

Educating through teaching¹

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Jilly, Viktor (2012). *“We shall overcome!” Civil rights movement in the United States – For advanced students of English – level C1*. Budapest: Jilly-Tan Bt., 2012. 64 pages, ISBN: 978-963-08-5235-7

Aiming high

Viktor Jilly’s new book aims to achieve three goals that are quite a feat by themselves. First, it is an excellent course book for advanced learners of English. Second, the language development element of the material is embedded in topics of US civilisation, notably in topics relating to the civil rights movement in the United States. Finally – and this is what may be its most important effect in the long run – it offers opportunities through the language and cultural content and classroom activities for the students to explore the values of diversity, acceptance, solidarity and social inclusion.

The book – the title of which evokes the emblematic song of American civil rights movements – follows the best traditions of communicative language teaching: motivates the students to take part in discussions and learn about issues that are not normally treated in other school subjects. Foreign language classes can deal with a host of content areas, however, not many teaching materials offer opportunities for meaningful and formative conversations. *“We shall overcome!”* (henceforth *WSO*) therefore fills a real niche in this respect, too.

Choosing a course book for an advanced group can be very challenging, indeed, as the high level language learning activities are often paired with rather shallow content. The blurb of *WSO* says that the volume is intended for groups that have already covered the compulsory topics of language classes such as family, home, school, environment, etc., groups that study history in English or college/university groups of English language development or American civilization. At the same time it is just as suitable for maintaining one’s language proficiency, particularly as most activities can be adapted for individual learning or pairwork. The book uses authentic pictures, interesting newspaper articles, reports as well as video clips of interviews and documentaries to help develop listening, reading and speaking skills. One unit is based on a feature film.

Between and beyond the covers

The presentation of the book is very pleasant. It is practical: the spiral binding makes it easy to handle. The black and white printing is a wonderful allusion to the title and the content, while it also makes the volume unique among the garish and flashy course books on the market. The same seriousness is reflected in the layout of the book, which underlines the clear and user-friendly structure. The book is made up of twenty two-page units, with an additional twenty pages

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containing the information gap activities to be done in pairs. There is perhaps just one thing missing: a table summarising the elements of the language development and content in each unit would be useful in raising the students' awareness of the issues already learnt and to be learnt.

WSO has an Internet site (<http://www.wsobook.com>), which contains a detailed Teacher's Book as well as the links to the video materials. The links are thus accessible for the students, so they can practice listening outside classes, too. It is a pity that the pictures of the book only appear at random and the gallery is not searchable.

What it's all about

The units introduce the American civil rights movement chronologically through the discrimination affecting African Americans and endeavours to end it from the middle of the 19th century to our days. Every unit encourages the students to discuss human, social and moral issues, to examine how these are present in their own surroundings, and to form their own viewpoints. The first unit uses the example of the Jim Crow Laws to show how hopeless racial integration was at the time, and using the distance in time, it also raises the students' awareness of the absurdity of discrimination. This is followed by the introduction of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and by drawing attention to the importance of civil rights campaigns. The next chapter gives an overview of the history of the Ku Klux Klan and makes the students discuss the possibilities of banning hate speech. In the unit called "The Darker Brother" we get to know Harlem Renaissance, a cultural, social and artistic movement, which intended to boost a proud racial identity among African Americans in the 1920s and 1930s. The topic for discussion here is minority identity. Unit 5 is about the social responsibility of public figures and the impact of their deeds. As an example, a 1939 event is evoked of Eleanor Roosevelt resigning from a women's organisation that denied an African American singer a performance at their venue. After this the students get to know the story of Jackie Robinson, the first African American baseball player in the 1940s, and can discuss the role of sports in breaking racial barriers. Unit 7 presents two Supreme Court decisions and raises the issue of the legal status of segregation and its role in education. This is followed by Rosa Parks' historic action of not giving up her seat on a bus to a white passenger in 1955. Her arrest led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott lasting 381 days. Interesting student discussions can ensue about the chances of minorities in their fight for equal rights by provoking the majority. The following chapter deals with desegregation in schools and an incident in Little Rock where the white majority demonstrated against black students attending the same school as their children. An iconic photo of the event warns of the dangers of bigoted hatred. Unit 10 is about the sit-ins of the 1960s and offers the possibility to discuss the chances of non-violent resistance. The next topic is the Freedom Riders from 1961. The students learn about how black and white activists from the already desegregated north travelled to the segregated south to call attention to the social and legal injustice practiced in those states. They are also given a chance to imagine themselves as members of a minority. The unit that follows is about the battle of Ole' Miss, the popular name of the University of Mississippi. The battle occurred in 1962 because the university refused to register an African American student, and because the dogmatic segregationist views of the politicians who took a stand led to violence. The topic is concluded by a discussion task on the relationship of hate speech and violence. Next we learn about the letter Martin Luther King wrote from the jail of Birmingham, Alabama, and the demonstrations that emerged in support of civil rights legislation. The students can discuss issues of justice and legislation. The following chapter deals with the famous 'I have a dream' speech Martin Luther King delivered at the March on Washington in 1963. The unit then offers an opportunity for the learners to examine whether a peaceful or a radical approach is more effective in civil rights movements. Chapter 15 introduces Malcolm X, another renowned figure of civil rights movements, known for his radical views. It then raises the dilemma of whether or not drastic methods can be used successfully to end segregation. The next unit describes the murder of three civil rights activists in 1964, and proposes a discussion

