A Book Review: *Contemporary Topics 1: Academic Listening and Note-Taking Skills 3rd Edition*

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Abstract

Helen Solorzano and Laurie Frazier’s *Contemporary Topics 1: Academic Note-Taking and Listening Skills 3rd Edition* is a textbook targeted towards intermediate level ESL students. The book centers around 12 different academic lectures with different topics, each of which is designed to simulate the subjects discussed in a university classroom. Each unit also provides the learner with up to 14 vocabulary items that will be utilized in the lecture, comprehension questions based on the lecture, and supplemental activities and projects which expand on the lecture topic. In addition, the book provides a supplemental audio CD so that students can review the lecture and vocabulary for each unit outside of class. My experience with this book dates back to 2012 when I started instructing ESL listening classes at Kent State University in the United States. Over a period of four years, I utilized *Contemporary Topics 1* in classes with students from Saudi Arabia, China, Japan, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Oman, Spain, and Somalia. This paper will first provide some background on the utilization of this textbook with Kent State University’s ESL students. This will then be followed by a description of the textbook in detail, and finally, I will conclude by highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of using the book in an ESL classroom. Since the
textbook is set at an intermediate-level and focuses exclusively on listening and note-taking skills, I recommend it for high-level CELE communication classes.

**Background**

The English as a Second Language Center (ESL Center) at Kent State University currently assists over 300 international students in transitioning to undergraduate coursework. According to the Kent State University website,

The ESL Center offers a unique, intensive language program with a variety of classes that are designed to complement each other as well as provide in-depth English language instruction. The intensive program consists of seven-week long modules and allows students to develop those language skills needed in an academic environment as measured by standardized tests such as TOEFL.” (2015)

International students enrolled in the ESL Center are placed in one of ten levels—beginner to advanced—within the program, and placement is based on results from the initial placement tests. Students in ESL classes are required to take at least two credit hours at each level. For instance, two credit hour core skills classes include: listening, writing, reading, grammar, and speaking.

Kent State’s ESL listening classes are designed to improve and develop listening skills for academic settings, and also improve the speed and efficiency at which students take notes. Listening classes are held five days per week, and each class is 50 minutes in
length. The ESL listening classes utilize the entire series of *Contemporary Topics* textbooks. Furthermore, these textbooks are divided in half so that one textbook can be used for two levels. The text I primarily worked with, *Contemporary Topics 1*, is utilized for level five and level six classes.

**Description of Contemporary Topics: Academic Listening and Note-Taking Skills 3rd Edition**

*Contemporary Topics 1: Academic Listening and Note-Taking Skills 3rd Edition* (Solorzano & Frazier, 2009) is the second installment in the *Contemporary Topics* series. The first book in the series, *Contemporary Topics: Academic Listening and Note-Taking Skills Introduction* (Clement & Lennox, 2009) textbook, is aimed at beginner ESL students, while *Contemporary Topics 1* is aimed at intermediate students. The subsequent textbooks build upon skills learned in the previous books, and thus each textbook is best used in sequential order. Each *Contemporary Topics* package includes: a student book, teacher’s manual, audio CD with lectures, and DVD with lectures. Students are able to purchase the book individually or in a package with the CD. The DVD features all 12 academic lectures, as well as the option to turn on English subtitles, presentation points (bullet points of main ideas), and coaching tips (tips which help guide the listeners as they take notes). The audio CD features all 12 academic lectures, as well as example sentences based on each unit’s set of vocabulary, a “Connect to the Topic” section, and a “Talk About the Topic” section for
each unit. Finally, the teacher’s manual includes unit tests, answer keys for comprehension questions, and transcripts of all the lectures.

