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Review of Sag Mal: An Introduction to German Language and Culture

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***Sag Mal: An Introduction to German Language and Culture.* By Christine Anton, Tobias Barske, Jane Grabowski, Megan McKinstry, and Dexter Morgan.** Boston: Vista Higher Learning, 2014. \$195 Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-61767-950-6.

Sag Mal: An Introduction to German Language and Culture is a visually stimulating and well-organized textbook for college-level students learning introductory German. The book has twelve chapters and is meant to be used in two, three, or four semester periods.¹ Each chapter unit (*Lektion A & B*) is broken down into ten sections, ranging from practice in pronunciation to cultural readings and exercises. Some of the core sections in each chapter are: *Kontext*, providing vocabulary and practice exercises for the chapter; the *Fotoroman*, a video series about a group of students in Berlin which coincides with each chapter's theme; and *Strukturen* which introduces the grammar and accompanying exercises. The other elements of the chapter build upon the grammar and vocabulary and use the *Fotoroman* in order to put these into context. The chapters have numerous activities, some involving the resources from the website, others encouraging students to use the internet on their own to find out more information on a particular topic.

The book also includes an online component, the Supersite. The Supersite includes the workbooks for students: Student Activities Manual (SAM), the Lab Manual (LM), and Video Manual (VM), which coincide with and expand upon the exercises in the book and *Fotoroman*. The Supersite can also be used by instructors to enter student grades, communicate with students, and access the online version of the textbook, the *vText* (virtual interactive text) that can be used on a computer, tablet or smartphone. The Supersite also offers sample lesson plans and syllabi, PowerPoint slides, sample tests, and other materials.

Chapter 3, *Familie und Freunde*, is a fitting example of what *Sag Mal* has to offer as a textbook. The chapter units are broken down into *Lektion A (Familie)* and *Lektion B (Freunde)*. The units start out with a *Kontext*, which introduces students to the unit's theme and associated vocabulary. There are listening comprehension exercises, which can be found on the Supersite, and exercises that are both in the book and on the site. There are a wide range of activities including communicative exercises that require students to work in groups, such as the activity, *Wer bin ich?*. The activity worksheet can be found in the instructor online resources. *Wer bin ich?* requires students to take given statements, such as *Ich habe keine Brüder*, and formulate them into questions to which group members must provide appropriate responses. Students have to talk to each other and then report on what they have learned about their group members to the rest of the class.

The *Fotoroman* also provides excellent opportunities for student interaction. It builds upon the vocabulary students have just learned in context, and the structures that they will be learning later in the chapter. There are two episodes of the *Fotoroman* in chapter 3, one for each unit (*Lektionen A and B*), and the episode transcripts are accessible through the Supersite. For example, the *Fotoroman* episode for unit 3A is "Ein Abend mit der Familie." The characters have dinner at Sabite's parents' house, and Sabite's father is Turkish, so this provides an opportunity to discuss the unit's theme of family, while also engaging students in multicultural

¹ *Sag Mal* Instructor's Annotated Edition p. IAE16. There are suggestions for course planning for each semester system.

aspects of German-speaking countries. Such engagement provides students with a context crucial to understanding Germany today. The book also provides exercises to accompany the *Fotoroman*, for example a personal family tree that students prepare and present to the class. The episodes and activities target the grammar, theme, and vocabulary of the unit.

While there are many positive interactive aspects of the book, there are some organizational issues, such as the sequencing of grammar topics. The *Strukturen* sections in each unit are introduced using vocabulary from the *Kontext* section and offer contextual examples from the *Fotoroman* assuming that the students have already watched the episode and have been exposed to these structures. Chapter 3B introduces modal verbs, prepositions with accusative case, and the imperative tense, and uses snippets from the dialogues, such as the imperative, “Sei nicht gemein, Meline,” or the modal verbs, “Oh George, du darfst nicht so ernst sein.” The accusative prepositions are introduced in chapter 3B. Considering that the accusative case was first introduced in Chapter 1B, this sequencing can make it difficult for the students to understand the exercises containing those prepositions in some of the previous chapters. Additionally, it can also be difficult for students to express themselves without knowing the necessary prepositions. With some slight reorganizing on the instructor’s part, one could choose to present the prepositions along with the introduction of the accusative case in the earlier chapter.

From my own classroom experiences using *Sag Mal*, students enjoyed the book because of the variety of activities. They especially liked the *Fotoroman*. It was helpful for teaching and learning purposes, according to the students, that the material was presented in context with the video series. Students in my class also enjoyed quite a few of the game activities, such as Simon Says, battleship, and bingo, which use the newly presented vocabulary and grammar of the chapter unit and also get students out of their seats and moving around. While the students gave positive feedback for the textbook, they expressed some frustration with the Supersite which can be confusing at times. Technical support for instructors and students is provided with the purchase of the book and the Supersite.

Sag Mal’s Supersite makes it easy to integrate technology in the classroom when desired. Despite some glitches involving listening or speaking exercises with some mismatched text (use of different names or nouns), and a slight learning curve for the instructor and students, it is a great way for instructors to keep track of students’ progress outside of the classroom. The book itself is visually stimulating, perhaps a little too much at times due to the variety of graphics and text, but the suggestions for instructors for extra activities, discussion lead-ins, and further tips are useful. The standout feature of the textbook is the *Fotoroman*, as it ties everything together in context: the grammar structures, vocabulary, culture, and more. Although my own students described it as “cheesy” at times, they thoroughly enjoyed it, and were able to refer back to the videos for language retention. This well-organized textbook and the accompanying website are highly recommended for colleges and universities looking to teach German using modern methods over the course of three to four semesters.

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