

Nell McCutchan

FOCUS ON READING

A Workbook for ESL Students

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Preface

Focus on Reading is designed for adult students who have prior knowledge of both spoken and written English but still are not proficient readers. The material can be broadly described as intermediate level. However, the instructor can adapt it to serve students with a range of language abilities through selection from the graded exercises. This workbook was written for use in college classes but would also be appropriate in adult education or high school programs. It can serve as the only text in a 40- to 50- hour course of study or be supplemented with a reader.

THE READING PROCESS AND THE ESL STUDENT

Reading, like listening, is a receptive skill whereby the message is interpreted by the receiver. The reader accomplishes this by making use of orthographic, syntactic, and semantic information. The ESL student often lacks the knowledge to take advantage of one or more of these sources and may also be impeded by native language interference.

Although English orthography is systematic, it is very complex. Native speakers, who already control the sound system, find it difficult even after years of study. Most ESL students are still somewhat unsure of the sound system and almost unaware that an orthographic system exists. This lack of information causes the first breakdown in the reading process to occur at the word level. Quite understandably, these students attach such great importance to individual words that they fail to take advantage of the syntactic and semantic clues within the context. As a result, they read so slowly that the meaning escapes them, and reading becomes a frustrating experience.

Students who are new in the United States face another problem, nonlinguistic in nature. They read in a near vacuum as far as the culture is concerned. This makes it impossible for them to put the information they have laboriously acquired into perspective.

THE GOAL OF THE WORKBOOK

The goal of *Focus on Reading* is to increase the reading ability of the students through an understanding of English orthography and an awareness of the syntactic and semantic information in the context. The exercises provide the practice they need to internalize the rules of the language that native speakers make use of intuitively.

THE COVERAGE

Part I, "The Sound System," presents an overview of the English sound system in which the sounds are described by standard dictionary symbols. While this presentation falls short of that offered in pronunciation books, it is

sufficient to enable the students to make better use of the pronunciation information in the dictionary. This look at English sounds serves a second purpose. It forms a basis for an understanding of the dichotomy between the spoken and written forms of the language. It is easier for the students to learn the relationship between sounds and letters if they first have a clear understanding of the difference. After completing the exercises in these sections, they should have the ability to read standard dictionary symbols, knowledge of the effect of voicing on the pronunciation of noun and verb grammatical suffixes, and an awareness of the role stress plays in pronunciation.

Part II, "The Dictionary," describes not only *how* but also *when* to use a standard all-English dictionary. In the first section (Section 6), the information in the individual entries is explained, and the dictionary is cited as a source of quick reference on people, places, and things. The exercises provide the students with the opportunity to explore their dictionaries. In the second section (Section 7), they are discouraged from overreliance on the dictionary while they are actually reading. Examples from the article on Washington, D.C., in Section 11 are used to illustrate how the meaning of individual words is related to the meaning of the sentences in the context. The exercises also utilize vocabulary items from the Section 11 articles.

Part III, "The Spelling System," provides a detailed description of English orthography as it is related to the sound system.* An understanding of the letter-sound relationships contributes to word identification, only one step in the reading process. However, for ESL students, it is an important step in the development of both reading proficiency and vocabulary.

The format used for the presentation of the consonant and vowel spelling units suggests the teaching strategy. The "bare bones" system for which the students are responsible runs down the left-hand side of the page. The sound values of the units are indicated by dictionary symbols, and key words are given. The right-hand side is devoted to notes that provide additional information on the various units as well as exceptions and common words with irregular spelling. While the students are only expected to learn the system, they need to be aware of its irregularities as a basis for comparison. Some 80 percent of the words in English are regular in their spelling. Fortunately, almost all of the irregular 20 percent are high frequency words that most intermediate-level ESL students have already learned.

In presenting these sections, the instructor should encourage the students to internalize, not memorize, the rules of English orthography. This is best accomplished by an emphasis on their use first in familiar, then unfamiliar words, i.e., by analogy. The Teacher's Manual explains how this process can be introduced as a class activity with the students supplying each other with words to fill the "other examples" blanks that accompany each unit. The only rules that they are asked to learn are those for the "long" and "short" vowels, and the strengths and weaknesses of these are carefully explained.

