

Storytelling: How to apply TPRS for best results

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A high school teacher of Spanish asked me recently, "I was at a TPRS storytelling workshop and the presenter advised us to jump right into storytelling without TPR. I was surprised. What do you think?"

There is no research that I am aware of supporting storytelling without at least three weeks of student preparation with classical TPR. After that, make a transition into storytelling but continue to use TPR for new vocabulary and grammar. This strategy applies to students of *all ages* and *all languages*.

After about three weeks, I recommend a variety of activities using the vocabulary the students have internalized with TPR. These include role reversal, sotrytelling, skits created and acted out by students, games such as TPR Bingo, pattern drills, and dialogues. All of these activities will ease students into speaking, reading, and writing, but remember to TPR the words first. As you know from your own experience, variety is essential to keep students interested day after day. There is no one magical all-purpose technique that will work for everything.

Running a successful language classroom is like a Ringling Brothers Circus. A "one-trick pony" is not enough to attract and keep the audience's rapt attention. A successful language classroom needs many different acts.

Heather Fairbanks, who is working to preserve native languages in North America, explains storytelling this way: "I think that students of all ages will get tired of sitting day-after-day going over-and-over a short story, but I think the approach would be good to use part of the time as a follow-up to classical TPR."

Here is what professional linguists and some outstanding language teachers have to say about TPR Storytelling:

Dr. James J. Davidheiser

Professor of German at the University of the South,
Sewanee, Tennessee

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"For over five years I have been teaching TPR for the first three weeks of the term in Elementary German to college students...They love it and learn rapidly.

"After about three weeks we make the transition to TPR storytelling and students are able to do this with only minor, normal adjustments as would be the case when doing anything new. As students advance, I continue to use TPR for new vocabulary. At the end of the term, many students rate the first three weeks, the TPR phase, as their favorite part of the class."

Mark Vinson Jones
EFL Instructor at Chonnam National University
Gwangju, South Korea
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“Day 1: An enjoyable learning experience for me and my students works like this: I TPR the words and grammatical structures that will appear in a short story I will introduce on Day 2.

“Day 2: I review the vocabulary with a variety of fun right brain activities such as a picture-word concentration game, a picture bingo game, a picture crossword puzzle, or a picture “Go Fish” game. Even a traditional left brain pattern drill is exciting to students if they have first assimilated the vocabulary with TPR which, as you know, has the bonus of zero stress and long-term retention. Now, when I tell the short story for the first time, my students are impressed that they understand every word I am saying in the target language. Understanding the story is a thrilling revelation to them. And when they are excited, I am rewarded for being ‘the world’s best instructor.’

“The secret of success I believe is the skillful orchestration of material that plays back and forth to the right and left brain. The alternation between both sides of the brain neutralizes adaptation, boredom and stress. TPR is a powerful tool in your tool box, but it is not the only tool. Label every technique you have ever tried as either a right or a left brain tool. Then you are ready to assemble a successful day after day learning experience for all your students.”

Dr. David Wolfe
Supervisor of Foreign Languages in the Moorestown Township
of the New Jersey Public Schools
and Professor at Temple University
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“...We believe that one should do classical TPR for about three weeks; then begin storytelling. One should apply TPR to internalize any concrete vocabulary that will appear later in the story.

There needs to be a silent period of several weeks before students begin speaking; premature storytelling is a violation of this principle. I’ve yet to see any long-term research on the effects of storytelling...”

Dr. Francisco Cabello
Associate Professor of Modern Languages at Concordia College
and author of “The Total Physical Response in First Year
Spanish, French or English”
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“...there is no substitute for fast vocabulary acquisition with TPR...Now, I have observed that when the TPR students begin role reversal and try speaking for the first time, they tend to use the imperative for everything because that is what they have heard most. However, after telling a few stories in the target language, they make the transition to other verbal structures.”

Stephen M. Silvers

Professor of Modern Languages at the University of the Amazons in
Brazil and author of the “Listen and Perform books”
and the “Command Book: How to TPR 2,000 words in any language”
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“I have three comments:

“First, after 30 years of teaching English successfully here in the Amazon to students of all ages, I find that grammatical structures learned with classical TPR facilitate the learning of more advanced structures.

“Secondly, storytelling without TPR is like writing an essay using a typewriter. It can be done, but there is a better ‘tool’ available. As we all know, storytelling is older than the Bible, and has long been used as a technique in language teaching. What makes TPRS unique and more effective for second language learning is Asher’s TPR component—a powerful tool for getting students ready to understand a story when they hear it for the first time.

“Thirdly, telling a story with hand gestures (to help students retrieve words in the story) may work if the gestures have an integral connection to the meaning of a vocabulary item. If the connection is too deviant, we may be burdening students with still another system of symbols to be learned. Clarifying this issue would be a worthwhile research project for all those graduate students looking for something exciting to explore for a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation.”

Laura Zink de Diaz

Prize-winning teacher of Spanish, French and Russian
for more than 20 years in the Seattle area
and publisher of a cutting-edge newsletter for FL/ESL teachers
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“...The beauty of TPR is its fluidity, its adaptability. I think that TPR, properly applied, is far less likely to produce ‘ingrained’ structures (a fixation on the imperative) than following any text even a TPR storytelling book, because classical TPR enables the teacher to work so much variety into the use of the structures.

“Any time you rely on a textbook, you run the risk of students becoming stuck in the patterns taught in the text. Focusing exclusively on stories can have the same result. In the end, texts don’t create good instruction—all texts can lead you down the ‘garden path.’

“With any textbook, even a TPRS textbook, it’s easy for the teacher’s approach to become mechanical—dependent on the book, rather than on her creativity. A beginning class is precisely where one should never skip TPR...”

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