

# SCRIMP

## Keeping Students Engaged, Keeping Teachers Enthused

Excerpt from  
*Special Person Student Interviews:  
Launching the Interpersonal Speaking Mode,*  
by Bryce Hedstrom

Are you scrimping on essential practices that could make your teaching effective, memorable and long-lasting? If you want to engage students, you cannot afford to SCRIMP on any of these elements in your teaching—especially in reading and in Special Person interviews. Engaging teaching is:

**S**ustainable

**C**omprehensible

**R**epeated

**I**nteresting

**M**eaningful

**P**ersonalized

The elements in SCRIMP access both systems in the brain: the fast and the slow thinking systems, the emotional and the intellectual. Getting students to use both systems makes learning stick with students.

SCRIMP is a backward mnemonic, in that you *should* do each of these, rather than scrimping on them, or not doing them at all. You must not be stingy with any of the elements of SCRIMP. But don't let that backwardness dissuade you: that extra bit of concentration will make the acronym even more memorable.

Are these elements obvious and purposeful in your teaching?

## **S Sustainable**

**Is the format and pace of your teaching sustainable?**

**Can both you and your students keep it up all school year?**

Teaching is a marathon, not a sprint. You must set a pace you can maintain. Do not try to imitate all the wild and zany antics of some wacky, high-energy presenter. They may not be doable for every teacher. Do not put that kind of pressure on yourself. The supposed high-energy folks may not maintain that pace all day every day in their classes either, so don't get down on yourself if you try the wildly entertaining and hilarious techniques and find that you cannot sustain them. Don't put undue expectations on yourself.



- Are you setting a pace you can maintain week after week?  
The school year is a marathon, not a sprint.  
You need to be able to keep up with what you begin.
- You need to teach in such a way that both you and your students can stick with week after week
- Do you have structures in place that allows for both predictability and flexibility?  
A regular daily routine?  
A regular weekly routine?  
Gaps built in to allow for inspiration and unexpected creative bursts?
- Can students bear your lesson with no breaks?

They need breaks: both physical and mental. What breaks are you building in?  
Students learn more with short, frequent, purposeful breaks.  
Get them up and moving,  
Get a different person in front of them.  
Change the interaction.

## C Comprehensible

### Is your message clear to all students?

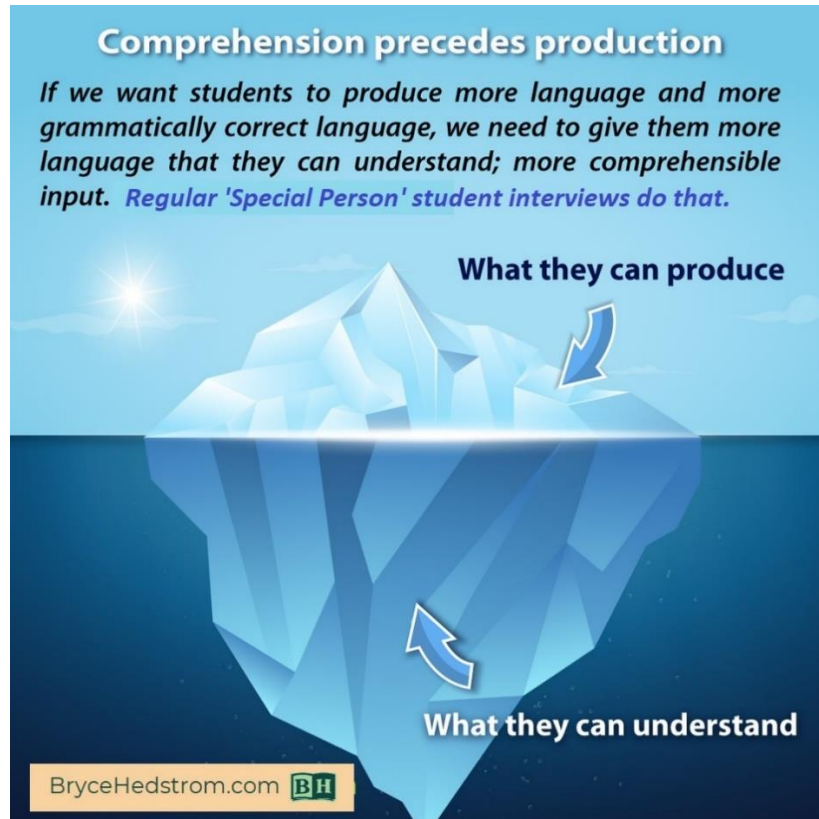
Students must understand most of what you are saying, or it is gobbledygook. If they do not understand, they will not acquire the language and they will be frustrated. You must use the target language and they must get most of what you are saying. If students do not understand the message in the target language, they will not acquire it.

