The MovieTalk: A Practical Application of Comprehensible Input Theory

Rachel Ash
Parkview High School, Gwinnett County, Georgia

ABSTRACT

Teachers new to Comprehensible Input can incorporate a MovieTalk, target language discussion using a movie short as inspiration, easily into their existing curricula. This paper summarizes the theory and research behind Comprehensible Input and describes the relevance of that theory to the activity known as MovieTalk. The paper also provides examples of MovieTalk scripts, guidance in creating one's own MovieTalk script, and videos of MovieTalk demonstrations. Finally, the paper discusses the various options for delivery of a MovieTalk and activities to reinforce the vocabulary taught using the video.

KEYWORDS

Comprehensible Input, Latin, Second Language Acquisition, MovieTalk, Vocabulary

INTRODUCTION

Even before the advent of the internet, teachers, particularly those dedicated to Comprehensible Input theory, recognized video's potential in the language classroom and utilized the medium to bring interesting and understandable communication to their students. Since the internet has revolutionized information and text, short, compelling videos are easy to find, and can excite student interest and change student focus from the words being taught to the content being communicated; i.e., students will begin to care about the meaning of the words and forget they are listening to Latin. In a "MovieTalk," a teacher, using the target language at a level comprehensible to his or her students, narrates sections of a video while pausing the video strategically for discussion, questions, and educated predictions; this provides a natural, engaging means of teaching vocabulary, practicing grammatical forms, and encouraging communicative interaction in Latin. The videos provide both visual support and conversational focus, allowing teachers to practice forms

and vocabulary with students without becoming repetitive. For Latin teachers seeking to begin introducing spoken Latin into their classes, a MovieTalk is an ideal first step, an activity that requires minimal spontaneity but still allows for creativity and personalization, and a tool that can be customized to enhance any curriculum.

The Argument for Comprehensible Input

Although Comprehensible Input (CI) has become a buzzword in language education, teachers would be mistaken to disregard CI as yet another education fad; the theory behind CI is solidly built upon decades of hypotheses and their respective research, and is the source from which current Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory has evolved. CI is comprised of six main hypotheses and the essence of the hypotheses[1] can be condensed into three fundamental pillars of CI: instruction should be comprehensible, compelling, and caring.

The importance of the first of these pillars, comprehensible language instruction, is supported by a multitude of studies. Stephen Krashen, whose ongoing research has influenced language education for almost half a century, explains that "we acquire language and develop literacy when we understand messages" and "acquisition happens gradually, and occurs best when texts are very comprehensible" ("Free Voluntary" 7-8). Krashen cites multiple studies in which comprehensible input leads to significant vocabulary gains for the students involved. Beniko Mason, another researcher into the effects of comprehensible input, describes a series of studies which "show that in vocabulary, grammar, and writing, the comprehension-based approach is far more efficient than either traditional or eclectic methods" ("Comprehension is Key" 373).

Even across the often conflicting theories about SLA and the way our brains process language, it is agreed that "successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input," and for students of a second language, "the more exposure they receive, the more and the faster they will learn" (Ellis 7-8). According to James F. Lee, in his book Tasks and Communicating in the Language Classroom, "language

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1 Robert Patrick, 110-111, details the hypotheses, offered here in short: the Acquisition-Learning Distinction, the Monitor Hypothesis, the Natural Order Hypothesis, the Comprehension Hypothesis (also called the Input Hypothesis by Krashen; see Krashen "Comprehension Hypothesis Extended" 81), the Affective Filter Hypothesis, and the Compelling Hypothesis. These hypotheses suggest long-term language acquisition only occurs as a result of much repetition of interesting content at a comprehensible level in an unstressful environment and that focus on grammatical rules prevents acquisition.

or input that is modified to suit the capabilities of the learner is a crucial element in the language acquisition process," i.e., "comprehensible input is essential to language acquisition" (5). Bill VanPatten, a leading researcher in the field of SLA, argues that "acquisition cannot happen in the absence of input" ("Creating Comprehensible" 25), and that "skill development [in language] happens not because of explicit teaching and intervention, but by providing appropriate opportunities" for students to experience and understand the language in context ("Two Faces" 10).[2] VanPatten calls the complex process of mapping language and linguistic rules in the brain "mental representation" and describes it as "the abstract, implicit, and underlying linguistic system in a speaker's mind/brain" ("Two Faces" 2). He clarifies that this linguistic system (i.e. "internal grammar") "is built up via exposure to comprehensible, communicatively oriented input--a position that is unquestioned in the field of SLA after four decades of research" ("Evidence is IN" 418).[3] A Latin teacher using Comprehensible Input, who "consistently is delivering understandable messages in Latin," is using current research in SLA as it is intended--to inform his or her teaching practice (R. Patrick 111).