Both the consonant and vowel unit sections include integrated practice drills and final exercises that tie the letter units to the sounds they represent. The vowel unit section also includes sentence and paragraph exercises that require

*The description of the orthographic system is based on the comprehensive coverage of Richard L. Venezky's *The Structure of English Orthography* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970). However, I am sure my efforts at simplification have resulted in imperfections.

the students to use the units in words and also to make use of the syntactic and semantic information in the context. While some of the exercises require them to spell out words, none emphasize spelling per se. The Teacher's Manual suggests that spelling dictations be limited to simple words that let the students demonstrate their understanding of the letter-sound relationships. Undoubtedly they will become more proficient spellers. However, an emphasis on spelling moves the focus away from the actual requirement of reading.

After completing these sections, the students should be able to identify the sound values of the consonant and vowel units in words. They should also be aware of the vowel units that are reduced to schwa in unstressed position. This knowledge of the relationship between letters and sounds contributes not only to the students' reading ability but also, in some cases, to improved pronunciation. Adult students are visually oriented and therefore prone to find the sounds of the language more concrete when they are tied to print. Pronunciation improvement is more likely to be a biproduct when class work is reinforced by work in the language laboratory.

Part IV, "Word Formation," describes how words are formed by affixation. The most common prefixes and suffixes are presented and their use is illustrated in examples. In the case of suffixed words, changes in primary stress and the resultant vowel sound changes are indicated. The sentence exercises are integrated to give the students the opportunity to practice using the affixes a few at a time.

Part V, "Reading for Meaning," explains how reading comprehension depends less on knowing the meaning of individual words than on recognizing the syntactic and semantic relationships between all of the words in the sentences.

The first section (Section 11) illustrates how the reader can make predictions by the use of syntactic and semantic clues in the context. The articles are written in a style that emphasizes the structural and semantic redundancy in the language. This enables the students to extract the general meaning even though many of the words are new to them. The integrated exercises are boxed so that they can be ignored during the initial reading of the article.

The Teacher's Manual suggests that the material be presented in three steps. First the students are asked to read the article in class. They are instructed to read as fast as possible without stopping to analyze or "sound out" unfamiliar words or to use their dictionary. Immediately afterward, they complete the general comprehension and multiple choice exercises as an oral class project. Few students will have picked up all of the information, but everyone will have picked up at least some of it. The purpose of this approach is to give the students the confidence they need to read through material without coming to a halt at every word they don't know. As second language learners, they will have limited vocabularies for some time to come. Therefore, it is essential that they learn to make use of the other sources of information within the context.

The students begin the second step as homework. They reread the article and complete the integrated noun, adjective, verb, and adverbial sentences and the final cloze exercise. They are advised that they do not have to use the exact words from the article as long as those they select have the same meaning. Later, in classroom discussion, the variety of words selected by the students leads to an additional vocabulary expanding experience.

The third step is the study of the new vocabulary that is presented in word

families. The students select the correct form of the words to complete sentences that are not related to the particular article. This leads them to accept the words as part of their general vocabulary. By reading (and rereading) the article, completing the exercises, and participating in class discussions, they have been exposed to these words in various contexts. Most are able to learn their meaning with minimum use of the dictionary.

The emphasis in all of the sentence exercises is on content words, which serve as the focal point of eye fixations during the reading process. As the students must consider the structure of the entire sentence in order to select a suitable noun, verb, adjective, or adverbial, they also get considerable practice at recognizing the function of articles, prepositions, and conjunctions. However, selection of the proper form of such words is not covered since this is the domain of writing, not reading.

After completing this section, the students should know how to make use of syntactic and semantic information when they are reading. While they can be expected to retain only general information from the various articles, they should achieve control of the vocabulary presented in word families.

The second section (Section 12) of Part V explains how both speed and comprehension can be increased by phrase reading. The students practice this skill in four articles with simple sentence structure. The first three are divided into phrases for them. The fourth is phrased only initially after which the students are required to start phrasing on their own. The articles themselves are the primary exercises. New vocabulary is defined at the beginning of each article, and very general comprehension questions are provided.

After completing this section, the students can be expected to understand the concept of phrase reading. However, they can achieve no real proficiency at this skill without considerable practice.

While the articles in this part of the text are designed to improve the students' reading ability, they are insufficient in number to qualify the book as a reader. In some classes, the teacher may wish to use a reader or news periodical as a supplement. At institutions where the students are taking several ESL classes concurrently as well as other classes requiring reading, no supplement other than a standard English dictionary is needed.

