

**We Teach Languages Episode 108: Less Burnout and More Input with Lance Piantaggini**

**Stacey Johnson**:  [00:01] This is "We Teach Languages," a podcast about language teaching from the diverse perspectives of teachers.

[00:08] [music]

**Stacey**:  [00:14] I'm Stacey Johnson. Today, on Episode 108, I get to interview Lance Piantaggini, also known as Magister P to his students and blog readers, about how language teachers can keep schoolwork at school, avoid burnout, and provide as much input as possible for their students.

[00:36] I know many of you are like me and struggle with work‑life balance. In fact, for a long time, my blog was called work‑life imbalance. I've talked to a lot of colleagues and friends over Twitter and in person about how to manage what can sometimes feel like a job where the work just never gets done. There's just always more to do.

[01:05] That's why I was really excited to get to talk to Lance. He does his job in a way that is consistent with his principled approach to language acquisition while also managing to keep his workload under control and enjoy his life outside of work.

[01:23] In fact, Lance is not only a teacher, he also makes time to be an author of comprehensible readers that he calls novelas for Latin students. I think it's really cool that he's writing materials that lots of other teachers are using in their classrooms. I kicked off our conversation by asking Lance about his side projects as an author and how he got started doing that work.

[01:49] [music]

**Lance Piantaggini**:  [01:53] It started with writing for my students. I think a lot of authors, a lot of independent authors started that way, from what I gather. It doesn't really exist. Why don't I write a book for my kids or with them? They find this topic interesting, so let's make a book out of it.

**Stacey**:  [02:13] What are some of your favorite novelas that you've written?

**Lance**:  [02:18] That's a good question. The first one has a special place. I had no idea there would even be a second one.

**Stacey**:  [02:29] What's your first one called?

**Lance**:  [02:30] It's called Piso Ille Poetulus, Piso the Little Poet. I wrote that in mind with poetry, because most Latin programs wait until years three and four to really get into the meter of Latin poetry.

[02:47] That also is when most of the students drop language ‑‑ at least Latin. I said, "Boy, there should be something for a first year or a second year student to read that can get them into this, into the rhythm of Latin poetry, because it really is kind of hip. It's too bad that most people don't experience it."

[03:12] That's where it got it all going, because I really miss my thing. It took so long to write that first one. It was something like eight, nine months of really working on it every day. I think once I established a workflow, other novelas were written in a fraction amount of time.

[03:37] After that book, I decided to make every single other one easier to read, requiring a smaller vocabulary, fewer words in each one.

**Stacey**:  [03:46] All of the novelas that you sell, you label them by how many unique words are included in them, right?

**Lance**:  [03:54] I do. I know there are different ways to account for that. It would have been some good discussions online. The way I do it is, it's unique words, not including different forms of words, which linguists know as inflections. If meaning is established in the book with a footnote.

[04:15] Some people don't include cognates in the word count. I do include cognates in the word count. Many times, I'll also establish meaning of a word like gladiator. Just to be like, "Yes, this is exactly what you think it is. Your instinct is correct on this one."

[04:34] That's mostly because some cognates, teachers think students get, but they don't. There's almost no guarantee which word is going to throw off one student or the next. I do include cognates in that word count.

**Stacey**:  [04:50] I also think by including cognates in the word count, you're expanding your potential audience to students who aren't native English speakers.

**Lance**:  [04:59] That is a great point. That's true. In my latest teaching position, I teach about 70 percent Latinx students. Often, I will establish meaning with a Spanish word.

[05:14] We found that many times, it's pretty close. It's often closer than the English. Sometimes can be a lot more obvious to a good handful of students in that room at any given time. We have to account for other native languages.

**Stacey**:  [05:32] I think that's fantastic. Building on that, I enjoy your blog. I followed it for a while. I just have a lot of strong, fuzzy feelings about people making Latin really relevant and accessible and increasing enrollments in Latin. I'm grateful for the work that you do. The fact that you do it publicly so other people can benefit from your work as well. Thank you.

**Lance**:  [05:55] Good, thank you. My pleasure.

**Stacey**:  [05:57] The thing I'm really excited to talk to you about today though is, I've been following your...I actually don't remember what the name is and I don't have it up. On Sundays, you've been posting on social media, basically, how awesome your life is without fanning and grading.

**Lance**:  [06:13] [laughs] Yeah. I tried to campaign to get people to do #TeacherSunday, which is a little funny because the first few times, I was seeing how that hashtag was used maybe three or four years ago. It was like lamenting over their teacher Sunday, which was piles of grading.