for the learners about the social role of law enforcement. We then proceed to the story of the 1965 riots in Los Angeles that claimed 34 lives and left over 1000 people injured. The question naturally arises of the role of race riots in fighting for civil rights, and of how they can be prevented. The next unit introduces the Black Panther Party, which was active between 1960 and 1982, and which aimed to strengthen the self-esteem of African Americans by organising cultural, political and sports events, and using provocative discourse as well as emphasising the importance of guns in their fight. The topic for discussion here is the effect of demonstrative acts by sportsmen from minority groups. Unit 19 details the process of social awareness raising through the storyline of the 1967 film 'In the Heat of the Night'. We understand the slow and rugged way to the reconciliation between blacks and whites which was not exempt from suspicion and accusations. The tasks encourage the students to analyse the film from several points of view. The final chapter revives two important speeches: On the night when Martin Luther King was murdered in 1968 Robert F. Kennedy – then presidential candidate – emphasised at a rally in Indianapolis that the country torn by violence and injustice needed love, wisdom and compassion to heal. Many cities burned after the murder but as a result of Kennedy's words there was no fire in Indianapolis. The second speech is Barack Obama's first presidential inauguration speech in 2009 showing how far civil rights movements have come. The last tasks of the book make the students reflect on what ethnic or racial issues they have to face in their countries, and what they can do to improve the situation.

The tasks complementing the rich content of the book make the learning process very varied. The students acquire important knowledge through the wide-ranging activities based on pictures, written texts and listening materials. The vocabulary learnt in the comprehension activities is recycled during the phases of creative language use in the pair- and group work activities, discussions and debates. The questions accompanying the comprehension exercises focus the students' attention and encourage them to use relevant language items. The author has proposed very stimulating questions to initiate meaningful conversations, which is a particular strength of the book, as it contributes to effective language learning. Although developing writing skills is not a stated aim of the course book, I believe that the topics and texts provide a solid basis for this, too. Using the course book is made easy by the teacher's manual on the website of the book. It contains instructions as well as the key to the exercises. Yet, the teacher's hands are not bound: the book can be suited to the needs of the groups.

Reaching high

Viktor Jilly's new book has not only aimed high, it has reached high both in terms of language development and content. I firmly believe that it has a wonderful potential for both educating and teaching the students, and thus turning out mature, reflective, socially responsible foreign language users with good English communication skills. Unfortunately the book is not available in retail stores. It has been published with support from the Regional English Language Office of the US Embassy in Budapest, who provide free copies for educational institutions upon request. This is a highly laudable initiative, and I hope that many groups will have the opportunity to learn from this book.