

Headwork

Chris Culshaw and Deborah Walters

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This is a new series intended for lower secondary or middle school pupils with reading difficulties. Each page contains a problem or puzzle, which requires the pupil to carry out various operations – such as deduction, matching, comparing, sequencing and classifying, and (in later books) working with flow charts and summarizing. The books fall squarely within the ‘reading for meaning’ tradition, and present tasks which relate to several areas of the curriculum. A typical page contains a drawing or diagram, with a series of questions or statements which have to be thought through to arrive at an answer. At the beginning of Book 1, for example, we have such exercises as:

Six drawings have to be matched with six speech balloons, containing such sentences as *I am going to the roller disco*, *Where can I land?*, *This tastes nice*;

A picture of a family with a very large pet is followed by a series of statements, such as *Doris is very big*, *Doris eats ice cream*, and the reader has to decide whether the sentence is true, false, or ‘not enough evidence’, based on what is shown in the picture;

A set of common objects is shown, and the reader has to fill in a matrix of relevant features, as a classification task (*Things we can eat/wear/hear*. . .).

The approach is based on the principle that reading is a problem-solving process, and that different types of reading matter demand different strategies. The authors have therefore tried to balance readability against what they refer to as ‘thinkability’, by posing demanding questions in a manner which they hope will be interesting as well as readable. Some of the tasks ask the pupils to tabulate information in a different way; some ask them to translate text into drawing. Some tasks are closed, requiring short, single-word answers; others call for more discussion, requiring the pupil to make decisions about the nature of the evidence needed to solve the problem. A great deal of attention is paid to basic notions, such as colours, shapes, parts of the body, time and space terms.

Most of the exercises work well, and some I’m sure pupils will find very helpful. For instance, choosing the best summary to fit a story is a valuable task. Too often, children are given comprehension summaries to do, but have not had enough experience of evaluating other people’s

summaries. There's an appealing use of humour, both visual and verbal and some clever uses of rhyme ('What would you call . . . the very thin wife of a king?').* I also liked the exercises where words are placed in different contexts, and the reader has to determine their meanings or function in the text. I thought there wasn't enough context, at times, for some of the questions. Same/different exercises are always a problem, for instance, without lots of context. So, is 'The girl sat near the old lady' the same or different in meaning from 'The old lady was sitting near the girl' (2.64)? The trouble is that 'beside' implies 'near' but not vice versa. But these were minor points.

The books are approximately 24 × 19 cm, and have a full-colour front cover, but the drawings and text are a rather uninspiring black-and-white throughout. This keeps the price down, but for pupils with difficulties, I am not sure that this was the right decision. It isn't simply a question of maintaining interest; some of the more complex pictures are difficult to work through, as a consequence (e.g. 3.17).

A two-page note to the teacher is printed at the front of each book. In this, the authors say that the books have been written 'to help pupils find a challenge in the necessary routine of practising basic reading skills and to help them understand that reading involves thinking'. The aim, it would seem, is to cut across the Remedial/English divide: no mention of 'difficulties' is made in the books themselves (only in the accompanying brochure). I personally think the level is a bit 'young' for secondary school children *without* difficulties, and might not be so challenging. By contrast, I tried bits of it out on some fourth year juniors and they liked it. The series may take a while to find its level, therefore, but in the meantime it strongly deserves to be tried out.

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