

SOUNDS INTRIGUING and VARIATIONS ON A THEME.

Alan Maley and Alan Duff. Cambridge University Press, 1979.

These two books approach the same problem - oral production - from opposite directions. Sounds Intriguing starts from a given arrangement of sounds on a tape e.g. water lapping, humming, or water gushing, and suggests lines of development for pair or group work (with the important condition that the groups themselves should interact). Variations on a Theme begins with a function e.g. making an offer and illustrates it by using several exponents such as "Perhaps I could _____?" or "Can I help?" in three or four dialogues of from six to eight lines each.

Sounds Intriguing is therefore completely open as to level and use. Any student can respond to the sounds on the tape using the structures and vocabulary he has mastered. Any teacher can fit the material, as Maley and Duff suggest he should, into a place in a course he is teaching. In fact the authors suggest fairly strenuous ways of focussing the material. Questions guide the students in a desired direction. Group work interprets the sequence. The teacher has the alternative of a writing phase. ("Write a poem of six lines. It does not have to rhyme".) There is vocabulary associated with the sounds e.g. drip, splash, lap, to increase the student's powers of expression. It must be said that there is a lot of vocabulary here many teachers would consider not essential for the students with whom the book is most likely to be used - beginners.

Variations on a Theme is already focussed on certain definite functions and their exponents. But as the authors stress, imitation of the dialogues is not what they have in mind. Interpretation and discussion take off from the dialogues and a list of extra exponents e.g. I didn't like/enjoy/think much of _____ is at hand for extensions of the original dialogues or new work in parallel situations. Here the authors cannot entirely avoid the criticism normally levelled at functional texts - too many exponents, and little generalizability of structures. Their reply would surely be that their dialogues have great naturalness and if the point is not to memorize, it makes no sense to bring up the objection of little generalizability. But what,

then, will the students take away from the classroom with them? The answer seems to be in the field of cognition. The authors suggest many ways to expose the students to the tapes and they are careful to define the 'variations' (extra exponents) as medicine, to be served in small doses only. They have thus anticipated the objection of too many structures, at the same time allowing the students scope to evolve their own learning strategies.

Perhaps a more serious objection involves the problem of intonation. The list of extra functional exponents - especially associated with work in small groups - could lead to intonational confusion among the students. (Even a native speaker finds it difficult to repeat exactly the same intonation pattern more than once.) Here the lesson would have to be carefully prepared by the teacher in a way perhaps the authors have not anticipated.

Given this proviso, Variations on a Theme is highly commendable for intermediate to advanced students. Sounds Intriguing is useful at any level, but perhaps most in the problem area of relatively free oral work for beginners.

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