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Rethinking America 3: An Advanced Cultural Reader by Margaret E. Sokolik; and Today's World by Linda R. Fellag

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Rethinking America 3: An Advanced Cultural Reader by Margaret E. Sokolik.Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999. 236 pp.

Today's World by Linda R. Fellag. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1996. 203 pp.

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These two books, both exemplary offerings by Heinle & Heinle, are excellent examples of current language learning textbooks that incorporate literature that is *interesting* to read. Both texts are parts of larger series that identify specific and general scope ESL concerns. Yet while *Rethinking America* and *Today's World* can be used independently, each text could well support the other pedagogically, since their respective strengths and weaknesses tend to compensate for one another.

Margaret Sokolik's *Rethinking America* is a three-book series designed to introduce American culture through authentic texts in ten topic areas that vary from book to book. With texts at the intermediate, high intermediate, and advanced reading levels, *Rethinking America* attempts to facilitate dialogue among students who are interested in the ways in which contemporary American culture differs from their own. Such dialogue between students ideally fosters introspection, conversation, and debate. While maintaining the cultural emphasis of the series, each of the three books challenges its readers with progressively more difficult texts and additional reading strategies.

Rethinking America is carefully organized into chapters that revolve around a theme and further separate into sub-themes. For example, the "Money" chapter contains four readings: two on the economy (spotlighting two very different capitalist ventures: Starbucks and Ben & Jerry's) and two on credit (pro and con outlooks of our debt culture). Furthermore, each reading is presented to the learner accompanied by a visual cue, culture-specific information, and often a small biography of its author so that the reader may build an appropriate working schema prior to navigating the passage.

Sokolik's text emphasizes several aspects of the reading process through targeting activities. First, a reading strategy is introduced and a related exercise is presented for the student to perform through length of the passage. While some of the specifics of these strategies are not without their weaknesses (as I shall discuss later), it should be noted that its inclusion, on the whole, is a terrific asset.

Students next focus on vocabulary. Here, unfamiliar terms are highlighted

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and their additional use is prompted. "Think About It" sections encourage understanding through simulations such as role-play and through involvement in related projects. At the end of the chapter, a synthesis section provides additional project ideas and can be used by students as a springboard for discussion and debate.

Writing as an adjunct to reading is presented as well at the chapter's end. This is a pleasant, if not wholly successful, merger of two academic skills that would require the addition of a writing component to the course in order to teach properly. Finally, each chapter concludes with a set of optional independent activities that may prove helpful to the student who enjoys a particular theme and would like to explore it further outside of class.

Additional features adding to *Rethinking America's* attractiveness include an cultural almanac and Cable News Network (CNN) video accompaniments. By pairing each chapter of the text with a short video clip from the CNN archives on an accompanying videocassette, *Rethinking America* presents students with visual and oral previews of the material they will be studying in written form. Transcriptions of the video segments are also included in the instructor's manual, another bonus in addition to its answer keys, tips, and guidelines for EFL settings. Also included with the text is an almanac of cultural information detailing major US events, immigration statistics, the mottoes of the 50 states, etc. How relevant these "factoids" may or may not be to the students' daily lives doesn't seem to be a factor in their appeal: the point is that the information is *interesting*.

Even with these additional features, however, there are some limitations to the Sokolik text. For example, rate development in reading is an area that *Rethinking America* inadequately addresses. Rather, the many of the very strategies that should be presented for practice in rate development (scanning, for example) are presented only *after* the passage has been introduced. Moreover, such strategies are not well integrated with the text; they appear primarily as a catalog in the front of the book.

Another drawback to this series is its lack of emphasis on writing skills. Writing is introduced as an independent activity and is not fully explored as another way of understanding the reading. Despite these shortcomings, however, *Rethinking America* is a text which, with minor adjustments for additional concepts, could be successfully employed in either ESL or EFL learning environments.

