# AMERICAN TOPICS

*A Reading-Vocabulary Text for Speakers of English as a Second Language*

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for Speakers of English as a Second Language

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*This book is dedicated to the people who assisted me most:*
*My mother,*
*Lois A. Lugton, who inspired this project,*
*and my wife,*
*Borinquen Lugton, who helped me keep it going.*

# *Preface*

*American Topics* is intended for students of English as a second language at or above the intermediate level. Each of the fifteen chapters centers on some aspect of American life. Some present opinion; some provide factual perspective. All have been planned around contemporary issues of concern to older adolescents and adult students, and all have been especially written or adapted for this volume.

Language learning can be fun—it has the obligation to be interesting. With this in mind, the essays in this book were picked for provocative reading. Because today's student cares about his world, there are controversial issues, the kind discussed each day in the press and popular magazines. These topics range from pollution to marriage, from ecology to wildlife management. But there are also themes in a lighter vein—popular music, food, and sports. The chapters are all informative; many are consciousness raising. This is a book that can be used by students in schools overseas as well as in America.

To stimulate interest and motivate discussion, each chapter presents pictures, a map, or other visuals, and concludes with a set of language exercises that cover the following: (1) questions for oral response, (2) vocabulary, (3) synonyms and antonyms, (4) prepositions and other structure words, (5) word-form practice, (6) idioms and special expressions, (7) reading comprehension, (8) composition topics, and (9) dictation. The text provides enough material for a reading-vocabulary class that meets from three to five hours a week for fifteen weeks. A class with fewer weekly meetings can, of course, also use this text.

The aim of this book is the development in students of an active, not passive, command of English, and the essays and lessons have been selected and arranged with this goal in view.

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# *Introduction*

## Guidelines for the Teacher

These materials are designed for the intermediate level, a transition phase in language learning when the student moves from the rigidly controlled work of the beginners' class with its restrictions on syntax and vocabulary toward a less structured approach in which the ability to ask questions, participate in discussions, read unadapted material, and write with comparative ease is assumed. This is a critical stage in language learning when the student must evolve from a halting speaker to a fluent conversationalist, with reading, writing, and comprehension skills to match—a crucial transformation.

Progress at this stage can be greatly facilitated if the presentation of materials is keyed by the teacher to the language capability of his students, this capability being quite variable, as we have seen, at the intermediate level. With a less proficient group, a more controlled approach is desired. As proficiency improves, controls can be gradually relaxed. What is needed are exercises that can be varied so as to progressively increase the level of challenge and difficulty. *American Topics* provides this flexibility. For teachers unfamiliar with the technique, the following suggestions are provided as general guidelines to the use of the readings and exercises in this text.

## Reading

Apart from an occasional passage of unusual complexity, there is no reason to have a selection read aloud in class.* In fact, that is a misuse of class time. Reading is a silent, receptive activity—the process of getting meaning from the printed word. It is better to have the students prepare each story as an out-of-class assignment. This develops good reading habits too, for in resolving comprehension difficulties on their own, students acquire self-reliance. And they more rapidly transfer to English the reading skill they possess in their first language, that of reading directly for meaning. They should mark difficult concepts and structures in the margin of the text for questions in class later on (if these are not anticipated by the teacher when the reading is introduced). Any residual difficulties in comprehension will clear up when the students do the oral and written exercises at the end of the chapter.

Some techniques do make reading easier. To begin with, students should read the selection several times to grasp the meaning as a whole, without pausing to look up every unfamiliar word in the dictionary. Looking up words at this point will simply obscure the overall picture and immerse the student in a mass of disconnected detail.

Secondly, the meaning of many words can be guessed if the reader uses his general knowledge of the subject and fits together related information from the surrounding text. A phrase here, a sentence there, define, restate, summarize, add details, or in some way clarify the passage. Such context clues, deliberately inserted by the writer to make his meaning clear, abound in these selections. Students should be taught to find and understand them. For instance:

A. Do you like *coq au vin*, a chicken and wine dish from France?

B. The pioneer family had already traveled a long distance. They and all their belongings were packed in a *covered wagon* which was horse drawn and could only travel six miles a day.

One need not be an expert on French cooking to understand *coq au vin*, so explicitly is it defined in Example A. In Example B, the references to *travel, horse drawn,* and *six miles a day* clearly mark *covered wagon* as a slow moving vehicle of some kind. There is no need for stu-

* The exception to this rule are the chapter prefaces which are to be read in class as part of the Preview activity.

dents to skip past unfamiliar expressions. Enough can be inferred about these words from the context for the reader to move on with an acceptable degree of comprehension. Application of this technique should be encouraged by the teacher using examples from each reading assignment until the students can apply the method automatically.