CULTURAL CONTENT

When people read, they rely on their stored knowledge of the world around them to interpret the new semantic concepts they encounter. ESL students, whose life experiences have a different cultural setting, can therefore anticipate a reading problem even before they open their books. No one text is able to eliminate this dearth of general semantic information on United States culture, but *Focus on Reading* makes it somewhat less severe. From the first sentence exercises through the final articles, the material is cultural in content. It introduces such characters as Humpty Dumpty, Little Red Riding Hood, and Santa Claus and such trivia as "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." It also provides the background of national holidays and tours of seven of the country's major cities. While the students will certainly not remember all of the details, they will store many in their memories. In the future, a newspaper or television reference to Manhattan, the Mardi Gras, or the Windy City will have relevance.

VOCABULARY CONTROL

The vocabulary throughout the text has been carefully controlled, but frequency has not always been the prime consideration. In the sections covering the sound and orthographic systems, almost all of the words used as examples and in the exercises fall well below the 3000 word level.* In the section on prefixes and suffixes, words were selected to demonstrate affixation as a method of word formation. In the case of the suffixes, the stress pattern was also a criterion, the goal being to show the systematic nature of stress changes. In the articles on U.S. cities, word selection was based on the desire to stretch the students' vocabularies as far as possible beyond their present limited boundaries.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE MATERIAL

As the approach taken in *Focus on Reading* differs considerably from that in other texts, mention of the development of the material seems appropriate. The first version was introduced in classes at City College of San Francisco and at Skyline College, a neighboring institution, in the fall of 1975. Since then, succeeding versions have been used with considerable success in more than 80 classes. The students in these classes have come from 12 to 15 different language backgrounds, with the majority indicating their native language to be either Chinese (Cantonese) or Spanish.

ACCOMPANYING MATERIALS

The Teacher's Manual gives the rationale for the various sections of the text, makes detailed suggestions for their presentation, and states student learning objectives. It also suggests ways in which the material can be sequenced. While some sections logically precede others, all of the sections need not be covered sequentially. As the students are not beginners, they can work comfortably through the articles in Part V after completing some of the earlier sections. Answer keys to the exercises are provided.

A short program of tapes (cassette or reel-to-reel) is available for language laboratory reinforcement of the sound and orthographic systems. Part I, "The Sound System," tapes include the Sound Symbol Sheet and the Sound Recognition Practice exercises. Part III, "The Spelling System," tapes cover the A-, E-, I-, O-, and U-Letter Words. These pages give the students additional practice in the recognition and production of the sounds represented by both the vowel spelling units and initial and final consonant clusters.

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*Sources used for vocabulary selection are: Edward L. Thorndike, *A Teacher's Word Book of Twenty Thousand Words* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University; re-published Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1975); Michael West, *A General Service List of English Words* (London: Longman, 1953); Ted Plaister, *English Monosyllables* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1965).

Francisco, for making me aware of the importance of teaching the letter and sound relationships of the language and for allowing me to adapt her material for use in ESL reading classes on an experimental basis.

