

Side by Side Book One

Vocabulary Guidelines

We have been using the Side by Side series by Steven J. Molinsky and Bill Bliss (Longman-Pearson) since 2008. Students range from primary school through adult. The materials we use are the books that are readily available in China – the Student Book and the Activity Workbook with the related audio. The later we converted to MP3 format as the supplied audio CD's are not practical for our use. Additional materials such as a Teachers Guide, flash cards, practice tests and other are available directly from Pearson Education.

Grammar Based Approach

The Side by Side series uses a grammar based approach to the early learning of English. It does this without teaching actual grammar rules but instead uses a repetition based approach of grammatical patterns that are easy to understand and practice. The books also make attempt to teach vocabulary, pronunciation, reading and include many listening exercises. Writing is not really addressed in these books but this is probably OK at this level of instruction. In our work we introduce students to formal writing after they have completed Side by Side Level Three.

Our Background

As mentioned above we have been teaching using the Side by Side materials since 2008. We are also involved with teaching more advanced students including SAT, TOEFL and IELTS test preparation as well as Business English. Our experience at various levels has resulted in the revision of our teaching approach at the lower levels.

Schools in China tend to focus on reading and listening skills. These are the elements of language where students need to understand what is presented to them, but do not require them to generate or produce the language themselves (speaking and writing). While a natural way to start learning a language, the additional skills of speaking and writing never seem to get properly addressed in the local schools resulting in students who are unprepared for either schools overseas or for proper communication with English speaking colleagues. This sets up many Chinese students for failure later (even if they do satisfy their short term test score goals).

SZTeachers Approach to Early Training

For early English language learning we believe the Side by Side series are some of the best resources available at this level. The books are easy to follow and grammar is presented in a manner that is interesting and fun to follow. The reading and listening exercises are very good and reinforce the basic vocabulary introduced at the beginning of each chapter.

With that said, we feel that the Side by Side books by themselves are not enough to provide adequate training at this level. In all our classes we use the stories in the books for dictation exercises as well as more advanced vocabulary learning. While the basic vocabulary at the beginning of each chapter is good, it is not enough for a student to understand everything that is being presented to them (especially in the stories and the section Gazettes). For these sections we try to review ALL vocabulary in the book and ask that students verbally describe each word found.

The results we have observed in the area of pronunciation correction during dictation have been good. We see steady improvement in pronunciation accuracy over time. The results in our vocabulary work however have been mixed. A common problem observed is that while students learn the words and even use them to a limited extent they are not retained and hence not available for the student to use in normal conversation or writing. This does not help in resolving the core problems that students see at the higher levels where good speaking and writing skills are required.

SZTeachers Provided Resources

As an attempt to addressing the vocabulary and retention problems we have written a set of vocabulary exercise sheets for each chapter of the book. Each worksheet introduces words that are used in the chapter and asks the student to provide both a written description of the word (in English) and a sentence using that word or phrase. This is analogous to the approach taken by the IELTS and TOEFL speaking tests

but at a much simpler level, and in writing. It is hoped that by getting students used to describing simple things like words at this level that later on it will be easier for them to move on to describing things of greater complexity.

In addition to the student worksheets we also provide a teachers version for each worksheet with standard dictionary type definitions. Not all definitions are complete. Abbreviated definitions are at times used to align the meanings with what is presented in the book while at the same time limiting the complexities of some words given the level of this training material. Not all words are presented in their base form, but rather in the forms presented in the textbook. In some cases several variations of the words are presented. As this is basically a book on grammar this was done on purpose to illustrate different ways base words can be used.

The definitions presented in the teachers notes are intended to assist teachers and it is not expected for students to provide these levels of definitions. As long as they can reasonably communicate what the words mean (in a manner consistent for describing nouns or verbs) this should be adequate.

All the words in the worksheets have also been collated into an accompanying dictionary document. Most of the definitions in the dictionary are the same as in the teacher vocabulary worksheet notes. References are provided to the chapter(s) where the words have been found.

How to Use SZTeachers Materials

As no two students or classes are completely alike there are several ways in which these materials may be helpful. A lot depends on your goals for the class as well as the levels and patience levels of the students involved. Our approach is simple – we want our students to understand EVERYTHING in the book including ALL words and vocabulary used in the book. Other teachers or centers may have a different approach where vocabulary and exercises in verbal descriptions are not emphasized as much, or done through different materials.

In most cases we believe that students learn and have a better chance of retention by doing rather than just listening. This is true for most other subjects so should not be a surprise for language learning. For this reason our preferred approach is to present the student vocabulary worksheets as homework exercises after the completion of each unit. The dictionary and teachers notes are not to be provided in this case as it is important for the students to learn by looking up each word themselves and coming up with their own sentences. For these students we can provide the dictionary after completing the final chapter of the book.

Another option teachers may consider is providing the teacher notes AFTER each completed unit. It should be noted however that the vocabulary level for the teacher notes is considerably higher. For some classes this may be appropriate if you think the students have the interest and ability to look up the additional words that have yet to be mastered.

For a few of our adult classes with motivated students we are considering providing the dictionary together with the worksheets. Most of these students consult standard dictionaries anyway so streamlining this process may be beneficial as long as answers are given using their own words and not those found in the dictionary.

For More Information

We are still adjusting the materials based on feedback from students and peers. If you have any comments, suggestions or spot any errors or omissions please contact Tim at tim@szteachers.com (email).