1. A descriptive summary of the book

The rationale for content-based instruction is that the content is often academic subject matter (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche 2003). *Academic Encounters Listening and Speaking: Human Behavior* is a content-based textbook dealing with the topic of human behavior related to psychology and communication. The book contains four units: Health, development through life, nonverbal messages and interpersonal relationships. There are two chapters in each unit. The content of each chapter consists most of interviews, lectures and surveys. The interviews and academic lectures are semi-authentic materials from real college classrooms. The DVD that accompanies the text contains all the lectures from the textbook. In each chapter, students are asked to develop four skills: listening, speaking, vocabulary, and note taking. According to the author of the book, the intended population for the book is high intermediate or low advanced students in secondary school. The purpose of the textbook is to provide students with the skills necessary for taking academic courses in English and to prepare them to be successful in their academic study.

Each unit in the book has four parts, and they are distributed across each chapter. These parts are: Getting Started, Real-Life Voices, In your own Voices, and Academic Listening and Note Taking. The first part, “Getting Started,” is a warm up activity that includes a top-down reading activity and a top-down listening activity. Both of these activities are followed by comprehension questions. These activities are consistent with the whole language approach in which “students work from the top-down, attempting first to understand the meaning of the overall text before they work on the linguistic forms comprising it” (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, P. 141). The section called “Real-Life Voices” includes one to three authentic interviews. “In your own Voices” gives students a chance to use expressions to ask, answer and perform, share personal information, describe a typical scene, and conduct surveys. “Academic Listening and Note Taking” includes lecture materials and three types of activities. At the end of each unit an oral presentation, which serves to test learning outcomes, is given.
2. An evaluative summary of the book

When it comes to tasks and activities, the author chooses to use a top-down activity first as a pre-reading or pre-listening activity to introduce each topic. The reason for this is to help students build schema, predict the content and anticipate the listening. According to Brown (2011), prior knowledge has a positive effect on comprehension. On the other hand, in during-listening activities, the author changes the focus of the activities to bottom-up tasks such as vocabulary and grammar exercises. Apart from the specific activities and multitasks in the content, the organization of the book is almost the same in each chapter. This gives students a clear view of the content and structure of each chapter and helps them to be more efficient in conducting tasks and learning skills.

At the end of each unit, learning outcomes are evaluated as a whole through word forms, topic reviews and oral presentations. The teacher can thus test students’ speaking and vocabulary skills. Although the evaluation of listening and note-taking skills is not given in the text, the teacher can check students’ mastery of these skills by assigning homework. For instance, the teacher can require students to watch the DVD and complete listening exercises, or require students to hand in their listening notes to evaluate these two skills.

The book is successful in three aspects. It is comprehensive in that it contains not only speaking and listening tasks, but also vocabulary and note taking tasks; it is abundant as it provides not only semi-authentic materials, but also knowledge of academic content; it is interesting in that colorful symbols, graphics, and humorous pictures are included to support the discussion. However, I have one concern about its effectiveness in improving students’ overall speaking and listening skills. This book seems to assume that students can improve their speaking and listening skills by conducting surveys and working in pairs to fill in tables and charts. This means that in order to complete the exercises, students only need to write several words in the missing blanks. Completing these tasks may be interesting, but with vocabulary knowledge, students cannot be pushed to be very communicative and such tasks may require a large amount of time.

3. Reference to current theory and research

There is ample current theory regarding the significance of content, skills and technique addressed in this book. This book reflects several aspects of task-based language teaching. In task-based language teaching, students are asked to do project work (oral presentations), information gap activities (filling in blanks, recording numbers), opinion-gap activities (sharing own personal perspective), and reasoning-gap tasks (inferring information) (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Secondly, there is a growing emphasis on both bottom-up and top-down skills in current perspectives of teaching listening and speaking (Hinkel, 2006). This book successfully integrates these two skills into every task. Thirdly, graphic organizers, which are a technique that requires students to write down missing information on charts, tables and graphics, are also used in the
“The Graphic Organizer helps students to organize and remember new things. They combine words and phrases, symbols, and arrows to map knowledge. They include diagrams, tables, columns, and webs” (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, P. 142).

Above all, the author integrates current theories of task-based language teaching and content-based instruction into the book which makes it very well suited for low-advanced learners. However, because of the limited time in class, it is always helpful for teachers to choose to present the main parts, to create a cohesive and clear syllabus, and to assign communicative and other remaining tasks to students after class. In this way, students can enhance their overall skills and teachers can better evaluate their learning outcomes.

References


