



A STORY-BASED APPROACH TO TEACHING THE SUBJUNCTIVE

Unit #1: Expressing Desire



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Contents

Introduction	2
PART 1: Introducing the Characters	5
PART 2: Setting up the First Problem	9
PART 3: First Solution and Second Problem	16
PART 4: Interlude	20
PART 5: Final Solution	22
On Assessment	24
Using Extended Readings	25
Cuento #1: Los dos problemas de Marcus.....	26
Cuento #2: Cazador tiene problemas.....	28
Cuento #3: Riley y las chicas.....	30
Cuento #4: Problemas con Megan y Danielle.....	33
Quizzes on the Extended Readings	36
Grammar & Vocabulary Used in the Stories	40
Vocabulary Acquisition Check-up	43
Present Subjunctive Long-Term Unit Plan	49
Riley and the Girls (Story #3 Commentary and English Translation)	51
What teachers are saying about this lesson	54

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A STORY-BASED APPROACH TO TEACHING THE SUBJUNCTIVE #1

FOCUS STRUCTURE: quiere que vaya [wants him to go] (*present subjunctive with desire*)



INTRODUCTION

These training materials grew out of an extended conversation about teaching with stories to a colleague. I think it will be valuable to teachers that are interested in teaching foreign language with a narrative approach; an approach that focuses on the students and uses Comprehensible Input-based methods like TPRS®. Although the examples are from a Spanish III class, the principles apply elsewhere. These techniques can be used to teach with stories in any language and at any level.

To get students to understand and use the higher level grammatical structures that are required in many of the courses we teach, we have to purposefully use the grammar and vocabulary in comprehensible and engaging ways. In order for students to be able to use and understand a structure like the subjunctive we need to explore it and purposefully use it with them. Structures like the subjunctive are a double whammy: the subjunctive mood is being lost in English, and it also does not occur often enough in Spanish for students to acquire it during normal classroom discussions. It is a new and unusual form for them and it is also relatively rare.

Some studies indicate that extensive pleasure reading can give students enough input to acquire the subjunctive (http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~genzuk/Free_Voluntary_Reading-Krashen/FVReading3-Krashen.pdf), but in typical classroom conversations there are not enough instances of it for students to get the feel of how the subjunctive mood works. We need to help them by focusing on it. This is an example of one way that we can give students enough interesting repetitions so that the subjunctive can begin to make sense to them at a visceral level. This example will show you how to:

- 1) *Craft an engaging story that focuses on one grammatical structure.*
- 2) *Get enough repetitions and comparisons for the students to get it.*



This story and explanation are a simulated way of experiencing compelling comprehensible input-based teaching. It is a way to observe an extended lesson in a detailed, analytical way with crucial time to reflect built in. This processing time is something that is often missing in workshops and video demonstrations of the method. For a teaching like this, an extended written example is better than a demonstration. This specific example is appropriate for a Spanish class from levels 2-4, but the storytelling principles apply for levels I to AP and beyond.

*The story in our example is from a Spanish III class that focuses on a phrase using the present subjunctive: **quiere que vaya** [wants (him) to go]. The initial set up creates a wacky sitcom-style situation that the students will quickly recognize and run with once we get it started for them.*

After the initial set up, virtually every sentence leads to another question and answer.

Those student answers direct the story and give it interesting details.

Transcriptions of class conversations, questions and several models of class story-inventing are all included below. You will notice that after the initial set up, virtually every sentence leads to another question and the answers given by the students direct the story. This is not a lecture or just telling a pre-packaged story—it is inventing a story with the students. This is the highest level of thinking according to the New Bloom’s Taxonomy. (See the chart in my book Stuff for Spanish Class, p. 10, for more on this.)

You might want to point this out to administrators when they check off “lecture” as your teaching style in a drive-by evaluation. Building class stories is far more than passively listening to a lecture—it is interactive co-creation of meaning.

The entire resulting story titled Los dos problemas de Marcus follows this extensive commentary section. Three more example stories from different classes titled Cazador tiene problemas, Riley y las chicas, and Problemas con Megan y Danielle follow that one. These stories were all created using the same set-up and questioning method. All four stories are presented without commentary or notes so that they can be used as extended readings in your classroom. You can use them after your classes invent a similar story to reinforce the learning, or you can have students read them before you begin to invent a class story to give them ideas.

