

Talking Our Way to Successful Reading

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Why read in a language-learning classroom?

I once heard a foreign language teacher say, “*I am a Spanish teacher! I don't know how to teach reading (that's not my job)!*” regarding the use of leveled chapter readers with sheltered content for beginning language learners. It is an honest statement, and a valid point. Why is it necessary for language teachers to emphasize reading, especially in the beginning stages of language learning when students don't know very much?

It is my goal to facilitate the ability of my students to acquire a second language. Through an emphasis on comprehensible immersion and literacy building this is achieved. As we teach students to read in the target language we teach them *to fish for a lifetime*. We are fostering a love of language learning and a gateway to learning more beyond the classroom. When we teach students isolated words and grammar in a language, we give the students *a fish for the day*. In this way we prepare them for the formative assessments of a given curriculum. Extensive research already exists on the power of reading and its link to language acquisition. Input must be comprehensible to be acquired, so reading with beginning learners and gradually increasing the complexity of the readers throughout the program is beneficial for all.

How can teachers present language to their students in a way that fosters successful reading experiences?

Here I will offer some strategies for activating reading and captivating our students by using the target language in a series of “Talks.” The concentration and exposure of high-interest and meaningful teacher-to-student language, combined with a healthy diet of comprehensible reading materials allows for optimal language learning (Elley, 1997). The [American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages](#) recommends that the target language compose at least 90% of class time (Crouse 2013). The strategies for reaching such language derive from the term “teacher talk” that comes from the *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*. Teacher talk is a variety of language and a style of speech used to address language learners (Richards, 1992). By presenting language aurally to my students and using the strategies of TPRS/teaching with Comprehensible Input (CI), I can ensure that my students understand and can successfully read in the target language.

Get away from words to get students to read

Many of my students are not interested in reading. Initially, reading can be boring or unpleasant in the classroom, hindering the link between reading and language acquisition. In September, I wrote a brief blog article based on my re-reading of John Medina's New York Time's bestseller *Brain Rules*. If I want students to read, I keep these principals in mind:

#4 | ATTENTION | "We don't pay attention to boring things."

#9 | SENSORY INTEGRATION | "Stimulate more of the senses."

#10 | VISION | "Vision trumps all other senses."

In the classroom, students do not want to be bored. Stimulating the senses coincides with differentiated instruction, so when students can visualize as they learn, more effective learning will take place. Medina claims that teachers and business leaders should "*ditch*" the PowerPoint presentations. They are text-based and play against the strengths of the brain. If using text-based resources is less effective, what can be done to fulfill the goal of teaching reading? In the Pleasure Hypothesis, Krashen says, "activities that are good for language acquisition are usually perceived by acquirers as pleasant, while those activities that are not good for language acquisition are not consistently perceived as pleasant, and are, in fact, often perceived to be painful."

Pre-reading/talking activities

Since all that I do in the classroom is to foster reading, everything I do is essentially a pre-reading activity. I implement a backward design, pre-teaching prior to reading. Reading requires words and text but as a prerequisite to that, there must be a negotiation of understanding of the new language. Spanish teacher Eric Herman wrote an extensive article on Ashley Hastings' MovieTalk (Narrative/Paraphrase approach) in *IJFLT*, June 2014. In his article, he discussed several different techniques and suggestions for using a video clip in order to create interesting and comprehensible input.

MovieTalk is an activity that concentrates the target language on a video in a highly engaging way for students. Through narration and questioning, the teacher stays almost entirely in the target language. Similar to Hastings' MovieTalk, below is a collection of other variations on "Talks" to prepare students for reading. The mixture of talking topics creates a classroom environment that has a lot of variety for students. At the same time, it allows the lessons to be conducted mostly in the target language, cultivating immersion-like learning.

PhotoTalk

When I was a younger teacher, I often thought it was unprofessional to speak of my personal life with my students. Personalization and talking about my personal life has become a point of interest for my students and starting point for introducing new language to new learners.

