

# The News as a Textbook in the Spanish Classroom: A Language/Social Studies Approach to Teaching



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## Introduction

During the past six years at the Collegiate School, I have been exploring a variety of techniques to teach Spanish, looking for the best ways of engaging young minds in the foreign language classroom. These efforts, combined with my personal interest in “real language,” helped me develop a variety of pedagogical units geared towards building a foreign language/social studies curriculum. I call “real language” the Spanish of everyday life and the media, as opposed to the generic quality of the language used in most traditional textbooks directed at English speakers learning Spanish.

The news — in print, on TV, on the radio, or through the Web — provides an ideal framework to teach language because by nature, the news is always “in flux,” is usually interesting, and is real. By exploring the news from a given Hispanic country or from anywhere else for that matter, I have also aimed at goals beyond linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding. With a personal investment in promoting citizenship and social awareness in my classrooms, I maintain that by using the news as a textbook, students are stimulated to develop affective, cognitive, and critical thinking skills in a captivating learning environment. Regardless of what subject matter we teach, we should probably always pay attention to these aspects of our students’ growth when planning our lessons. However, to avoid chaos in a foreign language classroom ruled by such a mobile, somewhat open-ended working tool, a clear, carefully thought out pedagogical agenda is needed and must be reassessed at all times.

## How Does This Foreign Language Curriculum Work?

This foreign language curriculum relies on the use of the news as disseminated by radio, television, magazines, newspapers, and the Internet. The media have the power of enhancing foreign language acquisition from the perspective of providing real language in more provocative ways than are found in the most commonly used

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textbooks on the market. Students may respond faster and better to the real world around them than to school textbooks, which often present them with removed, generic school-like, family-like, and community-like situations. Far from suggesting that we should get rid of all textbooks, my language/social studies approach to teaching aims at re-energizing the students’ experiences in the foreign language classroom. Textbooks, therefore, become friendly allies in the process, instead of main sources of information, while the media are incorporated as the primary teaching tool. In my view, textbook-based language instruction is partly responsible for those “successful” generations of students who, although they have graduated from our current educational system scoring high marks in standardized testing, are frequently incapable of holding a simple conversation in the target language. I call the results of such teaching/learning practice “laboratory language,” as opposed to my notion of real language.

## For What Levels Is This Instructional Approach Suitable?

This approach works best at the middle and high school levels. Extensive preparation by the teacher is required for every meeting in order to meet the academic needs of a given curriculum. The idea is not simply “to learn the news in the target language.” If completed without appropriate planning, the material may be as removed from the students as the readings from the worst textbooks in the market. Students must be exposed gradually to increasingly complex language concepts as they interact with the news in a meaningful, carefully planned manner. Every lesson should focus on the integration of different areas of the language as needed — grammar and/or syntax and vocabulary — with the contents of the chosen news story. Oral and written drills must be designed to learn and practice the new material. The students’ progress is measured with appropriate rubrics for each level. I adjust these rubrics during the school year, using a basic layout of 25% for homework, 25% for class participation, 25% for quizzes and tests, 20% for special projects, and 5% for behavior. For presentations, which fall under the category of “special projects,” I

like to involve the whole class in assessing each student’s work (See Appendix D).

Although advanced students may seem the logical beneficiaries of this approach to teaching, the students’ level of language proficiency is not crucial in accessing information. A language curriculum that is based on the news has the advantage that most of us are familiar, to a greater or lesser extent, with what is happening around us, either nationally or internationally. It is the teacher’s job to use these “real” facts as a contextual framework to help students make progress in all areas of the language acquisition. The focus, however, should remain multi-layered, with an emphasis on current events in Spanish-speaking countries, in addition to relevant news from the United States as well as from other countries. This framework is particularly effective in intermediate- and advanced-level courses in generating discussions about what is happening in the students’ own city, their schools, and often among their families and friends.

