

Building Community with “The Special Person”

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The **Special Person** (La Persona Especial) is an important and popular part of the class that involves getting to know real facts about real people with real language. Every student is interviewed in the target language at some point toward the beginning of the semester. The complexity of the interview grows along with student growth in the language. Students are continually learning about each other throughout the semester. This kind of questioning can help students in a number of ways:

- 1) **It helps students to learn the language in a relaxed social context.** We use the most useful expressions and highest frequency vocabulary repeatedly, which helps students to acquire the target language quickly and subconsciously and in a comfortable way. Students are not forced to produce the language, but most of them want to speak because they are sharing their stories and details about their lives.
- 2) **It helps to build community in the classroom** by modeling respect and interest in others. When students know one another they are more likely to treat each other better. The growing knowledge base bonds the class together and makes each student feel like a viable member of the tribe.
- 3) **It teaches a combination of vital 21st Century Skills: Learning & Innovation Skills** (Thinking Creatively, Working Creatively with Others, Communicating Clearly), **Life & Career Skills** (Interacting Effectively with Others, Guiding and Leading Others, Being Responsible to Others) and of course the **21st Century Core Subject & Theme** of World Languages. All of these can be taught with or without high technology applications. ([Terminology borrowed from Bernie Trilling and Charles Fadel's 21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in our Times](#))
- 4) **It teaches students how to have a conversation and how to show interest in others.** *When someone says he plays the guitar, for example, we NEVER just*

EXAMPLE:

So with the guitar player we follow up with questions like:

- How many years have you played the guitar?
- Do you play the guitar every day?
- What kind of guitar do you have?
- How many guitars do you have?
- Where is the guitar from?

- Did you buy the guitar?
- Did you buy it with your own money?
- Was the guitar a gift?
- Do you take guitar lessons?
- Do you play in a band here at school?
- Do you play your guitar alone?
- Do you play with friends?
- Do you play in your own band?
- Do you want to play in a band?
- Do you play any other instruments?

shrug and say “cool”, we ask follow up questions. We try to draw some more information out of the person because we are genuinely interested in him. We try to engage him and get him to open up a bit by focusing on his experience, background, activities, interests, abilities, talents and strengths. Students are later responsible for the information they learn about each other. This allows them to focus on meaning and content and more easily acquire the language. They will later be responsible in extension activities or class discussions and asked to recall details that students shared during these interviews.

I want my students to know that the things that create an interesting life are not merely the typical straightjacket thinking that too often passes for interesting in school. I want to free up each student to create a lasting and interesting life by embracing openness, taking risks, being honest, making friends, thinking, understanding humor, having a sense of adventure, developing sensitivity to others, awakening confidence, appreciating family, becoming humble, trying new things, trusting intuition, exploring gifts, having the courage to be different, developing a quick wit, reading, writing, telling good jokes, embracing different hobbies, delighting others, doing non-standard activities, and appreciating the world. There is at least one student’s name and face attached to each of those outstanding qualities in my mind—and we learned about those qualities by interviewing students in the target language. We can encourage students to explore and develop these qualities by showing interest in them and appreciating their responses—by asking them questions and urging them to tell their stories. I want to communicate clearly that we don’t expect perfection; we expect growth.

The day after we interviewed a new transfer student (with significant assistance with translation from her new classmates) I overheard a couple of girls walking out of the classroom with her. They said, “You are going to love this class. We all know each other and like each other.” That was a proud moment, because the Persona Especial part of the class was working the way it was designed to work. The kids were getting to know and respect one another and they were learning a lot of Spanish at the same time.

The possibilities for conversation are endless and so are the amazing things we can learn about one another when we just talk. This kind of interaction is the foundation of the crucial **Interpersonal Communication** component of learning another language and it is also the foundation of knowing and respecting one another in the classroom.

Bryce Hedstrom teaches Spanish at Roosevelt High School in Johnstown, Colorado. He writes TCI/TPRS teaching materials and is a workshop presenter. More information may be found on his website, brycehedstrom.com. An excerpt from 21st Century Skills can be found here: http://21stcenturyskillsbook.com/wp-content/uploads/21stCS_excerpt.pdf

This is another in a series of articles on personalizing the Comprehension-Based language classroom. Previous articles can be found here:

Is Input More Interesting When It's About Me?
<http://www.tprstories.com/images/ijflt/articles-april-2013/IJFLT-May-2013.pdf>

10 Ideas for Personalizing that Language Classroom Every Day
<http://www.tprstories.com/images/ijflt/articles-april-2013/IJFLT-May-2013.pdf>

Upcoming workshops on personalization include:

Karen Rowan, Austin, Texas, June 19, 2014

<http://www.rsvpbook.com/event.php?432106#Sessions>

Karen Rowan, Los Angeles, August 9, 2014

<http://www.rsvpbook.com/event.php?432106#Sessions>

Sessions at iFLT, Denver, Colorado

<http://tprstorytelling.com/conference/>

Sessions at NTPRS, Naperville, Illinois

<http://www.ntprs.org>

Bryce Hedstrom, Greeley, Colorado, Understanding TPRS Workshop, February 8, 2014

Bryce Hedstrom, ([CCFLT](#)) Spring Conference, Loveland, Colorado, 2/21-2/24

Additional resources can be found on Bryce Hedstrom's website, brycehedstrom.com

Submissions for future editions by teachers on their experiences with personalization are invited.

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart.”

Nelson Mandela

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