You already speak the language, so we are not talking about you here.  
It doesn't matter if they should know it.  
It doesn't matter if you have covered it before.  
It doesn't matter if it was in a previous lesson or unit or class.

Tell students:           **“My job is to speak clear [target language] to you.  
Your job is to let me know if I am doing my job or not.”**

If most of the students don't get most of your message in the target language it doesn't count and language teaching.

- How are you checking to be sure everyone understands?
- Do you have a system to check comprehension at different levels?
- Do students have a signal they can give you to:
  - Show they don't understand?
  - Show that they want you to slow down?
  - Show that they want a phrase to be repeated



Are *ALL* students getting everything they can in your class?

#### BOTTOM

- Are the slowest getting the basic message?
- Are you taking time to ask them specific types of questions to be sure they understand?

#### MIDDLE

- Are students in the middle getting lost in the shuffle as you attend to lower and higher levels?
- Are they being coached to think at higher levels and at different ways with the language?

#### TOP

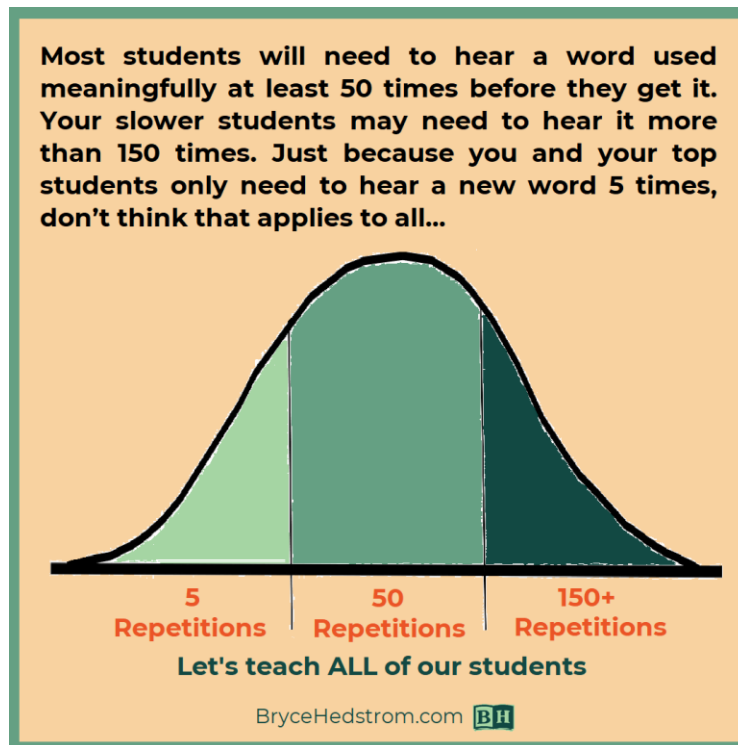
- Are you only speaking to the top of the class?
- Are the most advanced students being challenged?
- How are you prodding top students to think above the course level?

## **R** Repeated

**Are students getting enough repetitions to acquire the language?**

There is an old Latin phrase, *Repetitio mater studiorum est* (**Repetition is the mother of all learning**). This ancient Roman proverb has stuck around for good reason: That's the way we learn. We need to hear things again and again in order to learn them well.

Repetition is the mother of learning. Most students need to hear a new word many, many times to get it. The urban legend in the comprehensible input world is 50 times for the average student, but 150 times for a slower student. Gifted students may need only a few repetitions.



Just because you are gifted at language and can pick up words in your 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> language with only five exposures, don't deceive yourself into thinking that this applies to all of your students.

