

COMPREHENSIBLE

INPUT



*Finding the “Goldilocks Level”
for English Language Learners*

Defining Comprehensible Input

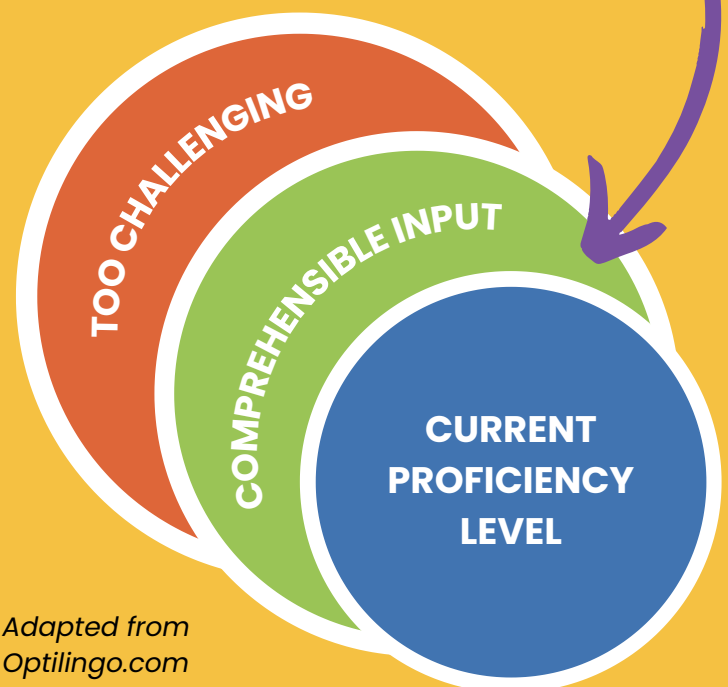
Imagine that all of your subjects were in a language you do not understand. All of the input in your six-hour day – from the cafeteria to science, math, and language arts classes – are in a new language. Even on the playground or in gym, all of the language conveyed to you, whether through signs, teacher directions, or conversation, are in another language. Each subject would entail not only new content to learn but also linguistic demands that you would possibly not even notice in your first language. In order to effectively participate and learn the language, you would need the language input to be comprehensible.

As educators we present students with a lot of information, both orally and in writing, including language objectives, mini-lectures, worksheets, text assignments, directions, research papers, and video clips – all of which have language demands for learners. In a virtual environment, this becomes even more critical because students have less context to draw from to make the text understandable. When a lesson objective is presented virtually on a slide, for example, students miss out on the support a teacher tends to provide in a classroom, such as gesturing, pointing, demonstrating/modeling, and using physical examples.

These **scaffolds** make the language input more accessible to the learner. When working with ELLs, one must be conscious of the language demands presented and create deliberate plans to make instruction what Cummins called “context-embedded” (2008). In this session, we will discuss how to make instruction more accessible to ELLs across learning environments through **comprehensible input** (Krashen, 2004).

Stephen Krashen (2004) describes the critical importance of presenting **comprehensible input** in order for students to acquire a new language. Unfamiliar language can be made comprehensible by adding context, such as physical objects, gestures, or visuals. Selecting how to make lessons more comprehensible depends on students’ proficiency levels, as well as background and content knowledge, and should be tailored to be “just right” for each ELL.

What is Comprehensible Input?



Adapted from
Optilingo.com

Comprehensible Input: Multiple Modalities

"Comprehensible input in English is English language that you can understand. Language inputs are things that you hear (like podcasts, the radio, conversations, and so on) as well as things you read (like books, articles, English blog articles, etc.)" (Lewis, 2020).

