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Reviewed work:

Making Connections Intro: Skills and Strategies for Academic Reading (2nd ed.). (2015). Jessica Williams & David Wiese. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 286. ISBN 9781107516076. \$44.25

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English as a second language (ESL) learners who are first-time readers of academic texts might find academic reading overwhelming. In addition to decoding print, they need to understand academic words, which are likely unfamiliar to them since they are infrequent in everyday communication (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999). Academic readers also need to be active, strategic, and purposeful to comprehend and locate information effectively.

A textbook that supports ESL students as beginner academic readers should provide systematic exposure to academic text to develop reading fluency and build academic vocabulary. It should also train students to use cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies to aid comprehension. Cognitive reading strategies—such as previewing, skimming, scanning, identifying main ideas—help students become more confident when approaching and navigating an academic text. Metacognitive strategies, on the other hand, help students monitor their own comprehension by being aware when to utilize a specific reading strategy. Metacognition is defined by Flavell (1976) as “active monitoring and consequent regulation” (p. 232) when processing information.

Making Connections Intro: Skills and Strategies for Academic Reading (2nd ed.) is a good example of a textbook at the high-beginning level. It aims at enhancing students’ reading fluency, building their academic vocabulary, and equipping them with reading strategies. It is the first volume of a five-textbook series for academic reading published by Cambridge University Press. *Making Connections Intro* presents reading as an interactive process in which students make

connections between text and self, text and text, and text and world (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). That is, students learn how to be active participants in the reading process through bringing their background knowledge and experiences to the text; linking the information, vocabulary, and reading strategies learned from one text to another; and finally connecting the knowledge gained from a reading to the world. The following section explains how *Making Connections Intro* achieves this.

What Does *Making Connections Intro* Offer?

Making Connections Intro consists of eight thematic units: (a) Human Behavior, (b) Fact or Fiction, (c) Marketing, (d) Taste, (e) Oceans, (f) Communication, (g) Money, and (h) Space. Each unit contains three readings related to the theme. The textbook has a consistent organization visualized in Figure 1.

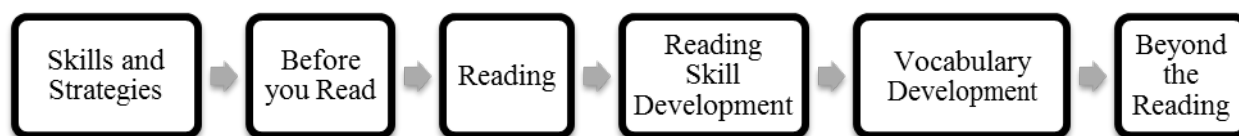


Figure 1. An example of how a unit is structured.

Skills and strategies

At the beginning of each unit, students study and practice specific reading and strategies, such as determining the meaning of unknown words through context. Second language reading research has indicated that the use of reading strategies plays a significant role in comprehension (e.g., Wu, 2008).

Before you read

To activate students' schemata, students discuss questions that help in making connections between text and self. For instance, before reading a passage on procrastination in Unit 1, the word "procrastinate" is first defined, and students then discuss questions about their own experiences with procrastination. Students also interact with the text before they read for a deeper understanding by applying two important reading strategies; previewing and predicting. Schema activation makes reading more interactive as students think about what they read (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007) and try to link the knowledge that they already have to the new information presented in the text.

Reading

Readings are one to two pages long. They are structured clearly (i.e., main idea is presented at the end of the introduction; each paragraph has a clear topic sentence; examples, opinions, and facts are signaled). Sidebars remind students to apply the previously introduced reading strategies as they are reading, which is efficacious in reinforcing metacognition. The readings are

appealing and informative. They are based on facts, research, and real-world events. Additionally, reading thematic articles supports students in making connections across texts. Moreover, downloadable audio recordings of the readings are a great resource for modeling good reading.

Reading development

After each reading, students engage in activities such as “the main idea check” activity, “a closer look” activity (i.e., answering questions related to details), and a “skill review” task in which students have a chance to test their reading comprehension and mastery of reading skill(s).

Vocabulary development

Because each unit contains three thematic readings, vocabulary items are recycled across the readings and in subsequent units. After each reading, several tasks (e.g., definitions, word families, words in context) facilitate the study and practice of the academic words used in the reading. Additionally, the final reading is followed by tasks that connect the words learned in the unit to the Academic Word List (AWL). Repeated exposure and explicit instruction of specific vocabulary (e.g., wordlists, definitions, and exercises) can be beneficial (Graves, 2006) as academic words become more noticeable and retainable to students.

Beyond the reading

This section works on developing students’ higher-level thinking. It takes students beyond the information presented in the reading. Students discuss questions that require critical thinking. They research and find more information about the reading topic and write a short report on the results of their research.

The textbook comes with the following resources that are available for free at www.cambridge.org/makingconnections: downloadable audio recordings of the readings, editable quizzes, and a Teacher’s Manual. In addition to the hard copy, the unit tests come in a Word doc format, which is convenient for adapting the content of the test to meet course objectives. Each test covers two units, combining two themes, and is followed by comprehension questions and vocabulary and strategies quizzes. The Teacher’s Manual comes in two versions: a hard copy and a PDF. It contains teaching suggestions, quizzes, and answer keys for unit exercises and quizzes.

Personal Reflection

I have personally used this book in a pre-intermediate level reading and writing course (an approximate IELTS score is 3.5-4). The course is offered at an intensive language center in the U.S., which prepares students academically to pursue undergraduate and graduate studies. There were ten students in my class from different countries including Japan, China, Korea, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, and Haiti. Over the course of the session, I was able to observe—through reading alouds, discussions of articles, and formative and summative assessment—that my students grew as strategic readers. Having various opportunities to consciously notice and practice the use of

academic vocabulary was also effective in expanding students' inventory of academic language. I could observe their use of academic words from the units in their discussions and written reports about the topics of the readings. Additionally, the appendices include resources that my students found helpful, such as the key vocabulary of each unit with definitions, an index to key vocabulary, strategies for improving reading speed, and a chart where students may record the reading time and speed for each article. I also found the audio feature particularly valuable when assigning a reading outside class. Students reported that listening to and reading the passage at the same time helped them with reading fluency and accuracy. Furthermore, students' engagement and enthusiasm in the reading topics was evident. The readings are centered around real-world topics, so it was easy to locate authentic material to support the readings and boost students' interest in the topics. For instance, in a unit on marketing, the authors provide some examples of guerrilla marketing by referring to T-Mobile's flash mob-style advertisement and UNICEF's use of dirty water vending machines as a part of their Dirty Water campaign. Watching both advertisements on YouTube made the topic more interesting and enhanced students' understanding of the information in the reading.

One drawback of this textbook is that it may not address all the expected learning outcomes of a program's reading curriculum. In my case, for example, the textbook does not have explicit exercises for making inferences, so I had to create supplementary material. Additionally, the post-reading exercises take a multiple-choice format as do the questions on the unit tests. Because I needed to assess the students' ability in answering questions using complete sentences, I adapted some of the unit test questions by eliminating the choices. Nevertheless, overall, *Making Connections Intro* is a powerful resource for supporting L2 beginner academic readers in acquiring essential reading skills and strategies and building their academic vocabulary.

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