

Observations and Recommendations

By Bryce Hedstrom

I have been doing long-term coaching for school districts this past year. It has been helpful for teachers and gratifying for me. Everyone has struggled during the pandemic, and the teachers I have observed are no exception. Students were behind and teachers were anxious to get them caught up. I saw a few teachers revert to teaching explicit grammar to get students closer to where they traditionally were. Here are my recommendations based on an observation of a level 2 Spanish teacher doing a lesson on direct object pronouns.

The Main Thing: Use mostly the target language (TL), most of the time in class. Students cannot acquire the language if they do not hear it used in context, in many different ways, and often. 90 % target language use, as recommended by ACTFL, by both the teacher and students is good. 95% may be even better for fluency. There is a huge difference between hearing an explanation in English, and hearing a word is used meaningfully in the target language. **Here are three specific ways to do that:**

1. Flip the Instruction.

If your current curriculum requires specific instruction and grammatical units, think of how you could flip the teaching. Use homework time for mandated discrete grammar practice and use precious class time for comprehensible input.

Talk with your students about topics that matter to them, or at least are entertaining. It is much more effective to pause occasionally to highlight grammar points briefly than to teach an entire unit on a grammatical point. Do this as the grammar shows up naturally, rather than a week-long unit.

I used to teach a two-week unit on direct and indirect objects. At the end of that time, most student did well on the unit test... but they still couldn't use DOP's and IOP's well in spontaneous speech.

Students will get the targeted input they desperately need mainly from the teacher. They can get it best in class. They can get masterful grammar instruction on line, if that is what is needed according to your curriculum, but they must have input tailored to their diverse needs by you in class. Do not use up that valuable opportunity with long grammatical explanations in English. Give them narratives, stories, and discussions in the target language during class time.

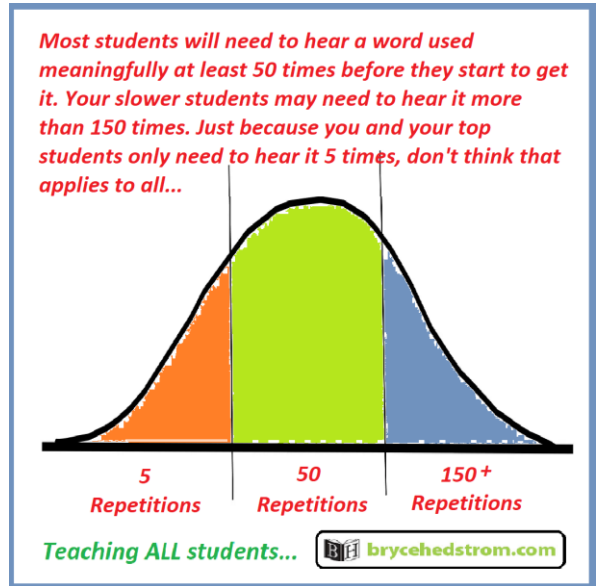
2. Tell a Story.

Tell a story or talk about a cultural topic that uses the grammar students need, repeating those targeted structures over and over, almost as if it were a vocabulary item they needed to hear repeatedly.

Remember that high aptitude/high achieving students need to hear a word many fewer times than lower aptitude students. You are probably good at learning language. You were probably one of those high aptitude students, so you may project that ability onto all of your students. But there is a problem: they don't all learn at the same rate. They don't all learn as quickly as you might imagine. Do not think they all learn the same way or at the same speed. Give your lower aptitude students a chance to get it by repeating the structures they need.

Students do not need long grammatical explanations as much as they need **examples**, many examples, **of how the structures are used**. They need to hear those structures over and over in context, in different forms, and with different types of sentences.

And some students will need to hear more examples than others. Lots more. Slower students may need to hear 30 times as many examples as more gifted students.



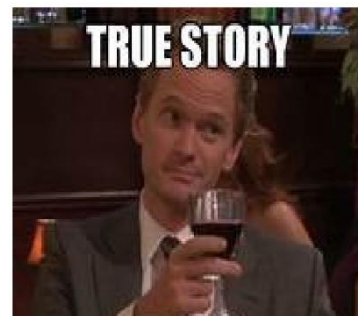
STORY IDEA USING LOTS OF DIRECT OBJECT PRONOUNS

Here is an idea for a story that would work in this case (focusing on direct object pronouns). *Story Plot: **Somebody sees something that another person doesn't and they both get frustrated.***

It would be even better and funnier to act out in class if the supposed viewer was just making it up as a dodge for something else. A dodge like this actually happened my family when I was a kid:

One summer day when I was a child, we were driving in the mountains of Colorado, and my mom had to go. There were no facilities for miles. So, my dad pulled the car over and told us kids to create a diversion while he served as the lookout. My brothers and I were to act as if we saw some wildlife, like bighorn sheep, on the mountain on the other side of the road, while our mother snuck off in the opposite direction. We were to distract passersby, so that no one would notice mom in the nearby bushes.