## Some Examples

Two years ago I used the Elián González case in my fifth grade class, a beginners course, as a thematic framework to pursue the linguistic and cultural objectives that I had chosen for the group. The linguistic objectives were to reinforce the irregular verbs *ir*, *tener*, *ser* and *estar*; to teach the regular *-ar* verbs; to introduce vocabulary on the family and the house; and to enhance physical descriptions. The cultural objectives were to develop a social studies unit on Cuba (See Appendices A & B). We worked on this unit for an entire trimester as the Cuban boy’s saga was in the news, becoming almost a national obsession. Since beginning students cannot read Hispanic newspapers in Spanish, I used the articles I chose as reading practice in class, translated some sections into English, prepared simplified versions of the ongoing information in Spanish on a regular basis, and designed a variety of drills to help the students assimilate the material. In addition to using newspaper and magazine articles, I showed recorded video clips of the on-going news about Elián’s case, not more than five minutes per day, in order to establish the tone for the day’s activities.

Last year, we followed the presidential elections with a similar language/culture agenda in mind, adapting the information to suit the grammar and vocabulary skills that I wanted to teach. We have also followed sports news, particularly the World

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*“I maintain that by using the news as a textbook, students are stimulated to develop affective, cognitive, and critical thinking skills”*

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Series, which helped the students learn sports-related terms. The results were extraordinary across the board, with fifth graders practicing their verb conjugations and a selection of words pertaining to voting, living in a democracy, and baseball, for example, in addition to cultural topics connected to these events, the range of which is impossible to acquire through ordinary textbooks at the middle school level.

In my twelfth grade elective course, I typically keep up with a number of news stories as my core curriculum, using similar resources: TV clips, printed materials, and the addition of pre-recorded radio news and Internet activities. The contents of these resources are subject to change, replacement, and expansion, according to what happens at either the local, national, or international levels during the semester (See Appendix C).

Some of the main topics that I have covered in my senior class are the conflict in Puerto Rico regarding the presence of the U. S. Navy in the island of Vieques; the social changes in Mexico with the arrival of President Vicente Fox (we have kept a close eye on the Zapatistas' tour to the Congress); the crisis in Peru with the sudden resignation of President Fujimori and the subsequent presidential elections; the national and state elections in the U.S.; and the crisis in the Middle East. For these topics, I have relied on the students' general knowledge (or sometimes ignorance) to build a dynamic curriculum integrating language and culture. We had the unfortunate addition of the school shootings in California and other states, but we used the opportunity to debate issues in the target language and to learn new terms.

Debating is an important component of a language/social studies curriculum. Students are part of an interactive setting in which they must speak in Spanish to express themselves on controversial topics. By doing so, they apply affective, cognitive, and critical thinking skills, which are all invaluable learning avenues in a classroom.

## Tools

The following are some of the resources that I have found to be effective in my classes:

1. A journal is the basic tool for this type of course, regardless of the students' language proficiency level. It is the place for taking notes, recording one's opinions, gluing newspapers cutouts, summarizing articles, and planning short and/or long essays to be submitted later in the term. Clearly, English will be fairly predominant at the lower levels — no doubt, a controversial factor for many educators — whereas the target

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language is mandatory for intermediate- and advanced-level students. For these latter groups, journals are also the place to describe their daily routines as a means of “building an autobiography in progress.” Ideally, by the end of the school year, all intermediate and advanced students' journals should consist of a fair amount of entries in which they record their daily lives as well as their opinions on current affairs.

2. Access to the media in the target language
3. Access to authentic cultural products, such as realia, videos, movies, music, dance, photography, and foods.
4. Internet access to read the news, surf specific sites in search of assigned information, and E-mail.
5. Access to native speakers through interviews, key-pals, visits, and special cultural events.

## Teaching Strategies

For this section, I will focus on my experience working with both intermediate and advanced students so that I can list a wider range of strategies. When working with beginners, I must adjust these same guidelines to suit their developing language skills and interests.

