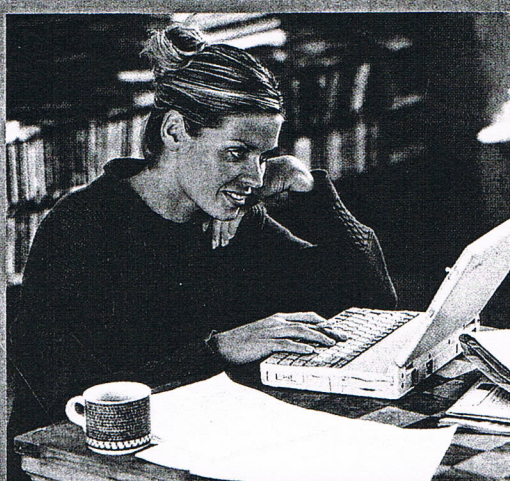


With index to
volume 9

October 2000

MODERN ENGLISH TEACHER

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Including...

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Keywords • Patrycja Kaminska

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9

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4

MODERN ENGLISH TEACHER

EDITORIAL

You've noticed, we've grown. The main reason for the change is to gain more flexibility and a more spacious layout. I do hope you like the new look and find MET pleasurable to read.

The new design has allowed us to include photos of contributors (and editors – so no more attending conferences incognito) and to give more detailed personal information. We have also, where possible, included contributors' e-mail addresses, which should be good for networking.

Another new feature, which I hope you'll find useful, is the age, level and focus guides for the Classroom Ideas articles. But please **DO** treat them as a rough guide only and **DON'T** ignore articles that don't seem to fit your circumstances exactly – many of the ideas can be adapted.

You'll notice a whole new section on page 65. It will be a regular section, edited by Martin Eayrs, to bring you everything you need to know about things electronic in relation to language teaching. Our aim is to cater for all levels of competence, so whether, like me, you've only just learned to switch on a computer or whether you've been at it for decades, there should be something for you. We feel we probably ought to apologise for calling it Bits & PCs, but, well, we couldn't resist it.

Martin Eayrs' other job on MET is to be our Webmaster – the Web site is free to all subscribers. You should by now have had a letter telling you how to access it and giving you your password. Some parts of the MET Web site are also open to non-subscribers. Log on to <http://www.onlineMET.com> and have a look.

And yet another change: a letters page. We haven't devoted a whole page to letters before, but we hope that starting one will encourage you to write in and contribute to it – either by post or via the Web site.

So – why not put your feet up, relax and enjoy browsing through your new-look MET? You can't because you've got a class to teach? Then turn immediately to page 39 and find out how you can set your students a simple but engrossing activity and let them get on with it, while you – yes, that's right – put your feet up, relax and enjoy browsing through your new-look MET.

Thérèse Tobin



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'People and Places' Editor: *Susan Fearn*, radio producer and writer, UK.

Bits & PCs Editor: *Martin Eayrs*, freelance consultant with an interest in ELT publishing and Internet projects, Webmaster of the OnlineMET Web site and editor of *LATEFL Issues*.

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CONTENTS

▶ Keynote

- 5 **Young Learners of English**
Background and issues
Shelagh Rixon

▶ About Language

- 12 **Reading and writing as arithmetic**
Is learning a language like learning maths?
Scott Thornbury
- 16 **Notice Board**
David Maule
- 20 **Create a crossword**
Follow the steps to produce a crossword on your PC
Andrew James

▶ Classroom Ideas

- 25 **A listening lesson**
How to make the coursebook more interesting
Lindsay Miller
- 29 **Eco-mad machines**
Creativity in recycling vocabulary
Eva Homolová
- 31 **Do it yourself**
Adapting games and activities from resource books
Tony Penston
- 33 **Timed conversation**
An activity for engaging large groups
Brad Deacon
- 39 **One hundred questions**
My favourite lesson...
David Wright
- 42 **Web wisdom**
Basic Internet skills for university students
Gerard Sharpling

▶ Tips and Hints

- 49 **Don't just sit there...**
Getting students to change places in class
Sue Murray
- 53 **Buttons and balls**
Using visual and physical stimuli
Jean Rüdiger-Harper
- 56 **Keywords**
A creative way to remember new words
Patrycja Kamińska