But there was a problem: We were such convincing and enthusiastic actors that cars started pulling over. People began piling out to see the imaginary bighorns on the mountainside. We kept pointing and talking and pretending that the magnificent animals were "right there." More cars stopped to see the what was going on, and even though they were all looking in the other direction, mom couldn't get enough privacy, so we all had to get back in the car, leaving the crowd behind gazing at the non-existent wildlife, as we drove off to find a better spot for our long-suffering mother. We were all laughing so hard that she almost had an accident right there in the car.



Here's how a similar scenario, using lots of direct object pronouns, might play out in a class:

- There are **32** direct object pronouns in the little scenario and follow-up questions below. In a classroom situation, there would be many more as you rephrased and verified that you understood, and acted like you forgot parts of the story. The main thing is to keep talking to your students and keep checking to be sure they notice and understand when you use the structures you want/need them to pick up.

- You would not show the translations below or interpret into English during the lesson. The translations are provided below so that non-Spanish speaking readers can follow the lesson. But if you do a class story that is similar to this one, asking students to read the scenario below with no English translation could be beneficial. You could make it a comparison/contrast assignment with the class story.

- The way to ensure understanding is to do comprehension checks and start over often: Ask a question and then say, "Let's see, where were we...?" and then back up a bit in the story and begin again.

- Actors: Actor A should be a real with-it kid, one that picks up language quickly.
 Actor B could be a slower, but funny kid. Mostly says, "**No lo veo.**"
 Use the class clown as the mom that is trying to hold it during the conversation.

- The story need not be just like the one below. Let the actors have some leeway to express themselves. They will think of something better. It can help to have a story like this in mind to get started though.

- Students are getting the direct object pronouns and much more with this lesson: word order, using DOP's with different verbs and combinations, reviewing important verbs, forming questions, negotiating meaning, and more.

As you read the dialogue below, keep these ideas in mind as you imagine how this would work in your classroom:

- **Have a story in mind.** Having students help to make up the details of a story based just on a scenario is fun, but it sometimes flops. It is helpful to have a rather complete story like this one in the back of your head, just in case the focus gets off track, or the interest and ideas fade.

- **Coach students.** In a live classroom situation, you would not use this exact dialogue, but rather coach students to use some of these expressions

- **Keep asking.** Keep on asking your students what will happen next. They will come up with unique twists you hadn't thought of, those twists will bring new opportunities to use the language.

- **Keep verifying.** Keep acting like you are checking to see if that you are getting the story, acting as if you are trying to remember the details, and reflecting parts of it back, using the direct objects as you go.

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- Key:
- **A & B** = Student actors
 - **Red print** = Spanish with direct objects highlighted
 - *Black italic* = English translation – in class there would be little-to-no English
 - *Blue italic* = Teaching suggestions at this point in the story. Mostly targeted questions. You do not have to ask this many questions, as it could disrupt the flow of the story. These are examples of potential questions for students at different ability levels to differentiate your instruction.

- A:** ¡Hay un animal! ¡Hay un animal! ¿Lo ves?
There's an animal! There's an animal! Do you see it?
- B:** No lo veo.
I don't see it.
- Ask a lower-level kid: What does 'No lo veo' mean?*
Ask a mid-level kid: What does the lo in 'No lo veo' mean?
Ask a higher-level kid: ¿Cómo se dice 'I don't see them'?
Students may not have seen or heard you specifically teach or explain the plural, but a couple of students will have already caught it. This higher-level kid may have to stretch, they may have to be coached a bit. That's OK. They need to be challenged.
- A:** Está allí.
It's right there.
- B:** No lo veo.
I don't see it.
- Ask a mid-level kid: What does lo mean in that sentence?*
Ask another mid-level kid: What 'it' is that talking about?
- A:** ¿No lo ves?
You don't see it?
- Ask the whole class these 2 questions, signaling a choral response:*
Clase, ¿Qué ve A? (say the name of actor A)
Clase, ¿B lo ve o no lo ve? (Say the name of actor B)
The whole class should answer quickly and confidently.
If not, go back to the beginning of the story, acting as if you need to review to get the details straight.
- B:** No, no lo veo. ¿Dónde está?
No, I don't see it. Where is it?
- A:** ¡Está allí! ¿Cómo no lo ves?
It's right there! How do you not see it?
- B:** ¡No lo veo!
I don't see it!
- A:** Está al lado de la piedra grande. ¿La ves? ¿Ves la piedra?
It's next to the big rock. Do you see it? Do you see the rock?

