

**Episode 94: Stefanie Neal**

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

[00:09] [musical interlude]

**Stacey**:  [00:12] I'm Stacey Johnson. Today, on episode 94, returning contributor Caroline Schlegel introduces Stefanie Neal, her friend and former colleague, who is a Latin teacher who's made the transition from a grammar‑based curriculum to proficiency, spoken Latin, and comprehensible input strategies in her classroom.

**Caroline Schlegel**:  [00:40] My name is Caroline Schlegel and I am a Spanish teacher in Washington County, Maryland. Today I have with me Stefanie Neal, who is a Latin teacher in Wicomico County on the Eastern Shore of Maryland.

[00:56] Stefanie is truly the reason I survived my first year teaching. She took me under her wing. [laughs] She showed me the ropes of effectively managing a classroom through established procedures, things that she had done for years.

[01:09] I truly admire her as a professional, because she has completely changed her approach to language instruction in the best interests of her students. As a Latin teacher, the shift from teaching Latin as a translated language, to teaching Latin as a spoken language with comprehensible input was definitely not easy.

[01:31] Stefanie, can you tell us a little bit about yourself? Welcome. Where are you from, what you teach, how long you've been in the profession?

**Stefanie Neal**:  [01:38] Thank you for that introduction. That was very sweet of you. I am from Central Virginia. I graduated with a Bachelor's degree from Radford University in Latin and Secondary Education.

[01:52] I taught in Central Virginia for two‑and‑a‑half years in Chesterfield County before I moved to Maryland's Eastern Shore. I have been in Wicomico County since the year 2000. [laughs] I've got 21 years' total experience teaching Latin at the middle school and high school level.

**Caroline**:  [02:10] That's amazing.

**Stefanie**:  [02:11] Sometimes I think I'm crazy for sticking with it, but it really is fun.

[02:15] [laughter]

**Caroline**:  [02:15] That's what I love most about our profession. When you go to work, it's fun. I love that you agreed to join me today, Stefanie. Teaching Latin as a comprehensible language with comprehensible input definitely was not a popular trend in previous years. Recently that's really changed. Over the course of your 21‑year career ‑‑ holy cow...

[02:38] [laughter]

**Stefanie**:  [02:38] I can't believe it.

**Caroline**:  [02:40] I'm in my 12th year. I'm thinking, "Wow, so much has changed." The way you have approached your language instruction has truly, completely shifted. Can you tell us a little bit about your past methods of instruction, and what you did in your language classroom previous to what you do now?

**Stefanie**:  [02:57] Yes. What I used to do equals boring. What I do now equals awesome. It is the most difficult thing I have ever done in my life. It was more difficult than birthing children.

[03:09] [laughter]

**Stefanie**:  [03:10] It was more difficult than getting my Bachelor's degree, getting my Master's degree. [laughs] I wasn't sure if I could do it. It was scary at the same time.

[03:19] My former way of teaching was old‑school grammar translation. That's the way that I was taught. I had Latin for five years in high school. I majored in it when I was in college. I never spoke it. I was never taught to speak it. I didn't hear very many people say much of anything in Latin.

[03:39] You were taught to read and interpret. It was like a literature class. Of course I always thought it was cool, but it's very boring.

[03:48] [laughter]

**Stefanie**:  [03:48] The whole grammar translation approach doesn't speak to many people. It doesn't get through to every student. As you know, so many trends come along in education. The one thing that you know you need to do as a teacher is reach all of your kids.

**Caroline**:  [04:05] Absolutely.

**Stefanie**:  [04:06] Grammar translation doesn't do that. It's only going to speak to your four‑percenters, the cream of the crop. They're the ones that are going to get anything regardless of how you do it.

**Caroline**:  [04:18] [laughs] The language geeks. The ones that are like you and me, that become language teachers, right?

[04:23] [laughter]

**Stefanie**:  [04:23] Exactly. My program was dying. Our program ‑‑ there's one other teacher with me here in Wicomico County that teaches Latin. We realized we need to do something. It was a whole lot more than that going on at the time, but this proficiency‑based, comprehensible input, like I said, it's scary. It was the craziest thing I've ever done in my life, but well worth it.

