

## Ben Slavic Storytelling Workshop Handouts – Longer Version

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### **“Getting Your Feet Wet”: Three Skills to Make It All Work**

Before thinking about getting into stories, we need to get some degree of command of three (of the many) skills used in TPRS. Then we need to practice them at the beginning of the year in some simple activities (listed below).

Learning the three skills and applying them to the activities is a wonderful way to start the year when one is just learning TPRS. The activities are so simple that you can actually practice them in the first few months of the year while training your students in the rules and the game of CI, and then, only when you feel ready, start stories.

By making the first month or two of the year into a practice session for the teacher and a training session (especially in the establishment of rules!) for the students, the anxiety of the teacher new to TPRS goes down, and the teacher gets comfortable with the method right there in the classroom in the fall!

Here is a description of the three skills that I feel are crucial to success in TPRS - Pausing and Pointing, SLOW, and Circling. It is followed by descriptions of the five activities you can use them with before getting to stories, while you “get your feet wet”:

#### **PAUSING AND POINTING**

I present this skill first because I consider it the most important skill in TPRS. When you write your target language words or structures on the board or the overhead at any point in class, write the translation of the word in English as well. Then, during class, point to the structures and question words each time you say them. Do this slowly.

Point, as well, to the question words whenever you use them. They should already be translated and on the wall in poster form. Do not assume that your students know the question words. Point to them when you say them and wait for a few seconds, looking at your students, before going on.

Again, write any new word down with its English translation and, pointing to both, pause in order to let the new information sink in. Even after you have established meaning and begun the story, continue at all times to reinforce meaning by pointing and pausing during PQA and beyond.

Pointing to and pausing at the question words as well as the target structures and any new vocabulary throughout the lesson results in much more highly engaged students. The students really need you to do that so they don't get lost. Overlooking this skill may explain why teachers sometimes feel that TPRS doesn't work for them.

When you pause, count to four or five, or until you feel a kind of invisible “kathunk!” as the words fall into the minds of your students. Remember, this is all new information to the students. So wait for that “kathunk” moment to happen, even if it takes up to ten seconds!

If you sense that the word did not stick in their minds, do not go on. Instead, stay on the word until you sense that they “have” it. Do this for anything new or anything unfamiliar at any point in the class.

The pause time is vastly superior to talking non-stop. The kids need time to absorb and process the new information. Pausing (and twin sister SLOW) helps assure that our pointing has its desired effect.

It is our choice. We can point, pausing with the intention to make sure they get it, or we can point without pausing and assume they get it. If we do the latter, they probably won't get it.

It takes months before the entire class truly locks on to the question words, and since the question words are always used in a TPRS class, are they not worth hammering in visually as well as auditorially?

In a recent community college class of motivated adults who were all in close physical proximity to me, I saw how valuable pointing really is. It was the first class of the term, and I literally pointed to everything I said.

Everything was on the white board, with English translations that were easy to see – all the question words, the two structures I was trying to teach, and a growing list of new words as they occurred in class.

I happened to be focusing on just this one skill in that class, hence I became firmly aware of its importance. I believe that had I not pointed to everything in that class, the students would not have been as engaged as they were. I am sold on the importance of this skill.

Be clear – we must physically point to the structure and its English version on the board or overhead each time that it is mentioned, remembering to pause. This is especially true with the question words you use, particularly at the beginning of the year.

The question words are:

que veut dire\_\_ – what does\_\_ mean  
 qui – who  
 que – what  
 est-ce que – is it that  
 qu'est-ce que – what is it that  
 est-ce qu'il y a, y a-t-il – is there  
 de quelle couleur est – what color is  
 où – where  
 quand – when  
 combien – how much, how many  
 pourquoi – why  
 parce que – because  
 comment – how, describe  
 quel/quelle – which  
 de quelle couleur est – what color is  
 à qui (ownership) – whose  
 de qui (relationship) – whose

I once heard someone say at a workshop: “They get a lot less than we think.” That sentence has stuck with me, and I feel that pointing but doing so in a way that we know they get it is the best way to guarantee that our students get a lot MORE than we think.

Needless to say, we never introduce a new word or expression without first making sure that the previous one has been circled into comprehension. Two planes can't take off on the same runway at the same time. This fact is obvious intellectually, but, in the heat of teaching, it is not so easy to remember. More than a few TPRS teachers have become

untracked by using words without first making sure that those words had been acquired via sufficient repetitions.

Thus, point to everything you can: the structures for the story, the question words, and any new words! Make sure they get it! Doing this guarantees happy students.

### SLOW

Are you going slowly? Next to circling, this is perhaps the most important skill in TPRS. Speaking too fast disempowers students. Speaking to your students slowly indicates respect. When you go slowly you acknowledge that you appreciate how hard it is for your students to understand the new and foreign language.

To quote from Blaine:

*The reason we have to go so slowly is that we can't feel how hard it is. We have a feeling that the language is easy because that is our experience. By slowing down much more than we believe is necessary or possible, we are getting close to the best speed. We can only feel this by learning another language.*

Blaine implies here that compassion is a necessary ingredient in proper story telling. One must put oneself in the position of the learner, and feel how hard it is. Much of the current training of new teachers in TPRS reflects this idea – there are hours and hours at the national TPRS conferences in which novice teachers are asked to study languages they don't know. This truly puts the teacher in the position of the learner.

One day I was watching my class being taught by a teacher new to TPRS. She was working on circling and I was coaching her from the side of the room. Being new to it, she went very slowly. The kids responded so beautifully, due to the slowness. I felt the truth of SLOW at that moment. To put it simply, when the kids are with you, you are going slowly enough. If it is too fast for even one student who is trying to learn, it is too fast.

One student, whom I perceived as something of a jerk because he didn't pay "enough attention" in class, and whom I had given up on as a barometer student, was really hanging in there with this particular student teacher and her slower circling. I had to recognize that his problem was not entirely him but me as well. By slowly circling, this teacher was really getting some good teaching done. I watched in amazement at how powerful the two things, circling and SLOW, really are.

Some teachers even count seconds between structures while circling. They count "one thousand one, one thousand two" or something like that. What a wonderful idea! We can credit Mary Holmes for that one.

Personally, I have learned through practice to speak in "chunks" of sound lasting three or four seconds. I have found that if I do not aim for that amount of time for each utterance, I lose the kids. When I frame an image or an idea in these "chunks" of sound, the kids understand me.

It is quite difficult to slow down in English, so why should we think it easy to do so when speaking to our students in the target language? SLOW requires strict discipline. The feeling is of driving 35 miles an hour in a 65 mile an hour zone.

Many of us work so hard at mastering the other skills involved in learning TPRS, but then when we forget SLOW, we miss the entire point and invalidate all our efforts in learning the other skills. The other skills have no effect unless we go slowly!

When we express something in three brief seconds when the students might require ten seconds to understand it, we often blame and complain internally that the students are “slow.” This is a big mistake. Students are always exactly where they are, and if we express something in three seconds, and they are seven seconds behind us, it is up to us to slow our speech down to the level of the student and not expect the reverse.

We must develop empathy for what the student is experiencing. If we could develop and put into practice this empathy, we would derive results we could not have predicted or imagined.

Lynette Lang in Chicago is a real pro at this skill. She paces so slowly, and with such patience! Hers is a perfect pace and her students seem to hang on every word she says.

Moreover, Lynette actually takes the time in class to laugh with her students. It is honest laughter, and is a great tool for personalization because it is authentic. The laughter has the effect of slowing down the class. The class suggests things to her and it often strikes her as funny. She lets herself actually think about it and when she laughs they all laugh.

Lynette doesn't say, "No, that isn't it, I'm looking for something else." Laughing at funny things at the right moment is an advanced skill in TPRS, and it happens more spontaneously when the teacher is teaching slowly. We should seek genuine laughter in the classroom not only because true learning is fun but also because of the enormous neurological benefits it has to the students and the teacher. We must, however, remember to avoid any comment that could be even remotely perceived as a personal comment, as the world of teens is most often a very sensitive one.

Another way Lynette slows her classes down is to whisper some of the CI to her students. She uses whispering in the same way professional storytellers do. Between the laughter and the whispering, it is no wonder that Lynette's students easily handle the AP French Language exam every year.

Can one go too slowly? In one class, I asked the students if I was going slowly enough (I knew I was), and one student said, “Mr. Slavic, do you know how when you ride a bike, if you go too slowly, you fall off? That's what this is like!” But that doesn't happen very often, and it is best to err on the side of caution.

It seems like a simple thing to go slowly, but it is not. It seems that most TPRS teachers, no matter how much experience they have, repeatedly forget this skill after even a few days. It requires constant vigilance, above all the other TPRS skills, and is, in my personal view at least, among the top three most important TPRS skills.

### CIRCLING

In the same almost magical way that pausing and pointing properly creates more engaged students, the students become strongly engaged when you circle properly, as mentioned above. There is always a strong link between student engagement and good circling. In the early stages of learning this skill, you will probably refer frequently to your circling poster.

Circling is:

Statement  
 Question  
 Either/or  
 Negative  
 3 for 1  
 What  
 Who  
 When  
 Where  
 Why  
 Ask a detail

An example of circling was provided above in the Circling with Balls activity. Here is another example:

Statement: "Class, there is a boy." (ohh!)  
 Question: "Class, is there a boy?" (yes)  
 [You add: That's correct, class, there is a boy.]  
 Either/Or: "Class, is there a boy or a girl?" (boy)  
 [You add: That's correct, class, there is a boy.]  
 Negative: "Is there a girl?" (no)  
 [You add: That's correct, class, there is not a girl. There is a boy.]  
 3/1: "Is there a monkey?" (no)  
 [You add: That's correct, class, there is not a monkey. There is a boy.]  
 What: "Class, what is there?" (boy)  
 [You add: That's correct, class, there is a boy.]  
 Who: Class, what is the boy's name? (Howard Ino)  
 [You add: That's correct, class, the boy's name is Howard Ino.]

All research indicates that output cannot occur without having first been preceded by massive amounts of comprehensible input (listening). Thus, listening (CI) should be the pre-eminent focus of all foreign language instruction. Circling is the pre-eminent feature of CI. The astounding results gained by TPRS students would be impossible without circling.

The focus of circling in each sentence is on the part of the sentence new to the students. If you are in touch with what your students have already learned, then, when you circle, you can stress with an increase in sound in your voice the part of the sentence that is new to them.

One thought must be in the forefront of the instructor's mind when circling: the word or structure that you want the students to know must be repeated, repeated, and repeated again, and vocally accentuated at the same time.

Some instructors focus more on the circling than on the structure, thinking that there must be a "right" way to circle. Circling is not a formula to be blindly followed! Rather, repetitive questioning that accentuates and repeats the structure to be learned is proper circling.

By focusing less on the circling itself as a formula and more on the structure being circled, the structure quickly becomes comprehensible to the students. It becomes instantly recognizable to the students when it occurs later. Just remember that mixing up the questions and thus avoiding patterned responses is required for success.

It is possible to get ten questions from one sentence by circling all three parts of the sentence. If the structure is:

avait l'intention de (intended to)

I ask a student to stand next to me in front of the classroom. I ask, "Class, did Zach intend to drink some water yesterday?" And then I circle that as below. I circle the subject, then the verb, then the object. Note that although there are twelve sentences below, the first in each group is the same so there are really only ten questions.

First, you circle the subject:

1. Class, did Zach intend to drink some water yesterday? [Yes] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.
2. Did Zach or Derek intend to drink some water yesterday? [Zach] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.
3. Did Derek intend to drink some water yesterday? [No] That's right, class, that's absurd. Derek did not intend to drink some water yesterday. Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.
4. Class, who intended to drink some water yesterday? [Zach] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.

Next, you circle the verb:

1. Class, did Zach intend to drink some water yesterday? [Yes] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.
2. Did Zach intend to drink or eat some water yesterday? [Drink] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.
3. Did Zach intend to eat some water yesterday? [No] That's right, class, that's absurd. Zach did not intend to eat some water yesterday. He intended to drink some water yesterday.
4. Class, what did Zach intend to do yesterday? [Drink some water] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.

And then the object:

1. Class, did Zach intend to drink some water yesterday? [Yes] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.
2. Did Zach intend to drink some water or some milk yesterday? [Water] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.
3. Did Zach intend to drink some milk yesterday? [No] That's right, class, that's absurd. Zach did not intend to drink some milk yesterday. He intended to drink some water yesterday.
4. Class, what did Zach intend to drink yesterday? [Water] That's right, class, Zach intended to drink some water yesterday.

