USING AUTHENTIC MATERIALS FOR TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION IN A MEANINGFUL WAY

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Introduction

Choosing materials is a difficult task and instructors must be aware of many aspects before choosing specific material for their students. For example, if the level is appropriate, the activities meaningful, the material helpful for the students to reach the stated objectives, etc. However, there are other elements that are also important but not commonly represented in textbooks. For instance, the point that readings should resemble the real use of the language since students will eventually be exposed to authentic texts (texts not created for teaching purposes) outside of the class, among others. This aspect forms part of the investigation I have carried out in which I analyzed if theories or information established by experts are present (explicitly or implicitly) in the materials that are being
 sold in the market. These materials, although valuable, do not present a variety of authentic texts which integrate authenticity, meaningfulness, students' needs and interests. In my project I have applied instruments to obtain information about the kinds of texts the university students like and need to read.

Moreover, the level of the book we choose is relevant. We must make sure that the level really suits your students' needs. The problem lies in the fact that textbooks mention the level they were designed for, but many don't provide an explanation of what that level means. Due to this, the section of the teacher's guide I'm presenting is created based on the description the CEFR provided for A2 level students and it is specific to college courses. (See appendix 1 to see the CEFR guidelines).

By presenting this investigation, I intend to provide an insight for the professors who teach reading comprehension as well as those who would like to create or are in the process of creating materials for the improvement of the teaching-learning process of this skill. I have created a teacher's guide which is intended to be used in the Costa Rican context. This material will contain authentic texts that students can find in "real life".

Theoretical Framework

There are many theories that professors should read about and take into account when teaching. All that is needed is investigation, analysis, and application. I have researched some information provided by various authors which will provide insight for the use of reading comprehension materials. In this section of my project, you will find important citations and theories from various authors as well as comments and analysis I have provided in reference to the information researched.

Writing materials requires many aspects to consider such as layout, the organization of the text, the level for which it is intended, its usefulness, among others. But there is one aspect that I would like to give special attention to: the use of authentic texts (readings that were not created for teaching purposes) for teaching reading comprehension. My interest derives from my belief that students should be taught to understand readings like the ones they may eventually need or like to read in their context (outside the classroom) using the target language. Authenticity is an aspect that should not be set aside. Unauthentic texts (readings created for teaching purposes) don't frequently transmit culture with the same richness and are not as motivating as an authentic text. Several authors have approached this topic; I will now refer to the opinion of some of the authors in favor of using authentic texts.

Grellet and Swaffar said that "Authentic texts are vital; they motivate students, offer a real context, transmit the target language culture, and prepare students to read outside the classroom" (Barnett 145).

Another important insight is that "Simplifying, or 'doctoring up' an existing short story or description is therefore not only unnecessary but also is a disservice to students who are thereby deprived of original material with its natural redundancy, humor, wit, and other captivating features" (Brown 299).

One who agrees with Brown is Vincent who says " Too many graded Readers are pale imitations of original writing, in thin, stilted language, lacking all the linguistic, emotional, and aesthetic qualities that characterize real literature. A diet of simplified versions of great books can be demotivating" (212).

The previous authors have strong beliefs and defend the use of authentic texts. I must say that I agree with the authors when they refer to literature pieces that were adapted. If vocabulary is changed to make it simpler, than the effect of what is being transmitted in the text changes. It is a fact that many authors are against unauthentic texts and there are studies to demonstrate that using material created for native speakers has its advantages. One study carried out by Vigil is explained below.

> In reading, Vigil (1987) found significant differences in comprehension with beginning language students who read unedited authentic texts. Not only did their comprehension skills increase, but there were also improvements in oral and written language performance. The results of these and other studies indicate that we may be underestimating the positive effects of authentic texts on both listening and reading comprehension (Shrum & Glisan 117).

