

Using the Sweet 16 Verbs in Your Classroom

A fundamental change taking place in world language classrooms is the recognition that, if the goal is to develop communicative competency, then focusing on high-frequency vocabulary in class is much more effective than memorization of thematic lists. There are some surprising consequences. Much of the thematic vocabulary traditionally taught in a level one Spanish class does not qualify as high-frequency vocabulary!

How do we identify high-frequency vocabulary?

I was shocked when I first started using a high-frequency word list to guide my curriculum. While I was eager to rid my students of such low-frequency words as *fregadero* and *algodón* in favor of words that they would use spontaneously on their own, I was unaware that even words like *azul* or *octubre* are much less frequent than some words that I typically would save until their third or fourth year of language study. I am not arguing that colors and months be altogether dropped from level one courses, but if you want your students to quickly become communicatively proficient, then you should emphasize the most frequently used words. I have seen estimates that the 100 most frequently used words make up about half of the spoken language! Even if your school district insists that you follow a certain textbook closely, posting and actively using these posters in class will lead your students to develop an amazing native-like fluency with some of the most commonly used words in the Spanish language.

High-frequency word lists are not intended to be given directly to students as vocabulary lists, but rather to aid curriculum designers in prioritizing vocabulary. In order to arrive at a high-frequency word list, a linguist will first compile a corpus—a massive collection of texts in the target language that together may contain millions of words. One corpus available online was compiled using the subtitles of popular films. Any corpus will reflect the source texts: Clearly a corpus compiled entirely from the work of William Shakespeare would be a poor choice to guide a level one ESL curriculum. An appropriate corpus for our purposes would include contemporary examples of both spoken and written Spanish. Once a corpus is assembled, computers easily count the number of times each word appears and rank them in a word frequency list. Of course, you don't have to do this yourself. The best word frequency list in Spanish that I know of, by Mark Davies, has been published in both book and eBook formats: *A Frequency Dictionary of Spanish: Core Vocabulary for Learners*.

How can I use these posters in my classroom?

These “Sweet 16” Verbs were inspired by the realization that many of the highest frequency words in the Spanish language are forms of the most common verbs. Within the first several hours of instruction, my students are already acquiring about half of these verbs in the present tense through “getting to know you” activities. Within a month all of the verbs have been at least passively acquired, while many students are actively using the third person conjugations. By June, my students effortlessly and correctly use all verbs, in multiple conjugations. Here are some tips to get the most out of these posters.

Post each set in separate locations: I post the present tense on a long empty wall space to the left of students. This wall will fill up with student work over the course of the year, but starting the year with large empty spaces between the posters emphasizes the importance of these visuals. I post the infinitives above the white board directly in front of students. The imperfect and preterite posters are placed to the right, between two windows. Posting them in separate locations avoids confusion.

Point and pause: When I first start using a verb, I use my laser pointer to point as I speak, and I pause longer than I feel necessary to make sure all students have had time to process. The pause is crucial: Some students need a few seconds to swivel their heads around. If a student does not look, I ask them what the verb means.

When I first introduce the verb, it is crucial that I let them process slowly. Their processing speed will increase with more repetitions as long as we go slowly, with abundant comprehension checks, so that all students focus on the meaning of the word when it is being used. The goal of this slow procedure is not to get students to speak, but rather to get students to recognize and process the word quickly in context.

Meaningful repetitions: Choral repetitions of verb conjugations will not lead to great leaps in communicative fluency. Instead, when we point and pause, we want to be using the verb in a meaningful way so that students are processing the meaning of an entire phrase. I use a “Question Words” poster so that, at the beginning of the year when it is so difficult to stay in the target language, I can point to the word “*Quién*,” pause, then point to the verb “*es*,” pause, then write on the board “*el profesor = the teacher.*” Hopefully, students will say my name. “*Correcto*,” I would respond, “*el señor Peto es* (point and pause) *el profesor.*” Then, holding my hands out as if I were choosing between two options, “*Clase, ¿es* (point and pause) *el señor Peto el presidente* (write that word on the board because not all students are hearing the cognates) *o es* (point and pause) *el señor Peto el profesor?*” Hopefully they would say *profesor*. This might seem really easy, and it should be! I am not trying to present difficult questions. I am getting students to process the meaning of the word *es* in many different contexts so that they move from being slow processors to processing at the speed of a native speaker.

