

***Refining Composition Skills: Academic Writing and Grammar*
(6th edition) by R. M. Smalley, M. K. Ruetten, and J. R.
Kozyrev (2011), A Book Review**

Makiko Asaba¹

Teachers College, Columbia University, Tokyo

Refining Composition Skills: Academic Writing and Grammar, 6th edition is the revised version of the previous edition published in 2001. This textbook is written with the purpose of providing intermediate-high to advanced level English as second language (ESL) and English as foreign language (EFL) students with a comprehensive support in developing their academic writing skills. Although the latest edition maintains a similar chapter organization to the previous one, quite a few improvements have been made.

First, in terms of usability, the book has become physically bigger and thinner, making it more portable for students. Compared to the older version that had very limited writing space for actual tasks, the new book provides more space for hands-on writing exercises under each skill development section. Secondly, the gray-scaled, flat presentation of the previous edition has been turned into a visually appealing, four-color text presentation, along with full-color pictures taken from around the world that are fun to look at. Moreover, a newly introduced vocabulary building section in each chapter has a fairly extensive coverage of word forms and collocations that should strengthen learners' bottom-up writing skills. Also, the contents of the appendices are truly worth mentioning. This nearly 50 page-long appendix covers many writing problems that ESL/EFL learners often struggle with, such as plagiarism, paraphrasing, citations and punctuation. The section should support the learners' understanding of the nuts and bolts of English academic essay writing. Throughout the series, the major strength of this book seems to be its organization, which represents a comprehensive as well as step-by-step development of the writing process, starting from the sentence level and finally reaching to the level of composing an argumentative essay. Taking all of these into account, the

¹ Makiko Asaba works as a full-time corporate consultant at ALC Education Inc., and teaches speaking, TOEIC and TOEFL classes to business professionals. She is currently working on a pilot research project on instructed pragmatics for young learners. Correspondence should be sent to makikoasaba@gmail.com.

overall “student-friendliness” of the book seems to have improved significantly.

The book consists of three units: Unit One on paragraphs, Unit Two on essays and Unit Three on grammar skills. In Unit One, there are five chapters covering various genres of paragraphs such as narrative, descriptive and expository paragraph writing and related skills, such as steps for generating, narrowing and connecting ideas. Even for the students considered intermediate-high or advanced, it is often necessary for them to improve their paragraph writing skills before they can actually progress to academic essay writing. Therefore, the way this book supports the fundamental needs of ESL/EFL writers is very helpful to both teachers and students. Unit Two, consisting of seven chapters, is the core unit of this textbook in which many key essay types - comparison and contrast, classification, process analysis, cause-and-effect and argumentative – are covered. The textbook provides a variety of scaffolding exercises and authentic academic reading texts in order for the learner to be able to develop practical writing skills that meet their needs and requirements.

In this textbook, each chapter has its own grammar focus related to its goal. Towards the end of the chapter the book gives a list of grammatical structures that are essential for the target writing tasks with reference page numbers to Unit Three, the section for refining grammar skills where students can find more detailed explanations. The way this book organizes all the necessary grammar knowledge, skills and tips in one unit seems to be very effective in bolstering students’ autonomy. Rather than having individual grammar points scattered around the book, by having them all in one dedicated unit, it facilitates students’ accessibility to knowledge and consequently it should enhance their autonomous learning in and outside the classroom.

On the other hand, there are some potential improvements that can be made in the future. The textbook seems to have tried to incorporate more variety of world cultures just by introducing colorful pictures from different regions of the globe; however, as Hyland (1996) claims, the issue of cultural bias and the lack of real-situation oriented readings in ESL/EFL textbooks are often little recognized and this textbook is not an exception. To make students’ writing experience more meaningful, textbook writers should be more selective in choosing appropriate writing topics and examples. It would have been much better if the textbook writers had struck a better balance between topics based on Anglophone culture and those of non-Anglophone. In this textbook, most topics covered are based on familiar issues for native English speakers written by native English writers; however, I found it really interesting to read one essay written by an Asian immigrant student about her painful experience growing up in bicultural atmosphere. I

Asaba, M. (2012). Refining composition skills: Academic writing and grammar (6th edition) by R. M. Smalley, M. K. Ruetten, and J. R. Kozyrev (2011), A Book Review. *Accents Asia*, 5(1), pp. 83-85.

expect more of those topics related to EFL/ESL students' real issues to be included in the future edition. Moreover, just showing native based perfect writing model is not enough for effective teaching. Texts written by other EFL/ESL students should also be introduced in ESL/EFL textbooks, as they can become excellent ZPD² models for the target students.

I would also like to see more of a connection between the textbook and the latest technology. Interestingly, with the previous edition, the book had a CNN video that provided extra visual input to support the learners' writing. However for some reason, the authors entirely discarded the idea for this edition. Instead, teachers can purchase an assessment CD-ROM with Exam View software separately if they wish. The software should help teachers create quizzes and tests based on the textbook contents. From students' point of view, I would like to suggest the creation of a website where students can get extra visual input such as short videos, audio versions of the readings, graphs, and other data that can support the learners in developing their writing skills through real-world contexts. It would be even better if the website can support a student platform where learners can exchange their opinions, problems and experiences in order for the student group to foster their autonomous learning through student contribution and peer teaching (Dörnyei, 2001).

In conclusion, I would like to recommend *Refining Composition Skills: Academic Writing and Grammar* since it is a comprehensive as well as mostly learner-focused writing textbook. This textbook should provide a solid support to ESL/EFL learners who hope to develop their academic essay writing skills to prepare for future study abroad.

REFERENCES

Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press.

Hyland, K. (1996). *Second language writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

² ZPD: Zone of Proximal Development is one of the most important Vygotskian construct that is defined as the distance between what a learner can do in the L2 if assisted by others versus what the learner can achieve alone.