If you answered no to this you’re not alone. Many people in the United States are a perfect example of a brief and fleeting attempt to learn a language other than English in school. “Less than 1% of American adults today are proficient in a foreign language that they studied in a U.S. classroom” (Friedman, 2015). This lack of proficiency is due to a slew of factors that range from a delayed and brief exposure to another language, to the enabling effects of speaking a language associated with world-wide economic and political power. We’re a nation that prides itself on an immigrant background, but one that expects language assimilation. Friedman (2015) claims that as the U.S. education increases its STEM focus to compete internationally it is simultaneously forgetting another important aspect: international communication. Rethinking traditional practices and mindsets on world language instruction can help disrupt this trend.

For the past year I co-taught a Spanish and Humanities block to roughly fifty tenth grade students at High Tech High. Due to the beautifully untracked nature of High Tech High, our Spanish class was made up of students with mixed abilities. Our students' language abilities ranged from beginning Spanish learners to native Spanish-speakers. I used the improvement science framework to learn how to improve my practice as a Spanish/Humanities teacher. My aim with the students was to develop authentic understanding and expression using literature in Spanish. Through iterative cycles of inquiry I specifically wanted to understand if the use of comprehensible literature would increase Spanish language acquisition, beliefs and mindsets about learning language. The following article is by no means a how-to, but instead a reflection on some lessons learned. My findings suggest the importance of a comprehensible, engaging, communicative, and deep experience in the world language class in order to significantly
impact learning for students. These findings also helped to deepen my own teaching practice.

Using Literature to Create Less Stress, More Comprehension

“One learns grammar from language, not language from grammar.” - Kató Lomb, 2008

In order to create an environment for successful language acquisition students must have resources and a sense of agency, that is, students must feel empowered and comfortable to take risks. Additionally, topics must be interesting enough to discuss and encourage authentic engagement in the language being taught. Priscila Leal (2015) reported that the use of literature within the reach of a second language learner’s skills, “can be used to improve students’ linguistic, cognitive, and socio-emotional skills” (p. 200). Leal states that literature, “can be used as a model for student writing, can engage students in critical thinking, and can be a springboard for meaningful discussions and creative composition” (p. 200). Leal’s research demonstrates that when literature is used in a class to promote the expression of personal experiences and opinions it personalizes language acquisition in a way that helps motivate students to make language gains far beyond a class based solely on grammar. I’d argue that when students engage with literature it provides lasting grammar lessons with grammar in its native habitat, it allows students a variety of entry points and creates authentic opportunities for students to question and explore ideas for themselves.

I wanted to put this idea to practice in my classroom. To do this, I used a novel as the frame from which to operate a highly communicative approach. We read the novel *Felipe Alou: Desde los valles a las montañas*, written by Carol Gaab. I intentionally chose this novel, written for Spanish language learners, that explores topics that make it nearly impossible not to emotionally connect with the character. It tells the story of an Afro-Dominican baseball player that immigrated at a time of genocide and dictatorship, to the Southern United States during the Civil Rights Movement. My use of this novel allowed me to address many of my non-negotiables as an educator. These non-negotiables can be best

categorized as 1) teach culture through language, 2) focus on frequently used words and verbs in context, 3) discuss social injustice, 4) allow students the opportunity to learn about the experience of others, while 5) exploring the student’s own identity through discussion of personal obstacles they’ve faced in their life. Here are some of my take-aways from my research.

Make it comprehensible: Build confidence

“It isn’t that people don’t think language education [is] important. It’s that they don’t think it’s possible.” - Richard Brecht, Center for Advanced Study of Languages (Friedman, 2015)

The thought of using literature in a world language class reminds me of my Spanish 3 class in which my well-meaning Spanish teacher, handed out copies of Don Quixote. The class proceeded to popcorn read seventeenth century Spanish, like reading Shakespeare but in another language. I remember thinking it sounded like a list of words that no one could pronounce. It wasn’t comprehensible at our level and it left most of us feeling like we’d never learn to or want to learn to read in Spanish. I often think of the terror this experience evoked in me in hopes of never replicating it with my students. Choosing an appropriate text is key to a successful experience in using literature that pushes students while also carrying them along, building the confidence and skills needed to progress with more complex texts.

Prior to beginning *Felipe Alou* I surveyed my students’ confidence reading in Spanish. My students self-reported an average of 3.5 on a scale of 1-10 (where 1 is not confident and a 10 is confident). At the end of six weeks, once we finished the novel, I asked my students to rate their confidence reading in Spanish. I was curious to see if their self-perceptions in confidence had changed. Students reported an average 5.8 in their confidence to read 6 weeks later. Broken down further, 84.6% of students said their ability to read in Spanish increased, 100% of students reported that reading *Felipe Alou* taught them more vocabulary, and 92.3% said that as a result they can understand a sentence even if they don’t know every word. Over two thirds of the intermediate students, 69.2%, reported that

“In reading Felipe Alou I learned that I will get better at reading in Spanish with more practice.” The data above assures me that students aren’t having the same experience I had with Don Quixote. I believe that part of my students' success and confidence can be attributed, in part, to the accessibility of the text.

