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Teachers' Centre

AEXALEVI *Forum*

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AEXALEVI *Forum*

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In this article, we look at ways in which graphic organizers can help our students deal with reading and writing in the foreign language class.

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We have received a letter from Prof. María Angélica de Quevedo in which she highlights problem areas in the Fourth Year Syllabus. In this section, we discuss how to sort them out.

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As part of the research that we are carrying out at the Teachers' Centre, Prof. Mirta Cataldo has planned and implemented activities in her writing classes which are helping to improve her students' compositions.

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Dr. Andy Curtis, co-author of the book "Pursuing Professional Development" published by Thomson & Heinle, visited the Asociación and shared with us an enlightening talk about his vast experience worldwide.

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In this article we discuss a practical idea to deal with vocabulary and patterns.

Getting Ready for Examination Time

What do graphic organizers have to offer?

At examination time, students might find it difficult to organize their ideas when they have to retell the stories that they have read or when they have to write the composition. The problem sometimes lies in not being able to establish a hierarchy and a sequence of ideas to produce an organized piece of discourse, either written or oral, which can lead students to success. In written exams, we often see students investing a lot of time in counting the words in their compositions. They sometimes start the word count over and over again as if that was the core of the matter. In oral exams, we have seen cases of students who can repeat a summary that they have studied by heart, but who get lost if we attempt to ask a question about the story. What can be done during the learning process to help students develop better strategies to tackle these issues at examination time?

Graphic organizers

When students read a story or when they write a composition, they have to hold lots of pieces of information together in their memories. The best way to deal with these pieces is to write them down on paper in a graphic organizer. This enables students to:

- see the relationship between the pieces: cause-effect, chronology, opposition, addition.
- establish hierarchy: main ideas, support ideas, details.
- understand or to create the development of plot: beginning, conflict, climax, resolution.
- analyse characters: how they relate to one another, how they relate to the conflict, what they are like, what they think.
- become active readers by jotting down what they know about the story, what they would like to know and what they predict as they read on.
- become effective writers by jotting down ideas and showing the relationship they hold before

actually writing their compositions.

- blend reading and writing as all the work done on graphic organizers involves reading a story and writing about it.
- be able to create mental maps of the text that is being read or written. Graphic organizers imply the activation of the visual, auditory and kinesthetic channels.
- explore text non-linearly through the use of different kinds of graphic organizers to deal with different aspects of the story.
- seek the aid of graphic organizers to provide useful support while the retelling is going on.

The advantages of using graphic organizers are countless. In particular, they provide students with a strategy to deal with text. This means that we are not only teaching them the story for the exam, but once they know how to think about a story, they are expected to do the same with the stories that they themselves have to create in their compositions. As it is said, a story exists because other stories do.

Graphic organizers can be put up on panels in the classroom for all the class to complete as the reading is going on. Those panels can be used the next class for retelling. More graphic

organizers of a different kind can be added in later lessons.

The same procedure can be used for writing. We can suggest a topic for the whole class to brainstorm ideas one class and the next class another graphic organizer can be used to select and establish a hierarchy of those ideas. It is advisable not to do all the reading and the writing in one class but to develop work over time. The deeper stories are explored, the more successfully students will be able to deal with them orally and in writing.

We can help students move away from persistent word count in compositions and redirect their attention to organizing the text. We can help students drop the habit of relying on a written summary of the story that binds them to something they have studied by heart and redirect their efforts to feeling comfortable with the story. Above all, we can provide students with a practical tool which will turn them into more strategic readers and writers.

Which graphic organizers?

There is a whole range of graphic organizers at our hand. They can be roughly put together in three groups:

- 1) Graphic organizers that follow a step-by-step format.

- 2) Graphic organizers that have a mind-map format.
- 3) Graphic organizers that have the format of charts or sets.

Below you will find an example of each category.

Example of a graphic organizer with the format of a chart.

Fill in the prediction chart with actions you think the character may do next in the story.