The lengthy example and explanation below will show how a story is created and the reasoning behind it. Your results will be different because your students are different. The goal is not to teach this exact story, but to invent a unique story with your own class based on the initial situation and the target structures. We are teaching a skill here: how to create a compelling story that incorporates what are thought of as advanced grammatical structures. Learning this teaching skill is quite different from acquiring language, which is not so much a skill as a universal human ability. The human brain acquires language on its own, given the right conditions. What we are trying to do with this example is to show foreign language teachers how to set up those conditions so

This story is just a model.

The goal is not to teach this exact story, but to invent a unique story with your own class using these structures and storytelling principles.



that students can acquire the language. The purpose is to clarify the skill of circling a new structure and show how to incorporate it into a compelling class story. Learning this comprehensible input-based story-asking skill takes practice and focus, but acquiring a language should be easy. Makes a teacher's brain hurt—we have to learn a hard skill so that our students can pick up language easily.

*To acquire language students need quality repetitions. We are shooting for comprehensible input that is meaningful, interesting and repeated. We are trying to get as many interesting repetitions as possible using **quiere que vaya**; perhaps **100 quality repetitions** in this first story alone. In the example below **the target structures are highlighted** for easy identification—there are more than 50 written repetitions of the structures in the example, but in a live classroom situation over a period of several days this number would increase because there is even more banter going on and there are more quality repetitions.*

A quality repetition is one that is interesting to the students and more: it is compelling. Compelling input is appealing content in the target language. Compelling means that the students cannot help but pay attention. It is not enough to just repeat the structures over and over; the repetitions have to be woven into an engaging experience so that the students cannot help but be caught up in it. We want them to be so into the story that they forget we are speaking Spanish. Dr. Stephen Krashen explains this concept here:

*Stephen Krashen, The Compelling (Not Just Interesting) Input Hypothesis,
http://www.sdkrashen.com/articles/The_Compelling_Input_Hypothesis.pdf*

This level of involvement is important because even though the subjunctive is relatively easy for students to understand, it can be difficult for them to produce accurately and spontaneously. They need hundreds of quality repetitions to begin to get the feel for it and even more repetitions to begin to produce it automatically and reliably.

This story is broken up into five parts. Here are the parts and the general ideas behind each section:

PART 1: Introducing the Characters: Focusing on the Student Actors

- A) A boy, M, has two problems: two girls, H & K
- B) Make all three student actors look good.
- C) Review the characters before jumping into the story

PART 2: Setting up the First Problem: Using the Structure

- A) H wants M to go with her. K wants M to go with her.
(Red print indicates the BIG QUESTIONS that guide the development of details in this story)
- B)
 - **Where does H want M to go?**
 - **Why does H want M to go there?**
 - **Why else does H want M to go there?**
- C)
 - **Where does K want M to go?**
 - **Why does K want M to go there?**
 - **Why else does K want M to go there?**
- D) Which will M choose?



E) *Review the problem with many & varied questions*

PART 3: *First Solution and Second Problem: Repeating the Structure in a Different Setting*

- A) *M solves the problem*
 B) *It leads to another problem: H and K both want him to go somewhere*
 C) • ***Where does H want M to go?***
 • ***Why does H want M to go there?***
 D) • ***Where does K want M to go?***
 • ***Why does K want M to go there?***
 E) *Review the second problem*

PART 4: *Interlude: Enriching a Character with Background Information*

- A) *Explain something that gives insight into a character's actions*
 B) *Review the background information*

PART 5: *Final Solution: Ending the Story*

- A) *M solves the problem*

Not every story will turn out according to this pattern. This particular story just happened to develop this way in this class. You will have different ways of dividing up a story, but building in distinct parts and breaks is important. At every break we take time to review the story (breaks can also help the teacher to think of what to do next). In my classes, the breaks tend to happen in the middle of the class period and towards the end. Many times the story stretches over the course of several days so these reviews of the details of the story are important for all of us to remember everything.

PART 1: Introducing the Characters:

Focusing on the Student Actors

Clase, hay un muchacho de la clase de español que se llama Marcus.

[Class, there is a boy in the Spanish class that is called Marcus.]

I chose this boy because he is bright but very easy going. Most of us could imagine how he might wind up in a situation where he would not want to offend two girls that were fighting over him.