The second pillar of CI, instruction that is compelling, suggests that, to create the most effective and efficient environment for language acquisition, teachers should provide comprehensible input that is "so interesting that all attention is focused on the message . . . so interesting that the acquirer 'forgets' that the input is in another language" (Krashen, "Free Voluntary" 9). Compelling input inspires students to read, research, and interact with the language outside of the classroom, and Krashen believes most language learners acquire language through interesting pursuits ("Compelling Input" 16):

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2 It should be noted here that this paper treats the terms "input," "comprehensible," and "comprehensible input" as interchangeable with some precedent. Stephen Krashen equates them himself by renaming his Input Hypothesis the Comprehension Hypothesis ("Comprehension Hypothesis Extended" 81). Bill VanPatten, in *Key Terms in Second Language Acquisition*, writes "all major linguistic and psycholinguistic theories of SLA in use today assume some version of the Input Hypothesis; that is, these theories assume that input contains the data necessary for acquisition and that acquisition is partially a by-product of comprehension" (96). In sum, references to input when discussing SLA theory imply comprehension, because it is necessary.

3 In his article, "Why Explicit Knowledge Cannot Become Implicit Knowledge," VanPatten further describes the importance of input to true linguistic competence in a language; the article's illustration of phrasal hierarchies within the German language lays out in clear terms the difference between implicit linguistic knowledge (or "mapping") and explicit grammatical rules, which he terms "descriptions of the consequences of underlying processes in language" (651).

> *An important conjecture is that listening to or reading compelling stories, watching compelling movies and having conversations with truly fascinating people is not simply another route, another option. It is possible that compelling input is not just optimal: It may be the only way we truly acquire language.*

When teachers create content that intrigues students and excites their curiosity, students learn, because "when a CI teacher delivers understandable messages in Latin about topics that students are interested in, and the teacher keeps the stress in the room low, students forget that this is a language class" (R. Patrick 112). Students then simply enjoy speaking about and listening to a story, the news, or anything else the teacher finds to fascinate them, and learning Latin becomes a fortuitous side-effect.[4]

Creating a classroom culture that is caring, the third pillar of CI instruction, reduces anxiety in students, and the resulting low-stress environment increases language acquisition. Krashen, in his Affective Filter Hypothesis, building on the work of Dulay and Burt,[5] proposes a connection between student stress and inhibited language acquisition (*Principles and Practices* 31):

> *Those [students] whose attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition will not only tend to seek less input, but they will also have a high or strong Affective Filter--even if they understand the message, the input will not reach the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition, or the language acquisition device. Those with attitudes more conducive to second language acquisition will not only seek*

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4 An exciting trend in the Classical community is the movement that calls itself "Active Latin." Thanks to the "compelling pursuits" of practicers of Active Latin, Latin teachers have access to more resources, types of texts, and interesting material than any other time in recent history. There is a growing library of novellas, podcasts, and online resources such as Legonium (Latin stories told with Legos) and Jesse Craft's collection of Minecraft-based cultural videos (narrated in Latin). In addition, Teaching Latin for Acquisition is a Facebook group of like-minded Latinists who share experiences and materials in equal parts.

5 Heidi Dulay and Marina Burt lay the groundwork for the Affective Filter Hypothesis starting in their essay "Remarks on creativity in language acquisition," in which they describe "affective delimiters" as "conscious or unconscious motives or needs of the learner" that can act as a screen through which language has to travel in order to be acquired.