Ask the whole class: Clase, ¿qué significa ‘piedra’ en inglés?

Ask a mid-level student: ¿Qué significa ‘¿La ves?’ en inglés?

B. Sí, **la** veo. Pero todavía no veo el animal.

Yes, I see it (the rock). But I still don’t see the animal.

*Ask a lower-level student: **What does “Sí, la veo” mean in English?***

*Ask a mid-level student: **Why do we use la there instead of lo?***

A. Ok. ¿Ves la piedra? El animal está a la derecha de la piedra. ¿**Lo** ves ahora?

Ok. You see the rock? The animal is to the right of the rock. Do you see it now?

B. ¡No **lo** veo!

I don’t see it!

A. ¿Qué? ¡Es obvio! ¡No entiendo por qué no **lo** ves!

What? It’s obvious! I don’t understand why you don’t see it!

B. ¡No sé, pero no **lo** veo!

I don’t know, but I don’t see it!

A. ¿Cómo no **lo** ves?

How do you not see it?

B: ¡Aaaaggg! ¡Todavía no **lo** veo! No veo nada. **Lo** siento.

Aaaagggghh! I still don’t see it! I don’t see anything. I’m sorry

***Lo siento** is used for “I’m sorry”, but literally means, “I feel it,” and uses another direct object pronoun. Most students will know this expression, but they may not realize that it is a DOP, having memorized it as a useful language chunk early in level 1.*

*Ask a low-level student: ¿Qué significa ‘**Lo siento**’ en inglés?*

*Ask a mid-level student: **What does the lo in ‘Lo siento’ mean?***

A: ¿Qué? ¿Todavía no **lo** puedes ver? ¡No entiendo como no puedes ver**lo**! Es obvio. ¡Espérate!

Ahora hay dos, no... ¡hay tres! ¿Los** ves? ¡Son magníficos!**

What? You still can’t see it? I don’t understand how you can’t see it! It’s obvious. Wait! Now there are two, no... there are three! Do you see them? They’re magnificent!

*Ask a mid-level student: ¿Qué significa ‘¿**Los** ves?’ en inglés?*

*Ask a different mid-level student: **What is the difference between lo ves, and los ves?***

B. ¡No! ¡No **los** veo! ¡No **me** digas mentiras!

¡No! I don’t see them! Quit telling me lies!

*The **me** in this exclamation is, of course, an indirect object pronoun—not that most students would notice or understand the difference between a DOP and an IOP—they just want to*

understand the story. Just go ahead and keep using direct object pronouns, indirect object pronouns, and double object pronouns with comprehension checks. Your students will get how to use them confidently and well if you use them confidently, well and often. They will pick up which verbs require indirect objects.

- A. **Bueno. Sigue buscándolos. Vas a encontrarlos eventualmente...**
OK. Keep on looking for them. You're going to find them eventually...

You could make this story longer or shorter, depending on the need. And you could also easily add more direct object pronouns by adding elements like trading binoculars, or pointing out other features on the mountainside to help the viewers zero in on the supposed sight.

3. Check for Understanding. Talk to students in the target language (or read aloud in the target language) about interesting cultural topics, pausing often to check for understanding. You will need to do these comprehension checks at different levels:

- The most basic level is: **Are they all following you?** It is crucial that even the lowest students get most of what you are saying. If they do not understand, the input does not count.
- The middle level is: **Do they understand how word forms and word order affect the meaning?**
- The highest level is: **Are they playing with the words in their minds and coming up with other ways to use them?**
You, the teacher, as an adept language learner, do this in your head all the time, so you think everybody does. They don't. they need to be coached and coaxed and reminded to turn new words and structures around in their heads, to give themselves extra repetitions.

You can use these questions to frame the different levels of students in your classes:

Low aptitude: **"What did I just say?"**

Mid aptitude: **"What does ___ mean in that sentence?"** or **"What is the difference between ___ and ___?"**

High aptitude **"How would you say ___?"**

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



So you're going to keep on talking without any comprehension checks?



These comprehension check questions are to individual, targeted students to see how they are engaging and thinking about the text or narrative—not to the whole class. Develop and teach a series of gestures that indicate which type of question you are about to ask.

Decontextualized information that is only memorized does not stick as well as that which is inferred and picked up from a story. This is the difference between talking about the language, and actually speaking the language with students. Learners need to get the sense of how the language is used. They need to develop a feeling of correctness, a sense of what sounds right. That's their subconscious stitching together all of the parts of the language into a comprehensible whole. That takes time and it comes only from comprehensible input.