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12-1-1996

Book Review: Mejor Dicho

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Recommended Citation

Lee, Lina. Book Review: Mejor Dicho. *Hispania*, 79(4), 822-823, December 1996. <https://doi.org/10.2307/345361>

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Mejor Dicho* by Carmen García and Emily Spinelli

Review by: Lina Lee

Source: *Hispania*, Vol. 79, No. 4 (Dec., 1996), pp. 822-823

Published by: American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/345361>

Accessed: 31-05-2017 17:59 UTC

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and work-book undergirds the hands-on approach to language practice. Students take surveys, formulate lists, fill out charts and grids, observe comics and photos, which stimulate conversation.

Tertulia's goals are stated in the preface and are attainable. The text aims to: (1) enrich the learner's vocabulary through structured and meaningful practice; (2) provide tools for conversational management; (3) provide students with stimuli for oral production; and (4) develop students' knowledge of culturally relevant content areas. Goal two allows students to experience and practice multiple entries and exits from conversations, transitions and conversational fillers. Goal four expands the students' knowledge about cultural topics and builds on it in stages. This pushes students beyond only expressing clichés through exposure to well-chosen readings, realia, listening samples, and conversational models.

The authors exploit commonalities and differences between the Hispanic culture(s) and Anglo-American culture as added cultural information becomes fodder for conversation. Only occasionally did my students experience any "breakdown" with the cultural materials. These moments were remedied with further contextualization of the situation by the instructor. The readings are heavily drawn from Peninsular sources. However, the text is international in character. The origins of the readings and realia do not define them. Casting the Spanish-speaking cultures in their global context is ideal for today's *postmodern* student that engages a broad world and whose conversations do not know the limits of national borders. The international orientation is evident in the author's choice of selections and activities, as well as through the reference maps of Spanish-speaking countries, regions and the complete world map. The readings and realia are diverse, and they are solid examples of well-spoken and -written Spanish. Additionally, students are exposed to some dialectical variants, such as the *voseo* and *vosotros* forms.

The text is easy to follow. Each chapter has three *etapas*. To introduce the topic, there are visuals that function as advance organizers or activators. The first stage includes a section called *Hablando se entiende la gente* that introduces the theme, vocabulary, and grammar for the chapter. Here the student finds model expressions and activities for participating in "conversations" guided by the exercises. In the first *etapa* there are activities accompanied by an

audio cassette that introduces new material. These listening vignettes are brief, well-paced, and authentic. The remainder of the first *etapa* and the second has abundant contextualized activities that move from the specific to more open-ended. There are matching exercises, sequenced activities, self-tests, quizzes, surveys, role-plays and many questions. The text has enough activities that an instructor can pick and choose without undermining *Tertulia's* approach. The third *etapa* is based on a journalistic reading with pre- and post-reading activities, which includes vocabulary work and nurtures speaking. For instructors that want to expand these topics further, optional assignments for reading and writing are available. Although the title of the text targets one skill, the authors understand the connectivity of speaking to the other skills. True to the definition of a *tertulia*, the book offers a *whole* language experience within the context of multiple conversations.

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García, Carmen and Emily Spinelli. *Mejor Dicho*. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1995. ISBN 066928906X (pbk). 307 pp.

Mejor Dicho, an advanced-level conversation textbook, focuses on a functionally-based approach to develop students' oral discourse skills through presentations of cultural information, linguistic awareness, and situational activities. Perhaps inspired by the ACTFL proficiency guidelines, the topic of each chapter is based on a particular functional skill. For instance, Chapter 1, "Las descripciones y las emociones," teaches how to describe people, places, and things in the present tense, and Chapter 11, "Las hipótesis y las acusaciones," deals with hypothesizing and how to react to an accusation using the subjunctive. A student tape, instructor's edition of the text, and tapescript accompany the text, although none of them was supplied to the reviewer.

