Ion Drew

*Associate Professor, Department of Cultural Studies and
Languages, University of Stavanger*

Rikke Pihlstrøm

Teaching English in Norway: Ideas, Schemes and Resources

Book review

Pihlstrøm, Rikke:

Teaching English in Norway: Ideas, Schemes and Resources

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Teaching English in Norway: Ideas, Schemes and Resources is a practical guide for practising teachers and student teachers of English. It provides the reader with numerous recommended lesson plans and activities for English teaching and a presentation of the underlying principles behind their use. Although the title and introductory ‘Note to teachers’ do not specify the target group of learners, it nevertheless becomes apparent through numerous references in the text that upper secondary school learners especially, in addition to lower secondary learners, are the primary target group.

The author, in addition to being a lecturer of Teaching English as a Foreign Language at the Department of Teaching Education and School Research at the University of Oslo, is also a teacher at an upper secondary school and often refers to her own teaching. It is clear that she wishes to share her knowledge, ideas and experiences with other English teachers and student teachers. The book is a welcome initiative for teachers and those aspiring to be teachers, an inspiration for those seeking fresh ideas and input, as well as an understanding of some of the fundamental principles behind the teaching of English as a foreign language. With its focus on teaching English at the upper secondary level especially, the book fills a gap in the literature on guidelines for English teachers in Norway.

The book contains eight chapters in the following order: learning and teaching vocabulary, teaching and learning grammar, developing writing skills, developing reading skills, developing speaking skills, developing listening

skills, assessments, and teaching literature, media and society. The first seven chapters begin with a brief presentation of underlying principles and research connected to the topic before proceeding with practical guidelines and advice about teaching and how to help learners develop in the given area. The main text of the chapter on developing writing skills is much more comprehensive and longer than the other chapters, possibly because the writing skill requires special attention among the target group. The final chapter on teaching literature, media and society is a collection of lesson plans of teachers in four upper secondary schools. The author makes a point of especially recommending this chapter to the readers.

The author's style is simple, direct and to the point. She adopts a hands-on approach with a desire to help teachers and student teachers with insight and tools that will help their learners to develop their language skills, expand their vocabulary and work on their grammar. Although the book is generally well-written, the first chapter contains some inaccuracies in the sections on strategies for understanding new words.

The author is careful not to overload the reader with theory, but rather selects some theoretical perspectives that are considered important in the context, or refers to the ideas of some scholars, before moving on to the practical implications for classroom teaching and the presentation of practical activities. In addition, references to useful websites and other resources appear frequently. A comprehensive appendix with numerous recommended activities appears at the end of each chapter. These normally outnumber the pages in the actual main text of the chapter, thus reinforcing the practical focus of the book. The author even suggests that those readers who are in a hurry can simply skip the research and principles sections and proceed straight to the activities and teaching resources.

For example, the chapter on developing reading skills initially presents the abilities required by a good reader and different models of reading, such as bottom-up, top-down and the currently predominant interactive (a combination of bottom-up and top-down) model. It also has a section on the distinction between active and passive readers, one on different ways of reading (scanning, skimming and detailed reading) and one on different strategies (before-, while- and post-strategies) during the reading process. The remainder of the chapter is a 17-page appendix including before-reading activities (e.g. identifying key terms and/or useful phrases), while-reading activities (e.g. the Cornell Note-taking System) and numerous activities connected to reading literature (e.g. add a new scene or character, bio poetry and what to look for when analyzing a novel or short story).

Another example, the chapter on developing writing skills, initially draws the reader's attention to the importance of genre awareness and the distinction between the 'private text' (generating content in the creative phase of writing) and the 'public text' (how effectively the text communicates its content to the

readers). The notion of a process-oriented approach to writing is introduced and sections follow on generating ideas, such as brainstorming, clustering and free writing, and writing to learn (WTL). Further sections address, for example, the reader, the purpose of a text, how a text should be organized, and the distinction between formal and informal English. The writer goes into detail on issues such as building a paragraph, forming a thesis statement/research question, writing an introduction, the five-paragraph essay and signposting (linking words) as cohesive ties. These topics are extremely important for learners at this level to be aware of, many of whom will go on to use English in higher education. As with the other chapters, the activities in the appendix are directly related to the topics raised in the main text of the chapter.

Arguably the main strengths of the book are its range of practical ideas for teachers, especially at the upper secondary level, its references to sources that can give teachers more ideas and the fact that it looks beyond just relying on the textbook, a resource which in fact is hardly mentioned, but which has a very strong tradition in Norwegian lower and upper secondary schools. It is refreshing to see a book that aims to enhance the quality and variety of English teaching at the upper levels of schooling in Norway.