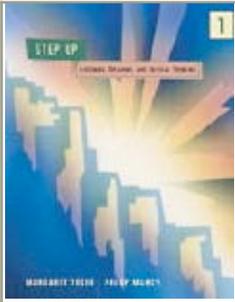


Step Up: Listening, Speaking, and Critical Thinking (1 and 2)

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| Author: | Margaret Teske & Peggy Marcy | |  |
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Step Up: Listening, Speaking, and Critical Thinking is a new series designed for teaching and learning oral communication skills for college students with low-intermediate or intermediate English-language skills. Structured around Bloom's pyramidal taxonomy of educational objectives, each chapter proposes a cycle of activities based on both social and academic topics. Black-and-white photos and drawings of objects as well as people of different ages and ethnicities add an agreeable aspect to these very structured books. Accompanied by two CDs of short talks and access to on-line study and teaching sites, each textbook offers complete and easy-to-use exercises that include graphic organizers and printed documents for group or dyadic work in the classroom.

Each unit of each book is organized as follows:

- Knowledge: warm-up questions, key vocabulary, and idioms
- Comprehension: half-page explanations of listening or speaking strategies along with listening activities based on the one- to three-minute talks recorded on the CDs
- Applications: a selection of jigsaw lectures, small group activities or new listening tasks; also, speaking activities to prepare students for TOEFL's speaking section
- Analysis: a variety of small-group activities such as debating, preparing a monologue, surveying, or sharing personal work.

- Synthesis: out-of-class assignments. Some of them, such as watching a TV show, finding a catalog, listening to strangers, or interviewing English-speakers may be problematic for teachers outside of an English-speaking country.
- Evaluation: the tip of Bloom's taxonomy; designed to help students reflect on the language progress they make during the unit, it is not an evaluation of the content of the unit.

Step Up 1 is geared towards low-intermediate college students. Each of the five units has three chapters. Comprehensive projects synthesize the content and strategies studied within each unit and are organized around planned group-speaking tasks such as observing strangers in different contexts, role-playing or simulating a company. Each project also includes a teacher assessment grid printed in the student manual that serves to encourage and evaluate student participation titled as follows:

1. "Small Talk: Sociology"
2. "Buying a Computer: Computer Science"
3. "Being Popular: Psychology"
4. "Business Ethics: Business"
5. "Health Concerns: Nursing and Health Care"

Social- themed chapters cover topics such as "Making New Friends on Campus", "Let's Party!", and "Our Need to Be Popular". Those with academic themes include chapters such as "What Is a Personal Computer?", "Ethics and Big Business", and "Serious Illness".

Using *Step Up 1*, I tried chapter 13, "What is Cancer?" during two-hour sessions with three different 18-student groups of second-year French college students majoring in sports and physical education. Students answered the warm-up questions readily, and poignantly, many of them "knew someone who has cancer." A short recording then introduced the vocabulary including difficult-to-pronounce words such as "blood" and "benign". Exercises 4 (Take Notes on Descriptions) and 5 (Reproduce the Message) are fill-in-the-blank-type tasks based on different parts of the same short lecture. Students needed to listen to the recording twice to fill in exercise 4, however exercise 6 (Choose the Best Summary Statement) was so evident that students chose the correct statements before listening to the recording. Students listened with attention to the next short lecture "Giving Support" and completed the exercises with varying levels of difficulty. The Application section includes a series of questions that each student asked his or her partner about the lectures. Students used their knowledge and consulted the chapter to answer the questions.

Because the subject was not sufficiently related to their major, I did not ask my students to complete the homework section on researching different types of cancer or the synthesis section on preparing 2-minute TOEFL-type talks. During the true-and-false evaluation, students declared having learned new vocabulary, were able to choose summary statements, and were more confident talking about lecture content. They were unsure whether they could take notes about lecture content.

Created for college students with an intermediate level of English, *Step Up 2* has the same structure and similar topics as *Step Up 1*, although the activities and content are more complex. The five units are as follows:

1. "Personal Safety in the Information Age: Technology"
2. "The World of Inventions: Business and Engineering"
3. "Joys and Pains of Families Today: Sociology"
4. "Looking Good: Psychology"
5. "Alternative Choices: Health"

Chapters include subsets of these themes including "Cyber-dating", "To Invest or Not to Invest", and "Single Parenting". The listening and speaking strategies sections range from "Express Strong Emotion" to "Notice Digressions" to cultural aspects such as "Call People by Special Names".

Over two, two-hour sessions, I tried chapter 4, "Great Inventions" with two 18-student groups of third-year French college science students learning English. They eagerly began the warm-up questions replying, for example, that "the type of person who invents things" is like their "physics teacher" and "the kind of invention that they would most like to have" is "a pen that only writes correct answers". They were to choose the best definition for the thirteen vocabulary words, but even with an English definition, they did not understand the meaning of *gear* ("wheel with teeth") or *patent* ("paper from the government to have the only rights to sell something"). Many of them said that they enjoyed searching for the words in the circle-the-word puzzle.

The Listening Strategy box suggested thinking about "who, what, when, where, why, how" questions before listening to a mini-lecture on the invention of crayons, the traffic light and the vacuum cleaner. This strategy is consistent with the research on listening comprehension. However, it was not explained that preparing beforehand also permits listeners to rely on their own knowledge of the subject. The subjects of the short lectures are not always announced beforehand, which makes relying on personal knowledge difficult. A second strategy box introduced the cultural and linguistic aspects of asking clarifying questions. Then, groups of three students gave animated jigsaw lectures about Leonardo da Vinci. This Application was easy to set up because each student's speech is printed on different pages at the back of the book. The students also had lists of questions related to the different parts including the recorded conclusion. After having read a third strategy box entitled "Interrupt Politely", students are invited to listen again to the invention lecture and to write down possible questions after given phrases. Having already listened to the lecture twice, taken notes and presented summaries to a partner, my students were no longer motivated to think about possible comprehension questions. Students reported positive learning experiences during the closing true or false evaluation section.

The male and female voices on the CD have standard U.S. accents; however, the website offers links to other authentic oral documents. Some of the content may be questionable. For example, the "Self-Improvement" chapter of *Step Up 2's* on-line help includes a link to a Botox commercial and Botox is defined in the chapter as a "medicine". One section of the jigsaw lecture explains, "However, diet and exercise are not enough. Listen to these statistics from the leading organization for cosmetic surgery and education. . . ." The pressure placed on physical appearance, especially in the United States, is an intriguing question, but this chapter did not offer enough critical information about the negative physical, emotional, or financial effects of the commercial possibilities of changing one's appearance.

The title *Step Up: Listening, Speaking, and Critical Thinking* implies that critical thinking is an integral part of the pedagogical framework. Grabe & Grabe define a *critical thinking* approach as emphasizing "the development of analytical skills that can be applied to a wide range of subject matter" (p. 452). The analysis section of the "Conformity Issues" chapter in *Step Up 2* asks students to bring in photos or magazine clippings of people and then to "make recommendations about the person's clothes, hair, or face that might improve the person's appearance" (p. 131). Eliciting what would have to be called subjective responses cannot be considered critical thinking.

Nevertheless, as implied by the unit and chapter titles, the authors have obviously attempted to find subjects to attract a wide range of student interests and have developed such topics through a wide range of activities. A teacher could easily use one of these textbooks over a semester with very little preparation.

Reference

Grabe, M. & Grabe, C. (2001). *Integrating technology for meaningful learning*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

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