

Q: Skills for Success 4 Reading and Writing

Debra Daise, Charl Norloff, and Paul Carne

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 253 pages

Q: Skills for Success 4 Listening and Speaking

Robert Freire and Tamara Jones

Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011, 245 pages

Q: Skills for Success 4 is the fifth in a series of six integrated course books for postsecondary English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes. Divided into listening and speaking and reading and writing strands, the set includes students' books, teachers' resource books, classroom CDs, a test-maker CD-ROM, and a host of online resources. Overall, it is a rich course book suite, with topical content; relevant, well-conceived activities for skills practice; limitless extendibility; and attractive presentation, although not without an important weakness in the alignment of content with its larger goals.

Each of the 10 units in the *Q: Skills for Success 4 Reading and Writing* student book contains a set of two readings on the same topic, covering themes from health, art, science, and the environment, to nature, marketing, and child development. The *Q: Skills for Success 4 Listening and Speaking* text follows a similar pattern, both in offering two listening passages on the same topic per unit and in presenting a parallel series of themes over the 10 units, presumably to allow the two books to be used in concert. Teachers whose course structures allow them longer classes can, therefore, create extended lessons with several activities unified by theme; teachers of shorter classes will have to deliver each unit over several lessons. The modular nature of the activities in each unit allows for this.

A variety of text genres are represented, including newspaper and magazine articles, blogs, Web pages, books, and authentic texts licensed from sources such as the *New York Times*, Cable News Network (CNN), *Science Daily*, and online sources. The listening materials also include passages from sources such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, CBS Television Broadcasting Company, and Reuters, as well as non-authentic lectures, interviews, and dialogues. It is a generally successful balance of the strengths and weaknesses of both authentic and non-authentic material, although the pitfalls regarding the use of authentic listening materials have not been completely avoided. One of the Unit 4 listening passages has been adapted from the soundtrack of a TV documentary, but stripped of its visual component, the remaining audio sometimes lacks context.

The reading texts and listening passages are generally topical and engaging ("Can climate change make us sicker?"; "Everyday people changing the world"; "Manga's new popularity"), although at times they focus on what could be termed "first world problems." Gray (2002) criticizes ELT textbooks

bound for global use but produced in developed-world, English-speaking countries for focusing on themes and values irrelevant to those from other social, economic, and geographical contexts. In the case of *Q: Skills for Success 4*, a text on how to stage your home for quicker resale, a blog post on a 20-year-old graduate contemplating joining a corporate accounting firm, and an entire unit on nutrition “trends” are good examples of this phenomenon, and so certain students may find these topics inaccessible.

Both the reading/writing and listening/speaking *Q: Skills for Success 4* texts have a particular focus on vocabulary, with a variety of lexical skill activities built into each unit. The Academic Word List and the publisher’s own Oxford 3000 list are featured resources, both in terms of the vocabulary items chosen for pre- and post-reading and listening exercises, and the end-of-unit vocabulary lists. Dictionary skills are taught explicitly in both strands of this series. Although broader vocabulary skills and strategies such as prefixes and suffixes, collocations, and deriving meaning from context are covered, there is repetition in the pre- and post-reading and listening vocabulary activities, which generally consist of matching words to definitions.

Arguably, the strongest aspects of *Q: Skills for Success 4 Reading and Writing* are the grammar and writing skills activities. Integration is key here; grammar and lexico-grammar points are chosen for their direct relationship to the genre of text assigned in the writing and reading activities. For example, a review of the past perfect accompanies the narrative essay; a comparison and contrast essay is accompanied by exercises on subordinators and transitions of comparison and contrast. Although this approach is by no means new or exclusive to this series, it gives relevance, focus, and immediate applicability to the grammar included in the book, which is sometimes lost in texts that focus on grammar in isolation.

The oral activities are a highlight of the *Q: Skills for Success 4 Listening and Speaking* text. Each unit contains a major speaking assignment, which is designed to flow seamlessly from the themes in the unit; connected to prior listening passages; and accompanied by pronunciation, reading, grammar, critical thinking, and speaking skill-building activities. These provide the context and scaffolding necessary to turn the final task into meaningful speaking practice. McDonough and Shaw (1993) define an authentic speaking task as providing “as close an approximation as possible to the world outside the classroom,” and this course book includes activities such as presenting one’s opinion to persuade a group at a town hall meeting, participating in a group discussion in the workplace, doing a short individual or group presentation, preparing and telling a story, and participating in an interview.

The pronunciation activities are also a strong point. They progress through the book cumulatively, with a particular focus on stress. The explanations are concise and accompanied by recorded examples, and the exercises are bite-sized and focused on excerpts from the listening texts.

The set of resources accompanying these two course books is extensive and rich. The teacher's books contain an abundance of alternative activities and assignments, ideas on how to adapt the activities to multilevel groups, activity extensions, and cultural notes; accompanying online resources are also available to teachers. The series comes with free student access to online materials through a sophisticated learning management system (LMS), which allows for access to classroom audio as well as supplementary independent practice in all skill areas, with activities specifically related to the books' content. Teachers can monitor this practice, check students' progress, and make certain activities available or hidden to students through the LMS. This is certainly a boon for teachers and students without the luxury of an institutional virtual learning environment.

Q: Skills for Success 4 is a rich, engaging course book suite appropriate for many contexts, but not necessarily rigorous enough for many EAP courses. The series is marketed as appropriate for preparing students for "academic success"; it includes "academic skills" and genres such as the lecture and essay and draws on resources such as the Academic Word List. However, *Q: Skills for Success* seems somewhat "EAP-lite."

The content in *Q: Skills for Success 4* appears similar to that of standardized exams such as the IELTS and TOEFL. Texts and listening passages tend to be journalistic and on topics of general interest. Also, academic in-text referencing and citation conventions are absent from reading texts and writing skills sections. The emphasis is on personal rather than academic writing, and comprehension questions that reappear in the same format after every reading and listening text also seem to echo those found on standardized tests.

Some researchers (Moore & Morton, 2005; Taylor & Weir, 2012) have found a discrepancy between the genres present on standardized tests and those on university reading lists and assignments. English for Academic Purposes is a broad field, and an English course promoted as EAP could take a variety of forms, from a simple test-preparation course to an intensive pre-session course in a university focusing on both academic and English skills. *Q: Skills for Success 4* seems better suited to a course focused on general ESL skills development or standardized exam preparation. EAP courses aimed at preparing students for university study through direct exposure to and practice with real-life academic topics, skills, and genres might be better served by another textbook.

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The Reviewer

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