**Caroline**:  [04:53] As your colleague for many years ‑‑ this is a fun little side note ‑‑ I went to a high school where Stefanie was the Latin teacher.

**Stefanie**:  [05:04] Yes, true story.

**Caroline**:  [05:05] I taught Spanish.

[05:06] [laughter]

**Caroline**:  [05:05] Her classroom was right next to mine. When I started teaching in Wicomico County, I was fortunate enough to also have a classroom right next to hers, as a professional, and not as a student next to the cool Latin teacher.

[05:22] [laughter]

**Caroline**:  [05:24] For many years as your colleague, I watched you convert your classroom to one based on proficiency. You used to use a grammar translation method. Now you're using comprehensible input.

[05:37] When did you first become interested in this, or curious about converting your methodology? Was there any one moment, or person, or PD opportunity that you had that really said, "This is exactly what I need to do?"

**Stefanie**:  [05:53] There was a combination of things. My colleague, Tammy Kantzes, was instrumental in getting this done.

[06:00] It was probably about 10 to 7 years ago when it seemed like, at the end of every school year, we would look at the numbers in all we had. We probably serviced four schools at that time. We still had a middle school that we could have a lot more class in.

[06:16] Every year the numbers got smaller and smaller and smaller. Every year, I would always wonder, "Is this the year where I'm going to have to have five preps and teach English, when I have absolutely no desire to teach English?"

[06:32] [laughter]

**Stefanie**:  [06:32] It's that. Ringing in the back of our heads is all the talk that we received with professional development in regards to proficiency‑based. People used to say things to us like, "Tammy and Stefanie. Don't worry about that, Latin's not proficiency‑based."

[06:48] [laughter]

**Stefanie**:  [06:48] They would say things like that and they would exclude us from things. We're like, "It should be."

**Caroline**:  [06:56] Wait a second," right? It should be.

**Stefanie**:  [06:59] You start to question, "Why isn't it?" or, "Why don't people speak it?" You can speak it. I had always done small things. I would always teach the kids greetings. I would teach them how to talk about the weather and things like that. That was really the extent of it when I did grammar translation.

[07:14] Tammy took a leap of faith and attended a Latin‑immersion boot camp, which she's done for several years. This was during a time in my life where I was either pregnant or having kids or had babies. It was a no‑go for me.

[07:29] She went. She would come back and share with me everything that she had learned. She said, "I'm crazy. You're crazy. This is what we need to do. Let's do this. This is super cool." As crazy as I am, I said, "You're right."

[07:43] [laughter]

**Stefanie**:  [07:44] Let's do this. Let's switch stuff over." It was a very long process. I hate to say this out loud, but I don't even remember the first year.

[07:52] [laughter]

**Stefanie**:  [07:52] It was such a blur. It was trying to figure...The first year was the most difficult, because we bit off more than we could chew. We failed at things, but you learn from your mistakes.

**Caroline**:  [08:04] I was going to say, "From failure comes success."

**Stefanie**:  [08:06] We were trying to blend the textbook. That was our lifeline. That was all that we had with the proficiency‑based approach. Looking back, I was looking the other day at some stuff that I had done in Latin One, the first year that we did it. I'm like, "Oh my gosh."

[08:23] [laughter]

**Stefanie**:  [08:23] What we do now is so different. We don't use the textbook at all, anymore.

**Caroline**:  [08:29] Yeah. It's amazing, the comprehensible input strategies, the way it changes what you do. I know, as a teacher, even in the 12 years that I've been teaching, I look back at some of the things that I did in my first year teaching, I'm like, "What was I actually thinking?"

[08:46] [laughter]

**Stefanie**:  [08:48] Exactly.

**Caroline**:  [08:48] I'm sure, in recreating the way you deliver your lessons and the way you engage your students, that first year working with comprehensible input in Latin as a spoken language, very much, in many ways was probably like being a first‑year teacher again.

**Stefanie**:  [09:04] It was. Here I am in year 21. I'm 43 years old. I still feel like I'm a first‑year teacher at different times.