▶ It Made Me Think

- 59 **Collaborative test taking**
Getting students to do written exams in pairs
Linda Bawcom
- 64 **Your Letters**

▶ Bits & PCs

- 65 **Information and communication technologies in ELT**
Martin Eayrs

▶ People and Places

- 69 **Capital Shakespeare**
Exploring the Globe and the Rose
Susan Fearn

▶ Reviews

- Survey review ▼
- 74 **Some recent examination books**
Bryan Robinson
- Books I've used ▼
- 78 **Language Passport; Insight into IELTS**
Glenda Inverarity
- 80 **Some elementary and intermediate readers**
Pietro Pacini
- 82 **English Prepositions Explained**
Gordon Dobson
- Background Books ▼
- 83 **Business English: Research into Practice**
Celia Shalom
- A Book I Like ▼
- 85 **Next of Kin**
Mark Lowe
- 87 **Books Received**
- 88 **Competition**
Win a copy of *The Language Teacher's Voice*
- 89 **Index to MET Volume 9**
- 95 **Writing for MET**



Survey Review

Some recent examination books

Success International. English skills for IGCSE

Marian Barry

Georgian Press 1998

Student's Book ISBN 1 873630 18 2
Teacher's Book ISBN 1 873630 19 0
Cassette ISBN 1 873630 20 4

First Certificate Star

Luke Prodromou

Macmillan Heinemann 1998

Student's Book
(International edition) ISBN 0 435 28144 5
Teacher's Book ISBN 0 435 28145 3
Cassettes (2) ISBN 0 435 28147 X
Practice Book: *Grammar and Vocabulary with key* ISBN 0 435 28152 6
Practice Book: *Grammar and Vocabulary without key* ISBN 0 435 28146 1

Proficiency PassKey

Nick Kenny

Macmillan Heinemann 1999

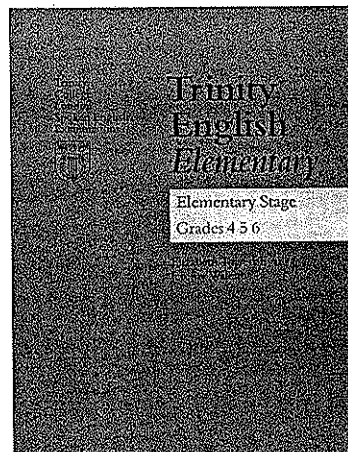
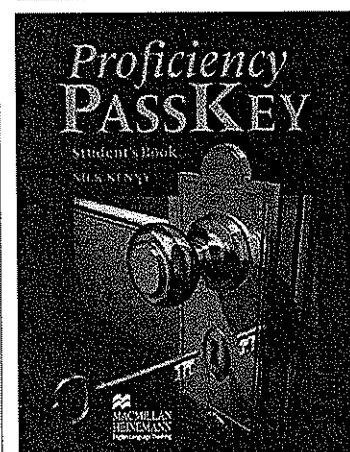
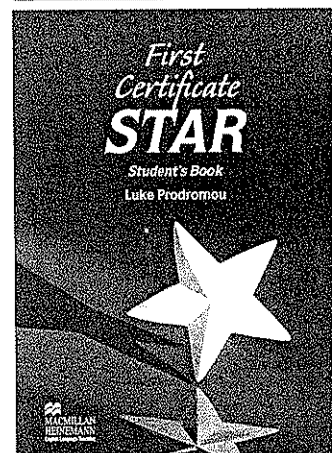
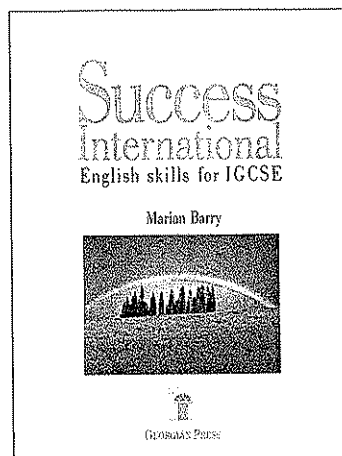
Student's Book ISBN 0 435 24520 1
Teacher's Book ISBN 0 435 24521 X
Cassette ISBN 0 435 24522 8
Workbook with key ISBN 0 333 75508 1
Workbook without key ISBN 0 333 75612 6

Trinity English Elementary Stage Grades 4, 5, 6

**Jeremy Walenn, David Newbold
and Elizabeth Towers Evans**

Macmillan Heinemann 1999

Cassette ISBN 0 435 24108 7
Photocopiable pack ISBN 0 435 24106 0
VHS video cassette ISBN: PAL 0 435 24112 5
NTSC 0 435 24113 3
SECAM 0 435 24114 1



When you are working with an examination class...

