

## Feature Article

*We Really Can Do it: strategies for using authentic sources to encourage language use.*  
*Ruth Ferree, University of Virginia*

Even the title, “Can-Do Statements,” suggests that these activities are within the realm of possibility for students. Using authentic materials as the starting point for language tasks can boost students’ confidence, providing them with evidence that they really *can* read French or understand a scene in a Spanish video (Weyers, 1999).

Thanks to the Internet, access to authentic materials is relatively easy. Let’s consider three categories of authentic sources and what students might do with them. First, on-line shopping sites, which I’ve seen generate debates as intense as if students had real money to spend. Second, video/film clips, which can engage students with strong visuals and stories. Finally, news sites, both text and video, offer the whole world of topics in the moment. These are especially useful for Advanced Placement-related themes such as global challenges and science and technology, but can also be useful with novice learners.

### Online shopping

Some of you may be familiar with the fun of shopping online and how easy it is to spend hours perusing the possibilities. Your students feel the same way! Aiming for the Novice Level, Interpretive “*I can understand familiar words, phrases, and sentences within short and simple texts related to everyday life,*” (ACTFL-NCSSFL), the students might visit the site of a business supply store <http://www.jpg.fr/> to look for back-to-school items. Students can be asked to compare what they pay to prices listed or to select supplies for the classroom.

Pretend shopping for clothes is almost as much fun as actually buying. Imagine using the department store Falabella <http://www.falabella.com/falabella-cl> as the anchor for activities about preparing for a trip. The students might get this explanation, “Imagine that you have won a trip to Chile. Part of the prize is \$300 to spend on clothing for the trip. You must make your selections from this website and write a list of items you wish to purchase to send to the sponsor.” Variations include asking students to have a simulated conversation with a parent about the clothing, such as why the red boots are important. This would fit with the Can-Do descriptor for Intermediate Level Interpersonal “*I can participate in conversations on familiar topics using sentences and series of sentences. I can handle short social interactions in everyday situations by asking and answering a variety of questions. I can usually say what I want to say about myself and my everyday life.*” (ACTFL-NCSSFL).

### Video and film clips

While shopping websites are fairly static, authentic film and video clips offer the thrill and challenge of understanding native speech in dynamic settings. An entire film at once can be overwhelming, but short segments offer the authentic oral input and topics for conversation from the everyday (“What do you like on your pizza?”) to the philosophical (What would you risk to save a famous piece of art?)

You Tube clips and DVDs are among the great gifts of the modern world. Include music videos, and the offerings are even richer. A segment with dramatic action presents many possibilities for narrating events in different time frames. This is an important element in the Intermediate High Presentational Statement “*I can make presentations in a generally organized way on school, work, and community topics, and on topics I have researched. I can make presentations on some events and experiences in various time frames.*” (ACTFL-NCSSFL).

To us this strategy, select a scene that includes risk or something to anticipate. Play the scene and stop at a crucial moment. Ask students to predict what will happen next. For instance, if you’ve seen the film *Indiana Jones and Raiders of the Lost Ark*, you might recall the scene when Indiana Jones is in the pit with snakes. Even if students have seen it, they can offer alternatives for what will happen. Going the other way in time, play the scene and ask students to write a summary of what happened, as if they were relating the incident to the authorities.

The basic guidelines for using clips are the same: 1) Use short clips. You Tube is a good place to start, but keeping your own clips has advantages. There are a number of free screen capture software programs that have decent reviews. I made the leap and purchased one of the upgrades, because I use video clips so often. 2) After initial interpretive activities, play the clip multiple times, each time with a different focus. 3) Use the clip content to start conversations. “You and a friend want to order pizza. Try to agree about what toppings to include.” Students should easily recognize that this meets the Intermediate Mid description for Interpersonal Communication, “*I can participate in conversations on familiar topics using sentences and series of sentences. I can handle short social interactions in everyday situations by asking and answering a variety of questions. I can usually say what I want to say about myself and my everyday life.*” (ACTFL-NCSSFL).

For Spanish speakers, there’s a wonderful resource called *Cine Con Clase!* <http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/SpanishFilm/principal.html> with pre-selected clips from over 25 films, carefully chosen and transcribed by real teachers. (The site is free, but asks for a registration.) Those clips are accompanied by scripts, glossaries, and suggested activities. The prompts described above are based on scenes from films found in *Cine con clase!* The pizza question comes from *Planta 4a*, a scene called “Pizza,” and the question about saving art is from the film *La hora de los valientes*, a *Cine con clase* scene entitled “En el Prado.”

## **Weather and Current Events**

No matter what the language, everybody talks about the weather. This is definitely one of the “familiar” topics described in Can-Do Statements across the Novice and Intermediate range. Online weather forecasts are accessible to even novice learners because they are somewhat, er, predictable. They usually offer visual supports. They can be found in all languages through Internet sources. Weather reports and forecasts can be used for Interpretive activities (“What was the temperature in Québec yesterday?”) and a range of interpersonal and presentational tasks as well. One teacher had groups of students learning about different cities and each day they had to verify the weather for their assigned city and give a brief weather report on it. This would match the Novice High Presentational description “*I can present basic information on familiar*

*topics using language I have practiced using phrases and simple sentences.*” (ACTFL-NCSSFL).

Discussions of current events can be used at all levels of language proficiency, building on authentic texts and video from news sites. Still, their real power is in supporting language learners moving into advanced levels and beyond. Gathering information from authentic sources and applying it in an essay is a key process for success at those levels.

The Advanced Low Interpretive Can Do statement is *“I can understand the main idea and some supporting details in organized speech on a variety of topics of personal and general interest. I can follow stories and descriptions of some length and in various time frames. I can understand information presented in a variety of genres on familiar topics, even when something unexpected is expressed.”* (ACTFL-NCSSFL). Opening class by playing a video news segment from Germany through Deutsche Welle <http://www.dw.de/themen/s-9077> and asking students to summarize what they heard after listening to a video will demonstrate that skill.

Because the range of topics in the news is limitless, students can follow their own interests, which should increase motivation to read. If the students are to use evidence to support their self-assessment of the Can-Do Statement, and the description for the Interpretive mode at the Advanced Low is, *“I can understand the main idea and some supporting details on a variety of topics of personal and general interest.,”* (ACTFL-NCSSFL), what more convincing evidence could a student need than being able to look at the home page of *El País* and understand the gist of the articles offered there?

Using authentic materials helps students believe in their ability to communicate in the target language. Real events motivate real conversations. Moreover, through authentic materials, we encounter all the C’s: Culture, Connections, Comparisons, Community and, of course, Communication. We really can do it.

### **Resources:**

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (2013). *NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements* Progress Indicators for Language Learners. Available at: [http://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Can-Do\\_Statements.pdf](http://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Can-Do_Statements.pdf)

Weyers, J.R. (1999). The effect of authentic video on communicative competence. Modern Language Journal, 99, 339-349.