> *and obtain more input, they will also have a lower or*
> *weaker filter. They will be more open to the input, and*
> *it will strike 'deeper.'*

The Affective Filter Hypothesis delineates an inverse connection between the stress students experience and the language students acquire; high stress blocks the subconscious process of acquisition.[6]

The hypothesis has an implied consequence for education, a fact recognized by Krashen himself: "the Affective Filter hypothesis implies that our pedagogical goals should not only include supplying comprehensible input, but also creating a situation that encourages a low filter" and therefore lowers anxiety and stress (31). A caring classroom environment incorporates practices that reduce student anxiety. In addition to using understandable and compelling messages in class, "humor, stories, personalization and creating personal connections with students bring the stress level down in the room" (R. Patrick 111), CI teachers should seek to keep students' affective filter low, providing them with an environment that is as conducive to language acquisition as possible, and actions that are often labeled "caring" (i.e., learning about students and engaging them in conversation, incorporating humor and fun, and being sensitive to their needs), are the same actions that lower students' affective filters. A caring classroom is one in which students feel safe, valued, and therefore open to language acquisition.

In short, the benefits of comprehensible, compelling, and caring instruction--and, by extension, Comprehensible Input--have been repeatedly substantiated through research. Mason agrees, "there has never been a language acquisition approach that has been validated to this extent both qualitatively and quantitatively, not only for its efficacy but also its efficiency" ("Comprehension is Key" 378). As language teachers, choosing to incorporate Comprehensible Input into our Latin instruction is choosing to build our programs on research and scholarship.

MovieTalk: A Comprehensible Beginning

Comprehensible Input practices can seem overwhelming to any language teacher, but arguably even more so to Latin and Greek teachers, who often have

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6 Krashen in "Free Voluntary Web Surfing" describes the process of acquisition as subconscious: "acquisition via comprehensible input also happens subconsciously; while it is happening, we are not aware that it is happening, and the competence developed this way is stored in the brain subconsciously" (9). High stress prevents this natural process and hinders competence.

little-to-no experience speaking the language they are teaching. A MovieTalk, however, is an approachable activity that can be prepared with as much or as little detail as a teacher chooses, and thus is ideal for language teachers beginning to explore CI practices.

The CI Connection

The MovieTalk was first developed by Ashley Hastings as a focused listening practice for ESL (English as a Second Language) students that would capitalize on the compelling nature of film while still providing the opportunity to control the input students received and make it comprehensible to them ("Preview"). In "Making Movies More Comprehensible: The Narrative/Paraphrase Approach," Brenda Murphy and Ashley Hastings write, "Movies have the potential of being excellent sources of comprehensible input, since they usually feature a coherent plot, a set of main characters, and recurring environments" (25). Their Narrative/Paraphrase approach is a clear precursor to the current approach to the MovieTalk:

> *the teacher narrates the scenes in deliberate, clear, simple English, describing and commenting on the objects, characters, places, and actions that are on the screen at that very moment. This enables the students to associate what they hear with what they see, making the spoken input more comprehensible than it would be without the images.*

Teachers are expected to pause the film for elaboration, make sure they use frequentative vocabulary, and ask questions to probe students' understanding of the narration (25).

Murphy and Hastings are not alone; many teachers and language acquisition theorists see potential for compelling material in film. Swaffer and Vlatten state, "New materials, especially visual ones, often serve to motivate and interest students" (176), and Sturm calls movies "attractive to students accustomed to a multimedia environment" (246). Thus, as a medium with an intrinsically compelling nature, film becomes an ideal resource for any language teacher.

Movies also intrinsically make language more comprehensible. Swaffer and Vlatten explain, "As a multisensory medium, video offers students more than listening comprehension: Students have the opportunity to read visual as well as auditory messages," and continues, "When compared with students who have only print

or auditory texts, learners supplied with video materials understand and remember more" (175). The images in a video provide context that students would lack in purely auditory or textual input. When CI teachers then create "activities that ensure multiple exposures to the language modeled in the film and that require learners to focus on linguistic detail as they abstract the ideas from the film, providing an 'input flood' . . . of targeted structures and vocabulary," they provide students with an ideal condition for language acquisition (Bueno 320). In presenting a MovieTalk, the teacher uses paused images to scaffold the selected vocabulary, speaks slowly and clearly, and asks questions to gain repetitions of the highlighted words or phrases. Eric Herman, in his article "How to Use a MovieTalk to Teach with Comprehensible Input" agrees: "the combination of more comprehensible speech, pointing at the content in the visual, the teacher's use of gestures, and establishing meaning for pre-selected target structures makes for high quality comprehensible input" (20). Because the teacher pauses the video for discussion, not only does this activity allow "the class to enjoy the richness of the frames, seeing things unnoticeable at full speed" but it provides time for questioning and repetition of vocabulary, an essential practice for CI and SLA (18).[7]