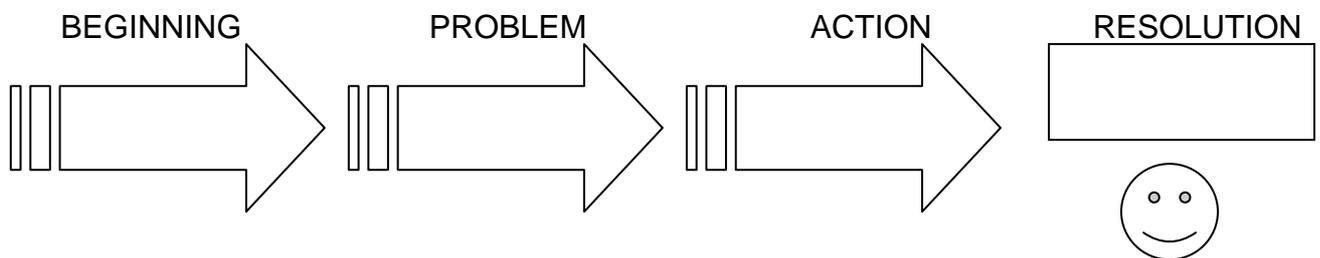
CHARACTER	NEXT ACTIONS	TICK YOUR PREDICTIONS	WHAT DID HE DO?

Did the character take the right decision? Why?