*Contemporary Topics 1* is divided into 12 units, and each unit focuses on a different topic and corresponding academic-style lecture. Unit topics include: Genetically Modified Food, Modern Art, Sir Ernest Shackleton, Ethics, and The Search for Extraterrestrial Life. Each topic mirrors topics generally covered in most undergraduate courses, and each academic lecture is narrated by a different speaker to provide students with exposure to various accents and speaking paces. According to the introduction by series editor Michael Rost (2002), the intent is to “ready students for genuine academic and professional contexts where they will be expected to participate fully” (p. vii).

At the beginning of each textbook, the initial “Scope and Sequence” section helps learners quickly identify the skills and strategies that will be covered in each chapter. For example, since the topic of Unit 10 is “History: Shackleton”, the respective details in the “Scope and Sequence” section informs students that this chapter will focus on numbers, dates, and periods of time.

Each chapter then begins with the aforementioned “Connect to the Topic” section to elicit the learners’ prior knowledge of the topic. Students are given short warm-up activities, usually surveys or short answer questions, which are designed to be completed in pairs or groups. Afterwards, the class instructor is prompted to facilitate a discussion on the topic before proceeding to the second part of the unit. After the “Connect to the Topic”
stage of the lesson, students are then presented with up to 14 vocabulary items which are
featured in the corresponding unit’s academic lecture. These items are introduced
interactively—in the sense that students must actively interact with the text and match words
with their definitions or choose the correct definitions from multiple choices. Each item of
vocabulary is always accompanied by an example sentence, which can be played on the CD.
Each vocabulary section also contains a “Pair Work” consolidation activity in which
students work together to identify each word’s correct usage. For example, Unit 8
(Genetically Modified Food) asks students to choose the correct verb tense for vocabulary
words in sentences.

Following the vocabulary section is a “Focus Your Attention” section designed to
teach learners a specific note-taking skill. Rost (2002) explains that this section “provides
specific coaching tips to help students direct their attention and gain more control of how
they listen” (vii). These coaching tips include: how to identify examples, to how write
abbreviations, and how to listen for main ideas. Each coaching tip is lecture-specific,
meaning that the skill presented in the “Focus Your Attention” section is directly related to
the academic lecture for that chapter. For instance, since Unit 10 is a history lesson, the
“Focus Your Attention” section trains students how to listen to details efficiently and
correctly note dates.

Once the “Focus Your Attention” section is complete, students listen to the academic
lecture for the unit. They are prompted to close the textbook, listen to the lecture, and take
notes. The academic lectures can be found on the *Contemporary Topics 1* DVD that accompanies the teacher pack. In addition, each DVD lecture has subtitles, presentation points, and “coaching tips” capabilities. The lecture is then replayed for a second time, and students are instructed to add details and correct any mistakes in their notes. After the second viewing, students can check their comprehension of the lecture with multiple choice or true/false questions in the textbook. Students are also given a simple outline of the lecture that can be used to help them organize their notes.

Next, the textbook features a “Talk About the Topic” listening section. For this section, learners watch a short conversation between four students who are all discussing the previous lecture. As they listen, learners both answer questions about the conversation and make inferences about the discussion. One weakness of this section is that the inferences and their meanings are not previously introduced in the chapter, and this point will be further discussed later in this review.

Finally, each unit ends with an “Extend the Topic” section which is usually completed after the unit test. The “Extend the Topic” section expands upon the unit by presenting additional group discussion questions, listening activities, and group-based projects. The “Extend the Topic” activities are not directly related to the content of the academic lecture from the chapter. However, these activities aptly supplement the material presented in the units.
Discussion of *Contemporary Topics 1: Academic Note-Taking Skills 3rd Edition*

**Strengths of *Contemporary Topics 1: Academic Note-Taking Skills 3rd Edition***

I utilized *Contemporary Topics 1* at Kent State University from 2012-2016 and found many strengths in the textbook including: organized units, authentic content, and skills-integrated activities.

First, the units in *Contemporary Topics 1* are well-organized and easy to follow. Since each unit follows the same basic structure, students quickly become familiar with the routine. This structure allows for an efficient use of time, as students quickly learn what is expected of them with each unit and are able to subsequently complete the tasks within the allotted time frame. Based on the structure of each unit and the aforementioned sections, I was able to create a five-day routine, whereby students anticipated learning vocabulary on Monday, listening to the lecture on Tuesday, and so on.