It is easy, therefore, to show that a MovieTalk fulfills the first two pillars of Comprehensible Input Theory: by its very nature, it is a comprehensible and compelling activity. The third pillar, caring, may seem more evasive. A caring environment, however, easily results from low-anxiety tasks and taking a direct interest in students. A MovieTalk, by nature, is low-stress, and it provides ample opportunity for personalization--a method for engagement in which a teacher asks students questions about their lives and tells them about his or her own. A teacher can "ask students questions about a time when they experienced what the characters experienced or were in a similar situation," building an even stronger relationship with students and promoting a caring environment (M. Patrick, "Movie Talk").

The true strength of a MovieTalk is that with very little outside force, a teacher can shape the activity into something that stands solidly on the three pillars of CI instruction, builds a sturdy foundation of vocabulary and language structures, and, when paired with follow-up activities, prepares students to read Latin.[8]

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7 The greater the number of understandable repetitions in context, the better students will retain and acquire the vocabulary. Herman elaborates (20), "Studies suggest that the memory of a word requires dozens of exposures in meaningful contexts and many more exposures are needed to comprehend the word in a new context."

8 I often use a MovieTalk just to introduce vocabulary or grammatical structures I want to focus on.

MovieTalk Basics

A MovieTalk utilizes a short video or a short section of a video as fodder for comprehensible discussion. In the example below, I had a student film a MovieTalk as I delivered it. The class is a relatively new one for me; when we took the video, I had only been their teacher for one week. Worth noting in the video is how often I clarified vocabulary meanings (especially as my students and I got to know each other's lexicons), and took the time to point at a word whenever I used it in the discussion. You may also note that I kept a script in my hand to remind me of pause points in the film as well as one or two questions to help me personalize the discussion. Lastly, especially because this class was so quiet in its responses, at times I changed my questions to ask for a vote so I could see that students were comprehending what I was saying, even if they were not used to much spoken Latin.9

A MovieTalk is an ideal first foray into Comprehensible Input and I have written here the steps I personally take to prepare a MovieTalk for my classes, as well as offering a worksheet for your own use and an example I used in my Latin II class.
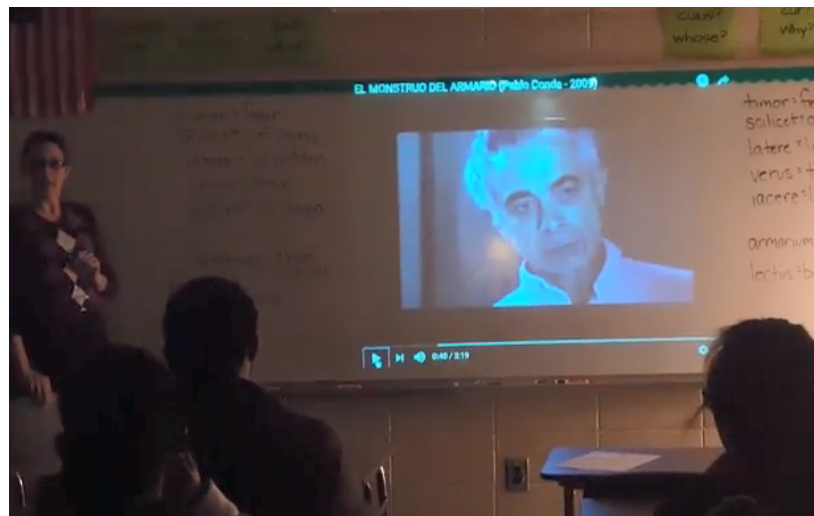
If you prefer to view this video on YouTube, you will find it here.

Most commonly I follow a MovieTalk with one of the listed reinforcement activities, and then an embedded reading, ultimately leading to reading a Latin passage.