- Choose the coverage of a current event of importance preferably, but not exclusively, from somewhere in the Spanish-speaking world. Photocopy or download it, and bring it to class.
- Introduce the grammatical topics you need to teach within the context of the particular news story, in accordance with the linguistic objectives you have established for the class. For instance, if you are explaining the subjunctive, provide elementary hints about its formation for students to work as “verb detectives” and discover the subjunctive forms in the given piece of news. For the following class, they should repeat the process with a different article about the same event. On a later date, you will present the subjunctive to your students, offering tables of conjugations, plenty of examples, and drills. By then, they would have already been exposed to these verb forms in the

meaningful narrative of a particular piece of news traced through at least two or more articles.

- Assign students to buy a local Hispanic paper and follow the pre-selected event. If buying papers in Spanish is not easy, provide photocopied materials for students to read on a regular basis.
- Alternatively and/or simultaneously, assign specific Internet sites for students to visit so that they can keep up with the latest developments concerning their piece of news. If the Internet is not a viable resource, download information from Internet sites of your choice to distribute in class as often as necessary.
- If your school has the means, take your class to the computer room and ask your students to get into specific Latin American and Spanish newspapers pages on the Internet that you should have previously bookmarked for them to save time. Assign them to read/follow their topic in these newspapers and require a summary in their journal for the next class. They may print the information they read on their screens to take home, if needed.
- Organize Internet scavenger hunts on culture in the computer room. Divide your students into teams and hand them 15-20 questions to be answered during the class period. Those who complete the work timely and accurately will earn points, prizes, a grade, whatever suits your own or your school's policies. A brief example from my unit on the ongoing conflict in Vieques: *¿Cuándo se estableció la Marina Estadounidense en la isla de Vieques?* [When did the U.S. Navy establish a base on the island of Vieques?] *¿Cómo se llama la gobernadora de Puerto Rico?* [What is the Puerto Rican Governor's name?] *¿Qué significa la palabra “boricua”?* [What is the meaning of the word “boricua”?] *¿Quiénes son los Taínos?* [Who are the Taínos?] *Nombra 3 escritores prominentes puertorriqueños.* [Name three prominent Puerto Rican writers].
- Ask students to summarize the material on the assigned event in their journals on a regular basis. Periodically, ask them to add a personal response, not longer than a paragraph (50 words, maximum) to their summaries. They must make the effort of including the targeted grammatical concepts at all times.

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***“Organize Internet scavenger hunts on culture in the computer room.”***

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- Prepare lists of vocabulary and/or circle the chosen words in the articles that you have previously photocopied from papers/magazines, or downloaded from the Internet to hand out. Practice these target terms in class, asking students to make sentences with them. Also, make a point of including these terms when asking questions to your students. As extra practice, you might want to ask them to write sentences using the same terms in their journals for the next meeting.
- Assign students to watch the news on any of the local Hispanic channels at least once a week. In this way, not only can they follow the particular topic, but they can also have a sense of what else is happening in the world ... in Spanish! If this is not possible, tape and edit the news before showing a specific segment to your students (no longer than 5 minutes of your class time).
- While these tasks are being accomplished, have a list of cultural topics of interest regarding the country or countries where the news you are following originates, and assign individual students and/or groups to research and present the material to the rest of the class. Suggestions include geography, history, the current form of government, arts, foods, prominent contemporary and/or historical figures. The students' presentations should involve oral and written texts as well as relevant visuals.
- Hold routine conversations on the assigned cultural topics and design periodic written questionnaires to check on the students' understanding of the news they are following as well as the grammar and vocabulary you intend to cover. Continue to stress the introduced language skills throughout the unit.

