

## TEACHER TO TEACHER

### **Non-Targeted Comprehensible Input: How it Works for My Students and Me**

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Stephen Krashen's (2013) article "The Case for Non-Targeted, Comprehensible Input" gave a name to an approach I had seen work in my classes and, along with his (2015) lecture "TPRS: Contributions, Problems, New Frontiers, and Issues," has provided me and many colleagues with a framework for deeper understanding of our practices. Inspired by the success I have observed in my and my colleagues' students with contexts rich in non-targeted comprehensible input (CI), this article explores non-targeted CI from several angles: what it is, why one would or wouldn't pursue it, what it can look like in a classroom, aids and obstacles to implementing it, and its effects on me and my students. Although I'll summarize the theoretical basis for non-targeted CI, this article is not academic. I

leave full discussion of the theory to others, focusing instead on practical ways to plan, use, and enjoy non-targeted CI.

### **What non-targeted CI is**

Non-targeted CI is simply comprehensible input that is provided because of its compellingness to a particular learner or group of learners, or to fulfill a current communicative need, rather than because it showcases or abounds in a certain feature of a language. Non-targeted CI can involve discussing students' interests and opinions, reading or viewing content that especially interests students (perhaps selected by students individually), inventing stories with students, or interacting about anything that happens to come up that elicit strong reactions from students.

In an important way, non-targeted CI is actually very much targeted. But its primary target is the interests of specific learners; the bits of language involved in the process are determined (1) by the present desire to communicate about these interests and (2) by the language itself, i.e., by the fact that certain words and word-relationships necessarily come up frequently whenever someone uses a given language. By contrast, a language-targeting approach determines in advance the order in which students ought to learn elements of a language and then, ideally, exposes students to the next element in as engaging a way as possible.

### **What non-targeted CI is not**

A non-targeted approach's emphasis on present interest and relevance does not mean...

1. ...*that the input does not abound in certain features of the language.* Non-targeted input still offers many encounters with words and language features that frequently occur in the language in general and with words that are central to the point or plot of the input.
2. ...*that the input is unsheltered.* A teacher or writer can avoid unknown vocabulary, for instance, without targeting other vocabulary. Sheltering (guarding against the introduction of too many new words in a short time) is a crucial skill in a non-targeted approach.
3. ...*that the input is random.* On the contrary, content selection and the sheltering of vocabulary involve continuous responsiveness to students' interests, comprehension, and contributions.

4. ...*that teachers who use non-targeted CI “just talk” or abandon their hard-earned teaching skills.* Theoretically, non-targeted CI could involve just talking about whatever in a way that students understood, but the efficiency of non-targeted CI in a classroom comes in no small part from clearly establishing meaning (making sure students know what a word or phrase means), steadfastly observing classroom procedures, speaking at an appropriate rate and level, checking for comprehension, repeating things when necessary for comprehension, and eliciting details and other ideas from students in efficient ways.

### **Why not target?**

Why not just target, in as interesting a way as possible, whatever language we want our students to learn? Among the reasons that Krashen highlights are the impossibility of forcing acquisition and the risk of omitting the very language elements that a given learner is most ready to acquire (2013:102-103). There is no way to know exactly what a given learner, let alone each member of a group of learners, is ready to acquire, and the odds of everyone’s being ready to acquire the same thing at the same time are slim. So we cast a wide (but comprehensible!) net, increasing both the likelihood that the input will contain something that a given student is ready to acquire and the likelihood that words and features of the language will be re-encountered according to their importance.

Krashen emphasizes that targeting should not be necessary: “Given enough comprehensible input,  $i+1$  (all the vocabulary and structures the student is ready for) is automatically provided” (2013:105). The high-frequency words and language features that many thoughtful language programs target will, by definition, occur frequently in content and communication on a wide range of subjects, whether a teacher consciously targets those features or not.

A risk of targeting mentioned both by Krashen and by many teachers who discuss non-targeted CI is that, even if we give great attention to students’ interests while targeting specific language, in practice, highly conscious targeting may involve an unintentional sacrifice of buy-in. It can be hard to have interactions that students consider worth their while if we’re concerned about making sure students hear a given word 70 times during the class period. It’s not impossible—some teachers manage to do both, which is a skill practiced, for instance, during training in Blaine Ray’s TPR Storytelling® (TPRS)—but the risk is there.

### **What does non-targeted CI look like in the classroom?**

It doesn’t *have* to look like anything in particular, as long as students understand what they hear and read and want to keep listening or reading, but it’s nice to have some models of how it *can* look.

