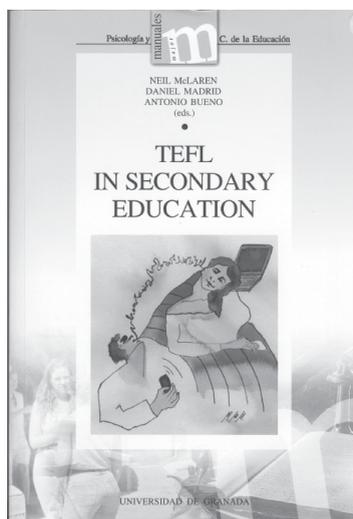


Recensiones

TEFL in secondary education: handbook and workbook. Neil McLaren, Daniel Madrid, Antonio Bueno (eds.) Editorial Universidad de Granada, Granada, 2005.

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Trying to offer a brief account of such a long, complex and informative book as this in just a few pages is always difficult. This is why I am here concentrating on those aspects which, from my point of view, are most innovative in this new book adapted to the urgent, and growing, needs of the Spanish University system in the area of TEFL. And I am here speaking of the needs of the Spanish University system because, in spite of its title, or precisely because of it, this publication is offered to those current, past and future students of English studies who want to have a broad panorama of the different areas of teaching, skills and resources for a present or future teacher of English in the secondary school level. As an updating of other previous approaches by the same editors, this title concentrates on those aspects which, in this kind of world, have mostly changed in the last ten years or so. As a result, the introduction itself, let alone the rest of the chapters, is a brief but intense reflection on the laws that regulate the system and how it is absolutely necessary for a secondary school teacher to be aware of all the changes and novelties that it demands. The organisation of the book into chapters is also well balanced and, in itself, highly informative of the kind of approach intended by the editors, as we could say that it contemplates general background (chapters 1-6), skills (chapters 7-10), aspects of language (chapters 11-14), and resources, assessment and research (chapters 15-18). And, again dealing with very general matters, the internal organisation of each chapter is simply prodigious, as they contain: a) index; b) theoretical background, conceptual framework and discussion; c) summary; d) further reading; and e) tasks for papers. All these sections, in themselves, are useful and show that you can offer astonishingly clever and deep views on a series of issues concerning teaching matters, and also that you can do this coherently, in the sense that it would be a paradox if you simply did all this without considering the way in which your readers have to proceed the enormous amount of information offered to them in over seven hundred pages of compact text. In this case, I am quite sure that the editors have quite consciously decided on a course of action, and their enormous expertise as teachers



and researchers has helped in this rather arduous task. Another common feature to all the chapters is the very interesting inclusion of a series of highly informative elements, in a different format, for those who either want to use them in class with their students of TEFL or want to use them for autonomous learning. These elements, included in all the chapters, really are a must for all conscious teachers of English, mainly (but not only) in the secondary level, since I must say that I have personally gathered a lot of relevant information that, either consciously or unconsciously, I am sure I will incorporate to many actual teaching situations at the tertiary level. And, without wanting to judge what I cannot properly judge, I am sure many primary school teachers could do something similar about their own teaching practice.

Concentrating now on the different chapters, I will first deal with the block on general background. The task for the authors of chapter 1 (“Concepts of language: linguistic theory and language teaching”) is, indeed, a hard one: they offer a brief summary of the main concepts behind the study of language and linguistics, how they interrelate and how they apply to language teaching. This is a well balanced, although necessarily partial, approach to the topics, as it is really difficult even to offer a summary, in less than forty pages, of the main contributions to this field in the last twenty-five centuries approximately. Even so, we can say that the job is done, with the only possible limitations that I personally would have liked to see some reference to the main contributions of John Locke to modern linguistics and, especially, to how integrational linguistics is contributing to offer a new view on it, especially if contrasted with pragmatics and discourse analysis, which are fairly well dealt with in the chapter. Everything considered, however, the key factor in this chapter is how it sets the picture for all the rest of the book, which is difficult in itself but is well solved by the authors. I particularly liked chapter 2, “Individual characteristics of secondary school students,” although I tend not to agree with some general assertions concerning individual learners when they are taken as a group, such as the fact that left-brained and right-brained learners always process the information differently (p. 102), or, being the father of a girl and a boy, the suggestion that I may have been personally more involved with her language education than with his (p. 104). From my point of view, and it may be a purely personal thing, it is rather that they always reacted differently to their parents’ stimuli, not that we consciously dealt with them differently in this or other relevant matters. Chapter 3, “Teaching and learning foreign languages,” is specially rich in its presentation of additional material, both in the diagrams and presentation of complementary information in a different format and, particularly, in the discussion activities and tasks for papers, which are simply excellent and one of the sections that, in themselves, give the reader a good reason to use the book, above all when we consider that the book is designed for use in the new European common framework of higher education, where learner autonomy is more than empty words. Chapter 4, on “Current approaches and teaching methods,” has the double advantage of taking practically nothing for granted, and thus the special section at the beginning, offering in just over one page the definition of fourteen essential terms in language teaching, and of offering, all through the chapter, a brilliant summary of these methods and approaches, in very clear and practical terms, specially when, as I mentioned above, these are starting to be really difficult tasks after many years of approaches and methods. Chapter 5 is a very practical and neat view of “The FL teacher and class management,” which in itself is not surprising considering the authors’ expertise and always sensible approach to the topic, to my knowledge; it is absolutely packed with excellent suggestions for the neophyte and I am sure that even more experienced