When teaching reading, we must consider all of the aspects mentioned above and our purpose or objectives. If our intention is to help our students read, then why are we simplifying

texts for them? Are they going to face simplified texts in real life? Will they be able to understand and enjoy authentic readings when they encounter them in non-academic environments? If students are not "trained" in class to face the kind of texts they will find outside the classroom, then how will they understand the cultural connotations? Will they even feel motivated to read anything in the target language? Wouldn't it be frustrating to face different kinds of texts for the first time and not know how to go about them? Well these are all questions we will have to find an answer for in order to help our students deal with real life situations.

If we, as teachers, could provide students with interesting and fun texts to read, our students will enjoy more and therefore acquire the language. In order to reach language acquisition students must be exposed to input and internalize it without even knowing (Krashen 10). Krashen states in his acquisition theory that "in order to acquire, two conditions are necessary. The first is comprehensible input containing $i + 1$ [i represents the student's current language competence and i+1 the next level of competence], … and second, a low or weak affective filter to allow the input 'in' "(33). Krashen also states that the following affective variables are important for acquisition: Motivation, self-confidence, and low anxiety (31). Having these conditions when teaching reading provides students with the chance to acquire the language unconsciously as they read. "Our intermediate students may find real texts, read for interest and pleasure, easier than our pedagogical materials. Moreover, if the above analysis is correct, it may be that free pleasure reading will result in more acquisition of the language" (Krashen 166). There are also a few requirements for optimal input established by Krashen: comprehensible, interesting/ relevant, not grammatically sequenced, quantity (enough), low filter level (this is met if the texts are comprehensible and interesting), and tools for conversational management.

In regards to Krashen's acquisition theory we can see that choosing the texts to be used in class is not a random process; In fact, we must be sure they meet the necessary standards. Both conversation and pleasure reading have the potential of meeting the requirements for optimal input for acquisition very well. We have reached the conclusion that an interesting conversation and reading something for pleasure, are excellent language lessons. This comes as no surprise to millions of people who have acquired language using only these "methods", and have acquired them very well (Krashen 167).

Having a variety of authentic texts interesting enough that students would like reading even in their native language and avoiding the great number of pre-reading and follow-up activities that accompany many texts, will then result in pleasure reading. This means a low affective filter, relevance, low anxiety, input with no grammar sequence, and comprehensible input (i+ 1) resulting then in acquisition of the target language.

Krashen has made it clear that the input must be relevant. To provide the students with relevant information, it is necessary to make our lessons meaningful and material we use for

them as well. We must always be aware of the fact that if students are exposed to materials or topics which are not appealing for them, then effective reading comprehension, in this case, will not take place. In addition, I would like to emphasize on the meaning of relevance, since it is such a crucial aspect. What does relevant input mean exactly? To answer this question I will refer to Ausubel who explains what meaningful learning is.

Meaningful learning …may be described as a process of relating and anchoring new material to relevant established entities in cognitive structure. As new material enters the cognitive field, it interacts with, and is appropriately subsumed under, a more inclusive conceptual system. The very fact that material is subsumable, that is, relatable to stable elements in cognitive structure, accounts for its meaningfulness (Brown, Language Learning and Teaching 80)

