Supportive Skills* sets. *Reading Schedules* gives the student practice in reading sched-

ules and tables, a common necessity in our society and something which is seldom taught or ever explained. The set includes a wide variety of tables and schedules which most students are likely to encounter frequently. *Understanding Word Relationships* uses an analogy format (blue:blew::bury:) to aid the student in recognizing different kinds of relationships between words. Many different types of relationships are covered, such as sound spelling, time, abstract meaning, synonymity, antonymity, etc.

While the *Supportive Reading Skills Series* covers important skills, the content matter tends to be much less interesting than the content matter in the *Specific Skills Series*. For example, page after page of word analogies tends to get a bit tedious after a while. But the quick feedback and

reinforcement aspect of the *Specific Skills Series* is also present in this series.

As I have, in the past year, looked at many different materials available in the TESOL field, I have been amazed at the amount of material that is now being published, some of it good, some of it poor. In my work with students in the English Skills Lab, I have been impressed with the materials Richard Boning has produced. They are usually very interesting to the students, but, more importantly, they are very effective in helping the students improve their basic reading skills.

REFERENCE

- Haskell, John. 1978. Teaching reading (to adults). In Donna Ilyin and Thomas Tragardh, (Eds.). *Classroom Practices in Adult ESL*. Washington D.C.: TESOL.