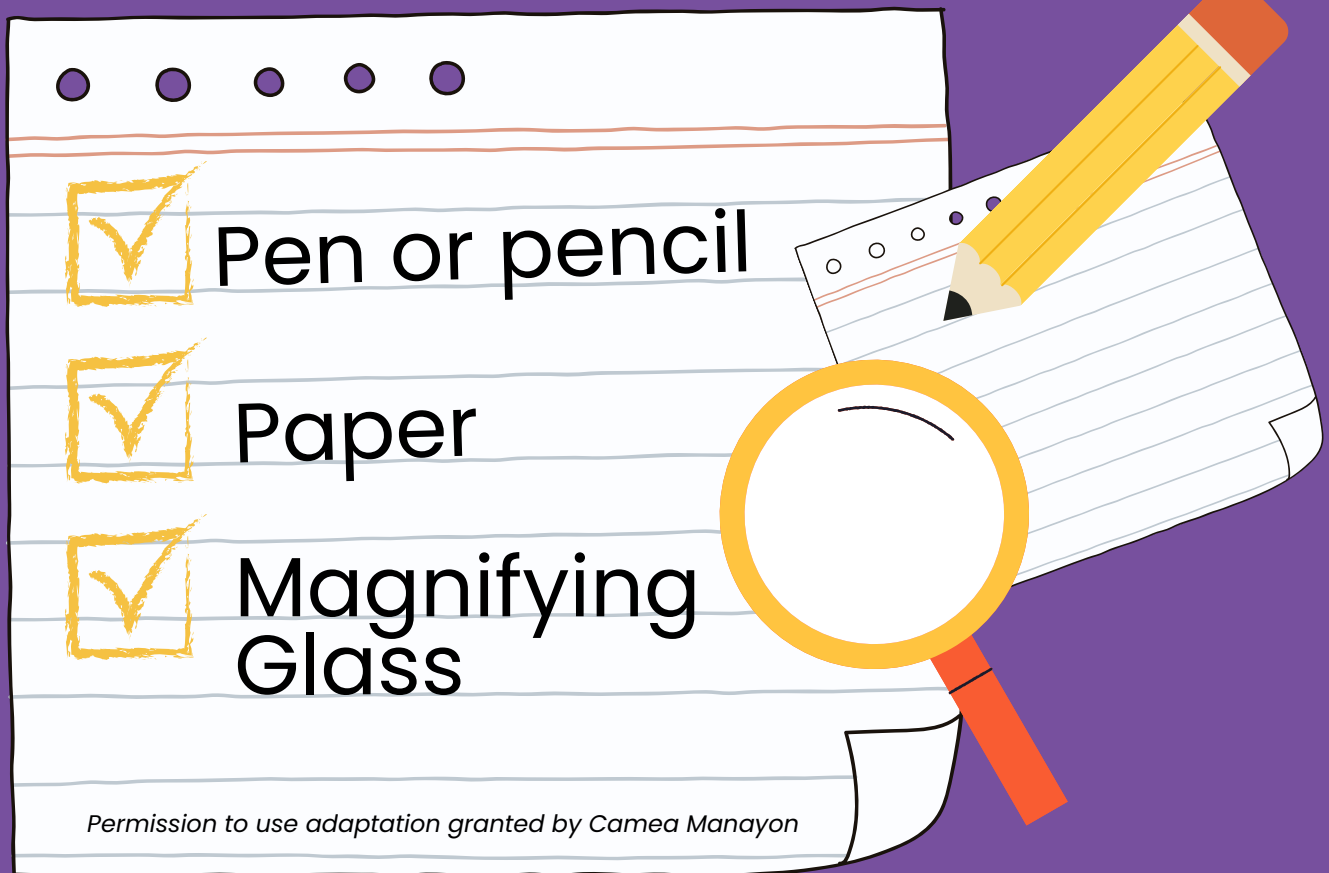
When we use only words, orally or in writing, without any other input or context, it's difficult for a language learner to understand what the speaker is saying. When these words are paired with visuals, multimedia, other texts, or a physical context, the meaning of the words is more easily understood. Even simple directions can be difficult to understand if one uses either written or oral form alone, instead of the combination.



The challenge for teachers is that when you have a classroom with a diversity of language proficiencies, each student needs a different type of comprehensible input and scaffolding to meet the linguistic demands.

