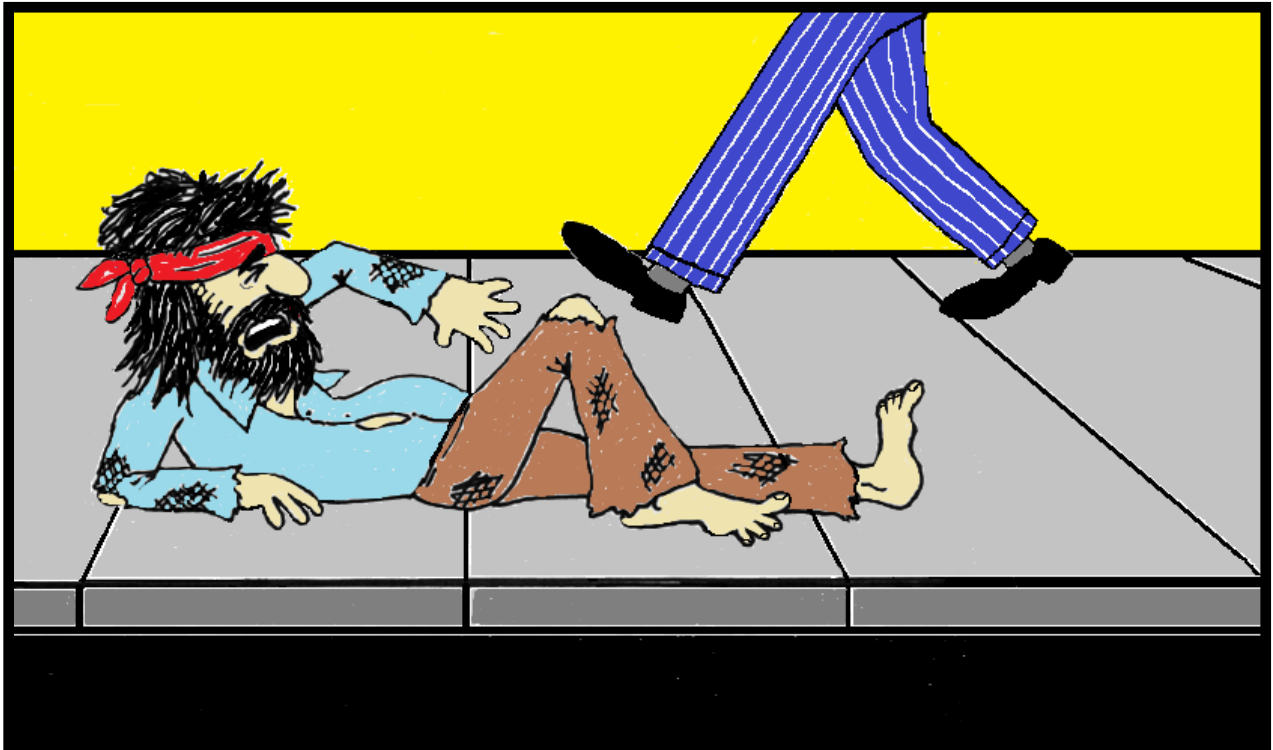


# **EL CUENTO TRAGICO DE MARK**

A Student Story and Teacher Training Focusing on the  
***If + Past Perfect Subjunctive + Conditional Perfect Structure***

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# THE TRAGIC TALE OF MARK (AND HOW KIRSTEN RESCUED HIM)

## Story Development and Explanation

This is an explanation of what an advanced class might look like when taught with comprehensible input-based methods like TPRS®. It is a snapshot of a few days in one of my classes when we were telling a story in a Spanish 4/AP class.