I have barely started: Reading from the name card of one of the students I ask, “*¿Es* (point and pause) *Brian el profesor?*” Class responds, “no.” “*No, Brian no es el profesor. Brian es el estudiante.*” I write “*estudiante = student*” on the board. “*¿De dónde* (point at question word poster and pause) *es Brian?*” Notice that I am addressing the class so as to avoid changing the conjugation (for the moment). I look at the class and ask, “*¿Es Brian de Mongolia?*” Then I look at Brian and simply ask with my hands outstretched to indicate an either/or option: “*¿Sí... o no?*” He’ll probably say no, but if he smiles mischievously and says, “yes,” then I know that I have a live wire. I exclaim, “*¡Brian es* (point and pause) *de* (point and pause) *Mongolia! ¡¡Increíble!!*”

Students might stop looking at the posters as I point and pause: If it is a word they are already comprehending, then that is fine. They just need more meaningful repetitions to increase their processing speed. If, however, they do not understand, then it is very important that I figure that out. Typically, the activity that I just described would have many questions posed directly at particular students, as well as other questions asked for a choral response. Those of you who are trained TPRS teachers will recognize that skill as “**circling**,” one of the core techniques of the TPRS method. I have barely scratched the surface on describing the technique. I recommend that you read a wonderful blog entry by Martina Bex on how to circle effectively: <https://martinabex.com/teacher-training/essential-strategies-for-tprsci-teachers/how-to-circle/>.

“Getting to know you” activities: I love Bryce Hedstrom’s *Persona especial* activity (<http://www.brycehedstrom.com/2013/la-persona-especial-process>) as a recurring activity throughout the first semester of any level. It is essentially a very slow, comprehensible interview with a single student. Using the Sweet 16 Verbs to guide you in the first weeks of instruction is a great way to get meaningful repetitions without being tedious. If your students are like mine, they are most interested in learning about each other. As new words are introduced, be sure to write them on the board in both Spanish and English, but maintain your own speech in Spanish. As you circle through more of the Sweet 16 Verbs, you will naturally build their vocabulary while they focus on something that they find highly compelling—themselves.

New conjugations: At a certain point it would be unnatural to avoid using the *tú* form. Simply write “*eres = you are*” on the board, point at *es*, and say to the class, “*Él es de Mongolia*,” then turn to Brian and say, “*Eres* (point and pause) *de Mongolia.*” Don’t rush to introduce all of the conjugations of the verb *ser*. Weeks may go by before I start making a concerted effort to get a lot of repetitions of the *nosotros* forms. I tend to focus on the third person form first, then I move to second person talking directly to a student and, perhaps, I will respond in first person to tell them about me (but they are not as interested in me as they are in each other). Once their responses to the third person forms are automatic, I will turn my attention to the other forms of the verb.

However, I always connect the meaning of the new form to the poster by a combination of writing on the board, pointing, and pausing as described above.

I believe that a three-second question in English calling attention to the way form influences the meaning of a word is a powerful way to teach grammar. “What does the ‘s’ on the end of the word mean? What does ‘-emos’ on the end of the verb mean? What does ‘-aste’ at the end of the verb mean?” Whether focus on form has *any* impact on language acquisition (and, if it does, how to apply this insight to teaching practice) is still a hotly debated topic among researchers. If you decide to use grammar pop-ups, use them sparingly. Your main goal is to get your students to process the Sweet 16 Verbs at the speed of a native speaker—not to produce or analyze them. Once they are processing quickly, speaking will happen naturally in response to your questions.