Context clues, though helpful, cannot clarify every word. For a precise definition, the student must use a dictionary, but hopefully not a bilingual edition. That practice should be discouraged. Looking for a native-language equivalent for every English word (and writing it interlinearly in the text) inhibits bilingualism, retards vocabulary building, and makes the student first-language dependent for a long time. On the other hand, the monolingual English dictionary (any of the many pocket-size versions will do) provides not only a definition but synonyms, antonyms, and other useful information. But be sure the students understand how to use the dictionary, how to look up words and interpret the abbreviations in the entry. A unit is provided in the appendix for dictionary practice. Many teachers find a review of this section helpful at the beginning of the semester.

## Lesson Plan

Organize the treatment of each chapter into three broad divisions—*Preview, Practice,* and *Review*—to be spread over the total time available in the week for that chapter. The *Preview* is the introductory phase when the new selection is scanned for vocabulary and structure. Have the students look through the reading in class, paying particular attention to the pictures and the preview paragraphs which preface each chapter. Your purpose at this stage is to familiarize the students with the subject matter and motivate them to do the reading assignment. In the *Practice* sessions, which should be spread over several class periods, go through the reading assignments to check for comprehension, and do the oral drills and exercises. The *Review* is the final phase. This should not be a mere repetition of exercises already done, but something new, at a higher level of difficulty. It should resemble "real" language activities as much as possible.

Remember that pace and variety are important. Practice all the language skills by including different types of activities in each lesson. Intersperse controlled drills with free discussion, seatwork with boardwork, students working singly with students in groups.

The following weekly plan provides variety.

## Weekly Lesson Plan

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **I**<br>**PREVIEW**<br>**First Day** | 1. Question and answer drill using the pictures.<br>2. Discussion or question and answer drill using the chapter preface. | 5–10 minutes<br><br>5 minutes |
| **II**<br>**PRACTICE**<br>**Several Days** | 1. Questions for Oral Response (Include line-by-line questions of this type in the initial and each succeeding day until the chapter has been covered.<br>2. Reading Comprehension<br>3. Vocabulary Development<br>4. Vocabulary<br>5. Synonyms<br>6. Word-form Chart<br>7. Word-form Practice<br>8. Prepositions<br>9. Idioms | 15 minutes<br><br>5–10 minutes<br>10 minutes<br><br>5–10 minutes |
| **III**<br>**REVIEW**<br>**Final Day** | 1. Special Activity<br>Skit, debate, discussion<br>2. Dictation<br>3. Quiz | 5–10 minutes<br><br>5–10 minutes<br>10 minutes |

## Preview: Using the Pictures

The pictures provide a great deal of information at a glance. They not only keynote the story line but also illustrate vocabulary. Use them as the focal point for questions. Since you will want to practice structure as well as vocabulary, many variations are possible. But the Preview lesson, whatever its focus, should be carefully planned beforehand, with a specific structure and set of lexical items in mind.

Ask for the name, function, location, number, size, color, use, value, purpose, or whatever else is illustrated in the picture, writing the new words on the blackboard. Have the students copy the words, brief definitions, synonyms, and the like in their notebooks.

This question practice can be conducted at several levels of difficulty depending on the proficiency of the class. For example:

*Method 1*

| | |
|---|---|
| Referring to the picture, the teacher asks a question, introducing a vocabulary item. | How many *baskets of shrimp* do you see? |
| Student | I see three *baskets of shrimp*. |

The practice continues with the teacher asking similar questions about other objects in the picture.

*Method 2*

| | |
|---|---|
| Referring to the picture, the teacher gives the vocabulary item and the question word. | *baskets of shrimp/how many* |
| Student A (composes the question) | How many *baskets of shrimp* do you see? |
| Student B (responds) | I see three *baskets of shrimp*. |

*Method 3* (advanced)

A. The teacher puts a short list of words relating to the picture on the board. Using these words, students take turns composing questions and calling on other students to answer. In this method, the teacher remains largely silent, monitoring the exchange and supplying help when it is requested.

B. In another variation, the students write out the questions and exchange papers with a neighbor who writes the answers. Papers are returned to the owners for correction.

C. In still another variation, as follow-up to any of the above or as a quiz later on, the students, using the words on the board with books open to the picture, write questions. To continue the practice in structure and vocabulary, they can answer their own questions or exchange with another student. The papers are corrected and graded by the teacher. If desired, this exercise can be structured by restricting grammar and vocabulary in some way: to count questions using "how many," to ownership questions using "whose," to location questions using "where," etc.

