

**An evaluation and adaptation of two sections in *Compelling Conversations:
Questions and Quotations on Timeless Topics* by Eric H. Roth and Toni Aberson
through the lens of social justice**

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Part I: Material Description

I chose to evaluate two sections of Chapter 35, “Practicing Job Interviews,” in the textbook *Compelling Conversations: Questions and Quotations on Timeless Topics* published in 2008 by Eric H. Roth and Toni Aberson. It is described as being an English as a Second Language (ESL) textbook aimed at advanced-level English Language Learners (ELLs) in adult education and Intensive English Program (IEP) contexts in the United States. The purpose of the textbook is to help ELLs develop conversation and critical thinking skills relevant for daily life in the United States. Each chapter contains various sections dedicated to (1) practice discussion questions, (2) targeted vocabulary words, (3) common sayings and (4) quotations related to the topic of the chapter. Appendix A contains an ebook screengrab of the two sections I chose to evaluate and adapt from the chapter on job interview preparation; the sections are entitled “Anticipating Questions” and “Sayings.”

Part II: Material Evaluation

Teacher Perspective

From a teacher’s perspective, I like that this textbook has such a communicative focus. It is also very user-friendly in the sense that it does not overload readers with information, but rather lays each chapter out in a concise and similar manner (i.e. organizationally and in terms of linguistic goals, though each chapter has its own topical focus). The textbook also focuses on providing students with ample opportunities to share their opinions and think critically about controversial quotations (e.g. students are instructed to converse about whether they agree or disagree with the quotations in each chapter and why).

With that being said, I was appalled that, in a chapter entitled “Job Interview Preparation,” the practice interview questions focused not on students’ qualifications or interests, but rather on their criminal history (e.g. being arrested, being caught stealing, having a professional license revoked, etc.) and negative work experiences (e.g. quitting without proper notice, being fired or laid off, being investigated for misconduct, etc.). In fact, there are only a

few questions that are similar to ones I have actually come across in my own job interview preparation. Perhaps the author was trying to make this section inclusive for ELLs who have had these experiences, which would be fine if they were included amongst more common, and arguably, more relevant questions. But, as the questions currently are—with so many focusing on the aforementioned topics—I think the authors have overlooked the harmful stereotypes against non-native speakers (such as having criminal histories and being unprofessional workers) that are embedded in many of the questions presented.

In addition to the questions being insensitive, the sayings students were asked to read also struck me as insensitive and misleading for a different reason. Sayings such as “the secret of getting ahead is getting started,” “what you don’t ask, you don’t get” and “anything worth having is worth working for” imply that taking initiative or working hard will make things easier for an individual, or allow them to obtain the things they need or desire. In reality, this is often not the case; many individuals—both native and non-native speakers of English—work extremely hard but are still impacted by factors out of their control, and thus, struggle financially or have a hard time reaching their goals. To me, this does not indicate that they “haven’t asked” or haven’t “worked for” what they want and need, but rather that life is not so black and white and hard work does not equate to desired outcomes.

Student Perspective

I think it is reasonable to assume that many adult ESL students who open this chapter hoping to practice their interview skills will find the majority of sayings as being problematic and/or untruthful, and the majority of questions irrelevant and/or unhelpful. For example, in a preliminary internet search I conducted to find what are commonly regarded to be the most typical general interview questions, the questions focused on asking applicants about their professional goals, why they want to work for a specific company, their strengths and weaknesses, etc. (Stump & Associates, 2018; The Balance Careers, 2021; The Muse, 2021). An advice section in the Stump & Associates (2018) article also stated that interviewees should

maintain positivity, and that when discussing a negative experience, they should include what they have learned from it (which none of the questions in Appendix A encourage readers to do).