Are your hearers getting enough repetitions to make the lesson stick?

- Repetition is the mother of learning.
- You, the teacher, don't need the extra repetitions. We know you get it.  
    Will your students?  
    No, they won't. Not without lots and lots of extra repetitions.

## **Interesting**

**Are your lessons and content keeping your students' attention?**

Content sticks better when it is inherently interesting. Interviews do that because we are talking about real things in students' lives. And not just the dry facts—their hopes, frustrations, fears and dreams often come out. Nothing too personal that a parent would not want us to know, but there are plenty of fascinating stories that every student wants to tell.

Is your message capturing your students' imaginations?

- Is it touching their hearts, or is it merely satisfying brief intellectual curiosity?
- If it is only *your* agenda, it's not enough. It must be compelling to them too.

## M Meaningful

### Is the lesson more than just a mere academic exercise?

The content should have meaning for students. Dry, random facts do not stick in the memory. Most students find it difficult to learn from lists of vocabulary. Meaningful input is not always the curriculum or the teacher's agenda. We are not just going down the list of questions during the interview, we are looking into the interviewee's eyes as we question and into the eyes of the rest of the class as we "report back."

- What are the consequences of this lesson?
- Is it clear how students will be able to use it?
- What are the worthwhile and useful elements students will get from it?

**"I do not fear the opponent that has practiced 10,000 kicks. I fear the opponent that has practiced one kick 10,000 times." —Bruce Lee**

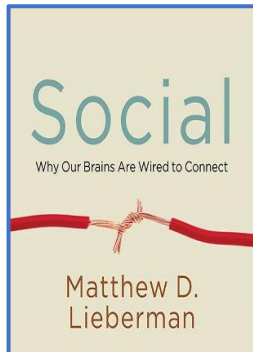


*What kick are you working on?  
What teaching skill are you focusing on?  
(Please don't say, 'Not ending questions with a preposition.')*

## P Personalized

### What personal connections are you making between the material and the students?

Teaching sticks best when there is a personal connection. When the details students are discussing and revealing connect with and support their personal and social lives, the language is absorbed effortlessly and subconsciously.



**“The mentalizing system (the social brain) is not just for social thinking—it is also a powerful memory system. Under certain circumstances, it appears to be a more powerful memory system than the traditional one, as social encoding leads to better memory performance than actually trying to memorize.”**

*Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect (p. 285)*

Special Person Interviews do this by the implicit comparison and contrast going on in students' minds during every interview. There are personal and social elements at work. Both the interviewee and the observers benefit. They are comparing themselves and others to the interviewee. They are all personalizing every bit of the interview by continual comparison and contrast in their minds as they listen. Every time.

Asking follow-up questions is how to super-charge personalization.

**SPECIAL PERSON INTERVIEWS**

**WE WANT TO KNOW**

- What you think*
- What you like*
- What you want*
- What you know*
- What you do*

**WE WANT TO KNOW  
WHO YOU ARE**

# KEEPING IT 'SCRIMP'

## Practical examples to keep your teaching in the SCRIMP zone

### S Keeping it Sustainable

You need to set a pace you can maintain. Only you know what this is. It can change every week.

#### *Here's How:*

#### **START SLOW**

- Don't start too many new techniques at once. Implementing these ideas is not all-or-nothing.
- Think about starting with just one class. You don't have to change everything in every class all at once.
- Experiment and see what happens. Your lowest achieving class may be a good place to implement new ideas—there is less to lose since they aren't learning as much anyway. Take a chance that they may respond to new techniques.

#### **USE NATURAL LANGUAGE INTERACTION**

- Some teachers like to ask students to fill out a sheet that is something like an application before doing student interviews. This can be counterproductive and misses the point. With *Persona Especial* we are trying to get students to acquire the language and speak spontaneously. We do not want them to be reading off of a worksheet.
- There are sentence starters on the wall of the classroom all of the time to help students that are unsure. These sentences starters are not the interview. They give guidelines for follow-up questions. Find these sentence starter wall posters in many languages at: <https://www.brycehedstrom.com/free-stuff/special-person-interviews/>
- Everybody needs the sentence starter posters at the beginning.
  - Faster students will soon ignore them.
  - Slower students need them longer.
  - Students that are not paying attention in class can land their wandering eyes on the posters and get a dose of practical language while tuning you out and looking around.