It is not intended that you do all ten possibilities above. Instead, pick and choose depending on the situation. This technique gets good personalization of the structures, the students get needed repetitions, and the story will definitely roll along more easily with you having done this. Stop the circling when the class shows confidence in what you are saying.

Once the pattern is understood, you then have the option of mixing it up. This is a good way to make students process each question at a higher level, resulting in greater

gains. You have mastered this aspect of the skill when you can circle at will in random order without glancing at the chart.

A word of caution, however. Too much random circling, though artful, can really confuse the students. It is the old trap that many teachers fall into with TPRS: they think that because they get it, that their students naturally do as well.

Circling need not be limited to normal classroom discussion (PQA and stories). TPR commands, including those in the Three Ring Circus described later in this text, can be circled as well. If you command Mark to “run,” once Mark has done so the instructor can then ask the class:

Class, did Mark run? (yes)  
 Did Mark or Ryan run? (Mark)  
 Did Ryan run? (no)  
 Did Derek run? (no)  
 Did Mark run or walk? (run)  
 Did Mark walk? (not)  
 Did Mark swim? (no)  
 Class, who ran? (Mark)

If Mark then “ran to the left,” you can see how adding just this one simple detail greatly increases the number of questions you can ask. Every time you add a detail to a discussion you greatly increase what you can do with circling.

Circling TPR commands and sentences in the Three Ring Circus builds great confidence in teachers new to TPRS because they are so easy to do. See Skill 8 for more information on the Three Ring Circus.

I often repeat the same exact question three or four times in a row using different emotions. One would think that this would bore the kids, but the kids can be fooled into decoding the same sentence multiple times by asking them questions in different ways using different emotions.

C'est vrai?/Is that true? said in a timid way, for example, conveys a completely different meaning than the same expression said with anger, or with embarrassment, or with surprise. The emotions override the meaning, and the students don't notice that the words are the same. This keeps interest high in the structure, resulting in more meaningful repetitions and greater acquisition.

A multitude of studies support this trickery, stating that most of human communication is non-verbal. If these studies are accurate, it means that many language teachers plan their teaching around less than 10% of what is actually happening in the classroom!

If you want to prove the accuracy of this research, simply point to something in class while you are speaking, but do not connect what you are saying with what you are pointing at. All heads will turn and focus at what you are pointing at, and the kids will completely tune out your verbal message in favor of the (fake) visual message. The effective TPRS teacher will explore the role of the voice to convey meaning in their own classroom.

Another way to make input meaningful to the students using circling is to add a parallel sentence to the one you are already circling. A parallel sentence can be described as a sentence which has the same verbal core, but whose subject and object are different.



If you are trying to teach *voudrait avoir*/would like to have, instead of circling just one sentence around that expression, you introduce a similar sentence and circle both of them.

If your original sentence is:

Classe, Elliot voudrait avoir une voiture /Class, Elliot would like to have a car!

You add another, parallel, sentence into the circling:

Classe, Jane voudrait avoir un Sprite /Class, Jane would like to have a Sprite!

Adding this second sentence expands the size of the circling “field” in which you are working. It instantly adds many more possible questions to your circling, because you can do more with two sentences than you can with one. Adding a second, parallel sentence into your circling brings more repetitions, and whenever there are greater repetitions, there are greater levels of comprehensible input and learning.

I consider this technique of bringing in a second sentence to mirror another one during circling to be one of the truly great little tricks in TPRS – you will feel immediately more relaxed when you have that extra sentence to ask questions about.

Having had a look now at the three key mechanical skills (in my opinion) of TPRS, we can take a look at the five activities that will “give you your wings” when you apply the three skills in your classroom during the first few months of the year:

### **Handout/Segments #1: Word Association**

Making associations with single words from wall charts (65 words per month on the wall – we do about five words a day using this activity) can be considered a simple training wheel exercise that impacts everything I do in TPRS very heavily. In the same way that we put physical actions into our bodies with TPR, word associations take the form of gestures, sounds, or images that enable us to remember the meaning of a certain word.

For example, if, on the word list, I want to teach the word “voiture” in French (car, pronounced “vwature”), I ask my students, in English, if anyone can think of “some way to remember that voiture means car...”.

Different suggestions come up, some very outlandish but which are somehow, ironically, often the most effective ones, and we just discuss those sounds or images and then go to the next word. In the case of “voiture”, someone may suggest that we can remember that it means “car” with the associative phrase, “What year (sounds like voiture) is your Toyota?”

Another example is “les yeux” in French. The kids associate that sound with laser eye surgery or lazy eye. Sound associations are the most powerful. I once asked a student who score a perfect score on the National French Exam one year what part of the instruction he felt most contributed to his score, and he immediately replied, “...those word activities we did at the beginning of the year...” Anyone who has done this kind of gesturing and association, knows how strangely powerful it is as a teaching tool, especially as set up work toward building successful stories later.

A few details: (1) if no one can come up with an association, we just go on to the next word; (2) we never do more than five words in one class period, and we are fairly quick about it. (3) a key point is to be specific in the sequencing of questions during this short word association activity. First I tell them *what the word means*, and then I ask them *how they can remember what it means*. Doing this creates a pleasant sharing of ideas. Using L1 in this way at the beginning of class allows us to connect *in a social way* first, before getting into the harder challenges of connecting in L2. It is a nice way to settle into class, highly recommended because it creates the proper mood right away and leads to a more personalized classroom. How?

Each time that we introduce a new word in the word association activity, we ask the class how WE can remember what the word means, as in:

*Students, the first of our five words from this big list for today is les yeux. Les yeux means eyes. How can we remember what les yeux means?*

When the class as a group chooses to remember that les yeux means eyes by making associations in their own minds and by expressing those associations out loud in the group in their own voices, *they create a community*. When the instructor says

*Oh, class, Bryan said that we can remember that les yeux means eyes because of lazy eye!*

she acknowledges Bryan and his immediate contribution to the group at the beginning of the class. Michael is also acknowledged for his equally intelligent and creative suggestion (expressed in his own voice) linking of les yeux to laser eye surgery.

The teacher, like Scrooge at the end of *A Christmas Carol*, sends an

*I'm going to like this class!*

message out to the kids at the beginning of every class! That is a fine way to start a class - not commonly done in schools - with plenty of personal acknowledgement of how smart that particular group is. Flattery gets us everywhere in TPRS.

The phrase "how can we remember" is of key importance when we do the word association activity. How can WE remember it? Here we are all together, about to embark, after this brief period of doing five word associations, into L2 for the rest of the class period, and the inquisitive message from the instructor is

*How can we all work together?  
What can I learn from you?  
How smart you kids are!*

and the kids' message to the class and to the instructor is,

*Look how smart we are!*

There is a tonal difference here. This inclusion of the individual in the group, this attention to what their own life experience has been enough to ask them how their life experience (how can WE remember) can help the larger group, this attention to the student as a person, is significant and merits further discussion in our discussion about what personalization really is.

## **Handout/Segment #2: One Word Images**

“One Word Images” is a term that I use to describe a way I have of using principles of storytelling to teach exploratory classes that are not ready to do full stories, although I also use this technique with more experienced classes as well. It is a lot of fun for the kids, because it is about one of them, and is my own favorite TPRS activity, one that I could do for hours and hours on end, just to see what the kids come up with. It involves word lists and large amounts of personalization, and is very free form.

Just pick a word from a word list and ask the kids a specific set of questions about it, choosing from questions about:

- its quantity
- its size
- its color
- its intelligence level
- rich or poor
- mean or kind
- hair color
- eye color
- other physical characteristics – see *TPRS in a Year!*, Portrait Physique
- its mood
- where it is
- when this occurred (time, day of the week, etc.)

Then just use circling to see where the class takes it as you ask more and more questions.

This simple process is actually very much like asking a story, but without the complexity. All that is needed for exploratory classes is to work first with a single noun, ask the questions listed above, and expand things, seeing how far the original word can go via simple circling with the students.

Keep in mind that the purpose of circling is not only to add repetitions to words but also to permit the adding in of details. The repetitions build the CI, and the new details build the (personalized) interest.

Such little images may not take things as far as a regular story, but so what? They are a lot easier to do, and they carry a feeling of real safety for those new to the method. Building confidence in new teachers is not something that TPRS is known for.

So the new teacher can just take a word like “casa”. Just say casa in front of the class in a tone of expectancy, like it is a special word that you and the kids are going to talk about in a special way. Repeat it like it is special.

Next, to establish meaning, write casa on the board and then in English. Point to the Spanish and then to the English and then pause to let it sink in to the student’s minds.

Next, you may want to associate the sound of the new word with some other image or sound or gesture - you could just put your hands over your head like a roof, and have the students do that. With other words, you may instead want to associate a sound, etc.

When you do this, the neurology is such that the kids will quickly decode it when it comes up later, relative to the number of repetitions you are able to get in via the circling you do around the word.

This word - casa - is just the first brick of a little image you are going to build! It may or may not become a scene, but for now it is just a little image, a little brick.

But in that image is a potential story! Each new word added to casa, as you work with your students without English to build the image, can contribute to the eventual building of a beautiful and hilarious story - a home run story.

So you say casa and if the students are beginners you then say una casa and then you ask about a color for the house and then you ask if the house is big or small and big or small in relation to what and soon a person walks into it and something happens and you are off and running with a story.

That's it! You just build a little red house together and if it develops into anything more than that, great, if not, the kids are hearing and understanding the language via the circling you are doing, which is the point of the whole thing. And you are getting valuable training that will lead to your building an entire story using TPRS.

To repeat, the purpose of circling is to get these repetitions, of course, but circling also sets up little gaps after each question you ask into which the students can suggest details in the form of cute answers. When students suggest cute answers to your circled questions you are going to be successful with TPRS because your students will then have ownership in the process - it will be their image, their story.

It is normal! The kids in a TPRS class have to feel a fairly large degree of ownership in the building of the story or the story won't be interesting to them.

Thus, the building of a story must always be done by the group, not by the teacher alone. It also must be done without English except when you write each new word and its translation on the board, or when you allow the kids their two word suggestions in response to your questions.

So people new to TPRS may want to consider this idea. Instead of swinging for the fences, just try for the bunt or the single - just make contact with the ball by circling single words into little images first, and only after that into little scenes, and finally, when you are ready, ramp one of those little scenes into a story.

It is further suggested that this technique of building images from a single word, in addition to the PQA technique of circling with balls, be used to in all TPRS exploratory classes, as well as in all TPRS first year classes during the first 3-6 weeks of the year.

### **Handout/Segment #3: Circling with Balls**

Each student has a half sheet of colored card stock. (I use a different color for each class I teach.) The students have written their names clearly in large letters across the top of the sheet, and below it a picture of a sport or musical instrument they play, adding a favorite pet or animal as well.

I teach in a middle school, and many of them draw a picture of a sport ball. If they don't have a favorite activity or a pet, I ask them to draw a picture of something they would like to be good at, or a pet they would like to have. Whether the information is imagined or real does not matter. The students will learn that in my class imagination is a great thing to have.

By asking the kids to do this on the first day of class, I catch their attention. The students see that their interests, and not a textbook, are going to be the subject of the class.

For the next several days, I ask the kids to place their papers facing me. Then, I just walk around the room, expressing authentic interest in each one while engaging them in conversation in the target language about what they have drawn.

As I walk around, I may notice is that Casey has drawn a volleyball under her name. So I say:

Classe, Casey joue au volley!

Next, I go to the board and write:

Casey joue au volley/Casey plays volleyball!

Then, pointing to and pausing at each single word I say, I begin a series of circled repetitive questions based on the original statement. While making these statements, I ask the class to respond to each one in some way, as indicated below in parentheses:

Statement: Class, Casey plays volleyball! (ohh!)

Question: Class, does Casey play volleyball? (yes)

Either/Or: Class, does Casey play volleyball or does Casey play soccer? (volleyball)

That's right, class, Casey plays volleyball! (ohh!)

Negative: Does Casey play soccer? (no) No, class, Casey doesn't play soccer. She plays volleyball! (ohh!)

3 for 1: Class, does Casey write novels? (no) That's right class, that's ridiculous, Casey doesn't write novels! She plays volleyball.

What: Class, what does Casey play? (volleyball) That's right, class, she plays volleyball!

Who: Class, who plays volleyball? (Casey) Correct, class, Casey plays volleyball.

