

Chapter 7: Articles on Personalization

“Just as the wave cannot exist for itself, but is ever a part of the heaving surface of the ocean, so must I never live my life for itself, but always in the experience which is going on around me.”

– [Albert Schweitzer](#)

PROFOUND PRESENCE AND CURIOSITY

Listening deeply without distractions is a practice. Listening for the answers, making eye contact with students, laughing at their funny responses, remembering things they’ve said because we were really paying attention... they add up to an experience. Students experience being seen and heard by a deeply present adult. Sadly, in their daily lives your class may be the only time that happens in a day. Make the most of it. Sacrifice the curriculum on the altar of presence with our students.

We cultivate in ourselves a deep level of curiosity about the lives and thoughts and feelings of our students. In exploring that, we get to know them.

Both Bryce Hedstrom and Ben Slavic have written on the topic of connecting deeply with students from the very beginning. Ben’s Circling with Balls activity and Bryce’s Special Student activity (in IJFLT) are ways to focus on students through Personalized Questions and Answers and bring their unique personalities into class and pseudo personalities. I recommend resources from both authors.

While most of these techniques and strategies in this book involve specifically weaving personalization into storytelling, Bryce and I both use the information generated in class to give personalization quizzes. Students are required to know each other’s names and to know things about each other. Their level of concern about the content of stories and their fellow classmates is higher when they know they are responsible not for the

grammar, but for knowing each other well.

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10 ideas for Personalizing the Language Classroom Every Day

by Karen Rowan

"I think I'm going to have to change schools. I don't have any friends here. The friends I used to have, have started being really mean since one of my best friends started dating my ex-boyfriend. I lost him and them all at the same time and I'm sad all the time."

"Things are better since my mom finished chemotherapy. We're just trying to spend a lot more time with her right now, so I'm not really focused on school as much as I should be."

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"My back has been really hurting since the car accident. It's hard to get comfortable in a desk."

"My parents kicked me out, so I've been living in my car and showering in the locker rooms. Sorry I've been falling asleep in class."

These are actual responses from the extra-credit question, "Tell me what's going on in your life?", a question originally suggested by Blaine Ray over fifteen years ago.

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Some of these ideas work best in a storytelling classroom. Most will work in any classroom that is providing ample comprehensible input:

1. Use student's names. Give them nicknames.
2. Start the year with a student interest inventory. Ask questions and leave blanks.
3. Use those inventories while talking with the class. Talk about one or two students at a time, highlighting some of the interesting things about them in a story or conversation.

4. Provide students with short lists of questions throughout the year. (Favorite celebrity, activity, food.) Swap those lists with other students. When you ask questions, students are responsible for talking about other students or comparing their own likes to those of the paper they were handed.
5. Talk about your students in the target language. Don't just ask them about their weekends. Instead, ask other students what students did this weekend. Ask them to confirm what they did or didn't do. When students were in the same place, pretend one was spying on the other and ask for inside information and confirmation.
6. Remember details about student's lives and likes. Write those on small pieces of paper and post them on the wall or along the hallway. Number them. Other students walk around matching the statements to the correct student.
7. Celebrate victories. Celebrate awards. Celebrate birthdays. Celebrate accomplishments, big and small. Celebrate all things that make students feel good about these accomplishments and talk about them in the target language. Find opportunities to affirm that they are communicating effectively in the new language.
8. Make students into heroes and experts. Whenever there is a lack of information on any topic, ask a designated expert on the topic. Whatever that student says, goes. It does not matter if it's true. When a hero is needed, rather than relying on traditional superheroes, rely on students. Make them stronger, more powerful and faster than any superhero. One of my favorite cognates is "secret identity." All students can adopt a more powerful, more interesting secret identity in stories.
9. Writing can be an input activity. As the teacher writes on the overhead, board or computer screen, students contribute ideas to create a story. Each story will be radically different as it encompasses details about each class. The teacher does all of the writing, which makes it a reading (input) activity. Students can be provided with a copy later, allowing them to re-read what the class has created together.
10. Add an extra credit question to your next test -- "Tell me what's going on in your life." Students may answer in their own native language. Share what is interesting and praise-worthy with the rest of the class. Keep whatever is private confidential, and they will continue to share.