[09:13] [laughter]

**Caroline**:  [09:13] Yeah. I don't think that ever goes away.

**Stefanie**:  [09:16] But it's OK. It spices things up. It makes things more interesting. I already knew when I went to college that I was going to be a teacher. I knew that I did not want the kind of job where you sit behind a computer and do the same thing every day. [laughs] This was right up my alley, [laughs] changing over to comprehensible input.

**Caroline**:  [09:33] I love that about you. What I hear you saying, which is one of the most important things, and one of the most important points that you've brought up, is that you are constantly changing things based on the students that you have before you.

[09:46] Meeting their needs, differentiating your instruction, making sure you're doing what you need to do in order to keep your program alive and keep you students interested and engaged in the language. Have you made it through converting all of your levels, at this point?

**Stefanie**:  [10:00] Yes, except for level four. We're both picking and doing topics and things like that. I guess Latin Four is the least developed. One, Two and Three are pretty fleshed out.

[10:14] Even last year, one of the things we did, at the very end of school, we met. We had our topics that had occurred and the vocabulary that we had taught in levels one, two, and three, and fleshed out what we wanted to take out, what we wanted to do, and what was new, which was super cool. That was an awesome way to start this year.

[10:35] There were some things that we threw out in level three and replaced. Like I said, we need to do some more work for Latin Four, but we did not have a Latin Four this year.

**Caroline**:  [10:46] How did you manage the workload?

**Stefanie**:  [10:49] I don't know.

[10:50] [laughter]

**Stefanie**:  [10:52] I had Tammy. If I didn't have Tammy Kantzes, I wouldn't have been able to do it. She is the researcher. She reads. We follow blogs of Latin teachers who teach with CI. We're on Facebook pages, reading all these posts and things like that.

[11:09] She's the reader. She reads it. She's like, "Oh, Stef, you've got to read this one." She reads through things for me. She would say, "Oh, look at this idea. Look at this idea." I'm the doer. I'm good at getting things started, like, "Oh, this is an idea, so let's go ahead and create this from this." The fact that we share everything was instrumental in being able to get all this done.

[11:33] You just have to take baby steps because what your Latin One year one looked like and what it looks like now are two completely different things. I think this is our seventh year of doing Latin One CI. Even this year, we're changing the order of some things, switching things up.

**Caroline**:  [11:56] As a Spanish teacher, we have all of these authentic resources. I can pull up Univision news channel, and I can pull a news clip. I can pull up the newspaper and pull real‑world relevant thing for my students to take a look at depending on which theme I'm teaching to and what I'm addressing. How do you find resources?

**Stefanie**:  [12:19] Some of the blogs share things that Latin teachers have created. Tammy and I have created things to teach like a certain set of vocabulary. A lot of it is just things that we've created, little stories that we've made that we thought were interesting. Or, you have your set of vocabulary and you do some kind of CI strategy where you get the kids to make stories. They love to write stories.

[12:52] That's what it starts out at in the beginning years, and then you could dip into the authentic resources. Tammy and I Really like Aesop fables. There are so many of them. They always have some kind of a moral at the end. They're relatively short, even though they take an eon to teach, and that the vocab is limited. You're not trying to teach your kids a hundred words a five‑day period.

[13:19] She had developed an Aesop fable. I had developed an Aesop fable. I started mine off, maybe in October in top mind with my level threes, put everything into SharePoint. She taught hers in October and put everything in the SharePoint. Now, we've switched. Now, I'm teaching her unit to my kids. She's teaching my unit to her kids. It's that kind of a situation.

**Caroline**:  [13:47] 20 years ago, we weren't teaching with proficiency in mind in our classroom, necessarily. Doing verb conjugation charts and looking at direct translation, and how do you say this list of 87 vocab words by next Wednesday. [laughs] A lot of us can relate to that, for sure. I'm so glad that you guys have the CI strategies to help you make your language come alive.

[14:15] Speaking of strategies, what are some of your favorite comprehensible input strategies as a Latin teacher?

