

## COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

### Methods and Assessment in Teaching Languages, Frédérique Grim, PhD STUDENT QUESTIONS AFTER SEPTEMBER 4, 2023, GUEST LECTURE

• **How do you involve higher order thinking questions with CI? We talked about asking questions for comprehension and those are lower level on Bloom's taxonomy, but in education courses they always talk about how to get students to go beyond and start doing higher levels of thinking. How often do you use higher order skills? What does it look like?**

We definitely need to consider how to get students to higher levels of thinking.

The lesson I modeled for you in your class was for the first moments of a Novice-Low class where students knew nothing of the target language. The idea was to let you get a feel for how much usable language you could learn in just 20 minutes—to get the language learner experience. It was the very lowest level of language acquisition. The questions were understandably simple because you all didn't know much Latin yet. It gets more complex.

[This](#) document describes how to apply Bloom's Taxonomy in a communicative language class. [This one](#) shows how to ask questions practically based on Bloom's different levels of thinking.

• **What do day 2, 3 ...98 etc. look like? Are they similar to day 1? What is a typical day like in advanced high school courses like AP Spanish? Or what about courses that are taken in college? Do you still focus on reading in class?**

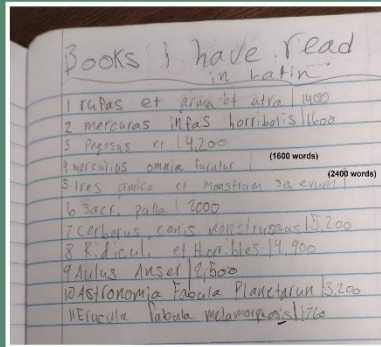
It varies, but the general idea is similar: a spiraling curriculum that is interesting and comprehensible to the students. The vocabulary and grammatical structures are repeated and pressed upward in quantity and complexity. [Here](#) is a Latin lesson similar to the one we did in your class—the story and vocabulary are expanded a bit, but you will likely understand much of it. With you, one student actor wanted better coffee and another one had it. With middle school students [in the first four days of Latin](#), the desired object was a little book.

Yes, reading is a big focus at all levels. Extensive reading is the surest way to increase vocabulary. Independent self-selected reading is enjoyable and self-differentiating. See [The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research](#) (2004), by Stephen Krashen, and [Teaching Extensive Reading in Another Language](#) (2020), by I.S.P. Nation and Rob Waring.


With the right preparation ([high frequency verbs](#) and [function words](#) used in stories—more on those two later) and materials ([vocabulary-controlled novellas](#)), beginning students can start to read on their own much sooner that you might suspect.

**Can beginning students participate in free voluntary reading?**

Renata, a fifth grader, read all of these books in Latin in the first 4 months on her own outside of class. That adds up to 37,000 words, not to mention the stories and interviews in class and reading portions of *Rufus et Arma Atra* together with the class.



Book Title	Words
1 Rufus et Arma Atra	1400
2 Mercator infans horribilis illius	
3 Pegasus et 14,200	(1600 words)
4 Mercurius omnia turat	(2400 words)
5 Sires panca et monstrum saevum	
6 Bacch. pule	2000
7 Cerberus raris monstruosus	15,200
8 R. dicit. et Horribilis	14,900
9 Aulus Anser	8,800
10 Astionomia Fabula Planchatum	15,200
11 Eruvia fabula metamorphosis	11,700

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• **To what extent can you become communicative outside the classroom if at the end you practice the same story to which you add more parts?**

I'd like to ask you some questions to help me understand more precisely what you mean here. Hopefully we'll be able to do that upon my return visit.

In the meantime, here is a general answer: You saw the very beginning moments of a Novice-Low lesson. I taught some vocabulary and told a simple story in Latin with student actors. Language acquisition does not stop there. That was just the very earliest stage. The key is to get students fluent with the core vocabulary of the language—the high frequency words.

You can expand on a story and get students to understand a lot, and we also do different stories throughout the year. But there is a lot that can be done with one story, as you add more vocabulary and details with each retelling of the story. This technique is called [embedded reading](#). See the embedded reading I wrote about [La Leyenda de La Llorona](#).

In order to communicate outside of the classroom students will need to know the words that are used most often in the language. Paul Nation (1990) showed that in English the 4,000 – 5,000 most frequent words account for 95% of language use. The 1,000 most frequent words make up 85% of speech. More recent research indicates these figures are in the ballpark for other languages as well.