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Building Community with "The Special Person"

Bryce Hedstrom

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The **Special Person** (La Persona Especial) is an important and popular part of the class that involves getting to know real facts about real people with real language. Every student is interviewed in the target language at some point toward the beginning of the semester. The complexity of the interview grows along with student growth in the language. Students are continually learning about each other throughout the semester. This kind of questioning can help students in a number of ways:

1) **It helps students to learn the language in a relaxed social context.** We use the most useful expressions and highest frequency vocabulary repeatedly, which helps students to acquire the target language quickly and subconsciously and in a comfortable way. Students are not forced to produce the language, but most of them want to speak because they are sharing their stories and details about their lives.

2) **It helps to build community in the classroom** by modeling respect and interest in others. When students know one another they are more likely to treat each other better. The growing knowledge base bonds the class together and makes each student feel like a viable member of the tribe.

3) **It teaches a combination of vital 21st Century Skills: Learning & Innovation Skills** (Thinking Creatively, Working Creatively with Others, Communicating Clearly), **Life & Career Skills** (Interacting Effectively with Others, Guiding and Leading Others, Being Responsible to Others) and of course the **21st Century Core Subject & Theme** of World Languages. All of these can be taught with or without high technology applications. (Terminology borrowed from Bernie Trilling and Charles Fadel's 21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in our Times)

4) **It teaches students how to have a conversation and how to show interest in others.** *When someone* says he plays the guitar, for example, we NEVER just shrug and say "cool", we ask follow up questions. We try to draw some more information out of the person because we are genuinely interested in him. We try to engage him and get him to open up

a bit by focusing on his experience, background, activities, interests, abilities, talents and strengths.

EXAMPLE:

So with the guitar player we follow up with questions like:

- *How many years have you played the guitar?*
- *Do you play the guitar every day?*
- *What kind of guitar do you have?*
- *How many guitars do you have?*
- *Where is the guitar from?*
- *Did you buy the guitar?*
- *Did you buy it with your own money?*
- *Was the guitar a gift?*
- *Do you take guitar lessons?*
- *Do you play in a band here at school?*
- *Do you play your guitar alone?*
- *Do you play with friends?*
- *Do you play in your own band?*
- *Do you want to play in a band?*
- *Do you play any other instruments?*

Students are later responsible for the information they learn about each other. This allows them to focus on meaning and content and more easily acquire the language. They will later be responsible in extension activities or class discussions and asked to recall details that students shared during these interviews.

I want my students to know that the things that create an interesting life are not merely the typical straightjacket thinking that too often passes for interesting in school. I want to free up each student to create a lasting and interesting life by embracing openness, taking risks, being honest, making friends, thinking, understanding humor, having a sense of adventure, developing sensitivity to others, awakening confidence, appreciating family, becoming humble, trying new things, trusting intuition, exploring gifts, having the courage to be different, developing a quick wit, reading, writing, telling good jokes, embracing different hobbies, delighting others, doing non-standard activities, and appreciating the world. There is at least one student's name and face attached to each of those outstanding qualities in my mind—and we learned about those qualities by interviewing students in the target language. We can encourage students to explore and develop these qualities by showing interest in them and appreciating their responses—by asking them questions and urging them to tell their stories. I want to communicate clearly that we don't expect perfection; we expect growth.

The day after we interviewed a new transfer student (with significant assistance with translation from her new classmates) I overheard a couple of girls walking out of the classroom with her. They said, "You are going to love this class. We all know each other and like each other." That was a proud moment, because the Persona Especial part of the class was working the way it was designed to work. The kids were getting to know and respect one another and they were learning a lot of Spanish at the same time.

The possibilities for conversation are endless and so are the amazing things we can learn about one another when we just talk. This kind of interaction is the foundation of the crucial **Interpersonal Communication** component of learning another language and it is also the foundation of knowing and respecting one another in the classroom.

