

# THE NEWSPAPER AS A TEACHING TOOL

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The newspaper is one of the most common information means in our society. It is an affordable way to inform oneself of current events, developments and happenings. It seeks to inform and entertain in a quick, concise and (generally) straightforward fashion. By integrating the newspaper into our language teaching, our students will greatly enhance their reading, writing, speaking and creative skills. The present paper seeks to provide the teacher with a practical way to go about this, by providing an alternate approach to newspaper use in the classroom.

## I. NEWSPAPER BASED EXERCISES

There are many different and varied exercises to be used in conjunction with language teaching. Here are just a few:

### 1. SKIMMING

A basic reading skill, skimming means glancing rapidly through a text to determine its general content. Speed is an important factor here since the aim is to obtain the general idea. There are several ways to approach a newspaper for skimming purposes:

- Look over a section of a newspaper, for example, the international section. Jot down the main headlines or leads that appear, then compare these with other responses for communicative practice.
- Skim an article, jot down the main idea or content. You can give each student a different article to skim after which students can report back to each other about what they have skimmed.
- Have students skim two similar articles, afterwards have them compare and contrast. Since skimming is a speed exercise, detail is not important; the key word here is general content.

### 2. SCANNING

Here again, we quickly go through a text. However, this time we are searching for specific information. By scanning, we obtain needed information in a fast way. When we scan, we reduce our search objectives to only one. There are several ways to approach a newspaper if we are going to use scanning:

- Scan through a newspaper to discover on what page you can find a specific section, example, sports or the weather.
- Scan the classified section for a specific job offer or a car on sale.
- Scan the sports section for a recent game score.
- Scan the business section for interest rates, exchange rates, international coffee prices or stock market averages.
- You can scan a specific article and search for pre-established information.

## 3. READING FOR THOROUGH COMPREHENSION

This is careful reading done in order to understand the total meaning of a passage. Students here should be able to summarize the author's main ideas. Different exercises that can be done are:

- Have students summarize in their own words what they read.
- Have students inform other students about the article in a summarized fashion.
- Choose several articles, then, based on these, prepare a series of sentences in which you write possible main ideas; have students choose the best or most possible solution.
- Prepare basic information questions to be asked afterwards to check reading comprehension.

Newspaper articles lend themselves very well to reading comprehension because of their short length. Some exercises allow for free student search, while others are more controlled by the teacher so as to focus on a specific point and to allow the teacher to plan, program and guide skill use.

## 4. CRITICAL READING

This type of reading demands that the reader make judgements about what is read. This kind of reading requires posing and answering questions such as: Is this information reliable and truthful? Does it share the author's point of view? How does my own experience come into play here? In other words, critical reading requires in depth thinking coupled with serious analysis.

There are several ways to approach this:

- a. After articles are read, set up small discussion groups: three or four students is a fine number. Have them discuss openly with one or two basic guide questions given to them beforehand. This works best when all have read the same article. Articles should be chosen beforehand to guarantee sufficient interest and discussion as student discussion is often slow and tedious when the topic is unstimulating.
- b. Have students come up with their own critical reading questions, then pass them out to the class. They can then answer spontaneously or write out their responses as a composition practice.
- c. Conduct student opinion polls. Students can draw up critical questions, say 5, then go around the classroom asking for information. Questions could be: "What is your personal opinion about the article?", "Do you agree with the author?", "Do you agree with what is happening there?", and "What could happen in the future?"

## II. VOCABULARY BUILDING EXERCISES

Newspapers offer a wide range of vocabulary usage within an authentic framework. This backdrop provides the students with valuable new vocabulary, that might otherwise go unseen and therefore is not internalized. Newspapers also tend to repeat certain vocabulary as well as a certain structure; getting to know these words and patterns is a great teaching tool. What can one do then? There are two possibilities:

### 1. THE DICTIONARY

Essential practice in dictionary use is vital for the language learner for it gives him freedom in word use. There are several possibilities:

- a. Have students underline unknown words. They can later go to a Spanish-English dictionary and look up the meanings.
- b. A follow up for (a) could be to look up synonyms in the thesaurus and then return to the original text where they would proceed to change one for the other.
- c. New sentences could be generated from the new words and this would allow for more flexibility.
- d. As another follow up for (a), you could have students look up word information such as: etymology, pronunciation, and parts of speech.

### 2. CONTEXT

Context exercises should be done before a reading. They allow the learner to guess meaning from context clues to see if surrounding words provide information about unknown words. Certain sentences with difficult vocabulary could be isolated with these words underlined. The class can be divided into 4 or 5 teams and would try to discover the meaning in a competitive and genuinely challenging environment.

## III. OTHER EXERCISES

### 1. GRAMMAR PRACTICE

More often than not, students are unsure about the different parts of speech and the role they play within a given sentence. They may confuse simple past with past progressive or be unaware of what an adjective really modifies, or they may not know how to label a gerund, be it the subject or the object of a preposition. Here are some possible solutions to these problems:

- a. Whatever grammar point is being treated in class at the time can be searched for in any article; for example, have students underline all gerunds and then proceed to classify each according to function.
- b. They can choose a short article and then make a grid, under one column 'nouns', under another 'adjectives', and another 'verbs'.
- c. They could search for passive versus active voice, irregular tense and past participle forms. These activities offer a different approach to the everyday use of grammar in a class, since it allows for the quick recognition and labeling of an authentic material. In this way students can feel sure about their own understanding of grammar; they can measure their knowledge of basic parts of speech.