When, where, why and other details can be added into this process, but only if relevant and only later in the year.

This questioning pattern is a staple of TPRS. Circling in this way has two big advantages:

It is personalized and hence interesting

It is easily comprehensible to students via the circled repetition of information

Circling is an amazing thing. When we circle slowly in the target language, our students understand what we are trying to say. They gain confidence and trust as they experience our efforts to reach them on a personal level.

Two things are required when circling: 1) that the instructor go extremely slowly and 2) that the instructor point to and pause at every single word they say. Thus, when I ask the class the question as per the above pattern:

Classe, est-ce que Casey joue au volley?/Class, does Casey play volleyball?

I must then go to a list of question words on the wall and point to the word that I just used, which in French is "est-ce que". Next to the word is its English

translation, “is it that”. I have three sets of question words and their translations in large poster form in different parts of my classroom.

Having three posters enables me to point to the question words wherever I happen to be in the room, which could be anywhere because I want to spend all my time walking around the room looking at and marveling at my kids’ identity sheets, looking them in the eyes, getting to know them, and speaking to them in the target language.

I always give my students time to absorb all the words I say by including long enough pauses, up to five seconds. I must remember to continue to do this slow pointing and pausing all of the time, for the whole year.

As the students’ familiarity with the question words grows, I stop pointing to things that they easily comprehend, but I continue pointing to anything that they do not yet know with ease. With anything new, I write it down with its translation before moving on.

I never say anything that they don’t understand without writing it down in both the target language and in English, and pausing and pointing to it to let it sink in. I have two goals: 1) to make the language fully accessible to my students, and 2) to make the class about them.

As mentioned, in most beginning classes (in which the kids are between thirteen and fifteen years old), more than half of the students draw a picture of a sport. This, then, immediately brings a sense of play into the first few weeks of discussion. All you need is a number of sports balls of different types in your classroom.

I have three smaller sized basketballs (with a goal in the corner for relaxing between classes), two footballs, a soccer ball, a volleyball, a tennis ball, a plastic softball, etc. Some real balls (basketballs, softballs, footballs) are too unwieldy (they bend little fingers), so get the smaller ones.

As I circle in the target language about one kid’s interest in their sport, I hold the ball associated with their sport, maybe tossing it around the room once or twice. I keep the ball away from the kid I’m talking about. This builds tension and interest.

When the kid finally gets the ball at the end of the circled PQA about them, they get to sit there with the ball in their hands or in front of them, now an important member of the group.

There is something about being able to toss the balls around that relaxes the students. Thus, if you walk by a desk and see the name “Reed” and there is a drawing of a basketball there, you say in amazement, “Class, Reed plays basketball!”

As you hold the basketball it is clear to everyone that Reed wants it, because he knows that being a basketball player is going to be an identity for him in your class this year. In fact, you may have already decided that he is Willis Reed, an old New York Knick from the Walt Frasier days of Knick glory in the NBA.

But you hold on to the basketball, tossing it to a few kids, but not to Reed, circling away:

Class, Willis Reed plays basketball! (Ohh!) Class, does Willis Reed play basketball? (yes) Class, does Willis Reed play basketball or does Abe Lincoln play basketball? (Willis Reed!) That's correct, class, Willis Reed plays basketball. Class, does Willis Reed play volleyball? (no!) Correct again, class, you are very smart! Willis Reed does not play volleyball, he plays basketball! Class, who plays basketball? That's right, class, Willis Reed plays basketball!

The circling with the balls builds tension and interest in the class. Whatever Reed's typical level of academic achievement in his other classes is, here he is 100% focused.

The kids are hearing language that is meaningful to them. They can understand this simple language that is about them. Waiting to give the ball to Reed only when the circling about him is over, as mentioned, somehow keeps the interest up and going through the entire process.

The great advantage of circling becomes apparent during these discussions about sports: circling keeps things going in the target language! You keep asking questions from the question word chart, and in just a few moments, almost magically, you have circled your way into personalized details. You learn from the class that Reed plays basketball behind Best Buy at five p.m. on Wednesdays in the summer, but only in the month of July. Your reaction to each one of these facts is, of course, one of incredulity.

As long as the instructor:

*listens* to the students' cute answers (which are in English but not more than one or two words long),  
*makes certain* that student-provided information is driving the class,  
*pauses and points* to all question words,  
*writes down* all new words with their English translation,  
*pauses and points* to any new words, doing comprehension checks and barometer checks (see below on assessment),  
*goes slowly and circles*, using absolutely simple language,  
*conveys an honest sense of wonderment* that these students do such wonderful things,

then the fluency portion of your year long language program is being addressed.

When circling, certain protocols must be established immediately about what kind of comments are acceptable. *The student is always the star*, and no derogatory comments are allowed for any reason in any way. We must always keep in mind the fragile nature of the egos of many of our students, in spite of how they may behave in class.

Therefore, if you are circling information about a certain student, and another student makes a comment about her boyfriend or some other personal bit of information, the teacher must channel that personal information into something imagined, usually in the direction of some celebrity. It is much easier for a student to be talked about in front of the class about having a celebrity as a boyfriend than something personal.

Any cute comment that is made at the expense of someone must be rigorously refuted by the teacher, and it must be made clear, even if a parent conference is necessary, that this rule will be followed to the letter. If a student does not feel safe in a classroom, they cannot learn. That is why we work so hard to build positive community through

personalization early in the year, as per Alfie Kohn's research mentioned later in this text.

By thus starting the first class of the year in the target language, I send many messages to my students:

By speaking only in French I am sending the message that French, not English, is the language that we will be focusing on in class this year.

By slowly circling in the first minutes of the first class of the year, I am sending the message that slow circling will be the rule in my classroom all year. I am also sending the message that it is my job to make my message clear, and that all they have to do is sit back and listen.

By taking time to stop and laugh if something is funny, I am sending the message that we will laugh in my class this year.

By requiring that my students react with (Ohh!) when I state something, I am sending the message that everything I say is totally fascinating to them, and that it is their job to make sure I understand that they know that.

By immediately writing any new words on the board with their translations, pausing and pointing to Monsieur, Madame, Docteur, le Président, and le Petit Cochon, so that they can see and process every new word I use in English, I send the message that we will use English as a basis for understanding words in French this year.

By praising them at every turn, I am sending the message that they will not be criticized on even the smallest level in my class this year, and that any hostile or controlling personality they may have brought with them as protection won't be needed.

By making constant eye contact with each of them, I send the message that I care if they are learning.

By discussing myself (my name and a sport that I do) first, I am sending the message that this class will be about us, the people in the room.

By supplying card stock for this activity, and by having the cards carefully collected and rubber banded at the end of class, I send the message that we keep our classroom clean and neat.

When I begin talking about THEIR cards, doing so with joy and a sense of great interest, I send the message that they are very important to me.

By giving a five minute assessment at the end of the class, I am sending the message that they will be tested often in the form of short, unannounced quizzes in my class, and that they won't have to memorize a lot of material outside of class for long, meaningless tests.

By choosing test questions that are reasonable and straightforward, I send the message that it is not my purpose to trick them on tests, but instead to grade them fairly. This motivates them.



By speaking French in such a simple and straightforward way on the first day of class, I build good will and ensure my students' success, thus insuring myself against the "October Collapse", which happens when the kids' gas tanks of good will that were full in August are empty because the teacher has insisted on teaching a simple thing in a complex and boring way.

A tip is to print the questionnaires on the back of the Circling with Balls cards, combining the third and fifth activities described herein. During the Circling with Balls activity, you can pick up the card and glance on the back.

When I did that in my session last week, my eyes fell on "a name that you would like to be called and why", and, when I flipped the card over, it said, "Her Majesty". I proceeded to incorporate that name during the circling.

Instead of just being a cardboard cutout in your class, Carol the Faceless Student becomes Her Majesty the Dancer. This brings important details about the student in much earlier than if you just circle with balls in the normal way. You therefore have the advantage of being a lot further along into the details right from the beginning of the class.

When you do that, you don't have to build interest in the class, it starts out interesting and skyrockets from there. The kids can't wait until you get to them. They don't even consciously notice that everything is in the target language, as per Krashen.

I remember in one Circling with Balls coaching session, when the student teacher took over the controls of the session from me, she had us fill out our Circling with Balls cards, and, although I was supposedly the instructor in that session, I deeply felt the needs of Ben, the Guy Who Rides Bikes, to be noticed by my classmates. I was unable to fully stay in my role as her circling coach, and this realization quite blew me away.

I will certainly combine the "name they want to be called" piece here with the regular Circling with Balls activity on the first day of class on the first day of each school year. I want to be clear - I am saying that, on the first day of class, when a student is talked about in terms of what they do and then when the name that they want to be called is used in that discussion, it is much more powerful than the Circling with Balls activity alone.

#### **Handout/Segment #4: Word Chunk Team Activity**

Chunking – grouping words – offers students new to the language simple comprehensible input (CI), paving the way for more complex language and, eventually, stories. At the same time, this activity engages students in fun and meaningful group activities.

It is used in exploratory classes and at the beginning of the year in year long classes. It reinforces the words, builds a sense of play, group trust, group identities, and teaches the kids to carefully listen to L2. We use our wall word lists in this activity. Here is the process:

1. After teaching, gesturing, and working individually with the words on the wall list (whatever words you are using to start the year – mine align with district benchmarks), you then put the kids into groups, and ask them to come up with a silly group name, plus a motion or sound to go with that name.

2. Then make up little combos (chunks) of words from the wall list, keeping them really simple at first. For example, you look at the list and see the word “hand” and the word “yell” and so you say, “the hand yells” in L2. It doesn’t have to make sense, and is often better if it doesn’t, because it teaches them to decode with greater attention.

3. Each group then tries to translate what they hear after consulting with each other. They work together to come up with the correct translation. You call on the first group to raise their hand, trying to get a correct translation of the word chunk question you asked, and, if it is right, their group gets six attempts at a basket (in under one minute) or some other little reward in class. I have a small basketball court, fairly authentic like in arcades, and it really works to get them to listen, because they all want to shoot for points and show off for their classmates.

4. Just remember that their group name and sign is a big part of this. When I call on them they have to make their group sign *in perfect synchronization* between all group members. If they can’t do that, they don’t get the question. I know that sounds over the top, but if you see it in action you can see what this synchronization detail does for the game. This activity does all sorts of things for the class chemistry. It is fun, the time goes by quickly, there is a lot of laughter, and there is a tremendous level of auditory focus on L2, with readily apparent auditory gains early on in the year, setting the stage for successful stories later in the year.

For example, the members of the group known as the “Conquistadores”, when I say something like “the house is not red” (house and red being on the word list), have to jump up and, exactly at the same moment, clap and yell “Olé” (the group sign they made up to go with their name) together. All have to do it. If it isn’t perfect, the class bemoans them for their slackness, and other groups vie for the privilege of answering the question.

Eventually, a group does their group sign perfectly and answers correctly, and so they get to go to “the line” at the basketball hoop, for three shots for every correct answer. They take the scoring very seriously, and just about any kid in class can tell you how many points each group has at any time during the week, a thing that has never ceased to amaze me about middle school students.

So, when I say it is a chunking activity, I mean that I am moving them, right at the beginning of the year, from knowing just single words to knowing words that I arbitrarily chunk together during our game.

You should see the level of involvement. They think they are playing a game, but they are doing some serious auditory decoding in the first weeks of the year, beautifully preparing for stories.

I once wrote a response to a question on this Word Chunk Activity from a colleague who asked about sourpusses – how to get them involved in this game? I include part of it here:

Whenever the team has to synchronize their team sign, little Joyless Johnny, bless his young heart, is put on the spot by the rest of the group to participate. Even if his mind is clearly not going to participate, his body must, or face the wrath of the class. That is why it works in my room, anyway - it is the synchronized sign that keeps the sourpusses in the game.

But, if there is a REAL sourpuss, I tell them that I need their help to judge the synchronicity reactions of the teams, and that kid takes a stool and sits next to me and look at one half of the room and I look at the other half and we decide together who had their hand up first. They don't get to play, but now they have a job that I need them for, and the result is that the sourpuss is neutralized. I also authentically need this judge to see what group got their hand up first.

8. This asking kids to judge the action also works for native speakers. I put them in front of the room with me and they pick out which group was first. They also help me by making up questions. They just look at the word chart and make up chunks and alternate with me in directing the action. The native speakers really get into making up word chunk questions and being like referees in choosing the first group with their hand up and, really, doing everything the teacher is doing, which is what native speakers should be doing in classrooms that they shouldn't, in the first place, even be in.

