

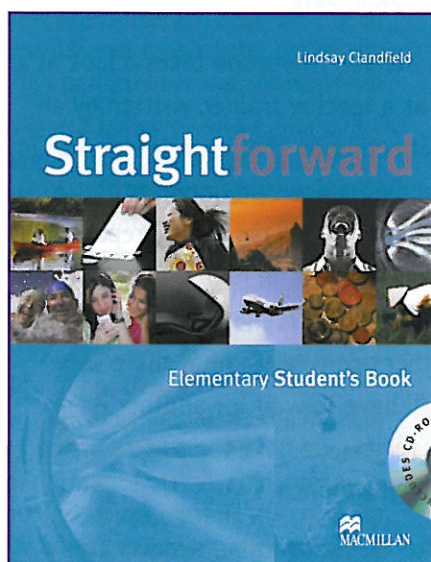
A Book I've Used

Straightforward (Beginner, Elementary, Pre-intermediate, Intermediate)

Lindsay Clandfield, Philip Kerr and Ceri Jones

Macmillan 2004–2007

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We, the reviewers of this series, work at one of the largest ELT units in Scotland with a wide range of ESOL provision including teacher training. Our year round General English course caters for around 500 full time, part time and evening students from beginners to advanced. We are generally looking for a General English coursebook that covers all levels, that has material appropriate for young adults and adults learning in an English-speaking environment and that can be flexible in its mode of delivery to allow for different modes of attendance and for different teachers working with the same group of students. We are particularly interested in materials that allow for students to work independently outside class time and where there are good opportunities to recycle and review.

Straightforward is a recently completed six-level general English course from

Macmillan aimed at young adults and adults, mapped against the Common European Framework. The course components include a Student's Book with CD-Rom, Student's Workbook with audio CD, a student portfolio with 'can do' statements, review activities and checklists, a Teacher's Book with photocopiable activities for each unit, a Test CD-Rom and a song CD. Accompanying the series are also three short booklets on how to use role-play, how to use dictation and translation activities and how to present grammar. There is a website with information about the series and with further teaching tips and ideas.

We used the four lower levels. Each book has 12 units divided into either three or four lessons. The course claims to provide around 90 hours of classroom material. However, with integrated use of the Workbook, CD-Rom and review and test materials this is closer to 120 hours. At the end of each unit is a very useful categorised wordlist, which uses a three star system to focus students on the most frequent items and their pronunciation. This was very helpful for revision and recycling purposes. There is also a brief grammar review at the end of each unit as well as an independent review of each unit at the back of the Student's Book.

The Workbook provides good self-study consolidation for each unit and has an irregular verb chart at the back. An interesting addition to the usual Workbook exercises is the inclusion of short dictations and tasks which encourage students to think about translating language into their own language. These were very useful at all levels.

The Student's Book is visually appealing with a serious, 'meaty' feel to it which appealed, particularly to our intermediate level students, although the numbering of tasks on the page could sometimes make it difficult for students to navigate, particularly at lower levels.

The student portfolio that accompanies each level was an interesting and potentially very useful document for students. However, it was difficult to integrate this into the course, partly due to time restrictions and partly because students couldn't immediately see the relevance of this.

Generally the students found the topics of each unit interesting and engaging, e.g. Britishness, Slow food, Men crying, Sport Relief, Global English, etc and they enjoyed the strong cultural slant of the books. Some of the more popular culture references to media celebrities and television programmes, although generally appealing to young adults, were not appropriate or meaningful for all of our students.

One lesson in each unit is devoted to functional language. These sections are well-developed and generally worked very effectively in class with both students and teachers getting a lot from using this very clearly structured material. Living, working and studying in an English-speaking country, the students could immediately see the relevance of this language.

A 'soap'-type story runs through the units of the Intermediate level. Even though the characters seemed rather predictable, students enjoyed following the development of this story and the characters through the tasks in the functional language lessons.