Krashen suggests two main schemes for creating environments rich in non-targeted input: “Expanded TPR” and Sheltered Subject Matter Instruction. For expanded TPR, he mentions “yoga instruction, self-defense, dance, magic tricks, juggling, cooking.” For Sheltered Subject Matter Instruction, Krashen lists “music, popular literature, SLA theory, linguistics” (2015:6-7). (The fact that Krashen, a pianist, avid reader, and linguist, has these particular topics on his shortlist highlights the role of personal interest in non-targeted instruction!) My own implementation of non-targeted CI includes these two schemes, but also the TPRS staples of Personalized Question and Answer (PQA), Storyasking, and reading (both class-created and self-selected), as well as sheltered conversation about anything that turns out to be of relevance or interest to a particular group of students in a particular moment.

### **My variations and follow-up on expanded TPR**

In addition to the spiced-up TPR topics Krashen mentions, I’ve used dance, origami, making Harry Potter wands, party games, [party tricks](#), and guided walks around the school, the block, or a nearby park. I’m pondering the use of video games, memory tricks, knots, and outdoor survival techniques for expanded TPR based on the interests of certain groups. Linear procedures—a repeated sequence of actions, for instance, or step-by-step instructions—tend to work well, because they involve a limited amount of vocabulary, much of which is naturally repeated, and students listen for understanding in order to be able to follow or complete the action.

The comprehensible input in these activities comes from describing the action or teaching the steps in the target language (TL) while sheltering vocabulary and repeating as necessary, from asking personalized questions, and from Storyasking that may grow out of the answers to personalized questions. Here is an example:

Let’s say you find out that Olivia is an origami master. You ask follow-up questions in the TL— with whom does she like to do origami, what does she like to fold, since when has she been doing origami, etc. You find out that Olivia makes a mean origami ferret. Sometime between this class and the next you ask her to show you the steps involved in folding an origami ferret and you develop some ideas about how to describe these steps with vocabulary already known to the students and two or three new words. During the next class, Olivia comes up and slowly demonstrates the steps while you narrate the instructions in the TL and ask her and the class questions about what is going on. The other students can follow her example and your instructions in order to make their own origami ferrets. By the end of this segment, you have a bevy of origami ferrets. At this point, you see if any of this might lead to a TPR Story. You can elicit details

about one of the freshly folded ferrets (what is it called? how does it feel? what does it like to do?) until a problem emerges that the ferret wants to solve. You can elicit information on students' feelings vis-à-vis ferrets until a problem emerges that could be solved in a co-created story. The best ferret could become a popular, recurring character in subsequent stories. The ferret might remain on a classroom shelf all year as evidence of its folder's prowess and as inspiration for further conversations and quirky-skill-demonstrations.

Along with these possibilities and the conversation starters mentioned below, extensive student-selected reading ("[Free Voluntary Reading](#)") and listening may be the most efficient sources of interest-targeting input. I recommend cultivating a [classroom library](#) with books of many genres, at many levels, as well as an annotated list of online material for reading, listening, and viewing. You can set students on a long-term, joyful language-learning journey by providing them with opportunities, early and often, to consume TL content that they themselves have chosen based on their interests and level.

### **Planning for non-targeted CI**

Here is my basic approach:

- 1a. Find out what students are interested in at the moment or in general.
- 1b. Be alert to news, pictures, cultural phenomena, minor controversies, etc., that students may not yet be aware of but will be intrigued by long enough for personalized conversation to get going.
2. Find, foster, or co-create vocab-sheltered content and interactions, whether general conversation or Storyasking, about those interesting things.

Putting this into practice involves:

1. *Getting to know my students continuously.* Yes, I use student interest surveys and [personal interviews](#), but I also want to constantly learn about what is on my students' minds and what issues are immediately relevant, whether a school play, dance, or sporting event, things happening in other classes, surprising news, a gift that a student has received, a student's recent accomplishment, or even something that happens outside the window during class. I do this by chatting with students in and out of class and, where relevant, attending their games and performances.
2. *Determining a question or other quirky conversation starter.* Ideally, students would always make clear as they are entering class what interactions would be most compelling to them on that day, and you might institute a routine that helps students do so. But sometimes there just isn't pressing news or a particular interest that students are eager to share. So I usually have a conversation starter ready—a personal question, a [quirky picture](#), a [mysterious package](#), an [optical](#)

[illusion](#), a [riddle](#), an event from “[this day in history](#),” or a challenge. These might or might not relate to a particular piece of content (text, film, song) that students will encounter.

