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Improving Comprehensible Input for ELLs through Technology

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Introduction

As educators working with English language learners (ELLs), the authors of this article have come to understand the importance of technology in supporting ELLs' classroom learning and attention. In particular, we believe that technological tools can be leveraged to improve comprehensible input for ELLs, a critical factor in their language acquisition and subsequent academic success.

Research in the field of English as a second language (ESL) on the topic of multimodal teaching and learning including technology is growing (e.g. Choi & Yi, 2015). Educators who work with ELLs daily know that “making the core curriculum comprehensible is central to preventing new English learners from becoming long-term English learners” (Echevarria, Frey & Fisher, 2015, p. 23) and we find that incorporating technology is key.

Andrea is a former secondary English teacher and literacy coach who has worked in diverse U.S. school settings with classrooms comprised of 50% or more ELLs. Now she is a professor at the university level with a professional interest in supporting mainstream teachers in increasingly diverse school settings to provide comprehensible, meaningful instruction to native English speakers and ELLs alike. Beth is a former elementary classroom teacher in the U.S. who has moved into full-time ESL teaching at her school. Her teaching is in a pull-out program, meaning that ELLs attend separate ESL classes with her. She also supports mainstream teachers in learning to differentiate instruction for ELLs when they are pushed into their classes, which is for most of their school day.

The two authors began collaborating when Beth was a student in Andrea's graduate program, and she shared how she used technology regularly to meet the needs of her diverse classroom population. We learned that we both have a passion for supporting mainstream teachers in their work with ELLs, and as a result, have become colleagues and friends who enjoy working together on this topic. Between us we have nearly 40 years of teaching experience.

Here we explain what comprehensible input is, why it is important for ELLs, and how technology can help teachers make their lessons more successful and inclusive. Then, we highlight technological tools that Beth has used in her mainstream and pull-out ESL classroom settings to make content learning comprehensible.

Comprehensible Input Defined

Comprehensible input is a term coined by applied linguistics scholar Stephen Krashen (2009). Krashen explained that for students to acquire a new language, they must be exposed to the language in simplified terms that they can understand. Research suggests that there are many ways to make speech more comprehensible to language learners: "1) slower rate and clearer articulation, which helps acquirers to identify word boundaries more easily, and allows more processing time; 2) more use of high-frequency vocabulary, less slang, fewer idioms; 3) syntactic simplification, shorter sentences" (p. 64). Comprehensible input "involves a conscious effort to make the lesson accessible through a variety of means" (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2017, p. 104), including technology.

Comprehensible input is important for ELLs in the most basic terms because these students will not have access to content learning without being exposed to language they understand. Comprehensibility is fundamental and necessary for language acquisition to occur. In his seminal work on comprehensible input, which first appeared in 1982, Krashen (2009) argued that the optimal output by the teacher is comprehensible because "when the acquirer does not understand the message, there will be no acquisition ... incomprehensible input, or 'noise' will not help" (p. 63). Essentially, Krashen's point is that that students will not learn English simply by sitting in classrooms with English being spoken around them. He goes on to add that "the defining characteristic of a good teacher is someone who can make input comprehensible to a non-native speaker, regardless of his or her level of competence in the target language" (p. 64). Students at the earliest stages of language acquisition have the potential to learn content in subjects taught in school with appropriate attention to comprehensible input. Comprehensible input is so important that it has been identified as one of the 8 essential features in planning and delivering effective lessons for ELLs in the well-researched and implemented Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, or SIOP Model, an approach for integrating the teaching of content and language in classrooms with ELLs (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2017).

Leveraging Technology for Comprehensible Input

Technology provides many avenues for improving comprehensible input in classroom discourse. As is evident in Tables 1 and 2 below, there are numerous tools and applications which can make the English language more understandable for ELLs. In addition to

technology providing visuals (photos, illustrations, diagrams, videos), auditory components, and differentiation of content, these tools present an engaging way to interest students in content learning. This is particularly important for ELLs whose attention is constantly shifting from understanding the language of the classroom to understanding the content of the curriculum.