Using the posters to introduce new vocabulary: After I posted my “Question Words” poster in a spot that I frequently looked at during instruction, I noticed that I was asking many more questions in class. In fact, I even asked a greater variety of questions. Suddenly, interrogatives like “¿Cuál?” were popping up everywhere. My students fully acquired these words rapidly because I frequently used the poster as a crutch to help me generate questions on the spot.

In the same way, the Sweet 16 Verbs posters are as much a crutch for the teacher as the student. After a few weeks students will occasionally glance over at the posters (which is valuable for me to recognize what has not been fully acquired), but for the most part, posters become invisible if they are not an active part of the class. To prevent these verbs from becoming buried, I recycle them whenever I introduce new vocabulary. The posters really help me come up with questions during the heat of the moment—unscripted, but perfectly comprehensible. Here is an example:

One day in November, my level one classes were working on two phrases, *pide una Coca-Cola* and *le ofrecen una Pepsi*. We were co-creating a story about a guy who could not drink Pepsi™ because he was allergic to its secret ingredient. The employees kept trying to give him a Pepsi instead of a Coke®, because there was no Coke in the store. As I was circling these phrases, I went through the list of high-frequency verbs (which are in bold):

*¿Puede beber una Pepsi el hombre? No, él no **puede** beber una Pepsi, por eso pide una Coca-Cola. ¿Los empleados **salen** para comprar Coca-Cola? No, le ofrecen una Pepsi porque ellos no **quieren salir**. ¿Por qué no **quieren salir**? Porque **quieren ver** su programa favorito en la tele. Entonces, ¿qué **ve** el hombre en las manos de los empleados? El **ve** latas de Pepsi, pero no **ve** una lata de Coca-Cola. ¿Le ofrecen una lata de Coca-Cola? ¡Qué va! ¡Le ofrecen una lata de Pepsi! ¿El hombre se **pone** la Pepsi en la boca? ¡Claro que no! Él puede morir si bebe Pepsi. El hombre pide una Coca-Cola. ¿Los empleados **saben** que el hombre **quiere** Coca-Cola? Sí, ellos **saben**. **Saben** muy bien, pero **son** flojos y **quieren ver** la tele...*

Even if you are not creating stories in your classroom, you can embed new vocabulary into Sweet 16 Verb phrases, so that students develop an ability to handle the highest frequency verbs with ease. Suppose, for example, your district requires that students learn 30 words related to camping. Rather than spend an equal amount of class time on words that are extremely low frequency, you might create an activity to foster a passive understanding of the new words—a *matamoscas* game, for example (you can find instructions if you google the phrase “matamoscas game”). After 5–10 minutes of *matamoscas*, I would transition to questioning:

(Placing a can opener discreetly on a student’s desk.) *¿Quién **sabe** dónde **está** el abrelatas? Ay, Dios mío, **vamos** de camping, pero no **podemos ir** (pointing and pausing, connecting “puede” in the present tense poster and “ir” on the infinitives poster with my laser pointer) **sin** el abrelatas. (A student answers correctly that Susan has it.) ¿Susan? No **es** posible que Susan **tenga** (point and pause at “tiene”—they’ll get it) **el** abrelatas. **Ella es** una chica buena. (Turning to the class.) Class, what did I just say in English? Class says in English: She is a good girl. (Turning to Brian.) Brian, what would I*

say if I wanted to say she is a bad girl? Brian: *Es una chica mala.* (Turning back towards the class.) Susan *es una chica buena, ¿ella no tiene mi abrelatas! Clase, ¿cuál es el problema?* (They might not know how to articulate an answer to my question, or someone might rudely say “¡Usted!,” so I rephrase my question as an either/or question.) Clase: *¿quiero saber dónde está la linterna, o quiero saber dónde está el abrelatas?* (Hopefully they respond *abrelatas*, but if the response is not strong I simply ask the question again slowly, pointing and pausing). Clase, *¿adónde vamos?* (They answer “de camping.”) *Sí, correcto, vamos de camping.* (Turning towards Sally.) Sally, what does the *-mos* on the end of *vamos* mean? (Sally says, “we”). *Y clase, ¿qué necesitamos para abrir las latas?* (If they can’t say the answer, then I write the word on the board and ask them an either/or question.)