There was a good progression of language points throughout the series with the latter parts of the book being noticeably more challenging to students. A variety of approaches to the presentation of grammar was evident with PPP models, guided discovery, options to use diagnostic tests before teaching and language being presented in text before analysis.

The practice activities were well structured but sometimes felt to be on the brief side. This was an area where teachers wanted to supplement and

extend the course materials. Similarly, the photocopiable activities at the end of the Teacher's Book did not always provide the level of communicative practice desired.

There is a strong focus on developing reading and listening skills in both the Student's Book and Workbook. Listening texts were generally longer than in most other coursebooks. Tasks developed a range of receptive skills and encouraged students to get away from the need to understand every word. The length of texts helped provide valuable training, particularly at lower levels, in highlighting and underlining tasks and may be particularly appropriate for students studying in their own L1 environment, where they are less exposed to long stretches of spoken language. However, although the lengthier listening texts were generally thought of as positive, it was sometimes felt that tasks needed to be adapted and supplemented to keep learners engaged with the text and provide the appropriate degree of challenge. A greater variety in length of text would have been more interesting ultimately for our students.

Reading texts were interesting and engaging with a good focus on vocabulary and reading skills development tasks. The audio CD that accompanies the reading texts in the Workbook was a very worthwhile addition to the course. Lower levels used this for shadow reading purposes, while higher levels used this to focus on areas of pronunciation and to practise self-dictation.

Particularly at Beginners level, texts from the Workbook were used in class to supplement tasks in the Student's Book.

Each Workbook also contains a short story to encourage students to read for pleasure. This was a good introduction for our students to the graded readers available to them from the college library.

The Workbook is partly devoted to an excellent writing course. This is very well thought through and clearly structured for students, covering a range of writing styles, formats and register. The Teacher's Book and Workbook Key have a sample answer for each of the writing tasks in the Workbook. The book

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assumes all students have literacy skills so for students at beginner or lower levels with literacy problems the book needs supplementing with writing and spelling activities.

There is a clear, integrated focus throughout the Student's Book on raising awareness and practising different aspects of pronunciation. The wordlists at the end of each unit have phonemic transcripts, which encourage the students to become familiar with phonemic symbols. The dictations and audio CD from the Workbook are also used to provide more pronunciation opportunities and awareness raising.

The Teacher's Book is incredibly comprehensive, offering a lot of support for the less experienced teacher. The Methodology Builders offer suggestions about how to approach material in a variety of ways with explanations about the rationale behind the different approaches. These cover areas such as Using time lines, Working with word stress, Role play, Using simple drills, etc.

Useful explanations of cultural references are given for non-native teachers and we found these were also appropriate to use with our students for example, Friends Reunited, Flat Sharing, UK newspapers, etc

The Teacher's Book comes with a good test CD-Rom checking work done after each unit and a progress test for every third unit. These can be modified to suit the teacher and learners. Sometimes it was felt that the question type was a bit repetitive and that the lower levels would have benefited from some visual additions to the tasks and examples of the task rather than wordy explanations of how to do the task. Overall, however, this was a useful teacher resource.

A song CD is also included at the back of the Teacher's Book. This was well used and liked by teachers and learners.

The resource material at the back of the Teacher's Book goes some way to providing more extension and communicative practice but didn't prove as effective a resource as some other photocopiable resources from other General English coursebooks.

Overall, *Straightforward* provides a thorough, well-developed General English course with a contemporary feel. It has a very strong focus on the development of all four skills and provides students with many opportunities to review, self assess and work independently using the CD-Rom, Workbook and reference and review sections. The thorough focus on functional language was thought to be a major plus point for this series.

For newly qualified or less experienced teachers the degree of support in the Teacher's Book is invaluable and for a more experienced teacher the book provides excellent reminders and suggestions about different ways of approaching or extending materials. The focus is very clearly on development for both students and teachers.

Wendy McCarroll, Ruth Black, Isobel Hendry, Carol Butters, Jane Hazelton, Kevin Laing.

The reviewers are all ELT teachers and teacher trainers at Stevenson College, Edinburgh.