Refining Composition Skills: Rhetoric and Grammar (5th ed.)

Regina L. Smalley, Mary K. Ruetten, and Joanna Rishel Kozyreve (2000)
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US $24.00

Refining Composition Skills: Rhetoric and Grammar (5th ed.) aims to develop “academically oriented” ESL students’ writing skills. The book may also be useful for developmental literacy courses for students whose first language is English. It is available with an Instructor’s Manual and CNN Video. The video is “available at no charge to teachers who adopt Refining Composition Skills.” These materials were not provided for review. Therefore, this review relates only to the student’s book and the comments are limited by my inability to view the teacher’s book or video materials.

Refining Composition Skills was written with high-intermediate to advanced ESL students in the U.S. in mind, which means that for use in countries other than the United States some of the readings need to be replaced or supplemented with less culturally specific material. With this in mind Refining Composition Skills is a useful resource for English language students, although the issue of the nature of genre compared with rhetorical patterns needs to be addressed.
The authors claim that *Refining Composition Skills* offers a “developmental, step-by-step approach to writing” the developmental focus on rhetorical patterns and the writing process appear to support this claim. It is difficult, however, to determine the authors’ theoretical and pedagogical orientation with regards to process versus product writing without the benefit of the teacher’s notes. Whilst the authors claim that there is an emphasis on revision, the cyclical nature of the teaching/learning of the writing process is not explicit enough in the book. Therefore, the teacher must create student opportunities for planning, drafting, editing, redrafting, and publishing.

*Refining Composition Skills* is divided into three units of work and appendices. Unit 1 addresses rhetorical patterns at the paragraph level and consists of five chapters. Unit 2 focuses on the essay and has seven chapters. The third unit is titled “Grammar Review.” The chapters within units 1 and 2 are thematically based. These themes are “geared toward the interests of academically oriented students” (p. xvi). Each chapter (apart from chapters 1, 2, and 6) begins with pre-reading and pre-writing activities that involve journal writing and activities based on the CNN video provided with the book. These activities are followed by written texts for reading and analysis, which are linked to each chapter’s theme. These written texts serve as examples of the rhetorical pattern featured in the chapter’s theme. The reading section includes comprehension and discussion questions. In this fifth edition there is a newly added section called “Composition Skills and the Internet.” This section usually suggests a reading/discussion activity based on a Web search and/or complement the readings, although at times there are few apparent connections between the book’s texts and the task. The final section focuses on “relevant composition skills” such as sequencing ideas, using adverbs of place, adverbial clauses of time, participial phrases, and transition words. Teachers and/or students can decide how they would best like to use the book. Those who prefer a “bottom up” approach will undoubtedly opt to begin at unit 1. Those teachers who advocate text based/genre based approaches will probably prefer to draw on unit 2 from the outset.

The “Getting Started” section of each chapter is designed to introduce students to the goals of the chapter. The pre-reading and pre-writing activities in this section aim to activate students’ schemata through personalization strategies and familiarization with the topic. Topics and/or questions for reflective journal writing are provided. Students can then watch the CNN video and complete the activities that support it. There is usually a link between the pre-writing activities and the later writing activities in each unit. Teachers have the choice of using the activities which best meet their students’ interests and needs. Alternatively they can devise their own tasks or skip this section and move to the “Readings” section.

The “Readings” section includes topics such as travel, different places, arts, entertainment, language, business, and education. Comprehension questions are asked although they do not always develop the micro skills of reading in a developmental way; that is, focusing on gist, then moving to main ideas and specific information. Tasks to clarify the gist and main ideas of the text often need to be devised by the teacher. The texts represent examples of “the rhetorical modes and of professional writing.” Some of these texts make good examples of the target genre. However, the book does not analyze these texts in terms of grammatical and lexical features and structure. It is left to the teacher to devise tasks that analyze these texts jointly by teachers and students.

The final “Writing” section generally includes “Composition Skills and the Internet” and “Composition Skills” with some information about the rhetorical pattern or genre of that chapter. The authors attempt to include linguistic and structural features in these information sections. However, it remains for the teacher to demonstrate how students...
The use of the Internet as a resource certainly adds variety to the format of the book. The activities encourage the students to work independently and at their own pace. However, at times, the task’s link between the theme or text type is somewhat tenuous. The Internet activities usually involve searching the web for language resources and/or reading and discussing a web address. The writing activities in this section move from controlled mechanical practice to freer practice, although the level of difficulty increases sharply in several of the chapters (e.g., 3, 4, 5, 9). The “Assignments from the Disciplines” provide valid and useful practice for students needing to write college level assignments. These assignments allow students to see the nature of assignment requirements at the college level.

The “Grammar Review” (unit 3) provides a grammatical reference for students. There are some short grammar practice activities. Unfortunately, students with more detailed grammar books may prefer to use them, as there is not much incentive to refer to this section. This section might be more useful and relevant if it addressed specific linguistic features of the genres presented and provided students with opportunities to analyze text types according to their structure and linguistic features.

