

How to use MovieTalk to Teach with Comprehensible Input



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Following the 2006 and 2014 IJFLT articles by Ashley Hastings on MovieTalk, there has been a surge of conversation on international listservs, such as the moreTPRS Yahoo listserv (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/moreTPRS/join>)

In response, I will discuss strategies I use to provide comprehensible input in my public elementary and middle school Spanish classroom. MovieTalk appeals to teachers who teach languages by providing comprehensible input, because a compelling video in large part takes care of classroom management concerns and the teacher does not have to worry about being the source of entertainment nor improvising the details of a story as is done in other Teaching with Comprehensible Input (TCI) methods, such as Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS). It's one more powerful tool to provide novel, compelling, comprehensible input.

Basic Technique:

The Narrative/Paraphrase technique, which came to be called “MovieTalk”, consists of the teacher playing and pausing a video clip, while narrating the scenes, paraphrasing any dialogue, and asking questions with short answers in order to check for comprehension (Murphy & Hastings, 2014; Hastings, 2014). This form of video appreciation allows the class to enjoy the richness of the frames, seeing things unnoticeable at full speed. Think of every frame as a page in a picture book. The teacher describes the picture in a way that is comprehensible to the students (pointing, gesturing, drawing, etc.). Teachers should use TPRS skills like circling, point and pause, pop-ups, and Bertie Segal’s levels of questioning to increase comprehensibility (Segal, 1992, p. 9; Ray & Seely, 2012, p. 139-173).

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In the original design, Hastings would have a movie segment first play without interruption, then replay the video and narrate with the volume lowered or pausing the video to narrate. Some teachers show the entire clip first, without saying anything, just to give the students background knowledge. It has been my experience that student engagement is highest the first time through, so I suggest not showing the clip first.

Introduction to Students:

There are three main rules that students follow during a MovieTalk:

- 1) The students must only speak in the target language.
- 2) The students must keep their eyes on me and on the screen.
- 3) All students must respond to my questions or else signal they don't understand.

When you first start MovieTalk, the kids may protest the frequent stopping of the film. It is important that the teacher explain the purpose of the activity. I tell students that I want to show them fun videos, but the ultimate objective is to listen to the target language. I choose short clips so that I can replay the clip without stopping at the end of the period. If I replay, I may narrate without pausing or ask the students to tell the story to themselves in their heads as the video plays.

Length:

Originally, MovieTalk was used more for feature-length films, but it was designed for use in 4 hour classes of university ESL students and was part of a multiple week listening module. The shorter periods in middle school and high school lend themselves to shorter clips. I've had the most success with MovieTalk when the clip has a repetitive plot and is short (1-4 minutes). Longer clips (4+ minutes) can work if they are repetitive. You can let the video play for longer periods of time, until the repetitive scene occurs. The longer, repetitive clips can be effective, because less frequent pauses are often more tolerable by students and allows for embedded brain breaks.

Interactive:

Although a MovieTalk utilizes storytelling, rather than the "StoryAsking" (a term coined by Jason Fritze) the teacher can decide the level of interaction. That interaction can range from low (mostly narration) to high (asking questions after every statement). Your strategy depends on your intent. If the number one intent is pleasure and not repetition of targeted structures or vocabulary words, then ask fewer questions. If the objective is to focus on comprehension skills (prediction, evaluation, etc.) and repetition, then ask a circle of questions and also ask higher order thinking questions.

Without student actors, as in TPRS, you are at risk of not getting the other verb forms into the input. To include first person input you can "speak your mind," modeling your own thought process about predictions, reactions, etc. Additionally, ask your students personal questions that parallel the characters, utilize students as the characters of the MovieTalk as you would in TPRS, and read the story from different points of view.

There can be a tendency in a MovieTalk to spend more time on narration, which could cause students to zone out during a MovieTalk and doesn't give the teacher feedback on the students' comprehension. To maintain attention, strive to ask a question after every 1 to 2 statements, in order to check that the students have actually comprehended. Additionally, you do the same things teachers do in TPRS to hold kids accountable, e.g. requiring choral responses, exit quizzes, and timed rewrites of the story. Likely, you will find a mix of narration and questioning to be ideal. You can always ask your way through a segment, then rewind and narrate, just like we often do in TPRS to retell the story and gain more repetitions.

The 4 C's of Optimized Input:

In two studies, students in the Focal Skills' Listening Module, of which instruction time was mostly spent on MovieTalk, showed three times greater listening comprehension gains compared to standard ESL classes, while equaling progress in reading and writing (Hastings, 1995; Yu, 1998). I imagine the effects can be further enhanced by teachers who do the best they can to apply the 4 C's of optimized input.

