

# English for Academic Study: Reading

by John Slaght with Paddy Harben

(Course Book ISBN 1-85964-742-1 • Source Book ISBN 1-85964-742-1 • Teacher's Book ISBN 1-85964-743-X)

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The writers of this set of books provide a very refreshing approach to teaching academic reading. Generally, approaches to reading emphasise comprehension, testing and practice with little advice on how to perform the task. Testing is based on questions clustered around literal, inferential and evaluative skills, focusing mainly on students' performance. These books are different.

Slaght and Harben's 'middle way approach' encompasses both strategy and task-based approaches. Strategies refer to techniques students consciously apply as opposed to skills which are automated and mechanically applied. The task-based approach is closely tied to purpose for reading. For example, if the purpose of the reader is to obtain the main idea of a paragraph, tasks should be designed to scaffold this purpose, which will also determine the kind of strategy to be used. These combined concepts of strategy and task-based approaches provide the basis for the varied questions designed. These questions also provide scaffolding to aid students' understanding processes. The focus in these books is on developing students' 'competence' rather than simply testing their performance.

The Source Book consists of seven units. Each unit consists of a few related texts on social issues ranging from the environment to language. Since students in an academic setting are expected to synthesise information from their readings, several short texts on a related theme lend themselves to realistic academic tasks.

The Teacher's Book provides useful information on the 'practical considerations' which have informed the design of the book, without being too theoretical. This will be welcomed by teachers of reading. Concepts underlying task and strategy-based approaches with a focus on developing students' reading competence are clearly explained. This book also provides photocopiable materials which may be well received by many teachers. More importantly, the authors provide detailed notes and pointers for teachers on how they can structure the different tasks and provide the scaffolding required for understanding texts.

The Course Book consists of seven practice units covering a range of tasks requiring the use of specific strategies. For text content, the students are referred to the Source Book.

The introductory section of the students' Course Book states the four aspects of academic reading as reading for a specific purpose, working on specific strategies, obtaining detailed sentence and paragraph-level understanding and being able to analyse texts for their organisation. All these aspects of reading are clearly elaborated under four different sub-sections which give the student an overview of what to expect in the other units. This is followed by a section called Task Introduction wherein the different aspects of reading are introduced as tasks which demand the use of certain strategies.

Two factors could have made this set more student-friendly. The first is that tasks could have been explicitly related to the different aspects of reading mentioned in the Course Book. For example, the task of predicting text content in Unit 1 could have been explicitly related to the strategy of skimming mentioned under 'Specific Strategies'. This would have further justified the writers' claim in the Teachers Book that the 'Middle Way Approach' subsumes both the task and strategy-based approaches. The writers could also have made this connection more explicit both for the teachers and students. Secondly, the texts in the Source Book could have been included in the Course Book for students for easy reading and application of strategies. This could have been achieved by combining them into one publication.

However, what makes this series refreshing is that teachers do not have to teach reading in a vacuum, based on their intuition. The book provides teachers with a theoretical basis for designing reading tasks and for teaching strategies. Teachers are also gently reminded that there needs to be a shift from testing performance to developing competence in student readers, especially in an academic setting. This can be done by designing questions which are task-strategy related.

The strength of this set of books lies in the fact that it can be an excellent resource for teachers. Ideas for designing tasks can be adopted and adapted by teachers to suit their own teaching and their students' learning context. More importantly, these books show how reading can be task, strategy and competence driven rather than performance-based.