
Title: Voyager - Reading & Writing for Today's Adults / Book 4 of 9
Author: Beverly J. Smith
Publisher: New Readers Press
Also Available: Teacher Resource Guide, Workbooks, Assessment Tests, Placement tools

PRIMARY INFORMATION:

Target: The primary focus of this textbook is on reading and writing, which includes such skills as critical thinking and learning strategies. A secondary focus is placed on speaking through role plays and discussions. The book is intended for Intermediate Adult ESL learners.

Textbook Organization: The textbook is divided into 4 units that cover popular themes reflected in day-to-day life (staying healthy, getting a job, community, and crime and the law). Within each of these units, are 3 topical lessons (each of the 3 lessons has its own topic, yet they all relate to the overarching unit theme) which include the following major components: authentic literature for reading, informational articles for reading, writing assignments, using/understanding graphic organizers, life skills and discussions.

The topics chosen are very interesting, sophisticated, current and relevant to the students' lives. The information is not only suitable for learning purposes (appropriate class material and at the appropriate level), but can be used and carried over to the students' personal life. The topics also introduce many cultural and social aspects that will be helpful for the students. In addition, the topics are handled in a neutral tone even when talking about sensitive issues and use ethnically diverse subjects within the photography.

Textbook Sequencing: The sequencing in this book is based on "variety" through its themes/topics, and lends itself to being very flexible for the teacher. Each of the four units is essentially a separate entity and could be taught in any order without having an impact on the student's progression.

The reading / writing skills acquired in this book are sequenced in a way so that they are integrated and naturally flow from one to the other (to speaking skills as well). The reading and writing skills are not dependent on one other, but more so, add to each other or build on each other to form a solid understanding of the skill. For example in each lesson, new reading and writing skills are introduced, but each skill that is covered is a new component/strategy/approach to reading and writing and not dependent on what was learned from a prior lesson.

Visual Presentation: The textbook is very easy-to-use. It is organized into sections, each clearly identified with its corresponding focus, and clearly distinguished from another section by having ample space in between. Special tips or supplement pieces are properly identified as such by either having a visual cue or being placed in the margin. It is very easy to browse through the book and find exactly what one is looking for.

Visual Elements: The textbook only uses blue and black ink for its publication, but even so, it uses the colors in a very effective, organized, predictable and discernible way that it doesn't lack anything (compared to a full-color textbook). For instance content text is in black, instructive text is in black, and pictures are all in grayscale, but all the callout text, section headers, important text (reminders, tips), and visually organizing graphics (like arrows, tip boxes, goal boxes) are all in blue. Using color variations, a range of text font & sizes, and a variety of eye-catching graphical elements, the textbook properly relays (in a visual manner) to teacher/student the relevance/importance of each section. One last thing to note, are the pictures. The pictures consist of real people in relevant contexts (to the adjoining content) with a few instances of illustrations and cartoons. They (in addition to all the other graphic elements) help to break up all the text within the book.

ADDRESSING THE LANGUAGE SKILLS:

Reading: Reading is handled in the following manner. It begins with a Pre-Reading section which includes schema building, reading preview exercises, personal relating and reflections, predictions, and opinions based on experience. Next comes the actual reading which consists of interesting and relevant authentic reading material with pictures to visually support it. The reading also employs little callouts interspersed in the margins for predicting and generating thoughts. It ends with a Post-Reading section which includes reading comprehension questions, a section to revisit the strategies introduced in the pre-reading, a section for thinking beyond the reading which includes class/partner discussion, and in addition, includes reading tangents (this is new material but it still emphasizes the topic previously read). When the reading component is complete it has a separate section called "Think About It" This section covers the skills that can help in understanding the reading. By using excerpts from the reading, this section analyzes the text via questions and discussions. The student has an opportunity to practice the reading skill, discuss its use, comprehend it by filling out graphic organizers, and lastly, by applying the new information to personal situations.

Writing: The writing section is comprised of: writing strategies to help with the writing, a pre-writing section to help gather the thoughts, and then the actual writing assignment (generally initiated with starting points) This is nicely setup, however, a few things the instructor might want to add would be more concentration on peer feedback, revising multiple drafts, providing samples for the students to analyze, and providing more accuracy review (optional and based on needs only).

