

# **A language classroom that works for high-speed learning**

**By Dr. James J. Asher**

Originator of the Total Physical Response,  
known worldwide as TPR

Everyone recognizes these features in a traditional second language learning program:

Please listen and repeat after me.

Let's analyze this sentence to point out the grammar rule for the day.

Open your books and complete the exercise on page 25.

Memorize this list of vocabulary.

Memorize this verb conjugation.

Open your books to page 63 and translate the first paragraph.

Let's practice putting the appropriate direct object in the correct place in this sentence.

## **A few students do benefit**

The evidence (Asher, 2003a) suggests that only about five percent of all the students who start the study of a second language in a traditional program continue on to achieve fluency in speaking, reading and writing. Ninety five percent of all those students with good intentions say, "I give up." And then they jump to the harmful conclusion: "I guess I am no good at foreign languages." This may be the reason that thirty states have now discontinued the study of a second language as a "required" course. Parents would like to have their children acquire another language or two, but from their own experience in school, they feel that the effort in traditional classes is a "waste of time." Better to invest time in something useful.

## **"Learning" compared with "acquiring" a new language**

There is a difference between "learning" a second language and "acquiring" a second language. Learning involves the left brain and acquiring involves the right brain. Left brain learning puts the emphasis on "correctness" such as using the appropriate form of the verb and speaking with a near native pronunciation. This means that speakers must interrupt the flow of their thinking in the middle of sentences to mentally conjugate a verb or rehearse the pronunciation of a word. One harmful byproduct of this is to produce a kind of mental "stuttering" that discourages the student's willingness to play with the new language as a toy.

### **The left brain encourages students not to take risks**

The left brain does not want the student to take risks because the person may make a mistake. The right brain, for comparison, encourages playfulness without fear. The right brain tells the student: "Take a chance! You won't go to jail! Enjoy it! Just start doodling in this new language."

### **Translating into one's native language**

Translation from one language into another language is a harmful left brain approach because it slows down communication. If you think about it, translation is abnormal in high-speed communication between fluent speakers. To memorize the pronunciation of a new language and decipher the meaning in another language are extra steps that are totally unnecessary when one acquires the second language without reference to one's native language.

The research shows that these left brain procedures do not work for most students:

"Listen and repeat after me!"

"Analyze this sentence."

"Translate this paragraph," *and*

"Memorize this dialogue."

By most students we mean most students in the introductory and even intermediate levels. Advanced students may very well find many of these left brain techniques to be useful to fine-tune their skills in the second language.

Well, then—what does work for most students in the beginning and intermediate levels?

### **Brain organization and language acquisition**

Since Roger Sperry's Nobel Prize winning experiment showing that each hemisphere of the brain can think independently, more than 4,000 studies of brain lateralization have been conducted worldwide. In the past 30 years, we learned more about how the brain is organized than we knew in the prior 3,000 years. Here is what we now know:

### **Comprehension comes before speaking**

Asher (2003) has demonstrated in decades of experiments that the optimal language acquisition experience is: comprehension before speaking. You can observe this yourself with babies. For months before even babbling appears, there is a silent period in which the infant seems to be listening to directions from caretakers: "Look at me!" "Smile for Daddy!" "Raise your hand!" "Walk to Mommy!" These are unique "conversations" in which someone speaks and the child responds with a physical action. I call this the "total physical response" which is known worldwide as TPR.

Notice that the child is silent, but acknowledging understanding with a physical movement which often shows a complex comprehension of the target language (i.e., "Pick up your toy and put it on the chair in your bedroom.")

No parent would expect or demand that infants will begin speaking immediately. There is a preparation period of months before the child utters anything intelligible such as "Mommy" or "Daddy." The evidence suggests that the neural wiring for acquiring a language is comprehension before production. This means that the circuitry of the right brain in Wernicke's area must light up for a long period of time before the circuitry of the left brain in Broca's area flickers on.

### **Risk of a speaking-on-demand approach**

The traditional teach-from-the-textbook instruction is a speaking-on-demand approach, which plays to the left brain. It is a brain antagonistic approach. Except those with an unusual ability to mimic anything they hear immediately, most children and adults are not ready to begin speaking a new and alien language. They need a long preparation period of silence in which the instructor speaks a direction and students respond with an appropriate action: ("Stand up and walk to the table.")

Most people need time to decipher—to map out on the right brain—how the language works. This includes structure such as grammar, but also semantics, and the melody of the new language.

For more on the left and right brain, see Asher's *Brainswitching: Learning on the right side of the brain* and *The Super School: Teaching on the right side of the brain*.

### **Going from a traditional left brain classroom to a right brain classroom**

Students who transfer from a traditional class with left brain instruction into one of our classes rich in right brain experiences will be shocked. Our students will not be conjugating verbs, translating, or memorizing vocabulary. Yet they will be conversing rapidly and clearly with a native speaker. For example, as Joan Christopherson explains: "An all "A" student in a first year traditional French class transferred into my second year class expecting to excel, but was stunned to discover that the other students were all speaking and understanding the French language.

"She begged to drop out until I persuaded her to give me one month to make her feel comfortable. I assured her that she knew things my students had not yet learned, but were going to be studying, and that she could apply what she had learned the previous year by using our approach. By the end of that year, she was successful at both. She continued in the language for two more years."