### 2. PARAGRAPH ANALYSIS

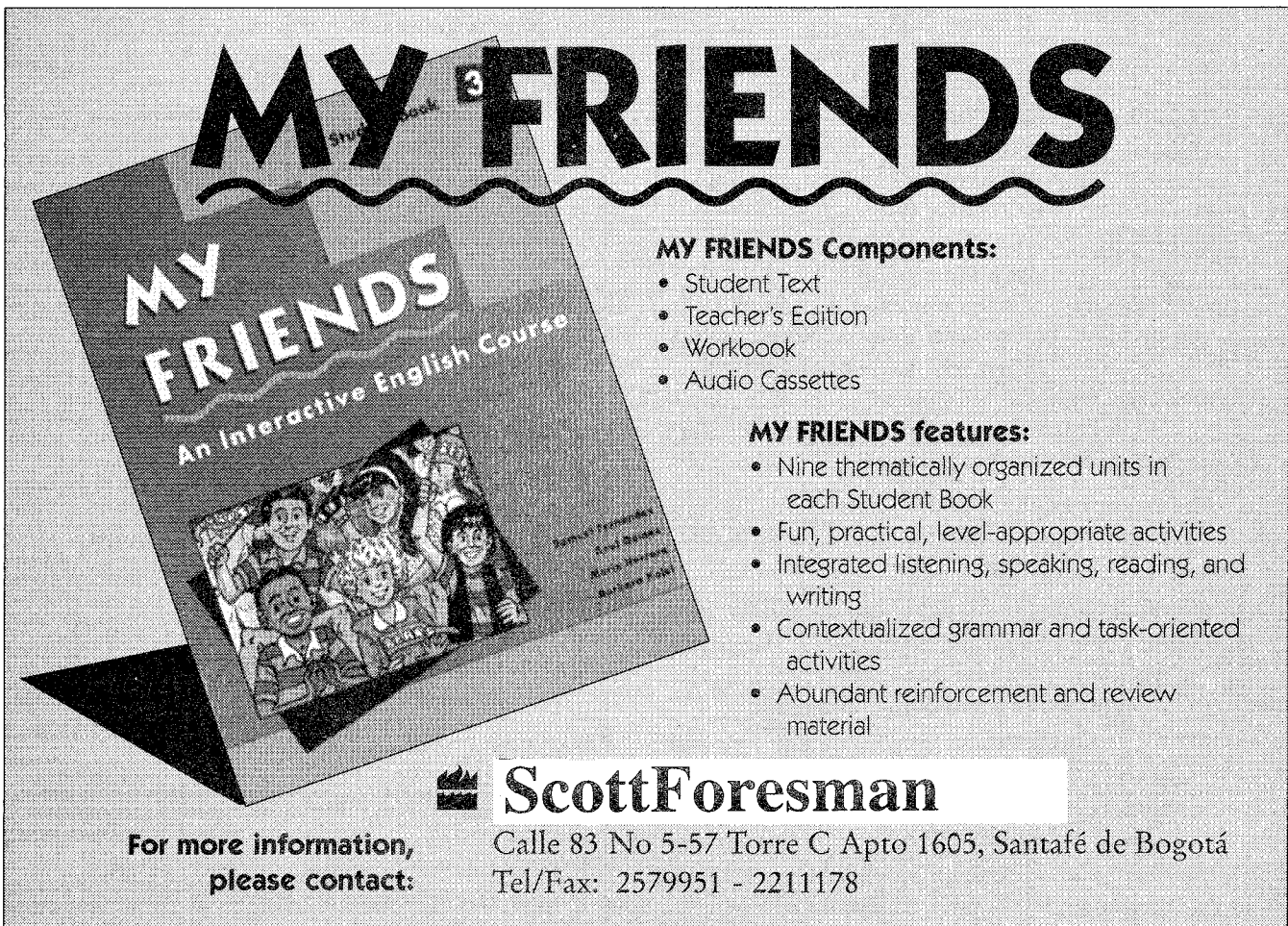
One way to improve the writing ability in our students is by having them identify the different parts of a paragraph. Once students understand the way something is written, they will have an easier job at writing. The teacher could briefly talk about the topic sentence, supporting sentences with their different levels of generality or support primary, secondary, tertiary, (these three are not always present, maybe only primary, or primary and secondary) and concluding sentences. Then have students label an article according to the learned principles. Students can then compare their results with other classmates.

#### IV. WRITING YOUR OWN NEWSPAPER

This activity is a profitable learning experience for students and teachers alike, since it stimulates mutual growth through the sharing of different points of view that lead to the creation of a unique experience. Newspapers can be created at many different levels: from a simple classroom edition put together within the class unit or an institutional journal to a regional or national gazette. Each one meets diverse needs and responds to the wishes of those interested in its results.

The author believes the starting point is the classroom, for this is the privileged place where so

much creation is stimulated and promoted. Therefore, the teacher could supervise the new project allowing students to take an active role in the whole process. All those interested in collaborating could be given a position: editor, director, proofreader, columnist, reporter, designer, and so on. The important thing is to get the ball rolling. Deadlines could be set for articles to be done by the students themselves who would have a selection committee and who could count on teacher support for correction and advice. The activities that can be programmed are unlimited. Best of all, being a class project, everything would be done together. An authentic learning experience inserted in a true to life context.




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