Furthermore, I see this chapter as being potentially harmful and offensive from a student perspective for several reasons. First, many of these questions perpetuate stereotypes about non-native English speakers in the United States, particularly immigrants, being criminals and/or unskilled, unprofessional workers. Additionally, other questions suggest that ELLs are outsiders to the United States by asking about their eligibility, documentation and whether/where they have worked in the United States before. Many students in adult ESL contexts have been in the United States for significant periods of time—even their entire lives—and questions that assume an individual with a native language other than English will be asked about their documentation and eligibility to work in the United States can feel alienating for students who view the United States as their home.

Praxis

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, many of the questions chosen by the authors for students to focus on assume negative stereotypical stances about immigrants and/or non-native English speakers as the norm. It is inappropriate to begin a chapter about interview preparation for jobs in the United States with much of the content having a negative focus (and offering no opportunities for students who have had negative experiences to offer explanations or share what they learned). Thus, it is not only exclusive to students who would like to focus on the positives of their backgrounds and/or share how they have come out on the other side of negative experiences, but it is also exclusive to students who have not had those experiences, and thus, find the questions irrelevant.

In regard to the “Sayings” section, the authors missed an opportunity to have students reflect on, and even challenge, the sayings’ meanings (both overt and covert); this would have fit particularly well within the textbook, since one of the authors’ key goals is to evoke critical thinking. Instead, the authors chose to emphasize that taking initiative and working hard leads

to positive results, which is a view of the world that fails to consider the harsher realities faced by many. Given that this textbook is designed to be used in a wide variety of adult education and IEP contexts throughout the United States, including additional common sayings with other viewpoints, and being more mindful of the implications of the messages being relayed, would have also strengthened this section.

Part III: Material Adaptation

My purpose for adapting this material is to remove the harmful messages, implications and stereotypes perpetuated throughout the material to make this an inclusive chapter for ELLs of all backgrounds. I began by replacing all of the questions in the “Anticipating Questions” section with ones I found through internet research about commonly asked job interview questions (Stump & Associates, 2018; The Balance Careers, 2021; The Muse, 2021). In the adapted materials, there are still questions that invite students to share difficult or even negative experiences (e.g. questions one and thirteen), but in a more open-ended manner and in a way that is typical for an interview context in the United States. In the instructions, I included an opportunity for students to brainstorm additional interview questions that they might be asked when interviewing for jobs in their respective field(s), as well as an option for students to make note of inapplicable questions for their roleplay partner to skip. Furthermore, I modified the directions in this section by instructing students to switch roles every five questions instead of every ten, so students would have speaking turns in more frequent intervals.

Another change I made was to modify the chapter’s targeted vocabulary words and instructions (1) to reflect the change in questions and (2) to encourage students to use their problem-solving skills instead of simply asking a peer or teacher for answers. The instructions now have the students work in pairs to use context clues and a dictionary to determine the meanings of unfamiliar words. Additionally, the “Vocabulary” section was moved to the beginning of the chapter (instead of after the “Anticipating Questions” section) so that students are able to fully understand the practice interview questions prior to answering them.

In the “Sayings” section, instead of simply asking students to add similar sayings, I adapted the instructions to include the following: (1) which saying(s) struck the student; (2) what the student interprets the saying(s) to mean; and (3) whether the student agrees or disagrees with the saying(s) and why. I also added additional sayings for the students to choose from (which were sourced from a discussion about this topic with peers). Furthermore, I included a separate section entitled “Cultural Connections” which expands upon the “Sayings” section by asking students to discuss, as a whole class, about (1) sayings related to work and employment that they can think of their native country and/or language, (2) the meaning of the sayings, (3) similarities and differences between the sayings in their home culture and those in the United States and (4) the extent to which they agree or disagree with the sayings and why. With these changes, it is my hope that students will have the agency to choose what they would like to share and focus on, as well as opportunities to think critically and make cross-cultural comparisons.

Part IV: Adapted Material

Vocabulary

Circle the words you know. Then, get with a partner and discuss the words that you do not know. Use context clues from the “Anticipating Questions” section below and a dictionary as guides for words that are new to both of you. Note: in parenthesis next to each word is the question number the word is found in.

