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# Teaching Spanish: A Practical Guide

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## Vital Statistics

**Authors:** Rivers, Wilga, Azevedo, Milton M., and Heflin, Jr., William H.

**Copyright:** 1988

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**Title:** *Teaching Spanish: A Practical Guide*

**Edition:** Second

**Intended Users:** Future modern language teachers and practicing teachers at the high school or undergraduate level

## General Description

This book is part of a series of *Practical Guides* for foreign language teaching. Each chapter begins with a brief theoretical discussion; emphasis, however, is on practical applications. The book provides many examples of activities for developing and evaluating interactive foreign language communication. Within each chapter, there are assignments and topics for further discussion. There are also additional assignments per chapter at the end of the book.

*Teaching Spanish* has three major sections: "Communicating," "The Written Word," and "Across Modalities." Communicating includes chapters on speaking and listening; The Written Word covers reading and writing. The last section focuses on testing and assessment. In addition, there are two bibliographies, the ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines, and an alphabetical index of topics.

The authors maintain that language learning occurs through interaction; knowledge alone is not sufficient for communication. They, therefore, advocate the functional use of language. Furthermore, because language learning strategies vary from individual to individual, instructors must be flexible and "seek a well-rounded approach to language teaching." The

book provides a wide range of activities so that instructors may choose those that best suit their students' needs.

## Positive Features

A good reference book or a good textbook should make it easy to find specific information. *Teaching Spanish* has several features which are helpful to the reader. It has a detailed, well-organized Table of Contents which lists the three major sections, their chapters, and subtopics. For easy reference, the end notes are organized by chapter. A comprehensive Index facilitates cross-referencing and location of particular topics. In addition, countless cross-references appear throughout the text. For example, the chapter on testing ends with a reference list of testing procedures. Finally, initial-letter classifications (e.g., C for Communication, G for Grammar) help identify examples dealing with specific areas.

Another excellent feature of this book is its extensive Bibliographies. The General and Supplemental Bibliographies prove a valuable resource for additional information on a wide range of topics. The General Bibliography consists of those authors and materials referred to in the text; the Supplemental Bibliography lists additional readings in linguistics and the psychology of language learning. Combined, these bibliographies incorporate some of the most important writings in the field of foreign language instruction.

Although the authors subordinate phonology and syntax to teaching and testing, *Teaching Spanish* recognizes the importance of theory in language teaching. The authors briefly discuss the theoretical basis of some language teaching activities and evaluational procedures. Understanding the theoretical rationale is important to understanding language learning and language teaching.

The authors draw a clear distinction between language-use and language-getting. They stress the importance of letting students use what they know in interactive communication. From this perspective, they examine the strengths and weaknesses of specific language classroom activities. This type of analysis is very useful for beginning teachers. There is a tendency to teach as one was taught. Thoughtful analysis of teaching activities helps teachers avoid the mindless acceptance of traditional methods.

For those involved in teacher training, the book offers assignments which readily lend themselves to group discussion. For example, after presenting various types of dialogues and analyzing their discursive features, students are asked to assess the quality and appropriateness of dialogue discourse found in current textbooks. Such exercises give reality to abstract learning. Teachers who understand the relative value of textbook materials and exercises can be more critical and selective in their teaching.

## Limitations

When a book is well-written and well-organized, the reader can readily follow the authors' ideas. Cross-references are valuable for expanding and illustrating concepts. However, too many cross-references can be counter-productive. Moving from one part of the book to another, the reader quickly loses the train of thought. The text becomes tedious and uninteresting. This fact is particularly evident in the chapter on testing. This section contains no sample test items; instead, it refers to previous chapters. A look at page 320 to 323 reveals 13 references to other chapters. These pages also contain 11 references to end notes. In the Preface, the authors of *Teaching Spanish* state that the numerous cross-references are useful for "those who wish to consider aspects of language in a different order." Readability and cohesiveness should supercede providing for such a limited use.

Similarly, illustrative examples can clarify ideas, but, too many examples will defeat the purpose. Examining pages 127 to 133, I found 14 consecutive examples of grammar drills. In four of these instances, there was no transition between the preceding or the following text. The sheer number of continuous examples within the text interrupts the train of thought. Fewer examples

within the text with additional examples at the end of the section, chapter, or book would improve readability while retaining many relevant examples.

Discrete activities, in and of themselves, do not insure integrated language classroom experiences. The authors note in the Preface that the presentation of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in isolation is artificial. Though the authors occasionally mention how some language areas may be combined, they fail to present an integrated picture.

Inexperienced teachers confronted with the vast number of possible teaching and testing activities contained in *Teaching Spanish* may be confused as to how or when these could be used in the classroom. Introducing a multitude of classroom activities without general guidelines is akin to providing an inexperienced cook with all the ingredients for a cake yet not explaining quantities or cooking procedures. The experienced cook knows that by changing certain ingredients, and by increasing or decreasing quantities, it is possible to meet individual preferences or needs.

Effective teaching stems from a knowledge of language teaching and language learning and revolves around actual classroom experiences. Though, as the authors suggest, teachers should develop their own flexible teaching style, they must first be exposed to effective teaching and understand why certain activities are ineffective. Granted, there is no one correct way of teaching; there is evidence, however, that some methods are more effective than others.

In short, future teachers will benefit from *Teaching Spanish* if they are also exposed to hands-on activities. In addition, they will need to understand the theoretical and scientific rationale underlying language classroom activities. On the other hand, the book is an excellent resource for experienced Spanish teachers looking for greater instructional flexibility and alternative classroom activities.

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