### Some Suggestions for News Projects

In my experience, news projects in the target language are most successful when carried out collaboratively. Students enjoy gathering information and deciding on the format of their presentations in a group setting. Sometimes, individual work can be more appropriate; it all depends on the topic/s chosen and, of course, on the students' personalities, interests, and language abilities. Here are some successful ideas I have adopted, after years of trial and error. Obviously, these suggestions are suitable for different levels of language competence and should be adapted by teachers accordingly:

- In teams of two to four, have students prepare spontaneous presentations. Each team is given a picture of a

famous/prominent person, a set of questions, and ten minutes to present their figure to the rest of the class. Typical questions: *¿Cómo se llama esta persona?* [What is this person's name?] *¿De dónde es?* [Where is s/he from?] *¿Cuál es su ocupación o profesión?* [What is this person's occupation or profession?] *¿Dónde crees que está en esta foto?* [Where do you think s/he is in this picture?] *¿Qué está haciendo?* [What is s/he doing?] *Descripción física,* [Physical description] *Elementos de su personalidad (si los sabes)* [Elements of his/her [personality (if you know them)] *¿Te gusta esta persona?* [Do you like this person?] *¿Por qué sí o por qué no?* [Why yes or why not?]. Only one student writes down the answers contributed by the whole group. When ready, each group has two minutes to introduce their person to the class.

- Have students prepare comprehensive presentations on particular news stories they have chosen to follow; a particular country where important events are happening; or a relevant figure, either contemporary or historical, preferably but not exclusively, from the Spanish-speaking world. Students should be divided into groups of three to five for this task. Each member of a particular group is expected to present a section of their group's topic, using collective and/or individual visual aids, and distributing new vocabulary lists to their audience. Each group should also plan a related activity for the rest of the class to be done during their presentation, or to be assigned as homework for the next meeting. These presentations may adopt a variety of formats, according to the students' interests and abilities. Power Point and Hyper-Studio presentations are popular choices among our "Generation D" (Generation Digital) students, those who are particularly adept with modern technologies. However, less technologically based projects, such as creating posters with cutout images, photos, their own drawings, collages, etc., should be equally encouraged as visual aids.
- Have students prepare TV news presentations of the material, organizing the information as if they were on camera. In fact, you might want to record your students' performances on video, as if they were in a studio, and later replay the tape as a catalyst for discussion and to elicit student feedback on the project.
- Have students write a personal response to a particular news story in a paragraph format to be shared in class.
- Have students write a comprehensive essay summarizing the data, taking

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***“Have students write and act out a dialogue in which they relate the facts and make comments, as if they were casual passersby caught by a candid camera.”***

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sides with the issues dealt with, and making recommendations for the future.

- Have students develop a radio script and present the material in groups of two or three, speaking into a fake microphone, as if they were on air in a radio station. This is a fun project. You can also have commercial ads, delivered by another two or three students. In addition, you might want to record the material so that students can assess their own work at a later date.
- Have students write and act out a dialogue in which they relate the facts and make comments, as if they were casual passersby caught by a candid camera.
- Have students participate in debate sessions, which may follow traditional debate formats (two teams presenting their opposite views on a given issue and a jury who will decide on it), or simply allowing for as many opinions as possible to be shared with teacher participation as a moderator.

### Conclusions

My agenda for a language/social studies course is to teach the target language in a meaningful cultural context. With this objective in mind, my classroom strategy is to present grammatical and syntactical rules as well as pertinent vocabulary within the framework of the news. Through the news, students learn information about specific countries, regions, and/or relevant personalities from those parts of the world where the news originates. From a language point of view, I emphasize communication through reading comprehension, the ability to make original sentences using the new and old grammatical structures and vocabulary, the facility to summarize the information orally and in writing, and competence at expressing one's opinion. From the social studies perspective, I expect my students to be aware of current events as well as to learn basic geographic and historical information about all of the places we discuss in class. My personal goal is to make Spanish a living entity for my students, a real language they can use to talk about real things that take place in the real world, instead of a scoring tool in the standardized testing realm.

## Appendix A: Middle School

Indica la respuesta correcta [Indicate the right answer]:

### 1. Elián es de

- a. la República Dominicana.
- b. Puerto Rico.
- c. Cuba.
- d. Venezuela.

### 2. Elián tiene

- a. 8 años.
- b. 5 años.
- c. 6 años.
- d. 7 años.

### 3. La capital de Cuba es

- a. San Juan.
- b. Caracas.
- c. La Habana.
- d. Santo Domingo.