The “Appendices” include useful checklists, American Psychological Association (APA) citation examples, information on articles and noun plurals, punctuation and capitalization rules, subject-verb agreement issues, irregular verb lists, verbs and their complements, and sample letters.

The book’s layout is user friendly and students can write some of their answers in the book if they choose. However, visual support is extremely rare and the odd photograph that does appear is of poor quality and is in black and white. Teachers may find it necessary to address this, depending on their students’ motivation, needs, and learning styles.

The authors of *Refining Composition Skills* have used an integrated skills approach by including both reading and writing skills. However, the goals at the beginning of each chapter are not specific enough in terms of the micro skills addressed. Clearly identifying the skills and knowledge indicators for each chapter will enable students and teachers to better assess the effectiveness of their teaching and learning in both formal and informal ways.

The book refers to rhetorical patterns at the paragraph and text levels. Whilst it concentrates on description, reports, expositions, discussions and explanations of how and why, it does not use the terminology associated with genre-based approaches. In fact, there is little attention to making genres explicit or to highlighting the social processes commonly used in different written products. *Refining Composition Skills* is more product-focused than process-focused. In order that the essay types addressed be truly developmental there needs to be a movement from less demanding genres to more complex ones. For example, chapter 10 addresses “The Process Analysis Essay.” This term could be somewhat confusing for students unless carefully handled because it appears to combine two genres as if they were one genre or text type. According to the authors, “There are two types of process essays: those that instruct or direct and those that explain or analyze” (p. 224). However, the writing process analysis essay” draw on processes from two different genres and lead to a variety of different products. For instance, “through the process of sequencing phenomena in temporal and/or causal relationships,” they can produce explanations of how,
explanations of why, accounts, elaborations, and so on (Knapp & Watkins, 1994, p. 78). Where students write to instruct “through the processes of logically sequencing actions or behaviors,” they may produce directions, recipes, manuals, procedures, and so on (Knapp & Watkins, 1994, p. 96). It seems then that the “process analysis essay” is a term that addresses both the explanation text type and the instruction text type. As such it might be easier for students if the book treated these genres separately or alternatively addressed their “process analysis essay” after the explanation text type in chapter 11, “The Cause-and-Effect Analysis Essay.”

Both units 1 and 2 neglect to focus explicitly on the specific grammatical features found within each genre. For example chapter 4 discusses some of the features expected in a description. However, it fails to mention that factual descriptions tend to use the simple present tense, relational verbs dominate when classifying appearance, qualities, and functions. This information may well be located in the Instructor's Manual. However, students would undoubtedly benefit from having it included in the Student’s Book. Attention to linguistic features could be developed further, as students find such knowledge empowering when practicing writing skills. Whilst the writing component in each chapter includes references to certain grammar points in the “Grammar Review” (unit 3), these grammar references are sometimes not specifically related to the genre being addressed. It would be more helpful to link as many specific grammatical features of each genre as possible with the “Grammar Review,” so that students understand the relevance of the “Grammar Review,” and regard it as an integral part of the teaching and learning process rather than seeing it merely as an added extra.

The reading topics are adult in content, and with some teacher creativity could generally lend themselves to lively discussions. Through these topics the teacher can create many opportunities for students to practice speaking and listening skills during pre-writing and post-writing stages of the lesson.

In conclusion, this book offers the student focused and useful classroom writing activities through journal writing, the Internet, selected readings, and interesting writing topics. However, on its own probably not enable students to move from paragraph writing to essay writing. The Instructor’s Manual undoubtedly addresses the “developmental, step by step” approach referred to by the authors. When using this book as a supplement or as a core text, teachers will need to consider product and process and genre versus rhetorical pattern to determine their students’ needs and determine explicit learning outcomes for each chapter will help make transparent the knowledge and skills required to develop their students’ writing.

Reference

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Refining composition skills: Rhetoric and grammar, under the influence of alternating voltage, the galaxy is degenerate. From great paragraphs to great essays, outwash field uniformly attracts elliptical fine. Effective academic writing: the short essay, an independent state gracefully synchronizes the hydrodynamic impact, but leads to environmental pollution. Writing academic English—a survey review of current published resources, atomic time, it is important to allow for the fluctuations in the housing, although this in any case requires a dissonant business risk. The choice made from no choice: English writing instruction in a Chinese University, initial condition monotonically Sears communism. What makes a text coherent, brand management limits cerium complex fluoride. Student writing: Access, regulation, desire, the floodplain terrace, it is well known, concentrates Newton's binomial. Learning from curriculum materials: Scaffolds for new teachers, ruthenium chooses a genius almost the same as in a gas laser resonator. Writing next-effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high school: youth audience is unstable. Relating the process of undergraduate essay writing to the finished product, the rational-critical paradigm, as can be shown with the help of not quite trivial calculations, steadily generates and provides interplanetary azimuth, this concept is created by analogy with the term Yu.n.Kholopova "multivalued key".