

Reviewed Work:

Text Features and Reading Comprehension. (2003). Mary Lee Field. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre. Pp. 44. ISBN 9971740834. \$3.50

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According to Euclid (c300BC): "Most ideas about teaching are not new, but not everyone knows the old ideas." In keeping with this ancient wisdom this slim volume is not full of groundbreaking new research but rather sets out clearly and succinctly an approach to one aspect of teaching reading skills - the use of text features to aid comprehension. This book is meant as a practical, affordable and easy-to-read guide for use by teachers, who may or may not be native speakers of the target language and who have a monolingual class. The information, however, could easily be adapted for use with a multi-lingual class or used by a native speaker.

Field's book is one in a RELC Portfolio series published by SEAMEO (South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization). These books are usually written by those with great experience in the language teaching field and offered at an affordable price, which means they will be bought and used.

Succinct this book may be, but it manages to fit a great deal into its 44 pages. It consists of a detailed introduction, five chapters dealing with the actual topic and then a brief conclusion. It also includes a manageable bibliography for those wishing to pursue the theoretical aspects further and three appendices. One appendix is a description of text features and the other two appendices are the texts used throughout the book. What is attractive about this book therefore is its accessibility in terms of length, style and practical ideas.

The first chapter is titled "What are text features?" The topic is clearly defined and the reader is engaged from the beginning. There follows a list of key textual features, some examples and exercises for teachers to do in order to increase their own awareness of the reading process, and a brief discussion of the functions of the text features. Field's argument is that activating teachers' consciousness will make it easier for them to understand their students' position. As Field (2003: 21) states: "It is important to remember that students have internalized their reading processes so thoroughly, that they are rarely conscious of them." They may, therefore, be unable to use these processes to aid their L2 reading. This may also apply to teachers who are just starting to teach reading. They, too, need to have their consciousness raised.

Next, Field discusses how to transfer L1 readers' use of text features to reading in L2. This time it is the students who are focused on, with both tasks for students and techniques for teachers fully explained. The first exercises aim to use the students' L1 to activate their prior knowledge before using these skills in another language. Alderson (2000: 17) states that "... much research

has emphasized the importance in reading of the knowledge that a reader brings to the text." This might seem obvious in the case of L1 reading. However it is important for learners acquiring an L2 to gain awareness that, even though their knowledge of the new language may be limited, they can still draw on their knowledge of reading and the topic in hand. According to Goodman (1982) quoted in Alderson (2000: 17) "reading is a 'psycholinguistic game' in which readers guess or predict the text's meaning on the basis of minimal textual information" – exactly Field's position.

Chapters Three and Four concentrate on using text features both before and during reading. Field discusses the techniques of prediction, visualizing, activating background knowledge, highlighting key words and main points and using lists. Throughout she includes sample texts and worksheets, which would be most helpful to the classroom teacher. Unusually Field does not dwell on activities and exercises for use after reading. She believes that many post-reading activities bore the students rather than excite them and discourage them from being enthusiastic to read more in the L2. In her view more emphasis should be placed on a general understanding of the text and the development of integrative reading skills.

The book concludes with a chapter stressing the importance of L1 reading skills and their transfer to the L2. It is a reminder to teachers of the importance of transferring students' prior knowledge and experience to L2 acquisition. The reference list not only brings together the source of the key theoretical ideas underpinning Field's approach, but also provides an excellent starting point for teachers wanting to read more about these important concepts. The texts in the appendices, which include a page from the Herald Tribune and an article on Adult and Community Learning (both used in various exercises throughout the book) provide very accessible descriptions of text features. Teachers can draw on these descriptions as a basis for analyzing other texts that they might wish to use for reading activities.

Field is an experienced teacher and researcher in the theory and methodology of reading, as well as being active in the area of cultural influences on reading. She has taught in many countries and is a well-published author in this field. She has obviously thought very carefully about her audience and there are few problems with accessibility in the content of this book. The only exception for this reviewer was the fact that, while most texts used in the exercises were provided, some were not and the provision of the additional two texts would have offered the teacher a complete set in reference to the exercises provided.

That minor limitation aside, however, I found this to be an excellent small book on reading. Teaching and learning reading is an enormous topic to cover and focusing on one specific aspect and making it easier to teach is an invaluable aid for teachers looking for ways to help their students. This book is to be thoroughly recommended for its brevity and usability for the classroom teacher.

References

Alderson, J. C. (2000). *Assessing reading*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.