### 4. El dictador de Cuba se llama

- a. Fidel Castro.
- b. Bill Clinton.
- c. Ernesto Zedillo.
- d. Hugo Chávez.

### 5. Elián llega a los EEUU

- a. en un neumático.
- b. en avión.
- c. en helicóptero.
- d. en bote.

### 6. Sus familiares de Miami son

- a. su hermana.
- b. su tío-abuelo.
- c. su mamá.
- d. su abuela.

### 1. Elián is from

- a. the Dominican Republic.
- b. Puerto Rico.
- c. Cuba.
- d. Venezuela.

### 2. Elián is

- a. 8 years old.
- b. 5 years old.
- c. 6 years old.
- d. 7 years old.

### 3. The capital of Cuba is

- a. San Juan.
- b. Caracas.
- c. Havana.
- d. Santo Domingo.

### 4. Cuba's dictator is

- a. Fidel Castro.
- b. Bill Clinton.
- c. Ernesto Zedillo.
- d. Hugo Chávez.

### 5. Elián arrives in the US

- a. in an inner-tube.
- b. by plane.
- c. by helicopter.
- d. by boat.

### 6. Elián's relatives in Miami are

- a. his sister.
- b. his grand-uncle.
- c. his mother.
- d. his grandmother.

\_\_\_\_\_ Los cubanos *opinan* que Elián *tiene que volver* a Cuba.  
[Cubans think that Elián should go back to Cuba.]

\_\_\_\_\_ La corte *tiene que decidir* el futuro de Elián.  
[The courts must decide Elián's future.]

\_\_\_\_\_ Elián *va* al hospital.  
[Elián goes to hospital.]

\_\_\_\_\_ El papá de Elián *llega* a los EEUU.  
[Elián's dad arrives in the U.S.]

\_\_\_\_\_ La mamá de Elián *muere* [=dies] en el océano.  
[Elián's mom dies at sea.]

\_\_\_\_\_ Los agentes federales *sacan* a Elián violentamente de su casa.  
[FBI agents take Elián from his home by force.]

\_\_\_\_\_ Los cubano-americanos no *están* contentos.  
[Cuban-Americans are unhappy.]

\_\_\_\_\_ Dos pescadores *sacan* a Elián del agua.  
[Two fishermen rescue Elián from the ocean.]

\_\_\_\_\_ Elián y su papá *están* contentos en las fotos.  
[Elián and his dad are happy in the pictures.]

\_\_\_\_\_ El papá de Elián *llega* a los EEUU con su esposa y su nuevo hijo.  
[Elián's dad arrives to the US with his wife and his baby son.]

\_\_\_\_\_ Elián *sale* de Cuba en un bote con su mamá y otras personas.  
[Elián leaves Cuba on a boat with his mom and other people.]

\_\_\_\_\_ Los cubanos *están* contentos.  
[Cubans are happy.]

\_\_\_\_\_ Los familiares de Miami *opinan* que Elián tiene que vivir aquí.  
[The Miami relatives think that Elián must live here.]

\_\_\_\_\_ *Hay* muchas protestas en Miami.  
[There are lots of demonstrations in Miami.]

\_\_\_\_\_ El papá de Elián *desea volver* a Cuba.  
[Elián's father wants to return to Cuba.]

**Tu opinión:** Prepara la siguiente pregunta para discutir en clase.  
**[Your opinion:** Prepare the following question to discuss in class.]

¿Dónde *tiene que vivir* Elián, con quién y por qué?  
[Where should Elián live, with whom, and why?]

## Appendix B: Middle School

Reorganizar la narrativa básica de la historia de Elián González escribiendo los números 1-19 junto a cada oración. [Reorganize the basic narrative of Elián González' story by writing the numbers 1-19 next to each sentence]:

\_\_\_\_\_ Elián *va* en avión a Maryland con su papa.  
[Elián goes by plane to Maryland with his dad.]