This can be applied to the use of authentic material. If we choose texts that contain aspects students can relate to themselves, such as their social context, their feelings, or the world they have created and believe they live in; then, students can find a connection with the text and reading can become interesting. We must also be aware of the necessity of keeping the reading activities meaningful as well. Ausubel's theory also refers to the fact that people keep in their long-term memory aspects which are meaningful to them, but fail to remember at a certain point aspects which were not significant. (Brown, Language Leaning and Teaching 82) So, if a student is taught the way one should skim a text, but doesn't explain why this strategy is a necessity, and the text used is not attractive, the student will probably fail to remember how to skim a text or the meaning of it. Providing a meaningful context is crucial for students to internalize the language, but if what Ausubel calls "rote leaning" (learning aspects in isolation) is what occurs in the class, then students are prone to forget everything they have learned. For example if teachers use a text and begin extracting specific grammar points, the meaning of reading is lost, and students will be focused on trying to understand the grammar point instead of reading for pleasure and learning to read. That is, the class will no longer be reading, it will be grammar-based. In the end we may find that students are reading texts which are adapted to be grammar sequenced and interest may be completely lost. Reading must be done meaningfully, and breaking up the text in pieces and isolating items will not provide students with meaningful learning. At a conference on reading; on August 23, 2006; Kate Cory-Wright said "Don't kill the reading text, recognize when it is dead". By this she meant that many teachers try to "take advantage" of a text as much as possible by focusing on grammar points, specific content and endless activities that students end up hating as well as the reading itself. She mentioned that we must know how to work on meaningful tasks and not overload the students with uninteresting activities. Ms. Cory-Wright's insight reflects Ausubel's meaningful learning theory, if we apply it to reading, in the sense that reading should be pleasant and the focus should not be shifted to the individual components of the text (see Ausubel's citation on previous page)

Another aspect to consider when using the material we choose is the various learning styles we can find in the classroom. There are various models that provide different categories of leaning styles: For example, one presented by Ricky Linksman, 1996; states that the learning styles are: Visual, Auditory, Tactile and Kinesthetic, which cannot be considered alone since each one should be linked to the brain hemispheric dominance (left or right). That is, according to this author, most people have one side of the brain more developed than the other due to various factors, and that side of the brain should be considered as well as the person's learning style when teaching. However, there are other proposals like the one proposed by Feldger and Henriques. They have stated the following learning styles: sensing and intuitive, visual and verbal, active and reflective, sequential and global, and inductive and deductive learners.(http://www.ncsu.edu/felder-public/Papers/FLAnnals.pdf) Another model is the one proposed, with many details, in the web page of Advanogy.com. They stated that there are seven different categories: visual, aural, verbal, physical, logical, social, and solitary. There are indeed many differences in these and other models; however, what's important is to keep in mind that we have many students in the class, and each one may have a different learning style. That is why we need to choose a variety of texts and teaching methods to approach reading comprehension. "The goal is a balanced teaching style, in all classes at all levels. Our hypothesis is that language instructors who adapt their instruction to address both poles of each of the five given dimensions should come close to providing an optimal learning environment for most (if not all) students in a class" (Feldger and Henriques 27)

Besides learning styles, we must also consider the reading techniques we plan to apply in the class. Brown (298) has proposed several principles for designing interactive teaching techniques which are very valuable for any reading course. His principles are the following:

1- In an interactive curriculum, make sure that you don't overlook the importance of specific instruction in reading skills.

2- Techniques should be intrinsically motivating.

3- Techniques should utilize authentic language and contents.

4- Encourage the development of reading strategies.

5- Include both bottom-up and top-down techniques.

6-Consider subdividing your techniques into pre-reading, during-reading, and after-reading phases.

7- Build in some evaluative aspect to your techniques.

In regards to the first principle, we must consider that assuming students know how to read is not the best thing to do. We must guide them and provide the time also for students to have silent reading. "Sustained silent reading allows students to develop a sense of fluency. Also silent reading then becomes an excellent method for self-instruction on the part of the learner" (Brown 298). The second principle takes us back to Ausubel and the importance of meaningfulness, and

Krashen and his affective variable necessary for a low affective filter and language acquisition. This is so since Brown emphasizes the necessity of choosing the right techniques and texts to make learning interesting for the students and provide learning experiences students can identify with. The third aspect, which is one of the main points of this project and referred to at the beginning of this section which refers to the importance and necessity of using authentic texts. The fourth and fifth principles are important because we do not intend for our student to read without guidance, we must help them find ways in which reading can be made easier and more productive. The sixth principle is a necessity because if a text is not introduced students may not be interested in them from the start. It is the teacher's duty to build curiosity and interest in any possible way. Also having students carry out any task as they read can help them improve their critical reading skills, like writing questions or short opinions on the margins as they arouse. The after reading phase is a must. It would be awkward to assign a reading and later do nothing with it. Debates are a good option, as well as role-plays, and many other activities. Of course the tasks will depend on the kind of text you bring to the class. The last principle has to do with assessing the students' reading comprehension. Brown says that reading is "totally unobservable" (300); therefore, we must refer to responses that indicate comprehension like doing, choosing, answering, condensing, conversing, etc. Due to this, I consider that the integration of skills is necessary so that students can show their understanding of a text, through the use of the other skills. For example, if students are to create a role-play about a certain story, they need to understand what they have read to carry out the task.

