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## *Express Yourself*

Review by Marcia Z. Buell, Ohio University

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EXPRESS YOURSELF. Trish Shannon. New York: Random House, 1989. Student's Book, pp. ix+166.

By its very nature, a conversational textbook ought to embrace communicative competence as its chief goal. However, because full communicative competence involves so many variables, the task of integrating useful vocabulary and structures with themes conducive to communication is a formidable one. Consequently, many conversational textbooks written for intermediate ESL students include both pattern recognition exercises and interactive communicative activities. *Express Yourself* is no exception.

As stated in its preface, the intention of *Express Yourself* is to enable learners to "articulate the full range of their experiences" by manipulating the functional forms needed to express or describe feelings associated with "common human interactions." The book is divided into ten chapters, each highlighting one emotion such as happiness, sadness, humor, anger, love or hatred. Within each chapter, exercises follow the same format. Each unit opens with a picture description exercise, includes controlled vocabulary and dialogue practice along with open-ended role plays and problem-solving discussions, and closes with a grammatical review and discussion questions.

Each chapter begins with a series of pictures depicting a story. The book's author suggests that pairs or small groups

of students tell the story and describe the characters' emotions. In performing this task, the learners' limited vocabulary and inaccurate structures will establish the key teaching points for the unit. More expressive vocabulary is introduced on the pages following the pictures.

A listen-and-repeat approach is recommended for introducing new vocabulary and sample dialogues that occur later in the chapter. To reinforce the new vocabulary, students are supplied with questions about the pictures which they answer in pairs, incorporating the new words whenever possible. For additional practice, students discuss pictures illustrating nonverbal expressions of the target emotion, and discuss cultural differences in showing the particular emotion.

Shannon recommends that students practice the dialogues in pairs after they repeat the teacher's model, by inserting the phrases written below the dialogue in place of the ones underlined in the text. After completing the controlled activities, students try to incorporate key words and concepts into interviews, role plays and problem-solving discussions. The pattern practices serve as a kind of build-up or rehearsal for the more authentic communication tasks.

For teachers who want to emphasize true communication, the role plays and problem-solving discussions can help to generate spontaneous speech focused on a particular task. However, when using

*Express Yourself* (or any book that suggests situations and topics), teachers must consider whether or not the suggested themes are relevant to the students. A scene in which a frantic parent struggles to describe the symptoms of a sick child (chapter 6: Fear) might reflect an event that learners will encounter in an English-speaking country. On the other hand, a role play where a parent uses English to scold his/her lazy teenager (chapter 4: Anger) is improbable because an adult ESL learner would be more likely to use the family's native language in a family setting.

The same selectivity must apply to the topics chosen for discussion. Some problem-solving activities bring up difficulties that second language learners may actually encounter. For instance, the chapter on humor asks students to come up with plausible defenses against ethnic slurs in the work place. This is a common problem, so discussion might be highly beneficial. Unfortunately, some of the suggested problems may bring up topics which the learners would not care to discuss. In the first unit, the problem-solving activity requires that students imagine themselves to be victims of a serious accident and destined never to walk again. For many people, visualizing

themselves in this situation is hardly the way to lower the affective filter and may even inhibit communication, particularly as this exercise falls in the first unit, when class members are just getting to know each other, and may therefore hesitate to discuss such a personal issue.

Even though some of the discussion and problem-solving situations are inappropriate, *Express Yourself* makes a good attempt at providing the language needed for everyday interactions centered around emotional situations. The suggested methodology is a mix of audiolingual approaches and communicative activities, but some teachers may feel that the text's emphasis rests more on memorization, repetition, and substitution than on the expression of original ideas, especially in the early sections of each chapter. In addition, many students view emotional expression as a low priority on their proficiency agendas. Thus, despite the fact that *Express Yourself* introduces some useful phrases and offers some beneficial situational practice, it may function better as a supplementary text than as a main text for a listening/speaking course.

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