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Ventures		
Author:	Gretchen Bitterlin, Dennis Johnson, Donna Price & Silvia Ramirez (2008)	
Publisher:	Cambridge University Press	
Pages	ISBN	Price
Pp. xv + 161 (Student Book)	978-0-521-60099-6	\$18.49 U.S. (Set)
Pp. 141 (Workbook)	978-0-521-67960-2	



The *Ventures* series by Cambridge is a five-level, integrated skills textbook with life-skills content aimed at immigrant and refugee learners of ESL. More than a textbook, it's a program with an array of teaching materials and tools for multilevel classes. Multilevel Adult ESL has traditionally been difficult to find appropriate materials for, but a number of publishers have recently designed textbooks specifically for this environment.

The collection of resources include a Teacher's Edition, Student's Book, Workbook, AddVentures Multilevel Worksheets, Multilevel Lesson Planner, and Ventures Arcade – an interactive, online supplement. To facilitate use in a multilevel classroom, all level books contain the same theme—such as “Unit 1: Personal Information; Unit 2: At school; Unit 3, Friends and family; etc.”—in the same order on the same pages.

Each unit comprises of five skill-oriented lessons with a review every two units. For example, in Unit 8, Lesson A begins with a series of four pictures telling the story of a young immigrant seeking employment. The students describe what they see in each picture, producing the vocabulary that will be encountered and recycled in the unit. Then they describe what's happening in each picture and try to guess what story is unfolding. The students then listen to the immigrant being interviewed by a personnel manager, and the story takes shape. The listening activities (audio provided on a CD-ROM at the back of the book) begin with an attempt to find out who is speaking and what they are talking about; subsequent listenings focus on the details of the interview.

The vocabulary elicited in the picture descriptions is utilized in the interview, and several activities provide practice with this new vocabulary. The characters in the pictures and audio represent multiple ethnicities and both genders, and the students are introduced to different accents. The conversations are complex and well thought out, providing the students with excellent listening input that is challenging but comprehensible upon multiple listenings. Some dialogues and accents will seem painfully contrived and inauthentic to a native speaker, but they accomplish their goal. All of the lessons end with Talk, where the students have conversations that relate this information to their real lives.

In Lessons B and C, the grammar focus, the authors attempt to use work-related content from the theme of the unit. However, practicing phrases about turning down the heat and throwing out the trash are decontextualized and unrelated to the theme of work. It would have been better to have the grammar fully integrated with the theme.

Lesson D has the students read a blog by a woman who is searching for a job. Here the vocabulary from the introductory lesson is recycled, and the students learn how to scan for information, practice reading a dictionary entry, and study interview-related adjectives.

The writing in Lesson E has students read and discuss a thank-you letter written as a response to a job interview. Then the students are guided to write their own interview thank-you letter using business letter format. With only the teacher and class as the audience, this writing task felt rather inauthentic, so I had the students write real thank-you letters to someone in their lives who helped them. They typed these up, delivered them, and were very proud of the result and grateful for being able to thank someone in a formal, written format. I felt this lesson was a successful culmination of the prior work in the unit and gave the students sufficient scaffolding to produce thank-you letters with confidence.

Lesson F's life-skills reading is a chart showing job growth for various occupations requiring a degree or vocational training, which led us into further lessons about which degrees were offered at our college and what the job prospects were in our community.

Each unit culminates in a project. In this unit, the students use the Internet to find common interview questions and discuss them. This didn't seem very productive, so instead I had my students get online to find jobs available locally. Then they decided which careers predominated and checked to see if training for those careers was offered at our college. While not useful in itself, the project in the book served to inspire me to tailor a lesson to our class.

The Workbook provides extra practice with the content and grammatical structures in the Student's Book and is organized in the same fashion. For example, the Workbook reading is another blog, the vocabulary is recycled, and a few new adjectives are introduced.

The AddVentures Multilevel Worksheets are a useful addition. Comprised of three reproducible worksheets for each lesson – easy, medium and difficult – they cover the same content and have the same answers but challenge students at different levels.

The Teacher's Edition presents a page of detailed teaching instructions facing a reproduction of every page of the Student's Book and includes the answers. The teaching instructions begin with a box highlighting the lesson objectives, which I find very important and helpful. It then provides instruction on warm-up, presentation, practice, and application. Also provided are numerous teaching tips in highlighted boxes and ideas for extension activities. Also included is a Teacher's Toolkit CD-ROM which has fun collaborative activities for each lesson, like role-plays, conversation cards, partner dictation, scrambled story sentences and jigsaw reading. Another item on the CD is an extended reading for each lesson, recycling the content of the unit material.

Further practice is available in Ventures Arcade (<http://www.cambridge.org/us/esl/venturesadulted/venturesarcade/>). This free, interactive online program has a number of activities: crosswords, multiple choice fill-in-the-blanks, matching phrases to pictures, and readings with comprehension questions (again, reading a work-related blog). This is good practice wherein the students get instant feedback. One problem, however, is that after completing an exercise, the user has to return to the main menu, click on the correct unit, and find the next activity – instead of simply clicking a “next activity” button. The Arcade Web site also has the MP3 audio files from the Self-study Audio CDs. This is very handy if you have a lab available and want to have the students listen individually to the audio without having to cue up CD's.

If you teach a multilevel class like mine (literacy level beginner to high-intermediate), I encourage you to purchase the Multilevel Lesson Planner. It provides excellent guidance and materials, on paper and digital, to use multiple levels of *Ventures* in your classroom at the same time. It also includes pictures to begin whole class discussion and then charts the organization of multiple break-out groups cycling through teacher-fronted, tutor-fronted and independent sessions.

As with any text, *Ventures* needs modifying to suit my classroom needs. For a relatively inexpensive textbook purchase, however, it fits the bill for multilevel life-skills adult ESL more than any I have previously used. I especially like the communicative approach of the design balanced with explicit grammar instruction and the quantity and diversity of supplementary materials.

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