The daunting task of simultaneously processing language and content could lead some ELLs to simply tune out, particularly if the teacher is talking at students for long periods of time and not providing tools that increase comprehensible input. Limited use of technology may lead to language overload for ELLs and less attention to content learning. Technology that is engaging and student-centered has the potential to reduce the stress produced by the learning environment and, as a result, reduce ELLs' affective filter: "Learners who are comfortable and have a positive attitude toward language learning have their filters set low, allowing unfettered access to comprehensible input" (VanPatten & Williams, 2015, p. 27).

Beth has been teaching at the intermediate elementary level in the United States for over 15 years. She has witnessed her student population increasingly grow linguistically and culturally diverse to where ELLs comprise about 20% of the school population today. Her interest in meeting the needs of her ELLs lead her to a graduate program in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, and now she is certified and teaches ESL full time at her elementary school. She has seen a shift in technology usage from being teacher-centered and focused on creating elaborate and alluring lessons, to student-centered and focused on making the content and language in the classroom accessible and comprehensible for all learners. Instead of spending hours creating presentations to use once and usually with the whole class, technology is now being used with groupings ranging from whole class to small groups, and even at the individual student level, based on what students need in the moment. This is appropriate in our local context because the expectation is that teachers spend more time differentiating instruction based on each student's learning needs and less time teaching whole class lessons, a change that has been driven by standards-based reform expectations.

In discussing applications that can help with comprehensible input, we distinguish between free tools that lend themselves to use at any time by classroom teachers and tools which require payment of a fee for using the tool at a given site location. There are numerous free tools available to teachers to use right away in their classrooms, as seen in Table 1. When reading an article or giving a workshop, we always like to think about what teachers can use in their classrooms tomorrow. These free resources are easily accessible by simply creating a username. There are also membership tools available if a teacher or district is able to pay the applicable fees, as seen in Table 2. Some of the tools are great for whole class lessons and introductions to units of study, allowing for content to be more comprehensible for ELLs. Other apps and sites are available for individual students and allow for progress monitoring and data collection. We especially like membership tools that help support science and social studies in the classroom because these often have engaging content in organized units of study.

In the next section, we will describe how some of the free tools can be used to support ELLs' learning by improving comprehensible input. In the section after that, we will describe how

some of the membership tools can be used. Though we only discuss a handful of tools listed in the two tables, Beth has tried them in her teaching and gives her reasons for recommending each one.

Free Tools

There are two free Google products that may be used throughout the day and across content areas to improve comprehensible input: Google Translate and Google Slides. Freckle Education also supports teaching across the content areas, and Starfall focuses on early reading skills.

Google Translate

Beth uses Google Translate throughout the day with her ELLs. Using a mobile device such as a smartphone, the Google Translate app can be used quickly for asking questions and giving simple directions. With Google Translate, the student can speak into the phone's app using the built-in microphone, and that speech translates to English. One particular student who was literate in her native language chose to read the given translations instead of listening to them.

This app is also used to make the regular business of school comprehensible to ELLs. For example, in one of Beth's recent classes, a newly arrived immigrant with very little English arrived, got settled in, and took a seat at her desk. Beth called her up to her computer to view Google images of the lunch choices and supported this with Google Translate. Gone were the days of having to sort through a large stack of downloaded, printed, and laminated pictures to show students what lunch choices were offered.

This newcomer ELL was a strong math student and Beth often provided math as morning work while the kids ate their breakfast. The class had begun studying multiplication, but she was getting confused between multiplication and addition. Using Google Translate and illustrations on paper, Beth was able to explain the difference between the two operations. This student then was able to successfully complete the multiplication work that morning. Beth also used the app to explain the scientific vocabulary and concepts within a science unit on living things; e.g.: *producer*, *consumer*, *decomposer*, and *scavenger*. Using the app in addition to visual supports helped make the content comprehensible and connect to the student's L1. This same student was with Beth reading a book. The student was trying to explain a word that was red and pointed to the text repeatedly. Using the app's speaking portion, the student spoke the Arabic word into the microphone and it was then translated to English. The word the student was trying to explain and connect the book to was *ketchup*. The student then said, "ketchup" and acted out dipping a French fry into the ketchup and eating it. Though the app is not always perfect in its translations, Google translate is a simple yet powerful tool for communicating social and academic language in the classroom.