9 For another demonstration with a more lively class, you may be interested to see Alina Filipescu demonstrate a MovieTalk in Spanish; in the video, take notice of the ways in which she engages her students, clarifies the meanings of words, refers to the visual many times, and ensures repetitions of key vocabulary. Also notice the interest the movie generates and the ease of the students in her class.

Preparing a MovieTalk

1. Choose a video. I often choose videos based upon vocabulary from a reading I want students to comprehend, though at times I choose videos because they introduce a theme or cultural topic. Either way, the video, or at least the section of the video you are planning to use, should be short, no more than 4-5 minutes, and I have used videos as short as 1.5 minutes with great success. It is important to be sure that the video is interesting and that the story or action does not lag, because you will be pausing the video at fairly regular intervals for discussion. It is also important not to overload the video with intended vocabulary; a good upper limit is six new words or phrases.[10] For your benefit, I am including here the [living document](#) on which Miriam Patrick and I keep a record of short videos we find online and use or intend to use for MovieTalk in our own classes. The document lists the title, url, and a quick description of each talk, in addition to notes we make for each other regarding with what level and what unit we have used each movie short.

2. Choose your vocabulary. Once I have chosen a video, I list the vocabulary words I want students to learn from the MovieTalk. Then I make a second list (labeled "icing words"), which delineates additional words necessary to write sensible sentences for discussing the video. On the day of the MovieTalk, I write both lists on the board with their English meanings. I discuss the words with students before we turn to the video, making sure they are clear (so that the messages I deliver will be comprehensible), and I return to point at the new vocabulary whenever I use it in the MovieTalk.

3. Write your script. With the vocabulary list as my guide, I watch the video and pause it whenever I think the scene would create a good opportunity for Latin discussion using the target vocabulary. I record the time of the pause and write a Latin sentence for use once the video is paused, then proceed through the video to the next discussion opportunity. I am including the [script I wrote](#) for "[El Monstruo Del Armario](#)" (the MovieTalk I demonstrate above) here, as well as another [sample script](#) I wrote for "[A Corny Concerto](#)." Both include the vocabulary lists as well as my pause times and relevant discussion points. I am also including a [MovieTalk worksheet](#) for you to use for your own planning.[11]

4. Teachers newly beginning CI should also script questions and discussion for their pause points ahead of time. This is a step that can be skipped once you are

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10 I have no data to reinforce this number; it is purely based on my own anecdotal evidence.

11 If you are unsure how to make a copy of a view-only file, I have written a guide [here](#).

comfortable speaking spontaneously with your classes, but until you reach that level of comfort, scripting questions and further discussion is nearly essential to success in a MovieTalk and many other CI-based activities. I am including a [sample of personalized questions](#) here; in the sample I have expanded the script for "In Armario" to include questions that inspire discussion. Preparing questions like these will help you ease into Comprehensible Input practice, and soon you will find that you no longer need such detailed scripts.

Delivering a MovieTalk

A MovieTalk can be delivered in several different ways. The first option offered below is the method I first learned, and the approach I think is the easiest when first beginning. The second option was developed by M. Patrick for a colleague who had been severely injured and needed substitute-ready plans. The third is a method I use almost exclusively now, which builds much more suspense, but requires more spontaneity.

1. Vocabulary-oriented delivery begins with a quick discussion of the vocabulary that will be used during the video (the vocabulary will already be posted on the board in preparation). The vocabulary discussion is followed by a viewing of the video with no discussion, though students are asked to look for opportunities to use the new vocabulary. In the second showing of the film, the teacher does not pause the video, but does general vocabulary labeling as opportunities arise in the video. I usually encourage students to call out vocabulary they notice, too. Finally, the third showing of the film incorporates pauses and discussion. I watch the timer in the corner of the video and pause the video according to my script. I then state the sentence I have written for that moment, and follow that by asking questions and discussing student answers. Once the video is ended, I move on to an activity that reinforces the target vocabulary (several options are included below).