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Contents

Preface, xiii

1

Introduction to Students, 1

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT ENGLISH ORTHOGRAPHY, 2

PART I THE SOUND SYSTEM

2

English Sounds and Dictionary Symbols, 5

SOUND SYMBOLS, 5

SYLLABIC CONSONANTS, 6

"LONG" AND "SHORT" VOWELS, 6

SOUND SYMBOL SHEET, 7

3

Voiced and Voiceless Sounds, 11

CONSONANT SOUND CHART, 11

VOICING AND THE PLURAL FORM OF REGULAR NOUNS, 12

VOICING AND POSSESSIVE NOUNS, 12

VOICING AND THE THIRD PERSON SINGULAR OF PRESENT TENSE VERBS, 12

VOICING AND THE SIMPLE PAST TENSE OF REGULAR VERBS, 13

SPELLING CHANGE RULES, 13

4

The English Syllable and Word Stress, 18

THE SYLLABLE IN SPEECH, 18

THE SYLLABLE IN PRINT, 19

WORD STRESS, 19

Primary and Secondary Stress, 19

General Rules for Stress, 19

Vowel Sounds in Unstressed Syllables, 21

5

Sound Recognition Practice, 25

ENGLISH VOWEL SOUNDS, 25

ENGLISH CONSONANT SOUNDS, 27

PART II THE DICTIONARY

6

Knowing the Dictionary, 29

WORD ENTRIES, 29

Irregular Word Forms, 30

Alternate Spellings, 30

Alternate Pronunciations, 30

WORD DEFINITIONS, 30

USAGE LABELS, 31

OTHER FACTS AND FIGURES, 32

7

Knowing When to Use the Dictionary, 41

PART III THE SPELLING SYSTEM

8

Consonant Spelling Units, 45

THE CONSONANT UNITS, 46

Special Note on Consonant Sound Changes, 58

REVIEW OF CONSONANT UNITS, 59

9

Vowel Spelling Units, 61

THE PRIMARY UNITS, 61

The Major Spelling Pattern, 61

Spelling Rules for Long and Short Vowel Sounds, 61

The Long/Short Vowel Rules and English Verbs, 63

Exceptions to the Long/Short Vowel Rules, 66

THE SECONDARY UNITS, 67

Homophones and Homographs, 67

A-LETTER UNITS, 68

Sounds Represented by A-Letter Units, 72

A-LETTER WORDS, 73

Rhyming Words, 74

National Holidays, 79

E-LETTER UNITS, 81

Sounds Represented by E-Letter Units, 86

E-LETTER WORDS, 87

I-LETTER UNITS, 95

Sounds Represented by I-Letter Units, 98

I-LETTER WORDS, 99

O-LETTER UNITS, 106

Special Note on ou Spelling, 111

Sounds Represented by O-Letter Units, 111

O-LETTER WORDS, 112

U-LETTER UNITS, 119

Sounds Represented by U-Letter Units, 122

U-LETTER WORDS, 123

Y-LETTER UNITS, 130

Sounds Represented by Y-Letter Units, 131

REVIEW OF VOWEL UNITS, 132

PART IV WORD FORMATION

10

Prefixes and Suffixes, 135

NEGATIVE PREFIXES, 135

OTHER COMMON PREFIXES, 138

UNUSUAL PREFIXED WORDS, 139

SUFFIXES, 140

Nouns Made from Verbs, 141

Agent Nouns Made from Verbs, 143

Nouns Made from Adjectives, 144

Verbs Made from Nouns and Adjectives, 145

Adjectives Made from Nouns, 147

Adjectives Made from Verbs, 150

Adverbs Made from Adjectives, 152

PART V READING FOR MEANING

11

Making Predictions from the Context, 153

PREDICTIONS IN CONVERSATIONS, 153

PREDICTIONS IN READING, 154

ENGLISH WORD GROUPS, 154

LEARNING TO MAKE PREDICTIONS, 155

BOSTON, 155

NEW YORK CITY, 166

WASHINGTON, D.C., 177

NEW ORLEANS, 188

CHICAGO, 199

LOS ANGELES, 209

SAN FRANCISCO, 219

12

Reading by Phrases, 229

- THE READING PROCESS, 229
- LEARNING TO READ BY PHRASES, 230
- A FEW WORDS ABOUT READING, 231
- THE STATUE OF LIBERTY, 232
- SAN FRANCISCO CABLE CARS, 234
- TEXAS, A VAST AND VARIED STATE, 236

Appendix I Comparison of Sound Symbols, 243

Appendix II Consonant and Vowel Spelling Units, 244

Appendix III Vowel and Consonant Sounds and Words Showing Common Spellings, 245

Appendix IV Vowel Sounds (yoo) and (oo) after Consonant Sounds, 246

Appendix V Spelling Change Rules, 247

Appendix VI Rules for Dividing Written Words, 249

Appendix VII Calendar of United States Holidays, 250

Appendix VIII Map of the United States, 251

Index, 252

1

Introduction to Students

Focus on Reading will help you to improve your reading ability by increasing your knowledge of the language in several areas. Reading is a complex process that requires you to use a number of different language skills. It is a little like driving a car. Before you can drive well, you need to learn how to use the gas pedal, gear shift, and brakes. Later you apply these almost automatically. Before you can read well, you need to learn how to make the best use of words, phrases, and sentences. Afterwards you will be able to apply this knowledge almost automatically.

The book begins with a review of the English sound system. Even when you are reading silently, a knowledge of how words sound is useful. It often helps you to identify the words. It also helps you to remember the words so you can use them in conversation.

The next section discusses the use of all-English dictionaries. You will find that they supply you with much more information than just the definition of words. You will also learn the best time to stop and use your dictionary while you are reading.