While all students reported feeling more confident after reading the novel I wanted to learn more about what contributed to feelings of confidence. To help me understand my students' perspective I had them answer the following question: Did your confidence in Spanish improve as a result of reading the book? Explain. Seventy-seven percent of students answered “yes” to this question. Student explanations provided interesting insight as to what aspects helped them feel confident. Eighty percent of the students answering “yes” explained that their general comprehension and ability to use Spanish had improved. Here are a few of the students' responses:

“I definitely think reading the book helped me with my pronunciation as well as formatting sentences. I hadn't really thought about it but I guess that would mean my overall confidence went up too (in part because I realized that I could read much easier than I had believed).”

“Absolutely, I definitely feel like my knowledge is expanding throughout the book.”

“Yes, it has. Because it has improved my ability to read and understand spanish even further.”

Ten percent of the “yes” answers demonstrated that student confidence came from gaining the ability to take risks. For example, one student wrote: “Yes because it pushed me to say things I don't usually say.” The other 10 percent of “yes” answers could be categorized as learning more vocabulary. For example, another student wrote, “Yes because I now know more spanish words”.

The previous explanations demonstrate the beauty of using an accessible novel for differentiation. This novel allowed for multiple entry points for students to find their own source of confidence—whether that be taking risks to speak in class, increasing comprehension, or building vocabulary knowledge or some combination of all of the above. While over two thirds of the students felt their confidence had grown with the use of the novel, twenty three percent of the students answered “no” to the question. Here is a glimpse into what students who reported "no" associated with gaining confidence. One student explained, “No because it was an easy book.” Another student stated, “No because reading one book will help me understand.” These "no" responses make me wonder how these students' opinions may change with longer exposure to comprehensible literature grounded in a project that is connected to students using Spanish with Spanish-speakers. These findings pushed me to think about how I can connect literature and other authentic resources in the target language to projects (project-based learning) that get students using Spanish outside of school.

Make it interesting and applicable

*Do not train a child to learn by force or harshness; but direct them to it by what amuses their minds, so that you may be better able to discover with accuracy the peculiar bent of the genius of each.* - Plato

As I launched into this idea of using literature with my students, I wanted to make sure they were engaged in the novel. After reading the first chapter of *Felipe Alou I surveyed my* students to see if they found the topic of the novel interesting. Not all responses were a resounding “yes.” While not all students reported interest in the novel the students who didn't respond, "yes- this novel is interesting" they did not report, "no- this novel is not interesting," they were somewhere in between. Two thirds of the students responded that they were interested in the topic. Some students added explanations to their answers:

“Yeah because it's about something old but new.”

“It's something I never knew about before.”

“It's fairly interesting to me.”

The other third were slightly interested. These students wrote responses such as: “kind of.” It may be important to note that the first chapter of the book is more informative than it is narrative. As readers we still hadn’t met the main character. I’ve found that before you meet the main character the story can be less interesting to students. While I wanted to keep my eye on the students who didn’t give a clear “yes, I am interested in the topic” response, I also knew that the book becomes more dynamic in the following chapters. That said, I didn’t want to underestimate the importance of finding a book that would be of interest to all students. With the breadth of novel topics available for Spanish language learners, I do believe it is possible to find a novel of interest to all students.

Exposure to material that is interesting leaves a student curious to find out more and read the next chapter, this is my main premise for using literature in class. If students become disengaged with the material or don’t find personal connections the literature loses its impact. Through this biographical novel we delved into world and U.S history, discussed what it takes to overcome obstacles and how students’ experiences compare to someone so apparently different than them. Using current news reports and videos we discussed the racism that still exists in the Dominican Republic and the United States. Reading about and discussing stories of people different from oneself provides an authentic way to build empathy and language acquisition. One hundred percent of students said that they know more about the history and culture of the Dominican Republic after learning about Felipe Alou. Ninety two percent of students, all but one, reported feeling empathy for Felipe after learning about his experience.

Make it Communicative

“Farmers and gardeners know you cannot make a plant grow….The plant grows itself. What you do is provide the conditions for growth. And great farmers know what the conditions are…” -Sir Ken Robinson, 2010

A traditional language class requires memorizing conjugations and vocabulary out of context often promoting temporary learning. A more progressive approach to language acquisition understands that language must be learned through experiences. These experiences should provide the comfort for students to build skills and mindsets that allow them to take their language outside of the classroom. Except for some noted cases of savants (Krashen, 2014), most people that have acquired a second language have done it by immersing themselves in the language.