Google Slides

Google Slides is another free Google product that is similar to PowerPoint and used to create slideshows. Students in Beth's classroom meet in guided reading groups or book clubs during

reading workshop. In one such grouping, the group consisted of two intermediate-level ELLs and two native English speakers who were to meet for the first time about a new book they would be reading called *Stranded* by Jeff Probst. Beth made a series of Google Slides that included photos to hook students early on, to build background knowledge, and to make the text more accessible.

Some of the pictures included were a map of the South Pacific Ocean and its relative location to Hawaii and Australia as landmarks. Also included were photos of a sailboat similar to what the characters would be on, an isolated beach so the students could have a picture of where the characters would become “stranded,” and a satellite phone that the characters would use to communicate in the story. The students were able to see that a satellite phone was a large cell phone that needed to work in the middle of the ocean. Providing images and vocabulary on Slides while having a small group lesson prior to beginning the book prepared ELLs to better comprehend their reading.

Beth incorporated Google Slides into another group before reading books about extreme weather. Photos and videos were put on slides to show various extreme storms and Earth events including: *tornado*, *hurricane*, *tsunami*, *earthquake*, and *blizzard*. Beth met with students prior to the start of the reading unit with printouts of the Google Slides as well as the laptop ready to show videos. Students made observations about the pictures and video and wrote notes for each slide. The discussion was beneficial as it helped clarify understanding of each Earth event or storm, and helped students think more deeply about what it would be like to experience these events firsthand, preview key vocabulary, and access the students’ background knowledge.

Freckle Education

Freckle Education, formerly Front Row, is a website that individualizes content in the four core content areas: language arts, math, science, and social studies. Every child has an individual login under their class profile. Students take an initial assessment for baseline data about their content knowledge in the discipline and then lessons are individualized from the assessment results. The lessons have questions embedded that allow for formative assessment of student learning. Each student’s data is tracked on their own profile accessible to the teacher through the teacher dashboard. By looking at this data, a teacher can look to see what gaps a student may have and correlate to a standard for grade levels starting with Kindergarten through twelfth grades. A teacher may have a third grade student who showed gaps with a patterns standard within the first grade strand, as mathematical concepts and gaps may occur across grade levels. The student then has various lessons to choose from to try and bridge the gap, and the content differentiates based on their performance on questions related to the lesson. If a student is having difficulty with a concept, Freckle will show video tutorials to build the student’s skills and content knowledge in that area. Students taking the lessons on a particular topic are tracked on how they answer questions and whether they move to another concept or whether they need further reinforcement.

At the end of a lesson, students see their performance as a percentage. For example, if Beth’s ELL students were struggling with Base 10 in math, they would view a video tutorial and

then practice on the interactive website. The teacher receives a report on how each student in the class is performing. Beth has found the language in the lessons to be appropriate for students with intermediate language proficiency.

Starfall

Starfall is geared for early readers to develop phonemic awareness and phonics skills, the building blocks of reading. There are also digital books with text read aloud and highlighted for students to follow along in their initial reading. Beth has used it in her reading instruction to help all students, including ELLs. Most students use the program individually with laptops and headphones.

For example, the practice on segmenting sounds is engaging and colorful with visual and sound effects. Students are encouraged to listen and then repeat the words as the sounds are blended. Beth has found her ELLs really enjoy listening to the nursery rhymes included, another simple way for them to be exposed to English in a lively and fun way. The Common Core State Standards in the U.S. emphasize foundational skills as the building blocks of literacy. Skill development can seem repetitive, but Starfall makes the process varied and engaging. Even for ELLs who are new to the country and English, this site is comprehensible.

