

Reviewed Work:

*Collaborations: English in Our Lives*, Intermediate 2, Student Book. (1997). Jean Bernard, Donna Moss, Lynda Terrill. Boston, USA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers. Pp. 109. ISBN: 0838457061. \$28.95

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This essay reviews *Collaborations: English in Our Lives* with a focus on how the series translates a participatory approach into adult second language literacy. The focus of this review will be on *Intermediate 2, Student Book*. The series' goals, objectives, and self-description are "meaning-based, learner-centered, and holistic", common characteristics of a participatory approach. This review discusses the general features of *Collaborations*, its goals, and how well the materials meet them. The concluding evaluation suggests that the progression of language activities as well as many of the components, such as *Think It Over*, *Bringing the Outside In*, and *Ideas for Action*, reflect a collaborative process of sharing, analysis, and action. *Collaborations* offers a highly valuable literacy model of translating participatory principles into practice. Before fully implementing the materials in a classroom, however, changes should be made as follows, (1) include novice as well as professional writings to provide a wider range of styles, (2) reinterpret the contexts for language use as discourse communities, and (3) address language competencies in a more systematic sequence.

*Collaborations*, a five-level series, is designed for non-credit, community-based programs in school districts and community colleges. The five-book levels range from literacy to intermediate 2 (*Literacy*, *Beginning 1*, *Beginning 2*, *Intermediate 1*, and *Intermediate 2*). The series' *Literacy Worktext* is intended for use with a multilevel group of learners who have (1) little or no exposure to written language, (2) some primary schooling in their native language, and/or (3) a different alphabetical system of writing. The series' highest level, *Intermediate 2*, emphasizes critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which its editors suggest may also be fitting for credit programs such as academic programs, GED study, and workplace preparation. The program components consist of student texts, student workbooks, student audio tapes, and a teacher's kit. This review examines four student texts and workbooks which range from 94 to 147 pages.

Each student book is organized "around contexts for language use in learners' lives." Each book is divided into six units—self, school, home, work, local community, and global community. Grammar, vocabulary development, language functions, and competencies are addressed "as they naturally emerge from the contexts and the authentic texts" (Bernard, Moss, & Terrill, p. viii). *Collaborations'* overarching purpose is to provide opportunities for adult learners to

develop English language and literacy abilities while reflecting on their changing lives. The series invites students and teachers to work collaboratively on language tasks that reflect students' life experiences and concerns. The series also encourages students' active participation in their learning as they prepare for their new roles in a predominantly English-speaking community in North America.

What follows reviews how *Intermediate 2, Student Book* addresses the series' overarching purpose with its own specific goals and objectives. The goals—though not explicitly stated—can be drawn from roughly 17 subsections of each unit and summarized as follows:

1. To provide opportunities for learners to respond to authentic stories and to relate them to personal experience;
2. To engage learners in examining how language is being used in various texts;
3. To raise learners' strategies to conscious awareness, allowing for learning options, reflection, and monitoring of their own literacy progress;
4. To foster fluency and community-building through cooperative learning with a focus on practicing language functions for specific purposes and contexts;
5. To guide learners to gain new experience and knowledge by *Bringing the Outside In*;
6. To engage learners in critical reflection of their situations (e.g., *Think It Over*) and decide collaboratively on learners' empowerment through *Ideas for Action*.