Though international travel is an impactful and effective way to immerse oneself in a language, not everyone can have that experience because of factors such as finances or political climate. As a result, carefully scaffolded and planned experiences using accessible literature in the classroom, as well as real use of target language in the community, are not only possible but are a more equitable way for all students to acquire additional languages. According to research and second language acquisition theory, creating comfortable environments that push exposure to comprehensible (rather than exhaustive) amounts of input (reading, listening), repetition and communicative practice create successful language acquisition. Within the realm of progressive language educators such practices are referred to as comprehensible input or CI.

Literature provides a platform for language to come to life giving context, perspective and emotion to what could otherwise be unrelatable language input. In our weekly class meetings we read a chapter together to make the language come to life. After each paragraph I facilitated discussion amongst the students by asking questions that served as

a dialogical check for understanding. After we read together, students completed activities that were related to the chapter that week such as: posting questions and responding to each other using google classroom, reading articles, watching youtube clips, and recording interviews of each other. I was curious which of these activities most supported student understanding of the novel so I surveyed my students. Specifically, I asked students, “When it comes to demonstrating my understanding of the chapter I learn best through…”, 77% of my students reported that the class discussions helped them to learn best. The other 23% of students reported that the combination of the other activities I just described helped them learn best.

The majority of the reading was done together in small groups. I was able to provide small group instruction in this setting but in a traditional tracked world language classroom, reading a novel might take place as a whole class. In my class, students generally volunteered to read. I learned that once students gained more confidence reading novels can be done individually or in groups (like we did) with discussions taking place during and after the reading. To ensure all students in the group are comprehending the novel I found it’s essential to talk through the events. When I asked if the discussion helped students to better communicate in Spanish all six students in the small group answered yes. One student explained, “it allowed me to answer the questions better because the questions had been part of previous discussions.” Another student mentioned, “not only the conversation quiz, but also the packets help me gain in understanding both the reading and writing part.” This small group discussion allows for low risk communication and the repetition needed to create lasting understanding. Working through each chapter as a group, in a dialogical manner, helped to make the text more comprehensible and less frightening.

To make the conversation as communicative and dynamic as possible, questions were both inferential and text-based (i.e. How would you describe what type of leader Trujillo was?) and personalized (i.e. Has the US ever had a dictator? How would dictatorship make you feel?). These types of questions allow the students to hear a lot of repetition of structures,

phrases and vocabulary in a variety of contexts. When asked on a scale of 1-5, how much the reading and discussion helped students understand the novel all students reported at least a 3. A student explained “I learned key words in Spanish.” I found that the repetition and dialogue through the novel were essential for students so that the vocabulary became natural to repeat in the student’s own expression. The goal with this approach doesn’t rest at simply teaching one person’s story but aspires to empower students to be their own authority in their language acquisition.

Why Learn Other Languages?

“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

Based on a Gallup Poll conducted in 2013, 70% of people surveyed in the United States said that knowing another language is essential or important (Jones, 2013). A surmounting body of studies show that being bilingual has significant cognitive, academic, and personal advantages (ACTFL-Kibler, 2015). A non-exhaustive list of benefits of language study include; higher academic performance in college (ACTFL-Wiley, 1985), increased reading abilities (ACTFL-D'Angiulli, 2001), prevention or delay of age-related cognitive loss such as dementia (ACTFL-Bialystok, 2004), increased problem solving ability (ACTFL-Stephens, 1997), and positive attitudes towards speakers of other languages (ACTFL-Bamford, 1989).

In an educational climate that preaches the benefits of 21st century learning skills and deeper learning competencies I encourage progressive educators to rethink their focus and commitment to the teaching of other languages. In the interest of providing equitable opportunities, all students deserve the opportunity to connect with speakers of other languages, not just those fortunate enough to afford to study abroad.

If we want our students to dig deeper in a second language and be prepared for the hurdles of using another language, the digging must be done in the target language. Using literature is one way to build capacity, confidence, and curiosity to then facilitate language use

outside of the classroom. I argue that just as progressive educators understand that math, science, and humanities classes should integrate real-life experiences, so too should a world language class. Language acquisition begs for experiential learning!

References


**About the Author**

**Andrea Adams** currently works as a Spanish Teacher at the Gary and Jerri-Ann Jacobs High Tech High, in San Diego, CA. Andrea strongly believes that in learning another language students learn more about themselves and the experiences of those different from them. Prior to teaching at High Tech High Andrea taught Spanish for three years in Memphis, TN. Andrea completed a Masters in Education from the High Tech High Graduate School of Education where she focused on the use of comprehensible literature to increase the confidence and acquisition of language learners. To find out more about her class, please visit her [website](http://www.nflrc.hawaii.edu/rfl/October2015/articles/leal.pdf).