Other Free Tools That Support ELLs’ Comprehensible Input

Included in the table below are the free tools discussed above, as well as others Beth and Andrea are familiar with. As noted in the table, these tools support ELLs’ learning of content and language by improving comprehensible input in one of at least four ways: 1) making materials easier to comprehend in general, 2) providing differentiated lesson materials to simplify complex content concepts, 3) presenting language with other graphics or comprehension helpers, and 4) providing leveled readings or individualized instruction.

Table 1: Free Tools

Tool	What is it?	How does it help ELLs and improve comprehensible input?
<u>EF High Flyers</u>	An app which focuses on vocabulary by playing games, using flashcards, and learning words categorically.	Visuals, audio, and individually paced practice with pronunciation enhance CI by creating more comprehensible materials.
<u>Epic!</u>	An app and website with a large library of popular books to read or listen to, and featured videos with engaging graphics.	Visuals, audio, video, leveled texts; teachers can assign students reading, can create folders of texts available for students by themes; CI is enhanced through differentiated reading materials.
<u>ESL Games Plus</u>	A website aimed for elementary students that contains a large variety of games and videos.	Visuals, audio, illustrations, interactive technology, early literacy skills and vocabulary reinforced; CI is enhanced through graphics and other comprehension helpers.

<u>Freckle</u> (formerly Front Row)	A website that individualizes content in Math, Language Arts, Social Studies, and Science.	Differentiates content, assessments, and assignments; provides visuals and videos to students; CI is enhanced by differentiating lesson materials to simplify complex content concepts.
<u>Futaba</u>	An app which allows for multiplayer gaming including vocabulary matching to pictures.	Visuals, audio, games may be 1-4 players, may create games with your own pictures; CI is enhanced by presenting language with graphics or other comprehension helpers.
<u>Google Slides</u>	An app which allows for a formal slideshow presentation.	Visuals; hyperlinks to video, audio, and other websites; CI is enhanced by creating more comprehensible materials and providing graphics and other comprehension helpers.
<u>Google Translate</u>	An app and website which allows for translations between two languages chosen from the menu bars.	Audio, microphone, written text, translations from L1 to L2 and vice versa; CI is enhanced through native language and audio/visual supports.
<u>NewsELA</u>	A website that includes current event news articles for a range of levels, addressing different reading skills, and contains a compilation of articles into text sets.	Differentiated content, photographs, nonfiction and current events focus, writing tasks and assessments available; CI is enhanced through leveled reading materials and graphic supports.
<u>Play Factile</u>	A Jeopardy style game where you may create your own theme, questions, and a final round question.	Differentiates instruction, promotes collaboration and teamwork, questions shown when chosen, provides unique opportunity to assess student learning; CI is enhanced by differentiating lesson materials to simplify complex content concepts.
<u>ReadWorks</u>	A website that focuses on improving reading comprehension.	Differentiated text/articles, audio, vocabulary supports; CI is enhanced through leveled reading materials and graphic supports.
<u>Starfall</u>	A website that focuses on foundational literacy including the alphabetic principle and phonemic awareness.	Audio, visuals, supports early literacy skills; CI is enhanced through scaffolded language practice using graphics and other comprehension helpers.
<u>Tween Tribune</u>	A website created by the Smithsonian containing a large library of news articles for students K-12 and a broad range of Lexile levels.	Focus on nonfiction and current events, photographs, differentiated content, quizzes and assignments available; CI is enhanced through leveled reading materials and graphic supports.
<u>Unite for Literacy</u>	A digital library that provides texts with audio in English and 37 other languages.	Connections between L1 and L2, visuals, audio, supports early literacy skills; CI is enhanced through native language and graphic supports.

Tools With Membership Fees

In a quick search on the Internet, teachers will find many, many sites that appear to have useful content for lesson planning and improving comprehensible input. We have discovered that some are better than others, and we highlight the best tools that Beth has tried in her classroom in this section. Flocabulary is an academic vocabulary building tool, Mystery Science leads students through inquiry-based units of study, and Reading A-Z supports independent reading.

