

Book Review: Two Thumbs Up

Street Speak: Essential American Slang & Idioms. David Burke and David Harrington. (1998). Los Angeles: Caslon Books. 135 pp.

By Michael Ogle and Connie Johnson, Universidad de las Américas-Puebla

Adolescent and adult students always ask us, their EFL teachers, about English slang expressions. Learning slang and idiomatic expressions that young native speakers use is a very motivating language activity for our learners, but many times, they can be very difficult to explain, even for native English speaking teachers. These expressions can be readily found in the English language environment and materials, but when we try to clarify to our students how and when to use them, it's not easy to find the right words. Or, worse yet, we give them long drawn-out situational explanations which our students probably will not culturally understand.

Street Speak is the second in a classroom series on American slang. The first was written by one of the authors, David Burke, in 1992 and was entitled Street Talk. Like the first, Street Speak is a useful tool for both teachers and students to explore the most popular and widely found idioms and slang expressions. These expressions are so commonly found in the United States that if we are to prepare our students sociolinguistically as well as grammatically to adapt into the English language environment, we cannot ignore their importance.

Street Speak consists of ten different lessons that deal with everyday situations all of which follow a format that is repeated in each unit. First the situation is presented in a colorful cartoon which illustrates the slang to be taught. Below, you will see a portion of the first conversation entitled, "At the Party" with the idioms being used in the unit in bold print (p. 4).

DIALOGUE USING SLANG & IDIOMS

- Debbie:* I don't know why I let you convince me to come here. I hate parties.
Becky: Would you **get a grip**? This is going to be a **blast**.
Debbie: On, no. Look who just walked in. Sheila Hampton. I **can't stand** her. She always **got on my case** because she didn't like the way I dressed.
Becky: What? Did you **get a load of** that tiny dress she's wearing?

This is then followed by another dialogue with blanks where the slang had been in the first conversation. The students must fill in the blanks with the correct meaning in standard English or a **synonym** for the expression (p. 5).

 DIALOGUE USING STANDARD ENGLISH

- Debbie: I don't know why I let you convince me to come here. I hate parties.
 Becky: Would you **calm down**? This is going to be **a lot of fun**.
 Debbie: Oh, no. Look who just walked in. Sheila Hampton. I **don't like** her.
 She always **criticizes me** because she didn't like the way I dressed.
 Becky: What? Did you **see** that tiny dress she's wearing?

After this, the same dialogue using the slang is written as it is spoken (p. 6).

- Debbie: I dunno why I letchu convince me da come here. I hate pardies.
 Becky: Would'ju **ged a grip**? This'ez gonna to be a **blast**.
 Debbie: On, no. Look 'oo ged walked in. Sheila Hampton. I **can't stand**er.
 She always **god on my case** 'cuz she didn't like the way I dressed.
 Becky: What? Didju **ged a load of** that tiny dress she's wearing?

This is followed in each unit of the book with a section called a *Closer Look at Real Speak*. In this section the learners see how different combinations of letters become different sounds when speaking. The subsequent activities involve speaking practice and listening exercises using the tape which accompanies the series. Also, there is a workbook and a teacher's manual to complete the set.

Finally, at the end of each unit each of the slang expressions are explained in closer detail. The idioms are explained in standard English and synonyms of other slang expressions are provided. For example, the synonyms for "to be a blast" would be "to be a kick", "to be a riot", "to be a scream", and "to be way cool". The exercises in *Street Speak* are not especially communicative, but they do provide the learners with ample practice with the expressions.

Even though *Street Speak* is considered by the authors to be at a pre-intermediate ESL level, it should be used at intermediate or even advanced levels in EFL situations where contact with the language is reduced and more exposure to English is needed. The book presupposes that the students have the basic verb tenses (present, present continuous, past, future) and a rather extensive vocabulary. In an ESL situation, this book could be used at a pre-intermediate level, but in our EFL context in Mexico, it would be perhaps better in a solid intermediate class. Advanced classes would also benefit from the exercises because of the "fun" activities it has and because the majority of the expression will not be commonly known.

It is our opinion that *Street Speak* should not be considered as an English text, but, instead, as extra material for the EFL classroom. As previously mentioned, the expressions are highly motivating for our students and this book should be considered as a supplement to the daily activities and textbook perhaps once a week or maybe even as a "reward" for an especially good group. This book presents a break from the daily routine that your classes will enjoy. And, you will too.

Street Speak should be available soon in Mexico since the authors were looking for a Mexican representative in the spring of this year. Perhaps if you began asking for the book at your local bookstore, it will arrive sooner because they will know that there is an interest. Or, as the authors might say, "**grab a cab and take a spin** to your nearest bookstore to **lay hands on** a copy of Street Speak. Don't **be a nerd**. You'll **have a blast** using this book."