



A STORY-BASED APPROACH TO TEACHING THE PAST TENSE

LA MUJER TRISTE

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IDEAS FOR TEACHING AND TALKING ABOUT THE STORY

Some of the advice here is specific to this story, but much of it will apply to any language at any level.

These are methods that have worked for me. The notes are intended to help teachers that are new to Comprehensible Input-based teaching and TPRS, but they can also supply even veteran teachers with ideas, fresh perspectives and alternative ways of delivering compelling, personalized comprehensible input to their students.

THUMBNAIL VERSION OF THE STORY:

The extremely short version of the story is this:

A woman thinks people are calling her a cow.
She goes for a drive in the country.
A farmer yells “cow” at her.
She gets mad and drives faster.
She hits a cow in the road.

With that short story and a few key verb structures that fit with it in your mind, you can create a fun story with your students. To give this a bit more structure for you, the story has been expanded to the thumbnails and pictures below. Some suggested grammatical structures for level II are also included.

*The **highlighted verbs** in the thumbnails below are the grammatical structures that are the focus for the story. Other verbs in the story are mostly ones that students have heard before.*

Each of these short paragraphs and accompanying drawings can be thought of as a short story. Each has a problem and a resolution. You can ask questions about each section to personalize the story with unique details from your students and expand them to several paragraphs. You can take one to two days per drawing if you like.

Here are the thumbnail paragraphs for each drawing:

Drawing #1:

*There was a woman. She had a problem: she was sad because **it seemed to her** that someone in the office **was always saying** “cow” to her. She couldn’t believe it. She decided to talk to her friend.*

Drawing #2:

*The woman talked to her friend. Her friend had a lot of ideas, but the woman did not like them. Finally her friend said that she needed a vacation. **It seemed like** a good idea to the woman. **It seemed** to the woman that she needed to go to another place because someone **kept on saying** “cow” to her. **She thought**, “Probably the people in the country are better than the people here in the city.”*



Drawing #3:

*But the woman had a problem. She did not have any money. She thought of how she could get the money to buy a car. So the woman called her dad and **asked him for** some money. She bought a new car and **drove** it in the country. While she was driving, she was happy.*

Drawing #4:

*But all of a sudden, a man in the country yelled “cow” at the woman. The man **kept on yelling** “cow!” at her. **He did not stop yelling** at her. The woman **thought** that it was an insult, and she was sad and mad again. **It seemed to her** that the people in the country were as bad as the people in the city.*

Drawing #5:

*The woman **kept on driving** her car. The man **did not stop yelling**. **He kept yelling** more and more loudly. The woman **drove** her car around a curve in the road. All of a sudden, she saw a big cow in the road!*

PRE-TEACHING THE VOCABULARY IN THE STORY

Give students a vocabulary pre-test (like the sample on p. 12) to check what they know before you begin teaching the story. This can be important because Comprehensible Input-based teaching is so effortless students may not realize how much they are acquiring.

You may need to pre-teach some vocabulary along the way with some quick classical TPR repetitions.

Be sure to emphasize the high frequency verbs that flow in the story naturally.

- *Focus on the key verbs **seguir, dejar, parecer & pedir**. These are some of the most common verbs in Spanish but many teachers do not use them often enough for students to acquire them.*
- *Spend more time on the key verbs by giving them extra repetitions through the personalized questions and answers in your class conversations.*
- *Use the verb structures naturally as you invent the story with your students. The story is what makes the words stick. This contextualization makes them meaningful and memorable to students. The unique class version of the story that your students create with you will get them to buy in. They will acquire the structures via meaning, usage and repetition.*

*There is a supposed Indian proverb, popular on storytelling websites, which goes: “**Tell me a fact and I will learn. Tell me a truth and I will believe. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.**”*

*Based on what I have read about cognitive psychology, brain research and from observing myself and my students, I would change that a bit to something like: “**Tell me a fact and I will learn***



about 10% of it and then forget most of that within a couple of weeks. Tell me a truth and I will believe a distorted version of it that complements my preconceived biases. But tell me a story and I have a shot at remembering at least part of it.” *Not quite as lyrical as the original, so it may not catch on, but I think it is more true-to-life.*

ACTING OUT THE STORY

Act out / Tell / Ask the story before students read the extended version. Most of your class time will be spent asking your way through this story. You will add details to make it unique to each particular class.

Acting out this story in class can involve a flexible number of actors. In the thumbnail version there are only three actors:

*the woman
her father
the farmer*

In the extended written version more characters are added:

*her friend
the family in the country (possibly up to four actors)*

This may be up to eight actors. To involve even more actors (or just to make it more fun) you can also add the roles of her (supposedly) rude co-workers, a car salesman, the cow and even the tree. Almost everyone in the class can have some kind of role. Get the class clown to be the cow and he will have them rolling with laughter with his sounds effects and antics—his chance to shine.

Pick a good actress for the role of the woman in the story. This actress need not be “Sally Super Smart” or “Vickie Volunteer.” For this role, you need to pick someone with “star power” because the story may take a week or even two weeks to tell/ask and this girl will be in every scene. If she is a good actress she will make it fun with her reactions to the twists and turns in the story that each class uniquely brings to the tale as the story unfolds before them. She needs to be emotive and feisty, and if she is not, you will need to coach her to act that way as you ask your way through the story.

