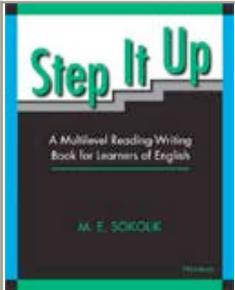


Step It Up: A Multilevel Reading-Writing Book for Learners of English

Author:	M.E. Sokolik (2005)		
Publisher:	Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press		
Pages	ISBN	Price	
Pp. xii + 229 + answer key	ISBN 0-472-03056-6	\$27.50 U.S.	

Introduction and Levels

Many of us who teach ESL classes realize that mixed-level classes are both a reality and a challenge for even the most experienced instructor. Not only are students in these classes of varying ability levels, but many also have different needs and learn in a variety of different ways. The challenge is to create a learning environment inclusive of all students, regardless of proficiency level. This book was written for those students who may have gaps in their instruction but also differences in their skill levels. For example, some students may be stronger in their speaking skills but weaker in their reading or writing skills. Step It Up tries to offer a solution to this issue. Three specific symbols are used in the book to indicate the difficulty level of readings and activities, the third level being for the most advanced students in the class.

Unit Organization and Features of the Text

The book is divided into 10 chapters:

1. An Introduction: Study Skills
2. Communication: Language and Culture
3. Education: Genius
4. English: American Short Stories
5. Art: Art of the Americas
6. History: Slavery
7. Business: Business Communication
8. Geology: Earth's Fury

9. Nutrition: Kitchen Science,
10. Ecology: Heroes for the Environment

Each chapter is comprised of four main parts: *Icebreaker*, *Chapter Preview*, *Check Your Understanding*, and *Chapter Wrap-Up*.

As stated, each chapter begins with an icebreaker activity which introduces students to the theme and also serves as a warm-up activity. These activities involve pair and group work, so they encourage communication and collaborative learning. Next is the *Chapter Preview*, which includes pre-reading activities. Each chapter contains three interrelated readings, one for each skills level. Once students have had an opportunity to read the selection, they proceed to the *Check Your Understanding* section. Found here are a variety of practice exercises about the reading including vocabulary practice and comprehension practice in a variety of question types: true/false, multiple choice, open ended. Comprehension questions are followed by group discussion ones, the latter to be done in groups of students who have worked on the same reading. Each chapter also includes a language focus section containing activities and questions about a particular aspect of language such as prepositions, word endings, articles, sentence structure, metaphors, and so forth. These exercises were developed based on prevalent features in the readings.

The follow-up activities in the *Check Your Understanding* section in each chapter are also divided into the three steps or levels. Students at the lower levels can be encouraged to try the other exercises and activities while students at the upper levels can review the first two-level exercises and may even encounter words or concepts they have not been exposed to before. Finally, *Chapter Wrap-Up* activities include speaking and writing tasks. Some of these are divided by levels while others are for all students. The book also contains four appendices, specifically *Suggested Videos*, *Extended Reading Suggestions*, *Related Websites*, *Vocabulary Practiced by Level*. An answer key is also provided.

Evaluation

Sokolik's textbook includes some excellent features that make the book very user friendly. It contains some very good reading selections on a range of topics most likely of interest to students. The initial chapters focus on the humanities and social sciences and then move into the sciences. The readings also span a range of genres, thus familiarizing students with different organizational patterns of text and the different features of specific kinds of text. The chapters follow a similar format so students know what to expect in each chapter. The vocabulary emphasized in each chapter are common academic words so students are acquiring vocabulary they will need to succeed in upper-level classes also. These words are highlighted in the reading selections so students can see how the words are used in context. Several vocabulary exercises require that students find and record the definitions of words and write sentences using those words. The follow-up questions and activities in each chapter are quite good because they emphasize and offer practice in a range of reading skills. In other words, the activities and questions in the *Check Your Understanding* section are designed so that students have opportunities to practice several skills.

Many chapters begin with questions formulated to activate schemata and prior knowledge. There is a heavy emphasis on vocabulary practice, and knowledge and

comprehension can be assessed and practiced through the comprehension questions emphasizing many levels of Bloom's Taxonomy and a range of reading skills. The final section, *Chapter Wrap-Up*, is a strong feature of the book also, because it integrates the remaining skills of speaking and writing. Writing activities include notetaking, journal writing, reader response, summary writing, dialogue writing, biography writing, and research.

As stated, a strong point of the book is the practice the book offers in various reading skills. What is missing, however, are explicit notes on reading strategies; so as teachers work with their students through each chapter, they must emphasize and model these skills throughout the book to make sure students apply these skills and strategies. For example, while teachers are going through a reading with students and they encounter a vocabulary word, they might pause to explain the strategies one might use to determine meaning, such as word analysis or context clues. One might discuss who the main audience for a reading is and then explain the concept of audience and purpose. In other words, modeling of reading strategies, especially in the first few chapters, would be essential to draw students' attention to how one can read more effectively and efficiently. Teachers will need to re-emphasize and re-visit these strategies throughout the text as students read the various selections in the texts. Class discussion on these strategies is essential so that these textual features and aspects are continually discussed and reinforced.

Teachers may also need to introduce or review certain language areas and concepts such as grammar points, literary features, summary writing, descriptive writing, etc. as some follow-up activities in the language focus and writing sections emphasize these areas and not all students may be familiar with these areas to the same degree. Explanations are not included within the text, probably because of space limitations and the intended purpose of the book. Again, it is a matter of modeling and explaining the required tasks. Incorporating these pedagogical elements within the text itself would increase further the benefit of this text for students in multilevel classes.

Online activities or resources that tie into specific aspects of the text also have been noted in the *Related Websites* section at the end of the book. There are numerous quality websites that students can access to make some of these concepts and geographical locations discussed in the readings come alive.

Step It Up: A Multilevel Reading-Writing Book for Learners of English offers a unique approach that could facilitate the work of instructors working with learners of varied proficiency levels in one class.

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