How does the examination influence the learning/teaching that goes on in the class?

Does it effect *what* is learnt/taught?

Does the exam affect *how* things are learnt/taught? Does it affect the *pace*, or the *sequence*, or the *depth* of learning/teaching that takes place?

What about attitudes? Does the examination alter your own and/or your learners' attitudes to the *content* of the classes or to the *methods* you use?

(Adapted from Alderson and Wall 1993)

Even if you've answered 'yes' to only one of these questions, then you're under the influence of washback, or backwash as some prefer to call it. There is a theory that 'Tests will have washback effects for some learners and some teachers, but not for others' (Alderson and Wall 1993). 'Washback' describes the influence

that examinations could have on learning/teaching. In itself, it is neither good nor bad, but it can be either, or both! To some extent, the quality of washback depends on the quality of the examination you are teaching towards. If the examination is communicative and uses communicative tasks, then the washback could mean you use communicative methodology in the classroom. Could. If the examination is more traditional and uses items that take language out of context, then it could

To some extent, the quality of washback depends on the quality of the examination you are teaching towards.

mean you study out-of-context language in your classes. Could. Why are there so many 'coulds'? Well, that's because washback is complex and no one has yet been able to describe it fully. But the most important thing we do know is that it is complex.

The challenge to authors is to produce a book that combines adequate exam preparation with a learning experience that can motivate and stimulate.

So if the quality of washback depends on the examination you are preparing for, then the key mediating factor in the process is the textbook. When a textbook is written to fulfil the needs of preparing for a specific examination, the challenge to authors is to produce a book that combines adequate exam preparation with a learning experience that can motivate and stimulate. In this review, I'm going to look at four textbooks, each of them tied to a

particular EFL/ESL exam. The first two aim to provide sufficient material to act as coursebooks; the others can only really be used as supplementary material.

Success International is a secondary school coursebook aimed at ESL learners of 14 to 18 years, who are studying for the UCLES International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE). The key distinction between *Success* and the other books in this review lies in the assumption that learners for IGCSE study in English-medium schools and/or are living in English-speaking countries. The book contains 10 topic-based units centred around the integrated-skills approach of IGCSE, and designed to be used at either of two levels, over one or two years. The exam approach is characterized by an aim at internationalism, which appears in the themes and activities that raise awareness of global concerns and present information that contrasts and compares situations across the planet. All this is intended to favour the students' intellectual and linguistic development and to be genuinely educational in the broadest sense. However, it does tend to make the book very 'serious' – it might easily have been enlivened by the odd touch of humour.

IGCSE is taken at two levels, and the book is intended for use at the higher level – described as 'upper intermediate' – with some limited guidance on to how to handle the material at a lower level, or with a mixed-ability group. The units are skill-based, and the contents chart – curiously, not printed in the Student's Book – details the eight sections that each unit contains. The presentation of reading and writing activities follows the IGCSE format throughout, whereas listening and speaking work builds up to exam format progressively. Throughout, there is a clear attempt to offer learners material that will challenge them to think and to develop mature responses. The Teacher's Book frequently refers to aspects of the examination where candidates underperform significantly, and the Examiner's Tips – before the brief unit-end summaries – reinforce them.

Reading texts are from a wide range of mainly journalistic sources and tend to be in British English. There are regular sections dealing with spelling, another perceived weakness in exam performance. In Unit 1 this is dealt with at great length, and both SB and TB give many practical hints to encourage spelling awareness and good revision habits. The approach, though, is an intellectual one: 'Why are the words misspelled?', but practical at times, too: 'Have you got a spelling and vocabulary book?' (p.7). The TB, though, does very clearly adopt many 'schoolmasterly' attitudes.