The grammatical structures that we were focusing on had been introduced; the students could understand them and use them, to a degree. They could probably even have passed test on it, but they needed to work on the structures to become more fluent. The structures were the dreaded **Past Perfect Subjunctive/Conditional Perfect** combo meal (**if he had studied** more **he would have been able** to go to college), what we refer to as the **"SIPS + would"** combination in my classes—**si** (if) **past subjunctive** mood + **would** (conditional tense). It is highly abstract and theoretical—this grammatical structure is not used frequently enough for students to pick it up naturally unless they are reading a lot. It is hard to acquire in everyday reading and speech and it may not be totally crucial for casual speech. But it is important for educated speakers to know and besides, it impresses the AP graders if kids use it on the exam. Students will also need to recognize it on the exam because there are likely to be a few instances of its use in the reading and listening parts as well.

The sad tale of **a life filled with regrets** is a good way to practice this devilishly tricky combination. Blaine Ray and Joe Neilson have a good model of this idea in the last chapter of *Mirame, todavía estoy hablando*, La Mujer Presa. That book is labeled as level 3, but I have used parts of it in level 4/AP as well, particularly the sections focusing on the past subjunctive.

All speech in Spanish classes is in the target language except to confirm understanding with quick questions in English.

### The Setup

To set up the story I asked the kids who was the student that was most likely to succeed in the class. They actually chose two, a boy and a girl, named Mark and Kirsten. Then I asked them to pick a really nice person in the class. They chose a girl named Mackenzie.

One reason that the kids had fun with the story was because it goes against type. The actors were super-students and indeed seem destined for success in life, but in the story we set up **one of them is horribly depressed over a series of bad decisions** that have derailed his plans. He becomes a listless bum on the street. The “nice” student also has the ability to go far and become fabulously wealthy



because of her brain power and strong work ethic, but she decides to become a teacher and use her talent to help students. She winds up finding the other student on the street and tries to help him. We are not trying to make fun of depressed students—in fact, the compassion that the kids have injected into the story is heart-warming and encouraging. We are just trying to be outrageous and have fun while working on advanced Spanish grammar.

### **Thumbnail Plot**

The thumbnail plot I had in my head was that the main character had to have made **a series of bad decisions and then regret it. The second nice person is there to help him and to hear his sad story.** We had done a similar story a couple of days before and the kids liked it. Since the class insisted on two characters, I had one help the other. Since the students in my class chose two super-stars, we added another character to the story. The second student had also made some questionable decisions and tells her story too. Here is the story as it stood after two days of asking, telling, re-asking, re-organizing, and summarizing with the class so far. We added a bit more to explain Kirsten's role the following day, but this should give a good idea of what can be done with upper level students with a class story.

The story uses relatively simple vocabulary and sets up the use of complex grammar. "**Shelter the vocabulary, but not the grammar,**" as Susie Gross says. What we came up with follows the "First Telling" below, but first a bit more explanation.

### **Encouraging Student Personalities**

In an upper level class the students do a lot more speaking. When things go right, the ideas are popping up all over the room and the teacher tends to become more of a facilitator or a moderator than a storyteller. This is a switch from disseminator of knowledge; the teacher becomes more of a "guide at the side" versus the traditional "sage on the stage"—just like they have been telling us in multiple in-service trainings over the years in my school district.

This teacher-as-facilitator role is particularly obvious in an upper level class—the teacher sets the stage, but the students tend to generate more ideas and twists in the storyline than in lower level classes—their personalities emerge more. This makes sense because they have more language to work with and have more tools with which to express themselves. There are more nuances and things can get livelier. I often find myself mainly asking questions and trying to understand how all of the different elements of the story tie together—reframing and re-wording it with slightly more complex expressions as the story progresses.

As with stories in levels I and II, these upper level stories can quickly grow and become remarkably complex. We often have to abandon a few good ideas, rabbit trails and subplots in order to tie the entire narrative together into a meaningful whole. That is the job of the teacher—to keep on asking clarifying questions so that the overall story makes some sort of sense.