In the early stories and reading in novice level classes, the focus is on [the most frequent verbs](#) and [the most frequent function words](#). This two-pronged approach is a reasonable strategy because:

- 1) **Verbs** compose 24 of the top 100 words in Spanish.
- 2) **Verbs** are more complex and harder for students to get in languages with conjugations.
- 3) **Verbs** account for 20% of all words in a language.
- 4) Without **verbs** it is difficult to talk about anything meaningful, like finding out about your students or telling stories. Many teachers of beginners focus on the low-hanging linguistic fruit of body parts, colors, numbers and classroom objects. These are easy-to-teach concrete vocabulary, but the interest soon dies with only those to talk about.
- 5) The top 50 **function words** compose 60% (!) of speech in English. The same goes for other languages.
- 6) The set of **function words** is relatively small (50-100 will easily do it) and once learned, those are the skeleton of every sentence.

Much of the above information comes from [A Frequency Dictionary of Spanish](#), by Mark Davies.

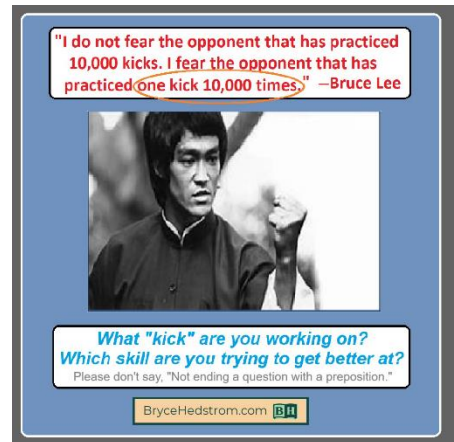
For students to communicate in the real world, they need to know the top words in the language. They can communicate competently if they know the most frequently used vocabulary. For example, high school students outside of school use on average only 800 different words a day. The same goes for adult twins talking to one another, and people in poverty. A typical medieval European peasant used only 600 words during their entire lifetime (*The Medieval Village*, G.G. Coulton). It is possible to communicate basic needs and ideas with a limited word set.

As Stephen Krashen has said, the goal of classroom second language instruction is to create intermediates. From that point, they can interact with native speakers and reading material outside of the classroom and become more proficient.

• **The only question I have is how to determine the difference between the IMP of the SCRIMP theory— how do I determine what is specifically interesting, meaningful, and personal? Do they all go hand in hand?**

You're right. The I.M.P. (Interesting, Meaningful, and Personalized) in the [SCRIMP acronym](#) are all closely related. Student interest will vary, but there are certain themes that will resonate with most students. You have to get to know your kids and find out what they like. Surveys can help, but just chatting with them has always worked best for me. **Interesting** is both a general and specific concept—most students in a given setting will be interested in certain topics; individual students will have their own specialized interests. **Meaningful** is what students take away—what sticks with them beyond the classroom. **Personalized** is how students can see a lesson applies in their own lives.

A winner activity that hits all three of these is [Persona Especial Student Interviews](#), where one-by-one you ask students questions about themselves. Talking about themselves is a subject that never gets old with students. In a nutshell, you ask kids questions about their lives and when they show a bit of enthusiasm **ask follow-up questions**. Asking follow-up questions is a crucial teacher skill, one of those 10,000 times practiced skills that make you great. I've never had better results from any other activity than with *Persona Especial*. Read [here](#) for an example of beginning level (early level 1) student interview, and [here](#) for a mid-level (Spanish 3) interview.



• **What do we do when we make a mistake in the TL when trying to speak it 90 percent of the time? Should we correct ourselves if we notice, or should we continue like nothing happened?**

Your TL speaking will get better as you speak more in class. Mine sure did. When I make a mistake, I correct myself. I feel like it helps to lower the affective filter of students in the class. It makes me more human and approachable. I am not a native speaker and after years of speaking and teaching Spanish I make occasional mistakes. When I make a mistake or don't know a word, I use a line like, "No one speaks perfect Spanish in here, including me."

• **What is your advice for how to practice teaching without having to be physically in the classroom? How do you get enough experience to feel comfortable on the first day?**

It takes practice, and you won't get everything right away. But hang in there, you'll get it eventually. For practice you could volunteer to teach short courses for free at community centers or retirement homes.

Reading [blogs](#) and [Instagram](#) or [Facebook](#) posts related to comprehensible input can help too.

• **Considering that many students do not answer questions due to the fear of being wrong or the questions being difficult/confusing to answer, how do you develop questions that would encourage students to participate in class?**

You have to make it OK not to understand in your class. Here are some ways to do that:

- 1) **Give them signals** to show they don't get it. Praise students that indicate they do not understand such as: I Don't Understand. Slow Down. Repeat. Time out.