1. Comprehensible

Comprehension suffers when students do not understand 95-98% of the input (Coady and Nation, 1988; Laufer, 1989). During a MovieTalk, the teacher's speech is much more comprehensible than the original soundtrack (more of the teacher's speech is visually reflected in the movie) and teachers use a higher frequency vocabulary (Hastings, 2014). The combination of more comprehensible speech, pointing at the content in the visual, the teacher's use of gestures, and establishing meaning for pre-selected target structures makes for high quality comprehensible input (CI). Video selection is important. Choose videos with action, easy to describe scenes, and that have little to no dialogue. There are 2 student C's that are the result of Comprehensible Input.

a) *Confidence* – When students can easily understand the message and successfully respond to questioning, then confidence soars.

b) *Comfort* – In terms of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), MovieTalk makes for more effective acquisition. It lowers the students' affective filters since they understand, are only required to respond orally with one-word answers, and due to the relaxing nature of watching a movie. Furthermore, during MovieTalks students may be invited to lounge on a carpeted floor and in comfortable chairs.

2. Compelling

The right selection of a video clip (e.g. humorous videos, like Pixar or Mr. Bean) make the story inherently compelling. While the volume of video clips can be lowered during MovieTalk, a good soundtrack can make a video more compelling. The story is not customized to the class-given details, which is the greatest source of compelling input for TPRS. The teacher and students aren't responsible for making the input compelling, which can make TCI easier and less stressful for the teacher. You can personalize the story if you desire, by asking questions to compare the characters to the students.

3. Contextualized

All the vocabulary happens within the framework of a story. We can do more than just point at objects and say them in the target language (e.g. point at a tree and say "tree"). We contextualize the vocabulary by giving sentence-level input (e.g. "There is a tree. What color is the tree?") and that input is part of an event in the story.

4. Concentrated

If you want to build aural knowledge that will be retained, which in turn eventually leads to output, you need to provide repetitive input. Studies suggest that the memory of a word requires dozens of exposures in meaningful contexts and many more exposures are needed to comprehend the word in a new context and use it in fluent speech (Nation, 2001). Within a MovieTalk you can be repetitive by targeting structures, utilizing the questioning technique known as circling, selecting videos with repetitive plots, replaying the video, and including a Screenshot BookTalk (see below).

Targeted Input:

TPRS targets a few structures and often spends several classes on the same structures. The ultimate goal of focusing on a few structures is to concentrate the repetitions the students would receive from more natural input

in order to accelerate acquisition of the vocabulary contained in the structures. Limiting structures is another way to improve comprehensibility of the input. Greater comprehensibility and repetition leads to greater acquisition and retention, which ultimately results in greater fluency. While targeting structures means narrating with a limited vocabulary, teachers should strive to not limit grammar.

The 3-step TPRS process (establish meaning of vocabulary structures, ask a story, read) works for any type of story. TPRS teachers have taken MovieTalk and fit it to this process by choosing clips with repetitive plots and turning the MovieTalks into short story scripts with 1-3 pre-selected target structures. Establish meaning with TPR and/or PQA (asking personalized questions about) the structures. Optionally, you can BookTalk the screenshots (explained below). Also, the class can read one scene of the story that has the targeted structures, translate, and discuss, with the objective of getting more repetitions of the structures and increasing the comprehensibility of the MovieTalk. In a way, this is the base reading of an Embedded Reading done before viewing the clip and an extended reading is completed after (for more information on Embedded Readings see Clarcq, 2012, p. 21-24 and visit <http://embeddedreading.com>). Then, play the clip, stopping on the frames that have the repetitive scene to narrate and circle the structures. Then, read, translate, and discuss the text. Finally, students are ready for more output-driven activities, such as pair retells and timed rewrites. You can play around with the order of the 3 steps and can do more than one simultaneously (e.g. combine PQA and story), just as you can with TPRS.

Non-Targeted Input:

MovieTalk is an opportunity to match pedagogy to theory. Krashen (2013) reminds us that the net hypothesis calls for non-targeted comprehensible input. The net hypothesis indicates that non-targeted comprehensible input automatically differentiates instruction, because it will include the vocabulary and grammar all the students are ready to acquire. Krashen explains some of the problems of targeted input, e.g. students don't always receive input they are ready for and it can constrain the interest of the messages. The power of the visual in a MovieTalk to make input comprehensible allows for "loosening up class discussions." MovieTalks can be done without targeted structures and they are still largely comprehensible, although less transparent (translatable), but this is how vocabulary is acquired. Each time we come across a word in a new context, about 5% of its meaning is acquired (Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985).

In a non-targeted approach, students don't get the same concentrated repetitions they get from a targeted approach, but if continued throughout the year, the repetitions would be received, albeit over the long term. MovieTalk was created for intensive instruction and the high volume of comprehensible input ensures repetition, but that is not the case in a daily, 40 minute foreign language class. Without concentrated repetitions around targeted structures, I would be concerned with retention loss and a likely delay in output. The same happens in TPRS if we choose too many target structures or use too much vocabulary. Then, students generally have less memory and output of the words, because they received fewer repetitions of each structure.