### C Keeping it Comprehensible

Language is acquired by comprehensible input.

- Make sure your instruction is comprehensible to all students.
- This applies at all levels: Level 1 to AP/IB; Kindergarten through college.
- It is not what they *should know* at this level—but *what they actually understand* that counts.



- It is not what you have covered—it's what they actually understand that matters.
- Use words and grammar most students mostly understand, and add just a little at a time.

*Here's How:*

**DO FREQUENT COMPREHENSION CHECKS**

Have students indicate with fingers or in the chat how much they understand out of 5. Use this with a sentence, parts of the lesson, or for the whole class period.

Check for comprehension often and in various ways. Differentiated comprehension check questioning works on several levels.

**EXPECT GESTURES**

Institute, expect, and reinforce gestures that facilitate communication. When one student sees another student making one of these gestures, they do it too. This will get the teacher's attention and not make the initiator feel as self-conscious.



*I don't understand.*



*Slow down.*



*Repeat.*



*Time out.*

These are valuable phrases for all language learners to know. Having students use gesture and say them in the target language in your class will give them confidence to use these expressions with native speakers. Teach these useful expressions with classical Total Physical Response: Have students do the gesture when you say the phrase to show they understand.

**BUILD IN BRAIN BREAKS**

- Your students need a break! Any student can do any of these gestures at any time.
- Expect them to do the gestures. Test them occasionally by saying something at a speed or with vocabulary or grammar that most will not know. If they don't gesture, ask them "What did I just say?" You can assign a quiet, but reliable, student to give you gestures if the class doesn't seem willing at first. It should be a student that can read social cues well and is seated where most of the class can be viewed.
- When students indicate they need a "time out" give them a moving brain break in response.

**KEEP IT SIMPLE**

- Adding too many new words can be overwhelming.
- Resist the urge to add too many new words to any one interview.
- 3-5 new words is manageable for most students.
- New words, including cognates, may be written on the board in the target language.
- Drawings or English can make the meaning clear to all.

- Avoid making students guess too often.
- Students will get it eventually, but if you rush the language, many of them will give up—that's when misbehavior starts. Keep it simple.

## R Keeping it Repeated

- Don't be afraid to repeat.
- Don't hesitate to say something again and again.
- Don't hold back from saying things another time.
- **“Repetition is the mother of all learning.”** Ancient Roman proverb.

### *Here's How:*

#### **USE THE “COLUMBO” TECHNIQUE**

- Pretend like you don't remember where you were at in yesterday's discussion.
- Start over, with help from students, to pick up where you left off, asking them verification questions.
- *The Columbo Technique* involves asking spontaneous-seeming questions when the interview seems to be over:

Oh, one more thing...

I do have one more thing to ask you...

Something is puzzling me. I'd like to ask you another question...

What you are saying makes sense, but I do have one more question for you...

- If you're not familiar with this old television character:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0v3Fi9dDkYY>

#### **MAKE PURPOSEFUL MISTAKES**

- Purposefully make mistakes as you are re-telling the facts from the interview.
- Making “mistakes” allows students to correct you. It makes them feel with it.
- You can use the excuse that you have several classes to keep track of, so naturally you can't recall all of the facts about every student.

#### **TEST THE LIMITS OF THEIR UNDERSTANDING**

- The *“Repeat”* and *“I don't understand”* gestures above should be used by students often. If they don't understand most of what you are saying, they are not acquiring.
- Check them by speaking quickly or using vocabulary they do not understand, then lovingly chide them if they do not give the gestures.

#### **VERIFY DETAILS**

- Keep checking back with the interviewee to “verify” the details. This verification step lets the interviewed student be the expert. It puts the teacher in the role of the interested interviewer, not the director of everything. If you try to steer too much of the process, it becomes your agenda.
- Trust that students will pick up the language they can as long as you keep all of the SCRIMP elements in place.

