

Headway Academic Skills:

Listening and Speaking: Introductory Level Student's Book

Reading and Writing: Introductory Level Student's Book

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Listening and Speaking: 79 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-474172-9 (pbk)

Reading and Writing: 71 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-474172-8 (pbk)

The *Headway Academic Skills, Listening and Speaking* and *Headway Academic Skills, Reading and Writing: Introductory Level* books are part of a series of three-level academic skills textbooks. According to the OUP, the books can be used on their own or in combination with other integrated skills texts or course books in an academic setting. The Introductory Level books are divided into two student books integrating listening/speaking (L/S) skills and reading/writing (R/W) skills, as has recently become the design of most English Language Teaching (ELT) books. Each book is organized into 10 units, and each unit has different thematic content. Across the skill sets that each book offers, however, there is a connection between the themes in the L/S and the R/W books. For example, the L/S book opens with the topic "A new start," while Unit 1 of the R/W book is titled "Meeting people." Each unit is designed with the ambitious expectation of providing content for five 50–60-minute lessons and includes skill-based exercises, vocabulary development, grammar support, and research tools.

In terms of layout, both books aim at achieving a contemporary appeal by adding an online research or search component. However, the pages at first glance look crowded, and I am not sure if this arrangement of pictures and boxes (*stickers*, as they are called in the books) appeals to all types of learners with different learning styles. The writers have intended to maintain the academic blueprint in the books through the content, and the publisher has attempted to maintain diverse cultural appeal by incorporating pictures of people belonging to different backgrounds. The L/S book provides pair work activities at the end of the book. The authors have given a lot of thought to the fact that the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers, in general, are more aware of the needs of their learners and are "more confident in their capacity to develop their own material" (Tribble, 2009, p. 401). For example, the teacher's guides offer extension activities in addition to supplementary photocopiable activities.

As for the development of academic skills, the writers have included "study skills" areas to promote critical thinking, which is new for this level of proficiency. "Vocabulary development" also takes a somewhat novel approach and offers a variety of ways to foster independent learning, prediction, and reasoning, which is a welcome deviation from the word-form-meaning-sentence patterns of presenting vocabulary commonly found in

textbooks. Units 3 and 4 in the L/S book, focusing on “Your day” and “Work” respectively, and Unit 3 in the R/W book, “Your studies,” offer insights into academic studies aimed at developing a connection between a career choice and the study path to achieving an academic goal.

Despite the fact that there are at least four or five sections of skill-based activities, at times it feels as if there is too much in one unit for the target proficiency level CEFR A1-A2. For example, in Unit 9, “Astronomy,” the vocabulary seems unfamiliar and challenging for this level of learners, although teachers can adjust the level by introducing the topic in detail before moving on to the actual content of the unit. There are eight short listening excerpts aimed at developing listening comprehension skills for large numbers, vocabulary, picture labelling, and gap-fills in a paragraph about the phases of the moon. According to the CEFR descriptors, at Level A1-A2, familiarity and immediate relevance to the topic area is very important for providing learners with a successful outcome. However, teachers who are more knowledgeable about students’ language proficiency and academic language proficiency are better prepared to help students face challenges beyond their current language proficiency (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008).

The R/W skills book is also compact, with the aim of developing basic predicting, skimming, and scanning skills. Reading texts progress from simpler to more complex throughout the units. Writing skills are developed through the use of vocabulary, parts of speech, and sentence structure. Some practical exercises on how to fill out forms and student cards are useful for students at this level.

The Oxford Online Skills Program (OOSP) that accompanies each book provides extra support for the teachers to use as supplementary material, in addition to tests and quizzes. Students can use the same resources for self-study and for tracking their progress. Can-do statements at the end of each lesson, which are organized in pre-lesson (*engage*), during-skill (*explore*), and post-lesson (*tasks*), can help students not only monitor progress but also set expectations for themselves. Students’ resources also include CEFR mapping, which can help them see what they are expected to do, thereby instilling a sense of autonomy and independent learning. Online support for reading and writing skills, in my opinion, can be very useful. The reading texts are reasonably long and use academic vocabulary. Comprehension questions progress in the level of difficulty and challenge. One highlight of the lesson for students at this level is the recorded version of the reading text, which can help students by modelling appropriate pronunciation. Most of the content in the OOSP is congruent with Cotterall’s (2000) statement that “language courses which aim to promote learner autonomy will incorporate means of transferring responsibility for aspects of the language learning process (such as setting goals, selecting learning strategies, and evaluating progress) from the teacher to the learner” (p. 110). The online support provides access to

the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, as well as communication tools, planner messages, and discussions.

The *Headway Academic Skills: Listening and Speaking* and *Headway Academic Skills: Reading and Writing* introductory-level books are certainly a useful and invaluable addition to ELT.

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