

[Review] Study Skills for Academic Success by Cheryl Wecksler

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Reviews

Study Skills for Academic Success. Cheryl Wecksler. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers, 1995 Pp. xv + 182. US \$22.95 ISBN 0-8384-3958-6 (paper)

Study Skills for Academic Success is another volume in the expanding *Tapestry* series. It is a high-intermediate to low-advanced-level book for students planning to enter American colleges and universities. Students who use this integrated skills text are asked to do exercises which are designed to lead them to develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning.

The stated purpose of this student book "is to introduce students to the type of work they will have to do in a typical university program and to provide them with the skills and strategies necessary to succeed in the system" (p. xi). The three skills concentrated on in *Study Skills for Academic Success* are: reading texts and other types of academic writing; listening to lectures and taking notes; and taking tests. The obvious question is whether these are the most important skills for language learners to focus on as they prepare to enroll in regular college courses. For guidance in this I will relate aspects of *Study Skills for Academic Success* to studies conducted on this issue over the past seventeen years.

The first chapter, "Beginning the Academic Year", opens with exercises for getting oriented to a U.S. college. Students can do these on their own as they explore their campus. Students are also directed to possible sources of help available to them on campus. To launch their campus exploration, learners will find in Appendix B a handy glossary of university terminology from "audit" to "workshop" for quick and easy reference. An important part of this book and the entire *Tapestry* series is to help students take responsibility for their own learning and become aware of learning strategies. So it's not surprising to find a questionnaire about study habits in the first chapter. In addition, the emphasis on taking responsibility for one's own learning is graphically illustrated at the end of every chapter. Each chapter summary is prepared as a chart which shows work students will need to do on their own and work that is done in class involving use of the skills practiced in these chapters.

"Using the Library", chapter 2, contains a number of very practical exercises to acquaint foreign students to a college library. First, basic terminology is introduced along with alphabetizing. For a more thorough listing of library terminology students may consult part two of Appendix B at the back of the book. The exercises on using terms are followed up with activities on using the Library of Congress cataloguing system. The clear directions on how to find materials using a computerized catalogue appear user-friendly for students. But recent research indicates that time spent introducing the library system to enrolling students would be better invested developing other skills. It seems that very few college professors actually require any kind of library research from their first-year students (Kehe & Kehe, 1996).

The next two chapters lead students through practice with authentic academic readings (found at the back of the book in Appendix A), preparing study notes from readings, taking notes from taped lectures, getting involved in class discussions, paraphrasing, summarizing and preparing for and taking objective tests and essay tests. Both faculty and students perceive the need for college students to be able to read authentic texts. According to a survey by Ostler, international students in U.S. colleges believe that the ability to read textbooks and take notes in class are the most important skills for them to develop (1980). San Diego State University faculty ranked reading as the English skill most important to students in their courses with listening close behind (Johns, 1981). Further, in a study of matriculated ESL students done in 1994, it was discovered that most writing assignments in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) composition courses do not require students to read,

understand, write about or respond to authentic academic text (Leki & Carson, 1997). This could imply that textbooks for EAP students might not be meeting their actual needs. In *Study Skills for Academic Success*, these academic preparation issues are addressed in chapters 3 and 4 beginning with a useful list of signal words in chapter 3. This is followed by an explanation of the SQ3R reading strategy and a practice exercise. Then, there are several useful activities for paraphrasing, leading into a major section on summarizing in chapter 4. Here is an important part of this text as the ability to react to and summarize a reading from a book or journal is required in authentic college assignments (Horowitz, 1986; Leki & Carson, 1997). Ostler concludes from her survey: "Both undergraduates and graduates ... need work in learning summary skills" (1980, p. 498). The summarizing work in this text also involves listening to taped lectures and taking notes.

Chapter 4 contains one page on synthesizing materials from multiple sources. Horowitz (1986) found fifteen samples of this type of writing task in his survey of actual writing assignments given to students in their classes. The three synthesizing exercises in this text could be strengthened a great deal in the classroom by adding teacher-generated supplementary materials. But used alone, they could easily serve as springboards for instructors planning to teach this complex skill.

Chapters 3 and 4 both conclude with sections on test taking preparation. These sections contain many good strategies for approaching objective and essay exams. The group of thirty U.S. professors in the Kehe and Kehe study recommend that foreign students practice taking multiple-choice tests (1996). Undergraduates see a definite need for greater skill in taking multiple-choice exams (Ostler, 1980). As we know, this type of test is standard fare in the large lecture courses most first-year students find themselves in, so the exercises for taking objective tests found in chapter 3 are welcome. Another feature in these chapters that warrants mention here is the inclusion of exercises in time management skills that should be employed when writing tests. My students have found these to be quite useful for test preparation.

The most important skill needed by foreign students entering U.S. colleges, according to nearly one-half of the professors interviewed by Kehe and Kehe, is being able to talk to them and ask for clarification. Many faculty expressed frustration "that foreign students often *say* they understand when, in fact, they do not. Also, too often, foreign students wait to talk to professors until it is too late for them to catch up" (1996, p. 113). These skills are referred to only twice in *Study Skills for Academic Success*. Very briefly in the chapter 1 section "Getting Help on Campus", and later in chapter 4. There are three exercises in chapter 4 which directly prepare students for class participation. I would like to have seen more exercises to help students formulate questions, however. The foreign college students in Ostler's study ranked the ability to ask questions in class as their third most important need (1980).

The final chapter of the text is, "Working on a Group Project". Here the author follows up on her advice in earlier chapters about the benefits of group study with tasks to prepare students for participating in a group project. The exercises in this chapter include: meeting deadlines, brainstorming ideas, library research, writing a thesis statement and giving an oral presentation. Obviously, these activities are relevant for most assignments whether they are done in groups or individually. The tasks set in this chapter lead students to an oral report and not the essay which is found in many other study skills texts. This is appropriate since in general, first-year courses require one to two pages of writing per semester (Kehe & Kehe, 1996). Also, it is refreshing to find an academic study skills book that does not work through comparison and contrast and other rhetorical modes. Understanding different modes of writing or having the ability to write a research paper was seen as being unnecessary by all of the professors in the Kehe and Kehe study (1996). Many of

these professors said that American students entering college today do not have these skills. Ten of the thirty professors recommended foreign students to practice writing under time pressure. It seems that because plagiarism is on the rise, more and more shorter in-class writing is being required. However, there is evidence to suggest that ESL students find writing under time pressure to be terribly restrictive (Leki & Carson, 1997).

Cheryl Weckslar has made a fine contribution to the *Tapestry* series. *Study Skills for Academic Success* takes newly-enrolled students through the basics of the college study experience with clear explanations, good models and excellent activities. Highly motivated learners could use this as a self-study text, but most would need some guidance from an instructor. Although sections of this book may not actually address the type of work first-year students typically do, these areas can easily be supplemented by resourceful teachers. Overall, I have found sections of *Study Skills for Academic Success* to be very helpful in my courses. Instructors of upper-level EAP students will find many of the chapters and individual exercises in this book, together with the teacher's manual and cassette tape, to be quite useful for practice in any of the skills.

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Timothy Stewart
 tstewart@miyazaki-mic.ac.jp
 Miyazaki International College
 Miyazaki International College
 1405 Kano, Kiyotake-cho
 Miyazaki-gun. 88916 Japan
 tel: 0985-85-5931
 fax: 0985-84-3396