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Reviewed work:

Read This! (2010). Alice Savage & Daphne Mackey. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 125 + *x* per book. ISBN 978-0-521-74786-8 (Book One); 978-0-521-74789-9 (Book Two); 978-0-521-74793-6 (Book Three). Student's books (\$26.00 USD each), teacher's manuals (\$19.00 USD each) (with a CD and tests for each unit).

Reviewed by
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“Fascinating Stories from the Content Areas” is the subtitle of *Read This!*¹ This three-book series from Cambridge University Press certainly delivers on that promise. Written by Daphne Mackey (Books 1 & 2) and Alice Savage (Books 2 & 3), each book contains three-to-five chapters on a major topic, such as psychology, technology, sports and fitness, and aviation. With an attractive layout making good use of space and color, the books are aimed at learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), predominantly adult and young adult, ranging from high beginners to intermediates. A website accompanies the books with audio recordings and a WebQuest activity for each chapter. Readers can view sample pages of the teacher book and the student book online at www.cambridge.org.

The introductory description by the authors that the series contains “high interest” and “content rich” (p. v) nonfiction is certainly appropriate as there is something new and of interest for students and teachers alike. Students can read, for example, about the Maasai tradition of drinking fresh cow’s blood with milk (“The Traveling Chef,” Book 3, Chapter 2) or that some scientists think that the great garbage patch in the Pacific Ocean could be the size of the United States (“An Ocean of Plastic,” Book 3, Chapter 5). In the same way, presenting information in an “easily digestible” (p. v) style of writing should engage young adult readers. In addition, activities that enable readers to look at the ideas and vocabulary before reading ensure that the texts are accessible. From a student perspective, the topics in these books are challenging, and they are very useful for EAP programs because readers can practice reading and also gain new

knowledge about the topic of a text. For example, in “Death by Internet,” readers can find out about the real effects of spending too much time playing online games. What is also useful is that the authors have ensured that the books increase in difficulty from the first book to the final book.

The well-organised activity sequences present a solid approach to checking vocabulary and reading comprehension. We particularly liked the “Developing Reading Skills” focus because it covers a range of useful skills that are recycled through the books and can be utilised independently, such as ordering events in time sequence, identifying cause and effect, and distinguishing between main ideas and supporting details. It would be good to see students encouraged to produce spoken or written texts which are organised in these ways, such as a short talk or paragraph using the main idea and supporting details framework they have identified in the text. There are frequent opportunities for pair or group discussion in the activities in the chapters, along with writing topics which include composing an email, a blog, and a news article from the perspective of someone who figures in one of the readings in the unit. For example, in Book 2 at the completion of Unit 1 on healthcare, the task is to write a news article from the perspective of one of three people in the preceding stories: a patient, a doctor or the scientist who created aspirin. These tasks are engaging ways of getting students to use some of the ideas and language they encountered in the readings.

The student reviewer in our group felt that the readings increase in length and complexity from the first to the third book. The exercise questions in the third book took more time to answer than those in the first two books. At times, the multi-choice questions based on the reading texts could be answered from general knowledge, without having to read the text. After a few retelling activities, a change in the type of activity was needed. One suggestion could be to include more exercises such as completing sentences with target words ensuring that the right tense or correct form of the word was used. Another suggestion was more true/false/make-it-right style questions that would help the reader check how well they had understood. An example of a true/false/make-it-right activity using general knowledge would be to look at the statement “Auckland is the capital city of New Zealand.” This statement is false. The students would correct the statement to read “Wellington is the capital city of New Zealand.” The questions on finding cause and effect were very well constructed, but students on an academic pathway would want more.