2. The reading approach, in which the movie is not viewed until students have already learned the relevant vocabulary and read the plot of the movie as a story, is especially useful if a teacher needs to miss multiple days of school. The teacher writes the script and uses it to create one or two readings based on the movie. Vocabulary is previewed and practiced via worksheets that attempt to recreate some of the conditions of Comprehensible Input (though nothing can replace direct interaction). I am including M. Patrick's [worksheet that I altered](#) for my own use as an example. After the vocabulary has been practiced, students read the story, and finally

they view the movie with real-time narration in Latin. The narration is comprehensible because students have been prepared for the narration by the worksheets and reading, and can be recorded ahead of time for use by a substitute. The final viewing is kept compelling by simply omitting the ending from all previous readings. In that way, there is still purpose for students when they are finally allowed to view the video.

3. Predictive viewing creates suspense within the first viewing of the video. This is the approach I use almost exclusively now, because it builds great suspense. Instead of allowing students to watch the video before starting discussion, the teacher pauses the video according to the script during the first viewing, begins discussion to practice the vocabulary, then asks students to predict what will happen next. Keith Toda demonstrates this approach in the video below; note that he simply introduces the situation, then asks student opinions about the film (Toda).

In the video, Toda is asking open-ended questions, which require at least some readiness to speak spontaneous Latin. If you are not comfortable with that, you could limit student choices: T*ua sententia, cur Piper currit? Currit Piper quod perterrita est an quod esurit?* Limiting options allows you to still have a script, yet create a voice for your students.

Some Reinforcement Please

The comprehensible and compelling nature of a MovieTalk means it is capable of being a stand alone activity or unit. I prefer, however, to follow a MovieTalk

If you prefer to view this video on YouTube, you will find it here.

with reinforcing activities that create even more opportunities for repetition of target vocabulary. Some of my favorite activities to pair with a MovieTalk are listed below; they can all be achieved by creating a powerpoint of screen captures from a MovieTalk. Stopping the video at all of the same times I paused for discussion, I take a screen capture of the video and create a powerpoint with the images and their respective sentences. I have included a <u>sample here</u>. These powerpoints are useful for multiple activities:

1. Use the powerpoint to review the video, this time asking different questions.

2. Hand out <u>copies of the powerpoint with the text removed</u>. Ask students to
    - label the images with as much Latin vocabulary as they can.
    - look at the pictures in pairs and describe to each other in Latin what is happening in each picture.
    - point to the correct image when you read out the corresponding sentence. This is an easy way to check for understanding. If you prefer more physical movement, you can cut out the images previous to the activity, so they have to hold up the image when you read the sentence.
    - use the images as prompts as they write the story again in their own Latin.

3. Create a cloze worksheet from the powerpoint's screen captures that leaves out the focus vocabulary. I have included a sample <u>cloze worksheet</u> here.

4. Cut out copies of the powerpoint's screen captures and their respective sentences. Ask students to match the sentences to their images.

5. Cut out ten copies of the powerpoint's screen captures and their respective sentences. Mix all of the images together in one section of the room and mix all of the sentences together in another section of the room. Organize students into a picture relay race.. I have included a <u>sample as a template as well as instructions here</u>.[12]

In addition to these options, M. Patrick recommends asking students to do timed writes over the plot of the MovieTalk or to retell the story in Latin in small

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12 The relay race is described in much more detail on my own blog post, "Picture Relay Races," which can be found <u>here</u>.

groups. In "EDPuzzle and MovieTalk," Toda offers directions for using EDPuzzle to create interactive videos to test student comprehension.[13] Each of these options for reinforcement creates extra repetitions for the target vocabulary without reducing the compelling nature of the MovieTalk they supplement. They provide closure and prepare students to transition to the next pursuit, whether it be Catullus 70 or a discussion on Roman morality.

CONCLUSION

One pitfall emerges as teachers of Classical languages begin to research and experiment with Comprehensible Input practices: driven by the research and examples of others, teachers attempt to change too much too quickly and suffocate under the pressure of changing entire curricula while maintaining the requisite testing, grading, and records with which every teacher is tasked, and at the same time trying to learn an entirely new teaching practice and philosophy. Instead, incorporating a MovieTalk in between comfortable, well-practiced activities is an optimal first step, one which can be taken by any teacher at any level of experience. In this way, any teacher can begin to incorporate comprehensible, compelling, and caring practice into his or her curriculum.

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13 M. Patrick's blog post describing MovieTalk can be found here. Toda's blog post describing MovieTalk can be found here. Toda's blog post describing EDPuzzle's use with MovieTalk can be found here.

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