Speaking: Speaking activities are speckled throughout the book in discussions, role-plays, pair-work, the pre & post lessons and within a “Talk About It” section. The textbook integrates “speaking” where it naturally would arise and uses “speaking” to converse about the actual textbook material as well as uses it to relate to personal opinions and experiences.

Listening: Beyond the inevitable listening that must happen from interacting/discussing/teaching, this skill is not focused on nor practiced. If the instructor would prefer a more balanced skill classroom, they ought to supplement with listening materials that coincide with the topics at hand.

Pronunciation: Besides phonetic spellings for a few of the more complicated words (for example: salmonella), not much pronunciation work is provided. This may be because speaking isn’t a primary focus, merely secondary. If the instructor adds more emphasis to speaking, then this section deserves more attention too (of course, based on needs and from what issues arise from the students)

Grammar: This textbook does not cover any grammar structures or points, except for a few sections that are geared towards common writing mistakes. If the students have questions or need clarification/review, the instructor should supplement with the appropriate grammar lessons.

Vocabulary: Except for a couple of instances within each unit, vocabulary is not a focus. Sporadically throughout the book, a few complex vocabulary items are defined, but the book places more emphasis on using word recognition strategies (tips for these strategies are in the back section). For increased comprehension, a possible suggestion would be to supplement the pre-reading / pre-writing with key vocabulary.

Life Skill Lessons: This section is comprised of an introduction and an explanation of some type of realia that is important and relevant to real-life, and offers practice in understanding the realia. This is a very important section to cover, although the material or realia that the book does choose to introduce is often limited to looking at the piece, reading about it and analyzing it through discussion. It might be more beneficial if there were more interactive scenarios watched (in videos) or performed (as role-plays) with the actual realia. For example, if the lesson covered “prescription medication”, instead of just reading about it and discussing it, it might be good to also go over functions like “asking for it from the doctor”, “purchasing it from the pharmacy”, and “dialing help from someone overdosing on it / a child taking it”. The topics are very relevant and important so providing students with actual opportunities to use the language in day-to-day interactions would be truly beneficial and practical.

ADDITIONAL FEATURES TO THE TEXTBOOK:

The textbook includes several useful “additional features” to take advantage of. It includes a nice introduction that explains to the student/teacher what to expect and how the book works. This is followed by a “Skills Preview” section which provides sample readings, comprehension questions, graphic organizers, and sample writing practice so the student becomes familiar with what to expect from the book. (Results are shared with the instructor so both parties can look at strengths/weaknesses.) It includes 2 student self assessment tests; one for the beginning of the course which evaluates the student’s knowledge within the fields of reading and writing, and then one for the end of the course which includes a final Student Assessment Test in reading/writing. The back of the textbook consists of an answer key to the lesson questions, a review of all the writing skills, word recognition strategies for reading, and a review of the actual writing process. All of these additions could be very handy for both teacher/student. Lastly, each lesson has a “preview” section which lists out the goals for the lesson (for the following: strategy, reading, practiced skills, writing, and life skills) and each unit has a “post-unit review” which is comprised of: further reading on an earlier topic with extra questions, continuation with writing on an earlier topic, and a short section devoted to accuracy in writing. These two features are valuable tools for the student for being aware of what to expect and for having proper review of a unit.

SUMMARY:

This textbook is nicely done. Like all textbooks it could use supplementing, but it does a nice job focusing on reading/writing and trying to integrate the other skills within it too. It’s especially beneficial in that it pays lots of attention to strategies in the particular skills and encourages learners to be active learners, continually pushing them to think about and apply what they are learning.

Students should react positively to this book. The topics are interesting, sophisticated (for an adult level), current and there are many instances where the book encourages personal relating to the topics so that the student is eager to dive deep into the lessons versus only stay at surface level.

The textbook is also beneficial for teachers. The book could easily serve as a framework for the course, and at the same time could be very flexible for teaching (seeing as the units are module in nature). Also, the rich and engaging topics could easily lend themselves for expansion if the teacher wants to supplement.