The vocabulary researcher and author of the Academic Word List (AWL) (Coxhead, 2000) observed that the authors group target vocabulary in an innovative way. For example, in the unit called “Death by Internet” in the second book mentioned above, the first group of words focused on is subject-based vocabulary related to psychology (*addicted to, counseling, and disorder*). The second group of words is from the AWL (*have access to, authority, collapse, estimate, generation, and role*). The final group contains words related to technology (*cyber café, virtual reality, and wired*). Readers are encouraged to work with these words before they read through the text, identifying the words they know already, discussing answers with a partner, and looking up unknown words in a dictionary. This introduction to vocabulary is followed by a gap fill activity. After reading, the vocabulary is recycled in a retelling summary activity (a passage, not sentences this time) and in a collocation matching exercise. A discussion exercise incorporates several of the target words (through questions such as “*Why do you think governments are*

worried about Internet Addiction Disorder? What can they do about it?” (Book 2, p. 104). In this example, productive use could be targeted more directly, as is done in Chapter 1 and Chapter 4 of Book 3, where students are given a list of words to include in a written activity. It is good to see some of the target items appearing in the “wrap up” of the chapter in a variety of ways, including a list of the words that were the focus of the chapter, a gap fill activity, a discussion activity, a role play activity, or a writing activity.

From the perspective of another member of our group, a teacher in an academic English programme who may at times teach students at the intermediate level (Book 3), the book would more likely be used as a supplement rather than an integral part of the programme, unless there was a thematic link to a topic being studied. In this teaching context, it is natural to look closely at the AWL target words for each text, because they are not discipline-specific in terms of selection, number of occurrences, variety of forms and useful collocations. The first two texts in Unit 1 in Book 3 on Tourism and Hospitality contain two words in each list that students would not be advised to learn at the same time because of the principle of avoiding interference (*appreciate/approach* in “Ice Hotel,” *distinct/diverse* in “The Traveling Chef”) (see Nation, 2000, for more on interference and vocabulary learning). The third text in this section, “Sail High in the Sky,” that deals with the topic of the tallest building in the world, located in Dubai, has multiple occurrences of some of the target AWL vocabulary (*design, layer, structure*), along with recycling of AWL words or family members from the previous two texts (*approach, unique, construction, distinctive*). It also includes 10 additional words from the AWL that students may have seen before in order to help build their knowledge of a word. If readers can get beyond the feeling that this text is an extensive advertisement for the Burj al Arab, with the Royal Suite costing US \$28,000 per night, there are some good opportunities for teachers to work with this text beyond the activities provided. If students have their own vocabulary learning system, such as a notebook, index cards, or a spreadsheet, attention can be given to building on their knowledge of a word, such as *distinct*. Students would have completed an activity to decide which part of speech to use in a sentence (p. 14), using either *distinction, distinct* or *distinctly*. In the following story *distinctive* appears (p. 19), which provides a good opportunity to explore this new adjective, first looking at the collocation, then checking how it is used in a dictionary, and finally adding it to their own records.

There is a useful section at the back of each book that explains the origins and importance of the AWL when learning vocabulary for academic study, and how to use the series to assist in this process. This information is followed by a list of AWL words used in the series and those that are the focus of study are coded so that students can find the appropriate book and chapter. It is customary to present such lists alphabetically for ease of reference, and that is what has been done in this series. However, it might be a good idea to include a note here suggesting that students not study the words in this way.

The reader is also pointed to a website that gives more information on the topics covered in the books. However, while Coxhead’s WebQuest lead her to some interesting facts about digital natives, she was logged out of the Cambridge site and she was not able to complete the worksheet. Falconer’s two WebQuests were more successful in a technological sense. There are also well-presented audio recordings of the texts which can be played or downloaded. While these books are clearly intended for use in classrooms, the series also lends itself well to

independent study of particular themes and academic subject areas that would be of interest to students of English for Academic Purposes.

In summary, the student, the teacher, and the researcher who together wrote this review all thought this series was likeable, usable, and recommendable.

Notes

1. We are approaching this series as a researcher (Coxhead), teacher (Falconer), and student (Le) in English for Academic Purposes. Any evaluations and recommendations in this review come from these three perspectives. In reviewing the series, we provide comments about the volumes overall rather than a detailed description of each book, so that readers can get a sense of the major features.

References

- Coxhead, A. (2000). A new academic word list. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34, 213–238.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2000). Learning vocabulary in lexical sets: Dangers and guidelines. *TESOL Journal*, 9(2), 6–10.

About the Reviewers

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