As a powerful tool for CI and for team building, I highly recommend the Word Chunk Team activity. It works best in seventh grade exploratories, whose (usually six week classes) are too short to get into stories, but my eighth graders want to play it everyday and when I say no they see it as a form of punishment! I allow them fifteen minutes of this game at the end of the week as a reward for good storytelling work.

By the way, this activity, along with dictation, keeps them focused at the end of the year when many kids and teachers have checked out already. That is something to remember. It is fun, and the synchronicity aspect described above seems to be a factor in making the WCT activity work at a higher, more focused, level.

Every once in a while, with the word lists, you can do a rote two minute activity to reinforce vocabulary. Just point the laser pointer at *only one* of the columns of words on the word lists (only one list is given above, but I have a total of nine covering all the required district vocabulary for one year]. Chorally go down the list. Great vocabulary builder and the kids seem to really enjoy it.

#### Spanish Sample Word List

levántate	señala	llora
siéntate	pega	ríe
rápido	cabeza	escribe
espacio	boca	dibuja
camina	ojos	oreja
salta	mesa	rodilla
parate	nariz	carro
da una vuelta	chico	tira la pelota
adelante	muchacho	corta
atrás	chica	le da, dale
levanta	muchacha	a la derecha
baja	silla	a la izquierda
mano	pisos	pelo
pierna	techo	pecho
grita	puerta	pie
suave	ventana	reloj
fuerte	come	toma
toca	pescado	casa
		brazo

lápiz  
pluma  
grande

pequeño  
pone  
hermosa

sonríe  
una vez  
me gusta

### French Sample Word List

on se lève  
on s'assied  
rapidement  
lentement  
marche  
saute  
arrête  
on se tourne  
devant  
derrière  
lève  
baisse  
main  
jambe  
crie  
doucement  
fort  
touche  
montre (v.)  
frappe  
tête  
bouche

les yeux  
table  
nez  
garçon  
fille  
chaise  
plafond  
plancher  
porte  
fenêtre  
mange  
poisson  
pleure  
rit  
écrit  
dessine  
oreille  
genou  
voiture  
lance  
coupe  
lui donne

lui dit  
coupe  
prend  
boit  
maison  
bras  
crayon  
style  
à gauche  
à droite  
cheveux  
poitrine  
pied  
montre (n.)  
grand  
petit  
pose  
joli  
sourit  
une fois  
j'aime

### **Handout/Segment #5: Questionnaires**

The questionnaire below was created by Anne Lambert. It can be used all year as an amazing source of information to you. If you learn that Catherine has two horses, developing that true statement into all kinds of imaginative comprehensible input over the course of the year greatly strengthens the quality of the PQA and extended PQA that you provide in your classroom.

Whether you use the questionnaire as a means of embellishing PQA, or just as a way to get to know the kids better at the start of the year, which is our topic here, you will find it *a most useful tool* in PQA and extended PQA. Think of the questionnaire as a sort of foundation on which you can build truly personalized and meaningful classes. A downloadable version can be found at [www.benslavic.com](http://www.benslavic.com) – posters, etc. – for your use.

Here Anne describes how she uses her questionnaires at the beginning of the year., year:

“I feel strongly that, besides the three phrases, the rest of the language in a story script should be, at the very least, familiar to the students, if not previously acquired and thus already part of their repertoire. In order to build that repertoire, I do not start the year with stories per se; rather, I work intensively with material provided in the students’ responses to questions on my TPRS questionnaire. I scan the questionnaires for an interesting piece of information and spin little scenes out of it. I choose one or two students to talk about each day. In this way, I cover structures such as *likes, is, wants, goes, has, eats, and plays*, in the first 6-8 weeks of school. This creates a body of

acquired language from which we may begin working with the scripts. It also gives me a chance to get to know the students, and communicates to them that they are important in my class. Below is an example of what one such scene, circled (PQA'd) out of the information that Chris plays bass guitar and Elliot sings."

*Chris plays bass guitar in a band. Elliot sings in the band. The band is called "Mr. Rogers' Band". It is a gospel band. Elliot sings in Pig Latin. The concert is in jail. Mini-Me is in jail because he is too short. Mini-Me cries and dances the Macarena.*

I asked Anne to elaborate on the above:

Q. How long do scenes like that take to create?

A. *That little scene probably took about one 40-minute period, very early in the year.*

Q. Do you work with two kids per class like this for three academic weeks (15 classes x 2 kids)?

*The two kids per class thing is not carved in stone. With music, it was easy to find two kids and put them in a band. When I talk about what someone likes to eat, for example, I might make it only about them. I don't really know going in. Normally I start each class having chosen one fact about one kid from his questionnaire. Sometimes others get added in, sometimes they don't. Three weeks is not long enough. It's more like 4-6 weeks. In between we may do a little song or some counting, or Simon says. But 90% of what we do is these little stories.*

Q. Do you get into more or less detail than in the scene you described above?

A. *The amount of detail is about right. Maybe more as time passes. But not necessarily.*

Q. Is it possible to get a first silly name from this activity?

A. A silly name? I never thought about it. Why not?

Anne concluded:

I call the use of the questionnaires my first quarter curriculum. It's easy to write a curriculum guide with it. Students will be able to tell where they live, how old they are, what they like, etc. Sounds just like the old textbook days, doesn't it?

Here is Anne's questionnaire:

### **Questionnaire**

Directions: please fill this out *thoughtfully*, combining made up and real answers. Blend a *little* of your real personality into a *lot* of a make believe personality:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Nickname \_\_\_\_\_

Name you wish you could have

\_\_\_\_\_

Job: \_\_\_\_\_

A job you would like to have

\_\_\_\_\_

Any interesting or unusual facts about you

---

A celebrity you find attractive and why

---

Favorite musical groups/athletes and why

---

A pet and their name \_\_\_\_\_

A pet you would like to have and their name

---

Something you don't like and why

---

Something you don't have but really want

---

Some unusual thing you have

---

Talents/abilities, however strange

---

Someone or something you fear and why

---

Weird chores you have to do

---

A food you don't like

---

If the kids don't fill out the questionnaires with a lot of really cool detail and well thought out answers, it is because you are somehow sending them the message that you aren't really that interested in what they write on them.

If, on the other hand, in the first few weeks of the year, they see that you attach a lot of importance to them, and use them a lot in the classroom, then many of them will get that the class is about them, and that their peers will be forming opinions about them from what you say about them and from the little scenes you create with the information from the questionnaires, etc.

Then they will ask for their questionnaires back. When that happens, you know that you are then using the questionnaires to their maximum effectiveness, and that your classroom is well on its way to being a real TPRS classroom, complete with plenty of P.

The reason I asked Anne about the silly names is that I strongly feel that one of the prime ways to personalize a classroom at the beginning of the year is by cultivating as many names for each student as possible during the course of the year. It is so easy to let names emerge from the fun of the PQA, as described in the next section.

### **Handout/Segments #6: The Naming Process**

[Note: the naming process is not a specific activity but one that is constantly going on during all L2 personalization activities described herein, all year long]

Building identities for our students via the right names is arguably the most important aspect of all pre-story personalization activities, indeed, of all activities we do all year. Finding the right names and using them often injects a level of fun and interest to the

class that is impossible to describe. It results in fantastic gains and is a pillar of TPRS overall.

There is no rush to get the names out. Instead, the names emerge organically, that is to say, from basic and authentic human interaction as it occurs with your students in a natural way.

You dance into an identity with a kid. You may perhaps learn a little fact in class while circling with sports balls or in some other identity building activity. Or the fact may emerge in the hallway. It may look so small. But you keep it, keep it, in your mind, like a treasure, and when the right moment arrives in class, you play the name.

Names emerge. This is such a fine thing. You are a watcher of the process, a contributor, to be sure, but you don't have to be clever and put the naming game all on yourself. They don't want you to. They want in on their names.

They may act amused if you tell them that they are Pablo, but they resent it on some level. You labeled them without getting to know them. Why do that, when the creation of funny, organically emerging names that reflect the real kid, is so crucial, so crucial, to your success.

When they have seen you pull an organic name from one kid, they are just waiting to see what you do with them. Even if it takes seven months, it is still better than the other way of branding.

So go ahead, get to know them, and wait, wait, and the right name - the one most honoring to them - will emerge. Some names happen in the first interchange of the first class because of something the kid did that was unique and worthy of a cool name right away.

Or it may take forever, like with The Boy Who Goes in Front (who had walls up, walls). So I waited, waited, and moved my chair figuratively closer just a few millimeters every day for six months, waiting for his name to emerge.

Naming kids is a very delicate little art form of waiting, waiting, and then a little thought will appear in class, or some little event that no one but you notice happens, because you are watching, watching, because you know that meaningfully personalizing your classroom is what you want to do.

You would no more tell a kid their name than tell them a story. Instead, by asking, asking for information about them, about them, you suggest from what you know, and you house it in humor.

As you stand by your door on hall duty between classes, you notice that a kid over there who never says anything in class just said to a friend in the hallway (walking by your door) that he ate nine donuts from Albertson's in five minutes this summer."

This is major information. So you yell down the hallway how impressed you are with that and ask him if you can use that in class and he mumbles something but you see in his eye a look of recognition and from that little look emerges not just the name but him as your student with an identity and now, only now, can you set yourself to the task of teaching Donut Master.

Because when a kid has an identity everything changes. In class, now, you cleverly work Donut Master into the discussion. Notice I didn't say story - it's too early for that and also I think that in TPRS we put way too much focus on the story.

Then, when and if you sense that the kid who ate all the donuts wants and invites you to circle that poached information into the class discussion, you go for it.

And because of this one little thing you have done, the class works for this kid. You have done what your most important charge is as a teacher - you have made a kid feel important in your classroom.

And you have done so without bringing up anything of a truly personal nature. These aren't good days to do that. We focus on the wonderful, funny things about them only. So, me at least, I wait, wait, and use names as glue in the classroom process, and the kids become more than mere Pablos and Marie-Laures, etc.

### **Handout/Segment #7: Signing and Gesturing**

When beginning a story, I like to write, translate and explain a few phrases from the story before starting anything else. It gives the students a few moments to work with the phrases so that when they show up in the story later, the student is aware of and familiar with them.

I do so without expansion or pontification, and with no comments about grammar, and the process of explaining the expressions is done quickly. Then, the next step is to sign and gesture them.

Signing or gesturing the words "pumps up" the students. Much more than merely reinforcing meaning via neurological training, it immediately builds a sense of trust through fun.

Imagine that it is the beginning of class and you have just written a *dansé/danced*. Students agree on a sign for danced and then sign or gesture it when you say it.

Next structure: *n'avait pas de chaussures/didn't have any shoes*. Students agree on a sign for didn't have and shoes, and then sign it when you say it.

Next, simply say the expressions with lots of quick repetitions as they sign. Have a grin on your face. Enjoy yourself. Play a memory game with your students. Monitor the barometer student, the slower one who tries.

First sign one structure, then two together, then do the same with students' eyes closed to check for acquisition. If students can sign the words with their eyes closed, they know it. If they can't, they don't know it, and they need more practice.

This skill brings to class some wonderful things:

Meaning is put into the students' bodies via the TPR involved, and not just their minds. As such, it is more deeply acquired and thus easier to access later in class during the contextual flow of the story.

Gesturing is a fun memory game, and it creates an upbeat mood in the classroom right away. The classes start with laughter and interest, since it is a game.



With the “eyes closed” aspect of signing and gesturing, the message is sent that every student is going to have to show knowledge of the structures. When you say:

“That’s great, class! Almost all of us have it, but there are still a few who need a little more practice with eyes closed!”

The message is:

“We will all learn in this class.”

Cynthia Payton once posted on the moretpers list serve from an article in Science Daily (July 28, 2007) about the work of Susan Wagner Cook in using hand gestures to teach new concepts. The research indicated that using hand gestures dramatically improves the ability to retain that concept. (Credit: Richard Baker, University of Rochester) It turned out to have “a more dramatic effect than Cook expected.

In her study, 90 percent of students who had learned algebraic concepts using gestures remembered them three weeks later. Only 33 percent of speech-only students who had learned the concept during instruction later retained the lesson. And perhaps most astonishing of all, 90 percent of students who had learned by gesture alone - no speech at all - recalled what they'd been taught."

