



Reviewed work:

Fireworks and Festivals: U.S. Holidays and Culture for English Language Learners (2012). Gretchen Fues. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. Pp. 149. ISBN 9780472034314. \$24.95

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Fireworks & Festivals by Gretchen Fues is a useful book for intermediate English language learners interested in American holidays, culture, and civics. The book offers a strong emphasis on vocabulary-building while providing opportunities for discussion and introduction of reading strategies. With each text being of similar difficulty, readers will find each passage easily accessible.

Fireworks & Festivals consists of eight units and one “pre-unit.” Each unit has clear and coherent organization. Units can be taught consecutively or used individually. Individual units are divided into two: the first half is dedicated to a specific holiday and the culture surrounding it, and the second is a biography of a figure related to that holiday. The biographies in each unit are carefully chosen and delightfully diverse. Veteran’s Day and Jackie Cochran¹, New Years Day and Anthony Muñoz², and Martin Luther King’s Birthday and Rosa Parks³ are just three of the combinations. It would be easy for an instructor to follow a lesson directly from the book or for students to work individually through units, although the repetition of activities from unit to unit may become dull after the first couple of units. An answer key is not provided with the book; however, a key for gap activities can be found online on the University of Michigan Press’s website.

Fireworks & Festivals is a carefully controlled textbook. Every text was created specifically for this textbook with the goal of vocabulary development and maximum reading comprehension. Each of the passages score approximately 5.5 on the Flesch-Kincaid reading level scale and 65 for reading ease, and is roughly 500 words in length. Texts also include glossed vocabulary for students to refer to while reading.

Vocabulary-building and maximum reading comprehension are the two main objectives of this textbook. Vocabulary-building is essential to every English language learner's progress in reading. For reading comprehension, not only do readers require a large repertoire of sight words, but they must also be aware of word meanings, polysemy and synonymy, in addition to denotation and connotation and how it relates to their first language (L1) (Grabe, 1991, 2004; Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009; Koda, 2005). Vocabulary development and form practice are central to *Fireworks & Festivals* readings. Five new vocabulary items are introduced in every half unit, and these thoughtfully selected, high-frequency words and their word families recur throughout the unit. The author uses explicit definitions, in combination with example sentences, to provide practice with both meaning and connotation. Students are given plenty of opportunities to practice new vocabulary before encountering them in the text; to draw attention to these words, they are underlined or bolded in subsequent exercises. In addition to pre-reading vocabulary, each text includes multiple glossed vocabulary items.

Furthermore, each unit includes all the components that an intensive reading lesson should consider: before, during, and after reading tasks. Pre-reading discussion questions allow for schema activation. Students are instructed to survey the text while skimming for vocabulary. This reading strategy of skimming the text can be explicitly taught to students so that they can apply the strategy to other academic situations. Eskey and Grabe (1988) asserted that pre-reading strategies, such as skimming the text, are even more important for second language (L2) readers than for L1 readers. After their first reading of the text, students are given a during-reading true/false activity to complete while reading the text again. They are then given after-reading questions to discuss and several writing prompts to choose from.

In addition to vocabulary-building and intensive reading skills, the author encourages students to build upon experience. Through pre- and after-reading questions, they are instructed to relate new information to their current paradigms. Students are encouraged to discuss and learn from one another's cultures and compare and contrast experiences, which are skills that will prove crucial in other courses as well.

To better understand the format of a unit, "Memorial Day" can be taken as an example (pp. 120-126). This half unit is prefaced by two discussion questions for schema activation: *What special person or event does your family's native country remember? Why do you think countries like to remember their past?* New vocabulary is then presented. The words for this half unit are: *bury, decorate, lasting, recognize, and relative*. After the five new lexical items are defined and presented in sample sentences, students are given three activities to practice identification and reproduction of lexical items: (a) fill-in-the-blank paragraph, (b) sentences with which they can agree or disagree and subsequently discuss their responses in groups, and (c) sentences with blanks to fill-in. Pre-reading activities allow students to familiarize themselves with the vocabulary and use the new words in context. Through group discussion and incorporation of personal opinion, learners can engage in authentic interaction while practicing new vocabulary and practice forming complete ideas with vocabulary words naturally. In addition, some of the questions could potentially draw on cultural differences between students and maximize learning opportunities in the classroom.

Following each reading selection is a comprehension check, discussion questions, and writing prompts. The first comprehension check encourages students to review the chapter and mark *True* or *False*. Students are then instructed to work with a partner or a group and discuss three topics. *In your family's native country, is there a day to honor friends or family members who have died? How do people observe that day?* These questions form one topic. Three writing prompts are also given, and students are instructed to write at least five to seven sentences about each prompt.

Grammatical structures in each text are carefully contrived to include only certain tense-aspect combinations. Although a strong case for comprehensible input and intensive reading can be made (Aebersold & Field, 1997; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Milton, 2009), extensive reading and authentic texts should not be overlooked (Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 2004). Because of the similarity in style and genre of each text, as well as similar reading levels and text lengths, students may not be adequately challenged by the end of the textbook. Students can benefit from reading authentic, more complex texts. In certain areas, the suggested writing prompts and activities also lack authenticity. I would recommend that teachers supplement discussion questions with activities that have an academic purpose.

I would also encourage teachers to add to the intensive reading strategies that are already built up through working with the textbook and to give students top-down, extensive reading strategies as well. (For a list of strategies, consult Grabe & Stoller, 2011 or Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009.) While it would be perfectly possible to work through the textbook in a linear fashion, teachers could supplement students' learning by giving them the opportunity to read additional authentic texts from different genres. As Bright and McGregor (1970) noted, "the most important thing is that the pupils should enjoy what they read. A book that satisfies all other criteria but fails this one is a reject" (p. 59). In summary, teachers can make effective use of this textbook while still creating a student-centered, enjoyable reading environment.

Notes

1. Jackie Cochran is a veteran of World War II. She served as director of the Women Airforce Service Pilot program.
2. Anthony Muñoz is the first Hispanic American to enter the Football Hall of Fame. He founded the Anthony Muñoz Foundation for children in 2002.
3. Rosa Parks is an African-American civil rights activist most famous for her role in the Montgomery bus boycott.

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