

***Tech Talk:
Better English through Reading in Science and Technology***

Author:	Felixa Eskey (2005)		
Publisher:	Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press		
Pages	ISBN	Price	
Pp. xiv + 183	0-472-03077-9 (paper)	\$24.95 U.S. (optional compact disk \$25.00 U.S.)	

Felixa Eskey's *Tech Talk: Better English through Reading in Science and Technology* is an assembly of authentic reading texts organized into themed units, along with pre- and post-reading activities for discussion and language practice. An optional 80-minute audio CD offers readings of many of the selections and an answer key for the short-answer exercises in the book can be found online by teachers.

The book has nine units: "Computers and Automation", "Flight", "Health Care in Space", "Wind Power", "High-Tech Lizards", "Time and the Brain", "Engineering Achievements", "Science News and Fun", and "Our Future". Each unit begins with a Search Your Knowledge section, which introduces the topic through questions or short activities. Some chapters also have a "Key Words" section, based on the chapter reading's vocabulary, which introduces key words and phrases through sample sentences. After these pre-reading exercises comes the reading. Some units have just one reading selection (e.g., "Health Care in Space") while others have as many as four (e.g., "Science News and Fun"), for a total of sixteen readings in the book. Readings range in length from half a page to about ten pages, and most readings integrate graphs, charts, drawings or visuals of some sort. Key vocabulary terms are underlined, and selected technical terms, idioms, and other words are defined in the right margin of the reading.

Readings are followed by a series of five post-reading activities:

- What's the Point? - reading comprehension questions in a variety of forms: multiple choice, short answer, true and false, or sentence completion.
- Understanding Words and Phrases - vocabulary exercises such as fill in the blank, multiple choice, or short answer questions.
- Grammar Check - one grammar point exemplified in the reading. Examples include the

- passive, adverb phrases, and quoted and reported speech.
- Let's Talk about It - discussion questions
- What Do You Think? - a writing prompt
- Expansion Activity (every unit except 1, 2 and 4) - outside-class investigations such as the one in "Time and the Brain" to try to replicate an experiment mentioned in the reading (p. 103), or the suggestion in other units to search the Internet for information related to the reading.

A major question for me as I reviewed Eskey's book was, "Would this book be good for my students?" In her introduction, Eskey writes that "This textbook is appropriate for all adults. It would be particularly useful to English students who are also scientists and engineers,

including university students and professionals" (p. x). I teach undergraduate science and technology students at a large university in Japan. Current materials I use for teaching reading somewhat resemble the composition of Eskey's textbook: authentic science and technology-themed readings with pre- and post-reading activities for English language development. Beyond this model, a clear strength of Eskey's text is the logical and consistent organization of activities within each chapter, and the attempt to satisfy learning the four skills (i.e., Grammar, Listening, Reading, and Writing) by including diverse language activities related to the reading. Teachers will find this book very easy to use, and EFL teachers without a strong science background will not have trouble comprehending the science talked about in the book (nor should students). Because of the considerable number of activities for each reading and the book's nine autonomous units, *Tech Talk* also lends itself to a flexible syllabus. In other words, skipping chapters or activities would not deprive students of knowledge found in later chapters. It should be noted, however, that the difficulty level of readings does increase somewhat as the book progresses.

Yet despite the appeal of such convenience and flexibility in using Eskey's book, for my own students I would have questions about both the value of the readings and the degree of progress my EFL science and technology students would make by working through the text. Aside from difficulty level and an overall science and technology theme, there are no clear criteria for the selection of readings included or for the themes of the different units. Also weaknesses are the lack of integration among different units and the lack of a defining, centralizing theme any more specific than science and technology. Such deficits make one wonder if students would have any opportunity to review and reuse either the vocabulary or the knowledge they are exposed to over the course of reading the text. There is no obvious repetition of vocabulary throughout the units, and there is no discussion of writing structure (e.g., introduction, thesis, topic sentences). Likewise, there is no mention of how to read in the sciences. The one page preface addressed to students entitled "How to Read" (p. xiii) is rather general in scheme, with advice such as, "For a longer text, you may want to skim it first" (p. xiii), or "Read quickly, but comfortably" (p. xiii). In addition, nowhere in the book is genre, a key concept in reading science, mentioned. A basic question about this book for any teacher might be whether, taken as a whole, it offers her more than she already has.

Two key things I was looking for in *Tech Talk* were (1) an academic approach to scientific reading, and (2) supplementary materials (beyond the functional exercises provided) to enhance the science and technology theme:

- (1) The inclusion of more technically demanding reading for student analysis and a

discussion of the different genres within the wide range of science writing. My own students, as undergraduates, are already trying to tackle the English of scientific academic journals. All the readings in *Tech Talk* fall within the genre popular science news, decidedly different from academic journal writing. Contrasting how to read an article from a popular-science news source and a journal article would be very valuable. Short of this, a discussion of the structures of the popular science articles in the book would be useful.

(2) A more robust collection of supplementary materials is needed. The optional audio CD is fine for listening to a science news story, but especially when dealing with science and technology it would seem that having video clip visuals, or at least pictures, along with a virtual version of the textbook including Internet links would be very useful for students. The classrooms at our university are all equipped with computer projectors, and many rooms have computers for students' use, so it would not be unreasonable, at least in our circumstance, to be reading and following links and integrating multimedia materials to develop our students' reading skills and interests. For a teaching situation absent such technology at hand, *Tech Talk* would suffice. But including an activity-filled CD-ROM would still seem desirable for a technology-themed textbook published in 2005.

EFL/ESL teachers will find *Tech Talk* a convenient compilation of science and technology journalism accompanied by plentiful English language learning activities geared toward intermediate and higher level students. For teachers in Intensive English programs, high schools, or other teaching situations where science and technology are not the main class focus, Eskey's book can be a perfect fit for delving into some modern, fascinating scientific topics over the course of a term. On the other hand, teachers looking for a textbook that teaches students how to begin to gain command of comprehending academic science writing, this book will fall short. Likewise, teachers who want a science and technology text that integrates current technology may not be satisfied with this book and audio CD alone. In any case, it is a pleasure to see-within this tiny category of ESL/EFL textbooks-another science and technology book. For that reason alone, *Tech Talk* is surely worth a look.

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