[06:36] It's funny that I was coming up from the opposite approach, which is showing people that teachers have...No, no, no. I should say teachers can live their lives on a Sunday.

**Stacey**:  [06:50] I need your help. I want you to please mentor me. I tend to be a person who really likes to stay busy. I jump in to big changes in my classroom and big projects at work and big things that I want to do that just take up all of my evenings and weekends.

[07:07] My teacher Sunday definitely does not look like your teacher Sunday. Mentor me. What do I need to do to get my life back?

**Lance**:  [07:14] I don't know because the first thing you keep repeating was, "I want to."

**Stacey**:  [07:19] Yeah, that's pretty...

[07:20] [laughter]

**Lance**:  [07:24] A typical week for me is, I leave the school at three o'clock, which happens to be the contractual time. We're there half an hour before school, half an hour after. I leave at that time, because I do my work during school. Often, I like to and I want to come home, go to the coffee shop, and work on a blog post. I want to process my own thoughts.

[07:50] I have 50 drafts of blog posts that will probably never be published. I might go back to them and say, "Is this relevant anymore?" I guess I just use my own blog as a diary. No one ever has to see this. Some of it does relate to the daily job, but it's also just something I'm interested in.

[08:08] If you're the type of teacher who wants to go home and sit there and design this three‑week unit that's going to be the best experience, hopefully, [laughs] or earn you whatever recognition it is you need at work and you want to do that, I say, go for it if you want to.

[08:32] Problem is most teachers I talk to aren't that kind of teacher. It's maybe like the same teachers who really want to put in that time on the weekends, after school clubs. If you're the school's mascot of a teacher and you love that, you're also probably the kid who likes studying grammar. [laughs]

**Stacey**:  [08:55] Hey.

**Lance**:  [08:59] Which we just know is very few. I'm just going at it from a strength in numbers. I hear a lot of teachers complaining about the work they're doing.

**Stacey**:  [09:07] I'll tell you what. Also, I hear a lot of teachers not just complaining about the work but wondering if they're cut out for it. It really is heartbreaking when I see talented, loving, enthusiastic teachers who just feel run down.

**Lance**:  [09:25] Yeah, burnt out. Totally burnt out.

**Stacey**:  [09:28] What I'm really wondering is, for those teachers who, here at the end of the year, are really feeling like they left it all on the field and they're really burnt out and is this the right job for them, do you have any insight that you can give us about how we can actually get the teacher work done during the teacher work day and maybe have a little something left over for our outside‑of‑school life? Because I know you've been doing that well.

**Lance**:  [09:57] Sure. How to do your work during the day so that you don't have to do it at night? I think you need a few systems in place as a teacher in order to carve out that time. One of the top things I've been noticing in the last year or so was our teachers try to change practices by adding on to what they're doing. I think that's a big problem.

[10:18] It sounds like some pretty solid advice to, "Oh, just try this one thing out and then go from there." I've just observed that that just piles on the demand.

[10:33] What can you do? What can you systematically change to give yourself time during your planning period to do the really high leverage stuff, which is probably just writing comprehensible text for your students? That is the only thing I do during my planning period is I create embedded readings of the latest animated video clip someone shared.

[11:00] It's because, A, I don't teach grammar. I don't at all. I think once you get over that, which a lot of people are still on the fence about, once you realize it's not necessary, that frees up a lot of time. Because if teaching grammar isn't necessary, you don't need to test grammar.

[11:20] A big part of what teachers do on their personal time is grading tests and/or creating the next test. If you don't have to do those, think about how much time is saved right there.

[11:35] I'd say, everybody right now could probably take whatever traditional quiz or test they have, chop it in half, get rid of half of the questions. If it's two‑page, go down one page. Everyone could do that and still wind up with a lot of evidence to show growth.

[11:53] If you're looking for some kind of, I don't know, weakness area, we can all reduce the lengths of our quizzes and tests immediately. The other immediate thing is to just do in‑class, whole class grading.

**Stacey**:  [12:11] Let me make sure I understand. What I'm imagining is that the students themselves are correcting their own materials?

**Lance**:  [12:20] Yeah.

**Stacey**:  [12:20] Can you give me an example of what something you might design that would be like this?

**Lance**:  [12:26] I give strictly four statement true or false quizzes. They're all input‑based. This is all in the target language. This is in Latin. They are receiving input as we are going over the short quiz we just took. We're just looking for, "Oh, is it true or false? Oh, it's false. Why was it false? This is why it was false. It wasn't true because of this."