\_\_\_\_\_ Las abuelas de Elián *llegan* a los EEUU.  
[Elián's grandmas arrive in the U.S.]

\_\_\_\_\_ Elián *está* en el agua durante 2 días en un neumático.  
[Elián is floating in the water on an inner-tube for 2 days.]

\_\_\_\_\_ Ahora Elián *vive* con sus familiares de Miami.  
[Now Elián lives with his Miami relatives.]

## Appendix C: High School

Examples of required journal entries:

- (For October 30th, 2000)
  - Si pudieras votar, ¿por quién votarías y por qué?  
[If you could vote, whom would you vote for and why?]
  - Tu opinión sobre el Partido Verde  
[Your opinion of the Green Party]
  - Si crees que no es necesario votar, explica las razones.  
[If you believe that voting is unnecessary, explain your reasons.]
  - Predicciones: ¿Quién ganará?  
[Predictions: Who will win?]
- (For Friday, March 9th, 2001)

Dáme tu respuesta personal a la tragedia de la escuela secundaria Santana, en San Diego, California. El lunes murieron 2 chicos y hay 13, tal vez más heridos. El criminal es un estudiante del grado 10. ¿Crees que es necesario que exista el control de armas en los EEUU? ¿Cómo explicas la violencia en la juventud? ¿Conoces casos similares en otros países?

[Give me your personal response to the tragedy in the Santana high-school in San Diego, California, where, last Monday, two students were killed and at least 13 were hurt. The attacker was a tenth-grade student from the school. What is your opinion about arms control in the US? How do you explain the violence among young people? Do you know of similar cases in other countries?]

## Appendix D: Assessment of Presentations

Presentations are assessed by both the teacher and members of the audience. The students in the audience are given evaluation forms at the end of each presentation which, once added up, will constitute 15 % of the presenter's grade. In turn, their feedback on a classmate will be 5% of their own grade as presenters. Therefore, 20% of each students'-grade is student-originated while the remaining 80% is based on the teacher's assessment. Although this system of assessment is rather laborious, it ensures collective involvement, guarantees attention to the presenters, and gives a sense of fairness in grading.

**SAMPLE STUDENT FORM** (Distributed in English in the middle school and in Spanish in the high school)

### Evaluación [Evaluation]

- Nombre del estudiante:  
[Student name]
- Título de la Presentación:  
[Title of the Presentation]
- Tu nombre:  
[Your name]
- Nombra 3 cosas que hayas aprendido durante esta presentación:  
[Name 3 things that you have learned during this presentation]
  - 
  - 
  -
- ¿Habló claramente el presentador?  
Indica tu selección:  
[Did the presenter speak clearly?  
Indicate your choice]  
Sí [Yes] No [No]  
Más o menos [More or less]  
No tengo idea [No idea]
- ¿Mostró entusiasmo por su tema?  
[Did the presenter show enthusiasm for his/her topic?]  
Sí [Yes] No [No]  
Más o menos [More or less]  
No tengo idea [No idea]
- Indica la calidad del material visual:  
[Assess visual aids]  
Mejor [Best] Peor [Worst]  
1 2 3 4 5
- Indica la calidad de la lista de términos nuevos:  
[Assess the vocabulary list/s]  
Mejor [Best] Peor [Worst]  
1 2 3 4 5
- Indica la calidad general de esta presentación:  
[Assess the overall quality of this presentation]  
Mejor [Best] Peor [Worst]  
1 2 3 4 5
- ¿Comentarios? [Comments]

### SAMPLE TEACHER EVALUATION

- Student name \_\_\_\_\_
- Other students in the group \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Topic \_\_\_\_\_
- Quality of research [15%]
- Pronunciation [10%]
- Grammatical accuracy [20%]
- Vocabulary skills [15%]
- Visual aids [10%]
- Vocabulary list [5%]
- Attitude (eye-contact; Does student have flash-cards or any other type of notes? Is the student confident with the material?) [5%]
- Other students' feedback [15%]
- Did student complete his/her classmates' evaluation sheets? [5%]