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REVIEWS

Totally True (Levels 1, 2, and 3)

Jane Huizenga and Linda Huizenga
New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

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Do you find yourself searching the Internet and wandering the aisles of your local library hunting for materials to liven up bland textbook lessons because your students come to class expecting interesting and entertaining texts that reflect the rich, complex, and surprising world outside the classroom? If so, you will be thrilled to learn about *Totally True*, an Oxford University Press three-level series by Jane and Linda Huizenga, aimed at building beginning and low-intermediate learners' vocabulary skills.

Teachers familiar with the *Can You Believe It?* series by the same authors will recognize many similar elements, in which true, upbeat news stories form the basis of each lesson. While ESL textbooks based on news stories are widely available in several competing series, the Huizengas have no peers in the construction of clear, well-organized, and engaging lessons that build on the irresistible appeal of a good story. However, unlike *Can You Believe It?*, which targets English idioms, *Totally True* addresses learners' more basic and urgent need for general, high-frequency vocabulary.

Totally True's approach to teaching vocabulary is based on the assumption that good stories are intrinsically motivating and on research that shows that the acquisition of new words is optimized by explicit instruction, incremental encounters, and opportunities for practice in a wide variety of spoken and written tasks (DeCarrico, 2001). In this series, new words are first introduced in the

context of a story and later reappear in activities featuring the study of thematic word groups and common collocations. Learners are provided with multiple exposures to the target words in a second story within each unit, in review sections, and in recycled appearances in subsequent units. In keeping with the communicative approach, there are plentiful opportunities for learners to interpret, express, and negotiate meaning on topics of genuine interest and relevance (Savignon, 2001).

The units are formatted clearly and attractively, and they move students from teacher-centered and controlled techniques that focus on comprehension at the beginning of each unit to student-centered and free activities at the end of the unit that push students to use language communicatively. Each unit begins with an interesting photo and a six-panel picture story that are the basis of prereading prediction activities. A nine-step lesson plan, repeated in each unit, then leads teachers and students through a well-planned progression of activities that integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

This series is extremely teacher-friendly and because of the clear organizational format, preparation time is minimal. With 39 stories offered at each level, teachers can pick and choose texts best suited to their particular students' ages, experiences, goals, and purposes for learning English. The open-ended questions in the "About You..." section are effective for motivating students to share their personal experiences with each other. While the stories are pleasingly quirky, the discussion questions are sensible and down-to-earth.

Support materials are also available. Audio CDs at each level contain a recording of the main story, as well as a shorter, summarized version for the "Take a Dictation" assessment activity. In addition, teachers can download unit tests and answer keys from www.oup.com/elt/teacher/totallytrue. For curriculum planners, *Totally True* has the added benefit of being coordinated with Oxford's *Bookworms* series, both in terms of grammatical structures and targeted vocabulary.

As in other publications of unusual, true-life stories, the appeal of the stories can be a major factor in the textbook's success in the classroom, but this also means that not all of the stories will appeal to all students. Another possible flaw is that the supplemental thematic vocabulary sections may be too low for the level of proficiency required to interpret the overall meaning of the texts.

Despite these minor shortcomings, the *Totally True* series is a valuable addition to the curriculum of low and low-intermediate classes. The easy-to-use communicative lessons based on true stories of personal creativity and the triumph of the human spirit will grab students' attention and serve as a motivating springboard for engaging and meaningful classroom learning.

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Focus on Vocabulary: Mastering the Academic Word List

Diane Schmitt and Norbert Schmitt
White Plains, NY: Longman, 2005.

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When a textbook is geared toward ESL students who aspire to enter the world of academic English, nothing is more reassuring than a text that is based on academic research in the field of TESOL and explains its underlying principles both to the teacher and the student. *Focus on Vocabulary* concentrates on teaching academic words that make up around 10% of a college-level textbook of any

discipline (Coxhead, as cited in Schmitt & Schmitt, 2005, in their introduction) and targets 504 words from Coxhead's Academic Word List for this purpose.

Written for high-intermediate to advanced students, *Focus on Vocabulary* aims to expose students to each target word several times, provide opportunities for practice and production, and raise awareness of the different types of word knowledge required to appropriately use a word. As it would be unrealistic to aim at teaching everything there is to know about all of these academic words, a significant part of the book is also devoted to strategy instruction that encourages students to become responsible for their own learning in order to be successful in their future studies.