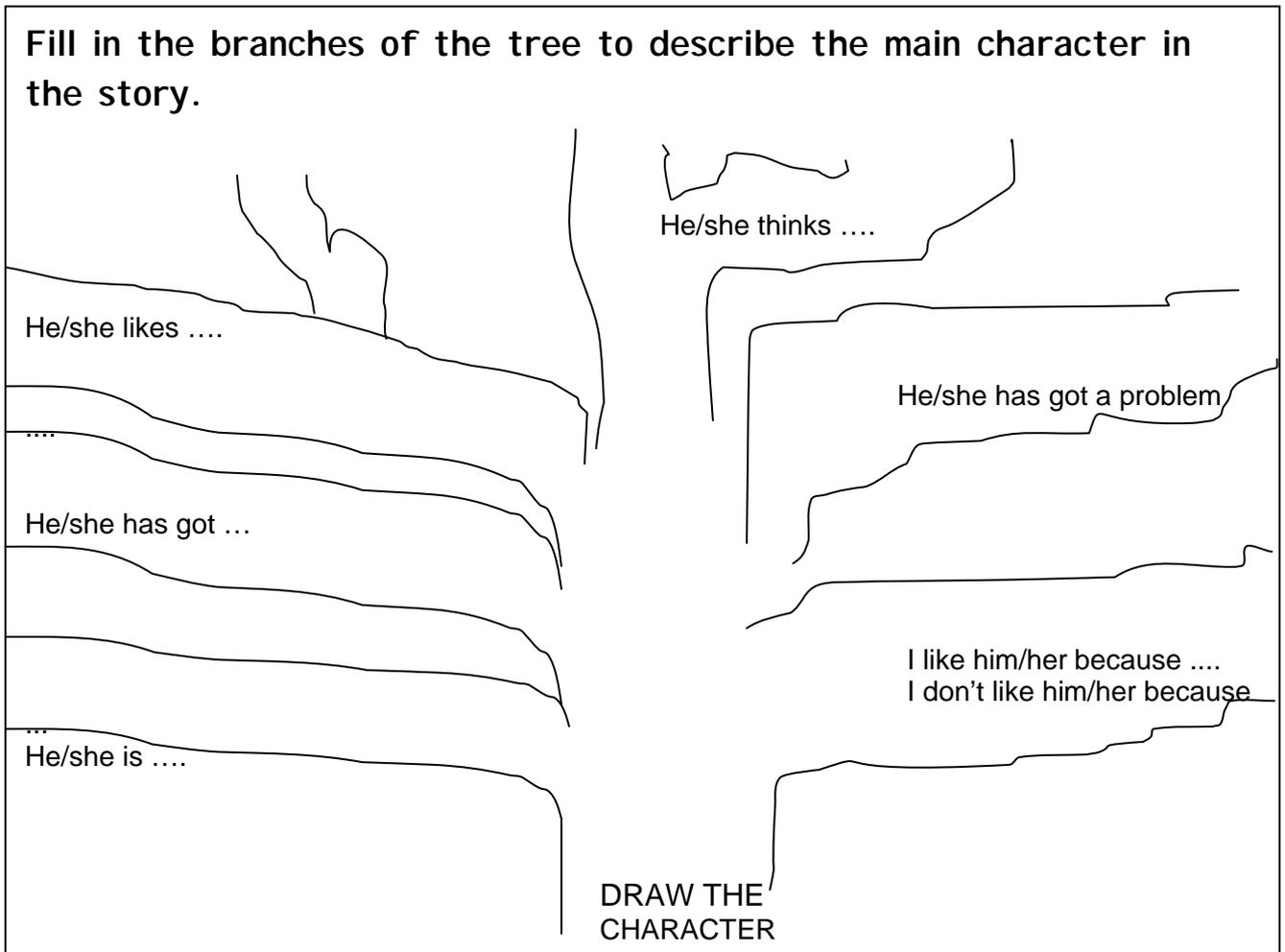
Draw  or 

Examples of step-by-step graphic organizer

Fill in the arrows to show the storyline



Example of a graphic organizer with a mind-map format



**In the Forum in our website,
you will find links to lots of examples of
graphic organizers.**

Syllabus Close-up

Prof. María Angélica de Quevedo writes a letter about difficulties that she has found in the Fourth Year Syllabus.

Dear Marta,

I am sending you the list of points which I think could be dealt with for recognition but not for production. As far as I am concerned, I will do my best to teach and practise all the units thoroughly. However, students find it very difficult to recognise all the different structures in the "Rewrite ..." exercise. The points are:

I wish / If only + Past Perfect

Verbs must have, might have, can't have for drawing conclusions

Reporting verbs (various structures)

There are other points like the Third Conditional, but I personally think it is a necessary structure for students to talk about unreal or hypothetical situations in the past so I think it should be included.

I would be grateful if you could let me know your opinion and your decision.

Love,

María Angélica

María Angélica's letter brings into question the balance of contents in syllabus design. We expect that other teachers will be sharing her concern. Therefore, we have decided to devote some reflection to the issue, hoping to arrive at decisions that will facilitate our students' learning process.

The issue of balance

When we look at the map of contents in *Snapshot Intermediate*, it certainly stands out clearly that there is an overload of linguistic forms in the last few units. On closer examination, we can see that these linguistic forms are to be found at the intermediate level. They are expected to be dealt with at this level. However, they all seem to cluster towards the end of the textbook. What the authors had in mind when they designed the syllabus, we cannot know but it is generally accepted that the last units in a textbook are units that will be revisited in the next level. A well-known ELT writer said once that authors tend to leave towards the end of the book all the

content that they know teachers will not have the time to deal with and that they will be teaching in the next level. However true this may be, it does not appear to sort out the problem of having to deal with so much content at the end of the year. When María Angélica suggests dealing with some of these points for recognition only, she is acknowledging the problem of having to consolidate new learning of difficult grammar when there is practically no more time to do so.

Staging

The case that we are considering here brings into the picture what is generally known as "staging". This is the time that is to be devoted to the development of each unit in relation to the amount of content to be learnt. It is a concept closely linked to syllabus. Staging affects the pace at which content is presented in the textbook. In *Snapshot Intermediate*, the pace is relatively brisk in the last units. The content is graded and sequenced in relation to the content that is dealt with before but perhaps more time should have been allotted to the grammar. The students are

suddenly confronted with too much difficult content to learn.

The issue of production

The “Rewrite...” test item typically addresses the linguistic forms of the kind that comprise the last units in the Fourth Year Syllabus. It is a production exercise in which the students need to show knowledge of structure, meaning and use. Something that they will certainly

not be able to face if they have worked on these points for recognition. What to do then? The most sensible path seems to be to make sure the students are not required to produce these grammatical points in the written exam. This is why you have already received “Circular N° 4” with Prof. Marta Moure’s decisions about content. We hope you will find it useful to have reflected on syllabus design in this issue.