The text contains a preliminary chapter and twelve regular chapters. Each of the twelve chapters follows in the same sequence: *Asimilación cultural*, *Primera situación*, *Segunda situación*, and *Estructuras*. Each chapter begins with a brief geographical and cultural orientation with question-answer exercises concerning a particular country or region and a useful linguistic information with dialectical variations commonly used in the speech patterns of the country. In addition to cultural components,

each chapter provides two situations, *Primera* and *Segunda situación* with high-frequency expressions for functions in the *Así se dice* sections, followed by two listening passages with pre- and post-listening activities.

Following each listening activity is a *Para su información* section illustrated with photos, and a reading passage which allows students to explore Hispanic cultural phenomena, behaviors, and values. Occasionally, there are authentic reading materials. One of the positive attributes of the text is the presentation of *Técnica de comprensión* which teaches practical listening strategies to facilitate the listening process. As advertised, the actual conversations, interviews, news reports, announcements, and other types of authentic input expose students to extended discourse with a wide range of accents, language, and cultural contexts.

Finally, a review of essential grammatical structure related to each chapter's language functions is provided in *Estructuras*. The authors encourage students to use the information in *Estructuras* while completing exercises throughout the chapter. Included at the end of the text are worthwhile maps of Mexico, Central America, South America, and Spain. For quick reference, a grammatical index, and two useful appendixes with the list of common weights and measures, and an introduction to business correspondence in Spanish are included at the end of the text.

The most distinguished feature of the text is that the authors present a text that focuses on a learner-centered approach with a variety of situational activities for pairs and groups in each chapter so that students can use the language in a creative and practical way to improve their communicative skills. The authors have done a good job of incorporating cultural and linguistic information into each chapter as well. Occasionally, the activities require students to incorporate the cultural information to contexts which students are likely to encounter in a Spanish-speaking environment. However, this reviewer found some of the questions unclear and difficult (116–17). Perhaps examples of how to use *Dichos y refranes* might be helpful to students prior to the exercises. In addition, the exercises of *Práctica y conversación* in the section *Primera situación* should be more open to allow students to express ideas with more than the one possible answer for each question. Nevertheless, the exercises are generally very interesting and succeed in engaging students in speaking and interacting with each other.

The authors suggest their book for advanced students; however, there are occasional cases where one might find the grammatical structure in the *Estructuras* section not too advanced. For instance, there are four pages of information on how to ask questions (12–15), not a difficult matter in Spanish. And the exposition of the use of adjectives seems unnecessarily long and basic, for students of Spanish at an advanced level, with examples like *bajo(a)*, *alto(a)*, or *pequeño(a)* (21). Perhaps instead of basic explanations, vocabulary for specific content areas could be added so that students could gain lexical knowledge while developing higher levels of language proficiency. Overall, *Mejor dicho's* notable strength is that it emphasizes the intergration of culture and language learning through simulated and creative activities and is designed to progress smoothly from an easy level to a more difficult level toward the end of the book. The text will certainly help students improve their speaking skills.

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Tamarón, Marqués de, editor. *El peso de la lengua española en el mundo*. Madrid and Valladolid: Fundación Instituto de Cuestiones Internacionales y Política Exterior, Fundación Duques de Soria and Universidad de Valladolid, 1995. ISBN 84-7762-547-6. 285 pp.

This volume contains six essays which highlight the importance of the Spanish language in world affairs and global communication. The authors include two philologists, two diplomats, a historian, and an engineer. Documentation in the articles is relatively sparse, consisting primarily of references to newspapers, popular magazines, and publications of international agencies, although some scholarly publications are also cited.

The collection begins with "El papel internacional del español" by the Marqués de Tamarón (13–75). According to that author, the pressing issue addressed by the collection of articles begins with Nebrija: "¿Es siempre la lengua compañera del imperio?" (13). His own view, however, suggests something quite different: "...ese nuevo matrimonio entre imperio propio y lengua ajena" (22). The author refers to the use of English as a lingua franca throughout the world, and he predicts that by the first decades of the next century, the major Asian economies of China and Japan will constitute the dominant force throughout the world. Asians and Ameri-