Finally, I will refer to the main points stated in this chapter with the purpose of finding facts that will lead me to the most accurate path for the realization of my project. First, authentic texts provide the students with a purpose for reading, cultural insight, and input to natural language use. Therefore, this will stimulate pleasure reading since students feel they are not reading to simply obtain a final grade. Thus, they will be reading for the same purpose they would in their native language. For students to enjoy the texts, they must feel identified with them, as Ausubel's meaningful learning theory suggests. The instructor must also be cautious in the selected tasks by considering Brown's principles for designing interactive reading techniques. However, if the teacher does not vary the different tasks and/or approaches to teaching in order to fit various learning styles, only a few learners would benefit, so it is relevant to teach in a variety of ways. Having accomplished all of the above, students will be highly motivated with a low-affective filter and would be enjoying their reading, which leads us back to Krashen, who states that reading for pleasure will result in acquisition of the target language. Considering all of the information stated above, teaching reading is not a simple task. However, as the instructor applies all of these relevant theories, he/she will notice that it becomes more simple as she/he gains experience.

This is so since the professor will be training himself/herself to teach in the most effective way with the most effective resources: authentic material.

Assessing existing textbooks and analyzing student needs

Assessing textbooks in the market

Reading, as one of the four basic skills, has been studied in detail by different linguists and many textbooks have been published with the aim of teaching reading comprehension to students of different ages. In this section I will present the textbooks with the best results of an evaluation of different kinds of textbooks sold in the market today. In regards to our context, the Universidad Nacional has been carrying out projects for a few years. There is some material being used by different fields for reading comprehension; however, these texts have not yet been evaluated by the corresponding language experts in the university. There are also five books in the "Biblioteca Joaqín García M." three of them published at "Euna", Heredia, Costa Rica, and the other two published at "EUNED", San José, Costa Rica. I have analyzed these five books and eleven others mostly published in he USA (see bibliography for the list of books).
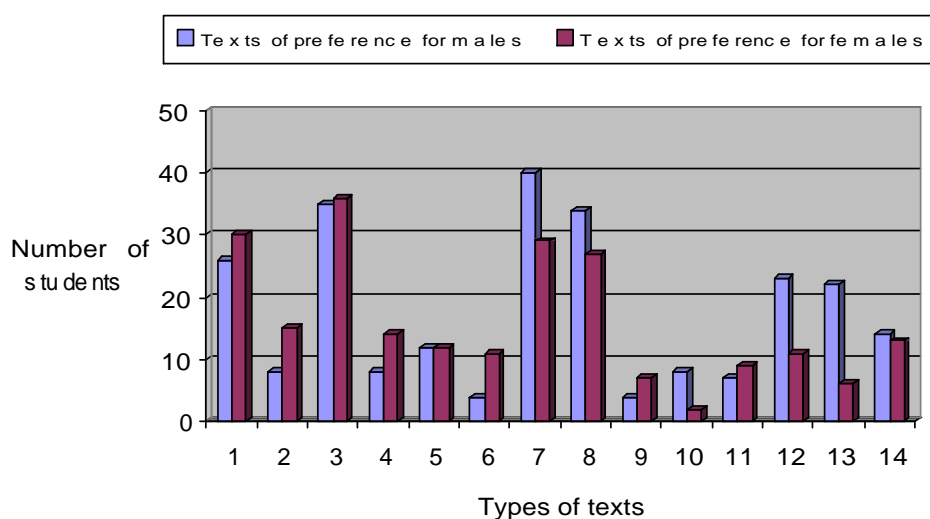
Textbooks with the most positive results based on the instrument applied (see appendix 2)