The link to that article and one that is similar is provided here:

<http://www.futurepundit.com/archives/004434.html>

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/11/071104191551.htm>

Signing and gesturing:

- employs proven ways of increasing memory
- gives auditory practice on the structures
- establishes that the class will be fun
- sends the message that the teacher is fully in charge of the classroom.

All the other skills become easier and the class becomes easier to teach simply because of the mood, the overall effect, that signing and gesturing creates.

Avoid telling the students what you think the sign should be. Ask them to come up with their own offerings. Attention is drawn to certain kids as we look at what they offer (which can approach slapstick), and invariably we laugh, and camaraderie is created instantly.

At that point, if you feel that the students are ready to go into a story, you can do so. Or, if you prefer, you can continue to “work” the structures a bit more in the form of PQA (see below). Remember to keep signing and gesturing short.

PQA stands for “Personalized Questions and Answers”. The choice to use PQA depends entirely on the personality of the teacher. Many teachers skip it. Some thrive on it, often to the exclusion of the story.

PQA normally follows the explanation of the words on the board and the gesturing of the phrases. Note that after explaining and gesturing the phrases, you have used up only a few minutes of the class period at this point. PQA, on the other hand, can take longer.

If it picks up energy, it can take up the entire class period. If it loses energy, the instructor can move right into a story. Whether PQA picks up or loses energy is often a function of the quality of the phrases – some phrases lend themselves to PQA whereas others simply don't.

From the structures presented above, one would ask in the present tense, “Who dances?” and when you find out that “Jessie dances!” you express that you are very happy to learn this important information.

Immediately, this personalizes the class. Without personalization, classes tend to drag. Students are always most interested in things that directly concern them, with the added bonus that personalization makes it much easier to establish comprehensible input.

Many teachers don't even care if they ever get to a story. They focus on providing comprehensible, interesting, and repetitive input via PQA. They engage the kids in talk about themselves. At this stage, finding out about the students is the primary goal, and the phrases should be put on the back burner in the interest of connecting with the kids.

These little conversations in PQA can really be helpful to the novice teacher because they don't involve the pressure of trying to make a full-blown story happen. For some, PQA is frustrating and difficult. For others, it is just a natural process. There is no rule here that says that you have to do certain things in a certain way.

The trick in PQA is to flow with what you find out from the students and not try to impose anything. PQA is not about asking a student what color their shirt is and when they say red the teacher says good and moves onto the next student. What is personalized about that?

Instead, the teacher tries to respond to what they learn from the students as if it is the most interesting information they have ever heard. They get details while at the same time laughing and having fun.

That is all that PQA is – enjoying the kids and speaking the target language. The process is one of enjoyment – what has been called the “game”. You focus on the student and you go slowly. Joe Neilson says,

“I think that the essential three elements in stories are: comprehension, interest and involvement, and meaningful repetition. As long as any activities have these elements, the students are learning.”

### **Handout/Segment #8: Building the Listening Skill - Stories**

The rules below KEEP YOUR CLASS ON TASK like no other set of rules I have ever seen. When watching the demo story, please notice when they are used.

#### CLASSROOM RULES

1. Listen with the intent to understand
2. No “talking over”

3. Sit up....squared shoulders....clear eyes
4. Do your 50%
5. Actors - synchronize your actions with my words
6. Speak English only to suggest cute answers – limit two words

If your story is too carefully planned, you may feel the need to force it on your students. This prevents the story from taking the form they desire. Keeping the story loose allows the students to make the suggestions that make the story interesting. Ideas from the students are infinitely more interesting to them than your own. So don't tell the story, ask it!

The trick is to start with a simple story script that has three locations, and via slow personalized circling, bend the story into something new without breaking its original form.

Staying too close or straying too far from the words in the original story script creates problems. If you stay too close to the original story you shackle the new one. Interest in the story dries up due to a lack of new and personalized information.

Straying too far from the original story, however, is like switching the direction of a train onto another track, sending it into a desert where it is sure to dry up because it lacks the phrases that were introduced during PQA and other earlier activities.

We must remember to express much more interest in what my students have to say than in anything else. We must practice what we preach. If we want our kids to respond to us, then we must respond to them at an equal level.

Asking a story is not just about merely listening for cute answers. It also involves actually responding to those cute answers with warmth and genuine appreciation. People love to be acknowledged for cute things they say, and this applies not just to us as teachers but to our students.

When we truly listen to your students on a heart level, we give them permission to suggest outlandish things, to be bizarre, to exaggerate, and thus to play “the game”. This attitude brings the best learning. Focusing on what my students say on a heart level has brought a level of human interaction to my classroom that I had not previously seen.

Should the kids be allowed to respond in English to your questions? In my view, the students should be allowed one or two English words when answering a question. I allow them to say something like “green cow” for an answer, but not “green cow with a busted nose and drool all over his face.”

In my experience, the story can move forward wonderfully with the students saying just one or two words of English, but cannot move forward at all if this rule is broken.

Without the one or two word privilege, the students' creativity is hampered, and the class then tends to be run by the so-called superstars. The instructor,

therefore, is in the very delicate position of allowing some but not too much English, so that all students can participate in the creation of the story.

### **Handout/Segment #9: Building the Speaking Skill - Retells**

There are three rules in retells: 1) they must be optional – students must never be forced to output language, 2) the student must be allowed periods of silence during the retell before being provided a word either by the class or the instructor, 3) the instructor must be very active in signing and gesturing the retell, taking particular care to *go to the particular locations in the room* associated with the story to help the speaker, 4) retells must be kept short, and 5) the instructor must remember to heap on the praise for any effort in this kind of output, always remembering what a complex and difficult thing it is to produce language.

### **Handout/Segment #10: Building the Writing Skill - Dictée/Dictado and Free Writes**

Besides using Blaine Ray's novels to learn how to read and write, the classic French dictée format is a powerful tool indeed. We do dictation on T/Th – their subject matter is the stories done on M/W. When this is done, the subject matter for the writing is not random, which is a huge factor in the kids' confidence, as they are able to connect things to known auditory information in their brains.

So on the day after the story I go to the LCD projector, and the students write the just completed story as I dictate it. An overhead projector serves well, but it is slower and messier and you have to look at the light bulb. LCD projectors are excellent for dictée.

The key point in dictée, a rule I consider more sacred in my classroom than the rules I have for stories about speaking English, etc., is that there be no speaking by the students during dictée. This must be enforced 100% of the time, or dictée is completely ineffective. Students speaking during dictation is much more egregious, even, than speaking during stories – it just defeats the neurological purpose. Neither must you, the instructor, speak English during dictée.

As long as English is not involved, dictée creates a wonderful flow of language, and spectacular learnings occur in the minds of the students about how language is structured. Dictée really bridges the gap between sound and writing, melding the two, moving across the hemispheres so to speak.

As I said, the dictée text I choose is the previous day's story. I just recall the story as best as I can, saying parts of each sentence three times, no more and no less, with enough pause to allow the students to write comfortably. I always remember to include all punctuation instructions in the target language.

On line one (of three), the students write what they hear. Again, I am sure to read slowly and allow enough time for them to write. I tell the kids that what they write on that top line will not be graded, but they are to make their best effort. They obviously don't see the correct version until they have tried to write the sentence correctly themselves.

So I just recreate the story on the LCD projector. The dictated version of the story doesn't have to be perfectly accurate. In fact, intentional errors as you recreate the story force deeper thinking by the students, and allow you to introduce new vocabulary.

I show them the correct version of the text at the proper time, phrase by phrase, or chunk by chunk, and not sentence by sentence, which is too complex. The students then bring down any corrections of the text that are needed onto line 2. I grade both lines, whatever is correct from line 1 and any corrections made on line 2. In this way, the students are graded on how well they can copy from the overhead!

Line three is just a line space to make everything clearer and easier to read.

The benefits of doing this are obvious. The kids participate to a very high degree, because they know that working hard at this task of processing sound into writing will bring them an easy grade, which increases their overall motivation in the class.

Another superior way to develop the writing skill is to do free writes. A free write is simply a period of from five to ten minutes during which the students write as many words as they can in L2. The rules for free writes are:

- Write without stopping for 10 minutes.
- When time is up, count the number of words you wrote and put in bar graph section at end of your composition book, with dates.
  - No English words in the story except for names.
  - Keep the sentences and story line simple.
    - Get your story idea ahead of time.
    - Use lists if you have them.
    - Use words that you already know.
  - If you don't know a word, don't use it or reword the idea.
    - Use as many adjectives as possible.
  - Spell as accurately as you can and then move on.
  - Add another character when you get stuck.
    - Use posters from the room as help.
    - Illogical stories are o.k.

At the beginning of the year, the students are told to write at least 50 words over ten minutes. If they do that, they get an A. You can devise whatever scale you want. Some teachers give a B for 40-49 words, etc. The students count their words, then write their letter grade on the top, then all you have to do is enter the grade.

Some teachers ask the students to record the word total for each student in bar chart form. This keeps track of the amount of words they write as the year goes on.

Every month or two, the students do three to five free writes, usually on Fridays. Their goal in terms of number of words is raised every so often to go from fifty words to one hundred words by February.

### **Handout/Segment #11: Building the Reading Skill – Literacy**

#### I.

The logical direction of all comprehensible input is towards reading, and reading is one of the great pieces in the language acquisition puzzle. Kids trained with stories read without dictionaries and with great confidence. They easily decode written texts because of their strong prior abilities to decode sound. We must all

understand L2 in spoken form before we can read in L2. This reflects the natural order of acquisition of language described by Stephen Krashen, who suggests that reading should occur a full 50% of the time in a foreign language classroom.

A most important text on reading and TPRS was written by Susan Gross. Rather than paraphrase it, I would refer the reader who wishes to truly understand how reading fits with TPRS to [http://www.susangrosstprs.com/articles/Reading\\_Essential.pdf](http://www.susangrosstprs.com/articles/Reading_Essential.pdf)

Here is something Blaine Ray has said about reading:

*“When we read and discuss, we are making the literature comprehensible by translation [ed. note: to me, literature here can mean any written text in L2]. We then focus the discussion on using the words we have just translated. This makes the reading more a fluency lesson than a literature lesson.*

*“Read and discuss has four steps:*

- 1. Translate the paragraph.*
- 2. Ask students the facts of the paragraph.*
- 3. Create additional facts about the paragraph.*
- 4. Create a parallel story. (This is detailed in the fifth edition of Fluency through TPR Storytelling.)*

*“I personally have an idea of how important this is from my study of French. [Blaine is a Spanish teacher]. Even now when I read Pauvre Anne I can understand most of the words. Yet there are many words where I don’t know how they are pronounced. It just shows me the need for a teacher doing “read and discuss.” When I see words where I don’t know how they are pronounced, I have a different (not confident) feeling about those words and about French. Fluency is all about having confidence.”*

Blaine here talks about connecting the written words with the sounds of the language - how that is important to him. It reminds me of Berty Siegel’s great axiom: “Language is acoustical, not intellectual.”

Reading is a great tool for personalizing the classroom. The teacher just goes back and forth from the text to the kids. If there is a pet wolf in the story, we just ask if anyone has a pet wolf and, when they say no, we ask them what kind of animal they have at home, and we just go on and on between the reading and the PQA, finding things out about the kids, laughing, returning to the reading from time to time, leaving it from time to time to talk more to the kids, always using the reading as the base for discussion!

This keeps the reading text connected to the spoken language. It keeps it in the whole brain, and prevents a falling back into mere analysis of language, which is a left brain activity that has *little to do with acquiring language* and everything to do with mere learning. (Remember, we learn science and math, but we *acquire* languages – there is a difference.)

So, in communicative based approaches to learning languages, we must connect reading to fluency. In TPRS our goal is fluency. And we connect reading to fluency by using Blaine’s read and discuss technique. Doing this reflects the name of TPRS - Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Stories.

What if one does not have the time to write out stories that the class creates as bases for reading? We just use Blaine Ray’s mini-novels for reading. Doing so can

result in a less personalized class than the reading technique described above, and so may hold less interest for the kids, but it is very useful if the teacher simply doesn't have the time to write stories.

## II.

Stories created in class on M/W become readings on T/Th. Five classes may have created five different stories from the same original story script, but it is not possible for a teacher to write five readings, so usually one or two of the stories are turned into readings, or an amalgam of all five is created, which is my preference.