teachers will welcome the authors' reflections on the teaching and learning process. To close this initial block, chapter 6 deals with "The EFL curriculum for secondary education," presenting very useful tables that are highly informative and which concentrate on the different features of the formal syllabus, the functional syllabus and the task-based syllabus, offering, in just a handful of pages, a quick summary of advantages and possible setbacks of all three, besides an excellent lesson plan that, as usually in this book, is a practical suggestion to make ends and means meet; on the other hand, I must say I have somehow missed a more critical view of the present curricular design, especially in what affects the development of oral skills, which are unfortunately not felt to be a priority in the education authorities' plans by many secondary education teachers, as the written nature of the official exam for access to the university and the still large numbers of most classes seem to suggest.

The second block, dealing with the four skills, starts at chapter 7, "Listening Comprehension," where the authors emphasise its active, rather than passive, nature, with a very sensible reflection on how we cannot really conceive of it as a kind of activity independent of the students' schematic knowledge and the roles adopted by the interactants; after these introductory notions, the traditional phases for the practice of listening, plus the evaluation process, are presented, finally considering the role of pronunciation activities for understanding, where there is an adequate dealing with suprasegmental, and not merely segmental, phonology, as is very frequently the case, but where, unfortunately, there is no mention of English as an international language and all subsequent discussions on Jennifer Jenkins' new paradigm. This last aspect would not be initially such a key factor were it not because in chapter 8, "Speaking and oral communication," which is, logically, to be seen in combination with the previous one, there is no suggestion about the fact that this new approach may bring with it significant changes in the way English is taught worldwide; although, as a whole, the chapter is interesting, as it reflects on the importance of new factors in teaching speaking, such as the Common Framework or the European portfolio, it presents the relatively minor setback that, not viewing chapters 7 and 8 as a common block, with many aspects in common, the teaching of pronunciation should have concentrated, from my point of view, on the main difficulties that Spanish speakers have to face to make communication something feasible in English, rather than on presenting the set of English phonemes (in traditional R.P.), without stopping to consider that, in very general terms, problems with stress and rhythm may be at least as important, if not more, as a hindrance to communication; the fact that no book on teaching pronunciation is included in the "further reading" section of this chapter may have some responsibility in this. Chapter 9, on "Reading," is well balanced and highly informative, with a conscious reflection on cognitive factors at work in this skill (not simply more "traditional" aspects, such as intensive vs. extensive, skimming and scanning, etc.), excellent diagrams and tables, and a very original discussion on p. 358 that no informed reader of English should miss, as in a way it partially puts you in a young learner's shoes; assessment is also considered, with a fairly exhaustive list of tasks of how to proceed. Chapter 10, finally, "Learning and teaching writing in the EFL classroom," has, from my point of view, two great advantages over some other previous treatments of this skill: it suggests writing must be dealt with as an integrated skill, so that most of the excellent activities and kinds of activities it introduces show this kind of approach; and, in one way or another, although not in so many words, it considers the evolution from controlled to free practice, which must be the key point in this skill for any speaker (writer?) of English as a foreign language; with a final note on another

basic aspect (being obvious does not make it less important, but more): for the writing skill, revision processes are absolutely necessary, and this is why, as a general rule, conscientious students tend to be better writers and to progress from controlled to free writing more harmoniously.