## USE NUMBERS

- Add to repetition naturally when numbers come up in interviews by writing out numbers as words, rather than numerals: ***treinta y dos*** vs. **32**. This reinforces numbers to students. Many children's authors also do this because it is a solid teaching technique.
- Numbers arise naturally in *Special Person* interviews: *How old are you? How long have you lived here? What is the number of your jersey? What was the score of your latest game?*
- If you only write the numeral, many students will not be thinking in the target language. They will be thinking of the English number words instead of the target language number words. The middle and low students, especially, will just be looking at the numeral and saying it in English in their heads. Don't do that to them.
- Give your students the gift of repeated target language number words, not just the number symbols.

### HOW **SCRIMP** COMES TOGETHER

**When students understand and are interested in what you're saying...**



**Comprehension** and **Interest** are the two crucial pieces. When those two are combined, class becomes a joy for both you and your students.

Students maintain their interest when the input is **Meaningful** and **Personalized**.

You maintain your energy when your teaching is **Sustainable**.

Sufficient **Repetition** ensures the learning gets in and sticks.

## I Keeping it **Interesting**

The interview stays interesting to students when **you**, the teacher, are authentically interested.

### *Here's How:*

#### IT'S A STORY

- You are revealing a student's story, not doing a rote exercise.
- You are uncovering a mystery, not just going down a list of questions.
- You are exploring a hidden drama about which most are not aware.

- Reading mysteries and dramatic novels will help you to absorb how stories are created = with a beginning, a middle, and an end with a twist.
- You can turn a student's interview into an ongoing story that will captivate their classmates and honor the interviewee.

### **NO MOJO = NO INTERVIEW**

- Keep the interview going as long as the "mojo" lasts.
- Continue the interview only as long as all of the stakeholders are into it.
- If the interviewee, the other students in the class, or you, the teacher are becoming disinterested, stop.
- You are chatting as if you had just met someone new and interesting at a party.
- You are not struggling to extract a confession from an unwilling witness.
- When the enthusiasm lags, the interview is over.

### **ASK FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS** *(Mentioned before, but cannot be emphasized too much)*

- Asking authentic follow-up questions is *the skill* to develop for successful *Persona Especial* interviews.

- Find out **why** your students think, act, and believe the way they do.

• Imagine that you were at a dinner party with a group of fabulously accomplished people: well-known playwrights, brilliant professors, fabulous inventors, best-selling authors, insightful artists, professional musicians, outstanding teachers, successful entrepreneurs, extraordinary composers, champion athletes, savvy investors, or thriving parents with loving and accomplished children. Would you talk about yourself all evening, or would you ask them question after question? *Your students will become those fabulously interesting dinner guests someday.* They have those qualities within them now. Sometimes they are hidden. Sometimes the students themselves don't realize those qualities are there. But you can mine for them, and bring them to the surface by letting your curiosity run loose with your natural follow-up questions.

- Don't waste precious time talking about yourself—unless they ask, then briefly mention a thing or two about you and go back to asking questions about them.

- Model what real interaction and curiosity look like—not narcissism.

***We want students to begin taking on some of the responsibility for  
Special Person Interviews. You are the model for that.***

### **ASK GOOD QUESTIONS**

- Most of your students will not know how to ask good questions. You may not know how yourself.

**“Question asking is a sophisticated skill. We're not conscious of learning it. We learn is through osmosis from those around us.”**

—Ian Leslie

*Curious: The Desire to Know and Why Your Future Depends on It*, p. 90

A few simple principles will help you and your students to develop their questioning skills. There are closed questions and open questions—those that can be answered with yes or no, or with an either/or answer, versus those that incite a longer conversation. Parents that produce children that do well with language ask more open-ended questions. And so do their children. It starts remarkably early, as young as age two. These parents and their children...

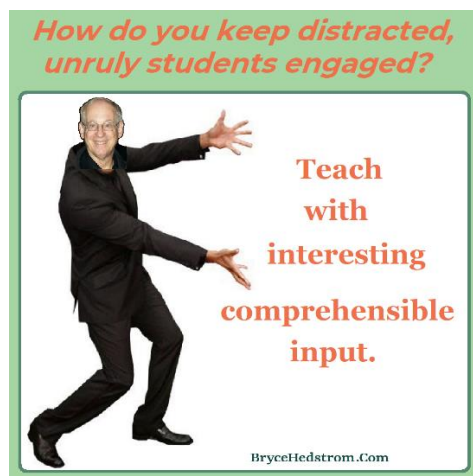
**“...were especially likely to ask curiosity-based questions: *how* and *why* questions. They were also more likely to engage with their mothers in passages of intellectual research—a series of linked questions, each following from the other.”** (ibid. p. 91)

- We need to ask our students question after question to get at the core of who they are. Find out what makes them tick as you show those qualities to the rest of the class.

