

My personal experience with
'Power Tools' of language instruction

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It was exactly 20 years ago, as a young Spanish teacher, when I reached for a teaching technique that would change my career. I had been struggling with how to best create an acquisition-rich classroom where, as research shows, real communication develops students' language proficiency. I had used all of the "old school" approaches in my instruction such as repeat-after-me and memorize-these-grammar-rules. None worked for me and my students.

Then I came across a well-laid out procedure for using Total Physical Response (TPR) in a big publisher's textbook. I tried it the next day in class for about 15 minutes and, to my surprise, it worked! I soon found that every major textbook publisher had TPR materials and I tried to get my hands on as many of them as I could. I was hooked...

At my university library, I found the book that started it all, [Learning Another Language Through Actions](#) by Dr. James J. Asher, the originator of the Total Physical Response, known worldwide as TPR. I spent the Thanksgiving break reading it through. Now I was really hooked! I ordered the book directly from the publisher, Sky Oaks Productions, Inc. I recommend you go to TPR World to get the book or better yet, the [TPR Super Starter Kit](#), that includes the book and everything you need for a fast start and sustained success in your language program.

I ordered Dr. Asher's demonstration videos with children and adults to confirm that I was doing it "right". To my delight, I saw how quickly students acquired chunks of the new language and how effortless it seemed. I was also amazed by how effective and yet fun it was to students (and teachers!). Now, 20 years later, there are many videos on Youtube including one of mine with my middle school students at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmfnrYerYbY>

What is the Total Physical Response (TPR)?

The "old school" conventional wisdom is this: Since the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, the fastest route to get people talking in another language is to ask them to, "Listen and repeat after me!" and "Memorize this dialogue." But, the scientific discovery in laboratory studies by Dr James Asher demonstrated that the opposite is true. When people begin to speak in a foreign language, they already have acquired the language. Speaking is the last stage in language learning, not the beginning. That is a difficult concept for seasoned language teachers to accept, but that is what TPR is all about.

If you want to witness TPR in a real life, observe the process infants go through before speaking appears. For months, babies are silent except for babbling, but during that time they hear caretakers giving them one direction after another. "Smile for grandpa!" "Take my hand!" "Don't spit up on your bib." Infants experience thousands of what Asher calls, "language-body conversations." Caretaker's utter a direction in the target language and babies signal understanding with a physical response. This is how language is mapped on the right side of the child's brain. Once the map has enough detail, speaking appears, triggered on the left side of the brain. Speaking cannot be forced, but will appear naturally when the child is ready. Therefore, it does not make sense to force speaking on cue before students are ready, and then interrupting them to make corrections.

It all sounds like an easy concept to apply in your teaching, but as the writer, Leo Tolstoy, once said, "It is easier to write ten volume of philosophy than to apply one new idea." Attending a TPR Workshop can be helpful. But, application takes patience. Start with just ten or fifteen minutes, and see what happens.

After applying TPR with several hundred students for ten years, I collaborated with Dr. Asher and published the book [TPR Storytelling](#) (also available at TPR World), which combines the power of TPR with the magic of storytelling. I am happy to arrange workshops for you and your staff...All the best!