Here is an example of the process described above. The original story script is from Anne Lambert and follows:

### *Johnny Brought Something Home*

*brought  
hid  
either...or*

*Johnny brought something home. He didn't want his mother to see it, so he hid it in a funny location. She saw (heard, smelled) it and asked, "Why did you bring that home?" Johnny offered a feeble response. His mother said, "Either you bring it somewhere else, or some dire consequence will befall you."*

*Johnny brought it somewhere else. He brought it to a new equally funny location in the house! He hid it in that funny location! His mother saw (heard, smelled) it and said, "Either you bring it out of the house, or some other dire consequence will befall you."*

*Johnny brought it out of the house.*

Here is the sequence:

Monday/Wednesday – use story script to establish meaning and create stories  
Thursday/Thursday – read the stories, embellishing and personalizing the text. If there is no time to write a story, which happens often, we use Blaine's novels.

We embellish (see below) the readings – adding in a variety of interesting new words - because we are responsible to teach certain vocabulary words during the course of the school year, and to keep the text interesting.

We personalize(see below) the readings - reading classes are most successful when the students translate the text and then speak about the section of the text they just read for awhile, perhaps spinning new information, but then returning to the reading, back and forth until the end of class as described above. Connecting the skills of reading and speaking normally occurs only at the graduate level in literature classes, but in TPRS occurs from the beginning.

Notes:

1. There is absolutely no need to reach the end of a reading text during class. We give priority to the back and forth flow from reading to discussing, for a few minutes in each activity. In TPRS the focus is on the process of learning L2, not on focusing on any discrete items in L2. This explains why language schools (in

- which the instructors just speak L2 to their clients) succeed where most institutions (in which only the pieces of language are studied only) fail.
2. Teach grammar and point out the new vocabulary embedded into reading without using complex grammatical terms. Instead, we merely mention discrete grammar items briefly and move on. In the story below, for example, we point out how the adjective “German” agrees in different cases in just a few seconds and we move on. We don’t do worksheets to learn about adjectives, because things studied in the context of a larger text are actually retained because the big picture is there.
  3. Personalization is easy. If you see something that might make for interesting discussion, like Matthew’s VW (Matthew doesn’t have a car but now he is interested in your class because you are talking about him owning one), all you do is ask Matthew or the class a few questions about his car. This can be brief or it can grow all the way into a story.
  4. I personally don’t give handouts of the readings to the students. It can be a distraction. Rather, we read from a common text written on the LCD, overhead, or, whiteboard. This keeps all eyes up and involved.
  5. The class in which the original story was created, lasting over an hour, has been made into a DVD. The reading that resulted from that class, as well, is available on DVD – both from benslavic.com.
  6. It is best to spend substantially more time on reading in reading classes than on the spinoff discussions. It only makes sense. If Krashen says that students in foreign language classrooms need to be reading a full 50% of the time, we should do it. Plus, the kids are getting plenty of auditory CI in the form of stories, etc. during the rest of the week.
  7. We must remember that reading, not just listening, is a form of comprehensible input.

The sample reading follows – embellishments (new vocabulary added) are underlined and personalization facts (details about kids in the class) are **in bold**:

Max ramène une belle fille à la maison. Il la présente à sa mère. La mère n’est pas contente. Après avoir rencontré la fille, elle a l’impression que la fille est stupide.

*Max brings home a pretty girl. He introduces her to his mother. After meeting the girl, the mother is not happy. She thinks that the girl is stupid.*

Max dit à sa mère, «Maman, cette fille n’est pas stupide; elle est vraiment très intelligente!» Max est en colère parce qu’il sait que la fille est à la fois intelligente et belle, même si sa mère n’en est pas au courant. Alors, c’est un problème.

*Max says to his mother, “Mom, this girl is not stupid; she is really very intelligent!” Max is angry because he knows that the girl is both intelligent and pretty, even if his mother is not aware of it. So, it’s a problem.*

Max décide de cacher la fille sur le toit de la maison. Il ne la cache pas dans le garage ou dans l’armoire ou sous une table ou dans le grenier. Il ne la cache ni dans **le cartable de Cody** ni dans **le portable de Jenn**. Il la cache sur le toit de sa maison dans **la bagnole de Matthew**, un Volkswagen.

*Max decides to hide the girl on the roof of the house. He doesn’t hide her in the garage or in the closet or under a table or in the attic. He hides her neither in **Cody’s book bag** nor in **Jenn’s cell phone**. He hides her on the roof of his house in **Matthew’s jalopy**, a Volkswagen.*



Le garçon cache la fille dans une voiture allemande parce qu'elle est allemande – il ne la cache pas dans une voiture française parce qu'elle n'est pas française. Etant allemande, **la fille préfère les marques allemandes...**

*The boy hides the girl in a German car because she is German – he doesn't hide her in a French car because she isn't French. Being German, **the girl prefers German brands.***

La mère s'endort dans la maison. Max s'endort dans la maison. La fille s'endort dans le VW sur le toit.

*The mother goes to sleep in the house. Max goes to sleep in the house. The girl goes to sleep in the VW on the roof.*

Le matin, la mère cherche le journal, le **Columbine Courrier**, du trottoir devant sa maison. Par hasard, elle lève les yeux vers le ciel et voit le VW sur le toit de sa maison. Elle dit, «Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça?» Max arrive et lui dit que c'est un VW sur le toit de la maison. Il dit, «Ne t'en fais pas, maman!»

*In the morning, the mom gets the newspaper, the **Columbine Courrier**, on the sidewalk in front of her house. By chance, she looks up towards the sky and sees the VW on the roof of her house. She says, "What is that?" Max arrives and tells her that it is a VW on the roof of the house. He says, "Don't worry about it, mom!"*

Mais la maman n'en est pas contente. Elle dit à son fils de le descendre du toit et de le garer dans le garage de **leur voisine Hannah**.

*But the mom isn't happy about it. She tells her son to take it down from the roof and to park it in their **neighbors Hannah's garage**.....(this last one is both personalized and embellished)*

[Note: In the DVD of this story, we did not finish the reading. It didn't matter in the least. What matters is that the students were reading and speaking in L2 for the entire class period.]

### III.

If the kids are reading, for example, Chapter 6 of *Pauvre Anne/Pobre Ana*, I only have them read a page or two, individually and silently, for maybe ten minutes. Any longer and the class starts to get separated by too many pages. Any time a group of thirty kids is not on the same page in a secondary school classroom, it is not a good thing, with organizational difficulties popping up all over.

The ten minutes of silent reading is done as per certain rules, given here:

#### WHEN YOU READ IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

1. Make a note of any words you don't know in your composition book. You will learn them later in class.
2. Look for cognates.
3. Sound out the words for meaning - you may have heard them in class.
4. Read from context - other words give clues.
5. Use information from walls.

After the silent reading (ten minutes maximum, or a page or two at the very most), I deliberately and slowly translate the text we just read. The kids follow along with absolutely no talking.

This is a marvelously productive time for them. I occasionally make connections (“Kids, did you know that “se réveille” is where we get the American military term “reveille” etc., etc.). I have figured out that most comments from kids, by far most of them, are to draw attention to themselves, which does not work for me when I am trying to fit a reading class into a scant fifty-three minute period. So I don’t let kids talk during this period. They hold all questions until the text just read has been thoroughly processed by me.

Of course, we can easily blend the two ways of reading described above (reading from stories created by the class or from Blaine’s novels), by simply asking personalized questions to the students that grow out of the reading of the Blaine novel!

### **Handout/Segment #12: Suggested Weekly Schedule**

Kids need more than rules. They also need a predictable schedule. Perhaps it’s their age. Whatever the reason, I find that my students perform better when they know what we are going to do on any given day. This is a schedule I have used, but is certainly open to change as we learn more about what works best in TPRS.

Monday – Story (45 min.) and Story Quiz (5 minutes)

Tuesday – Read and discuss story or Blaine novel

Wednesday – Story (45 min.) and Story Quiz (5 minutes)

Thursday – Read and discuss story or Blaine novel

Friday – Free Write (10 min), followed by choice of

- team chunking activity\*
- teach culture via DVDs
- music\*
- poetry\*
- free voluntary reading
- dictée of Wed. story (5-7 min. only)
- connect dictée to oral output (see [benslavic.com](http://benslavic.com) – downloads)
- testing

Reading quizzes, of course, can be given at the end of class on any Wednesday or Thursday, but, like the story quizzes, should be limited to under five minutes and test easy yes/no items. When students figure out that they can enjoy academic success in your classroom simply by paying attention, you notice all sorts of things, among them students who actually pay attention because they see that doing so actually has an impact on their grade, as well as increased enrollments because they feel confident in class. Of the above Friday options after the free write, the kids prefer the ones indicated with an asterisk.

[Note: the schedule above eliminates the “problem” created when a child is not present for a class. In non-TPRS settings, the (content based) instruction (i.e.

based on certain “activities” that must be done) burdens the teacher with yet another task, that of “keeping up” with who missed what work. *Teachers should never have to worry about such trivialities, because most of the students don’t care about them themselves.*

In the schedule above, rather, the student is invited to just relax and absorb the language in the form of the stories on Monday and Tuesday, and just read the story and listen to the discussion on Wednesday and Thursday. Missing a story or a reading class doesn’t create the same problems for teachers created in content based instruction - the student simply doesn’t take the (M/T end of period) story quiz. They are graded overall only on what they acquire (see assessment section of this text) instead of what “do” in terms of many pointless miniscule activities, as is done in content based instruction.]

### **Handout/Segment #13: Classroom Discipline**

Students must be reminded, constantly in the beginning, to sit with 1) clear eyes, 2) straight backs, and 3) squared shoulders.

When the instructor reminds the students about proper posture, a rustle of sound usually occurs as they sit up and give their full attention. Most children haven't been required to do this in other classes, and so it is necessary that they be taught how to do it, and without exception. Asking a story via circling cannot be successful unless the instructor repeatedly insists on the postural behavior that he or she wants from a child.

When the instructor tells a student to sit up and square up his or her shoulders with clear eyes, the instructor must wait until they actually get the response expected. Just wait. Each child must be given time to sit up with clear eyes. If the instructor is standing in front of any offender in silence while thirty people are waiting for them to respond, they must at least shift into an upright position.

Sometimes it is even necessary to give the withering Queen Victoria “we are not amused” look made famous by Fred Jones. Fred says that if a student misbehaves, the teacher must stop teaching, put their hands down by their side, going slowly, look at the student and lean in and say “thank you” without anger.

As in any class, if even one student wins the mental battle on posture and respect he or she can take ten others with them. In all classrooms, discipline precedes instruction.

Stories are not just for motivated high achievers. If we bring stories into our classroom with real conviction and loving discipline then we will reach the great majority of our students in a way we never would have predicted.

Many kids who look unmotivated are really motivated. Someone just allowed them to wear unmotivated looks on their faces and they got to liking it because it was an easy path, the path taken by so many students – that of avoidance.

In fact, all students can enjoy learning language, and it has nothing to do with how smart they are. If this were not true, then why do all levels of intellects acquire first language fluency?

Finally, we cannot expect the kind of discipline described above to emerge unless we speak the target language in class. English is not the point of the class. When the instructor uses English in the classroom, stories cannot work.

Here is a story about a student I once taught. It addresses how to deal with oppositionally defiant kids – the kinds who can make or break careers.

Mildred is the captain of the girl's basketball team. She is rough. She had to be rough because she was thrown around physically by her abusive parents in a double wide trailer growing up. One day I learn that one of the walls in Mildred's trailer has a gaping hole in it, covered with plastic.

I sense on this first day of class that that Mildred would probably have little chance in her life to leave that trailer and stay in a five star hotel in Paris on a vacation. Mildred may not even be sure what I teach.

I have a problem, because Mildred's swagger upon first entering my classroom is saying, "I am going to take over this class, and bring five of my friends with me, and that is the way it is going to be."

Mildred just doesn't go to her seat. She walks around a little, not unlike an animal staking out new territory by peeing on things. Mildred is peeing, but not in the way Susie Gross means.

Have you ever taught a Mildred? Isn't it fun?

If in this moment I say to myself, "I am going to really love Mildred", it is a futile act. Mildred has not experienced enough love growing up to know how to even respond to it. Instead, I need a technique, a process, for dealing with Mildred in a specific way. I have two possible scenarios from which to choose:

Scenario 1:

"Mildred, sit down now. We are going to start class."

She doesn't. What do I do? Wag my finger in her face? Raise my voice? The class senses my indecisiveness. Mildred finally sits down, but not after establishing a negative mood in my classroom on the first day of class.

