

Gianola, Ann. *Easy Stories Plus*. Syracuse, NY: New Reader's Press, 2001

Reviewed by Sara G. McIntyre

How many of us have had the experience of picking up an “easy” textbook, only to find out that the author’s definition of “easy” vastly exceeds our own students’ level of ability? It’s rare to find a reader full of stories written exclusively for adults that is at the same time carefully structured so that the very low-beginning student can pick it up and read it independently. Ann Gianola’s *Easy Stories Plus* is just such a reader. *Easy Stories Plus* consists of fifteen chapters, each headed by a short, (approximately 150 word), simple story with such titles as, “It’s Payday,” and “Headache Medicine.” A large cartoon drawing precedes each story and depicts the setting, characters and some key vocabulary in the story. Comprehension questions directly follow the story in every chapter. Each story is followed by a set of activities that make up the “Plus” aspect of the textbook. These activities are based on the theme of the story, and include vocabulary matching and fill-in-the-blank, listening exercises, dialogues, grammar exercises and discussion/writing questions.

Several features help the textbook live up to its “easy” title. The large cartoon drawing at the head of each chapter depicts the theme and key vocabulary of the chapter. The instructor can use the drawing to introduce key words in the story and help students make predictions. Another feature that makes the text “easy” is its large, easy-to-read typeface, a boon to older and/or sight-impaired adult students and visually less intimidating for less-literate readers. Following each story are ten comprehension questions which refer directly back to the text and make the story “easy” by allowing the reader to verify his/her understanding of the text.

For programs whose syllabi are organized around lifeskill topics such as *Food, Health, and Jobs*, these story chapters reinforce and supplement low-beginning vocabulary remarkably well. Chapter 8, “It’s Payday,” for example, can be used effectively as an independent reading at the end of a unit on reading and paying the bills. The chapters are not sequenced; rather each stands on its own as a complete lesson, a fact that will be appreciated by instructors in open-entry/open-exit programs. The stories are uniform in length and difficulty throughout the book, and lend themselves well to extension activities such as sentence-strip games, cloze activities, dictation, and timed reading.

The textbook’s weaknesses lie in its follow-up exercises, some of which are unrelated to the main story, and others of which often result in rote drills. Many of the follow-up activities seem to be focused primarily on the *language* of the story rather than on helping the student

extract *meaning* from the text. Although students often enjoy some of these exercises, perhaps because the exercises fulfill their expectations of what it means to “study,” the instructor might have to ask how beneficial these activities are.

Nevertheless, the strength of this textbook outweighs its weaknesses. If studies are correct, independent, self-initiated reading produces better readers and writers in the L2 classroom. I have found that students in my class tend to pick this textbook up enthusiastically and read the easy, often humorous stories with very little teacher intervention. *Easy Stories Plus* is a reader that encourages students to read independently and for pleasure, and I am happy to use it in my ESL classroom.