One of the strengths of English-medium schools is that students are exposed to English in a wide range of contexts. This means their fluency can often be taken for granted – but not their accuracy, or their use of appropriate language. They very often find it difficult to produce mature, sophisticated writing. To remedy this, Barry includes a number of activities, often based on the revising or editing of model texts provided by other students. She presents exercises intended to aid students to move ahead from their fluent but often monotonous written work by helping them to use a wider range of expressions and structures without losing their 'individuality of style and expression'.

Throughout 'Success', there is a clear attempt to offer learners material that will challenge them to think and to develop mature responses.

Listening and speaking components are linked in that the latter offer models of the type of interaction that students will be expected to produce in their examination. The listening materials – ten exam-format passages plus two 'model' conversations – are recorded with young people's voices in an attempt to achieve 'greater authenticity'. There is little, if any, direct teaching of language:

structures are assumed to need consolidation and extended practice rather than remedial teaching.

First Certificate Star is positive in many respects as it is totally open about features of the FC examination. The tips it offers don't just deal with language consolidation: at the same time there is information and advice about how to tackle the exam paper. There are 22 units, broken down into blocks of four, and later three. Each of these is followed by a review unit of examination-like material to test what has been covered. Units usually include grammar, with reference points highlighted, vocabulary, and Use of English, as well as the four skills. Phrasal verbs appear in each unit, and vocabulary activities are based around FCE topics. Development of language skills is painstakingly thorough, with much use made of parallel texts, examples of good or not-so-good versions of the target exercise – say in written production – with activities and commentaries. These are wisely linked to the Teacher's Book, which offers more information and insights teachers can use in preparing their classes, so making it an altogether more thorough and more reliable source than the *Success TB*.

The clear approach 'Star' offers can only benefit learners in the exam context and outside of it.

Reading comprehension is handled through thematically-linked texts that use the same activity types as those that appear in the exam. However, these are set in a more familiar pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading sequence. The wide range of texts are humorous and entertaining in their own right, though mainly of British English and British-culture based. Unit 8 struck me as particularly well prepared, basing all four texts around a sequence of episodes from a Sherlock Holmes' story.

Writing practice features the two tasks that appear in the FCE paper,

and each of the task types is thoroughly explored in a step-by-step teaching process. I know that some native-speaker teachers who have come into EFL from mainstream English language teaching, feel that 'formula' writing, more or less like that proposed here, is to be discouraged. However, I have seen it enable learners who are otherwise seriously challenged, to produce work of a satisfactory quality and grow in self-esteem, with the inevitable positive effect on their writing. The clear approach *Star* offers can only benefit learners in the exam context and outside of it.

The wealth of clear advice and support given in 'Star' puts the learner and the teacher on an equal footing.

The most important aspect of *Star*, though, is that it reflects pedagogic principles about learners and how they learn, about a balanced, power-sharing relationship between the learner and the teacher. Almost all of the relevant information is made available to the learner – only the answer key remains in the TB alone. The wealth of clear advice and support given puts the learner and the teacher on an equal footing. The attitude taken towards error reflects the author's belief that error is positive when examined in a mature manner, and can be used to inform follow-up teaching.

Proficiency PassKey is by far the least subtle of the books in this survey in terms of its exam orientation. As the title states, it is directed at candidates for Cambridge Proficiency (CPE), and like *Star* at FCE level, the course includes an SB, a TB, cassettes, and a workbook with or without a key. Unfortunately, at the time of writing (December 1999), only the SB is actually in print.*

Proficiency PassKey is a book that will clearly require a lot of work on the part of teachers if they are to

avoid an exam-centered and teacher-centered classroom. There are ten units, with a four-part internal structure – Vocabulary, Grammar Focus, a Help Section, and Exam Focus – that will all need a lot of supplementary material in order to make things come alive.

The choice of materials in 'PassKey' is right up-to-date, dealing with things like 'mad cow disease'.