Focus on Vocabulary includes seven units that cover general themes: (a) "Our Changing Society," (b) "Consumer Behavior and Marketing," (c) "Workplaces and Work Spaces," (d) "Use and Abuse of Natural Resources," (e) "We Are What We Eat," (f) "Encounters With Music and Sound," and (g) "Animal Nature." Each unit consists of four chapters; the first three are the main chapters, which contain at least one reading from a college textbook, and the fourth chapter is specifically dedicated to strategy practice.

Each of the main chapters contains sections clearly based on sound principles of second language acquisition. *Getting Started* provides personalized warm-up questions about the topic of the chapter, which are successful in activating students' interest and prior knowledge. Then, in *Target Words*, students are asked to assess their knowledge of each of the 24 target words of the chapter. The learners are thus given a map with the final destination marked and are encouraged to find their individual starting point. Any progress toward the destination is a sign of learning visible to the students and a source of motivation.

Next is the *Reading* section, which includes a near-authentic academic passage followed by comprehension questions. The passage contains all of the chapter target words in bold and many of the target words of

previous chapters. For learning the meanings of the contextualized target words, often inductively and by using strategies, there is a *Word Meaning* section. Additionally, since learning a new word involves much more than learning just its meanings, students can practice using the derivative forms of the words (*Word Families*) and develop their intuition about word partnerships, which will allow them to use the words naturally (*Collocation*).

The main chapters provide production or free practice of the target words with readings, discussions, and writing *Expansion* activities. For example, learners are asked whether they agree or disagree with thought-provoking statements, or they may be given questionnaires to complete that contain the target vocabulary. Lastly, the *Strategy Practice* chapter of each unit raises awareness of other kinds of word knowledge not dealt with in the main chapters (e.g., frequency). It also features other vocabulary learning strategies (e.g., using word roots and affixes) and extensively deals with how to fully take advantage of dictionaries.

Other strengths of *Focus on Vocabulary* include its commitment to using academic words in authentic contexts and recycling the words to promote student learning. Apart from choosing excerpts from college textbooks (with minor simplification of the nonacademic vocabulary and difficult phrasing), the sentences used in exercises such as collocations are also authentic in nature because they are based on patterns found in the 179 million-word *New Longman Corpus*. As for recycling, the target vocabulary is reused four times in each chapter and is also repeated naturally in new contexts in subsequent chapters.

Some weaknesses ought to be mentioned. As many teachers may be aware, academic vocabulary instruction can become monotonous; therefore, a wider variety of activities would increase student and teacher motivation. The reading comprehension questions could also be improved since they often cause students to parrot the passage in order to respond. Comprehension questions need to

be adapted that require more critical thinking and paraphrasing as well as summary writing practice.

Other minor shortcomings are lengthy instructions before some activities and the fact that certain strategies seem to be overemphasized (e.g., guessing from context), but since teachers rarely stick to textbooks from beginning to end and supplement from time to time, *Focus on Vocabulary* is definitely worth trying. Its sound theoretical foundations, which are due to the expertise of the authors in teaching vocabulary, result in a vocabulary text that teachers can truly trust.

Read All About It (Starter)

Susan Iannuzzi and Renée Weiss

New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

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Teaching reading to beginning ESL learners is challenging but does not have to be impossible. Teaching reading to learners at the beginning level creates good learning habits and builds a solid academic foundation, but often students are not motivated enough to read on their own so that reading assignments become a dreaded chore. Students can also become discouraged when they encounter a difficult text, especially one they cannot relate to. The book *Read All About It (Starter)* addresses just this issue as it is filled with relevant topics and authentic, engaging materials that are easy to read for adult or young adult ESL learners at the beginning level.

The starter book in the *Read All About It* series is an independent reading textbook, but it can also be used with the *Basic Oxford Picture Dictionary*. The themes in the book correspond to those in the dictionary and students can easily look up the words because the *Basic Oxford Picture Dictionary* page numbers are provided in the word list at the end of the text.

Read All About It (Starter) is divided into

several sections that combine for a comprehensive reading experience. The “Talk About It” section provides an opportunity for discussions before any reading takes place. The teacher can introduce the topic and encourage students to share their prior knowledge and personal experience in the open-ended activities and guided discussions.

The main section of this book is appropriately named “Read About It” and contains prereading, reading, and postreading activities. Before the students begin to read, they can gather more information on the topic and make predictions about the text.

New vocabulary is introduced in context and does not appear in a list until after the reading passage. This approach allows the students to encounter the words in context before they look up the meaning, a real-life reading strategy. This means that students are not expected to know every word in the text, and comprehension is addressed realistically. Instead of giving out vocabulary lists, teachers can focus on teaching learning strategies such as guessing the meaning of words from context and identifying main ideas in a passage.

