

Learning Italian at School with TPR by Playing, Creating, and Doing

An Italian version of 'Total Physical Response'

by

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Impact of immigration in Italy

Immigration, a relatively new phenomenon for Italy, has intensified in the last ten years. Every school year, around 60,000 new foreign pupils of different nationalities enter our classrooms, --- and that number increases 20% per year. Most enter the classroom without having any familiarity with the Italian language. During the 1991/1992 school year, foreign students were around 5% of the student body at the primary school where I teach in Milan. Today, the average has leaped to 41.7% and can reach up to 58% in some classes.

Most teachers feel overwhelmed and disoriented

Most of the teachers feel disoriented when facing new foreign students for the first time. They say that their students "don't understand a word of Italian," a complaint that clearly reveals the feelings of anxiety and inadequacy shared by those teachers who find themselves with a new challenge, ---teaching Italian as a second language. Compounding the problem is the fact that these foreign students have been thrown into classes with their Italian peers.

What should we do? How can we attend to children who cannot understand or be understood in our school? How can we promote what James Asher calls the "silent period" which is crucial to prepare children or adults for a graceful transition to speaking, reading, and writing in any new language? Most teachers imagine that to learn another language, students must begin speaking immediately on cue.

My personal motivation

Fifteen years ago when I began to teach Italian to foreign students, I could only rely on my own experiences as a student in England. Like most Italian teachers, I didn't have any specific training in teaching my native language to foreigners. At first, I tried to put into my teaching practice the strategies I developed when learning the English language. But, my students experienced that same feeling of confusion that I used to feel in my first days of school when I was asked to repeat aloud strange phrases like: "My name is... I come from Italy." Imagine asking a newly arrived child from China, to repeat aloud this dialogue according to the traditional approach ("My name is...I come from China.."). For insight into what the child is experiencing, try yourself to learn that little exercise in Chinese.

How can I spare my students the terrible feeling of discomfort struggling to speak to strangers?

Was there another approach different from asking students for immediate oral production? The answer I discovered was a powerful linguistic tool researched for more than 20 years by Dr. James J. Asher, called the Total Physical Response, known worldwide as TPR. His book, *Learning Another Language Through Actions*, now in the 6th edition, explains the research in non-technical terms, illustrates how TPR works with lessons you can try with your students, and answers about a hundred questions that instructors most often ask about TPR. To order the book and other TPR products such as books, games, student kits, and video demonstration, click on www.tpr-world.com

Why I use TPR for effective second language instruction

Learning Italian in Italy is different from learning Italian in a foreign language class

In Italy, students are “immersed” in Italian for hours in and out of school. Students not only have to learn the language but also, at the same time, learn other subjects IN that language. This difficult situation is what I call “submergence” rather than “immersion” in the strange language. This is why TPR is so valuable.

TPR supports the newly arrived students throughout the demanding task of decoding and analyzing language items. TPR sets up an obvious relationship between cause (the language) and effect (the physical response) which makes the meaning of the words immediately understandable. This is truly comprehensible input. This direct relationship between signifier and signified helps students acquire words and sentences almost in the first exposure. Asher has demonstrated in his research that the closer an item is to being learned in the first trial, the greater the chances for long-term retention. We have all experienced the reverse when we “crammed for a test.” After many repetitions, our brain decided, “Ok, I am tired. I will hold on to this information until after the test. Then I will erase it!” This is contrary to contemporary belief that the more repetition before learning, the more the information is “stamped” into long-term memory.

The silent period

The silent period will vary from person to person, from about three weeks to six months. After the experience of TPR, a few students are ready to speak after one or two days, others will take longer. By asking students to be silent while I apply TPR to synchronize the language with the movements of their bodies, students of all ages, including adults, enjoy immediate understanding of the alien language. Then, after the student’s brain has internalized an extensive map of the new language, speech will appear spontaneously. Of course, their speech will not be perfect, but gradually it will shape itself in the direction of the native speaker. It is important to be as tolerant of distortion in student speech as we are of children learning their native language. Asher calls this critical period of understanding before speaking, “Comprehension Literacy.”

