Stepping Stones to Stories: Ben's System of Starting the Year with Comprehensible Input

Apply Krashen to the Classroom in Simple Ways

by

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…with comprehension based instruction, teaching a language successfully is very difficult, but it reaches most students. Without it, success is virtually impossible, and reaches only a few bright kids. You have to pick one of these. If you pick the first, you align with 21st century standards and research. If you pick the second, you align with the past. You do, however, convey the illusion to lots of kids that they can't learn a language. Don't do that anymore…..

This book is dedicated to teachers who are new to comprehension based instruction. It is also dedicated to all who have struggled with TPRS. Buckle up. Get ready to fly.

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Rationale

TPRS trainings used to focus on stories right away. People would do a workshop and then try to start teaching in the fall using stories in their beginning level classes. It rarely worked. It was too much, too fast.

It is the premise of this book that it is best to wait to start using stories until the late fall or early winter, not before, using alternatives, the stepping stone strategies offered in this book, to start our year.

These stepping stones to stories are easier to learn than stories. In addition to preparing the teacher in the art of using comprehensible input, they also show the teacher how to set up:

1. a strong and vibrant classroom management program.
2. a personalized classroom.
3. an assessment program that works and saves time.

The caution to new teachers is that, without the classroom management, personalization and assessment pieces in place first, it is much more difficult to make comprehension based instruction work. In fact, it is nearly impossible.

Why is starting out a school year with stories a most difficult thing to pull off in foreign language classrooms? What opposes their use in secondary school classrooms in the United States? Here are some reasons:

1. The entire system of storytelling is very hard to learn and most people give up on it within months of trying it.
2. The vast majority of students don't know how to interact with their teachers in class and must be trained.

3. The data gathering and grading pieces required in schools are in conflict with the soul of comprehension based instruction. Students, parents and especially administrators who don't understand storytelling can ruin careers.
4. TPRS as a pedagogical term conveys an image of classroom chaos to huge amounts of teachers, due to past TPRS failures by teachers.
5. *Training is insufficient. It is folly to ask a teacher to attend a summer training in the area of comprehension based instruction and then go in and make the bucking bronco of comprehension based teaching work in their classroom in the fall.*

Training wheels, stepping stones to stories, are available here. The teacher who wants instruction in personalization is advised to read *PQA in a Wink!* Read *TPRS in a Year!* for training in actual story creation.

The purpose of this book is to help you get your year cranked up with good classroom discipline and personalization *before* you worry about stories later. You'll be a lot better with stories having studied and practiced the ideas in this book first. This is the right place to start.

The Problem

When students interact with a book or computer program to learn a language, only a very small percentage of students demonstrate gains. Even in those few students, the gains are stilted and reflect mere learning and memorization, not real acquisition.

Unbelievably, there are still teachers who preach memorization in the language classroom. A teacher recently wrote to me about an experience she had in a summer training:

"I'm at a standards based unit world language conference and the presenter has been telling us about the importance of memorization. Even the guy next to me who is against TPRS was shocked. I've already thrown into the discussion the whole language acquisition vs. learning piece, but she insists that memorization is critical when starting to learn a language in middle school. The presenter has been on the board of ACTFL."

This is unconscionable. It is false and aligns with no research whatsoever. There is so much false information out there against which we must guard ourselves. Rome is now officially burning for traditional teachers in the field of language acquisition.

Those of us who already know that we want to teach using comprehensible input, and thus align with current research, face a decision. Do we go against the odds and try in a determined way to make comprehensible input work in our classrooms, or do we fold and go back to the old ways of doing things which we know don't work?

On one side at the extreme end there are those who think that immersion in *incomprehensible* input can work, and on the other extreme end there are those who still think that we can learn a language by memorizing verbs.

The argument presented by both sides is specious. Both sides fail. Immersion in incomprehensible input doesn't work (Rosetta Stone is the worst example) and the traditional

20th century approach used in most American universities and secondary schools on down to kindergarten doesn't work either – all it does is shame most kids.

Is there a middle ground to be found somewhere away from all the insanity, somewhere we can meet our secondary school kids and rock the house with them so that our jobs are actually fun and our kids really learn and want to come to class and stay in our programs for four years no matter how "smart" they are?

The stepping stones to stories suggested below are based on the premise that *acquisition of a language is a deeply human thing*, and, as in all things human, right adjustment to others must define everything.

Therefore, we must look to *how we interact with our students* in a human way in the target language. We must look at classroom dynamics, not at a book or computer program, if we really wish to bring our students to real command of the language.

Using comprehensible input to teach a language is a *human process*, not a method. It's not math. It involves much more of the unconscious mind than teachers who stress grammar would like to admit. Such teachers are on their way out.

With comprehension based instruction, when the students are truly involved, the instructor is able to go into class with much less preparation and a much lighter agenda.

Chasms between students and teachers disappear when it all becomes fun and the kids learn to focus on the message and not the words. This frees the teachers up to relax and not be consumed by her job.

The greatest of all the many benefits of comprehension based instruction is not the massive proven gains that we bring to students, gains that are beginning to attract attention worldwide, but that language teachers do not become victims of teacher burnout.

