

# 90%+ TARGET LANGUAGE, AUTHENTIC TEXTS, NO ISOLATED GRAMMAR? HOW?

BY CALEB ZILMER

Editor's Note: Following in the spirit of the article on 21<sup>st</sup> century support systems on p. 20, Spanish teacher Caleb Zilmer presents a standards-based approach that offers a fresh look at curriculum, instruction, and assessment, while redesigning the language learning environment.



Far too often when adults recall their early language learning experiences, they lament that they studied in school for years and yet cannot remember much in the target language beyond how to ask, “Can I go to the bathroom?” Some feel it is their own inadequacy for not having learned the language despite hours of instructional time; they decide that they must lack intelligence or language ability, or they believe that learning a second language is simply unattainable to anyone beyond age eight.

It is unacceptable that such reactions to language learning experiences are so common. As educators, we must all agree today that this “business as usual” approach simply does not work.

The ACTFL Position Statement on the Use of the Target Language in the Classroom advocates a goal of 90%+ by teachers and students in and beyond the classroom (see [www.actfl.org/news/position-statements/use-the-target-language-the-classroom](http://www.actfl.org/news/position-statements/use-the-target-language-the-classroom)). Much of the latest research and many authorities in second language acquisition call for teachers to not use the textbook as

the sole source for input, to avoid teaching grammar devoid of a context, and to use more authentic sources.

In a recent *Education Week* article, J.B. Buxton and David Young noted, “For too many years, we have maintained a language-learning strategy that simply does not work . . . [We] seek to teach language to 100 percent of the students with a success rate of 1 percent.” Why such dismal results? Many experts agree that it’s because there is too much emphasis on grammar and translation and not nearly enough on learning to speak the language.

Making this shift can be a daunting task, especially when we face the question of motivating the students to maintain target language use themselves. We may see the abstract ideal, but the practical question of “How?” remains. There are, however, a growing number of practitioners who feel they have found a way.

Three main principles, based on the work of such seminal researchers as Lev Vygotsky, Merrill Swain, Stephen Krashen and others, activate the kind of learning that is taking place in more and more language classrooms.



## Focus on Meaning Rather than Grammar

*A focus on meaning leads to greater accuracy in the target language. An immersion environment in which language collaboratively and spontaneously manifests as a result of making meaning—a focus on communicative ability rather than accuracy and explicit grammar instruction—promotes natural language acquisition.*

The paradigm shift here is from focusing on units or grammar to focusing on the skills students need to function in the second language—placing primary emphasis on their language level and production, and being part of a community. The approach (being called “Organic Language Acquisition” by Darcy Rogers of Crater Renaissance Academy in Central Point, OR), has been spreading as it has caught the attention of other language educators and received positive feedback from students.

With a greater focus on communication, students and teachers alike are freed to explore whatever topics they want. Kai Wangle, a former student of Rogers, says of the experience: “[She] instituted a complete ban on English; we even got docked points if we were caught. And it worked: Everything was done in Spanish, from attendance, to giving out homework, to subtle heckled insults and . . . jokes. We even spoke Spanish amongst ourselves, often when we were supposed to listen instead. And when the bell rang and the door opened, the English resonating from the hallway always seemed to take everyone by surprise.”

With a 100% target language environment comes a balance: more of a focus on getting across one’s message and less of a focus on accuracy, especially at the beginning levels. Particularly in the earliest stages of acquisition, according to the ACTFL level descriptors for Novice and even through a good portion of the Intermediate level, it is understood that there will be errors and that a “sympathetic listener” is needed. Even some elements of the Advanced-Low level (control of aspect in the past time frame) are understood to be inaccurate at times.

For this reason, a few teachers have shifted their focus from accuracy to communicative efficacy. For example if a student says, “Yo hablar con yo mamá ayer noche” [I talk I mom yesterday night], we understand that

the student spoke with his or her mother last night and we deal with the grammar issues as a lack of clarity in communication—bringing students’ attention to it later. If, however, the student says, “Hablas con mi mamá anoche” [You speak with my mom last night] when in fact you did not, clarifying questions would be employed to reach a more complete understanding—that, in fact, it was the student who spoke with his or her mother last night.

Correction of errors is replaced by encouragement and praise for effective communication. Ruth Whalen Crockett of Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, MA, says, “Quiet encouraging smiles, pats on the shoulder, and clarifying questions are small and simple steps toward building a healthy classroom culture where students feel motivated to speak Spanish and actively engage with their peers.”

