

The Comprehensible Input Classroom and the New Curriculum

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When writing this document I assumed the reader is familiar with both the old and new BC language curriculum. My purpose then is just to point out how a TPRS/CI class goes beyond and above the requirements established by our new curriculum.

I will talk about general aspects first, and how we tackle them, and later I will go into some specifics for some grade levels.

Culture: In a TPRS/CI class we teach culture in a meaningful way and this happens all in the Target Language (TL). We use novels, short stories, movie talks, picture talks and songs to teach culture. We constantly invite students, and open spaces of discussion in the classroom (since grade 9), to analyze and compare their own culture with that one they are learning about.

We do not agree with teaching culture in English, since our goal is always trying to stay in the TL for at least 90% of class time. Being this our goal, we push ourselves to teach culture in a comprehensible way, adapting it to their level of acquisition, and using it to keep establishing meaningful conversations in which the language acquisition process keeps happening.

Communication: In a TPRS/CI class we have a clear definition of communication. Communication is not just talking, speaking, repeating dialogues or practicing rehearsed questions. Our classrooms are an authentic space for communicating in the target language per-se, there for everything that happens in it has to be framed in our working definition of communication. According to SLA (second language acquisition research), communication in the language classroom is defined as follows: “Communication is the expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning in a giving context for a purpose” Bill VanPatten.

Once you have a clear idea of what communication is, everything in the class revolves around it, there for every minute is spent communicating with the students.

Language Learning: According to SLA research we learn languages in one and only one way: through interaction with comprehensible input in a meaningful context. We do not acquire language through grammar. The explicit learning of grammar rules, and their practice, does not translate in language acquisition but in language like behavior that falls short when the students are exposed to real, authentic events. Our brains are designed to do their own mapping of the TL at their own pace and following their own logic. The so called language patterns (grammar rules) are not understood like that by our language brain. Language is acquired through meaningful communication, through stories and through learning about each other.

Use a Wide Variety of Texts: In a TPRS/CI class we are constantly providing students with different opportunities for reading and being exposed to the TL. Since week one, they are reading a full story, writing it and presenting it. We read novels, short stories, embedded readings, we do movie talks (not just watching a movie with English subtitles, but making the short video a meaningful experience to

provide students with CI), we do songs, we learn about the singers and their background, we learn common expressions used in the TL. We provide students with way more exposure to a variety of meaningful texts (that help them in their language acquisition process) than any traditional method.

Language Instruction: As stated in the new curriculum, teachers are encouraged to use the TL as much as they can. In a TPRS/CI class we strive to be in the TL 90% of the time since grade 9. The English that we use is minimal and it is always to deal with housekeeping issues, otherwise, everything related to the TL happens in the TL. But it is hard to stay in the TL 90%, so how do we do it? The only way to do it (keeping in mind that it has to be comprehensible to the students so we do not miss the purpose of communication) is by engaging in meaningful conversations with the students. These conversations are born through the stories, the personalized questions, the movie talks, etc.

Community Building and First Peoples Perspectives: In a TPRS/CI class we work since day one to build a very strong community in our classes. There is no possibility or chance for disengagement. We teach to the eyes and we require that everyone pays attention and participates. When students do their part, studying is out of the equation. In our classes students do not need to study at home as long as they have been engaged in class. They know this and they do it. It is a small price to be paid. Plus, through all the personalization that happens constantly in the stories and personalized questions, we learn a lot about each other (in an authentic way) which translate in a very caring and relaxing environment.

A lot of us do not even have desks. Not having desks creates an environment of connection. There is nothing to hide behind, not for them, not for me. We are there, baring our souls and forced to make it work.

How to Teach? In the new curriculum there is a lot of flexibility to use a wide range of instructional strategies. There is not a one way, one prescribed form of teaching, but we have the freedom to choose the approach that fits better the nature of our “subject”.

There is a big focus on the core competencies, and “doing” is part of this. The doing in the TL is simply communicating (orally, written, reading). The doing in the TL is not learning grammar and practicing verb conjugations. If the students can communicate in an authentic, unrehearsed way, both them and you have reached your goals.

Stories: There is a big emphasis on stories in our new curriculum. Research has shown that stories are what gives meaning to our lives. We built our identities, ideals, goals and dreams based on them. We make sense of the world based on the stories we hear every day: in the news, on social media, from our friends and peers. If you want to touch the human heart and core, tell them a story.

In a TPRS/CI class we teach through stories. We do not give lists of words to be learned or classify regular and irregular verbs. We simply use them in stories that we built together, and students will always remember those words because they were exposed to them through a meaningful connection.

Second language acquisition resembles first language acquisition. We do not learn our second (or third) language different from the way we learned our first one. The brain acquires languages the same way,

and this is something we have to understand. We learned our first language by listening to our parents talk, by listening to the stories our grandparents told us, or our cousins. We made sense of the world through stories, and increasingly complex interactions, that built up according to our age and intellectual level. We formally learned grammar so many years after we were proficient in our first language, not before. We cannot reduce language to boxes or patterns. Languages go beyond that. We can say we are proficient in a language when we can feel it, not when we have to stop to think about it.

In a TPRS/CI class we also read a lot. We have a built in free voluntary reading program. We start reading classroom novels with the novice students and pretty soon students become independent readers of novels written for language learners. This is how we scaffold to higher, more complex readings.

Specifics for each grade level: When you read the new curriculum you realize that the requirements for each grade level have grown, compared to the old one. We are supposed to “cover” more material in the same time. It is hard to wrap our heads around this if we pretend to keep teaching the TL in the traditional way. In a TPRS/CI class we do not cover material, we do not teach units, but we teach the language as a whole. So we start right from Sp9 (in French would be Fr8) using present tense, -ing, near future and both past tenses. We naturally cover all the new specifics for content from the beginning and even go way beyond the expectations and requirements.

In a TPRS/CI class we do not finish a unit and move on, we constantly recycle the language to build upon it. Students do not need to study, the classes are relaxing, fun and engaging, we do not practice, we barely have homework, but we are super-efficient in what we do. Students acquire language in a relaxed, authentic way.

Once they get to Sp10 we introduce the other future, “perfecto” and “pluscuamperfecto” (this is specific for Spanish). These verb tenses have never been taught in the traditional Spanish class even though they are extremely common in daily Spanish interactions. Students are constantly talking about themselves, their lives, the world, our surroundings, comparing situations, etc., so we are always recycling and learning in context.

By the time our students get to grade 12 they can easily write and express themselves in the TL using different forms of texts: blogs, articles, news articles, essays, reports, mails, and letters. They can also read different forms of texts and have developed the ability of decoding meaning according to context. They can also engage in meaningful and heated debates about every day issues like immigrations, fast fashion, health, social media, etc. They can express their opinions (unrehearsed) in the matter and answer back to someone else to defend their points. The beauty of this is that they have gotten to this point not by studying “hard” but by being engaged in a fun, meaningful class that only requires from them to pay attention while they are in class. Learning a language is fun and easy, and it can actually happen in a short period of time.