

A Book Review: *Let's Talk 1-3*

By Leo Jones

Cambridge University Press, 2007-2008

Let's Talk 1: 136 pp., ISBN: 978-0521692816

Let's Talk 2: 136 pp., ISBN: 978-0521692847

Let's Talk 3: 136 pp., ISBN 978-0521692878

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Abstract

This paper is a review of the *Let's Talk* series of textbooks by Leo Jones and published by Cambridge University Press. This series of textbooks aims to improve speaking fluency and listening skills and is targeted at high-beginner to low-intermediate level students of English. In this review the structure of these texts is described and examined, the benefits and drawbacks of the format and content are analyzed, and recommendations for classroom use are offered. Though limited in scope because of its emphasis on spoken fluency, the text is found to be effective in eliciting participation in classroom activities due to its simple yet fun activities which accurately stimulate target-language use. The series is recommended as a primary text in oral communications classes, and for supplementary use in four-skills and other classes.

Overview

The *Let's Talk* series by Leo Jones and published by Cambridge University Press is a three-volume set of textbooks intended to promote English speaking skills and fluency. The author has written many English texts for Cambridge UP including *New Cambridge Advanced English*, *New Progress to Proficiency* and *Working in English* among others. An expanded second edition of *Let's Talk* was released in 2008 after a first publishing in 2002.

The primary focus of the *Let's Talk* series is to promote discussion on topics of interest and familiarity to students, and to generate spontaneous conversational output through an engaging range of activities and games. The sixteen units of each volume of the text feature an abundance of activities, exercises and games, and their non-sequential nature allows the teacher to tailor the lesson to the needs of a particular class. The simple-yet-interesting discussions and fun activities provide a welcome antidote to the awkward silences, one-word-answers and excessive teacher talking time of many oral communication classes, and it can also be used to reinforce English grammar, listening or writing in classes focused on other skills.

Structure and Method

The *Let's Talk* series is composed of three levels. *Let's Talk 1* is intended for high-beginning to low-intermediate students of English, *Let's Talk 2* for intermediate levels, and *Let's Talk 3* for high-intermediate students (Jones, 2008e, p. iv). Each textbook in the series begins with a section featuring language that facilitates classroom interaction, helpfully depicted as speech from characters in a drawing of an ESL classroom. These include expressions to use with other students in group activities ("Whose turn is it?" [Jones, 2008b, p. vi]) or to elicit instructor assistance ("Can you explain the activity again?" [Jones, 2008b, p. vi]). The units of each *Let's Talk* textbook are divided into two thematically related sections. The topics range from those pertinent to daily life such as sports and leisure, food and the weather, to more conceptual ones such as humor, wealth and success. Each of the sections is a good fit for a 90 or 100-minute class, but the fact that the units and individual tasks can be done in any order allows flexibility in consideration of class size, time constraints or skill level. The units each contain three or four activities, many of which are also divided into two or three parts. Activities are based for example on questions designed to stimulate discussion, survey charts for students to fill out in information exchange activities, picture analysis and description, role plays or spoken passages for listening comprehension. In each of the activity parts, students alternate between working individually, in pairs, in

groups of four or as a whole class. The text suggests a certain number of students to work together on each of the parts, but as the main goal is stimulation of student output rather than target language uptake, the numbers of participants for each part can also be altered to fit any class. Most units also include a communication task at the end which allows application of all pertinent language from the unit. Designed to stimulate real-life conversations (Jones, 2008e, p. vi), instructions for these tasks are located apart from the main unit pages at the back of the book. This serves to remove the visual cues on the unit pages from students' gaze and force independent use of new language.

Though the unit activities do not explicitly drill vocabulary or grammar, the student book has a self-study section at the back which includes drills and other activities to reinforce target language learned in each unit. It also contains additional listening exercises, the CD for which helpfully comes with the student book. This section can be assigned for homework, used to fill extra time in class, or assigned as study practice for tests. Further reinforcement of language uptake comes in the form of review sections called Expansions which appear after every four textbook chapters. These two-page sections are simple board games in which students must use topical language from the preceding four units to advance across the board and win.

The classroom activities themselves are rather self-explanatory, but a great deal of useful material is provided in the Teacher's Manual for each volume of *Let's Talk*. In addition to extension activities and ideas for writing assignments, this includes the Talking points, which are activities and games based on the language focus of each unit. These function almost as an alternative iteration of the communication task activities, allowing additional flexibility in lesson planning or options for class review. The very thorough Teacher's Manual also includes short quizzes for every unit and two eight-unit tests per textbook level, with two versions of each test to prevent cheating. Also included are scripts for all classroom audio and examples of ideal student conversations for classroom activities to provide guidance for both students and instructors.

