

Spinning Personalized Questions/Answers into a Story

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As a three-time attendee of the International Forum on Language Teaching, IFLT, a summer conferences on Comprehensible Input-Based Strategies, I have often found great ideas to take back to my classroom in August. However, many of the strategies presented at these conferences are difficult to adapt for an urban high school setting.

Comprehensible input-based strategies rely on engagement, participation, and intrinsic motivation from our students – things that do not come easily in an urban classroom setting. For the past 3 years, I've tried to mesh the world of teaching with TPRS and other comprehension-based strategies with my students' backgrounds and needs. Some of it has yielded good results; some of it, not so much.

This year I attended a session at iFLT called Xtreme Personalization. Applying the techniques and strategies from the Personalization sessions this fall revolutionized my teaching. After having used personalization in my classes for years, my epiphany was that Personalized Questions/Answers (PQAs) should NOT be disconnected from the class story. In fact, PQAs should BECOME the class story.

The “Formula”

- Ask students what they did over the weekend (or yesterday) by asking questions and listening and thoughtfully responding to the responses.
- Ask several students until you get an interesting answer.
- “Fish for information” – using the PQA process to answer the Who? What? Where? How? Why? questions. Look for an interesting piece of information that could be built into a story.
- Bring the actor/actress up to act out the story as you “tell the story” or “ask the story” using all of the information you gathered during the PQA process.
- When beginning to act out a story, ask the class a question and then confirm it with your actor/actress, putting the main character in charge of the direction of his or her own story.
- “Find the problem.” Determine the central conflict or problem in the story by asking the class to tell a secret, or share a rumor.
- Use the target vocabulary structures and repeat those structures dozens of times while asking questions of the class and recycling the information that was obtained during PQA.

Results

Every time I have used this formula, I have hit a “home run:” a story that is compelling, usually funny and in which students are engaged. Behavior issues, academic issues, or attention span issues in general go away when the “story” is about someone in the class. My most reluctant Spanish students from last year are now enthusiastic participants, and they cannot wait to have their personal life experiences spun into our

class story that day. They love to see their answers used in the class story. With the population I teach, this is exactly what I needed to reach my students.