

Excerpts from Ben Slavic's Stepping Stones



Ben Slavic

Edited by Karen Rowan

Slavic teaches French in [Denver Public Schools](#), writes a [blog](#) and presents workshops on [teaching with comprehensible input](#).

Let's not mince words. Kids of today have few reasons to believe in themselves. The scene in most schools is still all about competition and testing and dominating and winning and excluding others.

But if we learn to teach using comprehensible input we can change that culture of competition into one of cooperation and mutual understanding and the building of community. We can bring success in languages to many more than just the few dominant winner students.

We really can. Let's give the kids something to believe in – themselves. By setting up classrooms in which we speak to the kids in ways that they can understand, in ways that make them want to understand, we give them hope enough to believe that they can do something, that they can be very successful in at least one of their classes.

Let's learn how to teach in such a way that our kids experience hope. Let's stop teaching in ways that crush hope. That is what the old system did – it crushed hope in kids. We just weren't aware of it. But the sad looks on our students' faces when they were in our classes before we made this change should have tipped us off that something was wrong.

All that is done now - it's over. There is no blame. The time has finally arrived for us to change how we teach so that we can change the looks on our students' faces. That is reason enough to get up in the morning and go into our schools.

We can do it. We can help kids believe in themselves. We can help kids believe that they can be good at something: a language. We can help kids believe in life. It's not really about teaching a language at all, is it? It's not. It never was. We do so much more than teach languages.

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One activity from Stepping Stones to increase personalization and comprehensible input:

One Word Images (OWI)

One Word Images is a term that I use to describe a way I have of using comprehension based techniques.

OWI is a lot of fun for the kids and for me. I could do it for hours and hours on end, just to see what the kids come up with.

To start, just pick a noun. Animals are good choices. Write the word down on the board in the target language and translate it. Next, do the word association process. Ask the kids to associate the sound of the new word with some other sound or gesture, anything that they can think of. For the image of a house, for example, when a shy student puts her hands over her head like a roof, you respond as if this is just a brilliant suggestion, praising the student and having the other students do that motion, glancing with great approval at the originator of the gesture. Now the student will pretend to be the house for the duration of the activity. Support her in consistently playing the part of a house. This is training the class to later perform as actors in stories.

Then start asking the kids the following specific set of questions about it:

- its name
- its quantity
- its size
- its color
- its intelligence level
- rich or poor
- mean or kind
- hair color
- eye color
- its mood
- where it is
- what it is doing
- when this occurred (time, day of the week, etc.)
- other physical characteristics

As you ask more and more questions (circling), the image will develop almost like a photograph in the minds' eyes of the students. To middle school students in particular, and especially when it is an animal, and especially when they create it, and when the animal has a silly name, and does strange things, the image becomes very compelling.

I have a laminated copy of the above questions on a clipboard at my desk for ease of access. It is my prompt sheet for this activity. The process of creating these images can last from a few minutes to an entire class period. When the animal has a silly name, and does strange things, the image becomes very compelling.

Circling permits the addition of details. The repetitions build the CI, and the new details build the (personalized) interest. This activity is easy for teachers and develops listening skills in students.

In the work we do with comprehensible input, we are not teaching images or stories, we are teaching little chunks of language. The kids think that we are teaching an image, because they forget that the instruction is in another language, but your focus is on the structures used, getting far more repetitions of them than we feel are needed.

All the while the child is beginning to acquire the language in the real way, by focusing on meaning and not individual words, freeing up the unconscious mind to do what it does naturally— processing sound into language unconsciously.

Slow repetition is the key to this work. If you were really to go slowly enough while getting these reps, you could conceivably take more than one class period to create just one image, because you repeated things so much. This would be painful for you but great for the kids.

The kids are brand new to the language; you cannot afford to get complicated on them when doing one word images. Give them brain breaks. Invite different kids to sit on the stool and pretend to be a house, or a fish, etc. Hang out in the language with them. It beats conjugating verbs.

A house becomes a little red house. If it develops into anything more than that, great. If not, the kids are hearing and understanding simple language via interesting, repeated and slow questioning, which is the entire point of everything we do.

These and other great ideas are in [Stepping Stones: Ben's System of Starting the Year with Comprehensible Input](#)

This is another in a series of articles on personalizing the Comprehension-Based language classroom. Previous articles can be found here:

[Is Input More Interesting When It's About Me?, Karen Rowan](#)

[10 Ideas for Personalizing the Language Classroom Every Day, Karen Rowan](#)

[The Special Person, Bryce Hedstrom](#)

Upcoming workshops on personalization include:

[Karen Rowan, Austin, Texas, June 19, 2014](#)

[Karen Rowan, Los Angeles, August 8, 2014](#)

[Sessions at iFLT, Denver, Colorado](#)

[Sessions at NTPRS, Naperville, Illinois](#)

Submissions for future editions by teachers on their experiences with personalization are invited.