
Echenberg, Eva Neisser.

Útil: Web-Based Writing Activities.

Montreal: Miraflores, 2007. Pp. 116. ISBN: 978-2-921554-98-5. US\$ 24.95. For orders, contact Miraflores at P.O. Box 458, Victoria Station, Montreal, QC H3Z 2Y6 Canada; e-mail: miraflores@sympatico.ca; phone: (514) 483-0722; fax: (514) 483-1212; and Website: www.miraflores.org.

Eva Echenberg's *Útil: Web-Based Writing Activities* is an invaluable resource for developing over 200 inspiring Spanish writing assignments using the

Internet. Echenberg furnishes four levels for the bilingual Web-based assignments for each unit: A = Beginner; B = Intermediate; C = Advanced; and *In my country/En mi país*. As a result, the units can be easily adapted for instruction at multiple levels and can be geared for individual, group, or project work. Neisser Echenberg describes the levels as follows:

“Beginner Level. Beginners list, chart, map and write short sentences. The search is specifically directed. The tasks mirror the vocabulary and grammar available to beginners. This is great practice in communication skills. Beginners are very resourceful in getting a message across using their limited language skills.

Intermediate Level. Intermediate students can stretch to learn new vocabulary or they can work on writing at a level that is comfortable to both increase fluency and integrate cultural information.

Advanced Level. Foster thinking skills. Advanced students write longer texts about more complex ideas. Their research takes them to new, exciting places. Advanced students can also make use of the tasks for the other levels to create a rich and varied writing portfolio that seamlessly ties together language and culture.

In my country. The fourth assignment relates the topic directly to the student’s own reality. It provides an opportunity for additional practice, extension and language recycling following one of the other tasks, or a stand-alone assignment” (Model Card).

The six overarching colored-coded themes, combined with the manual’s spiral-bound format, make *Útil* incredibly easy to use. The six themes and their corresponding colors are: Travel/Tourism (purple); Sports (orange); Arts (blue); Science/Nature (green); Daily Life/Festivals (red); and History/Geography (brown). In the index, teachers can choose from various topics for each theme. The thirteen topics are: *la identificación personal* (personal identification); *la casa y el hogar* (house and home); *la familia* (family life); *la comunidad y el vecindario* (community/neighborhood); *el medio ambiente* (physical environment); *las comidas y las bebidas* (food and drink); *la salud y el bienestar* (health and welfare); *la educación* (education); *el trabajo* (earning a living); *el ocio* (leisure); *las compras* (shopping); *el transporte* (transportation); and *temas de actualidad* (current events). Although every topic may not be applicable to each theme, potential adopters will be happy to know that when a topic is covered in a unit, it is covered at all four levels. They should visit www.miraflores.org to see sample unit pages in glorious full color.

Echenberg’s aim in producing *Útil* is not simply to provide Web links to information on the Spanish-speaking world, since Web pages often become quickly outdated or cease to exist. Rather, in a resource manual rich in highly attractive cultural images, she provides key search words in both Spanish and English for researching a particular topic using an Internet search engine of the student’s choice. These key words direct students to fascinating facts and images related to the Spanish-speaking world, thereby encouraging them to learn firsthand about current Hispanic culture. Furthermore, at each level, Echenberg carefully helps students learn what to look for and what to produce for the final version of the

assignment at hand. For example, among the various units this reviewer explored with her students, #45 was especially appealing: “¡Ayuden a esta escuela!/Please help this school!” In the current era of service learning and with the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning emphasizing use of a foreign language in the community, this unit promotes realistic ideas of what students can do to help those less fortunate. Two other examples of especially fun units are: #22: “*El ladrón/Catch the thief*” where students make a wanted poster after a theft from one of the great museums; and #34: “¡Pruébalo! ¡Te va a gustar!/Try it! You’ll like it!” where students create a children’s book about New World native foods, thereby learning how the products the Europeans took home from the New World changed European eating habits.

While this reviewer personally prefers the immersion method so that all student activities from the very beginning levels are in the target language, *Útil*, by providing both Spanish and English key words, gives two search options to instructors. Searching in Spanish fosters student acquisition of new vocabulary and has students reading and scanning in Spanish, thus making them more active participants in the target culture. Searching in English provides students with more confidence and helps them increase their skill level until they are able to search in Spanish. It is noteworthy that Sociedad General Española de Librería (SGEL), one of Spain’s leading publishing houses, will be distributing *Útil* worldwide. The SGEL version of *Útil* will be in Spanish only and will feature a different cover. Since Spanish publishers do not often find books in North America that they want to include in their catalogs, SGEL’s decision to include *Útil* speaks to the wide appeal and quality of the book as well as to the manner in which it successfully integrates technology.

In bringing the Spanish-speaking world to life for the student, the units making up *Útil* promote authentic language experiences and authentic cultural input while integrating technology. Indeed, the beauty of *Útil* lies in its flexibility of use at multiple levels of instruction. Nevertheless, this flexibility must not overshadow the fact that in creating *Útil*, Echenberg has paid attention to current trends in foreign language methodology as well as challenges facing educators and students today.

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Publisher’s Response

We thank Dr. Angelini for her generous review. When the reviewer says that *Útil* is an “invaluable resource,” has “flexibility of use at multiple levels of instruction,” and “successfully integrates technology,” there is hardly anything left for us to say.

Miraflores is very proud to be a leader in supplemental cultural materials anchored on the National Standards for Foreign Language. Please visit our

Website at www.miraflores.org for other outstanding cultural materials that can be used in the FL classroom.

Eva Neisser Echenberg
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