THE 12 Cs FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS:
Fostering Comprehensible Use of Language

Teachers use language in a variety of ways to facilitate the process of learning: giving directions, presenting information with posters and other visual aids, writing out instructions, discussing texts, and assigning tasks. The degree of learner success depends on the comprehensibility of the language which teachers use to structure or format the content of teaching. Effective and efficient delivery of comprehensible language is accomplished within the context of local, State and national standards, curriculum guidelines, and age-appropriate expectations.

Comprehensible input of language is crucial for English Language Learners; therefore, this Bulletin examines how teachers can foster learning by skillfully utilizing comprehensible language. The initial focus is on essential characteristics of comprehensible language, followed by a discussion of two basic practices to increase comprehension while adhering to the cognitive demands of the content.

WHAT IS COMPREHENSIBLE LANGUAGE?

Comprehensible language involves the presentation of knowledge in cognitively useful and varying ways. Learners acquire content through language comprehensibly if content is presented contextually; if it is presented meaningfully; and if it is presented with grammar and vocabulary appropriate to the language level of the learner. Context provides the setting through which content can be clearly understood; meaningfulness enables the learner to personally invest in the content and to make connections with personal experience; and appropriate grammar and vocabulary enables content to be presented through language at a level that the learner can initially use, and then build upon, in a variety of modalities - aural, visual, or tactile-kinesthetic.

WHAT CLASSROOM PRACTICES INCREASE COMPREHENSION?

**Figure 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitively Undemanding (Easy)</th>
<th>Cognitively Demanding (Difficult)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>e.g., simple, face-to-face conversations</td>
<td>e.g., reading, writing, lectures, discussions, high level questioning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Context</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embedded A</td>
<td>Reduced (Few clues)</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Many clues)</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>e.g., role plays, demonstrations, experiments, audio-visual assisted lessons</td>
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Practice #1: Always strive to deliver content language in a cognitively demanding way, from a context-embedded, to a context-reduced perspective.

Figure 1 illustrates the dynamic of comprehensible learning for English Language Learners. Quadrants A, B, C, and D represent progressively cognitively complex ways to deliver instruction through language use. The ultimate goal is for learners to use authentic, context reduced language at grade-appropriate cognitive levels.

Comprehensible language represented in quadrant A (cognitively undemanding/context embedded) involves simple, direct language use; comprehension represented in quadrant C (cognitively undemanding/context reduced) involves repetitive practice with exercises. The essence of comprehensible language use for English Language Learners (see Figure 2) lies in initial delivery of meaningful, contextualized, content supported by demonstrations, audio-visual support, tactile-kinesthetic activities, role plays, experiments, etc (quadrant B). This is the foundation for later, more context reduced forms of language use in reading, writing, lectures, discussions, etc (quadrant D).

Practice #2: Develop lesson plans around a question format to help learners see the curriculum as a series of questions for exploring topics.

Comprehensible learning is fostered by posing questions that establish the purposes for exploring content. The process of answering the question(s) enables learners to deepen understanding of content through the richness of language use. It also enables teachers to focus on what is important in the curriculum.

The following checklist can assist teachers in developing a question lesson plan:
1. What is the question(s) worth talking about?
   The lesson can focus on: a) the continuing answer to a larger, more essential question about the content; and b) the answer to the more immediate specific aspect of the overall content.
2. Is the question appropriate to the age level of the learners?
The question needs to be written in language that is appropriate to learner language level and interest.
3. What do the learners already know about the question?
   This involves brainstorming, discussions, etc. to elicit learner prior knowledge.
4. What strategies can be used to explore the question?
   Here, classroom practices that are context embedded and cognitively demanding should be initiated as a prelude to more reduced forms of language.
5. How will the learners be observed as they respond to the question?
   Performance based assessment is the most practical and relevant form of evaluation for content growth through language.

Additional considerations include posting the more significant questions in the classroom for quick reference; encouraging learners to personalize questions to their own lives; and allowing sufficient processing time for learners to see the inter-related nature of the questions.

SOURCES: