

## **Q: Skills for Success 1 Listening and Speaking**

*Jaimie Scanlon (Student Book) and Jenni Currie Santamaria (Teacher's Handbook)*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 213 pages (Student book), 110 pages (Teacher's Handbook)

## **Q: Skills for Success 1 Reading and Writing**

*Sarah Lynn (Student book) and Lawrence Lawson (Teacher's Handbook)*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 203 pages (Student Book), 128 pages (Teacher's Handbook)

*Q: Skills for Success* is a four-skills, six-level United States series designed for academic adult English-language learners and includes a full complement of resources for students and teachers in traditional and multimedia formats. Grouped by mode, the listening/speaking and reading/writing books contain 10 theme-based units, have companion Web sites for online practice for students, and include useful pedagogical (e.g., answer keys, rubrics, alternative and expansion activities) and testing (e.g., placement, exams) resources for teachers. The title of this series points to its key design element: each unit begins with a question intended to be thought-provoking and engaging and assumed to lead the learner to develop critical thinking skills, which the authors suggest are a fundamental component of any academic course curriculum. In addition to practice in the skill areas of each book, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary (selected from the Academic Word List and The Oxford 2000 Keywords) lessons are effectively integrated into each unit. In order to supplement its cultural content, the authors provide pedagogical suggestions for the development of "21st century skills," seen as most useful for students new to US professional and academic career paths. These two books complement each other in linguistic content and may be used individually or together.

*Q: Skills for Success* is advertised as being "the most learner-centered series available." A number of design features help learners understand the purpose of their learning and thus support the learner-centered claim. First, at the center of each unit, learning outcomes are explicitly stated and provide the focus for all instructional activities and unit assessments. Second, each unit begins with an explicit statement of the focused language skills. These two features acknowledge the learners' need to understand the purpose of learning and the focus of the lessons. Finally, at the conclusion of each unit, students self-assess their progress and are given suggestions on remediation where necessary. Added to the above is the unit question intended to stimulate and provoke discussion and engage students in probing topics of high

interest. Unit topics for Level 1 include names, jobs, culture, positive thinking, vacation, laughter, music, lying, adulthood, and fear; each topic is introduced with a preview of the context and relevant vocabulary. Each unit of *Q: Skills for Success Listening/Speaking 1* includes at least two listening passages (3-6 minutes in length; audio-scripts provided), which are scripted and recorded with clear but controlled, non-natural pronunciation; such passages can be both a benefit and a hindrance to students at the beginner level. The passages represent a wide range of spoken language genres (i.e., interviews, conversations, radio reports, lectures), and accompanying activities are equally varied and representative of tasks for academic language use (e.g., note-taking, schema charts, listening for detail). Each unit of *Q: Skills for Success Reading/Writing 1* includes two reading passages, which are short (i.e., half a page to two pages in length) and have sources of an authentic nature (i.e., Web sites, textbooks, magazines, newspapers) and varied genres (e.g., graphic information, news articles, research-based readings, editorials). However, the syntactic complexity and lexical range of these texts are controlled and simplified to accommodate the beginner learner, and the reading activities designed to engage the students with these passages lack variety.

Features of *Q: Skills for Success* that suggest that it stands apart from other proficiency-based textbooks are (a) the inclusion of skill-development activities useful for participation in academic or professional contexts (i.e., activities to collaborate, innovate, and demonstrate creativity, flexibility, and accountability); and (b) the inclusion of useful pedagogical resources to plan and adapt the materials effectively to suit the needs of the students. Specifically, these resources take the form of additional online passages, alternative assessments, tracking tools, expansion activities, and techniques for multi-level groups of students.

Overall, the Level 1 books in the series *Q: Skills for Success* are pedagogically well structured and thematically interesting and varied. However, two cautionary notes are worth considering. First, each unit treats one question or theme thoroughly, requiring more than 90 minutes per week of class. Dedicating a large amount of time to one topic may result in students becoming bored or being afflicted with learner fatigue. Further, if one group of students were to follow the listening/speaking and reading/writing books concurrently, the overuse of the theme would be amplified. Second, experience in teaching receptive skills in tandem with productive skills suggests that students are often more advanced in comprehension than in production; yet the materials reviewed here require students to produce language at a higher level than that required of the comprehension exercises. Finally, it would be necessary for ESL instructors to supplement these textbooks with authentic and more challenging reading and listening passages.

*Jennifer St. John*

## *The Reviewer*

Jennifer St. John has taught credit ESL to adults for over 25 years in the ESL program at the University of Ottawa. Her current focus includes teaching pronunciation and accent awareness skills, teaching oral communication skills, and exploring pedagogical tools for beginning language-learners.