

Language Inclusion Lessons Using Comprehensible Input in a High School Setting

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For the past several years, my upper level students have been teaching Spanish to students in the Mild Intelligence Impairment Program (MIIP) using Comprehensible Input (CI) combined with music, movement, dance, and other hands-on learning activities. This once a week program, developed in collaboration with the lead teacher in the MIIP, continues to benefit both groups of students in a variety of ways. The experience is valuable for both groups of students as it builds relationships, a sense of a unified high school community, and enriches our learning environment.

Background Information and Development of the Program

Several years ago I was approached by one of the Special Education (SPED) teachers to offer some Spanish lessons to her students. (In the past our language students had gone to the elementary school to teach Spanish to 4th graders but changes in the daily schedule and having to drive to another campus eliminated that program.) I introduced the idea to my Spanish 4/5 students and most students wanted to take part. That year I had a full class of 30 students so I offered it as an optional activity. I stayed in class with the remaining students who had a separate assignment while the student “teachers” went to the SPED classroom. Since then, I have had smaller classes and now all students take part in the activity. This is a preferable set up because I can observe the lessons, offer help as needed, and coach my student “teachers” when we return to class.

I prefer to offer this teaching opportunity to my Spanish 4/5 students. These students are 11th and 12th graders who generally have the confidence and ability to lead a lesson. At my school, there is typically one class of Spanish 4/5, which eliminates the situation of having one class of your multiple sections losing instructional time. One year I did the program with only one of the two sections of Spanish 3. At times it was a challenge to maintain the same schedule due to the time allotted for both planning and the actual lesson.

The Spanish 4/5 students have acquired Spanish in regular classes taught via Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling® (TPRS) and CI methods throughout their

language career at the middle school and high school. My students plan and teach the weekly lessons and draw on their experience as students in beginning classes. Each year when I introduce the program, the SPED teacher comes to my room to talk about her students (in a general way) and offers advice and guidance to the Spanish 4/5 students. Later, my students and I discuss what helped them learn when they were in their beginning classes. Student “teachers” brainstorm strategies that they will use in their lessons. The lessons focus on small amounts of vocabulary, repetition, modeling, gestures, visual images, and both group and paired practice. The student “teachers” develop lessons that are not only developmentally appropriate but are fun, lighthearted, and comfortable for the students with intellectual impairments.

Organization and Planning

My Spanish 4/5 class is typically scheduled for the first hour of the day, which meshes nicely with the time available in the MIIP classroom. Initially, my students walked down to the MIIP classroom to present the lessons, but now we frequently alternate classroom locations. The weekly lessons, which supplement the MIIP core curriculum, occur during their “morning meeting” or “advisory time”. The two groups typically spend 25-35 minutes together once a week with some time allotted for students to pair up in smaller groups for guided practice. This helps reinforce the lesson while cultivating new friendships. It is helpful to have the upper level language students pair up with students with intellectual impairments to allow for a comfort level if one of the language students is absent.

Over the years, the “target vocabulary” is usually focused on words and phrases relevant to functional living skills and daily learning words. Students have learned days of the week, greetings, mealtime words, body parts, and words related to school. One year when the students in the MIIP class were reading the book “Rocket Boys”, we taught several words related to the novel. The SPED teacher and the para-educators label items in their classroom in Spanish. I share interactive white board slides with vocabulary and matching games, etc. for the students to review and play during the week. We have used a variety of songs, chants, and music that feature the target vocabulary.

Two language students volunteer to lead the class for each lesson. They review the previous vocabulary and then present the new words with physical gestures and images on the interactive white board. The rest of the students sit or stand with their partners and also model the gestures. Playing games such as holding up a “YES” or “NO” (in the target language) to respond to verbal prompts and various matching activities on the white board are fun and allow students to get up and interact with the language students.

Early in the year, the student “teachers” and their students pair up to make a large name tent on cardstock. This serves as a review practice and is revisited throughout the year to add more information. The students work together to write their name on one side and also draw some of the students’ favorite things (color, animal, food, vehicle, etc.) on the

other side. The students' personalities come out during this time and they are excited to learn the words in Spanish for their favorite things. Activities are modified based on student's abilities. For example, a student who uses an iPad as an augmentation device for communication used it for her Spanish vocabulary as well.

This program has been an amazing experience for both groups of students. In our district we have been implementing the Nurtured Heart Approach® philosophy and these types of collaboration and inclusion activities help to develop a positive appreciation for diversity within the school setting and beyond. In addition, my students have become more patient with others and have developed a better understanding of the learning (and teaching) process. If you are interested in implementing a similar program, here are some suggestions.

Implementation Basics

1. Approach your Special Education teacher(s) and administration to introduce the program
2. Coordinate with your Guidance Office to arrange your upper level class during a time that works with the SPED teacher's class schedule
3. Work with the SPED teacher to decide on what vocabulary to begin with and prepare an overall plan for the year (and be flexible with it)
4. Continue to collaborate with the SPED teacher to share feedback and support their curriculum
5. Schedule a time for your SPED teacher to offer guidance to the language students and discuss accommodations/modifications
6. Prepare your language students for teaching (discuss CI and appropriate teaching techniques) and continue to coach them throughout the year
7. Allow time within each week to plan for the next lesson including any materials and props
8. Allow time immediately after the lesson for student "teachers" to debrief, make notes, and share successes and challenges
9. Provide SPED teacher and para-educators with the weekly lesson information and share interactive white board activities, music, etc.
10. Send an email to the office staff to tell them where you and your class will be and put a note on the door for late comers
11. Plan a celebration at the end of the year
12. Share your success by publicizing via school newsletters, etc.