As an example of some of the above points consider Unit 3 of *Let's Talk 3* (Jones, 2008d). The general topic is crime. The opening activity of Unit 3a (Jones, 2008d, p. 10) contains pictures depicting several crimes followed by simple conversation questions eliciting opinions about them. The choice of accurate and obvious imagery over text here serves to "even the playing field" between students of different comprehension levels, simultaneously facilitating easy introduction of new vocabulary and allowing for a more inclusive discussion. Subsequent activities include discussion prompts in simple English, pictures and photographs

(Jones, 2008d, p. 10-12). Each one is a stand-alone activity with a different approach, providing a range of options for each class and flexibility for when a change of focus is needed, as well as accommodating classes of different sizes and durations. The grammar focus for this unit, past forms of modals of speculation, is targeted in the final group performance activity (Jones, 2008d, p. 13, 75, 84). It features a picture of a desk which participants are told belongs to a friend who has disappeared. On the desk are several intriguing 'clues', such as a prescription medication vial, airline tickets and a letter from an accounting firm. Each participant is then given additional confidential information and is invited to speculate on what has happened to the friend. The Teacher's Manual provides a further picture-based activity, this one involving scrambled comic strips that participants must cooperate to arrange (Jones, 2008e, 147, 153). The imagery in these activities is very effective at stimulating production of the target language, and less intimidating for students of lower skill levels than a text explanation would be. Both the target grammar and new vocabulary are then reinforced in the Self-study section for this unit (Jones, 2008d, 98-99) with several listening activities, a writing activity and a crossword puzzle.

Analysis

The success enjoyed by this writer when using the *Let's Talk* series as the main text for oral communication classes has come primarily from the enthusiastic response of students to the activities. In these classes, most students took the initiative to participate with only limited input necessary from the writer at any stage of the activity. This was a stark contrast to previous classes using other similar texts, in which both a time-consuming initial explanation and continual teacher input throughout activities were necessary. The content is also noticeably well-designed. The discussions feature interesting topics pertinent to common experience for which students can use simple language, stimulating participation. Tasks are easy to understand, featuring accurate photos and illustrations. Particularly impressive is how effectively the tasks invoke target language without the need for drills or more explicit exercises. The large number of activities for each unit and their non-sequential nature also affords an amount of flexibility in lesson design and flow, so important for classes which can be of varying sizes, lengths and skill-levels. This is complemented by the Self-study section at the back of the student book, as well as the comprehensive additional resources available in the Teacher's Manual. The surfeit of material here is a welcome alternative to texts which rely on the creativity of the instructor to either extend a smaller number of provided exercises to cover the length of the class, or supplement with own materials or other texts.

The format does however have its limitations. Though its eschewal (in the main unit pages) of drills will appeal to most students, one group for whom this may not work is very low-level beginners who would benefit from a greater focus on mechanics. Some English knowledge is likewise necessary to participate in even the very straightforward discussions here. Though *Let's Talk I* is simpler in content than the subsequent levels of the series, low beginners could be discouraged by the large amount of new vocabulary presented even in the first few units of that textbook. Unit 2 for example contains a particularly extensive range of new vocabulary terms centered functionally around describing personal appearance and personality, with even an activity featuring zodiac signs (Jones, 2008a, p. 8-11). The lack of drills and emphasis on participation could also be a false friend to those with poor study skills or students who are poor at notetaking, though this can be countered somewhat using the Self-study section and by assigning other homework. Another hurdle encountered by the writer arose from attempting to involve more shy or quiet class members in the textbook activities, as some personal initiative in students is very helpful towards benefitting from the participation-oriented approach of these books. This is however a problem common in communication classes in general rather than specifically due to the nature of this text and can be minimized with effective student pairing or small group composition. Additionally, more online support for *Let's Talk* would increase its usability. Although both the classroom audio and the Talking points from the Teacher's Manual can be found at the Cambridge University Press website, the unit quizzes and tests are not online (Cambridge University Press, 2021). This can prove a challenge when teaching online, as these pages cannot be easily handed out in class in such a case.

Applications

The *Let's Talk* series is an excellent choice as a primary text for an oral communication class. Though the classroom activities focus primarily on speaking and listening skills, they also lend themselves to written assignments with some modification, providing an option for homework. Considering the writing assignment ideas available in the Teacher's Manual, this third skill can also be effectively covered in classes using this text. Given the flexibility of the unit structure and opportunities it provides for modification or innovation on the part of the instructor, it is believed that this could even be the primary text of a 4-skills class for those who enjoy more control over class content or prefer to use many of their own materials. The *Let's Talk* series is likewise still very useful and highly recommended as a supplementary resource in 4-skills classes using other texts. The activities,

which encourage speaking and provide excellent performance opportunities for specific language uptake, would be a welcome addition to any class.

With the previously mentioned exception of the tests and quizzes, also notable under current conditions is the ease with which the content of *Let's Talk* can be adapted to an online-teaching environment. The classroom activities here are simple enough to understand and perform quickly and can provide a welcome respite from the fatigue of sitting through online lectures. *Let's Talk* activities done in pairs or smaller groups are a great fit for the “Breakout rooms” feature of the popular Zoom platform.

Conclusion

This is an excellent classroom choice for both students and instructors, particularly for oral communication classes. The students will enjoy the fun activities as well as the well-designed pictures and language promoting easy uptake. Instructors will appreciate the flexibility of the format and the extensive amount of material provided, in addition to the enthusiastic participation of the class.

This is one of several texts from Cambridge UP focusing primarily on English speaking and listening skills. Another of the Cambridge line, *Nice Talking With You 1*, was in fact reviewed in *CELE Journal* volume 27 (Price, 2019). It is hoped that the print run of the now rather seasoned *Let's Talk* series will be extended with a new edition, though considering the more recent release of other texts focused on improving English fluency by this publisher this may not be the case.

References

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