



Osaka JALT Journal

Vol. 10 (2023)

<http://www.osakajalt.org/journal>

A Definitive Review of *Keynote 4*

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Article History

Published: December 20, 2023

Keywords

EFL instruction
Keynote 4
National Geographic Learning
Teaching materials
Textbook review

Abstract

Keynote 4 is a comprehensive and engaging course book that provides an excellent resource for English language learners. This review will detail why *Keynote 4* is an effective textbook for instructors of intermediate to higher intermediate and advanced EFL students.

The first edition of *Keynote 4* (Stephenson, Lansford, & Dummett, 2020), published by National Geographic Learning, is a popular coursebook series that has been used to teach English to students worldwide for some years. *Keynote 4* is a comprehensive coursebook that caters to language learners at an intermediate to advanced level. In this in-depth review, I will be taking a closer look at *Keynote 4*, its key themes, strengths, and weaknesses, as well as sharing my thoughts on this book.

I used this textbook over the course of two semesters at the YMCA, also known as the Young Men's Christian Association, in Kyoto, Japan. This book was used in several intermediate classes with class sizes of 2 to 6 students. I specifically selected this textbook instead of several other options available at a number of book retailers. The following sections will detail why *Keynote 4* is among the top textbooks available for instructors of intermediate to higher intermediate and advanced students in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms.

Overview

The first thing that struck me about *Keynote 4* was the design of the book. It is visually appealing with colorful pages, clear images, and easy-to-read text. The textbook has a clean layout and design and achieves this by going for a somewhat minimalistic approach, making good use of white space to make a visual separation between elements to improve readability. This is unlike many other textbooks I have used that seem to cram as much detail onto the pages as possible. The layout of the book is also logical, and there is an excellent balance between skills work and language input. The book is divided into 12 units, each with its particular topic and learning objectives. The unit titles are Embrace Stress, Media Influences, Development, Secrets and Lies, To the Edge, Money Matters, Medical Frontiers, Life Decisions, Technology and Innovation, Connections, Life in the Slow Lane, and Make Yourself Heard.

The units of the book deal with specific areas of language learning such as expanding students' vocabulary range, improving their writing skills, and developing their listening and speaking abilities. The book provides numerous practice exercises, which are designed to build confidence and competence. There is also a strong emphasis on the use of technology, with activities that incorporate web-based research and video analysis, ensuring that students have a well-rounded and up-to-date experience of learning English. My students and I liked the large number of TED Talks (<https://www.ted.com/talks>) that incorporated a lot of inspirational stories or interesting theories, which are broken down into three or four-minute parts instead of one long video. This helped most of my intermediate-level students remember what was spoken about during the video. There are also a lot of challenging activities and a good variety of words, expressions, and idioms that the students can learn. Figure 1 shows a TED Talks section in the book.

Figure 1
TED Talks Section in Textbook

6D Why giving away our wealth has been the most satisfying thing we've done

TED TALKS

BILL AND MELINDA GATES are the world's wealthiest couple and also two of its most generous philanthropists.

Bill and Melinda Gates's idea worth spreading is that entrepreneurs who have succeeded in business can use their wealth and knowledge to help deal with the world's biggest problems.

PREVIEWING

Read the paragraph below. Circle the correct meaning of each **bold** word. You will hear these words in the TED Talk.

Many of us dream of becoming wealthy, but the most **satisfying** thing Bill and Melinda Gates have done is to give their money away. Their **philosophy** for raising their children has been to teach them that **philanthropy** is more important than money. The Gates family believes that being wealthy is a great **responsibility**. Their mission is not only to give their own money away, but to encourage other wealthy people to do the same to help make the world a more **just** place.

- 1 Something that is **satisfying** gives you feelings of (**calmness** / **pleasure**).
- 2 The **philosophy** behind something refers to the (**ideas and attitude** / **uncertainty**) behind it.
- 3 **Philanthropy** refers to the effort you put in to (**distract** / **help**) other people.
- 4 If you have a great **responsibility**, you have a lot of (**power** / **common sense**).
- 5 A world that is more **just** is more (**fair** / **unfair**).

VIEWING

A **6.8** Watch Part 1 of the TED Talk. Check (✓) the ideas Bill and Melinda Gates would agree with.

- Giving children a good education is more important than giving them money.
- Children should be allowed to choose their own direction in life.
- Wealthy people should give something back to the world.
- Wealthy parents should limit their children's exposure to the outside world for safety reasons.
- Wealthy people should only invest money in profitable businesses.

One aspect of *Keynote 4* that is especially useful for language learners is the focus on developing the four language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The book draws on a broad range of authentic sources such as TED Talks by various renowned figures, annotated diagrams, and articles to expose students to a real-world context (see Figure 2). This approach enables students to acquire functional and practical language skills that are relevant and applicable to their daily lives.

Another feature of *Keynote 4* that stands out is the inclusion of a task-based approach to learning (Ellis, 2000). The book provides opportunities for students to work on activities such as presentations and writing a short piece of text where they collaborate with their classmates while using English to complete practical tasks. This approach to language learning is effective because it encourages students to use language in a natural and meaningful way and to develop their communication and interpersonal skills. Being student-centered allows the teacher to be a facilitator while offering some guidance. By employing task-based learning, *Keynote 4* prioritizes authentic and meaningful language use, fosters learner autonomy, encourages collaboration, integrates language focus points, and facilitates reflective feedback. These pedagogical principles support an engaging and effective language learning experience that develops linguistic and communicative competence.