For example, if you say to newcomers, "Today, you will need a pen or pencil, a piece of scrap paper, and a magnifying glass," the newcomers may not understand unless they are familiar with the words. However, if we pair the words with inputs such as gestures, text, and visuals, we make the information much more accessible and comprehensible. In a classroom, if a teacher accompanies words with graphics that represent the required items, most newcomers would understand..

But is it **COMPREHENSIBLE?**



The example on the prior page seems very straightforward. However, even when the words are provided as a checklist and are paired with graphics, some words still lack clear comprehensible input. Since the graphics show only a pencil, a newcomer may find it difficult to understand the phrase “a pen or pencil.” The newcomer has no comprehensible input to understand the grammatical use of “or,” nor do they have enough information to know which English word describes the object being held.

Even transitioning – or intermediate – students may not understand the colloquial phrase “scrap paper,” but the teacher simplifies the written instructions and there is enough lesson context through the prior work – and likely the other students pulling out the materials – to act as comprehensible input. If the teacher reads the words aloud at a moderate pace while providing the written checklist with graphics, ELLs have the opportunity to hear and read the same information and apply it with meaning to their task. Providing clear instructions is essential for English language learners to access content in the classroom and it benefits all students.

For Example:

Ms. Soriano is teaching a **third-grade math lesson** on the distributive property. She displays the **objective** on the smart board, drawing directly from the curriculum.

Apply the distributive property to decompose units.

Math Lesson - 3rd Grade
Module 1, Lesson 18 - EngageNY



Ms. Soriano knows that this lesson poses both linguistic and academic demands on all of her students. She wants to make sure her ELLs are able to access the content and also learn the language of math. Let's think through how we can make the lesson more **comprehensible** for ELLs and, most likely, other students in the class who thrive on multimodal forms of communication. The following sets of questions are useful during lesson planning.

What tasks will students complete to meet the lesson objective?

- Teacher will guide students through an application word problem.
- Students will use personal whiteboards during a mini-lesson on using number bonds to decompose numbers.
- Students will work on problem sets on a worksheet and debrief with the class, followed by exit tickets.

What are the linguistic demands?

- Students must be able to understand such content terms as "number bond" and "decompose," as well as general academic terms with multiple meanings, such as "apply."
- Students must understand how words in a problem translate into operations, such as prepositional phrases (e.g., with 10 levels, "on each level" = multiply by 10)
- Students must understand passive-voice verbs (e.g., "How many cars are parked on each level?")
- Students must be able to read and understand word problems, represent them through various diagrams and visual arrays, and restate the answer with the correct units.
- Students must be able to write equations.
- Students must be able to write an exit ticket to summarize what they have learned.

What are the content demands?

- Students must be able to recognize that multiplication requires groupings.
- Students must be able to represent multiplication through arrays and number bonds.
- Students must be able to transfer information into equations and then back into information.

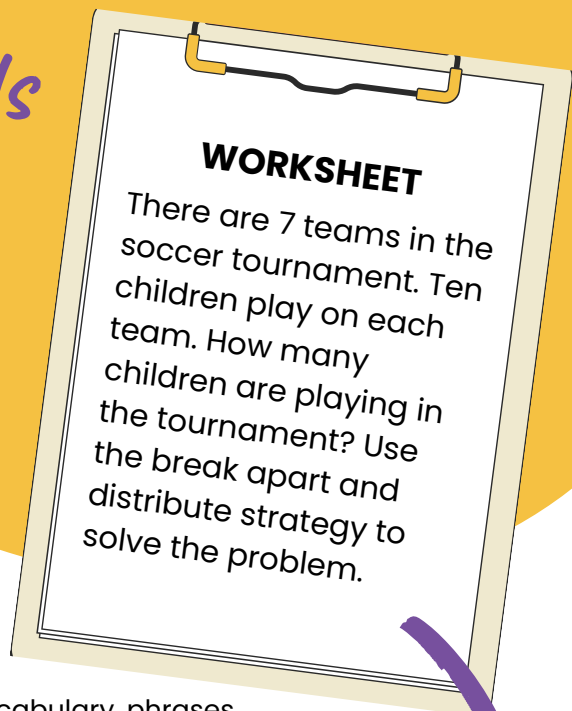
What are some possible ways to make the lesson content more comprehensible?

