

Review of Instructional Materials: *Identities: English is Part of Who I am.* 4-Semester English Series for Mexican High Schools

Douglas Tedford (2011), Cengage Learning, Mexico.

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Identities, by Dr. Douglas Tedford (Cengage Learning - Mexico) is a multilevel, constructivist, competency-based, and communicative American English course designed for high school students in Mexican public high schools. *Identities* aims to foster a positive attitude towards language learning, encouraging students to make English part of their own individual identity and a key part of their personal, academic, professional and vocational development.

Thematic teaching strategies guide students through carefully developed grammar and vocabulary activities leading to the creation of Learning Products. Expansion reference sections on every lesson page cover grammar, illustrated vocabulary and communicative functions. An extensive Total Support Audio Program models American English pronunciation for developing confidence in speaking and listening in various settings.

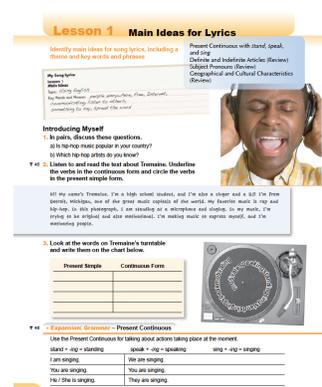
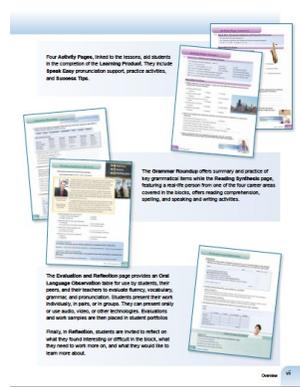
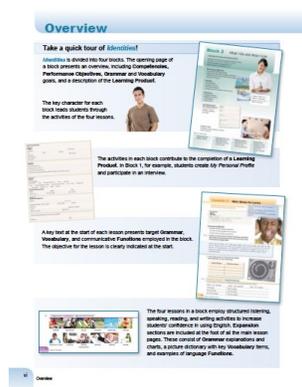
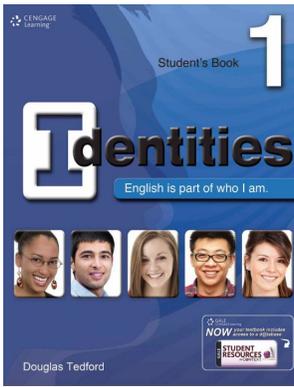
Unique links in every lesson to Gale's Student Resources in Context online database provide enrichment and enhance the value of the core course. The integrated Student's Book includes Activity Pages, a Grammar Roundup, Reading Synthesis pages, and an Evaluation and Reflection section to close each block. The Total Support Teacher's Guide offers guidelines for lesson planning, classroom management, testing, cooperative learning, and effective parental involvement.

Competencies and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)

Identities uses a competencies-based methodology and approach. Competencies are indicators of students' abilities to apply learning to solve a real-world, or simulated real-world problem. Teachers will recognize that *Identities* is fully competency-based, using contemporary approaches for learning English. Generic Graduation Competencies and Basic Discipline Competencies were identified and fulfilled for each block. Competencies are fully-referenced and integrated into each block. Performance objectives, grammar and vocabulary are also indexed.

Identities Student's Book 1 is aligned to levels A1 (Breakthrough) to A2 (Waystage) of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Although Book 1 of the course is oriented to Basic Speakers, it acknowledges experiences, practice and skills students may have acquired in previous coursework, while reinforcing and introducing beginning language forms, vocabulary and functions for total novices to English Language Learning.

Levels 2 (A2), 3 (A2 to B1) and 4 (B1) prepare students for incremental mastery of all four language skills. Learning Products, the end goal of each block, are simulated real-world challenges which increase in complexity in each level of *Identities*. *Identities* 1 – 4 prepares students for the potential successful



completion of standardized English tests required for admission to some vocational or university programs.

Principles of Constructivism and Constructivist Language Teaching

As the precursor of competencies, and other standards for lesson development, *Identities* is designed around principles of constructivist language teaching that inform language teaching standards in many nations. Constructivist language teaching is not a method, rather an approach, to teaching languages, which is eclectic, meaning all methods for teaching languages and other content areas may be incorporated as part of the process.

A key characteristic of constructivism is the emphasis on learning with a purpose of applying skills and knowledge to create a Learning Product. The learning product should represent original work, insights or new knowledge that can benefit, enrich or empower self and others. Lesson activities may be completed individually, in pairs or in cooperative groups. The three-phase learning cycle of Experience, Practice and Apply is embedded in the Suggested Lesson Schedule. The Secretaria de Educación Publica (SEP), Mexico's Department of Education, is presently employing standards for constructivist language teaching which had been employed in three US states since the 1980's. Hence, *Identities* is built around those specific principles, utilizing the theories and practices of Stephen Krashen and Jim Cummins.

Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis (1981, 1982) aligns with the constructivist principles of experience, practice and application which form the basis for this course. His model represented the first comprehensive application of constructivism for language learning in US public schools. It emphasized the importance of providing comprehensible input – meaningful experiences tied to language symbols – as the basis for learning and reproducing language patterns for application

to real life.

Krashen's theories aligned with the work of Cummins (1979, 1982) that emphasized providing experiences of Common Underlying Proficiency when teaching a language. Students of a foreign language (L2) learn quicker and retain more through concepts previously contemplated in the native language (L1). In *Identities*, the task of teaching English is met in one way by presenting social and vocational themes of high interest to students with picture vocabulary as support.

Throughout the lessons, students are provided ample contextual cues via audio and graphics, to comprehend and complete the tasks requested of them. The great value of infusing students with comprehensible input at regular intervals through the lesson cycle is that it equalizes opportunities for students to understand what is expected of them and provides options for deciding about how to construct the Learning Product.

Identities and Universal Design of Learning (UDL)

There are a lot of questions expecting the student to respond with personal opinions and experiences in the text, helping learners draw meaning from activities to describe who they are, their demographics, goals and plans, physical appearance, families, hobbies, favorites, jobs, friends, physical surroundings, communities, and nationalities. As opposed to traditional English acquisition books where one starts out by learning the rules and structural elements of the language, this author designed the text by utilizing key components of cognitive psychology to draw upon the background knowledge of the learners in order to help them internalize what they are learning (Willingham, 2009). As evident in many high school foreign language courses, the surface teaching may lead to certain level of proficiency, but learners seldom attain the competencies they need to adequately use the language

to speak, write, or think. Content only matters when the information learned can be processed, applied, retained, and generalized with some ease.

The core design of this text is based primarily on the three key principles of universal design pedagogy of (1) multiple means of representation (various ways of acquiring information and knowledge), (2) multiple means of expression (alternative for demonstrating what students know), and (3) multiple means of engagement (tap into learners' interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to want to learn). Universal Design of Learning (UDL) is a practical, research-based approach for responding to not only to issues of the *what* (content) of teaching but also to the *how* (pedagogy), and the *why* (emotion and intention) of teaching (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Presently, *Identities* is the only text that offers an extensive ICT component directed to the Mexico ELT (English Language Teaching) market. Naturally, *Identities* models a blueprint for the modern adaptation of instruction to meet the diverse needs of learners in acquiring a foreign language.

Course Organization and the Role of Educational Technology

Each class period is defined as a Day, and is designed to last from 40 to 50 minutes. Each Block is comprised of 12 Days. Each level of *Identities* is comprised of 4 Blocks, representing a total of 48 Days, consistent with teaching 3 Days per week, during a 16-week semester. Exercises are designated in two categories: Learning Support Tasks- a menu of activities to prepare the student for essential learning activities- and Core Tasks, comprising essential learning activities.

The focus of *Identities* on completion of the Learning Product as the central focus of each block aligns fully with contemporary discourse about Problem-Based Learning (PBL) units, which, like the Learning Product, can be completed individually, in dyads, or in small groups and can be enhanced through the use of Educational Technology, including accessing of resources through the Internet. ICT usage is recommended but optional in *Identities*, including exploration of Gale Student Resources in Context and the creation of Wikis for storing of ePortfolios.

In the course, active use of the Internet and other educational technologies is a recommended optional practice that fortifies completion of the Learning Product. ICT Connections boxes feature Gale Student Resources in Context, a password-linked database –

free with book purchases – which provides access to English-language articles, videos, and other listings. The site may be accessed for a full semester of study after the student registers on line.

A guide to Internet Safety and index of Internet Resources fortifies understanding of online practices, and includes a menu of educational technology sites of the most value to teachers and students. Included are links for English practice, translation, online communication, audio and video development and Wikis – free personal sites which students may use to store and comment on documents, including ePortfolio items.

Afterword

Identities is one of the few English language books in the market that presents materials using a combination of audio modeling of American English speakers, lesson links, database of enrichment exercises, and a total support teachers' guide which provides time-tested examples and classroom management strategies. Its writing is concise, the text richly-illustrated, the materials well-organized and the standards of learning carefully laid out.

What I appreciate most about *Identities* is that it shows the teacher how to create a classroom in which students can actively experience, experiment, and discover a foreign language with success! It systematically applies sound pedagogies and educational technology in the most innovative ways to motivate foreign language learners and enhance their learning experience.

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Identities: English is part of who I am. Four-semester ELT series for high schools. ISBNs for Books 1 and 3:

IDENTITIES STUDENT'S BOOK 1	9786074815733
IDENTITIES STUDENT'S BOOK 3	9786074815764