### **If you switch to a right brain approach, this could happen to you**

Joan continues: "Don't be surprised if your classroom draws visitors from all over the nation. It happened to me and my colleague, Laura Zink de Diaz, who teaches Spanish.

"Here is what happened when a teacher from France came to observe my class: I wanted to demonstrate the achievement of my first year students, so I selected a cartoon drawing of a busy restaurant the students had never seen before. Using an

overhead projector, I flashed the picture on a huge screen in front of the room and invited individual students to explain in French to our visitor what was happening in the restaurant. For more than thirty minutes and without repeating one another, they talked and talked. The French sentences ranged in complexity from 'There are ten people in the restaurant' to 'The waiter is bringing a tray with plates, cups, silverware, and napkins to the old man at the table in front of the window.'

"Our visitor was so stunned, she walked around the room looking on top and under the tables for hidden vocabulary lists. When I told her that there were no lists, she was astonished because it was difficult for her to believe that beginning students were spontaneously creating those sentences in French. My students were "originating" novel sentences which is the essence of fluency rather than reciting memorized "canned" sentences from a textbook."

"How,' our visitor wanted to know, 'did you get that level of skill from first year students?' What I revealed to my visitor you will find detailed step-by-step in my new book: *Organizing A Classroom That Works* to be published by the Prolinguistica Corporation."

### **How to work with colleagues who are dedicated to a traditional approach**

The wisest dictum here is, "Live and let live." You can coexist peacefully by focusing on your own students. Be gracious and accepting of colleagues who have confidence in a different approach. Always make them feel welcome to visit your class, at any time. Move slowly with any innovation so that you do not appear to be threatening the status quo.

### **How is the TPR "method" being used in the field right now?**

First, let me comment on the notion of a "method." In my opinion, there are no methods because "method" implies a formula and there is no formula for teaching anything. Teaching, like therapy, is a fine art, not a science. Science can give us some marvelous tools, but how we apply those tools depends upon the talent and training of the instructor.

I have demonstrated in laboratory studies and by language teachers in thousands of classrooms around the world in European, Asian, Semitic, and Indian languages that TPR is perhaps the most powerful tool in a teacher's linguistic tool box. It is powerful for three reasons: First, TPR has the unique feature of being aptitude-free (meaning it works for almost all students of any age). Second, it is high-speed language acquisition (meaning that students comprehend the target language in chunks rather than word-by-word). Third, study after study demonstrates that the skillful application of TPR results in long-term retention lasting weeks, months—even years.

But keep in mind that this powerful tool of TPR does require sophisticated training, not only in techniques of application but also in understanding the underlying brain mechanisms, all of which, in my opinion, is missing in most language methods classes. For example, by reading only one chapter about TPR in a typical methods textbook, students go into the field with only a rudimentary understanding of how and when to use TPR. Many believe, for example, that TPR is limited to beginning students or it is limited to selected vocabulary items only or they believe that TPR cannot help students internalize grammar.

The myth that “TPR is limited to beginning students,” is dispelled in Seely and Romijn’s prizewinning book, *TPR Is More Than Commands—At All Levels*. The myth that “TPR is limited to selected vocabulary” is blown away in Stephen Mark Silvers’ book showing how to TPR 2,000 vocabulary items in any language (items typically found in Level 1 and Level 2 textbooks). As to grammar, Eric Schessler’s books demonstrate how to TPR grammar for beginning, intermediate and advanced students of all ages.

My conclusion is: This powerful linguistic tool of TPR rates special attention in a course of its own followed up with practice by students in the field monitored by “personal trainers”—the professional college teaching staff.

### Summary

Yes, we can continue “teaching” in a traditional classroom with an “academic” (code word for left brain) curriculum that is safe from criticism by colleagues. The only problem is: It does not work if your goal is retaining students in your program for at least four years. Less than five percent of students who start the study of another language in a traditional program will continue to achieve fluency in speaking, reading and writing. If you are satisfied with that result, then it makes sense to stick with it.

However, if you would like to turn the statistics around and enjoy success with 95% of your students, then switch to a classroom that is organized with a major focus on right brain instruction and a minor focus on left brain instruction. \*

Start with a solid understanding by reading James J. Asher’s book, *Learning Another Language Through Actions* and Ramiro Garcia’s *Instructor’s Notebook: How to apply TPR for best results*. Then, once you are confident that a right brain approach will work to enable all your students to enjoy success, expand your skill with other books recommended in the references or click on: [www.tpr-world.com](http://www.tpr-world.com)

The writer welcomes your comments and suggestions. Contact him at: [tprworld@aol.com](mailto:tprworld@aol.com)

\* An example of a major focus on right brain instruction and a minor focus on left brain instruction would be the Paul Pimsleur Award-winning work of Dr. Margaret S. Woodruff-Wieding and Dr. Janet King Swaffer at the University of Texas in Austin. Using German as the target language, they applied TPR with beginning students for most of each meeting but reserved the last five or ten minutes for left brain instruction such as: “Ask us any question about today’s session. Ask us anything that may concern you about pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary... anything.” The discussion with the students was in English. (To review their work in detail, order their book, *Comprehension Based Language Lessons for Level 1* published by Sky Oaks Productions, Inc.)

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