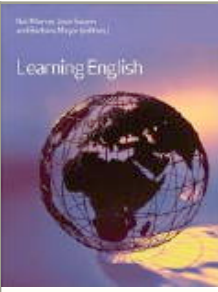




<i>Learning English, 2nd ed.</i>		
Author:	Neil Mercer, Joan Swann & Barbara Mayor, Eds. (2007)	
Publisher:	Abingdon, UK: Routledge	
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Pp. iii + 296	ISBN 978 0 415 37687 7 (paper)	£19.99 GBP



Learning English aims to familiarize the reader with the wide spectrum of theories and methodologies involved in acquiring English. Included in its scope are developmental studies in child L1 acquisition and bilingualism (chapters 1 to 3), English language teaching (chapters 4 and 6), curriculum design (chapter 5) and academic writing in English (chapter 7). Such broad coverage is certainly an ambitious goal for an introductory textbook. Inevitably, the volume has to make compromises and sometimes settles for outmoded paradigms and, perforce, does not always reflect the state of the art in each of the fields discussed. In the end, despite the occasional intellectual short-cut and the rather traditional ideas, Mercer, Swann, and Mayor have managed to compile an accessible textbook whose chief merit lies in its student-friendly discussion of English learning and teaching from an inclusive, cross-cultural perspective. This book may appeal to a wide audience in introductory applied linguistics, sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics classes.

It remains to be seen, however, if users of the previous edition will want to invest in an updated edition that shows so much overlap. Looking at the table of contents of each volume reveals that few changes have been made, especially chapters one, two, and the introduction. The names of the main contributors have largely remained identical, and so have the titles and content of each chapter. Chapters are still mostly authored by one field expert (though sometimes up to three) and consist in a review of the major issues and controversies in the fields discussed, supplemented with up to two additional readings at the end of each chapter. The selection of those sometimes specially commissioned short articles has changed significantly in the new edition, but not always for the better (note for instance the disappearance in the new edition of the insightful contribution by Lieven and Tomasello on "English as a first language").

This is not to say, of course, that editors necessarily have to change books radically for new editions. Yet when we read in the blurb that the volume is "based on latest research in the field" should the reader be hard-pressed to find evidence of this in the book? Bancroft's definition of language acquisition in chapter 1, for instance, apart from being directly lifted from Crystal's *Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language* (2003), confirms our suspicion. What we get here is the traditional yet scientifically questionable words and rules approach to language acquisition, even though cognitive linguists have by now convincingly argued in favor of an alternative, exemplar-based and frequency-based theory of language acquisition (Dabrowska, 2004). The same goes for the discussion of "prefabricated chunks"/"formulaic speech" (p. 53) in chapter 2. Mayor's one-paragraph discussion hardly does justice to what arguably constitutes one of the most actively researched topics in applied linguistics today. Why not say something about frequency effects (Bybee & Hopper, 2001; Ellis, 2002) or phraseology (Granger, 2007; Boers & Lindstromberg, 2005, 2006; Lindstromberg & Boers, 2005)? In short, this updated edition of *Learning English* does not attest to an awareness of the "latest research."

This book may largely consist of tried and true teaching notes that have been slightly dusted off for publication, but it still displays a high level of structural coherence and user-friendliness, as evidenced by the clear bibliographical references, comprehensive index, the abstract at the beginning and the summary at the end for each chapter, and clearly identified key terms. In future editions, however, Mercer, Swann, and Mayor may want to collect and briefly define those "key terms" in an alphabetical glossary. The book also systematically provides opportunities for reflexive learning and teaching in the form of "activity" boxes and "text" boxes which provide study questions and glosses/supplementary material respectively. Lastly, as a practising language teacher I think the authors have done well to include both approximate timing and model answers for each activity. In short, even if this volume does not convincingly incorporate the "the latest research," instructors and students alike are likely to appreciate its reader—friendliness and accessibility.

More specifically, the discussion of "Academic Writing in English" (chapter 7) should prove useful to students and instructors. However, readers expecting a step-by-step tutorial on how to write academically will be disappointed. Hyland's commissioned contribution in the readings section, which details how "succinctness and precision" are likely to engage a reader, is insufficient to shift the balance. What you get instead in chapter 7 is an overview of what it means to be writing for an informed audience, with an emphasis on diversity in academic discourse. Hewings et al. adopt a relativist position, most clearly expressed in their discussion of "discourse communities" (pp. 228-32), "disciplinary variation" (pp. 232-6), and "cultural differences" (p. 236ff). Once again, we can only lament that those in charge of this chapter, that is, Hewings et al., overlook key contributions to *English for Academic Purposes* by Coxhead (2006, 2008) or Flowerdew and Peacock (2001).

Overall, contributors' choice of secondary sources is sometimes problematic, particularly in the first three chapters. In the first chapter for instance, Bancroft and Gillen seem to regard David Crystal's *Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the*

English Language (2003) very highly. Yet, using Crystal's popularizing work as a main reference poses some serious questions about choice of sources in general. One would expect an introductory textbook to offer an up-to-date selection of core readings--albeit simplified or extensively annotated for a novice readership. I am afraid the volume under review only partly satisfies this premise, for it relies too much on sources whose appropriateness or timeliness are found wanting. Why, for instance, quote Crystal on "grammatical development" when there are more representative accounts of learning routes in Pienemann (2006) and DeKeyser (2005)? What is more, in a volume intended as an update to Mercer and Swann's (1996) *Learning English: Development and Diversity*, one might have hoped to find reflected the results of recent contributions to language acquisition and literacy research by the likes of Cook (2002, 2003), Tomasello (2003), Dabrowska (2004), Kumaravivelu (2005, 2007) to name but a few.

The global scope of this book is noteworthy, encompassing learning in both English-speaking countries (including the former British colonies) and non-English-speaking countries. It must be said to the compilers' credit that they never shy away from sensitive topics. In chapter 5, for instance, Monaghan and Mayor consider the reasons, both overt and covert, that have influenced the formal teaching of English as a school subject in English-speaking schools. Their discussion inevitably ventures into language policy, canon formation and cultural imperialism. Heugh's commissioned contribution valuably illustrates the complexity of the situation in sub-Saharan Africa, with a clear emphasis on South Africa. She notes that "policy and implementation do not go hand in hand" (p. 185) and that the principled equality between indigenous and non-indigenous languages remains a comforting mirage. Such, indeed, is the reality of what one might call English as a colonial language. However, Heugh fails to include an important factor in her (in)equation, pointed out by Silva (1997), namely that

[t]he status of English as an international language, and as one which is politically more neutral than any other South African language, and its choice by the ANC, seems to ensure its ever-increasing dominance at a national level. At this level English is a national asset and 'liberator', in that it offers international access and a tool for communication between language groups (n. p.).

Mercer, Swann, and Mayor's filtering of English language teaching and learning through the prism of multiculturalism remains one of the strengths of this volume. As such, users from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds will no doubt appreciate such an inclusive scope.

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