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GUEST WRITER

Writing lessons by Prof. Mirta Cataldo

At the Teachers' Centre, we are carrying out research into the writing process. We are attempting to answer the question "How can we improve our students' motivation to write?", which is certainly an issue that worries us all. Particularly, we have been discussing how to design activities and how to sequence them in order to improve the quality of our students' compositions as we notice that generally there is little improvement on what our learners write no matter what course they are in. Here are some ideas contributed by Prof. Mirta Cataldo, who is already beginning to notice a qualitative change in her students' production.

Report on a writing lesson

Course: 3rd Year

Age group: twelve and thirteen-year-olds

Number of students: six

Coursebook: New Snapshot Intermediate, Pearson Longman.

Aim: to revise text organizers from unit 2.

Time allotted: one hour and 15 minutes.

Task 1: Pairwork

The students listened to a series of sounds recorded on tape. The sounds

told a story. After listening, we did a vocabulary web on the board with the students' contributions.

Task 2: Pairwork

The students wrote the story they had imagined. The vocabulary web was on the board to provide them with support during the task.

Task 3: Pairwork

The students exchanged their stories and wrote a different ending. They used chronological linkers (first, then, after that, next).

Task 4: Pairwork

The students wrote an interview to the main character in the story they had read.

As part of the lesson, Mirta worked with her students on the following tips:

- 1) Avoid “tired words” (frequently used words such as “good”, “bad”, “nice”, “went”, etc) and start using vivid verbs, adjectives and adverbs to bring more meaning to your sentences. The students are working on new word banks.
- 2) Set off the weak word alert. Stop when you are tempted to use “tired words” and go to your word bank.
- 3) Set up the situation: where the characters are, when the story is taking place, who is involved and what the problem is.

Achievements:

The students used to write short, choppy sentences. It took them some time to combine a group of short sentences into one or two larger ones. Some students used dialogues in their compositions to add a touch of humour.

Planning a focus on language

For a group of students in fifth year, Mirta planned the following didactic sequence to focus on ways of walking:

Task 1: The teacher models the action and writes on the board a sentence with a verb of walking.

Task 2: The students listen to the sounds of somebody walking in the way described in the previous task and say which verbs refers to it.

Task 3: The students complete a chart with verbs of walking. They use their dictionaries.

Task 4: The students write their own sentences using the verbs and adverbs that go with them. The verbs must be used in different tenses.

Task 5: The students work in groups and write cards for a miming game. They have to imagine that they are writing names of films. For example: “Trudging through the snow”.

Task 6: The whole class plays the miming game.

Task 7: The students write a story using as many verbs as possible.

Thank you, Mirta!

Highly recommended

“Pursuing Professional Development”

by **Andy Curtis, David Nunan and Kathleen Bailey** published by **Heinle & Heinle, Thomson Learning**



From left to right: Prof. Myrian Casamassima, M.A. , Prof. Andy Curtis, Ph.D., Prof. Marta Moure, M.A., Prof. Liliana Luna, M.A.

On August 26th , we were delighted to have Dr. Andy Curtis as our guest at the Asociación. He had kindly made room in his busy schedule to come and have a talk with us over a cup of coffee.

Dr. Curtis is the Director of the English Language Teaching Unit and Associate Professor at the

Faculty of Education at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is a very-well known ELT writer and has recently co-authored the book “Pursuing Professional Development” published by Heinle & Heinle. Dr. Curtis has a vast experience in strikingly different parts of the world such as the UK, the USA and

Canada, on the one hand, and China, on the other.

