

BOOK REVIEW

Access to English as a Second Language

Robert G. Breckenridge

McGraw-Hill International Book Company.
1974.

The two texts and accompanying workbooks that comprise Robert G. Breckenridge's *Access to English As a Second Language* are, I think, valuable only to the more experienced ESL teacher. There are enough disappointing features encountered in the books that in the end it will have been the strengths of the teacher rather than those of the materials that have made their adaptation a success in class.

Teachers examining the texts for possible use in the classroom will find them time-consuming to figure out. There is no preface or introduction explaining how to use the

books or at what level students they are directed. To read some of the instructions to the student in the first chapter, one would guess they are directed only to fluent English speakers:

Situational practice gives you...the opportunity to use English for actual communication rather than just in mechanical repetition and drill (p.8)

There is some pretty advanced vocabulary in that. And yet the exercises that accompany are very basic:

Is this a book?

Yes, it is.

Is this a pen?

No, it isn't.

There are also modals (should, can) that are apparent early in either the instructions or the commentary, some future ("are going to") expressions, and some if clauses. All of this sophisticated language indicates that the audience Breckenridge must have in mind is an advanced one, but one that needs to go back and review the fundamentals of English.

It is also an audience that needs a teacher, and this may be a strength or weakness of the books, depending on how you look at it. The books lend themselves well to actual classroom work, with the teacher taking sometimes an active, sometimes a passive role, but always an instigating one. He prods the students constantly with questions, he walks around the room and holds things up and asks about them, and he gets the class to do the same things.

But the student on his own will have difficulty with the books, at least until he understands them after several chapters. There are not enough examples in many of the first exercises to give him what he needs to practice outside of class. Also, some of the examples are erroneous:

Give the correct answer, "Yes, it is" or "No, it isn't".

1. *Is Centerville a town? Yes, it is.*

2. *Is Centerville in the United States? Yes, it is.*
3. *Is Centerville in Mexico? No, it isn't.*
4. *Is there a school in Centerville?*
5. *Is there a bank in Centerville?*
6. *Do the Bankers live in Centerville?*
7. *Do you live in Centerville?*
8. *Are you going to read about Centerville?*

Obviously it's impossible to answer "Yes, it is" or "No, it isn't" to questions 4 through 8. This is cleared up later in the book mostly because one can assume the student has become accustomed to the routine. Nonetheless, the teacher will have to be careful to explain much to his class as they first attempt the exercises.

Perhaps the strongest selling points of the books are their approach and extensiveness of exercise. Listening and speaking are stressed throughout, with particular emphasis on question formulation. Questions are the basic tools for second language acquisition, but many students have problems with them, the appropriate words to use (who, what, how), their syntax. They therefore lack confidence and are embarrassed to ask about things they must learn. Breckenridge gives second language speakers that confidence through rather lengthy catechism and practice formulating their own questions about given situations.

Writing comes later and receives the most attention in the workbooks, which correlate well, by the way, with the texts. There are reading selections in each chapter. They become progressively longer and increasingly difficult, and have more paragraphs. Most of the exercises and questions stem from the reading selection.

Access to English can be a very effective approach to English in the hands of a competent, experienced teacher. Otherwise it may be a bewildering mistake for both teacher and student alike.

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