Achievement (8) | cope (6) | hire (18) | passion (10) | position (3) | pressure (6) | relocate (17)
salary (16) | strength (11) | weakness (12)

Anticipating Questions

Work with your partner and read through the following discussion questions. You are encouraged to brainstorm additional questions that you think you might be asked at a job interview in your respective field(s). Then, take turns roleplaying as interviewer and interviewee. As an interviewee, if a question is not applicable for you or you would prefer not to answer, ask your partner to skip it. Use complete sentences when answering each question.

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How did you hear about our company?
3. Why are you interested in this position?
4. What can you bring to the company?
5. What kind of work environment do you prefer?
6. Tell me about a time when you were under a lot of pressure. How did you cope? What was the outcome?

7. How would your coworkers (past or present) describe you?
8. What has been your greatest professional achievement?
9. Where do you see yourself in five years?
10. What is your greatest passion?
11. What is your biggest strength?
12. What is your biggest weakness?
13. Tell me about a challenge or conflict you have faced at work, and how you dealt with it.
14. Tell me about a time you demonstrated leadership skills.
15. Why are you leaving your current job?
16. What are your salary expectations?
17. Are you willing to relocate?
18. Why should we hire you?
19. Is there anything else you would like us to know?
20. Do you have any questions?

Sayings

Read the common sayings and proverbs below. Then, answer the following questions:

1. Identify which saying(s) struck you.
 2. What do the saying(s) mean to you?
 3. Do you agree or disagree with the saying(s) and why?
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- (a) Anything worth having is worth working for.
 - (b) Pleasure in the job results in perfection in the work.
 - (c) What you don't ask, you don't get.
 - (d) An expert in anything was once a beginner in everything.
 - (e) We do not learn from experience, but from reflecting on experience.
 - (f) It is not about where we stand, but in what direction we are moving.
 - (g) The secret of getting ahead is getting started.
 - (h) Few things will make you feel better than a job well done.
 - (i) Short answers save trouble.

Cultural Connections

Think of common sayings in your native language and/or country related to work and employment. Then, discuss with the class:

- (a) The meaning of the saying(s);
- (b) Similarities between this saying(s) and the saying(s) in the previous section;
- (c) Differences between this saying(s) and the saying(s) in the previous section; and
- (d) The extent to which you agree or disagree with the saying and why.

References

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Appendix A

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PRACTICING JOB INTERVIEWS

"Whenever you are asked if you can do a job, tell 'em,
'Certainly, I can!' – and get busy and find out how to do it."
—Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), cowboy, police
chief, colonel, and 26th U.S. President

Anticipating Questions

Work with your partner and role play applying for a position in your field. Switch roles every ten questions. Use complete sentences.

1. Have you ever applied for a job with our organization before?
2. Have you ever worked in the United States before? Where?
3. Are you eligible to work in the U.S.? Can you provide documentation?
4. Have you ever worked "off the books"?
5. May we investigate your background? Can we run a credit check?
6. Have you ever been laid off? Have you ever been fired?
7. Have you ever been sued? Have you ever been arrested?
8. Have you ever been caught stealing? Have you ever stolen from your employer?
9. Have you ever been investigated for misconduct? Have you ever had a professional license revoked?

10. Have you ever taken a psychological test?
11. Have you ever hidden problems from your managers?
12. Have you ever lied on a job application? Have you lied on your resume?
13. Have you ever taken a lie detector test? A drug test? A handwriting test? A psychological test?
14. Have you ever quit without giving two weeks notice?
15. Have you ever studied computers? Have you worked with computers before?
16. Have you ever used Microsoft Office? Other software? Which programs?
17. Have you ever used a cash register? Fax machine? Xerox machine?
18. What skills have you learned in your professional life?

Vocabulary

Choose the words you know. Ask your partner or teacher for the meanings of the other words.

apply | applicant | background | resign | bonus
misconduct | software | revoke | client | promoted

Sayings

Read the common sayings and proverbs below. Can you add two more?

The secret of getting ahead is getting started.
Short answers save trouble.
What you don't ask, you don't get.
Anything worth having is worth working for.