With a focus on communicative effectiveness and letting go of errors that do not obstruct meaning, the culture of the classroom becomes much warmer and more welcoming. The use of positive reinforcement is by no means a new concept to educators. We have all seen the powerful effects of celebrating success. The students’ sense of ownership in the community is what makes *them* the curriculum, which motivates them to experiment with new versions of themselves. Rogers says, “The new environment fosters spontaneity, errors, and fearlessness in communicating. Students are not a part of their learning process, they guide it.”

## Creating a Safe Environment for Experimentation

*Social interaction that relies on communication and movement creates a culture that facilitates a safe environment where learners can experiment with different versions of themselves. Instructors and learners construct meaning together and have fluid roles in the classroom. It is an environment where learners are intrinsically motivated to use the target language.*

With this approach to teaching the second language, the students’ lives become the curriculum. Because life cannot be antici-pated, whatever arises in the moment in the classroom or in the students’ lives drives the acquisition of language forward.

For example, in a Spanish 2 class taught by Rogers the topic of “bath salts,” the designer drugs being sold as “potpourri” came up. Students jumped in and told stories of what they had heard, with all of their grisly details. Eventually, the discussion evolved into an existential analysis of the inherent issues with drugs in general. Whether or not these stories were true or not was beside the point—these students were able to express themselves on a topic of interest to them using the second language exclusively, and to arrive at an understanding together of how they felt about drug use.

“Since adopting this approach in my classroom, I have been most struck by the need for me to get out of the way,” says Whalen Crockett of her practice. “Though I have to initiate a conversation with a provocative question, it is essential that I allow students to engage together in the work of understanding each other’s responses to the questions . . . Students’ stories are essential to our work together and can be huge in motivating us to stay in Spanish.”

She is not only saying she has to get out of the way of the conversation, she has to get out of the way of the movement—or, rather, become a part of it.

Wangle notes, “When I first entered the classroom, I was shocked to find no desks, and what few chairs were there were pushed up neatly against the walls, completely neglected. I reluctantly stood in the circle my classmates formed and listened; to my surprise I knew what they were talking about, even though the details often escaped me.”

She describes the physical structure of a classroom that removes the barriers of desks and chairs. Instead, students are often running, walking, skipping, hopping, clapping their hands, giving each other high fives and playing games like rock, paper, scissors. Not only is it fun, it builds community and such high energy brings up numerous opportunities for language instruction. Kinesthetic learning, including TPR-like gestures and circumlocution for new language, is a powerful tool.

When students are not moving around, they are interacting in a wide variety of groupings that fit the task at hand: whether in concentric circles; in rows facing each other; in groups of three, four, five, or six; or as a



whole class, the physical structure is malleable to the need of the communicative activity. While at times the format sounds chaotic, it is all done for a purpose—driving the students’ language ability forward. These teachers are highly aware at all times of exactly where their students are linguistically and what is needed to push them forward. Rogers states, “When teachers become guides along the journey that is language learning, instead of just imparters of all knowledge, then something incredible and wonderful happens in the classroom, it becomes more than just a classroom—it becomes life.”

## Instruction and Assessment Informing One Another

*A focus on accessible aspects of language allows learners to engage in tasks that facilitate communicative language growth at their appropriate level. Instruction and assessment are simultaneous activities—one constantly informs the other. Assessment facilitates scaffolding to give students greater ability.*

Whalen Crockett recounts an experience in her classroom where a student told a story about an encounter with the police: “Recently, one of my students began telling a story about being accused by the police of stealing a bicycle. Initially, the student stopped the story because he didn’t believe he could tell it entirely in Spanish. His peers were so motivated to hear the interesting tale that they coached him through the telling of the event by asking him clarifying questions and providing him important vocabulary. It was the motivation of the class to understand the story that fueled their interactions and engagement.”

This student got stuck a number of times in the telling of his story by specific vocabulary items and some advanced grammar. At one point, he and a couple of other students had to work around the verb *decir* [to say/to tell] in the appropriate past tense in order to discover who said what to whom when. They worked it out together, entirely in the target language, and then the student was able to continue with his story.