Embedded Listening:

One way to balance targeted and non-targeted input is to present a MovieTalk as if it were an aural Embedded Reading, what I call here an Embedded Listening. You start with aural narration and questioning of a base version that is easy for the entire class to comprehend. Upon subsequent repetitive scenes or on replays of the clip, add to the base version so that each successive version injects new information. The base version provides the most concise, targeted input and each successive version is longer and hence less targeted. The new information should not all be unfamiliar and more challenging. Rather, it should be of varying difficulty. In this way, you are able to manage comprehensibility and exposure to unfamiliar language, while each level provides

more repetitions of the language from previous versions. One strategy is to add 1-3 new target structures at each level, as is done in the Extended Versions of TPRS story scripts (see Tripp's Scripts: Tripp, 2012). You can embed the same short and compelling clip in consecutive classes and students will still pay attention. Or embed a clip that was introduced earlier in the year and go back and add a second and third level to the listening. MovieTalk lends itself nicely to this, since students don't have a problem re-watching compelling clips.

Reading:

However you present the MovieTalk, combining the MovieTalk with a reading of the text is a great way to teach literacy skills and provide more optimized input. Reading the text of a MovieTalk is great training in an important reading skill: visualization. There is a large amount of research showing that mental imagery enhances comprehension, memory, and higher order thinking (Sadoski, 1998). The Lindamood-Bell programs, such as Visualizing and Verbalizing, have had notable success in making students better readers by improving their abilities to visualize (Bell, 2007). These programs align with dual coding theory which explains that cognition consists of a verbal system interconnected with a nonverbal system (Paivio, 1971). The birth of the Lindamood-Bell programs came from a student who was good at reading comprehension who told Nanci Bell, "I make movies when I read" (Bell, 2007, p. 3-8). Expert TPRS teacher Susan Gross subsequently defined reading as students "seeing a movie in their heads." The discussion of the visual image during a MovieTalk primes the mental imagery, which can be accessed during reading. Reading the text of a video clip has great power to recreate that movie in their minds.

For the same reason I wouldn't show the entire clip first, i.e. lower engagement, I wouldn't read the text before the MovieTalk. Furthermore, providing the aural input before the visual input increases the comprehensibility of the reading and increases the pronunciation of that "voice in our heads" that we can hear when we read. If the MovieTalk has a cliffhanger, then you could stop the clip before the ending, read the text excluding the ending, and then go back and MovieTalk the final part. Finally, put the readings into folders made accessible during self-selected reading time.

BookTalk

When applied to videos, the Narrative/Paraphrase technique is called MovieTalk, but teachers can use the technique with picture books, and in this case, it could be considered "BookTalk." Fluency Through TPR Storytelling (Ray & Seely, 2012, p. 360-61) suggests "Kindergarten Days," reading aloud to students from a picture book. During a BookTalk you can tell a different story than what is written, just as pre-literate children "picture read" (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999). A good way for a teacher to improve his/her MovieTalk skills is to practice with a single picture or a children's book.

Screenshot BookTalk

You can turn a video into a BookTalk by creating and narrating screenshots of the frames. It requires more preparation, but you can also subtitle the screenshots. The subtitles can include narration, comprehension questions, or personalized questions. When the Screenshot BookTalk comes before the MovieTalk it helps to establish meaning and increase the comprehensibility of the MovieTalk. This previewing of the story is a recommended pre-reading comprehension strategy called a "picture walk" (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999). When the Screenshot BookTalk comes after the MovieTalk, it serves as repetition. With subtitles, this could be the reading, in which case the screenshots aid in the comprehensibility of the subtitles.

Conclusion

There are many ways to do a MovieTalk that will be effective to the degree to which they satisfy the four tenets of optimized input. Teachers are encouraged to experiment and find what works for them. It is likely that students will be most engaged if the teacher varies his/her approach and presentation style with every few MovieTalks. MovieTalk is still emerging as a common TCI tool and will continue to evolve.

[Watch videos of Eric Herman teaching with MovieTalk and other CI methods: teaching English in Honduras](#)
[teaching Spanish at the Edgartown K-8 School in Edgartown, MA](#)
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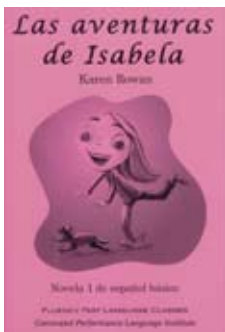
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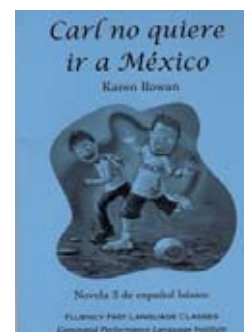
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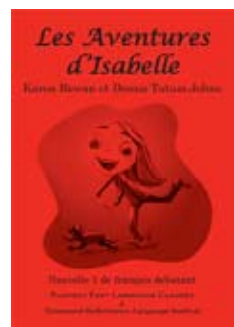
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Donna Tatum-Johns translated *Las Aventuras de Isabela* from the Spanish and also consulted with many native speakers and French teachers to arrive at the best translation. The book contains a glossary and a cultural glossary of places in Paris that Isabel visits. The book is set in Paris and the book reflects the French culture that surrounds her.

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