One caution here, the actress has to be a girl with VERY good self-esteem. Make it extremely clear that neither you nor the class think that she is fat—that is just what some of the people in the story supposedly say to the character in the story.

*To head off trouble from inevitable dinner table and texting gossip, ask questions like these overtly in the target language **BEFORE** you begin telling the story:*

“Class, is Lauren fat? No! Does señor Hedstrom think she is fat? No! Does this class think she is fat? No! Are we calling her fat? No! In the story, the woman thinks she hears people insulting her. Are the people in this class actually insulting her? No! That’s right, class. Lauren is perfect and she is also a very good actress. Lauren is simply acting insulted and hurt in the story. Right, Lauren? Do you understand, class? What a fantastic actress! Very good, class. Let’s keep on telling the story...”



You do not have to follow the story exactly as you ask/tell it to each class. Allow the story to change with the personalities in each group. That personalization is what makes it interesting and keeps it fresh.

REAL-LIFE ELEMENTS IN THE STORY

In my school district teachers are required to help students with other areas besides our own narrow disciplines. We also have to give documentation that we have done so. One way to do this is to ask the actual student actors about their real life future plans. With this particular story it is natural to incorporate elements of the student's actual ICAP (Individual Career and Academic Plan)—personal educational and work goals, and how the student intends to achieve them).

Ask the actual student actress where she thinks she will be working in 10 years and incorporate that into the story; do the same with her friend in the story. Ask those two main actresses where they actually want to go, what they want to do and how they plan to get there. Interrupt the story and have a conversation aloud with them in front of the class. Weave those details into the story as you and the class “ask the story.” With these details you can invent and tell a truly memorable story that will ring true to the actors and to the whole class. This will keep their attention. This will keep the story going for a long time.

Lots of great details, human interest, explanations and useful vocabulary can spring out of this type of ICAP-based personalization. For example, if the student actress thinks she will be a doctor in ten years, make a hospital the setting for the beginning of the story. Ask her what kind of doctor she will be, where she went to college and what kinds of challenges she faced as you tell/ask your way through the story. Stop and talk right to her using the tú form in natural speech.

Use this information to explain details in the story and to add interesting background information to it. For example, you might point out that she does not have a good car because she will not yet have a lot of money because she has a lot of debts from her extensive college education. Explain that even though she is a doctor her working conditions may not be perfect. She may have a jerk for a boss. She may work with people she does not like. She may not always be working with patients; she will have to do paperwork and will have to spend a lot of time working in her office too. This is real life. It is telling students that they can have a good job that is not perfect.

Give the students some control as you gently direct the action toward the vocabulary and structures they need to work on. Use Socratic teaching here. Keep asking questions that nudge students in the direction you want them to go. You can direct the story with your leading questions to get it where it needs to go. You can slowly steer the action to where she decides to get a new car and drive it out in the country to get some relief from her life and from her supposedly rude co-workers. If students come up with better ideas that can use the same focus structures, all the better.

Plan on spending at least one day of classroom storytelling time for each page/illustration of the extended written version of the story. You could spend much more time on it, but to start out, plan on one day per page.



ELEMENTS OF STORYTELLING IN LA MUJER TRISTE

If you can notice how these classic elements of storytelling function in this story it can become more powerful as you tell it in the classroom with your students. You can also use these elements in future stories to make them more appealing to students.

A good story needs an OBJECTIVE and a GOAL. There also needs to be CONFLICT and STRUGGLE. There also is a need for DETAILS. It is the details that bring the story its life and unique flavor—like the spices in your favorite dish.

OBJECTIVE: *Relief. In this story, the woman needs relief from her boss and her co-workers. She thinks that they are ALL rude (but it turns out in the end that she may have been wrong).*

GOAL: *To get out in the country where people are nicer.*

CONFLICT: *With her boss, with her co-workers, supposedly with the farmers, but ultimately with her own self; with her perceptions about the world.*

DETAILS: *The personalized details that each class comes up with during the telling/asking of the story in class will make it compelling to your students.*

There are also other built-in details which will help the story to come together that you can work into the class telling. SHE BUYS A NEW CAR TO GET OUT OF TOWN AND RELIEVE STRESS—IT IS A CONVERTIBLE. (This FITS WITH AN IMPORTANT LATER DETAIL—SO THAT THE FARMER CAN SEE HER.)

The FORESHADOWING is a great detail, too. (SHE USED TO BE CHUBBY AND SHE IS STILL SENSITIVE ABOUT IT.)

She needs a break and she thinks that people in the country will be nicer. But it SEEMS to her that the farmer is not nice at all. Her own perception creates a problem for her.

CHARACTER GROWTH: *Self awareness and at least potential growth as a person of one of the characters is an essential element in any story (sometimes the growth and awareness comes only to the hearer/reader, and that might be the case with this story). In the end the woman almost hits a cow! The farmer was not actually trying to insult her. He was trying to warn her about the cow.*

Result: Her original assumption was correct—How ironic!—the people in the country WERE actually nice!

Use the ironic twist at the ending to propel a higher-level thinking discussion in Spanish:

Maybe the woman was wrong about other things as well, like her supposedly overbearing boss and her supposedly rude co-workers.

The bigger lesson here for students may be that it was just her perception the whole time—maybe everyone back in her office and in the city was not an idiot. Maybe she just had a bad attitude.