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Great Writing: Foundations

Author:	Keith Folse (2014)		
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288 pages	9781285194981	\$52.95 USD	

Nunan (2003) perceives writing as a process that requires high productive skills that can combine ideas with word use. It requires the ability to comprehend the productive use of language parts involving grammar, conception, rhetoric, vocabulary, and other parts (Zhang & Chen, 1989). The comprehension ability varies from student into another in mixed ability classes where teachers of ESL international students have to use different strategies to overcome the challenges their students go through in writing classes (Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi, 2015; Reyes & Rodriguez, 2005). As a writing teacher of international ESL students, I have a difficult time teaching my students what they need in order to write a grammatical and comprehensible piece of writing, but *Great Writing: Foundations* is a book that contains what students at a low proficiency level need to write basic and meaningful sentences. Perhaps the single most innovative aspect of *Foundations* is that it is the first writing book I have seen that is arranged according to the English sound system, namely where each of the fourteen units is organized around one of the fourteen English vowel sounds. Each of these units focuses on one sound and its most frequent corresponding spellings. As a good practice book, it offers ample activities for students to develop their writing skill. Copland, Garton, and Burns (2014) think that one of the challenges that ESL teachers face when teaching writing is the kinds of tasks, especially the ones that are used to develop creative writing, that are provided in ESL books.

The fourteen units of *Great Writing: Foundations* are developed carefully for the foundational level, that is, for beginning students with limited proficiency, who will benefit from the numerous activities that cover grammar, spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, and writing. Rather than mundane exercises, most of the activities are like puzzles or games that students can solve while practicing combinations of writing skills such as vocabulary with grammar or spelling with pronunciation. Foreman et al. (2004) emphasize the

significance of interactive games and puzzles use in teaching a language since fun is an important piece in learning a language.

The book starts with the basics of the English language such as sequencing words in sentences in unit one and then identifying subjects in unit two. The third unit is about verbs in the simple present tense with sufficient but simply explained elaboration and activities. Chapter four discusses adjectives and their significance in writing, especially in describing people and things. The fifth unit outlines the simple present tense of *be* with a brief explanation of *be* with singular and plural subjects, again with adequate activities that cover all the students' needs. Pronouns are explained in unit six, while conjunction usage and corresponding punctuation are carefully clarified in unit seven. Unit eight is an explanation of articles: *a*, *an*, and *the*, which is followed by prepositions in unit nine. Coordinating conjunctions in longer sentences is very important in writing paragraphs, which is why the author dedicates unit ten a complete unit to this area. He then explains simple past tense in unit eleven through activities in which students need to talk or write about their past experiences, stories, and childhood. Writing with subordinating conjunctions (e.g., *because*, *after*, *before*, *when* and *if*) in unit twelve after the simple past tense is very rational since students need these time words when writing about the past. Adverbs are an obstacle for ESL students because learners seem to mix them with adjectives and they are not sure of their position in a sentence, which is why the author, Keith Folse, spends all of unit thirteen on this important topic. In unit fourteen, Folse writes about present progressive tense. The reason he sequences this tense as the last tense is that corpus research has showed that this tense is not so widely used in academic writing compared to the other two tenses, namely simple present and simple past.

Allen (1983) believes that adult learners may enjoy games just as children do when they are learning a new language. Correspondingly, Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Snow (2014) state that these games elevate learners' motivation in learning a language since they make learning process more enjoyable. The extensive activities in this book are organized in a systematic way that is carefully designed to improve ESL students' writing skills in English. All units have three sections: *Grammar for Writing*, *Vocabulary and Spelling*, and *Student Writing*. *Grammar for Writing* has a part called Common Student Mistakes that most ESL students commit when attempting to write grammatical English sentences. This part is followed by a variety of activities that have different focuses and use a range of techniques. Some of these activities are punctuation activities that can help many ESL students who face difficulty in demonstrating capitalization and final punctuation rules, especially Arab and Chinese students whose languages have different rules. There are also activities that require students to identify certain parts of speech in *scrambled sentences*, *finding and correcting mistakes*, and *dictation* activities that also help improve spelling.

Then the focus shifts to the *contextualized activities* that seek to improve students' writing skills by putting grammar and vocabulary together through *fill in the gap* and *guided writing*. The last section in each unit is *building vocabulary and spelling*, which has a part about sounds, spelling and new vocabulary with pictures. Though every unit has a different sound collection, all together form the whole English sound system.

The vowel sounds of the English language are divided on the fourteen chapters of this book with activities that make learning the vowels easier for international students. For each vowel sound being targeted in any of the fourteen chapters, there is a list of very common and useful words for the sound being taught in that unit. These lists are not arbitrary, they are based on research of the common and most frequently used words that ESL students need to demonstrate. This part has a wide range of activities that ESL learners may never feel bored doing. Some of these activities include *filling in the missing letters*, *scrambled letters*, *spelling practice*, and *which word is correct*. These activities are essential for ESL students since most learners try to spell the word in the same way they pronounce it. These activities help ESL students practice correct spelling by having all the possible spellings in a multiple-choice activity. At the end of each unit, there is *acumulative spelling review* for all the words the ESL student has learned up to this unit, except for unit one. The last activity is always *the student* writing that is connected with the question on the first page of each unit.

There is an online workbook that provides more activities for ESL students to practice writing, which is counted as a bonus to the remarkable activities in the *Great Writing: Foundations* textbook. Another huge plus for this book is that it, like most books by National Geographic, has activities that are supported with awe-inspiring photographs from National Geographic photographers. Big plaudit to the author and publisher for carefully selecting photos that will make ESL students feel connected to the activities in the book.

In sum, I think *Great Writing: Foundations* is an outstanding book for teachers who teach ESL students writing, especially at the foundational level. A book that can put together grammar with vocabulary for developing writing skill has long been needed for ESL students who seek to improve their writing while also developing grammar and spelling in the same course. Luckily, Folse and National Geographic have given us what teachers need to teach writing to low-level adult learners.

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