NOTE: *We are focusing on the structure here, not on using a lot of new vocabulary. The goal of the first story in a series of stories like this is for the students to get the new grammar, so this story does not contain many new vocabulary items. The*

This story does not contain many new vocabulary items for students. They will know virtually every word in it.

The focus is on hearing a new grammatical structure used in the context of an engaging story, not on adding new words and expressions.



idea is for students to know virtually every word in it. We will add more vocabulary to similar stories later, but for now, the focus is on hearing the new grammatical structure. Students need to hear it used in the context of an engaging story without being bogged down with a lot of new vocabulary.

Pero, clase, ¡Marcus tiene un problema!

[But, class, Marcus has a problem!]

This is the standard opening to a story. No surprises here, but when I say something enthusiastically, the students are expected to react enthusiastically. In this case, it being bad news, they need to respond with an "Oh no!" type of response. If they do not, I will repeat it and give them another chance, or I will just out-and-out say "Clase, eso apesta" [Class, that stinks]. That usually gets them to react more appropriately.

En realidad, Marcus tiene dos problemas.

[In reality, Marcus has two problems.]

This adds a bit more interest. Students are thinking: "Two problems? Usually it is just one! What is going on here?"

Sus problemas se llaman Haley y Kylee.

[His problems are called Haley and Kylee.]

Everyone knows who I am talking about. These were actual twins in the class. They were both enthusiastic and personable and no one would consider them to be a problem. I chose these two girls because they are actually twins. It helps that they are also good-natured and smart. This REALLY ups the interest because the problem in a class story is usually a situation, not a person, let alone two adorable ones like these two girls in our class. Some of the boys were probably thinking that they would have liked to have two problems like that.

Another big advantage of setting up a situation like this is the idea of a parallel story. We will soon begin to tell the story two times. We get twice the repetitions for the price of one story this way. One girl wants one thing and another girl wants something different. We get to compare and contrast and clarify details over and over while the two lovely young ladies and the lucky young man stand up front. The student actors mainly serve as props and occasionally verify details as we go along. They add energy and interest as we go through the story.

I don't know why, but this type of story always seems to have more power when it is two girls fighting over a boy rather than the other way around. Maybe it just goes against the stereotype in kids' heads of the passive girl and the dominant boy so that the girls ham it up more. I have tried different character combinations, but whatever the reason, it just seems to work better with this setup.

An additional benefit of this story set up is the opportunity to spotlight the lengths to which some girls will go to get a guy. I have seen girls hurt their friends and degrade themselves just trying to get a desirable boyfriend. This story set up allows us to deal with this phenomenon with over-the-top humor. In the class stories that develop, I allow the characters to become more and more extreme in their attempts to win the affection of the boy. By directing the conversation with my questions, I let the boy character become



passive and whiny while the girls become more and more desperate to win him. I feel that the exaggerated and ridiculous story we develop with this scenario can help students to reflect and make better decisions. It can become over-the-top practice for real life.

Sí, sus problemas son dos chicas.

[Yes, his problems are two girls.]

Audible groan from the class here. Some of the kids are starting to play the game with me at this point. There are some side comments here (in Spanish, English is not permitted during a story unless totally on task to ask a clarifying question because we do not want to pop the Magic Spanish Bubble) from the boys like, “¡Sí, las chicas siempre son problemas!” [Yes, girls are always trouble!]

What I call “The Magic Spanish Bubble” is the unseen envelope of Spanish that surrounds us in class. It is delicate and takes several minutes to form. It gets popped when someone blurts out in inappropriate English. English ruins the magic. Don’t pop the bubble!

Las dos chicas son gemelas que están en su clase.

[The two girls are twins that are in his class.]

Everyone knows that they are twins, but I verify the detail for this story.

Clase, ¿Son gemelas Haley y Kylee? Sí, son gemelas y son similares, ¿pero son exactamente iguales, clase?

[Class, are Haley and Kylee twins? Yes, they are twins and they are similar, but are they exactly the same, class?]

Hayley, ¿a ti te gustan cosas diferentes que a Kylee?

[Haley, do you like different things than Kylee does?]

¿Te gusta hablar con diferentes personas?

[Do you like to talk to different people?]

¿Te gusta hacer proyectos diferentes?

[Do you like to do different projects?]

Y Kylee, ¿a ti te gustan cosas diferentes que a Haley?

[And Kylee, do you like different things than Haley does?]