Bryce Hedstrom teaches Spanish at Roosevelt High School in Johnstown, Colorado. He writes TCI/TPRS teaching materials and is a workshop presenter. More information may be found on his website,

brycedstrom.com. An excerpt from 21st Century Skills can be found here: http://21stcenturyskillsbook.com/wp-content/uploads/21stCS_excerpt.pdf

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Excerpts from Ben Slavic's Stepping Stones
Edited by Karen Rowan

Slavic teaches French in Denver Public Schools (DPS World Language Teacher's video channel: <http://www.schooltube.com/channel/dpsworldlanguages/>) writes a blog (SKIP: link to blog <http://benslavic.com/tprs-professional-learning-community.html>) and presents workshops on teaching with comprehensible input (SKIP: LINK <http://benslavic.com/tprs-workshops.html>)

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.

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 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*

<http://benslavic.com/stepping-stones.html>

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Is Input More Interesting When It's About Me?

By Karen Rowan

Personalizing is one way to provide compelling, comprehensible input. Here are the five basic elements that contribute to language acquisition.

What the brain pays attention to

The crucial missing element in many otherwise successful classroom instruction programs is personalization. Our brains are attracted to and learn relevant information. We pay attention to things that are relevant to us and disregard the irrelevant. In any given moment, we are disregarding more than 90% of the information available in our surroundings. This is why we can remember the entire

plot of a TV show but cannot recall what commercials aired in what order at what time. Irrelevant information is not stored.

Relevant and compelling

Information must be relevant and also compelling. Our brains pay attention if it's about us and also interesting. In fact, we will eagerly eavesdrop on a conversation happening at a nearby table if it is dramatic and exciting even if it's not any of our business. We may even remember the details of the strangers' argument well enough to recount the details later.

Relevant, compelling and comprehensible

Information must be relevant and compelling but also comprehensible. That very same juicy conversation will be entirely disregarded if it is happening in a language we don't understand. Two people gesturing excitedly in Italian when we don't speak Italian leaves us with little to remember or recount.

Relevant, compelling, comprehensible, personalized

There is no better way to pique a person's interest than to drop his or her name into the overheard conversation. A dramatic conversation in a language we understand that also happens to be about us is the most enticing thing to eavesdrop on. Krashen calls this the Personalization Hypothesis (CITATION NEEDED.)

Relevant, compelling, comprehensible, personalized and repetitious

To recall specific words used in a story, we need to hear those words until they are acquired. Simply comprehending in the moment is insufficient because it does not create a long-term memory. With language learners, we must shelter the amount of vocabulary they are exposed to and expose them repeatedly to high frequency structures we want them to pick up. This can be boring, which is why providing compelling input is so critical.

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Three Arguments Against TPRS® Training and Why They are Wrong

1. It's hard to learn

The first problem with TPRS® is that, according to TPRS® teachers, it can be hard to learn, hard to implement and hard to sustain. TPRS®, according to students, requires a lot of attention, which can get tedious. TPRS® can be difficult to learn, particularly for teachers who either logistically or financially can't get to workshops. Teachers also run into numerous follow-up questions after the initial workshop and need continued support.

2. It's hard to learn alone

I was in Cody, Wyoming last year presenting an in-service to 5 foreign language teachers and passed by a movie theater in the hometown of Buffalo Bill Cody. A sign in the window said, "Must be 6 present to show." I found myself wondering what teachers in small towns could do to get access to training when even the movie theater requires at least 6 to show. TPRS® can be difficult to sustain in the absence of a supportive community of foreign language teachers. Presenters such as Beth Skelton who live in small communities are aware of the problems these teachers face and travel to other small communities.

3. We appear kooky to other professionals

Once we find TPRS®, it is so compelling compared to what some of us were doing previously, that we sound like brainwashed cult members spouting our stories of conversion. Very few professional foreign language teachers find this sudden conversion any less frightening than if we showed up at school with shaven heads. Many times, in the beginning, we aren't all that good at TPRS® and leave odd impressions of TPRS® with our colleagues that are difficult for them to overcome. Our apparently overnight transition in tandem with our effervescent excitement causes rifts and resistance in our departments and can cause problems in divided departments or in districts where more traditional teaching has been the norm.

Why they are wrong

- 1, Bad TPRS is better than good incomprehensible input.
2. In the age of the internet, this is a silly argument. You can even get Skype coaching now.
3. So what? We're language teachers. They already think we're weird.

