
Looking at English

Book Review by Nobuo Tsuda

LOOKING AT ENGLISH. Fred Malkenes and Deborah Singer Pires. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1981. \$8.95.

Looking at English is a three book series designed especially for beginning through intermediate adult ESL students. The textbooks are based on sector analysis, the position-oriented "x-word" grammar devised by Dr. Robert L. Allen of Columbia University. The authors claim that the most important point of x-word grammar is the changing positions of words in different types of sentences, such as statements, questions, and answers. As the students practice x-word movement, they learn to recognize positions in English sentences.

The textbooks are designed for an intensive course and approximately 60 to 80 hours may be spent in each book.

The series also includes a teacher's handbook which gives the instructor some good ideas to use in class. The instructions in each lesson seem to be very easy to follow. The authors suggest that the teacher begin by giving a spoken model. Secondly, with pictures as aids, the students produce the new structure orally, and finally, read and write it. In this way, the students don't have to read lengthy explanations about the grammar, but learn the rules inductively.

The text emphasizes written English, with exercises on grammar, spelling, capitalization, organization, punctuation, etc. There are also a number of other exercises geared towards the skills of reading, listening and speaking. Overall the texts are varied and interesting. However, with the emphasis on writing being diluted by these other exercises, one is inclined to ask if the material presented will be adequate for the needs of the students.

In the area of speaking, the students need to understand how to pronounce different consonants and vowels. However, because the lessons are so simplified, each lesson doesn't provide a sufficient number of models or exercises. More exercises for minimal pair practice, intonation, reduction, assimilation, etc. are required.

In the area of writing, I feel that the textbook takes too much for granted. The authors say, "Native speakers automatically manipulate x-words for questions and answers. Non-native speakers must be taught this simple but essential movement." It sounds like the second language learners should learn grammar in a very natural way without being taught specific rules. The debate on the similarities and differences between first and second language learning, however, is far from being settled. Many adult learners have a tendency to be very conscious about rules and feel a need to reason out why a sentence works in such a way. They often require a more precise explanation of grammar than children do to function well in a second language classroom setting.

Because the texts provide exercises in all the language skills, they are suitable mainly for ESL programs where the skills are taught together in one class. This series could work in a mixed-skills program, but it would require some effort on the teacher's part to provide the necessary supplemental exercises and activities to insure adequate opportunities to practice and master what is introduced in the text. An interesting sidenote: to the reviewer's knowledge, this is the first series that employs x-word grammar or sector analysis to teach spoken as well as written English. It will be interesting to see how well it works in this new application.

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