Block three, which deals with general linguistic aspects, opens, unsurprisingly, with “The teaching of grammar,” where it is, once again in the book, seen from a holistic point of view, as the old dichotomy grammar/communication is simply disregarded, as more communication may imply more grammar and vice versa, once we realise that cognitive factors and classroom dynamics are essential elements that may work together for a proper teaching of this “necessary evil;” and another further advantage of the approach is the fact that more than half of the chapter is devoted to practical matters, not just the role of theory. Chapter 12, “Vocabulary,” is simply brilliant; not only can we find in it the British tradition of great language studies, either mentioned (Halliday, Widdowson) or unmentioned (there is an obvious neo-Firthian pervasive presence); most of the chapter is devoted to practical considerations, such as the invaluable section on the selection of lexical needs for Spanish students (although I missed a reference to “common root familiarity,” which might be partially included in “learnability,” and which may explain the difference between processing and learning “vomit” and “puke,” for instance), the necessary cross-references to other matters, the techniques for teaching vocabulary, etc. Chapter 13, on “Sociolinguistic, sociocultural and intercultural competences,” is very ambitious both in scope and content and reflects an updating of older notions absolutely essential at this stage of TEFL; starting from the definition of very simple, but unfortunately also wrongly taken-for-granted notions, such as context, roles, goals, etc., it mainly focuses on those cultural components which signal essential differences between Spanish and English (even with globalisation in mind), and which have been traditionally neglected in TEFL; the tables, diagrams and quotes are simply indispensable for any conscious teacher of English in an “alien” context. The main difficulty that chapter 14, “Discourse competence,” as the final one in this block, has to face, is the fact that it may sound repetitive, as it incorporates elements and suggestions already elaborated in other chapters, unsurprisingly, given the “umbrella term” nature that “discourse” seems to have increasingly adopted in recent literature; the strategy followed by the authors seems to be that of reaching a point where the notion of contrastive rhetoric becomes essential, as it unites more process- and product-based approaches to the study of discourse and considers Spanish speakers’ difficulties when facing English; this, without being a weakness in itself, throws doubts, at least for me, on a wider kind of conception whereby psycholinguistic elements in the study of discourse are later, through the exposition to social factors, reinforced in the interactants’ communicative practices, which is, in the end, what discourse is about.

Finally, block 4 opens with one of the most useful chapters in the book, from my point of view, “Audio-visual resources and new technologies in ELT;” apart from offering a brief history of these two elements, it encapsulates quite a few practical suggestions and, especially, at different points gives no less than twenty-one very useful addresses on the web (some of them will not open at a first try, but this is nothing that, for the time being at least, google cannot solve, I have personally checked all of them); this chapter really is a must for any teacher of English who wants to be up to date in this fast changing world. Chapter 16, “Literature in the ELT classroom,” stresses the fact, expressed by the author of these lines some years ago, that you cannot simply neglect the use of literary texts in the secondary

education classroom because they are thought to be cognitively “difficult;” to highlight this fact, the authors include some creative texts written by Spanish secondary school students; although I have missed a reference to the students’ familiarity with a given topic, or text, in the list of possible criteria for the selection of texts (this is, after all, what literary competence is about), and a few quoted texts are absent from the list of references at the end of the book, I must say that, as a teacher and researcher on English literary texts for a few years, I have really appreciated the inclusion of a chapter on this topic in the book. Chapter 17, “Testing and assessment,” might seem to be a bit redundant at this stage, above all because some partial views on assessment are offered in some of the previous chapters; in spite of this, the chapter, from my point of view, is absolutely necessary for any practising or future teacher of English; it offers a down-to-earth vision of the Spanish system and includes the different models of evaluation, areas to be evaluated, what to evaluate, and very interesting commentaries on the whole process; as in the previous chapter, computer resources are offered. The final chapter, quite logically, is devoted to “Classroom research”, and in it the authors offer a definition of the elements making up research; evidently, what they present are very well known procedures and an excellent summary of how to do research in TEFL; finally, the inclusion of an actual case is an excellent idea, and very practical for those starting out in this area of work in English studies.

As a final reflection on the book as a whole, I must say that it is, to my view, good news that such an urgent need as a book on TEFL that is serious, well-designed, full of practical expertise and of theoretical knowledge has been finally covered. Especially when a workbook adapted to the contents is in the wake.