

Renewing Access to International English



by Richard Burgess

Have you heard the one about the Brit, the American and the Canadian in a hotel lift, together with a pretty girl in a short skirt? Well, suddenly there is a power cut and the lights go out. A loud slap is heard. When the lights go on again the American has a big red slap mark on his cheek. "These damn North Americans," the Brit thinks, "they simply don't know how to behave!" "These damn Canucks," the American thinks, "they're just a bunch of hicks, and I get the blame!" The Canadian thinks: "I hope there's another power cut soon so I can slap the Yank again!"

No, not a real-life anecdote from a Cappelen Damm work session on the new *Access to International English* book. But confirmation, as if confirmation were necessary, that the national stereotypes are all there waiting to be put to use.

The Canadians resent the Americans, the Americans disparage the Canadians – and the British still haven't learned to differentiate between the two!

Of course, it hasn't been like that between us three writers. Far from it – Robert Mikkelsen (the Yank), John Anthony (the Canuck) and myself (the Limey) have worked together on the new edition of *Access to International English* in a spirit of equality, cooperation and amiability. (After all, it must be difficult enough for them not being British without me adding to their burdens!) Three ex-pats with, between us, several decades of experience of writing textbooks in Norway. You would think, then, that we would be used to the process and prepared for its challenges. But, strangely, each book is like a new expedition into the unknown in which you make exactly the same discoveries as last time, but are equally surprised by them. Such discoveries include:

- how much time there seems to be at the beginning of the expedition.
- how little time there seems to be at the end.
- how it is perfectly possible to spend several hours writing one short paragraph.
- how it is equally possible that that very paragraph is the one that gets axed by the editor, Butchering Birger.

An expedition is one metaphor for writing a textbook, but there are also others. Pregnancy, for example. Not perhaps an immediately obvious one when the three writers are all middle-aged men, but it's nonetheless apt: the long period of gestation, the regular check-ups to see that the foetus is developing properly, and finally the difficult birth itself, when Butchering Birger becomes Benign and Benevolent Birger, providing encouragement ("just one more push!") and laughing gas (i.e. three-course restaurant meals) as required. Fortunately, on this occasion, we at least don't have to argue about what to call the infant. She will be named after her elder sister ...

A rather more macabre extension of the birth metaphor is found in a term familiar to all textbook writers, namely "killing one's babies". This refers to the process necessitated by a little-known law of physics, closely related to Sod's Law, which states that "the optimum number of pages of a textbook equals the total number of pages of the final draft minus one fifth" (often formulated as

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$x = y - y/5$). This means that not just sentences but whole exercises, indeed whole texts have to be thrown out at the last moment. In the old days these poor rejected texts, like stillborn children, would live out a sort of shadowy existence in the Teacher's Book – a real book, but one rarely opened (and invariably printed on inferior paper). Today the advent of the internet has made the Teacher's Book, like Purgatory, a thing of the past. Now any text that doesn't make it past Birger's axe may be permitted a virtual existence at access.cappelendamm.no, along with all the other resources to be found there. This not only saves the writers from the trauma of literary infanticide, it also means that textbooks now come with a wealth of "free extras" – at least, as long as the websites are free, as they are at Cappelen Damm.

Why is a new edition necessary?

The need for a radical rewrite – and it is a rewrite rather than just an update – is twofold; for one thing, the world is a different place to what it was in 2007 when the old book was published. The Great Recession, the Occupy Wall Street movement, WikiLeaks, the Arab spring, the ubiquity of social media – these are just some of the events and developments that have changed the world we live in and that demand the attention of a textbook writer trying to take the pulse of the English-speaking world. If I might be permitted a little trumpeting, feedback from present users of Cappelen Damm's books for English at *videregående* level suggests that the quality of the main "focus texts" of our chapters is still seen as one of our chief strengths. While some argued that the internet and its revolution in accessing information would somehow make such texts superfluous, we have always believed that the opposite is true – that the sheer volume of information available, and the overwhelming cacophony of voices it represents, makes the role of a focused, explanatory text more important than ever. In the new *Access to International English* this role has been deepened and broadened by drawing in other source texts and embedding them in the focus



text. The result is, if you will pardon the buzzword, a sort of "polyphonic" narrative – where explanation and exemplification are combined – that we hope will both clarify and inspire debate. The other need for a rewrite calls for a dose of humility on our part; the last book was the first of its kind for an entirely new course. After it had been used for a year or two it was clear, not least from teachers' suggestions to

our surveys, that there was room for improvement. One important issue here was the focus on language. While the curriculum for *Internasjonal engelsk* has important competence aims concerning culture, society and literature, it is nevertheless first and foremost a language course. By the end of the year, students should be able to feel that, as well as gaining insights into the world of international English, they have raised their game in the language itself. The old book wasn't

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systematic enough in its approach to improving linguistic competence, neither in terms of students' own written production nor in what the curriculum refers to as "kunnskap om språkets oppbygning på setnings- og tekstenivå og bevissthet om språklige virkemidler i ulike sjangrer". Teachers have pointed this out – and we have now had a chance to do something about it.

