

***Teaching ESL/EFL Reading and Writing* by I.S.P. Nation & John Macalister**

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I teach an upper-division undergraduate course called “Techniques in Second Language Teaching: Reading and Writing” that introduces preservice teachers to concepts and methods for teaching. One challenge is finding a textbook that addresses both skills without wasting students’ money on a book that also covers listening and speaking. I.S.P. Nation and John Macalister’s 2021 book *Teaching ESL/EFL Reading and Writing* devotes equal space to both reading and writing and is written at a level that is accessible to undergraduate readers with some foundation in second language development and language teaching. A revision of Nation’s 2009 book with the same title, the second edition has added valuable updates in some areas but does not address certain concerns I had with the first edition.

Summary of Chapters

The chapters are evenly divided between teaching reading (chapters 1 and 3–6) and teaching writing (chapters 7–11). Chapters 2 and 12 propose principles for planning a reading or writing course and offer suggestions for applying those principles in teaching a course.

Each chapter provides some theoretical explanation of the processes addressed in the chapter and then introduces teaching considerations about that aspect of reading or writing. The chapters conclude with a few “tasks” for readers, including discussion questions and directives to practice activities described somewhere in the chapter. Chapters end with one or two recommendations for further reading, many of which are articles and chapters written by the first author, Nation. Sample activities are included throughout the book at points where they align with the topic of the chapter. Most are laid out with enough detail that they could be implemented in a reading or writing class without much additional preparation.

The chapters on teaching reading are where this book shines. Both authors are well respected experts in second language reading, and it is clear that they are up to date on the literature and able to explain processes and techniques in ways that novice teachers can understand and put into their own practice. Chapter 1 introduces core concepts in learning to read, including those that learners can transfer from their first-language reading knowledge (such as the alphabetic principle and some reading strategies) as well as those that must be learned specifically for English, such as phonemic awareness and certain writing conventions. The chapter ends with a list of principles for teaching reading: meaning-focused input and output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. These principles are then elaborated on in chapter 2 and picked up in various ways through the rest of the book.

Chapter 3 introduces techniques for teaching intensive reading, and chapter 4 covers extensive reading. Chapter 3 discusses reasons for doing intensive reading (comprehension, language development, vocabulary learning, information gathering, and learning about a genre) and notes features of good intensive reading exercises and comprehension questions. In outlining the goals and limitations of teaching through extensive reading, Chapter 4 stresses careful planning when implementing an ER program to maximize incidental learning opportunities. Sections of this chapter recommend techniques for finding learners' vocabulary levels and choosing graded readers, as well as pros and cons of electronic reading programs and authentic (rather than adapted) texts. This chapter is much more thoroughly referenced than other chapters (probably because of the authors' own interest in the topic), with recent research summarized in detail.

Chapter 5 reviews reasons for promoting fluency in reading and provides suggestions for teaching students to read faster. Chapter 6 then discusses ways of assessing reading. Both chapters feel somewhat uneven compared to the polished work of chapters 3 and 4. They each end with a section of frequently asked questions about the topic of the chapter, with brief responses to questions such as "How can progress in reading fluency be measured?" (p. 80); this section feels a bit like the authors couldn't figure out how to integrate this information more coherently into the chapter but wanted to include it. Chapter 6 includes a section on activities for assessment, such as reading logs (for progress), reading aloud (for diagnosing problems), and cloze tests (for proficiency), as well as comprehension questions about texts (although the discussion here of comprehension questions does not refer back to the chapter on intensive reading, which explained comprehension questions in great detail).

Some of the subsequent chapters on teaching writing are not aligned with current research or best practices in second language writing. Except for the new chapter 9 on writing and digital technology, the writing chapters remain almost the same as in the first edition of the book and primarily cite references from the 1980s and 1990s. Chapter 7, "Helping Learners Write," reviews the same four strands noted earlier in the book, but with emphasis on what they look like in writing. It then introduces four types of tasks for teaching writing, although the examples of "experience tasks" are drawn from reading, not writing, instruction. The other examples are related to writing but rely mostly on sources from the 1960s–80s, with heavy emphasis on grammar in isolation from more extensive text creation. Chapter 8 describes the writing process (citing Flower and Hayes, 1981, rather than any newer perspectives on the writing process, such as the genre-based teaching and learning cycle; e.g., Brisk, 2015) and emphasizes that curriculum should cover writing that learners need to use in real life. The recommended activities, however, are grounded in classroom writing, with response mostly characterized as grammatical error correction other than a few suggestions for commenting on audience awareness, organization, or clarity of ideas.

As noted earlier, Chapter 9, "Writing and Digital Technology," is completely new in the second edition and reflects much more up-to-date practices and research than the other chapters on writing. The section on multimodal composing provides examples of digital storytelling, followed by an extensive discussion of the effects of digital technology on the writing process, including new types of writing, new sources of information, reduction of handwriting, and changes to sources of feedback. I object, however, to the authors' claim that sharing and publishing is "not typically part of the writing process" (p. 143) but can be done for digital

writing. Sharing and publishing has always been an end goal of process writing, although it was usually done more locally (within the classroom or school) before the internet. The chapter ends with a review of ethical issues raised by digital technology, including plagiarism, copyright infringement, and web courtesy in digital interactions.

Focused on two outmoded concepts, information transfer and topic types, Chapter 10 suggests that various types of writing are characterized by their structure more than any other feature. Current discussions in the field of second language writing argue that this focus on format over purpose is not only unproductive, but sets learners up for difficulties when they need to write for real-world purposes beyond the classroom (Caplan & Johns, 2019). The authors explain that teaching topic-types can help with note taking, but with benefits for reading, not for learning to write. They also admit some limitations to the topic-type approach, but do not recognize that these would not be a problem if instead teachers took a genre approach.

The final chapter on writing, Chapter 11, addresses response to written work, with a few newer sources added since the first edition. The authors recommend many approaches for improving the quality of texts. While some are accepted practices, such as providing whole-class feedback on common errors or encouraging students to reflect on their own writing, others are not advisable; these include collaborative feedback in which several students critique one writer's text (a practice that may cause embarrassment for student writers) and peer editing for grammar errors (learners in the same class generally are not well prepared to provide peers with feedback on the same errors they themselves make). Most problematic to me, however, is the authors' endorsement of reformulation, which they define as "a native speaker rewriting a learner's piece of writing so the learner can then compare their first attempt with the reformulation" (p. 163). When not used judiciously, this practice can lead to appropriation, with teachers taking over learners' texts and potentially changing the meaning from what the writers had originally intended (Merkel, 2018). The final section of the chapter addresses writing assessment, but is too brief to be useful to teachers, particularly for grading classroom writing assignments.

Critique

My overall view of this volume is that it provides thorough but accessible coverage of theories behind learning to read in a second language, with application activities that new teachers can use in their practice without too much modification. I appreciate having separate chapters on intensive and extensive reading, as well as a chapter on assessing reading. The writing section, however, remains out of date and (other than in chapter 9) could have incorporated more recent research in second language writing; much innovative work has come out in the last 20 years that challenges what was standard practice in 20th century writing instruction.

The reading level is about right for my students (upper-division undergraduate), and would probably also be appropriate for a TESOL certificate course. It might be helpful to have more illustrations, charts, and models, since some of the activities are described in words without an example. The introduction refers readers to a YouTube channel created by the authors' colleagues at Victoria University of Wellington, with models of some of the reading techniques. This type of supplemental material would be very helpful for the writing section as well.

References

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