Thematically, the reading texts are accessible and cover a range of fairly standard topics. The choice of materials is right up-to-date; dealing with things like 'mad cow disease', but the exploitation is very limited and rather bald and empty. While the vocabulary exercises are in the exam format, the guidance provided in the SB is limited to exam strategy tips. These are useful enough in themselves, but disheartening. Similarly, the grammar sections look at exercise types that lead up to those to be found in the paper. Right from page 2, students are being conscientiously prepared for the exam:

'...it is important to answer the comprehension questions in the correct way. Look back at your answers... have you written a complete sentence for each answer? Does your sentence answer the question completely? Have you used your own words?'

Given the quality and style of the approaches taken by Barry and Prodromou in their books, I find it disappointing to read 'exercises' such as this.

Without going into more detail, the Help Sections and then the Exam Focus materials are all in the same vein, which makes me think that *PassKey* is the sort of book that would suit teachers at a private language school I once heard of. The director was immensely proud of the school's success rate in Cambridge examinations, and put it down to their system: with daily classes, every Friday was given over to exam preparation in the form of a test

* Workbook with or without Key, Teacher's Book and Cassette now available. *Ed.*

exercise. You can imagine what that did to student motivation and attendance on Friday afternoons, can't you!

The fourth and final book in my survey is another specific examination preparation text: *Trinity English Elementary*. It is the first publication in what appears to be intended as a series of at least four offerings to match the four stages – sub-divided into three grades each – of the Trinity English Examination in Spoken English. The book, subtitled 'Preparation and Practice', is made up

All of the introductory material in 'Trinity English Elementary' is written in a positive, helpful style, which has been carefully crafted to ensure the maximum accessibility.

of eight two-page photocopiable lessons for each of the three grades that it covers. This is supplemented by information about the exam, teacher's notes, and audio and video cassettes. All of the text is included in a single spiral-bound volume, which means that it won't be damaged by repeated photocopying.

Each lesson is self-contained and timed to last one hour. The three Contents maps – one for each grade – show that there are five basic components to the lessons, elegantly woven together so that the fifth, an examination interview-oriented task, is built up to gradually. Lessons are not graded or progressively structured – this is, after all, supplementary material – and as the topics are varied, teachers can pick and choose the lessons they want to use in relation to the needs of their learners. Some of the topics are more closely linked to the prescribed interview themes than others, which provides a further criterion for teachers to apply. Parallel to each lesson there is a two-page set of teacher's notes, which more than adequately outline the ways in which the materials can be exploited.

For students and teachers who are unfamiliar with the Trinity College interviews, there are clear, brief, reader-friendly introductions, which describe their format, offer advice on how to prepare and handle them, and take the sting out of being examined by explaining the criteria that examiners use when marking. Trinity College examinations are marked on four criteria, and each skill is clearly and demystifyingly defined in a manner that does the organization much credit. This information is further expanded by separate individual grade introductions for teachers and students. All of the introductory material is written in a positive, helpful style, which has been carefully crafted to ensure the maximum accessibility.

In the lessons themselves, activities are clearly presented using attractive black and white photos and drawings, which will photocopy well. The balance of the activities is naturally enough that required by the exam itself: listening and speaking, with a limited use of writing for consolidation. There is a strong reliance on pair work, with some group work exercises for variety.

Probably the most important feature of this course is the 17-minute video. This offers examples of authentic 'pass' standard candidates during their interviews. The samples have been edited and graded in such a way as to enable the viewer to compare candidate performance at each of the three grades, focused on carrying out the same function, e.g. introducing a topic. In this way, the distinctions between grades become clearer.

Summary

If I were working with an exam class and using one or other of the texts I've been looking at here... well, I feel fairly sure that if it was *Success International* for an IGCSE class, I'd need to add a hefty dose of humour, but otherwise I don't think that it would significantly alter the way in which my classes would function.

Star would fit very nicely into my way of working with exam classes in almost every respect.

Trinity English would be a valuable addition to standard coursebooks with that exam in mind.

PassKey, however, would probably provide me with rather more supplementary work than I'd care to take on, given the quality of alternative coursebooks on the market.

Now, it's down to you to make your choice.

REFERENCE

Alderson, J.C.D. Wall (1993) 'Does Washback Exist?'. *Applied Linguistics* 14, 115-129.

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(Received January 2000)

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