By opening each unit with an edited authentic story by a newcomer to North America, *Collaborations* engages learners in experience-relevant readings—a way to create rich contexts for communicative activities. The questions after each opening story generally do not ask for factual information that is based on memory or literal recall skills, but invite students to use their prior knowledge and life experiences to interpret and evaluate what they have read. For example, students are asked to compare their learning goals and philosophies with those expressed in the reading (p. 20), or to reflect on what they would have done if they were in the writer's situation regarding cross-cultural dating and marriage customs (p. 37). While most of these discussion questions seem effective in engaging students in higher-order thinking skills of interpretation and evaluation, some seem less successful, particularly those that do not require any comprehension of the text, i.e., "How long has it been since you left your homeland? Do you consider yourself a lucky person? Explain why or why not. How do you maintain cultural traditions in North America?" (p. 2)

*Collaborations'* goal of addressing language competencies as they naturally emerge from the contexts of authentic texts is uneven in its effectiveness in translating to language activities. Language exercises in the first unit of *Intermediate 2, Student Book* seem more systematic in addressing various grammatical structures than those in the later units. An example that is effective is a three-part exercise where students are asked to first listen to a paragraph being read and fill in the missing pronouns, then rewrite the paragraph, changing first person to third person, and last, link highlighted anaphors to their antecedents. An ineffective exercise is where students are asked to fill in missing words that are not from a single category, i.e., structural or semantic. The series in general and *Intermediate 2* particularly embody Auerbach's (1992) advice on using grammar exercises in various formats whenever and wherever they fit as long as they are open-ended for students to fill in with content from their lives. An example of an open-ended grammar

exercise that is embedded in a community-building activity (*Learning About Each Other*) is using conditional sentences "If . . . , I would/could/should . . ." with a focus on sharing one's prospects for the future. Generally, one of *Collaborations'* weaknesses is that the series does not seem to deal with grammar systematically or in detail.

The goal of guiding students to gain new experience and knowledge by *Bringing the Outside In* is rendered into three types of activities (1) drawing on a community's funds of knowledge by conducting a community survey on the importance of and how to maintain cultural traditions in North America, (2) collecting and analyzing the texts of their everyday lives, such as food containers and movies, to serve as the content for their language and literacy lessons, and (3) sharing photos, traditional symbols, and news from home. By bridging home and school, community knowledge is validated, and more importantly, student-generated materials based on their experiences and concerns are sought and developed.

Many units include *Think It Over* and *Ideas for Action* activities that engage learners in critical reflection of their situations and decide collaboratively on learners' empowerment. This process of connecting the word and the world is Paulo Freire's philosophy of education, which proposes that "instruction begins with learners' social reality, providing a context for analyzing it, and taking action on it" (Auerbach, 1996, p. 10). *Think It Over* activities encourage students to reflect on sociocultural topics such as "Is America a Melting Pot," the culture of education, and varieties of English, as well as other topics, i.e., reading graphs and tables, and learning from history. Similarly, action can range from overtly political, such as maintaining cultural traditions by planning a cultural event, to a more neutral, pragmatic task, i.e., visiting a travel agency. While the more political *Ideas for Action* exercises would align with Freire's educational goal of building a humane, democratic, and just society, Campbell (2001) suggests that participatory programs in North America differ from Freire's popular education model because they have evolved in different contexts. Action, therefore, does not always mean sociopolitical engagement. Curriculum contexts and student populations are important factors in shaping what "action" means in the collaborative process of sharing, analyses, and action.

*Collaborations* does engage adult ESL learners as claimed in activities that are "meaning-based, student-centered, and holistic." The series' strengths are that many of its activities (1) center around authentic stories of immigrants, (2) invite learners to use prior knowledge and experiences in interpreting and evaluating readings, (3) organize around contexts for language use in learners' lives, (4) encourage students to take control of their own learning, and (5) promote multicultural awareness for community building. Before fully implementing the materials in a classroom, however, I would suggest the following changes: (a) besides novice writings, include works by published authors from multicultural backgrounds, e.g., Gloria Anzaldua, Amy Tan, Richard Rodriguez, and Audre Lorde, in order to provide a wider range of writing styles; (b) deepen and reinterpret the contexts for language use as discourse communities with particular genres and registers; and (c) address language competencies as they naturally emerge from the contexts and the authentic texts in a more systematic sequence. Overall, *Collaborations* presents a highly valuable literacy model—the best so far—of putting participatory principles into practice for adult ESL learners.

**References**

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