There is no recorded case in history where babies acquiring their first language begin to speak before a year to 18 months in which they are silent except for babbling. During this critical period, babies are deciphering the phonology, morphology and syntax of the “noise” they hear coming from people’s mouths. However, babies are not passive “sponges” soaking up the new language. Rather, they carry on thousands of what Asher calls “language-body” conversations

with caretakers, siblings, and playmates. Before the baby can utter “Mommy” or “Daddy,” they are responding to complex sentences such as, “Pick up your toy and put it on the bed in your room.” This is Comprehension Literacy.

And, there is no evidence that the wiring in the brain changes with age to accommodate speaking before comprehension in learning a second language.

The age of my students

I work mainly with children between the ages of 6 and 11 who do not know Italian at all. The level of the language and of the activities proposed is that of this age group. With a few adjustments, the same TPR activities were presented successfully with middle school students between the ages of 11 and 13. Some creativity from the instructor is needed to overcome obstacles along the way. Many Chinese students, for example, who were educated with an entirely different teaching approach, showed a certain amount of confusion after the first TPR lessons in Italian.

The reason: In China they are comfortable with tasks that required them to write, repeat phrases or to complete work at home. Now I am asking them to listen, move around and to play. What could be more anxiety producing? But soon their embarrassment disappeared as they experienced the joys of a more relaxed approach. They seemed to appreciate their fast and effortless understanding of Italian.

Children compared with adults: The context of learning

It is an everyday observation in all countries that children compared with adults seem to acquire the language of the host country faster and with a native pronunciation. This has suggested to some researchers that perhaps children have more “plasticity” in their brain, which disappears with age, making the acquisition of another language “difficult” for adults.

Asher has a different explanation. His research with children and adults acquiring Russian with TPR, demonstrated that the key is the context in which the new language is acquired. Children acquire the new language in the context of play while adults struggle to learn in a non-play situation. Asher’s research supported by the Office of Education, Office of Naval Research, and the State Of California showed that when both children and adults learn in a play situation, adults vastly outperformed children in understanding Russian and older children outperformed younger children. Asher and Garcia and others have further demonstrated that children before puberty have a definite advantage in achieving a native pronunciation. After puberty, it is almost certain that one will have some accent even if the person lives in the host country for 50 years.

Notice that children acquire the target language by (a) following thousands of instructions from caretakers (including parents, nursery school instructors, and teachers,) and (b) by playing with other children who will direct their physical actions with directions like: “Throw me the ball...Stop! Count to ten...Come here...etc.” The adults, on the other hand, learn in an “impoverished” context in which the movements of the body only rarely suggest the meaning of the expressions they produce. As Asher says:

“...But what about adults? These poor creatures attempt to acquire the target language in a non-play context in which language is disembodied. Adults are like statues in which balloons of language appear above their heads much like comic strips. Adults “converse” with dialogues such as this: Hello, It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it...?”

As for me, I was lucky enough to work in a primary school. The expressions used in class, in games, during direction-giving activities, which render this environment “rich” in comprehensible input, are among the first inputs for the newly arrived foreign students. The comprehension of this part of second language will permit the children, even with a partial language competence, to participate in daily class life and to begin to get familiar with the new learning context.

The myth that my language is more “difficult” than others

Everyone imagines that their native language is more “difficult” to learn than other languages. For example, the British came to the aid of Egypt and stayed for 500 years. Only a few English managed to acquire Arabic, not because it is “difficult,” but because the instruction was traditional slow-motion grammar-translation and speaking on cue with a request to “listen and repeat after me.” As a result, there is a widespread belief in the Middle East that no non-Arab can learn Arabic. All a myth!

As Asher explains, traditional language instruction plays to the left brain ---the side of the brain that evaluates all input, slowing intake to stressful word-by-word learning. TPR, which simulates how babies acquire their first language, enables fast intake of the new language in chunks rather than word-by-word. The reason: TPR plays to the non-evaluative right brain where there is a kind of “Alice-in-Wonderland” reality in which all languages are one. That is, the right brain does not know the difference between Chinese and Italian or Japanese and German. For more on the dramatic differences between brain hemispheres, see the reference section at the end of this paper.