**Stacey**:  [12:50] Is it based on a text that they read?

**Lance**:  [12:52] Yeah, I project a text and say, "Let's read this and spend one minute to read this text," which, by the way, is super pacifying. Everyone's engaged, because they know that that's their time to understand what the quiz is going to be about. It's a sneaky way to provide input. It's short enough that it's not much impact on my class.

[13:22] That's why, when I say correcting, it's really just marking, "Oh, no, it was true." It's not something that might be criteria‑based, where you have a writing rubric and you're looking for, "Oh, am I using connector words or not?" Because that is what takes a lot of time.

[13:46] Teachers who give that kind of feedback and are doing those kinds of corrections, they're doing a lot more than they have to because the most compelling evidence we have as a body of evidence is that reading creates better writers.

[14:03] Maybe you. Let's say, you might want to have to go and then give a writing assessment if you are teaching this semester. If you're at a level when you're working on writing, you've acquired so much language already. That's a separate thing.

[14:20] I would say most teachers are not teaching students a second language who are at that level, who need that much focus on improving their writing.

**Stacey**:  [14:32] Your quiz model is not so different from what I would do in class either. It's what I would call an interpretive quiz, where they have a short text that's very similar to text we've looked at previously in class and keep the grading really simple by not requiring a lot of production.

[14:51] A couple of true or false, categorizing some of the vocab where I say, "Write down every word from the text that's an animal or something like that." Boom, I have some evidence of their progress without having to kill myself. That's actually heartening that I'm doing something that you would say works.

**Lance**:  [15:10] What you just described could take almost no time at all to prepare.

**Stacey**:  [15:17] I actually never thought about having them self‑grade, but that's a really good idea. Why should I take that home? Even though it takes 30 minutes to mark 30 tests, but why should I take it home when they can get the feedback right then?

**Lance**:  [15:30] Yes. There's something that we talk about is immediate feedback, timely feedback. It's on at least every teacher evaluation rubric I've seen in my different states I've worked in. There's usually a section about the kind of feedback, and it should be timely. You don't want to take a stack of work and then give it to the kid a month later. That's irrelevant.

[15:53] In class, it's actually immediate feedback. You just mentioned how by doing that in class, you save, say, one minute per paper. You've just saved half an hour at home. In class, that half an hour, the correcting can all be in the target language. It's actually part of class, part of providing input.

[16:18] I don't think we need to look at it as different. I don't think we need to plan for our test day as if it's, "If you're finished with the quiz, take out a book and read." Or punish the kids for finishing early. That's even worse. By incorporating it, getting evidence as part of the class, we're not pressured to come up with some complicated format for a test or quiz.

[16:50] I've been very deliberately using the word test or quiz and not assessment. I don't know if you've noticed that.

**Stacey**:  [16:58] No, I haven't.

**Lance**:  [16:59] These are the things...

[17:00] [crosstalk]

**Stacey**:  [17:00] I did not notice that teacher's input. Thanks for pointing it out.

**Lance**:  [17:05] [laughs] These are things that most people will call assessments. I really try to make the distinction that my assessment of whether or not a student understands language is in real‑time during interaction.

[17:18] They don't have to speak. They don't have to say anything. There are a lot of signs of incomprehension our students can give us. You can easily scan a room and pick out multiple students who aren't understanding without any pen, paper, whatever.

[17:38] The adjustment is to make the language comprehensible. To the teacher, it doesn't matter who doesn't understand in that moment. You just know that at least one person didn't hear what you said. You were too fast. Maybe it was a new vocab word. Maybe it was a forgotten word. Whatever. All you know is that you've just assessed the class. You've now given an immediate feedback by making the language more comprehensible.

[18:07] I consider those authentic assessments. I do this all the time in workshops, in presentations. I'll just say a Latin sentence. I'll ask someone something in Latin. I can tell within seconds if they're a Latin teacher.

[18:22] [laughter]

**Lance**:  [18:25] If you think of it like that, you can tell if someone knows the target language. Then it just becomes a way of refining...This fourth year student of French just shows signs of incomprehension. The longer you're teaching you know how to adjust that.

[18:44] Those are my authentic assessments. Everything else is school stuff, because people expect it.