## Preview: Using the Chapter Prefaces

Each reading is preceded by a paragraph or two of background information. When the picture practice has ended, the chapter preface can be read in class with key statements selected for discussion. For instance, in the introduction to Chapter One is the statement, "Every country has a food specialty of its own." Ask the students to agree or disagree with this statement and justify their opinion. Have them name their national dishes, and list them on the board. If the class is sufficiently proficient, this information can be turned into a question-response practice, such as the following:

| *Student—Question* | *Student—Answer* |
|---|---|
| What is your national dish? | My national dish is . . . . . |
| How is your national dish prepared? | My national dish is prepared from . . . . . , . . . . . , and . . . . . |
| What foods are served with your national dish? | The foods served with my national dish are . . . . . and . . . . . |
| What foods are popular in the U.S.? | The popular foods in the U.S. are . . . . . , . . . . . , and . . . . . |

For more advanced classes, discussion questions such as, "How does a dish achieve regional or national popularity?" and "Why is a dish popular in one country and not another?" would also be appropriate. Each of the chapter prefaces lends itself to treatment of this kind.

## Practice

At the next class, ask the Questions for Oral Response. These take the student through the text line by line. They should not be answered with a response read directly from the book. That would be pointless. A better technique is as follows: The teacher asks the question (or gives a cue). All the students glance at their books, formulate the response, and then look up at the teacher, eyes off the text. A student is called on to give the answer.

As with the picture practice, this exercise can also be done in several

ways. Begin with Method 1, then move to Methods 2 and 3 as the class becomes more proficient.

*Method 1*

| | |
|---|---|
| Teacher reads a question from the Questions for Oral Response. | Who built a new nation? |
| Student glances at appropriate page in text for information, then looks up and responds. | The immigrants built a new nation. |

*Method 2*

| | |
|---|---|
| Teacher reads a line directly from the *text* and gives a question word. | The immigrants built a new nation. Who? |
| Student A (composes the question) | Who built a new nation? |
| Student B | The immigrants built a new nation. |

The teacher might continue the drill by repeating the same line with a different question word (such as *what*), or by going on to the next line in the text.

*Method 3* (advanced)

| | |
|---|---|
| Student A reads a line from the text. | Jazz belongs to the people. |
| Student B composes a question. | What belongs to the people? |
| Student C answers the question. | Jazz belongs to the people. |
| Student D creates a new question from the original line. | Whom does jazz belong to? |
| Student E responds. | Jazz belongs to the people. |

## The Other Exercises

The synonym, vocabulary, word-form and verb exercises, which require prior study, should be written first. Then they can be done as oral drills. A word of caution. Before assigning the fill-in exercises that use word lists, tell the students to keep their options open. A word from the list may appear to fill the blank only to be needed for a sentence later on. Some shifting around of words is to be expected.

## Review

In the *Review*, the students should have a chance to put into practice what they have learned. Turn each of the stories into a skit or role play of some kind, with students extemporizing on their version of the topic —ordering a meal in a restaurant, counseling a married couple, planning a vacation. A debate with the class taking sides on a controversial issue is excellent practice.

## Composition

The final measure of language learning is the student's use of vocabulary in meaningful communication of his own. The composition topics are designed to tie together the student's interests and experience with what he has studied in the reading. Have students use the new vocabulary in writing of their own. Sometimes a list of key words is provided by the teacher.

## Dictation

A dictation is provided at the end of each chapter to follow the oral practice and written homework. It tests aural comprehension and the ability to write correctly what is said. It also tests retention, spelling, and syntax.

Sentences for dictation should be practiced in one class and given at the next. The teacher should speak in a normal voice, should not read slowly, word by word, and should not repeat the sentence more than three or four times. Feel free to change some of the words to add an element of surprise.

Here are three variations to the straight dictation. The first is the dicto-comp. From the reading, the teacher selects a paragraph which contains about 100 words. Read this paragraph to the class several times. The students listen carefully. After the last reading, the students write the paragraph as they remember it, staying as close as possible to the original. They should not write while the teacher is reading but must

wait until the reading is finished and the paragraph understood. This exercise combines dictation with original composition since the student must create to fill in memory gaps.

In another variation, the teacher selects an incident from the story and presents it to the class in an abbreviated form. The students are asked to recreate the episode supplying all the missing details.

Still another variation uses the Questions for Oral Response. These will have been practiced ahead of time and are familiar to the class. The teacher asks the questions; the class writes the questions and the answer.

## Follow-Through Activities

Reading skill is acquired by reading—extensive reading of all kinds. Intensive class exercises like these should be followed up by out-of-class reading of some kind. Novels, short stories, and plays are all readily available in paperback. A class play or a book report make suitable end-of-semester activities. Helping students make a long range plan for outside reading would be, perhaps, the most appropriate way to conclude this course.

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