To summarize the findings of the textbook evaluations, I would like to mention the two textbooks with the best results in considerations to the aspects in the instrument (see appendix 2). These books are The Holt Reader and Strategic Reading. The Holt Reader presents texts which are authentic pieces of literature. It includes short stories, poems, essays, speeches, and a play. It has many activities in which the students need to use their critical thinking skills and really interact with the text. It also has a section where students can relate what they have read to their own lives. The disadvantage I found was that it doesn't include texts different to famous literature pieces; so variety in the sense of including songs, jokes ,etc. is not present. Other consideration is that this textbook focuses only on the American culture, doesn't include the four skills, or all learning styles, and it isn't based on the CEFR guidelines to choose the readings. On the other hand, although Strategic Reading, doesn't focus on literature pieces or any authentic material, though it has one major advantage in comparison with the rest: it provides the students with meaningful varied tasks, there is an inclusion of cultural diversity, grammar is not taught explicitly, it promotes interaction, and the majority of the topics could seem interesting for young adults and adults. The main problem with this material is that the texts are not authentic and most of them, although interesting, are magazine-like articles. Another aspect is they were not chosen based on the CEFR guidelines and the listening skill is excluded from the skills students must use in the exercises.
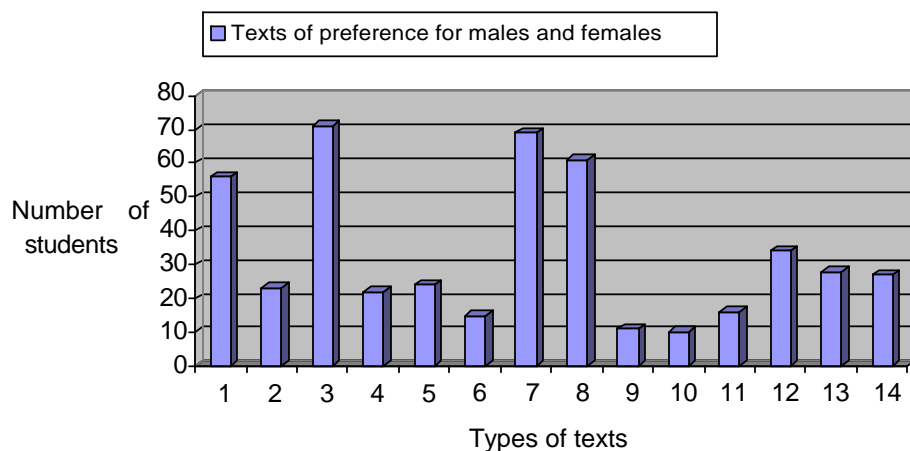
Results of the needs analysis obtained from the instrument applied (see appendix 3)

In order to choose the most appropriate texts for the population of this project, I carried out a needs analysis survey to find out what students like and need to read in their native language. In this way, my material will be created considering students' real interests and needs. The instrument was applied to students at UNA taking reading courses which are a requirement for their career. The students' ages range between 18 and 35 years old. 55 males, and 45 females for a total of 100 surveys.

The following results represent the top five choices of the male and female students:

The following graph shows the results obtained from both females and males together.

