Discussion Starters: Speaking Fluency Activities for Advanced ESL/EFL Students

Keith S. Folse (1996)
Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press
Pp. xv + 181
$24.00

Teachers who are having the not uncommon problem of finding interesting, motivating, and pedagogically sound discussion books for their advanced ESL or EFL students should take a look at Keith Folse's latest textbook Discussion Starters. I believe the author has made a valuable contribution to alleviating this shortage.

The principle goal of this thematically organized text is, as reflected in its subtitle, to allow students to focus on developing discussion skills and fluency. In addition, activities are designed to help ensure that all students participate equally in activities, instead of the situation found in many conversation classes where the most proficient, confident, or outgoing students dominate class or group discussions. Many activities in the text require that all students participate, for example, by each student possessing a piece of information that the group requires to successfully complete a story or solve a problem.

It is very clear that this book recognizes the connections between the skills of writing, reading, and speaking. In the preface Folse explains that the text is based on the axiom “that having to write out our thoughts on paper forces us to reexamine, rethink, and recycle our ideas until we have a much neater package” (p. x). He supports the idea that if some time is spent writing down one’s thoughts before speaking, it will make a real difference in both the quantity and quality of speech produced. This premise is reflected in the organization of this book, as each unit contains various pre-discussion writing activities which students complete before participating in discussions. Short readings, which are found in each unit, provide students with topic-related vocabulary and background knowledge, and lead into the writing and speaking tasks. These reading and writing activities help students cope with limitations they may have, such as lack of confidence in their language skills, lack of background knowledge and information, lack of interest, or lack of any opinion at all about the topic, which can cause problems in dealing with unit topics. They can be assigned as homework so students can come to class prepared, and as a result, allow valuable class time to be spent entirely on discussion activities. Each unit contains space for students to write answers right in the book. Vocabulary development is also attended to through a Language Review exercise found at the end of each unit. [1-] There is a wide variety of topics to be found in the book’s 32 self-contained units, including both serious subjects such as AIDS, gun control, and endangered species, as well as lighter topics such as tipping, humor, and movies. Most tasks and exercises relate to real situations, court cases, events, people, statistics, and so forth, from different places in the world, although the majority of units refer to the American context. Another important feature is that the author has chosen topics and designed materials that will not become quickly dated.

Diverse is a good word to describe the organization of this text. Several different unit formats are used, and different activities (usually about 10) are found in each unit. The major types of tasks are listed as:

1. Problem-solving tasks, found in every unit, require students to work together to solve a problem.
2. Court cases, found in 10 units, are related to the topic or theme of the unit. Students are asked to record their opinions and then come to a group consensus as to what they think the judgment in a case should be. They then read the real outcome to the case, which is found in an appendix at the back of the book.
3. Finish the story tasks, found in 2 units, have students discuss together possible conclusions to unusual stories.
4. Speaking puzzles, found in 2 units, require students to provide each other with oral clues that are needed in order to successfully complete a puzzle.
5. Role-play exercises, related to unit themes, are found in 6 units.
6. Discussion and oral presentations, found in 5 units, require students to bring in outside materials to present to the class.
7. Charts and questionnaires, found in 5 units, also require students to work together to complete them.
8. Put the story together tasks are found in 3 units. In this activity each student has a piece of a strip story and all students must work together in order to solve it.
9. Small group discussions are found in 4 units.

The use of such a variety of activities helps ensure that students do not get bored with the text too easily.

Three appendices are found at the back of the text. The first is a collection of 55 Communication Activities, each of which is a [-2-] part of a given unit. The second, mentioned previously, lists all the decisions for the court cases found in the text. The third gives the answers for the Language Review Exercises so students can check their answers on their own.

All in all, I believe this book possesses a good number of positive traits. The diversity of unit structures and activities, and the incorporation of reading, writing, and speaking activities in each unit are certainly two of its greatest features. The background readings and the written opinion questions are an excellent way for those students who get nervous about speaking or lack confidence in their speaking abilities to prepare for discussion tasks.
The court cases, found in several units, are especially interesting, and the fact that they are real motivates students to try to come up with a decision and then see how it compares with the judge's or jury's real decisions. Two other very good features of this text are, in my opinion, the avoidance of stereotyping, and the presentation of various viewpoints that are held on controversial topics such as assisted suicide and drug use.

I would highly recommend _Discussion Starters_ to teachers of advanced adult ESL and EFL students anywhere because of its attempt to take an international perspective with its choice of content, and because of its numerous positive pedagogical features, which add up to make it a highly interesting and motivating discussion text for the student, and one that is a pleasure to use for the teacher.

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