That was her purpose, because Mildred is comfortable in a negative mood. She thinks confronting people is a normal activity. She sits down, having displayed her power. You teach poorly the rest of the period, because Mildred is passively controlling the classroom via her aggression. Mildred wins.

What happened in this scenario? I allowed Mildred to bring her Personality A into my classroom, the personality she uses in all her classes and the one which will eventually cause her to drop out of high school before she graduates because it simply won't work for her in schools.

Is there a Personality B that you can develop with Mildred so that this doesn't happen? Is it possible for teachers in all subjects to interact in such a way with their students that the Mildreds of the world want to stay in school instead of dropping out?

Scenario 2:

When I greet Mildred at the door and sense her game, even though I know nothing about her, I sense that she may be “the one” who needs to learn some discipline at this point in the year a lot more than she needs to learn some French.

So when the students begin filling out their questionnaires, I casually sit down next to her and say, “Hi Mildred! What sport (activity, etc.) do you do?”

The reason I ask about sports is because a large part of teenagers’ personalities are centered around sports. It is a good way for them to get a workable identity in school. I have found that well over 50% of the kids, in eighth grade at least, when I do PQA with them, tell me about their sports first. It’s what they do.

If Mildred tells me that she doesn’t play sports, I find out one thing she does. If needed, I stay with Mildred for the filling out of the questionnaire, just sitting close by engaging her in idle conversation every few minutes, visiting with other students if possible, but keeping my focus on her on this first day of class.

The class is seated alphabetically (in a big rectangle around the room) to prevent Mildred from establishing a “cell” with her friends.

When I collect the questionnaires, I first look at Mildred’s questionnaire and bring her sport to the attention of the class. I turn this into a positive for both of us in the following way:

I start in English, “Mildred, you play basketball? That is so cool. I used to play basketball some but I wasn’t very good at it.”

Remember, this isn’t about teaching French. It is about establishing firm discipline in the classroom, a prerequisite to success in any classroom, and doing so via personalization. Then I say in the target language:

“Classe, Mildred joue au basket!/Class, Mildred plays basketball!”

The students understand “class” because it is a cognate, and “Mildred” because I say it in English, but not “joue” so I write down:

joue au basket – plays basketball

Now I stay there. I circle that expression really slowly using the question words, pausing and pointing, going slowly, not moving off the sentence until it comes to a natural stopping point. It is a simple sentence and everybody gets it because I am following the visual metaphor offered on page 108 of the Conclusions section of TPRS in a Year!

My focus is not on the target language now, it is on Mildred. I am neutralizing her by making her the center of attention. I whisper in English to her, “What position do you play?” She says point guard. This fact becomes a fact of supreme importance to me as I continue with this super-slow circling.

By now I have a basketball in my hand. I have created a kind of tension around the basketball. Will I hand it to her as I continue around the room circling? Mildred and the class sense that she will get that basketball if she keeps paying attention.

By my feigning a few handoffs to Mildred, but each time withdrawing the ball, the kids begin to understand that Mildred won't get the ball until she responds successfully with "yes" or "no" to me in French.

What have I done by this? By talking about Mildred in the target language, I have forced Mildred to pay attention to me because I am talking about her and because I am so impressed that she is the point guard on the basketball team.

People love to hear how great they are, and Mildred is no exception. I am beginning to own Mildred, the person who came into my classroom intending to own me.

And, in fact, Mildred buys into the whole thing. She has no idea that her Personality A is getting neutralized, and that her Personality B is being built. She gets the ball when the circling naturally dies down. I then interest myself in another student's sport or activity, but not before making strong and meaningful eye contact with Mildred when handing her the ball about who is in charge of this class.

What if Mildred decides to chuck the ball to a friend or toss it up and down? I simply take it and put it in the cabinet. When Mildred comes into class the next day, she goes straight to my cabinet where she gets "her" basketball. She is shocked when I allow her to do that, but she doesn't know that I am training her in her new personality. She also knows that the minute she disrupts class with the ball, it is gone.

I return often to Mildred these first few weeks, circling the simplest of sentences about her, keeping her involved, smiling, inviting her to accept this new Personality B – that of an important athlete in the school who pays attention in French class.

By the end of the week I have a naming ceremony using a small plastic sword from Wal-Mart, in which Mildred is dubbed in English "Best Point Guard in the History of Colorado High School Basketball," a name she will keep all year.

I will use this name in all sorts of PQA and extended PQA activities, in stories, and in readings. The Best Point Guard in the History of Colorado High School Basketball needs to learn how to read French to know what great things she has done on the court as described in the readings I have created about her Personality B. As long as I keep Mildred engaged and important, she doesn't relapse into Personality A.

By always returning the focus to this wonderful basketball star (the greatest in the history of Colorado high school basketball!) and this great French student, Mildred buys into whatever I do. I win.

Personality B sets in fully by the end of the second week. The problem is solved, not by my loving Mildred, but by my doing a specific, designed, activity directed right at her in the first few classes of the year.

Some teachers may object that this kind of energy output is not part of their job description. But, if we remember that we teach students first and language second, it is the most important aspect of their job. If they feel they cannot do it, they must fake it until it becomes a reality.

What if there is more than one Mildred in the classroom? How does the teacher deal with that?

The first thing is to keep them away from each other physically via alphabetical seating. I use the alphabet because they don't see it as a planned attempt to separate them from their friends.

If the alphabetical seating still allows two loose cannons to be in close proximity of each other, I casually seat them in places where they cannot see each other. I work very hard at this seating, because it works.

Mildred 1 soon forgets about Mildred 2 if Mildred 2 is in the furthest most out-of-contact seat in the room from Mildred 1. By the end of the first week of school, I have identified the Mildreds and they are so far apart as a result of my meticulous pre-emptive planning that they are a non-factor. Any social group that hangs together meets the same fate - the kids become separate entities in my classroom and their group has no power.

I also make sure I can put a name with a face as early as possible and learning at least one thing about each kid from their questionnaire, and then trying to bring it into the PQA. By doing this I send the message to the kids that each one of them is important.

Focusing primarily on who the kids are at the expense of content during the first weeks may seem somewhat off the mark to some teachers. But I maintain that if it is not done there will be little teaching of content. Conversely, if it is done, the academic atmosphere will be assured, and with it content.

There is another approach to classroom discipline that involves using colored notebooks. As the five above activities are going on, one bright student generates quizzes, another writes down the details about the CI for that day, and a third keeps track of any interruptions to the classroom process.

I personally use three differently colored composition notebooks for this, red for the student who writes the quizzes, green for student who writes down the CI/story line, and blue for the student who writes down, in columns, the names of the students in the room who interrupt the classroom process.

*The idea with the red notebook* is that, when a bright student writes the quiz, it is ready to go in those hurried last few minutes of class when the quiz must be given in a hurry. When the student during class writes simple quizzes in L1 that have simple (either yes or no) answers, everything is made easier for the teacher.

*The idea with the green notebook* is that, lacking a simplified description of some of the main details of the story, the teacher is unable to remember them to make the reading for the next day. When (another bright) student writes down in the green notebook the details of the CI as they happen in class, the way is paved for the teacher to write the reading for the next day of class without doing so from memory.

*The idea with the blue notebook* is to write down, in columns, as they occur:

1. bathroom visits (B)
2. student English infractions (SEI)
3. teacher English infractions (TEI)

Doing this allows the student to actually see on paper after only a few weeks, to what degree they actually and truly interrupt the classroom process, an incredibly important thing for students who are not aware of the extent to which they in fact disrupt the classroom. This way of dealing with discipline is much more positive than threats like detentions, etc. It allows me to contact parents with dates of infractions, and to hold myself accountable for my own use of English in the classroom. By simply pointing out infractions and interruptions to students and to myself, we move from a punitive approach to discipline to one of sensing what is best for the class and changing accordingly, bringing parents in often via phone calls, as this is their important role in participating in their child's education.

#### **Handout/Segment #14: Assessment**

When we work for fluency by using communicative activities, we are always assessing our kids by looking in their eyes. But there are other ways in which we can formatively assess our students.

During a story, every ten minutes or so, we can ask for ten finger comprehension checks – the students are simply asked during a story how much they understand on a scale of ten and if numbers are below eight we go back and retell, slowly and deliberately, until everyone understands.

Checking with our barometer student (our lowest achieving student who tries to understand) is also a form of formative assessment.

Aside from the daily formative looking into the eyes, ten finger checks, and barometer checks, assessment in classes in which storytelling is used can be described in this way:

After a story, the questions should be easy and designed to motivate. The best forms of story quizzes are yes and no questions and simple translation of single words. Nothing motivates like success.

After readings, we test for contextual comprehension. Was the overall sense of the passage used for testing understood? This is proficiency based testing, versus testing to see how many words overall were understood, or achievement testing.

This kind of assessment actually tests what the students learn. The teacher can choose between the variety offered in the form of story quizzes, reading quizzes, and free writes, instead of on useless fill in the blank or multiple choice tests.

At the end of the year we give proficiency exams, which are much more general and do not test discrete items. The New York State Regents Exams (<http://www.nysedregents.org/testing/slpexams.html>) provides an excellent example. Thus students should be able to read, speak, listen, and write in a general way at the end of the year.

End of year achievement tests take many forms (The National French/Spanish Contests and AP tests are examples). The bar on those tests is set for perfection. But perfection is not possible with students learning a language. As Susan Gross points out, "Perfectionism is the mental illness of great teachers."

Witness how small children learn a language – they learn by making constant errors. It is part of the definition of their learning. It is *normal* for them to go back



and forth between *I saw* and *I seed* and then, in a natural way, finally end up with *I saw*, without a big deal being made out of it. So to expect students to always “get it right” in languages is, in my view, unreasonable.

Eventually, in my opinion, all the achievement tests will be replaced by proficiency exams, as foreign language educators come to realize how achievement tests separate students into those who can and those who cannot. That is not our purpose as foreign language educators.

I have received a lot of requests for the specific format that I personally use to test at the end of a story or a reading class in my classroom. I publish that here, with the reminder that this story and reading quiz plan works for me and is not being offered as some kind of formula:

In order to keep everybody honest, I highly recommend giving the students very frequent short assessments of five minutes or so at the end of each story and each reading class.

Without such daily assessments, we can emerge after a few weeks with a skewed idea of what some of the less communicative students actually know. The quality of classes with frequent assessment is better, as well, because the kids are being held accountable, which is our job.

There are two things that I like to keep in mind when assessing a story class or a reading class:

1. I want to make the test easy. If a kid knows that in 40 min. from walking into my classroom they will be assessed on something that they can succeed at if only they pay attention, they will then in fact pay attention, a by-product of which is excellent classroom discipline. We all have to admit, on this topic of discipline, that normal traditional classes are so skewed in favor of certain kids, that there is a natural imbalance created. Why not keep ALL of the kids in the classroom in the fold and happy by guaranteeing them success? Why not take the word punitive out of your classroom? It is as easy as giving easy story quizzes!

2. The second thing is the need for speed. I really dislike stopping a story. They take awhile to build, and just when ideas are getting interesting and a lot of acquisition is occurring, we have to stop, get the quiz in, and let the kids go. But I work in a school and I have to show grades and so I do it. That is why 90 minute classes are better for storytelling classes. However, I am getting good at assessing fast in my 53 minute classes. Here is how I do those quizzes:

First, two kids jump up and get pre-prepared squares of paper (8.5 x 11 in four squares). When I say, "Question # 1!" the class knows it has only about twenty to thirty seconds to get ready to write. The two kids get the paper out, and two other kids get pencils out if anybody needs one, everybody moves apart with their composition books functioning as cover sheets. If a kid tries to look on another kid's paper I keep the kid after class and call the parent in between classes, or at least get a phone number from the kid which I use, treating it as a *hugely serious issue*, the result of which is that they don't try to cheat.

Next, the kid who wrote the quiz hands it to me. This is a very bright kid whose instructions are to write, during the story, questions that have yes or no as answers. What is to be noted here is that yes or no questions (yes and no in L2 have to be spelled correctly or it's wrong) **GUARANTEE THEIR SUCCESS and GUARANTEE A FAST QUIZ.**

So much time is lost in our schools to testing. This way of doing a story quiz recoups some of that time, and the kids get to learn more.