The conversation starter just needs to be interesting enough for us to get around to a question, answer, or observation that takes interest to the next level and leads to further conversation or Storyasking.

3. *Techniques for flow.* In order for non-targeted interactions to go smoothly, my students and I rely on procedures for maximizing comprehension, comfort, and the smoothness of interaction throughout class. The hundreds(!) of techniques involved (often cued by gestures or supported by assigned student jobs) include speaking slowly, repeating on request, establishing meaning, writing on the board, and “making lemonade”—turning an obstacle or surprise such as tech failure, a distracting noise, or a classroom visitor from a mere interruption into a driving force in our TL interaction. This can be done by talking factually about the issue (“Oh, no, the computer is broken! Has your computer ever broken at a bad time? What did you do?”) or invoking imagination (“What’s that noise outside? No, it’s not annoying road construction... That’s right, it’s an alien spaceship landing! Why is it landing here, of all places? What do the aliens want?”).

4. *Reverse planning and “make-up targeting.”* Often I’m under external pressure to give my students the best shot at success in dealing with a particular text or test. Even then, my interactions with students are generally interest-targeting rather than language-targeting, because I think that this will ultimately do the most good for students’ acquisition of and long-term relationship with the language. But our students are sometimes called on to cope with texts beyond their proficiency or with tests that are not linguistically or pedagogically sound. In anticipation of such a text or test, I use “make-up targeting,” by which I identify, during the weeks before the task in question, what words or language features students have not yet sufficiently encountered in order to succeed in reading or testing. Then I ensure, usually through PQA, Storyasking, and the resulting readings, that these words and language features occur at a higher-than-usual density in our interactions during those weeks.

I can usually tell at a glance what trouble my students are likely to have with a text or test, but I can make the process a bit more scientific by “reverse planning” or “descriptive planning”: after every class session, starting from the very first of the term, I create a record of whatever bits of language seem to have been most central to that day’s interactions. Often I identify these by asking students, “What words or phrases did we use the most today? What seems most memorable or useful?” I create a physical record by taking a picture of the board and/or jotting some notes in Evernote. Then, if I want to plan make-up targeting before a text or

test, I can cross-reference the language of the test or text with the lists created by my reverse planning. Similarly, if I myself need to create a text or test for my students, I can draw on the record of what language has come up most often or seemed most noteworthy to students. The record is also informative for my students' future teachers.

5. *Preparing myself as a teacher, as opposed to “planning a lesson.”* The freedom and the self-generating nature of an interest-targeting approach have made my life a lot better. Finding or creating content that showcases specific features of a language is a hassle even when it's fairly easy, and it's often quite hard—witness the number of requests one sees for “a movie with lots of infinitives” or “a story showing the difference between *savoir* and *connaître*.” Because I'm confident that the frequent features of a language are likely to come up no matter what, and I know that I can make-up target whatever doesn't, I can spend my prep time boosting my own proficiency by reading/listening/viewing, exploring TL content that my students may enjoy, reading about teaching and about second language acquisition, and being on the lookout for news and other sources of high-investment conversation. In other words, I can do things that I want to do anyway—things that would help no matter what my teaching approach—many of which are the very things that I hope my students will do.

### **Two good effects**

In addition to the benefits that have already come up, I want to emphasize these two:

1. *Elimination of the “we haven't covered that yet” phenomenon.* Because it is normal in my classes for words and phrases to come up in order to fulfill communicative needs, and because it is normal for me to establish the meaning of such words and phrases, there is no sense among my students of certain words' or language features' having been “covered” and therefore being “fair game” to use or to test, with others not yet having been covered and therefore not being fair game. Beneath such a view lies the problematic assumption that language is a school subject like any other, with discrete lessons that that can be mastered sequentially with hard-enough work, whereas, in fact, language is a basic and wholistic human function in which humans with healthy brains can participate, provided that stress and total cognitive load don't get in the way.

When a student doesn't understand a word or phrase that is said or read—whether it's come up for the first time or for the ninth time—I simply establish the meaning of the word or phrase, or invite another student to. Students don't get upset at each other or me for using a word they “haven't learned yet,” and I don't get upset with them for failing to learn something they “should know.” Students

and I know that they need to understand what they hear or read in order to acquire the language, that it will probably take many meaningful encounters for them to acquire any given element of the language, and that acquisition can't be forced. Our non-targeted approach has helped students and me take these realities more seriously without worrying about them.