The introduction of new vocabulary and contextually appropriate grammar is a hallmark of what these teachers are doing. Depending on the language level of the learners and the

context, different approaches are used, but TPR-like gestures and circumlocution are the mainstays. As students hit linguistic walls, the teacher often steps in to provide the needed elements—unless the other students can do it themselves!

In this “lesson,” the students and teacher alike engaged in natural conversation that all were simultaneously able to access at their own ability level and to push forward. By employing this research-based practice of making instruction and assessment one and the same activity, right at the students’ level, many teachers are saying that they are seeing greater proficiency in their students than in the past.

Administrators, too, notice changes. “Class is conducted in a circle of students. All students were speaking in Spanish and embracing the difficulty of communicating with a small vocabulary. All students appeared to have moved beyond embarrassment. This is quite an accomplishment! Some students don’t stop talking [in Spanish] or making noises even when directed,” said Tiffany O’Donnell, Assistant Principal at Eagle Point High School in Eagle Point, OR, after observing the author of this article’s Spanish 1 class.

What O’Donnell noticed as a classroom management challenge is in fact an intended outcome. “Students have replaced English side-chatter with Spanish side-chatter,” she noted. While a few teachers and administrators might see this as a problem, side conversations in the target language in the first three months of Spanish 1 can only be seen as a strength.

Furthermore, what O’Donnell remarks on here are actually explicit goals of the approach in the classroom:

- To speak the second language only
- To not be afraid of a second language environment
- To take risks (break down the filter and make mistakes)
- To be able to infer and circumlocute
- To participate and be part of the community

By holding to these five goals in the classroom, the teacher and students create their community in the second language.

O’Donnell goes on to say, “The teacher, with a small vocabulary, addressed [the

students’ poor behavior with a substitute teacher]. Students brainstormed problems and solutions. Mr. Zilmer talked about the definition of respect.” Seemingly unremarkable on the surface, when one stops to notice that these Spanish 1 students engaged in this conversation entirely in the target language, it is apparent that there is something exceptional happening here.

Teachers new to the profession are also drawn to what these practices can offer. Rogers recently led a workshop in Guatemala, during which Alycia Harrah, a new English teacher said, “It is 100% unconventional and 100% effective. It makes sense, and because it makes sense, it will work. Not to mention it’s a blast.” Abbie Case, another teacher at the workshop, noted, “I think this approach will be extremely effective for teaching English to our students. Not only does it make sense to immerse kids in the second language, but it’s so fun! I loved every minute of training, and I feel closer to my fellow teachers because of it.”

Many educators find that the connections they make with other teachers using these concepts are the most useful aspect to being involved in this international professional learning community. The ideas, techniques, and support energize everyone. While some practitioners in the language profession have been confounded by calls for 90%+ target language in the classroom, a move away from textbooks, and a focus more on communica-



To read more about the approach described in this article, which is being called “Organic Language Acquisition,” go online to [organiclanguageacquisition.wordpress.com/](http://organiclanguageacquisition.wordpress.com/) or join the Facebook group at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Organic-Language-Acquisition/292853297393181>.



tion than on explicit grammar instruction, there are educators are finding success teaching a second language for proficiency, and they and their students are finding deep fulfillment and intrinsic enjoyment at the same time.

"This new teaching method has given me the space to be who I am as a teacher. I could never fit into the textbook, and I needed something that could meet students where they are," says Nanosh Lucas, a Spanish teacher at Phoenix High School in Phoenix, OR. "While my teaching isn't perfect, I am developing relationships based on trust and honoring students where they are. We work directly toward standards, research-based practices, and making the learning exciting and meaningful."

*Caleb Zilmer is a Spanish teacher at Eagle Point High School in Eagle Point, OR.*



*Photo captions to come.*



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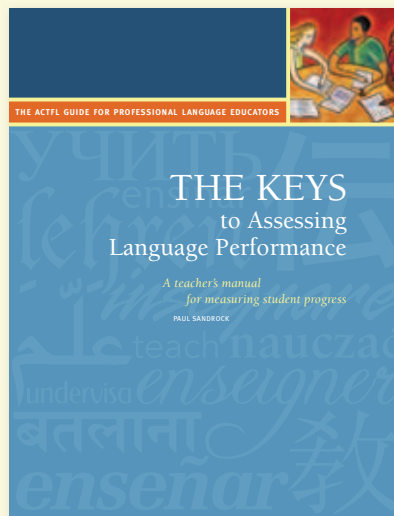
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