- Add a language objective with an icon of whether today's lesson will involve reading, writing, speaking, or listening (e.g., students will label the array and number bonds with the number sentences; students will tell a partner how to solve the problem using a number bond).
- Have students act out as a class what distribution means – or how to form number bonds.
- Have students do a puzzle or card sort to put the steps and a sample problem in order or match the array and number bonds with the correct equations.
- Watch a sample video with problem sets presented visually.
- Pre-teach the vocabulary, such as "apply" and "method," as well as "distributive property" and "number bonds," with visuals.
- Provide modeling and examples that students can use to complete the problem sets.
- Rewrite word problems in the active voice, removing extraneous information.
- Provide numbers for the steps to follow, as well as such sequencing terms as first, then, next, and lastly.
- Have students work in pairs or small groups to solve the problem sets.
- Have students orally tell how to solve the problems before working on them in writing.
- Provide audio and written translations.

While this is a third-grade example, the steps for increasing comprehensible input are useful across grade levels and subject areas.

Analyzing Language Demands of the Text and Task

Example continued from prior page...



Consistency Across Curricular Materials

After presenting the objectives and instructions for the lesson, Ms. Soriano then distributes student worksheets. In order for the worksheets to be comprehensible to ELLs, Ms. Soriano needs to make the input or content of the lesson comprehensible to ELLs by identifying the vocabulary, phrases, question types, and sentence structures students need to understand so that they can complete work independently.

She revises the worksheets by looking for patterns and deviations, based on the language proficiencies of her students and their needs. She then uses this analysis to establish consistency across different worksheets, as well as other curricular materials.

Look for Patterns and Deviations

Look at the sample worksheet on the upper right corner of this page. Do you see any patterns in how the information is presented and what language is used? Are there deviations from patterns in the language used and, if so, what should be the consistent form? Students could benefit from this kind of analysis, too, so that they can eventually deconstruct an academic text that is less consistent and use flexible thinking about different ways to write the same concept.

WORKSHEET

There are **7 teams** in the soccer **tournament**. **Ten children** play on each **team**. How many **children** are playing in the **tournament**? Use the break apart and distribute strategy to solve the problem.

1

Identify Patterns

Note words and phrases that repeat or refer to a common concept.

WORKSHEET

There are 7 teams in the soccer tournament. Ten children play on each team. **How many** children are playing in the tournament? **Use the break apart and distribute strategy to solve the problem.**

2

Identify Deviations

The use of "how many" deviates from referencing "numbers" and the last sentence deviates from the language used in the original instructions, as well as our revised instructions.

WORKSHEET

There are 7 teams in the soccer tournament, and 10 children play on each team. What is the total number of children playing in the tournament? Use our new strategy to multiply numbers faster.

3

Establish Consistency

The instructions now use a consistent number format (7, 10), consistently reference "number/s," and reference the strategy with language consistent with the original lesson instructions.

4

Provide Materials in Home Languages

工作表

足球比赛共有 7 支球队，每支球队有 10 名儿童参加比赛。参加比赛的儿童总数是多少？使用我们的新策略更快地乘以数字。

Hoja de Cálculo

Hay 7 equipos en el torneo de fútbol y 10 niños juegan en cada equipo. ¿Cuál es el número total de niños que juegan en el torneo? Usa nuestra nueva estrategia para multiplicar números más rápido.

WORKSHEET

There are 7 teams in the soccer tournament, and 10 children play on each team. What is the total number of children playing in the tournament? Use our new strategy to multiply numbers faster.