**Stacey**:  [18:49] I have one more thing. For the past few years, I've only been teaching SLA and teaching methods. I'm going back to the language classroom in the fall. I have collected a few of your blog post about zero prep activities.

**Lance**:  [19:04] Oh, yeah.

**Stacey**:  [19:05] Just because I have a tendency to plan so over the top. I'm really purposefully trying to ramp down how much planning I put in to one 60‑minute period. Can you share just what we need to know about zero prep activities and maybe a couple that you use that are effective?

**Lance**:  [19:26] Yeah. I'll first point out that I use my blog as my reference place. This stuff is here. I consult it frequently. One thing about no prep activities is, you only need one. How about that? This could be a mantra, this one takeaway. All you need is one. What one? All you need is one picture.

[19:51] Sometimes, you can sustain half an hour. Looking at one picture, asking students what they think is happening, predictions, all that. If it's high enough interest or if you ask the questions that build interest, all you needed was one picture. All you need is one. You need one sentence on the board. Start class, to read, talk about.

[20:16] Maybe it's something you want to build on. Maybe it's something that starts a story if you do collaborative storytelling. One text, whether it's one sentence to a paragraph to a page. Whether it's, we're coming, we start today with reading independently for 10 minutes.

[20:35] The follow‑up could be no prep at all. What did you read? Did you like it? Who else has read this book? What do you think is going to happen next? Again, it's all the same questions about different content.

**Stacey**:  [20:50] I would probably call what you just described as establishing classroom routines.

**Lance**:  [20:55] Oh, yeah.

**Stacey**:  [20:57] I decided at the beginning of the semester, here is the conversation that I want my students to be really good at having by the end of the semester. I'm going to start introducing these questions and introducing these routines of every time we see a text or a picture, we're just in the habit of having this conversation about that text or that picture.

[21:18] Does that make sense?

**Lance**:  [21:20] Yeah. I'm wondering if what you think of that is like what I do with my verb posters and question posters. Early on, what I would do is just look at my board and look at one of the verbs and ask a question using that verb.

[21:38] Which means if I have the top, a good core, top five frequent verbs up there ‑‑ like is, has, wants likes, goes ‑‑ yes, I will ask who likes X. I will ask that maybe 10, 15 times every single class. What's funny is you think that will get old but it doesn't.

**Stacey**:  [22:01] As long as the topic keeps changing. The content changes.

**Lance**:  [22:05] Exactly. One idea is to have enough exposure to the types of questions that your students might be asking by the end of the semester in some spontaneous conversation that I see that as similarly exposing students to the questions that are on my wall. They're there the whole time.

[22:28] You can also go a little more in routines in having daily routines or weekly routines. For two months, I'll do the same thing every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. I have my Thursday routine. That's one less thing to think about.

[22:47] For example, one of the last weekly routines I had is...It was like, Thursday is a reading activity. That means, the only thing I have to do the night before is choose a no prep reading activity from my list. I knew I wanted a reading activity. Now, it's just a matter of, "Oh, we haven't done this one in a while. Let's do that."

**Stacey**:  [23:12] I think what I've enjoyed most about this conversation is, we have very different terminology to describe the things we do. I really feel like the core of it is the same, which is, we're providing appropriate input, helping students process it, and then providing developmentally appropriate ways for them to express themselves.

[23:34] The terminology issue is really different. I really feel your strategies. I think that teachers who might be struggling and wondering, "Why is this so hard?" Just by having your very measured, predictable approach to what happens in the classroom, that could really benefit a lot of us.

**Lance**:  [23:51] Yeah, look at this. We each have our specialized vocabulary.

**Stacey**:  [23:54] Thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me today. I really enjoyed it.

**Lance**:  [23:57] Thank you.

[23:59] [music]

**Stacey**:  [24:03] This is one of those evergreen topics. It seems appropriate to talk about it here at the end of the school year, when we're all tired and wondering how are we going to do this again next year.

[24:18] If you have go‑tos for managing work‑life balance and keeping your schoolwork at school, I would love to hear about them. I know of several resources that I've linked to in the show notes, a podcast episode and a few blogs that I think would be useful for folks. If you have tips or tricks or anything else that you could share with us, I would really love to hear from you.

[24:46] You can leave us a voicemail or send a text message to 629‑888‑3398. You can reach out on social media. We're on Facebook and Twitter, @weteachlang. You can also leave a comment on any of our episodes or use our contact form on our web page, weteachlang.com.

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