Figure 2
Authentic Sources in Textbook

5 To the Edge

“ Magic ... is pretty simple. It's training and experimenting, while pushing through the pain to be the best that I can be. ”

David Blaine
Magician, illusionist, TED speaker

UNIT GOALS

In this unit, you will ...

- talk about significant challenges and achievements.
- read about David Blaine's endurance challenges.
- watch a TED Talk about achieving the impossible.

WARM UP

▶ **5.1** Watch part of David Blaine's TED Talk. Answer the questions with a partner.

- 1 What goal did Blaine have as a young man?
- 2 What goals have you set for yourself—as a child or now?

The tasks range from completing the missing information and choosing the correct verb tense to critical thinking exercises where they have to discuss the related topic in pairs or groups using language they have learned in the lesson. By working through such task-based exercises, the students can build their vocabulary, phrases, expressions, and confidence as they progress through the textbook. When these tasks are utilized in conjunction with self-reflection and peer feedback in class, students are able to critically analyze their language use and monitor their own progress. Furthermore, this type of reflection promotes metacognitive skills and enhances learner autonomy.

Keynote 4 has done a nice job of integrating key themes and topics that are relevant to students' lives. There is a strong focus on themes such as identity, culture, and social interaction, which are essential aspects of language learning. The book encourages students to reflect on their values, experiences, and attitudes, as well as to build cross-cultural awareness and understanding.

Keynote 4 also provides a range of support materials that are particularly helpful in supporting independent study. There is a useful grammar reference section, which gives clear explanations of key grammar points accompanied by example sentences. Additionally, there are transcripts of the TED talks near the back of the book that can help assist students who cannot catch everything said during the videos. There is also

the option of subtitles in the DVD menu to further help the students who similarly cannot quite follow everything that is said.

Another particularly strong aspect of *Keynote 4* is the provision of teacher support materials. A comprehensive teacher's guide accompanies the book, providing a wealth of ideas and activities for teachers to use in the classroom. Additionally, teacher training videos on the National Geographic Learning website provide practical advice on how to use the materials effectively.

An alternative to the *Keynote* series is *Headway*, which is published by Oxford University Press. *Keynote 4* would be similar to *Headway 5th Edition: Upper-Intermediate* (Soars, Soars, Hancock, & McCaul, 2019). Both textbooks have their merits. *Keynote 4* adopts a more communicative approach with a lot more tasks and exercises to facilitate language learning and a focus on fluency. This is seen in the exercises focusing on critical thinking, building vocabulary, and speaking. *Keynote 4* also incorporates more multimedia material. There are several audio CDs and two DVDs. Every 90-minute group class I teach allows time to watch a TED Talk or other video connected to the topic we are discussing. *Headway*, on the other hand, has a more structured approach with more extensive listening and reading exercises. *Headway* also makes use of a more noticeable progression, whereby students and teachers alike can notice a steady increase in difficulty as they progress through the textbook. *Headway* also has segments on most pages giving detailed explanations of grammar.

The textbook design and layout between *Keynote 4* and *Headway* also differ. *Keynote 4* uses a minimalist design with lots of white space and beautiful, high-detailed images. In contrast, *Headway* has tried to cram in as much content as humanly possible onto every page, which is busy and distracting to the eye. The audio of both textbooks is great and offers a wide range of accents to expose students to. From a design perspective, one point to highlight is that the audio tracks are easy to follow from the textbook with *Keynote 4*, whereas with *Headway*, you need to refer to a small booklet that comes in the CD box and has all the audio track numbers.

Critique

Overall, I found *Keynote 4* to be a great resource for language learners. The book is comprehensive and engaging while also providing a wide range of resources that cater to different learning styles. It is based on a sound methodology, and the approach is designed to provide both language input and skills practice. The book is beautifully designed, with high-quality images used throughout. However, one potential criticism of *Keynote 4* is that it is not suitable for anyone under intermediate to advanced levels. Students slightly lower than an intermediate level may find the material too challenging. This is because of the detailed TED Talks and long reading exercises that include challenging words and phrases in addition to a number of exercises that test their comprehension. Another potential criticism is that the book may not be suitable for a wide range of age groups. The book's topics are aimed more toward students in their late teens to mid-40s and might be of little interest to those in their 50s and over. Some of my students in their 60s were not so interested in the topics of aspirations, challenges, entering adulthood, or money.

In summary, *Keynote 4* is a comprehensive and engaging course book that provides an excellent resource for English language learners. The book incorporates a range of activities and exercises to develop learners' language skills and build their

confidence and competence. There is a strong emphasis on the development of the four language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, and the book provides exposure to a range of authentic sources, enabling students to develop practical and functional language skills. Overall, if you are teaching English to language learners at an intermediate to advanced level and want a textbook that is well-designed and is going to challenge you, *Keynote 4* would be an excellent choice, and I highly recommend it.

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