¿Te gusta leer cosas diferentes?

[Do you like to read different things?]

¿Te gusta tomar diferentes clases?

[Do you like to take different classes?]

¿Ustedes las dos tienen diferentes amigos o los mismos amigos?

[Do you both have different friends or the same friends?]

Adolescents are trying to establish their own identity and I added this short line of questioning because most identical twin adolescents that I have met want people to know that they are different from one another.

Building in breaks to review the story is important.

Breaks give the students time to process the story and they give the teacher time to think.



Clase, ellas son gemelas, pero no son exactamente iguales. Son diferentes. Generalmente, a ellas les gustan cosas diferentes, pero a las dos les cae bien alguien.

[Class, they are twins, but they are not exactly the same. They are different. Generally, they like different things, but they do both like someone.]

¿Quién es la persona que a las dos les cae bien, clase?

[Who is the person whom they both like, class?]

¡Sí! A ellas les cae bien Marcus. ¿Por qué a ellas les cae bien Marcus?

[Yes! They both like Marcus! Why do they both like Marcus?]

We go on a bit here exploring why these two girls would both like Marcus so much—pumps up his ego and that of everyone else in the class because they know their time will come soon enough—they know that we do not say negative things about people in our class. Eventually, though, we get back to the story.

We take a short break here and have the students pair up to see if they can remember the introduction to the story up to this point.

A break like this serves several purposes for the student:

- *It gives all students time to process the story.*
- *It breaks up the class so that it does not always look and feel the same.*
- *It gets the students up and out of their desks for a short physical break..*
- *It allows the stronger students to show how much they know.*
- *It lets weaker students get more input.*

A break also helps the teacher:

- *It serves as a check for understanding of the entire group.*
- *It gives the teacher a break from speaking and running the entire show.*
- *It gives the teacher time to think.*

Resist the urge to keep on telling your wonderful story. Give them a break. Our students' brains crave novelty. We need to give them something to do besides simply listening to us talk all period. They need brain breaks and body breaks. They need to be able to get up and move around. They need time to process. They need something to do.

Our students' brains crave novelty. They need to do something besides just listening to us talk all period every day.

We need to get students up and out of their seats.

They need time to process and something to do.



PART 2: Setting up the First Problem:

Using the Structure

(The focus structure is **highlighted** in the text below)

When you begin using the structure you will be tempted to add some more grammar. It will seem like they are getting it, so you will feel like adding more complexity to relieve YOUR boredom with the structure. When we do that we are focusing on the wrong thing. We are not focusing on the students and we are not focusing on providing engaging input. Keep it simple. Do not insert too many new grammatical structures at once. Resist the urge to pile on more grammar, because when you think they get it, they still don't get it like they need to get it.

Keep it simple. Do not insert too many new grammatical structures at one time.

Resist the urge to pile on more grammar and vocabulary, because...

When you think they get it, they still don't get it like they need to get it.

Clase, el problema grande que Marcus tiene es que Haley **quiere que Marcus vaya** con ella.

[Class, the big problem that Marcus has is that Haley wants Marcus to go with her.]

¿Haley **quiere que Marcus vaya** con ella?

[Does Haley want Marcus to go with her?]

I almost always start off a story this way: repeating the target structure or vocabulary immediately with a yes/no question. This seems redundant but it underscores what we are working on. They have to understand that phrase or the rest of what we do will be useless.

Sí, claro. Haley **quiere que Marcus vaya** con ella.

[Yes, of course. Haley wants Marcus to go with her.]

Pero esto es un problema, clase. ¿Saben por qué? ¡Porque Kylee también **quiere que Marcus vaya** con ella!

[But this is a problem, class. Do you all know why? Because Kylee also wants Marcus to go with her!]

The exclamations points here indicate enthusiasm in my voice and a demand that students respond intensely with "OH!" We start the questioning and the class direction of the story in earnest here. There will be MANY repetitions of the **quiere que vaya** form because that is the point of the lesson and also the fun part of the story.

Clase, ¿Haley **quiere que Marcus vaya** con ella?

[Class, Does Haley want Marcus to go with her?]

¿Y Kylee **quiere que él vaya** con ella?

[And Kylee wants him to go with her?]

¿Cuál es el problema de Marcus?

[What is Marcus' problem?]

¿Adónde **quieren las chicas que vaya** Marcus?