Second, the textbooks’ units include authentic, classroom style lectures that are reminiscent of college classrooms. Topics include diverse areas of study such as history, science, philosophy, and art, and each topic provides students with factual information that may prove useful for future classes. Moreover, each lecture features a different speaker, and so students are able to hear a variety of accents and speaking speeds. One technique I utilized with these lectures was to create an “Easy and Difficult” list on the board, and then encourage students to discuss the difficulties they encountered with each speaker. Students often commented on the speakers’ accents, pronunciation, and speed as determining factors
in whether or not they understood the lecture. As a result, I could use these comments to create supplemental materials.

Third, *Contemporary Topics 1* has excellent skills-integrated activities. The activities focus not only on listening skills, but they also incorporate reading, writing, and grammar skills. For example, many “Extend the Topic” sections require students to give a group presentation. Moreover, many of the “Extend the Topic” sections do not contain explicit instructions, and so the projects can be made as simple or as ornate as desired. For example, the “Extend the Topic” section for the Unit 10 instructs students to research and prepare a presentation about a famous explorer. However, I often expanded upon these instructions and had students prepare a presentation, an essay, and a group skit.

**Weaknesses of Contemporary Topics 1: Academic Note-Taking Skills 3rd Edition**

Despite its many strengths, *Contemporary Topics 1* also exhibits the following weaknesses: the vocabulary for each unit is not expanded upon or reviewed during or after the academic lecture, and the instructions for the academic lectures are not structured enough for intermediate-level students.

First, the vocabulary for each unit is not expanded upon or reviewed during or after the academic lecture; rather, it is merely introduced in the vocabulary section. It would be beneficial for students to be exposed to the vocabulary during the lecture. Perhaps one way of doing this would be to display the vocabulary on a screen during the lecture so that students can hear them in context. Another strategy may be for students to listen for the
vocabulary words during the lecture, and write down the time marker when the word is used. Either of these strategies would help students recognize the vocabulary in context, as well as understand the importance of the words within the lecture. Moreover, the items of vocabulary are never repeated or practiced after the lecture is finished. One strategy to remedy this issue would be to make vocabulary use mandatory in the “Extend the Topic” projects and presentations. Doing so would encourage students to use the vocabulary in context.

Finally, the instructions for academic lectures are not structured enough for intermediate students. During my time teaching *Contemporary Topics 1* at Kent State University, most of the students found the lectures to be too challenging. Many of the students struggled with listening to the lectures and taking notes simultaneously. Furthermore, many students had a difficult time understanding the structure of the lecture (for example, when the speaker was giving examples, when the speaker was making contrasts, etc.). My strategy for assisting students through the lectures was to give them a series of questions that they could answer as the lecture played. The questions followed the lecture, and most questions were “fill-in” style (questions usually containing a blank space where students insert the missing word). Other types of questions included making a list of points or answering true/false questions about a point in the lecture. To encourage students’ progress, I first provided students with detailed questions and then made the questions less and less descriptive with each unit. By the final unit I provided students with general
questions and required them to write as many additional notes as possible. I found that this strategy helped students feel more confident, and it helped them to better understand the note-taking process.

**Conclusion**

Overall, *Contemporary Topics 1* is an excellent textbook to help improve listening and note-taking skills, and I recommend it for intermediate to advanced-level communication classes at Asia University. The textbook’s topics are relevant and interesting, and allow for various extension activities. Moreover, the “Extend the Topic” section ensures that the units are not limited to listening and note-taking skills—they can be easily modified or extended to help improve skills such as writing, speaking, and spelling. Whether instructing Japanese learners or otherwise, I highly recommend *Contemporary Topics 1* as a resource for communication classes in any ESL/EFL classroom.
References