**Stefanie**:  [14:23] My favorite one is something called picture talk. That is my absolute favorite. You throw up a picture. It could be a picture of literally anything. You tell your kids in, of course, in your target language, you have two minutes to talk to your partner and then you need to talk to me. When you tell them it's going to be speaking grade, the hands go up.

[14:45] [laughter]

**Stefanie**:  [14:45] If I see a kid that wants to try, and doesn't have...can't figure out what to say maybe because everyone's already stolen their thunder, so to speak, they've all spoken ahead, you can ask them questions about the picture and if they can answer it. Some kids are really shy and they don't want to talk. It's really fun to find pictures.

[15:05] At the beginning of a unit, I will, in like my first PowerPoint, collect as many pictures as I can where it would have a compilation of the vocabulary words that we're working on, so that I could pull them up and use them on different days. It's also fun to try to find crazy pictures, or to make crazy pictures so that the kids don't run out of things to say.

[15:26] Even in a level one class, by the time I get the first picture up and ask them to start talking about it, I write everything that they say on the board. Usually, that way, kids don't repeat things, and they can see what's going on.

[15:41] You'll see that even in a level one class, you could almost talk the whole period and stay in the target language the whole period on just one picture. I think that's just amazing. even today, I think it's cool. Picture talk is definitely my favorite.

[15:56] Another one that, I love and the kids love it too, it's called movie talk where you have a little...You don't actually have a whole movie. Of course, they hear that, they think they're going to watch a movie.

**Caroline**:  [16:06] [laughs]

**Stefanie**:  [16:06] That's not what it is at all. You use a clip of something. It could be like a Pixar short or anything like that, and you have your little 5 to 10 list of vocabulary that you want to teach them. You use the movie as a vehicle to teach the vocabulary. There are so many different things that you can do with it after that.

**Caroline**:  [16:26] It's awesome. I love movie talk in my Spanish class.

**Stefanie**:  [16:29] I love it.

**Caroline**:  [16:29] It's so much fun. The kids, it really helps them understand what's going on in the scene, and it really helps them understand the target language. For some reason, I have so much success with movie talk. It's magical. [laughs]

**Stefanie**:  [16:42] It is. It's so cool.

**Caroline**:  [16:46] Movie talk, and then you said the other one, I'm sorry was?

**Stefanie**:  [16:48] Picture talk.

**Caroline**:  [16:49] Picture talk.

**Stefanie**:  [16:49] I have one more. [laughs]

**Caroline**:  [16:50] Oh, awesome. [laughs]

**Stefanie**:  [16:51] The kids love...Believe it or not, they like to write. They think it's cool when they get to write their own story. There's another strategy called four‑word picture story. They have a frame. It's just like a piece of paper divided into four.

[17:07] On that side, they would draw an entire picture. On the flip side, I have lines and I have a list of words. This one usually works best if you've got a long list of words, like at least 10 words that are new, that they've never seen before. You tell them that in each frame, they have to use one new word so that they would make a minimum four‑sentence story.

[17:33] You'll find that most kids do more than that. Sometimes, they need a little bit more to explain. The point is, is that they're not very long. I scan the pictures. I type up their little stories underneath. I make a booklet. You could print a booklet from PowerPoint. Oh my gosh. "When are you going to have our booklets ready? When can we read our booklets?"

**Caroline**:  [17:54] It's fun.

**Stefanie**:  [17:55] Usually, most classes, I have to split it up into four or five different booklets. It takes a while. It's a lot of work to put them together the first time. Once you have them together, you have two to three weeks' worth of lessons. Like I said, they really enjoy reading their own stories and stuff, and seeing their artwork, too.

**Caroline**:  [18:16] I was going to say, the students, they have ownership, then, in what you're teaching. What better way to connect with your kids than to have them create the curricula that you're teaching to them? That's such a great idea.

**Stefanie**:  [18:28] Yeah, and their books are on the bookshelf in the classroom. [laughs] They think that's so cool. [laughs]

**Caroline**:  [18:34] Classroom library, I love it. Obviously the kids are benefiting from seeing their work in your classroom. What else do you think, or how do you think your students have benefited from your shift, from teaching grammar translation, to now being a comprehensible‑input Latin teacher?