A set of comprehension questions guide the students through the prereading or become a group activity for the class after reading the passage once. In this case, the activity can be done individually or in groups, which provides flexibility and an opportunity to address the needs of students with different learning styles. The authors suggest that students can also demonstrate their comprehension of the passage by categorizing and sequencing ideas from the text.

The students are also given the opportunity to discuss the material and share their personal experiences and knowledge after they have read the passage. Beginning students may give only short answers, but they can benefit from this activity greatly by practicing speaking and listening skills.

The postreading activities offer a chance for the students to also practice writing; these writing activities can be done as a homework assignment, which allows the students to gain

another perspective and involve family members and friends, making the activity more personal and enjoyable by relating it to the students’ lives.

The “Read More About It” section offers another passage on the topic in a format similar to the first one, including prereading, reading, and postreading activities. This feature is especially useful and teachers should not skip it—it is not merely a review but expands the topic and offers a different angle and a second chance for the students to connect with the material.

Special features of the book such as teacher’s notes, answer keys, and word lists offer additional support for teachers and students alike. Perhaps the most valuable of all is the “Remember the Words” section in the back of the book. This section provides a table with five columns for a personal vocabulary journal. Students can enter not only a new word and its meaning, but they can also note how to pronounce it, the unit it appeared in, and a sentence that illustrates the word. Students have a variety of ways to remember the word through these associations.

On one hand, the topics of *Read All About It* are not only relevant but also very engaging. Appropriately, the first unit is about the weather; as a natural conversation starter it introduces the students to an aspect of American culture in a subtle way. However, no book is perfect, and this book is no exception. Although the topics are relevant and engaging, their sequence is not optimal for beginners. An important topic, “Calling the Doctor,” may be more appropriate toward the beginning of the book, and teachers may decide to hold off on complex topics such as “Hi-Tech Families” and “Homes on the Edge” until the students have become familiar with the book’s features and activities.

Despite its shortcomings, the starter book in the *Read All About It* series is a fitting text for teaching reading to both young adults and adults in beginning ESL classrooms. It provides a solid foundation for reading and learning strategies that will last a lifetime.

World Link: Developing English Fluency (Books 1-4)

Susan Stempleski, James R. Morgan,
and Nancy Douglas
Boston: Thompson Heinle, 2005.

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Increasing fluency without sacrificing accuracy is a challenging aspect of second language acquisition that ESL teachers continue to wrestle with today. Should ESL teachers focus on language use or language usage? Brown (2001) states that “fluency and accuracy are both important goals to pursue in Communicative Language Teaching” (p. 268). He later adds that current approaches strongly favor teaching language use (message orientation) while teaching language usage (language orientation) plays a supporting role (p. 269). The *World Link Series* by Susan Stempleski, James R. Morgan, and Nancy Douglas provides a healthy balance between fluency and accuracy through its excellent integration of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills and inclusion of vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar.

This four-part series is written for young and adult ESL learners from the low-beginning to high-intermediate levels. The books each consist of 12 units based on 12 topics relevant to young adult and adult audiences. The 12 topics vary within the four different volumes of the series, titled: *Introduction, Book One, Book Two, and Book Three*. These books each include four main components of vocabulary, grammar, communication, and topics.

The vocabulary section, titled “Vocabulary Link,” uses word families and useful expressions to increase knowledge of the vocabulary necessary for students to understand the subsequent activities. The listening section, titled simply “Listening,” always follows the vocabulary section and requires students to listen to two CD tracks and respond in a variety of ways, including sentence completion, multiple choice, and true/false. The listening activities

are also often preceded with an effective one- or two-sentence prelistening question to help focus students on the topic to be discussed.

The speaking section is divided into two parts, “Speaking” and “Speaking Strategies.” The former uses a CD-based dialogue that includes the specific speaking strategy to be discussed (e.g., expressing intentions). The latter allows students to practice specific strategies that were introduced in the conversation, either in pairs or in front of the class.

Each topical unit includes a short, high-interest reading passage followed by a writing activity related to the reading. The authors have strategically placed prereading, during-reading, and postreading activities before each reading selection. Part A is a prereading activity, such as skimming the headlines of a newspaper excerpt for the gist of the article. Part B, a during-reading activity, requires students to read the passage and interact with the passage through underlining, finding true or false answers, completing fill-ins, and so forth. Part C is a short postreading activity in which students must respond to the reading in some guided format.

The grammar component, titled “Language Link,” includes activities that are taught inductively or deductively, depending on which is more effective and practical for the grammar item being taught. These grammar points are related in some way to the preceding speaking or reading activities and ample opportunity is given for the students to practice these points communicatively in pair work. Each unit concludes with a “Communication” section, which provides further opportunities for students to practice concepts learned in the previous activities in pairs or groups.