Using photos of friends and family members from Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, I easily make textbook themed vocabulary and grammar relevant to teenagers of the “selfie generation.” Because the photos I use often have several different people in them, they easily lend themselves to a variety of topics: family members, physical and personal characteristics, possessive adjectives, places, time of day, and seasons. PhotoTalks are often discussed with a variety of grammatical structures and demonstrate the use of language.

From time to time, I will also ask students to send me a photo of something they did that weekend, last week, or last summer. As soon as we project it for all to see, an instant story appears. The student or students become the curriculum and, since the events of the photo already occurred, most of the grammar being used is in the past tense. This automatically increases student engagement. This type of activity is great to have ready when there is extra time in class, on Mondays to start the week, or on Fridays to end it. Some of the most organic language experiences occur when I use student photos because the lesson requires improvisation.

PropTalk

The use of a prop is a powerful tool to engage and re-engage students in a discussion. Sometimes I use props to start a lesson, and then that prop becomes the focus of our discussion. Many questioning techniques that provide comprehensible input can be used while presenting with a prop. Students can build a great deal of language around common objects like a cell phone, a coffee cup, or the various doors that a key might unlock. Exercise equipment, instruments, and food naturally involve students because they want to hold, use, or eat such objects.

I enjoy using stories that allow for numerous props. The story might start with a prop that is extensively used, discussed, or demonstrated. If students start to lose interest, a new item can be introduced to stimulate conversation and student interest. As we scaffold other aspects of teaching, we can also scaffold various levels of prop presentation. Since students are visually interacting with the topic and props, we continue to stimulate the senses, as Medina suggests.

MusicTalk

As a Spanish teacher, I have a wonderful resource in the form of Señor Wooly songs. Jim Wooldridge’s songs deliver comprehensible and interesting language. Music is the carrier to the subconscious and also manages the emotional state of the listeners (Jensen, 2008).

When we use music and music videos in the classroom there are always characters, settings, and storylines to discuss. This is the case for almost any song. Before, during, or after using a song we use various features of the target language. Lyrics of songs are forms of poetry and literature, and they can be analyzed and discussed as such. The added bonus is that music allows for students to better retain what they hear. For example, the song *Billy la Bufanda* is about a scarf that is essentially a hopeless romantic who encounters love when he meets his love interest, a pretty pair of boots. On the surface this seems ridiculous, but learning language is about telling stories. Billy goes on

adventures to various places, encountering various characters and problems along the way. Those adventures are rich with appropriate grammar, vocabulary and natural language structure for my students.

ArtTalk

I often use art to target language. I love using the works of Diego Rivera to discuss the socioeconomic issues of Mexico. Picasso and Dali are other artists who help me to discuss shapes, colors, and the possibilities of characters. If at any time I run out of language to use, I point to something else or use the next piece of art. ArtTalks can be very basic questions about colors and settings, or they can lend themselves to more intricate conversations about making connections between cultures. The Metropolitan Museum of Art recently made their art collection available on-line at <http://www.openculture.com>

EventTalk

EventTalks can be used in various ways. Sometimes the events discussed are common events like a wedding, traveling in an airport, or even something as ordinary as the morning wake-up routine. On the surface some of these events can be mundane, but one little detail can make the talks exciting and unique. For example, when discussing the event of airport travel, we use a story about the time I went to Hollywood and found a celebrity's wallet at the airport Starbucks. Initially, the event itself seems boring, but as soon as the students discover that after a disastrous flight, I find myself at Starbucks buying a coffee and find Matt Damon's wallet, they want to know more. The point of the event is not about the celebrity but rather about being able to demonstrate vocabulary and grammar involving travel.

CultureTalk

Culture, as presented by the *Partnership for 21st Century Skills*, directs teachers to emphasize the "relationship of perspectives, practices, and products of the culture." In my classes I seek to engage students in learning about another culture. I do not, of course, want to sacrifice language learning. CultureTalk is a great way for me to expose students to other cultures while still teaching in Spanish. For example, when discussing cultural aspects of Spain, I involve students in the stories about running with the bulls in Pamplona or bullfights in Valencia. These are stories based on life experiences and it is easy for me to relate them to the lives of my students.