In this most enlightening talk, he shared with us his ideas about how to carry out reflective teaching systematically by means of practical tools such as journal writing and action research among many others that are thoroughly described and illustrated in his book. As regards journal writing, this is what he told us about the difficulty teachers find in sitting down to write the entries:

“Can you think without writing? Yes. Can you write without thinking? No. You come out of the lesson and you feel great and then you have to sit down and write why it was a good lesson or why it was a bad lesson. (...) We’ve found out that language teachers are not ideal people for keeping a journal. They want to come back and do the spelling, the grammar and the punctuation. No, just keep writing. So we’ve developed some techniques. (...) One of these things you use when you are baking, you set it, five or ten minutes and then you just begin to write. Then when it goes off, you stop. You don’t do the spelling or the grammar. You just leave it. When they start writing, they could write for hours, but they don’t have hours. We had this idea of a critical period for writing, when in a whole day you focus on something that

might have lasted just a few moments.”

Dr. Curtis acknowledged that the main problem worldwide is that teachers do not have enough time to engage in further training, but as teacher development is an ongoing process and we all need and wish to continue learning, it is necessary to develop new strategies for teachers to be able to cope with the demands of the modern world. Technology has certainly proved to be on our side as many resources are available for teacher development, particularly online courses.

Dr. Curtis is a charismatic and knowledgeable speaker with a great sense of humour. It was an honour for us to have him here as our guest.

Prof. Marta Moure with Dr. Andy Curtis



Teach me the grammar

But the WORD grammar

Vocabulary on the one hand and grammar on the other. Can there be something like word grammar? Yes. Every word tends to occur together with other words in certain patterns. This is called “word grammar”. The value of learning it lies in the fact that when we learn new vocabulary, we do not only learn words but we learn how they articulate with one another in high frequency patterns. This should make the task of remembering vocabulary much easier.

How does it work?

The main idea is to present vocabulary in collocations and in the patterns in which they are frequently used, displaying them in diagrams like the one on the right to show how words would appear in a sentence. This simple way of recording words helps learners see how to combine verbs, nouns and adjectives in phrases with a high potential for communication. This means we do not choose just anything to include in the patterns but we focus on the vocabulary with the highest frequency. Our students will learn new lexis and they will also learn how to frame sentences, something that we notice students

generally find difficult to do. The table below (Lewis & Hill, 1999; 88) teaches the word grammar of “bus”:

catch	early	
get	first	
miss	next	bus
wait for	last	
take	number	
	13/24	

Lewis, M. & Hill, J. (1999). *Practical Techniques*. London: Thomson & Heinle.

Here is another example for the word grammar of “book” ((Lewis & Hill, 1999; 104).

Finish	marvellous	book	on	the War
Borrow	fascinating		about	Mozart
Buy	boring			
Study	super			Jeffrey Archer
Struggle through	heavy		by	Jane Austen

We first need to identify the key word. Then we must think of patterns that are useful for the students and in keeping with their level. Lewis says that “The main study of word grammar is, therefore, likely to produce relatively small, but communicatively powerful sets of verb + noun, adjective + noun, and verb + adjective + noun combinations” (1993; 142).

Lewis, M. (1993). *The Lexical Approach*. London: Language Teaching Publications.

The advantages of word grammar

We have already pointed out some of the advantages. We should add some more:

- We avoid dealing with words in isolation, especially with

nouns as these are the grammatical categories we all tend to teach more often.

- We help students record and remember vocabulary as it is used as part of a sentence.
- Students have exposure and can practise word order, which is usually rather difficult for us, Spanish speakers.
- Students can explore combinations of words on the table and check which ones are possible and which ones are not.
- Tables can be kept open and new words can be added to the patterns as new vocabulary is encountered.

The Teachers' Centre wishes you all a happy

Teachers' Day

With special thanks to all the teachers that make up the team that meets every other Friday here at the Asociación for their will and cooperation:

Prof. Elena Durán

Prof. Cecilia Nunzio

Prof. Beatriz de Lombardi

Prof. Mirta Cataldo

Prof. María Antonieta Castagna

Prof. Grace Morrow

Prof. José María Pollari

Prof. Alba Fantana

Also with many special thanks to all of you for caring and sharing and for being part of this committed network of teachers working together in many different parts of our country.

'Tis too high

Come to the edge

We might fall

Come to the edge

So they came to the edge

And he pushed them

And they flew.

Apollinaire