ورک شیٹ

فٹ بال ٹورنامنٹ میں 7 ٹیمیں ہیں، اور ہر ٹیم میں 10 بچے کھیلتے ہیں۔ ٹورنامنٹ میں کھیلنے والے بچوں کی کل تعداد کتنی ہے؟ نمبروں کے لیے ہماری نئی حکمت عملی کا استعمال کریں۔

bảng tính

Giải bóng đá có 7 đội, mỗi đội có 10 em. Tổng số trẻ em chơi trong giải đấu là bao nhiêu? Sử dụng chiến lược mới của chúng tôi để nhân số nhanh hơn.

TALE Hack:

Instead of paper worksheets, use Google Docs. With prior instruction on the technique, students can then use Google Translate within the document to select their home language for custom translation, if helpful. This saves you valuable teaching time. Instead of creating multiple versions of the same worksheet, you can focus on making the English version comprehensible and consistent. Let the technology translate! Remember to use caution since Google Translate may not always provide an exact translation.

MORE WAYS TO MAKE YOUR INSTRUCTION

Comprehensible

Read the following list of ways to make your lessons more comprehensible. Note which scaffolds you already implement and which ones you would like to start using.

- Provide** clear instructions, both orally and in writing; create familiar routines around student assignments; and highlight key information in directions with icons, bold font, or color-coding.
- Add** visuals to glossaries, word walls, and as much as possible to student assignments to create meaning.
- Add** multimedia tools, such as video clips, online games (e.g., Flippity), or Google Jamboard, to increase students' interaction with the content and one another and to reinforce the content through repetition.
- Select** texts and video clips that are "just right" for students.
- Speak** with clarity and rephrase your ideas frequently, simplifying and/or amplifying your sentences depending on the proficiency levels of your students.
- Accompany** speech with gestures, printed terms, and other visuals to emphasize key points.
- Pre-teach** vocabulary that may be unfamiliar and/or teach mini-lessons on words or phrases that require more depth.
- Use** graphic organizers and bulleted or numbered lists to display information rather than wordy text.
- Provide** demonstrations, modeling, and sample work.
- Use** a variety of language domains (e.g., reading, writing, listening, and speaking), modalities, and resources (e.g., read-aloud picture books, songs, puppets, manipulatives).
- Allow** wait time so that students can think about your directions or questions, especially for ELLs who may have to think or translate into the instructional language.

Note that while all students may benefit from comprehensible input, for ELLs who are approaching proficiency, this may be the only access they have to the grade-level content. For students who are at intermediate levels of proficiency, these scaffolds may help them to produce more language about lesson content. When thinking about when and how to provide comprehensible input, think about what your ELLs can currently do. What is their performance level in reading, writing, listening, and speaking? Compare their current performance with the description of the next level. How can we scaffold instruction to achieve the next performance level with support while they learn new academic content?

Now It's Your Turn!



It's time to think about how comprehensible our language is and how the learning environment affects comprehension. In your workbook, you will have a chance to brainstorm digital tools and portable practices that support comprehensible input across learning environments.

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About Us

The TALE Academy

The TALE Academy is a series of virtual learning experiences available to all New York State educators and offers a rich array of resources on topics related to teaching across learning environments (TALE). The TALE Academy is built upon the work New York State educators carried out during emergency remote teaching (ERT) throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and extends it toward the future. TALE invites educators to think beyond online learning to consider a broader perspective on teaching and learning that encompasses teaching across multiple environments (in-person, remote, and hybrid).

The Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE) Project

The TALE Academy is part of a broader New York State Education Department (NYSED) initiative known as Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE). In July 2020, NYSED was awarded funding through the United States Department of Education's Education Stabilization Fund-Rethink K-12 Education Models Grant to implement TRLE – a three-year project to build the capacity of teachers and educational leaders to effectively implement remote/hybrid learning for all students. Launched in the depths of the pandemic, the first phase of the TRLE project focused on getting resources to the field through partnerships with Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) and school districts across the state. The second phase, which began in February 2022, focused on aggregating lessons learned and emerging teaching and learning strategies to address a broader field of practice: teaching across learning environments.

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