2. *Increased joy and success.* My students and I were already pretty happy, but we've become happier since I started intentionally engaging in non-targeting practices. One sign of this is that almost all my students have remained in my program until graduation, even though this isn't required and actually prevents them from enjoying a free period or taking electives in other subjects.

### **Reasons to target**

Even teachers who recognize benefits in a non-targeted approach may choose to target. There are lots of reasons for this: You might, like I do sometimes, target in order to prepare students for the reading of specific texts or for too-specific common assessments or standardized tests. You might target because the language you teach has few cognates with your students' first language, or a non-alphabetic writing system, making it practically impossible for novice learners to comprehend content for which they haven't been strategically prepared. You might target because not doing so stresses you out. You might target because of uncertainty about your own proficiency in the language. You might target because teaching well involves letting go of so much control already and targets are something to hold on to. You might need to target in order to keep your job.

There are some students whose temperament or educational conditioning leads to a craving for predefined targets, and targeting may be a way of keeping these students' stress levels down.

If you find yourself targeting language for any of these reasons, I encourage you at least to explore non-targeted CI within the bounds of what is permitted and practical in your setting. Some of the obstacles are not just obstacles to non-targeting, but obstacles to good teaching in general, and are things we are always hoping to improve in ourselves, our students, and our schools. Students, parents, and administrators usually need to be taught the differences between acquiring a language and learning a school subject. We ourselves need to push back judiciously against curriculum or tests that don't promote our students' success. We need to practice relinquishing some control and trusting the power of our students' brains and contributions. We should engage in habits that contribute to our own proficiency in the languages we teach, just as we expect our students to.

Even in a department or district with common exams that cover a bunch of textbook chapters, you may not need to target words in the order or groupings that the textbook does. You can spread out and combine language from different chapters for the sake of more natural conversation or story-creation. If you're required to test every week or two, students won't be acquiring the tested material on that schedule anyway; they may be able simply to memorize what they need to in order to beat the test, with the actual acquisition of the language coming on its own schedule as students continue to be exposed to the language.

### **The fine line between targeting and not targeting**

In practice, targeting and not targeting may not look that different. The same basic activity or TL content could be part of either a non-targeted (i.e., interest-targeted) approach or a targeted approach. If a teacher shows a scene from *El Internado* to highlight lots of examples of the perfect tense, that's a targeted approach. If a teacher shows the same scene from *El Internado* because her students can't get enough of the show and are begging to watch more, that's a non-targeted approach. If a teacher initiates and directs a conversation about the relative merits of cafeteria lunch and off-campus dining in order to induce lots of repetitions of food terms and comparatives, that's targeted. If a teacher fosters a conversation on that topic because students walk into class expressing strong feelings about a new campus policy, that's non-targeted. If a teacher asks a TPR Story about an elf whose pointy ears have dulled in order to get lots of repetitions of *wishes that \_\_\_\_\_, goes to \_\_\_\_\_, and rejoices because \_\_\_\_\_*, that's targeted. If a teacher asks a similar story because students seemed to be fascinated by an elvish character, decided it had the problem of dulled ears, and sent it on a quest to get them re-sharpened, that's non-targeted.

There may be a distinction worth making between how new words and phrases come up in the first place (drawn from a list or arising because necessary for a specific task) and how words or phrases are treated in class regardless of how they come up, with a fine line between sheltering, i.e., guarding against the introduction of too many new words, and outright targeting, i.e., studiously reusing a few words or phrases as much as possible in hopes of speeding the acquisition of those words or phrases. And, of course, one can frequently transition between sheltering and outright targeting.

### **Conclusion: A funny thing I've noticed**

During the last several years I've gotten to observe many skilled teachers. Some say they target painstakingly, some say they don't, and many fall somewhere in between. But I've noticed another way in which the line is fine: *the more skilled a teacher becomes at the practices involved in either approach, the harder it is to*

*tell the difference*. Highly skilled targeters appear to be just going with the flow; the language used in class seems to emerge from the students rather than a prescribed curriculum. And in the classes of highly skilled non-targeters, the conversation is sheltered and purposeful, meaning is clear, and useful language comes up repeatedly.

Ultimately, neither targeting nor non-targeting is guaranteed to work or not to work. People acquire language by understanding it, regardless of how the speaker or writer decided what to say. This is worth keeping in mind as we evaluate and plan our own teaching, as we train and mentor other teachers, and as we share our successes and setbacks with colleagues in person and online. Here's to scads of CI for our students, however it makes its way to them!

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