Flocabulary

In one unit Beth taught, students were studying animals within their habitats. To make the point about how an animal survives in its habitat using adaptations, an engaging video from the website Flocabulary was used to serve as a digital jumpstart to the day's lesson (Rance-Roney, 2010). The habitat video featured animation and a captioned rap song being sung that included the key word, *adaptations*, numerous times. Any other important words in the video were highlighted in color, bold, or a different font. In addition, examples of adaptations were illustrated so students could see how that feature helped a particular animal. In the debrief discussion at the end, ELLs were able to define and give examples of adaptations, as well as make predictions and connections to the animal they were studying for their research project. Flocabulary was used on many occasions throughout the school year, so students were familiar with the site and enjoyed its featured rap songs and lively videos. Flocabulary is \$96 U.S./year for an individual membership and \$2,000 for a school membership; a 45-day free trial is also available.

Mystery Science

Mystery Science can be used whole class or for small group instruction. The Mystery Science curriculum is aligned to the Next Gen Science Standards and the Common Core State Standards, which are used in classrooms across the United States. Focused on grades Kindergarten to five, this inquiry-based website presents an overarching unit that is followed by a series of lessons. Every lesson has videos and thought prompts to provide students the opportunity to build background or to reflect, think deeper, and respond. In addition, the lessons include hands-on activities, and the preparation is easy for teachers as it comes with a list of handouts and supplies needed. Using this website, Beth led a whole-class science lesson on animal and plant migration by examining videos and images of fossils which appeared to be in unusual and unnatural places around the world. The video and narration were engaging and clear. Even her newcomer ELL student could understand the concept of migration by looking at the images of fossils in different parts of the world and determining their origins. The class participated in the thought prompts provided and were able to understand that a plant or animal's migration varies on reason and method. Mystery Science is \$99 for a classroom membership and \$499 for a school membership.

Reading A-Z

Reading A-Z has printable texts that are leveled so that any of Beth’s students may practice reading at home, even if the family has few books written in English in the home. This is a positive for families who have limited access to books, but more importantly, lack leveled texts that are just right for their child. The cost is \$109.95 for a classroom. This site is unique as membership may also be purchased by a family; however, the price is the same as a classroom subscription, which would be cost-prohibitive for many families. When Beth uses the books in class, she previews the challenging vocabulary and reads them with the students. They discuss the text during and after reading to build comprehension. The students are then able to take the books home to read independently or with their families. In this case, technology becomes the tool that allows for a traditional print reading experience that is differentiated and comprehensible for each student. Reading books at the appropriate level improves students’ fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, and having books accessible at home is correlated with improved literacy performance (Allington, Camilli, Williams, Graff, Zeig, Zmach, C. & Nowak, R., 2010).

Other Tools With Fees That Support ELLs’ Comprehensible Input

Table 2 includes tools with fees we have discussed in this article, as well as others we are familiar with. As in Table 1, the right-hand column notes how the tool helps ELLs in general and improves comprehensible input.

Table 2: Tools With Membership Fees

Tool	What is it?	How does it help ELLs and improve comprehensible input?
<u>Bitsboard</u>	An app that makes vocabulary accessible through games like True or False and Matching. The content and games are easily customizable.	Photographs, audio, engaging game formats to reinforce phonemic awareness and spelling; CI is enhanced by making language understandable through graphics and other comprehension helpers.
<u>BrainPop</u>, <u>BrainPop ELL</u>, & <u>BrainPop Jr</u>	A website that includes videos with recognizable characters addressing a wide variety of topics in the content areas; supplemental resources are available.	Engaging video and audio, allows for ELLs to have a preview of content, focus on important vocabulary for each lesson; CI is enhanced by differentiating lesson materials to simplify complex content concepts.
<u>Flocabulary</u>	A website that includes rap videos with a focus on topics in the content areas; supplemental resources are available.	Engaging video and audio, repetition of key vocabulary, allows for ELLs to have a preview of content, lessons linked to content area curriculum for students K-12; CI is enhanced by differentiating lesson materials to simplify complex content concepts.