Types of texts

1-Novels
2- Poems
3- Short stories
4- Self-help books
5- Songs
6- Cards
7-Newspaper articles
8- Magazine articles
 9-Horoscopes
10-Advertismets
11-Movie critics
12-Comic Strips
13- Jokes
14- Others

Male options:

Historical facts, science fiction, erotic stories, sports, true stories, art, documentaries, information about cars, theology.
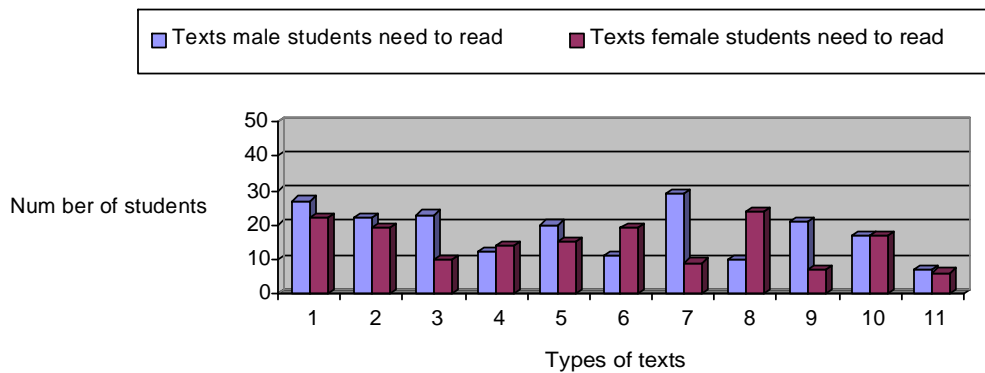
Female options:

The Bible, cultural aspects, plays, mythology, philosophy, math, Historic facts, reflections, art, technology

I can conclude that students do like reading articles from the newspaper and magazines, but may feel demotivated because they like other types of texts as well and don't find them in the textbook they use. In other words, they receive too much input of the same kind and this can make reading boring and the learning process less effective.
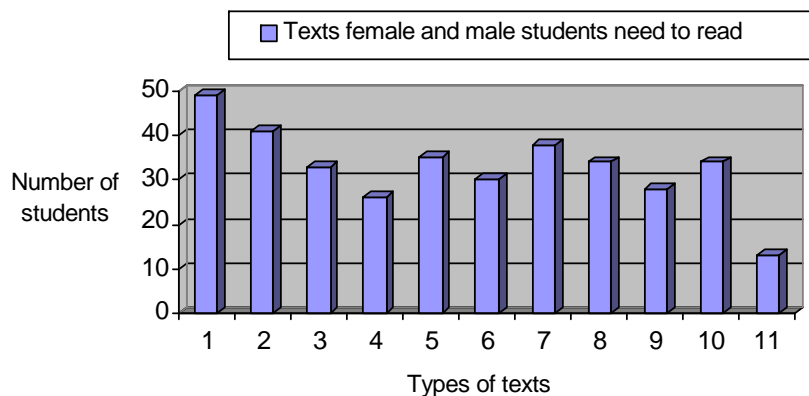
I have separated the information provided by males and females since I consider that they have different choices. Therefore, if we have a class where the majority of the students are from one particular gender, then we must choose most of texts considering the students' gender and what they may like more. Of course the professor can prepare a specific needs analysis instrument and collect information on his/her group's particular interests and needs.

The following graphs show the information collected from the same students described above. However, in this case the data refers to the top five texts students frequently read due to necessity.

The following results represent the top five choices of the male and female students:

The following graph shows the results obtained from both females and males together.

Types of texts

1-Nutritional information on food labels

2-Brochures about health topics

3-Brochures with information about products

4-Brochures with information about hotels and tourist sites

5-Menus

6- Instructions to prepare food

7- Instructions to build or put things together

8-Instructions to use daily products such as creams or shampoo

9-Manuals to use electrical appliances

10- Friendship or love letters

11- Others

Male options: The Bible, academic material for their studies, brochures of art expositions, warning signs

Female options: Academic material for their studies

The graphs presented above clearly show that students do read magazine and newspaper articles, which are among their top preferences. However, there are also other types of texts students prefer to read and marked as their five favorites.

