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[Review of Useful English: A comprehensive textbook for Standards 9 and 10 by S.G.M. Ridge and others]

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Book Reviews:

Useful English
A comprehensive English textbook for standards 9 and 10.
by S.G.M. Ridge et al

Useful English is a textbook aimed at both mother tongue speakers of English and speakers of English as another language. In the introduction the authors state that the book aims to offer communicatively based materials to cover the requirements of the new syllabuses. A functional approach to language is adopted.

The book proceeds thematically. There are 28 themes, each chapter focussing on one particular topic. These include, "Media messages and how we read them", "Fact and fiction: stories and truth", "Money matters", "Transport", "Drugs-marvels and miseries", "Looking into nature", "Religion and faith", "Living and loving" and "Recreation time". Each chapter has a warming up exercise to help learners to focus in on what they already know about the subject; this is followed by visual material such as cartoons and accompanying questions; there are also extracts from a fairly wide range of literature with follow up questions after each extract. (The literature is drawn from a variety of sources, for example, the Bible, Encyclopedias, periodicals, journals, newspapers and extracts from the writing of D.H. Lawrence, Mark Twain, Charles Dickens etc.) Many of the exercises rely quite heavily on group work and collaborative learning. The exercises range from those which can be finished in ten minutes to longer projects which could take quite a few weeks to complete.

The learners are aided by two very useful sections at the back of the book, entitled, "Reference and guide material" and "Remedial work". These provide very useful, quick and accessible guides, for example, how to use English socially (in situations such as expressing sympathy, greeting and responding to greetings, starting and developing a conversation). A chapter explains figures of speech, dealing with irony and sarcasm, denotation and connotation, euphemisms, imagery etc. A chapter entitled "Reading" offers useful information as to how to try to read efficiently; the next, "Writing successfully" looks at steps involved in writing and provides useful models of agendas, various letters etc. Other chapters, (all being on yellow, rather than white paper) deal with, "Research" and "Punctuation".

The final section, Part 3, discusses some Remedial work, dealing with common errors rather than serious language difficulties.

Useful English is wide ranging in content and resources. It has a rich variety of exercises and suggested reading at the end of each chapter. It is also a book which learners can

dip into by themselves, picking and choosing chapters of interest and deciding which types of exercises they wish to attend to. Learners can proceed at their own pace and find material for their own particular learning styles. Useful English is learner centred, stimulating and challenging and thus pleasing for the classroom.

However, I found this textbook curiously neutral if one considers that it is a textbook intended for South African pupils. There is a fair smattering of South African writers, for example, Dan Jacobson, Alan Paton, Richard Rive, Jennifer Davids, Ellen Khuzwayo etc. It is difficult to discern the criteria for picking these particular writers rather than others. There is little overt political writing or protest writing. Extracts have been taken from a few South African newspapers and magazines such as Frontline and The Argus; many more extracts come from British based sources or handle topics that pertain to Britain and America and are really quite "safe". Many other South African newspapers and magazines aimed not only at white readers are available; no attention has been given to these resources. The exercises do not attempt to make pupils examine the texts in a critically linguistic way, making them aware of ideology and how it is transmitted in even the most apparently neutral texts.

I found chapters with very promising titles such as, "The art of politics", "The woman's place", "That's fair enough: justice, law and government" and "Prejudice" to be bland and deceptive. Topics dealt with here are often not South African at all and no real attempt is made to confront the tough issues which Std 9's and 10's will be faced with in the South Africa in which they will be living. It is very important to provide the pupils with some way of understanding how language is being used in particular ways, often to obscure and hide issues concerning racism, sexism and heterosexism. No attention is paid to these very important needs of young adults in this text book.

The strengths of this textbook lie in its variety both of material and exercises and in its learner centredness. Its great weakness lies in its attempt to present language in South Africa as a fairly neutral activity. Useful English could be a resource for a good teacher if it is used in combination with other material from sources to which learners should be exposed and if there is constant attention given to how language works.

Deborah Mehl

The Blood of Our Silence, by Kelwyn Sole Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1987.

Poetry and history, the Mexican poet Octavio Paz observes, are rooted in different conceptions of time. Whereas history concerns itself with succession and synthesis (the weaving of individual strands into communal and national cloth), poetry - like a fiesta - celebrates the "break in the sequence of time", a liberation of momentary passion from its cell within the organic narrative of history. In recent times, South African historians have adopted the language of poetry; through workshops and field research, they are tracing historical patterns with the fine nibs of personal anecdote, the humble individual's impression. By these means, they are able to transform abstraction into story; the