<u>FluentU</u>	An app for older students that focuses on learning a second language through engaging videos.	High quality video and audio, quizzes available, an “immersion” into a second language; CI is enhanced by making materials more accessible that may otherwise be too difficult and presenting language with graphics and other comprehension helpers.
<u>Imagine Learning</u>	A literacy and language software program created to accelerate basic and academic language, key components of reading, listening comprehension, grammar, and speaking.	Addresses major domains of language acquisition, videos, audio, photographs, glossaries, translations; CI is enhanced by presenting language with graphics and other comprehension helpers.
<u>IXL</u>	A website for students K-12 to practice skills linked to the Common Core State Standards in Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies.	Differentiated instruction, individually paced, videos, data reports of student progress available; CI is enhanced by making materials more accessible through individualized instruction.
<u>Kidblog</u>	A website that allows for students K-12 to practice and publish writing in a safe and closed environment.	Collaboration available, student writing portfolio built online, practice with digital citizenship, support and build relationships with peers through comments and feedback; CI is enhanced through ongoing practice in expressive literacy and English language development.
<u>MobyMax</u>	A website that finds gaps in student learning K-8 and addresses those gaps with lessons, practice, and assessments. There are a variety of subjects available including reading, vocabulary, math, writing, and phonics.	Differentiated instruction, individually paced, data reports of student progress available; CI is enhanced by making materials more accessible through individualized instruction.
<u>Mystery Science</u>	A website that includes lessons for each of the Next Gen Science Standards for K-5 classrooms.	Engaging videos, step-by-step experiments, questions and discussion probes throughout each lesson, links to curriculum standards; CI is enhanced by making materials more accessible that may otherwise be too difficult and through graphic supports.
<u>Raz-Kids</u>	An app and website that allows students to listen to and read books and take quizzes to demonstrate comprehension.	Leveled texts, students may move up in reading levels, audio, visuals; CI is enhanced through leveled reading materials and graphic supports.
<u>Reading A-Z</u>	A website for teachers to download and print leveled texts including decodable books, fluency books, and poetry.	Printable books have illustrations and photographs, build early literacy skills, allow for practice with decoding and fluency; CI is enhanced through leveled reading materials and graphic supports.

Conclusion

We argue that incorporating technology is useful and necessary for ELLs to better comprehend what is going on in their classrooms. We hope teachers take away from this article that they need not spend much time adapting content for ELLs to make it comprehensible. Simple-to-use technologies described here make the classroom a welcoming and educational environment even for ELLs who are new to the country and new to the English language. In fact, the tools recommended here are useful for native-English speaking students, as well. Johnson (2015) argues, "Using technology is one of the best means for adapting materials for diversity and gathering information about many cultures. In some cases, it may be the only way to do so" (p. 81). We concur, and we urge educators of ELLs to consider how technology might make their lessons more comprehensible in order to improve students' content and language learning.

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Appendix

List of websites referenced in this article with links spelled out, presented alphabetically

Name of Software Tool	Link
Bitsboard	https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/bitsboard-flashcards-games/id516842210?mt=8
BrainPop	https://www.brainpop.com/
BrainPop ELL	https://ell.brainpop.com/
BrainPop Jr.	https://jr.brainpop.com/
EF High Flyers	https://highflyers.ef.com/
Epic!	https://www.getepic.com/
ESL Games Plus	https://www.eslgamesplus.com/
Flocabulary	https://www.flocabulary.com/
FluentU	https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/fluentu-learn-languages/id917892175?mt=8
Freckle	https://www.freckle.com
Futaba	https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/word-games-for-kids-futaba/id426517722?mt=8
Google Slides	https://www.google.com/slides/about/
Google Translate	https://translate.google.com/
Imagine Learning	https://www.imaginelearning.com/
IXL	https://www.ixl.com/
Kidblog	https://kidblog.org/home/
MobyMax	https://www.mobymax.com/
Mystery Science	https://mysteryscience.com/r1
NewsELA	https://newsela.com/
Play Factile	https://www.playfactile.com/
Raz-Kids	https://www.raz-kids.com/
Reading A-Z	https://www.readinga-z.com/
ReadWorks	https://www.readworks.org/
Starfall	http://www.starfall.com/
TweenTribune	https://www.tweentribune.com/
Unite for Literacy	https://www.uniteforliteracy.com/

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