New courses

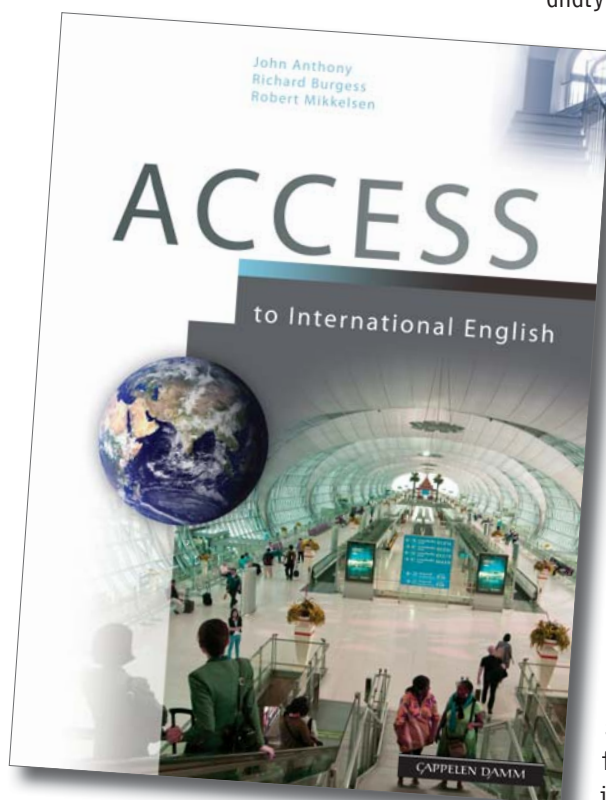
To remedy this we have made some significant changes and additions to the book. At the end of each of the book's six chapters there are two new units – a Writing Course and a Language Course. The Writing Course aims to give students a helping hand in some of the basics of writing well – crafting good sentences and paragraphs, making texts hang together. We don't give neat recipes for good texts – such things don't exist. Writing is a creative process and as such can never be completely systematised. The focus is on practical work with texts, looking at examples of good usage as well as typical pitfalls and how to avoid them. Essays get special mention, since this is a demanding genre that students often wrestle with. This is not surprising, really. It always strikes me as a paradox that for decades Norwegian students have to a large extent been evaluated in both Norwegian and English in their ability to produce a genre that they hardly ever read – except for their own fumbling attempts.

While the Writing Course is directed towards language production, the Language Course is directed towards analysis. The aim of the course is to provide students with some of the terminology and tools with which to manage the sort of linguistic analysis that exam questions increasingly demand: looking at how texts achieve their effects, comparing texts for style and intention. The six units deal with everything from the basic concepts of grammar to such topics as formal/informal language, literary devices and analysing genre. We believe that the course will enable students to tackle a

wide variety of analytic tasks. In both the language course and the writing course the focus is on examples and exercises. There is a world of difference between *telling* somebody how to do something and *showing* them how to do it. We try to do the latter as much as possible.

A world of literature

Another significant addition to the new book is the final literature chapter. There are basically two ways of using literary texts in a textbook like this. One way is to tie them to the themes



dealt with in the chapters and select them primarily for their ability to throw light on these themes. To be honest, it always feels like a rather unsatisfactory way of treating literature, since it often involves compromising quality for relevance. Good short stories and poems about particular topics are often difficult to find. The alternative is to choose literature for its own sake. In the new book we shamelessly use both strategies. That is to say, there are literary texts in the first five chapters, chosen for their relevance to the issues discussed in the main text. But we have also included a whole chapter of literature that is chosen for what it can tell us about its own world – the world of literature.

The literature chapter can be used in two ways: either as a store from which to pick stories and poems at random, or as a separate and continuous "literature course". If you choose the latter, you get a structured review of some of the key elements of literary analysis – plot and theme, point of view and irony, characterisation and setting, each element discussed in the light of a story in which this element is especially important. Poetry is, of course, also given its due. Some teachers may be surprised to find that we present students with our own analysis of texts. We make no apologies

for this. It is part of our belief in the importance of *showing* rather than just *telling*. Anyway, it doesn't leave the students idle. Far from it – each analysis deals with one aspect of the text, and as the chapter progresses and new elements of literary analysis are dealt with, the students are invited to look back at earlier texts (and texts elsewhere in the book) and put their new insights to the test.

At the time of writing this, the writers are slogging through a second round of proofreading. Soon the fruit of our loins, if you'll pardon the expression, will see the light of day, delivered from the printers in all its illustrated, multicoloured glory (complete, no doubt, with a ridiculous error that inexplicably survived five rounds of proofreading and made it into the final text, only to be discovered, triumphantly and noisily, by a participating teacher at a Cappelen Damm book presentation who always preferred Aschehoug anyway). Soon we can look forward to a time without deadlines, a time when Birger, if he appears in our dreams at all, will appear as Bountiful Birger, without his axe, but dressed in white, holding a flower in one hand and a large cheque in the other. Soon – but not yet. For after the Birth comes the Afterbirth – the book presentations, the answer key, the website. Alas, paternity isn't the carefree business it used to be ...