As you can see in the above description, the questioning is a bit plodding as I am trying to find something interesting to say about a can opener. More importantly, however, if I am able to speak like this without too much pointing and pausing, the students are clearly processing the present tense fairly quickly. I am expanding into the *nosotros* form and even occasionally using a verb conjugation that they do not know. Yet they understand the message at all times, as they are able to answer my questions. Hopefully, we will soon move on from can openers to a more interesting conversation topic.

Once students acquire the high-frequency verbs, there is no reason not to continually sow them into your classes. It really should be part of your daily routine throughout the year. Students will gain more experience with a variety of conjugations. If your focus is limited enough, by the end of the year they will be using these verbs fluently in multiple conjugations because they have heard them many times in meaningful contexts.

Will students actually acquire the Spanish if I leave the English translations visible? That is a very interesting question that I had to answer for myself through a little action research in my own classroom. My initial belief was that if I left the English available, students would never memorize the words but simply glance up whenever they needed the word. However, over the course of the semester, I noticed students glancing up at the posters less and less. They would still look during a quick write, for example, but I was never sure if they were seeking a translation (“What is the word for ‘to leave’ again?”) or if they were seeking inspiration (“What else could I write—ah, *salir*—I could mention that he left!”), so I designed a little experiment. During midterm exams I let two of my level one classes take the exam in my classroom with posters visible. The other two level one classes were brought to a French classroom where there was no textual support in Spanish. They were not previously informed that they would be brought to the French room, nor were the other sections that stayed in my classroom specifically instructed to not look at the posters. On the midterm exam, I featured the Sweet 16 Verbs heavily, because I think this is the bedrock foundation of level one Spanish. I want to know if these verbs have been acquired so that, if necessary, I will dedicate the rest of the year to really nailing down these verbs. To my surprise, there was absolutely no difference between any of the sections. I blogged about those classes that took the test in the French classroom here: <https://mrpeto.wordpress.com/2013/12/16/spanish-1-tprs-midterm-exam/>

So, what is happening here? I think the key to understanding my students’ retention is to look at the difference between (1) teaching students to memorize vocabulary and (2) guiding them to process the vocabulary more quickly. I try not to ask questions that my students cannot answer; instead, I am giving them so many meaningful repetitions that their minds learn to move faster than their eyes. The first time they hear the word *tiene*, their eyes will dart up to the posters. If I keep using the word *tiene* repetitively, they will stop even thinking “*tiene* means has.” *Tiene* will just mean *tiene*. The next day, I will have to repeat the procedure, and some students will process it very quickly, while others will need more time. Eventually, they will all be processing at the speed of native speakers.

I recommend that you do your own action research. If you are a travelling teacher who uses more than one classroom, try covering the English part with sticky notes in one of the classrooms after introducing the verb. See if there is a difference between your classes. Or try covering the English after two weeks—or two months. In any case, actively use the posters in your teaching every day so that students are seeing, and hearing, many meaningful repetitions of these high-frequency words.

What's next?

I did not invent the techniques that I have described here. If you want to learn how to add compelling storytelling to your class, or if you simply want to adapt these techniques to your existing curriculum, you should join the thousands of second-language instructors who have been formally trained at a TPRS workshop. Look at Blaine Ray's website for a list of workshops (<http://tprsbooks.org/tprs-workshops/>) or consider attending one of the national week-long conferences during the month of July (NTPRS or iFLT), or even one of the international conferences (google "TPRS conference Agen France" or "TPRS conference Netherlands").

I hope these posters bring joy into your classroom. Please check out my blog and follow me on Twitter for more teaching ideas using comprehensible input.

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