Everybody is happy, parents and administrators because they can go into the portal and see a slew of grades, me because I did practically no work to get them, and the students because they succeeded, making them want to listen the next day. The students who most appreciate these easy quizzes are those who don't spend a lot of time studying for those big district vocabulary tests (see [benslavic.com](http://benslavic.com), click on posters, etc. scroll to French/Spanish Thematic Units for an explanation of the other half of my assessment procedures). These quizzes make lazy kids who won't do the studying for the district vocabulary tests REALLY pay attention in class. If they don't prepare the district vocabulary (monthly big) tests, they HAVE TO bolster their grades by paying attention in class – it's when they keep from failing since they are choosing to do no work outside of class. It's usually the kids who don't study outside of class who create discipline problems, so it is nice to have their attention in class. Click on “Unit CDs” for more on that point.

Grading is a somewhat primitive game that we all have to play in education and it can really detract from a program. But, with my story quizzes as described above and with my district vocabulary assessments, I am happy because the time I spend assessing is minimal.

### **Supplemental Handout 1: Krashen/VanPatten/Piaget/Vygotsky**

Stephen Krashen

If one takes a close look at them, it is clear that many of Krashen's hypotheses fully support the activities presented above. They imply that reaching, and not just teaching, kids, is a key factor in building fluency:

1. Communicative Competence, for example, is defined in sociocultural terms, meaning that interacting in L2 is more than just a mental exercise, but a participatory, social one. Robots cannot converse.
2. The Affective Filter Hypothesis states there is a “filter” or “mental block” that keeps L2 from “getting in” – the lower the filter, the easier it is to learn L2. Thus, human contact of a relaxed nature, i.e. reaching kids in a way that is meaningful to them, increases acquisition of L2.
3. The Affective Hypothesis states that factors of motivation, interpersonal acceptance, and self-esteem deeply affect learning L2. Thus, we reach students by focusing on them and valuing them as human beings in our classes.
4. The Comprehensible Input Hypothesis states that the learner can only acquire language by connecting it to prior knowledge. Language that is not understood is just L2 noise. Thus, we cannot just teach students, we must reach them by making sure that we speak to them in a way that they can understand us.
5. The Monitor Hypothesis states that the learner unconsciously corrects his or her speech to conform to the correct spoken and written speech of fluent speakers. Thus, we reach students by speaking to them in the target language, not by speaking to them in English. By speaking to them in L2 in ways that carry meaning and interest to them, we reach them.

6. The Natural Order of Acquisition Hypothesis states that structures of L2 emerge in much the same order as they do in L1, an order that cannot be re-arranged. This implies that the mind is selective and learns what features of a language it wants to learn when it wants to learn it, as it hears L2 on a daily basis. This calls into question the “grammar syllabus.” Thus, we reach students by offering them the target language in forms that it can grasp, and not in ways that confuse them.

Krashen thus echoes the mantra set out by Susan Gross, that success in language teaching is really all about just reaching students. Maybe we should spend less time wrestling with learning how to create stories and just use a few storytelling techniques to just talk with the kids.

The technical aspects of asking stories are not unimportant, but they sometimes cloud our vision of what is truly important - reaching the kids. If a teacher were to use any simple combination of circling, slow, pausing and pointing, and teaching to the eyes, using just those TPRS techniques to engage the students in simple conversations about their interests, they might get unexpectedly fine results.

As we discover more and more ways to connect with our students, without worrying too much about how to create home run stories, we will give more and more life and energy to Krashen’s ideas, and thus become better teachers of fluency.

Alfie Kohn

Of course, we must mention Alfie Kohn’s work here, if only briefly. Mr. Kohn has put forward a “Theory of Value” that states that students need instruction in how to be responsible and respectful – that such things are not necessarily naturally occurring phenomena in students.

Therefore, before focusing on teaching L2, teachers must teach *by modeling* the behaviors they wish to see in their students. When the emotional needs of the students are thus met, what I have called the web of connection can occur in the classroom.

Kohn states that the goal of education is to enable students to realize that they can think, learn, act, and change things. Only after that is established can the students, together, create stories, scenes, etc. in L2 as per the activities presented in this workshop.

Bill VanPatten

Bill VanPatten’s main point is that in order for input to be successful in teaching languages it must be of a *communicative* nature, which means that the focus must be on *meaning*. In this sense, he supports Krashen’s concept of comprehensible input.

Another major aspect of VanPatten’s message is that language acquisition is different from any other kind of learning. VanPatten suggests that the brain treats language differently from normal human cognition and therefore should not be studied cognitively, which is how it is typically taught.

A great teacher of languages, Berty Siegal, echoed this idea in simple terms when she said that “language learning is acoustical, not intellectual!”

Lev Vygotsky

Lev Vygotsky's research, finally getting the attention it deserves, more accurately reflects the value of TPRS. Vygotsky's ideas and those of Georgi Lozanov (Suggestopedia), perhaps because they are from then-Soviet block countries, have largely been ignored in the West. To Vygotsky, speech and interaction with others represents the path through which knowledge is acquired. This means that we are learning by negotiating shared meaning, and that unless we interact with another person, we can't really "get it." To Vygotsky, learning is participatory.

Another relatively obscure idea in Vygotsky's thought is the implication that the mind is not actually located entirely inside the head, that higher psychological functions are body as well as brain-based. This is a Jungian/Eastern idea, that perception is not limited to the mind. It implies that students need to be put in learning situations that unconsciously and effortlessly open up neural pathways that will eventually, when it is time, bring speech out of their brains and into their mouths and bodies.

This is what TPRS does. In TPRS, the opening up of these neural pathways is called comprehensible input. It, along with personalization, are the key concepts in TPRS. Comprehensible input occurs when the student is unconsciously focused on the meaning of the message (Vygotsky) rather than the language itself (Piaget). Thus TPRS supports all three identified learning styles, not just one.

Comprehensible input in TPRS thus becomes a talisman for achieving shared meaning. This is done via stories, gesturing, acting, etc. TPRS teachers interact with their students. TPRS students learn because their minds are not trapped in the left hemispheres of their brains and their bodies are not trapped in their desks. They use their bodies. They open up their mouths and play with the magical sounds of the words without having to worry about losing points for misspelling them. They enjoy learning. They want to learn more.

Among the language theorists mentioned above, only Piaget fails to reflect what has become known, in TPRS circles at least, as the difference between "acquisition" and "learning".

According to master teacher Susan Gross, "learning" has as its goal the "ability to edit" language. It has no real auditory piece, and is characterized by "study", the "understanding of the mechanics of the language", the "practice of structures", and "rules".

On the other hand, "acquisition" has as its goal "fluency", is based on the auditory piece, and is characterized by "effortlessness", "easily understood messages", a certain "unconscious absorption of L2", during which it "feels like nothing is happening", and L2 just "sounds right".

Gross goes on to make the point that, according to recent research, the most ideal ratio of acquisition to learning, to get students performing at the highest possible level, is 95% acquisition to 5% learning.

### **Supplemental Handout 2 - Administrator Checklist for Observing a Storytelling Classroom (credit: Susan Gross)**

The teacher demonstrates enthusiasm:

- for the language and its culture
- for the students as a group and individually
- for teaching

The teacher checks for comprehension:

- by asking individuals
- by carefully observing all students in class
- by listening for responses from the whole class
- by asking for translation

The teacher offers opportunity for sophisticated language use

- by embellishing the basic statements
- by asking a variety of questions in a variety of formats
- by inviting students to create in the language

The teacher raises the level of student's attention

- by involving students in the narration
- by allowing student input to direct a portion of the lesson
- by talking to one or two individual students
- by talking ABOUT one or two specific students
- by referring to places/locations/people of interest to the students

The teacher models pro-active classroom management

- by remaining calm and in control
- by showing genuine interest in the students
- by taking time to listen to student suggestions
- by looking at individual students with a calm demeanor
- by moving close to possible disruptions
- by offering choices to students who fail to co-operate
- by using facial expressions that are appropriate to the situation (smiling, not angry, blank expression)

The teacher speaks the target language: 50%, 75%, or 90% of the time, depending on the activities that day.

Students are actively engaged in the lesson:

- by acting
- by responding to questions
- by contributing ideas to the lesson

The students are held accountable for the lesson

- by speaking the language when asked
- by helping each other
- by unannounced quizzes
- by retelling the story line in own words
- by translating when asked

The teacher promotes grammatical accuracy

- by explaining the meaning of unfamiliar or new items
- by using the unfamiliar or new items multiple times, in different contexts
- by asking students to predict correct grammatical usage
- by requiring increased accuracy throughout the year

The teacher demonstrates appropriate correction techniques

- by modeling accuracy: rewording the student's attempt while acknowledging the content of the student's statement

- by demonstrating the value of accuracy: stating the meaning of the inaccurate construction
- by inviting the student to correct him/herself

The teacher promotes higher-level thinking skills

- by asking students to synthesize the language in a story retell
- by asking students to create imaginative situations
- by asking students to supply motivation for actions in the story

The teacher tailors the tasks to individual student abilities

- by asking many types of questions
- by expecting multiple levels of answers to questions (on-word, phrase, sentence)

### Conclusions

Before even thinking about getting into stories, we need to get some degree of command of at least three (of the many) skills used in TPRS. Then we need to practice them in the form of the five simple activities described above. *It only looks like* the five activities are designed to teach the language - that is not their real purpose. They are designed to train the students in the rules of their TPRS classroom, to train the students in the game of CI, to place the focus on the kids and personalize the classroom, and to give the teacher new to storytelling some “batting practice” in the skills of Pause and Point, SLOW, and Circling before actually “taking the field” in stories.

Here, then, is the *hidden agenda* of each activity described above:

Word Association Activity – by asking students “how can we remember that \_\_\_\_\_ means \_\_\_\_\_”, or “show me \_\_\_\_\_” we immediately involve them in the classroom process, using English. To start out each class in the target language would immediately create a kind of artificial distance between the instructor and the student. Once a few students have made their suggestions, and after a few others have suggested a gesture for each of the five words (all done in just a few minutes), the way is opened for the instructor *to praise them* for their suggestions. *This praise creates a positive bond* between everyone in the classroom.

One Word Images – by asking the class questions about the details of the image, the *students create the image*, not the instructor. All the instructor does is ask questions from the list on page 10 above. This empowers and unifies the class. It prepares the way for stories. It gives the instructor all sorts of options to bring in other images, make comparisons, and generally follow a very free, thus interesting, CI process. Moreover, four supremely important goals are achieved through one word images: 1) the rules are taught, 2) the game of CI is taught, 3) the focus is on what *the kids* can create, and 4) the teacher gets valuable practice in the three crucial TPRS skills of Point and Pause, SLOW, and Circling.

Circling With Balls – this brings the personalization. The instructor is able in this activity to *draw attention to the unique real life skills and personal interests of each student* in the room, thus establishing a set of basic classroom information about each student which is then integrated into stories weeks later, at the end of this starting the year process.

Word Chunk Team Activity – this is about *inclusion*. By becoming a member of a smaller subgroup of kids from the beginning of the year, students who normally

create a distance between themselves and the class are brought into accountability with those few other students on their team. This creates a more cohesive class. A second goal of this activity is to apply the single words learned in the word association activity to chunks of words, thus training the students to decipher more than just individual words, a necessary skill for stories.

Questionnaires – an expansion of the Circling with Balls activity, the questionnaires *further personalize the classroom*, paving the way for personalized stories in a powerful way. When the instructor creates little scenes, PQA and extended PQA, from the information in the questionnaires, besides moving towards greater personalization, the class is given excellent *practice in following the rules*, and *the instructor is able to get further practice* in the use of CI before beginning stories.

#### One Further Note

As the five above activities are going on, one student generates quizzes as described above and another writes down the details about the story or PQA for that day. I use differently colored composition notebooks for this, red for the student who writes the quizzes, and green for the student who writes down the story line.

*The idea with the red notebook* is that, when a bright student writes the quiz, it is ready to go in those hurried last few minutes of class when the quiz must be given quickly. This is based on the idea that we need grades for our gradebooks. When the student during class writes simple quizzes in L1 that have simple (either yes or no spelled correctly in L2) answers, everything is made easier for the teacher.

*The idea with the green notebook* is that, lacking a simplified description of some of the main details of the story, the teacher is unable to remember them to create the reading for the next day. When a student writes down in the green notebook the details of the CI (not necessarily a story but any PQA, etc. – we can test on anything) as they happen in class, the way is paved for the teacher to write the reading for the next day of class without trying doing so from memory, which is impossible after a day of five classes.