Linda Fellag's *Today's World*, like Sokolik's *Rethinking America*, is part of a larger series—in Fellag's case, Rebecca Oxford and Robin Scarella's *Tapestry* series. The six volumes of this series are gradated readers running from "beginning" to "bridge" levels. *Today's World* is a "high advanced" reading text designed mainly for ESL learners attending post-secondary American institutions. Fellag's text differs from Sokolik's in its approach to its subject matter. For where Sokolik's *Rethinking America* explores the multiple manifestations of "American culture," Fellag's *Today's World* emphasizes a "multi-cultural" perspective of America. Each of the *Tapestry* books operates under the same principle of providing learners with

the tools to "empower themselves"—and part of empowerment, in *Tapestry's* view, is to focus on the multicultural, perhaps marginalized, experiences of new Americans.

Today's World is organized into eight chapters, each of which embodies a particular theme and contains three related readings. Each reading within a section is previewed, presented, and reviewed in turn, and reading strategies are highlighted during the presentations. Chapter four, for example, is entitled "Tribes" and contains a sub-section called "Goals." At the end of the chapter, a synthesis of the sub-themes is undertaken in order to relate them to the main idea of the unit. Expansion activities then invite the student to think outside the classroom and to make interactive projects for the group. (Each chapter also concludes with an evaluation section; however, these sections are very short and obviously are not designed to be key features of the instruction.)

One of the greatest strengths of *Today's World* is its emphasis on strategies and techniques to employ during the reading process. Each reading is paired with a strategy (e.g., "understanding idioms") that spotlights techniques to practice while reading. Additionally, the text facilitates reading rate increase by including short timed readings throughout the book. Such facilitation is entirely absent in the Sokolik text (a glaring singular defect), and Fellag nicely incorporates these readings and strategies into the overall framework of the book.

Another nice touch in *Today's World* is the "Threads" section that accompanies each passage in order to emphasize the multitude of viewpoints to any issue and to invite dialogue among students. In the "Tribes" chapter, for example, such "threads" include quotes from Bertrand Russell ("It's coexistence or no existence"), and from the 1994 World Almanac and Book of Facts ("Civil war intensified in 1994 in the central African state of Rwanda, where 90% of the population are Hutu tribes members and 9% are Tutsi tribes members").

Thus, while both *Today's World* and *Rethinking America* are textbooks that are constrained by their own limitations, both show signs of promise for particular types of applications. Sokolik's text is far more self-contained, due in large part to its inclusion of an almanac and accompanying videocassette as its components. Yet its conspicuous lack of "strategies work" necessitates the use of at least one other text in order to remedy this lack. Fellag's text would actually work very well in this respect. Moreover, because *Today's World* itself is hampered by a lack of accompanying materials, it really *should* be used only in conjunction with other supports (or as a support itself). Thus, Fellag nicely delineates the strategies that are lacking in the Sokolik text, with an end result that the texts complement each other well.

In conclusion, I would highly recommend both *Today's World* and *Rethinking America* for classroom use. Due to the very different natures of their content, however, care should be given to assess the interests of one's students prior to choosing one over the other as the *sole* classroom text. *Rethinking America* looks at America from various perspectives within mainstream society. It rarely presents

passages that explore the immigrant experience or marginalized position. This position, by contrast, is the primary focus of *Today's World*. Both would work well in either an ESL or EFL setting.

Based upon the general interest in understanding the mainstream culture that most ESL and EFL students have, however, if forced to choose, I would ultimately favor *Rethinking America*. The immigrant experience has been spotlighted for so long in textbooks of this kind that it is in danger of being seen by many students as a symbol of the disempowering of minorities. By focusing only on the views and experiences of themselves and other immigrants, non-native students are left at a disadvantage when faced with issues surrounding native Americans. Moreover, it is just this newly encountered American culture in which non-natives are most vitally interested.

Rethinking America presents a new perspective that allows the reader to think about aspects of American life *from the perspective of an American*. That is to say, Sokolik's text encourages the reader to align with the mainstream, not to segregate into the periphery.