Institute, expect, and reinforce gestures that facilitate communication. When one student sees another student making one of these gestures, they do it too. This will get the teacher's attention and not make the initiator feel as self-conscious.



*I don't understand.*



*Slow down.*



*Repeat.*



*Time out.*


These are valuable phrases for all language learners to know. Having students use gesture and say them in the target language in your class will give them confidence to use these expressions with native speakers. Teach these useful expressions with classical Total Physical Response: Have students do the gesture when you say the phrase to show they understand.

- 2) Put individual students on the spot with questions like, **"What did I just say?"** when you suspect they don't understand. When they admit they don't know, gently ask them, "Why didn't you show me? You have to show me or it's just blah-blah-blah."
- 3) Tell students, **"My job is to speak clear Spanish to you. Your job is to let me know if I am doing my job or not.** I may not be doing my job. You have to let me know."

You will have to tell them this over and over because it is such a different concept in many schools. Some teachers just drone on, and if you don't get it, tough luck. Not you. You will make sure that every regularly attending student gets it.

- 4) **Do not correct everything they say.** That makes learners shut down. Focus on the message behind what they are saying, rather than perfect grammar. But when students make an error, don't let it just sit there because other students will begin to acquire it that way. Recast errors in student speech by making a comment with the correct grammar.

Error Correction




Studies by Steven Pinker of Harvard (formerly at M.I.T.), support the idea that **error correction is not a factor** in language development.

**Our job as world language teachers is to provide students with interesting comprehensible input, not to correct everything they say.**

**"Attempts to show that parents correct their children's deviant sentences, or even react differently to them, have turned up little. Parents are far more concerned with the meaning of children's speech than its form, and when they do try to correct the children, the children pay little heed."**

—Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought*, p. 39

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• **When using a 90% approach in the classroom, how can you work with students to make them feel comfortable when their worry is that they understand very little of what is being said during class time?**

If regularly attending students understand very little of what is being said it is usually the teacher's fault. Incomprehensible language does not help with acquisition, so you must do constant comprehension checks, like one every minute. Students get very good at sagely nodding and acting as if they get everything you say. Don't trust that deceptive body language. Check for understanding. Focus particularly on the slower students. Make sure they understand what is being said.

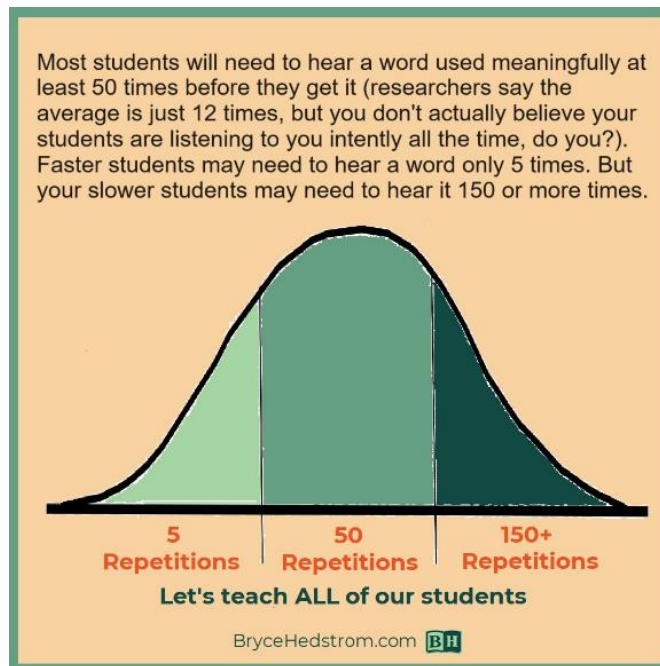
[This document](#) explains how to ask differentiated comprehension check questions to be sure that you are not losing the slower students, that you are challenging the faster students, and that you are meeting the needs of the students in the middle.

*Your C.I. angel observing your class for 30 minutes and not seeing a single comprehension check.*



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When thinking about student comprehension, it is good to keep this graph in mind:



For further support on teaching with comprehensible input, check out Ph.D. candidate **Eric Herman** of [The Acquisition Classroom](#). His writing is a source I trust for ongoing professional support. He writes a regular column on trends in second language acquisition which combines theory and practical application in the classroom. Each one is a gem.

Dr. Grim: **I think those are pretty good questions!** 😊

Bryce: Me too! Insightful. Their questions indicate they understand what I was saying and have thought about how it could apply in their own classrooms. Kudos!

Dr. Grim: **We will be going to Adrienne's class on October 17 to see her teach her class. It should be fun!**

Bryce: Excellent! She's been teaching this way for some time and is recognized as an expert. I'll be interested to hear their impressions.