At the time of this writing (2013), people are finally rallying behind the ACTFL Three Modes of Communication and the 90% Use Position Statement. It's all becoming more human, and a lot more fun!

Where is the research supporting the use of the book and computers and videos and mixing in large doses of explanatory English? And who even has the money to purchase such materials anymore? Who even wants to continue to use English in their classrooms?

The best research we have is that of Dr. Stephen Krashen and others in the area of comprehensible input. Those who dispute this are increasingly perceived as out of touch.

Acquiring a language has little to do with conscious analysis (the old way) and everything to do with turning the process of acquisition over to the unconscious mind, where it belongs.

Suddenly, the job security of a teacher, not to mention her mental health, depends on her learning how to get students to focus on the language as a whole and not just in pieces. When that happens, the process goes into the unconscious mind and the language is acquired.

Perhaps the greatest barrier facing the teacher investigating comprehensible input is a failure to appreciate the depth of the statement that we learn languages unconsciously.

That is what keeps the illusion going – conventional teachers miss the entire point when they fail to fully grasp that languages are acquired *without the analytical participation of the conscious mind*.

Some language teachers who are aware of the power of comprehensible input think that they can throw little bits of comprehension based instruction into their predominantly conscious analysis of the language. But this brings the same gains a yoga student would get by merely reading a book on the various yogic postures instead of actually doing them. We cannot serve two masters.

I have seen Dr. Krashen's ideas work in my classroom in ways I could never have imagined since I began working with comprehensible input some twelve years ago. After twenty four years of reaching just a few smart kids as an AP French Language and Literature teacher, I now reach almost all of my students in ways I could only dream of before.

Disclaimer

Written mainly for new people and for those who have struggled with TPRS, please note that this book is also intended for use by members of my online Professional Learning Community.

In that interest, many links to articles published on the PLC are provided in these pages. They can serve PLC members as embellishments to what is written here. Reading those links, however, is not to be viewed as any kind of requirement for success. The stepping stones as they are presented here are a stand alone pedagogy which will carry the diligent teacher across the waters to stories without any reading being done on the PLC.

Indeed, there are as many ways to do comprehensible input as there are teachers. There can be, in my view, no curriculum, no blueprint, no one set of prescribed materials, if comprehensible input is to work in your classroom in the real way. Therefore, the *entire* content of this beginning the year/stepping stone book is intended to merely *suggest ideas,* and not to lay down some kind of curriculum.

Teachers are asked to pick and choose from the ideas presented here with the intention of building a fluency program that reflects their own strengths, their own preferences and their own goals in comprehension based instruction.

Teaching should not be a cookie cutter experience driven merely by the delivery and collection of data – it should be a fun and expansive personalized journey for both teacher and student, one that is different in each class and on each day. Teaching the same thing all day is a proven part of teacher burnout.

If there is one single valid criticism that has been leveled against TPRS, TCI, and all the other things that have grown out of Krashen's research, it is that they have been made by *too many people into too much of a mystery*. This has resulted in a bad name for the entire approach.

It is the purpose of this book to simplify everything into doable form so that the teacher who may be skeptical of comprehensible input can at least try it and give it a chance.

We must redirect the chaotic light beams that TPRS has become into one continuous and focused beam so that comprehensible input can now shed a genuine bright light directly on the difficult work of teaching a foreign language. The time for this work of redirecting TPRS, whether we like it or not, has arrived.

Acknowledgements

All of the material in this book is of my own creation except the following:

1. The blockbuster classroom management tool that is jGR- explained later in this text - is a combination of the work of many people on my PLC, most significantly Robert Harrell in Los Angeles and Jen Schongalla in New Hampshire.

2. All five skills described herein are from Blaine Ray, as is the information on free writes as well as the concept of Read and Discuss. I express my deepest appreciation to Blaine.

3. I borrowed Dictée from the French educational system because I knew it would be of immense help in my comprehension based classroom and I was right.

4. Finally, it would be impossible for me to have stayed in teaching without the guidance of Susan Gross. She is now retired, but still involved, so if you get a chance to see her give a workshop, don't miss the opportunity. Susan saved my career as a language teacher.

Stepping Stone One: Five Activities

Activity #1 - Word Associations (WA):

Making associations with words by working with Word Walls is a powerful way to help beginning students dive into a foreign language. It is also a powerful and efficient way to start a level 1 class. It also gives both teacher and students confidence, which is what both need most as they start their new year together.

What I do is take a bunch of words and make them into a Word Wall. The list contains some verbs, but I also have a Verb Wall with only verbs on it. Here is how the process of using a Word Wall works for me:

I put a Word Wall and/or Verb Wall up. There are a few examples on the posters page of my website (benslavic.com/tprs resources/posters).

Where do the words come from? If you are locked into a pacing guide with vocabulary lists connected to thematic units, you can put those words up, but be cautioned that those words will not carry much interest. A lot of people take their words from frequency lists like this one found at our Denver Public Schools website:

http://curriculum.dpsk12.org/lang_literacy_cultural/world_lang/curr_docs/200_french_hi-frequency_words.pdf

Below is an interesting list or words for level 1 students that carry energy and make for good classes:

Spanish Sample Word List