Essential Teacher Knowledge
by Jeremy Harmer
Pearson Education 2012

Jeremy Harmer’s new book is about to hit the bookshops, and the author provides his own clear overview of it on the Pearson website (www.pearsonelt.com/professionaldevelopment/videoscasts/), where he claims that it is ‘a new kind of methodology book … in which we’ve tried to explain basic concepts about English language teaching in the most accessible and straightforward way’. So does Essential Teacher Knowledge live up to his claims? Of course, the proof is in the eating, but what a great-looking book this is! It’s colourful, well-organised, easy to read, provides a wealth of cross-references for key ideas – and the icing on the cake is a DVD with a large number of videos which bring life to ideas and methods explained in the book.

The book covers core modules of the Cambridge ESOL Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT), such as background to language learning, classroom management, teaching skills and assessment, as well as the specialist modules like CLIL, teaching young learners and language awareness. But it is likely to be useful for any teachers who want to refresh their knowledge of the basics and have access to clear teaching models. It also has some useful appendices: a cross-referenced glossary, useful classroom language and clear example lesson plans.

Here are some of the highlights:
• The wide range of topics with interesting, usable, exciting suggestions for teachers to emulate.
• The attention to detail in key areas like planning and classroom management.
• The range of nationalities of the teachers interviewed in the videos. This was a stroke of genius. It brings the topics to life and provides direct access to solutions and ideas for teachers.
• The two-page unit spreads, which might actually seem achievable for busy teachers.
• The way the texts in Section A illustrate key language points for teachers, who can then follow up clearly-marked references and explore them in more detail in other units. In my experience, a lot of beginner teachers feel very insecure about their knowledge of grammar. The grammar units are pleasingly gentle examples of how we can use context to illustrate parts of speech. Colour coding of grammar words helps you see at a glance what is covered in the unit.
• Explanation of difficult concepts. Take the section on assessment, for example. It’s often difficult to explain concepts like validity and reliability in a simple way, but the units on assessment make a valiant attempt. And more importantly, it encourages good test-writing practice – such as producing a list of test specifications for classroom tests.

And here are a few qualms:
• The follow-up reading list provides useful references for some of the topics, but misses out a few areas like ICT and assessment, which are also given a lot of importance in the book. However, the indications are that the accompanying website will have further reading suggestions.
• Sometimes the glossary seems simplistic. For example, a concordance is ‘a programme which allows you to get information about words’. That makes it sound like a dictionary. And a phoneme is not ‘an individual unique sound’ as the glossary states. It’s a range of phonetic sounds which constitute the smallest meaningful unit of sound. The problem here, of course, is that a more correct definition is immediately more complicated.

In sum – and I write from the perspective of a teacher trainer who works in many different countries – I think this book makes a brilliant attempt at living up to its claims and should be a treasure trove to many beginning teachers around the world.

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