The following sections explain English orthography—the spelling system of the language. An understanding of this will help you tie the written and spoken forms of words together. As a student of English as a second language, you probably have two vocabularies. You use words in speech that you cannot spell, and you know words when you read that you cannot pronounce. Once you understand the relationship between the letters and the sounds, you will be able to make better use of both the spoken and written language.

The next section shows you how words are formed by the addition of prefixes and suffixes. This will help you think of words in families. For example, happy, unhappy, and happiness all belong to the same family. Learning words in families instead of one by one will increase your vocabulary considerably.

The final sections explain the best way to get the information you want when you are reading. You will learn to depend on the sentences, not the individual words, for much of this information. You will also learn how to group the words of each sentence into meaningful phrases as you read.

Focus on Reading will help you develop the language skills you need to read faster and with more understanding. However, remember that the reading process is like driving a car. When you drive, you need to know not only **how** to use the gas pedal, gear shift, and brakes but also **when** to use them. When you read, it is necessary for you to make the same kind of decisions. At times you will read about a subject with which you are already familiar, and your eyes will move quickly across the page. At other times you will read about a

subject that is new to you. Then you may need to slow down to consider the spelling and sound of individual words. Occasionally you will have to put on the brakes and stop to use your dictionary. When you are reading, you are constantly adding new information to that already stored in your mind. Reading is therefore a very personal learning experience.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT ENGLISH ORTHOGRAPHY

The answers to these questions will give you a better understanding of English orthography.

Isn't English Orthography Difficult?

Yes, but it is also very systematic. Learning the system of English spelling is much easier than learning to spell words one at a time.

Why Isn't Just Knowing the Alphabet Enough?

The English alphabet is based on the Roman alphabet. While it serves its purpose very well, it does not fit the language perfectly. The alphabet has only 26 letters, and there are about 40 English sounds. Therefore, there is not a one-to-one relationship between the letters and the sounds. The 26 letters must be combined in a systematic way to represent all of the 40 sounds.

There are other things you should know about the alphabet. First, notice the three consonant letters that are circled below.

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T
U V W X Y Z

While c, q, and x are used in English writing, there are no sounds in the language for these letters. When they are used, they represent sounds that are also spelled with other letters.

C represents (k)¹ before the letters a, o, and u.

Examples: cat cot cut

It represents (s) before e, i, and y.

Examples: cent city lacy

Q is always followed by the letter u in English words. The letters qu represent (kw).

Examples: queen quick

X represents (ks) when it is used at the end of words or when it is followed by a voiceless sound.²

¹When letters are used as symbols to represent speech sounds, they are placed in parentheses (). The symbols used in this book are presented in Section 2, "English Sounds and Dictionary Symbols."

²Voicing is explained in Section 3, "Voiced and Voiceless Sounds."

Examples: box expect

It represents (gz) when it is followed by a voiced sound that is stressed.³

Examples: exam exist

Besides having three letters that have no sound of their own in English, the alphabet presents another problem. It does not have letters to represent six of the consonant sounds of English. We therefore use digraphs (two letters) to represent five of these sounds in writing; we generally use s or z to represent the sixth one. Two-letter sound symbols are also used in most dictionaries. However, it's important to remember that the two letters represent only **one** sound.

SOUND SYMBOLS

(ch) is written with the letters c and h.

Examples: check teach

(ng) is written with the letters n and g.

Examples: ring sing

(sh) is written with the letters s and h.

Examples: ship wish

(th) is written with the letters t and h. It is a voiceless sound.

Examples: thick thin

(th) is also written with the letters t and h. It sounds very much like (th), but it is a voiced sound.

Examples: this that

(zh) is a sound that is used in only a few English words. It is generally written with the letter s or the letter z.

Examples: pleasure azure

It is also written with the letter g followed by e at the end of words that are borrowed from French.

Examples: beige rouge

The alphabet presents one more problem. It has only five vowel letters, and English has about 15 vowel sounds.⁴ The five vowel letters, a, e, i, o, and u, are used to represent all 15 of these vowel sounds in writing in the following ways:

³Stress is explained in Section 4, "The English Syllable and Word Stress."

⁴Not everyone agrees on the exact number of vowel sounds in spoken English or on the sound symbols that should be used to represent them. This is discussed in Section 2, "English Sounds and Dictionary Symbols."