#### **KEEP THE REST OF THE CLASS INVOLVED**

- Keep on "reporting back" to the class every 30-60 seconds in order to keep the rest of the class with you.
- *Special Person* interviews are not a spectator sport.
- If you spend too much time talking only to the interviewee, the class will get restless and bored.
- Coach students to react in an over-the-top, melodramatic way to new details you “report back” to them:

Teacher: "Remember, this is the most interesting thing you have heard today, class"  
Teacher: [Tells a new fact]  
Class: Oooohhh!



## M Keeping it Meaningful

You are not drilling language. You are using words with a purpose. You are talking about useful, relevant, worthwhile content with students. You just happen to be using the target language to do so.

### *Here's How:*

#### **MAKE IT OBVIOUS**

- Is your lesson obviously useful and meaningful to students?
- You may have to spell it out.
- You may need to create a scenario to demonstrate how the vocabulary, grammar or culture you are teaching will be relevant to their lives. Some students will not be able to think abstractly enough to make that leap, so you will have to make it with them.

#### **WRITE IT DOWN**

- Writing out the content of an interview can make it more concrete and meaningful to students.
- When the interview seems to be over, have students get into pairs (in person) or threes (in remote classes) to review what they know and write down all of the details in the TL in their composition books.
- The discussion and writing should be done in the TL. They will need accurate notes and they may need to study them because there will be a quiz on the interviewee in a day or two.
- The quiz will be to write in the TL what we learned in class about the interviewee. Complete sentences, no notes.
- With middle school students or with rowdy high school students, have them write down the details as you do the interview. They need something to do. It is more effective if this writing step is delayed because students will rehearse the information (and the TL) in their minds more if they have to wait until the end of the interview before they write.

## P Keeping it Personalized

Is there something for each student to take away from the interview personally?

### *Here's How:*

#### **MAKE YOUR CLASSROOM AN OXYTOCIN FACTORY**

- Just watching kind interactions releases oxytocin, the feel-good group-bonding neurochemical:

**“Being kind to one another releases the “feel-good” chemical oxytocin in the brain, whether you are performing an act of kindness or witnessing it. And if you are charitable once, you are more likely to continue being**

**charitable. The more oxytocin we have in our body, the more we actually want to do good.”**

**“The human body is trying desperately to get us to look after each other, and the reason is very simple: by ourselves, we’re junk. But in groups, we are remarkable.”**

—Simon Synek, *Start with Why*

### ASK FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

*(Yep, this has been mentioned before. It's that important!)*

- Always ask follow-up questions.
- The ability to ask comprehensible, natural-sounding follow-up questions is the key to personalization.
- Follow-up questions display your sincerity.
- Asking follow-up questions shows that you actually care—that you are sincere, that you are really into the interview and not just going through the motions.

### REVIEW OUT LOUD

At the end of the interview, ask the class what we know about the interviewee. This is shining a spotlight on personalization: Everyone in the class knows and remembers details about them. One sentence is said aloud in the target language per student.

The superstars do not get to hog the spotlight here—they get one sentence, just like everybody else. But let the superstars know that you expect great sentences from them. "Se llama Elizabeth" is not sufficient for them. If a high ability student tries to slip in a sentence like that, say "*¡Ridículo!*" and scoff at their simplistic answer, claiming it has already been said. Everyone already knows the superstars are exceptional, they learn faster and retain more. They need to act like it instead of just coasting like they do in every other class.

- Can each student apply something from the lesson in their own situation?
- Are students merely sitting dutifully, or are they soaking in the meaning?
- Are they getting a nugget to use, or at least ponder, in their own lives?
- Have you checked at the end of the period to see if they got the personalized message?