Other cultural topics can be designed around information found in a text that we plan to read. When we use the Spanish reader [Los Baker van a Peru](#), many talks go into the history and images of the Nasca Lines. Since the characters of the book visit such a place, we look at various images and talk about the theories of the lines. This is an obscure topic for many students; understanding the practices by the Nasca people requires care if students are to develop a cultural and/or historical awareness.

StudentTalk

Many classes include students whose first language is Spanish. These students still need foreign language credits, and they often benefit from reading, writing, and language

instruction in Spanish. In these cases, these students might speak better than the teacher. These students are very much welcomed because we incorporate their skill for the benefit of teaching others. StudentTalks are sessions of conducting interview-like conversations with the native-language speakers. I slowly ask them questions, point to grammar topics or question words, and allow them to answer and clarify their responses for the benefit of all the students in the room.

Students often request more sessions with native speakers. Krashen says, “Language acquisition is a subconscious process; while it is happening we are not aware that it is happening” (*Krashen, 1982*). When native speakers are the center of curriculum and the information is comprehensible, the students are captivated and only care about the details of the story.

ActorTalk

A common technique found in TPR Storytelling® is to incorporate student actors into a story (also called Reader’s Theater). One reason to do this is that it allows the student actors to provide more repetition of the target language. I often use student actors when teaching a comprehensible reader. This is a great way for students to visualize the story. It is common for students to have trouble recognizing dialogue versus narration in a story. When student actors play the role of a character in a book, it engages the imaginations of the class to think beyond just the words in the story. Such characters might fit stereotypes and face various problems within the story; these can be explored in detail, thus using more of the target language.

Conclusion

I know my students are most successful when they understand the messages that they hear. Once they understand these messages, I seek to expose them to as much comprehensible reading as possible. All of these “talks” just help categorize the complexities of pre-teaching reading in a language classroom. I am determined to create frequent opportunities for meaningful and comprehensible immersion everyday. One definition of immersion is “deep mental involvement, or the action of immersing oneself in something.”

Among the many intellectual pursuits available, reading is currently perhaps the most often mentioned immersion or flow activity around the world. In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Mihaly Csikszentmihályi outlines his theory that people are happiest when they are in a state of flow—a state of concentration or complete absorption with the activity at hand and the situation. It is a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. The idea of flow is identical to the feeling of being in the zone or in the groove. The flow state is an optimal state of intrinsic motivation, where the person is fully immersed in what he is doing. He describes flow as “being completely involved in an activity for its own sake.”

It is not until I question my students about what they have learned or remind them about what they have read that they become aware of their language development. At times, some of my students do not realize they are learning because they have fun and enjoy all

of the topics in which we immerse ourselves. I want my students to be able to read happily, with ease and confidence. In order to help them accomplish this, I must be creative and thoughtful in how I provide comprehensible, compelling, contextualized, and concentrated input. “TeacherTalks” has been a great strategy for doing so.

Why do I teach reading in a language classroom? Reading is a tremendous source of comprehensible input for my students, which leads directly to language acquisition. These variations on “TeacherTalks” are part of a backwards plan for reading in the second language. For my students, reading is perceived as both comprehensible and pleasurable. When they leave my class after 180 days of instruction with the ability to read in another language, I have given them the best chance of acquiring more. By making their educational experience pleasant, I foster positive attitudes about learning new languages. Becoming a life-long language learner is the language student equivalent of learning “*to fish for a lifetime.*” It is my goal to facilitate the ability of my students to continue their journey in acquiring a second language. This is happily accomplished through an emphasis on comprehensible immersion and literacy building.

- Michael’s teaching blog: *Optimizing Immersion: Teaching with Comprehensible Input* at <http://www.Srcoxon.wordpress.com>
- Twitter: @coxon_mike
- Instagram: @srcoxon
- See classroom “Talk” videos: Search youtube “Michael Coxon TPRS.”

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