Thompson Heinle provides an excellent Web site at worldlinks.heinle.com for EL learners to continue their studies on-line. This site has links to both student and instructor pages for each of the four books in the series. The student page allows the students to select one of the 12 units in the book and then access the learning objectives for a particular unit, a glossary with relevant vocabulary, sup-

plemental exercises, flash cards, a concentration game, a crossword puzzle, a dictation exercise with authentic audio language, and a unit quiz. Students can also look up difficult words in *Heinle's Newbury House Dictionary of American English*.

The instructor Web site allows the instructor to access tracking information for the audio recordings. In addition, after a user name and password have been approved, ESL teachers may access speaking assessment prompts, examine a placement test package, receive a video answer key, download MP3 files for the CD audio tracks, and analyze video character profiles. Examview Pro, a test-writing component, allows instructors to create their own tests based on the topics in the book.

World Link has several merits worth noting, such as the excellent integration of the various skills into cohesive topical units. A second strength is the grammar component nested within a communicative context. Moreover, the series provides students with ample opportunities to participate in teacher/student and student/student interactions in individual, pair, group, and whole class activities. A wide variety of topics, colorful photographs and charts, and authentic reading and writing activities add even more appeal to this series.

A weakness of these books is that some of the computer-generated graphics depicting people are of poor quality. In addition, even though Thompson Heinle does include a video component on-line at worldlink.heinle.com, the series could be improved by adding a video component to complement the in-class lessons. All students may not have Internet access and, thus, would benefit from an occasional in-class video related to the specific unit being taught. This would allow for more immediate student/teacher and student/student discussion of the videos.

World Link is an excellent ESL textbook that integrates the four language skills. The colorful and well-organized scope and sequence charts at the beginning of each of the four books provide instructors with a

clear overview of each text. Despite its slight shortcomings in the area of the quality of some computer graphics and the lack of an in-class video component, the benefits of this series far outweigh any weaknesses. I highly recommend this series to ESL instructors who seek a well-organized and balanced core textbook with strong technological support and a healthy balance between fluency and accuracy.

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Our Own Journeys: Readings for Cross-Cultural Communication

Norine Dresser

White Plains, NY: Pearson Education, 2003.

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English as a Second Language learners face numerous challenges that may seem related exclusively to learning the target language and adapting to the new sociocultural environment. As ESL teachers, however, we recognize that nonnative English learners who live in the US function in a culturally diverse society that exposes them to learners of different nationalities. In this culturally rich environment, ESL teachers must embrace the complex task of teaching second language (L2) skills and culture, while developing L2 learners' awareness and sensitivity toward the sociocultural background of other nonnative English speakers.

Norine Dresser's book, *Our Own Journeys: Reading for Cross-Cultural Communication*, covers a wide variety of customs and traditions from different countries around the world and compares them to specific aspects of U.S. culture. Through the pages of this book, ESL learners identify and appreciate their own cultural backgrounds while deepening their understanding of the multicultural-

al composition of American society. ESL students learn to expand their cultural knowledge by going beyond native and target cultures and learn to cope with cross-cultural misunderstandings.

Would you feel offended if someone wrote a telephone number on the back of your business card? Is it acceptable to refuse a favor to a friend? Are men being disrespectful by not taking off their hats when they enter public places? These situations may create a feeling of uneasiness and diminish self-confidence for many of our ESL students as they interact in their second language. By gaining familiarity with different cultures and different customs, students can further shape their identities as L2 learners and fully understand how language learning helps them connect with the target culture.

As indicated by the author in the introductory pages, the book is intended primarily for high-beginning ESL students. It integrates communicative language instruction with culturally specific situations that elicit students' active participation in the language-learning experience. The book builds on a topical/situational syllabus that highlights holidays, body language, table manners, verbal customs, weddings, and business practices. The table of contents includes 20 units, which are divided into two major sections: the first section includes prereading and reading comprehension activities, while the second section focuses on student exchange of cultural information with the purpose of clarifying any possible miscommunications when functioning in U. S. sociocultural environments.

At the beginning of each unit, a full-page picture activates students' background knowledge on the topic and stimulates students' ability to formulate predictions by engaging learners in class discussions and/or group conversations ("What Do You Think?"). The reading passage that follows is based on a true story. A subsection with a few open-ended questions intends to develop students' ability to guess the cultural implications of the situation presented in the reading ("Can You Guess?").