Conclusion

A book is never the main focus of a course since learning is not based on following a textbook, but it will provide the teacher with the tools to carry out his/her class successfully. It is the instructor's job to provide a good teaching-learning environment and to promote motivation within the group, which cannot be done with any book on its own, but a very good one would indeed be of great value. That is why it would be very useful to have a teacher's guide that could simplify teaching by applying such relevant information in a single textbook.

Moreover, although the basis of a course may be reading, we can integrate speaking, writing, and listening. Instructors should not be afraid to make a change and create material they consider appropriate for their students. It is not a requirement to accept the textbooks offered in the market, except when these materials are mandatory in their institution where they work. However, even in this case, the professors can include additional readings and tasks or modify the ones presented in the textbook.

It is a necessity to create materials that are appropriate for Costa Rican students, where students are exposed to texts they will eventually encounter in "real life" and learn how to understand them. We, professionals in the field, must continuously try to find the best way to teach and share our experiences, as well as our materials in order to receive feedback and provide others with everything we have learned. We must never stop creating materials and contributing to the field of language teaching to increase the quality of education in our country. We should never forget that we influence and form part of education in Costa Rica in one way or another. Therefore, we must teach our children, teenagers, young adults, and future English teachers the best way that we can and transmit, create, and improve all that is possible for the benefit of the country.

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Appendix 1

Example of the Unit Elaborated

Section 1: Love Match

Objectives:
- To identify adjectives and their usage.
- To use adjectives in context.
- To understand simple texts with basic information

Functions:
- Comparing people's characteristics
- Describing oneself
- Describing an ideal soul mate

Procedure:

Pre-Reading

1- The students will complete a word map with the adjectives they consider describe them the best.

While-Reading

2- The students will read the personal ads and underline the words they think describe the people who placed the ad.

Post-Reading

3- The students imagine they had to choose one person from the ads presented. They will read each one carefully and decide who would be the best date for him/her and the reason(s) for it.

4- The students will write their own personal ad. They can use the information they wrote in the word map. They should include their description and a description of the person they would like to date.

4.1- (Optional) Tell the students to cut their ad along the dotted line. The men in the

class are asked to close their eyes while women place their ads on the board and/or walls. Then the men are asked to place their ad under the one that best fits the requirements. The ads are read and returned to the corresponding students.
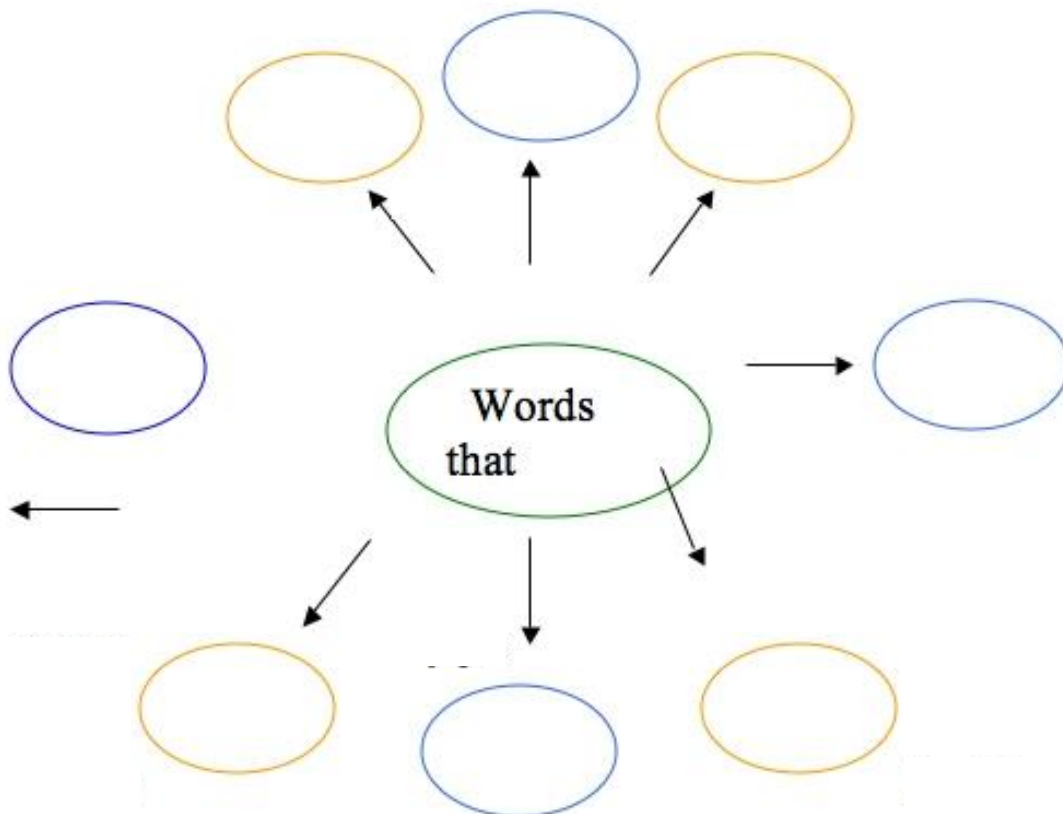
5- The students will assess their own work using the instrument provided.

