

A New Note About TPR

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I am pleased that a group of teachers is assisting other teachers in the successful application of tools for implementing the **comprehension-first principle of language learning**. I would like to share with you nine laws to consider for the 21st Century.

Asher's Law #1 (Multiple languages)

The noble goal of the 20th Century was to acquire a second language. The effort was not a stunning success since less than five percent of students actually achieved fluency in another language. Given the explosion of valuable information in the last decade or two about the right hemisphere of the brain, a realistic goal in the 21st Century is fluency in multiple languages. For example, one discovery is that language instruction was “dragged underwater” in the 20th century by the myth that fluency begins with speaking. Actually, the reverse is true: When speaking appears, language learning has already taken place.

Asher's Law #2 (Start before puberty)

All of the evidence suggests that high school is too late for students to enjoy a native pronunciation. Children have the unique, perhaps biological, advantage of acquiring a native pronunciation of any target language.

One of the great breakthroughs in the 21st Century will be to demonstrate how to enable adults to acquire a native pronunciation. Recently, I called United Airlines six times in hopes of getting an agent I could understand in English. They think they are speaking English, but I call it near-English. If they attempt to speak fast, it becomes jibberish.

Asher's Law #3 (Get it in the first exposure)

There is no way students of all ages can acquire multiple languages if we continue playing to the left hemisphere of the brain with exercises such as “Listen and repeat after me!” or “Memorize this dialogue” or “Conjugate this verb.” My research shows that the best chance for long-term retention of anything, including mathematical concepts, is to get it in the first exposure.

Each repetition indicates that the left brain is resisting the intake of the information. The left brain is erasing the information as fast as it comes in. You may have experienced this in “cramming for a test.” This is a “sledge-hammer” strategy with repetition, repetition, repetition until your brain says, “Ok. I give up! I can't take anymore. I'm tired. I'll retain the information until this test is over and then I will erase it.”

Asher's Law #4 (You only have a grace period of five minutes)

I often tell language educators around the world that they only have five minutes to convince students that they can actually learn the target language---only five minutes. If you cannot do it in five minutes, you will not convince them if they stay with you for a year. That's why my tool, the Total Physical Response, should be the primary tool in every instructor's linguistic toolbox. Within five minutes, your students should be excited as they say to themselves, "Wow. I understand everything she is saying in Chinese! You know what?---I think I can actually learn this language."

Now, it is important to realize that the Total Physical Response, known worldwide as TPR, is not the only tool in your toolbox. You have a batch of secondary tools such as role reversal, storytelling, skits created by your students, games, student kits, the Rosetta Stone, and other techniques you have acquired over the years, Knowing which tool to use and when to use it is the art of teaching which depends upon the talent of the individual instructor.

Asher's Law #5 (Words to delete from your vocabulary)

The first word to delete is "methods." The reason: Method implies a formula and formula implies science. Teaching is an art---the highest art form, not a science. Science can provide some valuable tools for your linguistic toolbox, but how you apply each tool depends upon your talent and skill as an instructor.

The second word to delete is "translate." On the surface it looks like a direct and easy solution to get what Krashen calls, comprehensible input. The problem: "Open your books to page 63 and translate the first paragraph." For the moment, the meaning is apparent, but it disappears because it is not believable. When you translate, you make assertions without any proof. Picture this: I ask a man and a woman to stand. I say to the class (pointing to the woman), "This is a murra." Then (pointing to the man, "This is a rashal." The student's brain automatically evaluates that assertion this way: 30 people in this room believe that person is a woman and that other person is a man. Only one person asserts otherwise. Who should I believe?

The third word to delete is "memorize." When you ask them to memorize vocabulary or dialogues or verb conjugations, you switched them into slow-motion learning of the left brain. There is an exception, however, discovered by Woodruff and Swaffar in their ambitious experiment at the University of Texas. Using comprehension-first with TPR as the primary tool, hundreds of college students moved on the fast-track towards fluency in German. After about ten weeks, the students were aware that it would be helpful to memorize certain fine points of grammar and pronunciation. They requested and received guidance in what to memorize. It is important to realize that memory work came from student requests, not a demand from the instructors.

Asher's Law #6 (Organize around student goals)

Teacher goals are of keen interest to instructors, but not necessarily students. Examples of teacher goals: Cover Chapter 1, then cover Chapter 2 until I get to the end of the book. The objective is fluency in the target language. A different grammar point will be featured in each lesson. The student's reward: They get to start a new textbook next year when I cover Chapter 1, then Chapter 2, etc.

I find the word "cover" interesting. An alternate meaning is "hide." Certainly the target language is hidden somewhere in those chapters. And why should covering chapters in one book

followed by covering chapters in another book be fascinating to students? Why should grammar be fascinating to students? Grammar is like one's body; it works best when we are unaware it is working.

Student goals come from your students. Keep the goals simple and something that your students can achieve in a short time, perhaps one or two meetings. Here are some examples: How to order breakfast in Germany? How to direct a taxi driver to the hospital, train station, or hotel? How to have a conversation with the opposite sex?

Asher's Law #7 (Encourage doodling with the language)

Doodling means to mess around with the target language. Doodling means to play around with the target language. Just performing in class is not enough. Students should be encouraged to experiment outside of class with novel sentences. Encourage them to talk to each other, to joke with each other, and to make up crazy conversations in the target language.

There is nothing sacred about the target language. Use it to laugh and have fun. I remember standing on the veranda during a break from the Arabic program at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California and bantering in Arabic with an Army captain:

"Who is that woman?"

"What woman?"

"That one walking with the huge, ugly man.

Are they your relatives visiting us?"

"No. I think the guy looks more like you."

"Wait! Let me look again. Yes. He does look like one of my uncles."

Asher's Law # 8 (Some practice is good)

There is an important difference between repetition before learning and practice after learning. For maximum gain, there should be no repetitions before learning. Learning should happen in the first exposure, but after learning is a different story. After learning, the more one plays with the language, the steeper the learning curve for fluency in understanding the subtle blending and truncating of words in the target language.

In my early experiments with Japanese as the target language, my research associate, Dr. Shirou Kunihiro, told me this story: When his ship arrived in New York Harbor on his first visit to the USA, the US officer came on board and greeted Shirou with, "Whasurname?"

In 12 years of study in English in Japan, Shirou knew this must be something basic the man is asking, but the question was completely baffling. He may have heard many times in Japanese school, "What-is-your-name?" but never "Whasurname?" Dr. Kunihiro felt that all those years studying English were a waste of precious time and he began to cry.

Response Time

Practice after learning also speeds up response time. One understands quicker and can respond quicker. You can see this phenomenon in any skill. When the typewriter was first invented, people were typing so fast, the machine jammed. To slow down typing speed, the

keys were randomized. You can see response acceleration in texting. People have invented abbreviations to speed up sending messages. People can text with the device in their pocket while they are listening to a lecture.

Asher's Law # 9 (Wrap it up in a few sentences)

Start with a short-term student goal. Use TPR, the primary tool in your linguistic toolbox, for convincing your students in less than five minutes that they can acquire any language on earth. Then use the primary tool of TPR to introduce any new vocabulary or new grammatical feature in the target language. Follow-up with secondary tools in your toolbox.

That's it! That is my blueprint for success. Keep it simple! Have fun yourself! If you have fun, so will your students.

Best wishes for continued success,



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