Students' predictions are validated in this first section of the unit as well, via a brief explanation of the story that students and teacher can read together ("Let's Find Out"). Two reading comprehension subsections ("Comprehension and Retell the Story") follow with a series of true/false questions and open-ended questions. Vocabulary-development activities ("Vocabulary") are also central to each unit and are combined with exercises that teach students to consult a monolingual English dictionary ("Dictionary Discoveries"). The approach to dictionary use is introduced gradually throughout the book; the author starts by presenting simple tasks, such as alphabetizing vocabulary and searching for word meaning, and moves on to more complex tasks such as discovering multiple meanings, matching, and writing word definitions.

As the second section of the unit describes U.S. customs and traditions related to the topic of the unit ("Culture Capsule"), students activate background knowledge and learn about the American target culture. In a subsequent activity, students share their personal experiences by comparing the target culture with customs and traditions from their own native culture ("Cultural Exchange"). Each unit ends with guided writing tasks that elicit students' critical thinking and personal involvement as they describe their personal stories and experiences ("Expansion" and "Our Own Stories").

This book is a great supplemental text that allows for the development of sociocultural competencies. It offers L2 learners a variety of relevant and meaningful information and situations to explore. The wide selection of culturally enriching topics stimulates student/student and student/teacher interaction, thus increasing learners' overall language proficiency.

ESL teachers looking for grammar instruction points will find that language structures are not part of this syllabus. However, the book offers plenty of opportunities to review and reinforce grammar features previously taught within a different instruc-

tional context. Illustrations are limited to the opening drawing and the print is colorless, which gives the book a rather plain look; nonetheless, the captivating and engaging context of the reading passages compensate for any graphic flaws.

This book guides L2 learners through their journeys to a new identity in American society; it teaches them to validate and appreciate their own cultural backgrounds as well as their classmates' customs and traditions. *Our Own Journeys* promotes a respectful language-learning environment and supports effective communication, thus making this text a great teaching resource.

The Genius of Language: 15 Writers Reflect on Their Mother Tongues

Wendy Lesser (Ed.)

New York: Anchor Books, 2004.

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Nobel Laureate Ilya Prigogine is credited with saying, "The world is far too rich to be expressed in a single language... the essential aspects of our experience can never be condensed into a single description. We have to use many descriptions which are irreducible to each other" (Prigogine, 1980). This thought is the essence of the book *The Genius of Language: 15 Writers Reflect on Their Mother Tongues*.

Wendy Lesser edited and wrote the introduction for this collection of passages by writers who came to write in English well after learning to navigate their worlds in another language. The contributors provide profound insights into the realities of those who experience multiple languages, cultures, and indeed, realities. This book is not a typical work found on an ESL teacher's bedside table or on a TESOL program reading list, yet it offers clear insights into the minds of those who have—in some sense—left their mother tongue to write for publications in English.

To say that Lesser's editing is no less than brilliant is not hyperbole. The entries read like the stories of people we would like to know and meet for lunch. Lesser takes the authors' already fine writing and pares it to the essential without being simplistic or patronizing. The authors come from around the globe and report vastly different experiences and circumstances, yet there is an eerie sameness to what they feel and think.

Luc Sante writes of his mother tongue, "French is my secret identity, inaccessible to my friends. Sometimes I feel as though I have it all to myself" (p. 84), and Amy Tan says of her struggle to understand Chinese culture through language, "It's dangerous business, this sorting out of language and behavior" (p. 29). Each of the 15 proclaims the gift of more than one language but also acknowledges its cost in terms of loneliness and separateness.

The Genius of Language is a book of stories and a book of ideas for everyone; it should, however, be required reading for those who are preparing to work with second language students and for anyone who is grappling with how culture and language are intertwined. Teachers who have second language students in their classes could also benefit from reading this book, particularly in a study or discussion group. And if those same teachers read this book while reading research about language acquisition and maintenance and debated the merits of bilingual programs, critical conversations would result. In the teacher-preparation classroom with a skillful teacher, the book could be a gold mine of examples and anecdotal information about the processes, thoughts, and feelings that are certain to be present in the minds of our second language students.

The Genius of Language is a fine book and a useful one. The potential power of the writing for those who work with second language students is perhaps best expressed by Ha-Yun Jung, "And I live on, not feeling whole in Korean or in English. For me, one language is complementary to the other, one always lack-

ing a capacity the other has. And I have a fear, constantly, of not quite being understood in just one language” (p. 160). For educators, reading this book will increase a trait necessary for us to connect with our students—empathy—so that we see the individual human beings sitting in our classrooms as people with real stories.

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