

Pathways 4: Listening, Speaking, and Critical Thinking

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The new Pathways academic skills series, published by National Geographic Learning, part of Cengage Learning, contains four levels and two strands: 1) Reading, Writing, and Critical Thinking, and 2) Listening, Speaking, and Critical Thinking. A. Suresh Canagarajah, in his 2006 *TESOL Quarterly* article, *TESOL at Forty: What Are the Issues?*, reflects upon a number of complex tensions in our field, some of which are evident in the series' highest level Listening and Speaking text. One tension involves the understanding that the four skills should be treated as integrated, with a requisite shift toward shaping our curricula around alternative principles of organization. A second concerns the distinction between critical thinking, which has emphasized thinking as an individualistic, problem-solving activity, and critical practice, which takes a more social and dialogic stance, calling upon such ethical and personal considerations as justice, inclusiveness, and examining our own biases. A third considers the impact of digital technology on our vocation and our communication. Canagarajah acknowledges that while we continue to grow as a profession, embracing "new approaches and realizations," at the same time he observes that traditional practices in TESOL can be hard to shake. While *Pathways 4* takes us forward in some areas, notably by incorporating technology, opportunities for student discussion and presentation, and significant, current topics, on the whole it does not reflect the depth of the evolving perspectives and pedagogies Canagarajah so cogently addresses.

Units draw upon content from National Geographic, and are organized around 10 themes: 1) Urban Challenges, 2) Protecting Our Planet, 3) Beauty and Appearance, 4) Energy Issues, 5) Migration, 6) Tradition and Progress, 7) Money in Our Lives, 8) Health and Fitness, 9) Mind and Memory, and 10) Food Concerns. Each unit contains an introductory "Exploring the Theme" and a "Viewing" component (with DVD), and is divided into two lessons, which include sections entitled Building Vocabulary, Using Vocabulary, Developing Listening Skills, Exploring Spoken English, and Speaking (or "Engage"). Units also contain a focus on select grammar points appropriate for intermediate- to advanced-level students (e.g., the passive voice, restrictive and non-restrictive adjective clauses, and phrasal verbs), as well as foci on pronunciation (e.g., -s endings, question intonation, syllable stress), critical thinking, peer discussion, and presentation skills. Teachers will be familiar with the means through which many points are discussed: e.g., cloze passages, matching and true/false exercises, pre-, while-, and post-listening tasks, deductive grammar explanations, and a variety of question types, from multiple choice to short answer to open-ended discussion questions. Each unit also includes an address of particular "Academic Pathways" based on its thematic content and emphasizing students' work in pairs or small groups—from participating in a debate to conducting a survey to creating a PowerPoint document. The overarching organizational and activity format, however, is a reflection of more conventional TESOL methods, rather than being grounded in integrating skills toward the accomplishment of larger educational goals (Canagarajah, 2006).

Included as part of the text title is critical thinking. Passages in the book center upon such noteworthy interdisciplinary issues as wildlife conservation, the recent financial crisis, chemicals in our food, and animal intelligence. In addition to asking students to consider questions about this content (e.g., whether

the government or private corporations should be responsible for developing alternative energies; how perceptions of beauty can vary between cultures), critical-thinking activities address important aspects of the academic experience, including understanding quotations and summarizing. The work falls short, however, of asking students to engage in critical practice—an activity integrating thinking with “practical struggles for social change and institutional advocacy” that “fundamentally shapes the tenor of one’s thinking” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 16). The skills-based focus in part overshadows the depth of investment promoted in reaction to its passages, with critical-thinking activities presented as subheadings under such categories as “Speaking,” “Using Vocabulary,” and “Developing Listening Skills” (absent in this series text is an exploration of ties between critical thinking and writing—a skill not emphasized with the listening and speaking focus). Critical thinking is thus treated more as an accompaniment rather than a foundation for the work as a whole. Teachers committed to engaging in critical practice in their classrooms will ask students to play a pivotal role in shaping the curriculum, likely drawing from a range of genres and text types, including students’ own experiences and queries. Here, the emphasis on preselected language items and functions remains.

Pathways 4 succeeds, however, as a textbook that provides an entry point into ways language can be used in academic settings today, and the types of tasks and materials students should encounter in these settings. A variety of evocative multimodal materials are provided, with graphs, maps, charts, and colorful images incorporated throughout, along with the video component, audio recordings for the listening exercises, and an online workbook allowing for students’ self-study. The Independent Student Handbook at the back of the book takes students beyond the classroom and text by providing helpful information about becoming a better vocabulary learner in the world outside, as well as tips and strategies for such activities as listening to lectures, taking notes, and using graphic organizers. The use of a dictionary is encouraged in virtually every unit (a Vocabulary Index notes more than 175 words as contained in the Academic Word List (AWL). Additional resources in the series include teacher’s guides, and assessment and presentation CD-ROMs intended to facilitate test creation and support classroom work with supplementary tools, including audio and video, for use with a projector or interactive whiteboard.

There is a real and pressing need in our higher education classrooms to grapple with hard questions about real-world issues, and our relationship to these issues as (multilingual) language users and as human beings. For the next edition of *Pathways 4: Listening, Speaking, and Critical Thinking*, MacIntyre may wish to consider how students might engage the text’s topics to more deeply reflect this need for complex and self-invested dialogue within a classroom community. This edition, however, may well provide an introductory resource, within a largely recognizable format, for English language teachers seeking to encourage students’ familiarity with valuable subject matter and common academic practices in the twenty-first century.



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