**Stefanie**:  [18:52] They are almost all successful, whereas before, not all of them were successful. The kids that aren't successful are the ones that, for whatever reason, they have low attendance. If you're not there, you can't get it.

**Caroline**:  [19:11] That's so critical. [laughs]

**Stefanie**:  [19:11] Other than that, if you're in the room, you're successful. That's amazing, and it's amazing to them. They're like, "Why do I have such a bad grade in this class, but I have an A in your class?" I'm like, "It's the way that we do things here."

[19:27] The other benefit for the students is that they talk. They talk in Latin. They talk to me in school in Latin. Outside of my class, they see me in the hallway and they talk to me. They even do it in public.

**Caroline**:  [19:40] That's awesome. [laughs]

**Stefanie**:  [19:41] I'm at the mall, but I feel that I was put here to teach them how to be responsible people and how to treat each other with kindness. If they learned Latin, great.

[19:53] [laughter]

**Stefanie**:  [19:53] Awesome, but if the only thing they remember, [laughs] is that they're supposed to be good and nice to other people, that's all that matters.

**Caroline**:  [20:00] That's 100 percent true. I love that, with Latin, you're able to teach...That's one of the things I love so much about teaching language, is that we're teaching young people how to properly communicate with other people.

[20:15] I don't think in any other class we're actually teaching the communication skills that are necessary in order to be successful, be it in banking, or the furniture business, or in medicine.

[20:30] [laughter]

**Caroline**:  [20:30] We're teaching kids how to have relationships and carry on conversations, be it in English, Latin, whatever. That's super important.

**Stefanie**:  [20:41] Definitely.

**Caroline**:  [20:42] Do you have any advice, Stefanie, that you would give to other Latin teachers across the country who are looking to convert to teaching Latin as a spoken language?

**Stefanie**:  [20:50] The first thing I would say is that you have to do everything in baby steps. You can't just go from teaching grammar translation one year, to the next year being all comprehensible input. That's not possible.

**Caroline**:  [21:03] That's such great advice.

**Stefanie**:  [21:04] You need to find a partner‑in‑crime, so to speak. [laughs] Someone that you can share your ideas with and say, "You do this. I'll do this. Let's do this together." You know what else you've got to do? Get over the fear. [laughs] You're going to fail at least once. [laughs] It'll be OK.

**Caroline**:  [21:25] As teachers, when we're willing to take risks in front of our students and be vulnerable and go out there on a limb and try things, the more willing our students are going to be to do the exact same thing in our classes.

**Stefanie**:  [21:39] Yes, they are. That's true. I can't tell you how many times I told those kids the first few years, "We're going to try something new today. I think it's going to be great. I think it's going to work."

[21:50] If it didn't work, I would say the next day, "I figured out what I did wrong. Here's what I should have done." They're like, "Yeah, that would have been better [inaudible] ." It's like, "Yeah. Sorry." [laughs]

**Caroline**:  [22:01] Yeah, it's a learning process. When you're transparent with the kids, they appreciate that. Then you have a lot of credibility as a Latin teacher, because you have done that and been open with your kids about how you're converting your classroom.

[22:17] You are a fascinating person. You're a wonderful friend. I love hearing you talk about what you do in your classroom. I love the passion that you have for Latin and language in general.

**Stefanie**:  [22:31] Thank you so much.

[22:33] [laughter]

**Caroline**:  [22:33] It's definitely inspiring. I hope those who are listening and considering teaching Latin as a spoken language, or those who are currently teaching Latin as a spoken language, that they can identify with some of the things that you're saying, and/or learn from the information that you've shared today.

[22:50] Stefanie, thank you so much for your time and for joining us on We Teach Languages.

**Stefanie**:  [22:57] Thank you so much.

[23:00] [background music]

**Stacey**:  [23:01] We would love to hear your thoughts on this topic. You can find us on Twitter or Facebook @weteachlang. You can comment on any of the episodes on our website at weteachlang.com.

[23:12] Don't forget to tell your friends and colleagues about the show. Please consider leaving us a review on iTunes or on your podcast app of choice, to help others find the podcasts. Thank you so much for listening. Bye‑bye.

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