One thing I find fascinating is that the personalities and values of the students and teacher begin to emerge in the telling and re-telling of these tall tales in the upper levels. As we knead the dough of the class story together, some of our DNA rubs off on us and becomes part of the tale. In the most recent telling of the Mark and Kirsten story below, one might think that we are being cruel to the depressed. It may look also like we are being elitist toward those that don't go to college. I sadly admit that something of those elements may be there and we must guard against becoming cruel, but deeper, more positive themes develop as well: dealing with life's disappointments, caring for the downtrodden, taking responsibility for our actions and our duty to develop our gifts also emerge. The silliness of the lower level story is still there, but an organic thoughtfulness also sprouts when we bend our minds toward building a story together.

### **First Telling**

This is how the story developed by the end of the first day. It expanded from the outline of the original thumbnail plot. On the first day we concentrated on Mark. We asked him questions and we asked questions about him to the class.

**When Mark was younger, it seemed like he was going to be very successful in his life, but it didn't happen that way. He made a lot of bad decisions. The same thing happened with Kirsten. It also seemed like she was going to be very successful, but she also made mistakes.**

**Mark liked Lady Gaga and wasted all of his time sending her wigs. If he had not wasted his time, he would have been able to study more. If he had not wasted all of his money, he would have been able to go to college. If he had studied more, he would have gotten better grades in school. If he had gotten better grades, he would have gone to college. But he didn't do any of these things, and Mark became a poor man living on the street.**

**Kirsten went to college and studied engineering at a good university. After graduating, she became a famous engineer and was very successful in her work. Kirsten invented many ingenious machines that helped a lot of people, but she left her work in order to go to the ocean to save the whales. Kirsten ended up saving Mark and caring for him.**

**One day Mackenzie was walking in the city and saw Mark sitting in the street. She talked with Mark and asked him what had happened with his life.**

### **Second Telling**

On the second day we expanded and played with the story. We reviewed and reorganized the sequence a bit (obvious below in the third telling).

### **Third Telling**

This is the result after three days of asking guiding questions after I had set up the initial situation. I try to ask Socratic-style questions that will lead students toward inevitable conclusions. A good example of



this incessant questioning that leads to a preconceived outcome is found in the short essay “Meno” by Plato. Don’t let Plato scare you off—it is highly readable and applies well here.

Notice how we set up the situation and had fun with Mark on the first day. We let him shine. His detail about wasting time on sending wigs to Lady Gaga was a gem. Now the story is looping back on Mackenzie, so naturally I am asking a ton of questions about her future life. Some I ask directly to her and some I ask to the class. Mackenzie almost always got to verify the details.

**This story takes place ten years in the future. It happens ten years from today.**

**Mackenzie was walking down the mean streets of Chicago. She had now become a math teacher in a prestigious secondary school in a Chicago suburb. She also was a volleyball coach in the school. She had had a lot of success in the few years that she had been teaching already, and she was very happy and satisfied with her job and with her life.**

NOTE: This complex information grew out of asking Mackenzie what she thought she would be doing in 10 years. She said, "I am going to be in business or a teacher." I kept on commenting, observing and asking questions in the target language until we got the delicious details in the paragraph above. I asked questions like these:

- *Mackenzie, I think you might be a teacher.*
- *Why would I think that, class?*
- *Mackenzie, will you be a teacher in a good school or a bad school?*
- *Where will you live?*
- *What will you teach?*
- *Will you teach advanced math or basic math?*
- *Will you do anything else? What sport will you coach?*
- *Will you ever take your students on field trips?*
- *Where will you take them?*
- *If you are teaching advanced math, it might be nice to show your top students some places where they could work, like a field trip to the Stock Exchange.*

**Mackenzie was walking down the street in downtown Chicago because she was planning on taking a field trip to the Chicago Mercantile Exchange with the students from her advanced calculus class, but she wanted to see everything before she took 57.6 students (one boy had been very sick and he was extremely skinny) to the downtown of such a big city. Also, she felt like going shopping while she was there.**

*[NOTE: It is important to use numbers in every story. Otherwise, students will begin to forget them from disuse. Using big numbers and decimals is funny because it can involve a wacky explanation like the one above.]*