If you insist on traditional instruction, Italian will indeed be “difficult”

In most languages the imperative mode corresponds to a single basic form that coincides with the root of the verb, but in Italian, the imperative is complicated by many forms that confuse most learners in a traditional class. Trying to explain this with an instructor or a textbook is futile. An explanation is evaluated and dismissed by the students’ left brain as “This does not make sense!”

I don’t get it. I will probably never understand it.”

The simplest way to resolve the problem is to choose a single form of the imperative such as the second person singular. When I use TPR, I behave as though I were speaking to a single student. Even if he or she is learning together with other students, it’s still that single child who needs to understand and follow the command. The objective in the initial stage is to develop comprehension of the language through commands and not to teach the rules of the Italian imperative form—those will be learned in time, in later stages of training. The key idea here is to “stabilize, then move on” which is like a patient being admitted to a hospital. Stabilize the patient before you move the person.

You are using TPR without knowing it

In the classroom, teachers are continually using the imperative form, or rather commands, even if they do not realize it: (PASS OUT the notebooks...LOOK AT the board...LINE UP...etc.). They use an extensive repertoire of commands in order to organize and manage foreign students.

Children use TPR without knowing it

When children play games in Italian, they are intaking huge chunks of Italian on the right side of the brain without effort. For example, "Stand here! Don't cross the line! Walk three steps, bounce the ball and jump!"

How to setup a TPR classroom

Using your creativity, you can reproduce in your classroom, life situations that your students encounter when they leave school. For example, to convert the room into a school bus, line up chairs with an aisle between them. To simulate the beach all you need is a piece of blue fabric. To recreate a cold location, simply put on a windbreaker. The student's imagination will fill in the rest of the scene.

For other exciting ideas showing how to convert your classroom into familiar situations at home and elsewhere, view the DVD video listed at the end of this paper entitled, "Children learning another language: An innovative approach."

How to make the transition from the imperative to other grammatical forms

One way to move from the imperative to other grammatical features is to say, for example, "Walk to the chalkboard." Then ask, "E tu che cosa fai?" (What are you doing?) Of course, this shift comes much later in training after your students are responding quickly and with confidence to a network of simple commands.

A TPR textbook especially for Italian

After working successfully for years applying TPR with hundreds of students, I have developed a textbook that moves students in easy steps from comprehension to speaking, reading and writing. To order the book entitled, "**Learning Italian at school with TPR by playing, creating and doing,**" please contact me at arcangelamastromarco@fastwebnet.it

TPR in Italy

When I began to use TPR, I ran into many prejudices and a lot of resistance from the so-called Italian didactic "experts" to whom I had turned, seeking encouragement in this experiment. The academic world had little knowledge then of the latest psychological and brain research. One of my goals is to persuade Professor James J. Asher to present a TPR workshop in Italy.. Meanwhile, you can observe, Dr. Asher in action by ordering a new DVD that shows him demonstrating TPR in Arabic and Spanish. See the references at the end of this article.

Today, although TPR is still under-adopted in Europe, there is much literature on the topic and many university students choose to write their final paper on it. Most importantly, more and more teachers decided to use TPR alongside other tools. I believe this progress is due, in large part, to the internet, which permits instant access to information. For example, for scores of helpful TPR articles, books, games, student kits and video demonstrations, go to www.tpr-world.com.

In general, old Europe still lags behind in using the most powerful tool now available. One would think, considering the number of languages spoken in Europe, educators would

gain an unbelievable advantage with TPR which focuses on language comprehension. As Asher clearly states:

“The most exciting application of TPR may be in Europe rather than America. The concept of a ‘United States of Europe’ suggests that it may not be necessary for people in different European countries to ‘speak each other’s language.’ It may be more realistic for each person trained with TPR instruction to only understand six or more other languages. Speaking those other languages is not necessary, because, for instance, a person from England speaks English to someone from Italy and that individual responds in Italian. Everyone speaks in their native language which is most comfortable.”

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