Section 1: Love Match

Pre-Reading: How would you describe yourself to someone from the opposite sex? 1-

Look at the word map. Complete the circles with words that best describe you.

Words
that

Strategies For Better Reading

Knowing how words are used, the function, and word order can make reading easier. When reading try to identify words by their function to help you understand a text better.

2- Read the personal ads and underline the words you think describe the people who placed the ad and circle the words used to describe the kind of person they are looking for.

Source: Personal, Classifieds. The Tico Times. Nov. 7, 2003.

901
Men Seeking Women

DANCING and Romantic Maybe more than you ever dreamed of. Handsome eligible 6' Canadian man in 40's seeks hot dance partner in 30's skilled in multiple swing & latin dance styles. Visiting CR Jan 20 – Feb 9'04. Photo exchange & email:
drummerboy@myexcel.ca

RETIRED Canadian wishes to meet attractive, caring lady 25-50 for a fun 2-wk vacation with the hope of making it permanent. Write Box "R"
   The Tico Times Apdo 4632-1000 or email
svwalm@hotmail.com picture appreciated but not essential

US MILLIONAIRE, 40, Handsome, smart, funny, considerate, seeks girlfriend & possible wife, 20-25, beautiful, smart, sexy, kind. Some English & photo required. Will be in CR January 2004.
Ideapro@earthlink.net

902
Women Seeking Men

LADY 24 yrs, single, w/daughter, wishes to meet North American man, 35-50 yrs.
   CR (506) 240-2727 Luvy.

LOOKING FOR someone? Honest female, bilingual, University student, seeks gentleman. Would you like to know more? E-mail cleo2jones@netscape.net

TICA LADY wants to meet N.A. gentleman any age for serious relationship.
Aayyss@costarricense.cr

Post-Reading: Choosing a date…

3- Imagine you had to choose one person from the ads presented. Read each ad again and decide who would be the best date for you.

3A- Mark your answer. The best date for me is…

<u>Men</u>   <u>Women</u>

____ Canadian man in his 40's   ____ 24 year old lady
____ Retired Canadian   ____ Honest female
____ US Millionaire   ____ Tica lady

3B- This person is the best of the three options because….

_____

_____

_____

_____

4- Imagine you are looking for your soul-mate and you are gong to send your information to a local newspaper. Create your own personal ad. You may use the information you wrote in the word map in the pre-reading section on page 1. Include your description and a description of the person you would like to date.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

5- Analyzing my work

Date: _____
I liked exercise _____ on page_____
because_____
I think it was easy for me to _____
_____

   I had problems with exercise _____ on page _____
because_____

   Check the options that apply to you:

_____ I understood the texts on page 2
_____ I learned to identify words that describe people.
_____ I learned to use words to describe myself and others.

I think I need more practice in _____
_____