

# Parents homeschooling their children to learn a foreign language

*Includes how Rosetta Stone is working in schools*

**JAMES J. ASHER, PH.D.**

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Review of an article entitled  
*"Dispelling the 'Greek' in foreign language*  
by Karen Haid

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Almost the entire Winter Issue in *The Old Schoolhouse* is dedicated to learning foreign languages including American Sign Language. The status of foreign language learning is summarized by Renee K. Walker who says, "Foreign language credit for high schoolers can be a nightmare for many homeschooling parents and students. Many public and private school students feel they are lucky when their state does not require it for high school graduation. Homeschoolers also often try to avoid it, but many find that colleges will not accept students without it..."

Karen Haid adds, "...Many parents have themselves studied languages in classroom settings throughout their student careers, unfortunately without ever having gained any real competency. Thus, the way in which one learns a language remains a mystery to most and seems a formidable subject for many."

So far, so good. We have a clear, authentic picture of where students and their parents are in foreign language learning. Now, what to do about it? We discover that Karen has herself learned two foreign languages as an adult. Marvelous! It would be exciting if she shared her personal story. How did she achieve skills in two foreign languages. Perhaps there is hope for the rest of us.

Unfortunately, Karen chose to recite the history of "methods" that have been attempted. This is like a physician saying to a patient, "I understand what is causing your pain. Let me review the medicines in my doctor's book and you select which one you think will work for you. I can tell you the ingredients in each. Since I have no experience with each medicine, I cannot personally recommend any one."

I decided to evaluate the "methods" in Karen's list and organize them into a recommendation for successful foreign language learning that works for students of all ages and aptitudes in the 21st century, including adults.

## **What "method" is best**

I often tell foreign language educators around the world that any "method" will work if students stay with the program long enough. Even the Rosetta Stone will work if the person, working alone, has enough self-discipline to continue with the program day-after-day to the end. Most people find the program exciting for a short while, then lose interest. This is true of any innovation. The publishers of the Rosetta Stone offer a "money back guarantee," but most people will not exercise this option. Most will say, "It probably would have worked if I had the self-discipline to continue with the program. Maybe someday I will try again."

## **Principal nixes plan for foreign language**

Middle school principal Barry Hopping hoped that Rosetta Stone was the answer to providing his students with a self-directed foreign language program on the computer since there was no

funding for a “live” teacher. Mayor Donna Holaday said she would fund the purchase if the principal would contact a dozen or so other districts to find out how well Rosetta Stone was working for their students.

Principal Hopping reported back that to the mayor with, “Nothing I’ve learned to this point puts me in a place where I feel comfortable making a recommendation.” The reason: Only one school was using Rosetta Stone as the primary source of its foreign language education; all the others used the program as an adjunct to their existing offering with “live” teachers. The one school using Rosetta Stone exclusively for instruction did so only because they could not afford to hire a teacher. To read the complete article, go to [www.newburyportnews.com/local/x657334539/Principal-nixes-plan-for-foreign-language](http://www.newburyportnews.com/local/x657334539/Principal-nixes-plan-for-foreign-language).

### **Trying something new**

Speaking of trying something new, in my book, **Learning Another Language Through Actions**, I share Ramiro Garcia’s story about innovation. One day, one of his colleagues appeared in Ramiro’s high school classroom.

The colleague said with excitement, “Ramiro, I found it! I found it!”

“What? What did you find?”

“ I discovered the secret of keeping these kids interested in learning Spanish day after day!”

“Please. Please.” Ramiro pleaded, “Please share your secret with me!”

“I have two slide projectors side by side. The kids see one beautiful image which I describe in Spanish dissolve into the next image. It is magic! The kids love it!”

Two weeks later, the colleague appeared again in Ramiro’s classroom. The expression on his face was grim. He said, “I give up! I boxed up the slide projectors. I will never show another slide again.”

“What happened?”

“It worked beautifully, until one day I walked in and there was mutiny.”

“One girl told me, ‘Please, we beg you. No more slides!’”

“ Another boy said, ‘If you show one more slide, I will retch in the wastebasket.’”

### **The lesson to be learned**

Any novelty will hold the student’s attention for awhile, but soon adaptation sets in. They no longer find the stimulation charming. Ramiro’s colleague had a useful tool with his slide projectors that can be used once in a while, but not as an all-purpose tool for every task. In carpentry, one has a box of tools: saw, hammer, drill, plane and others, but no one all-purpose tool that is appropriate for every task.

### **Hollywood discovered this phenomenon**

Professionals in Hollywood discovered this phenomenon early in their experience of making movies. You cannot focus a fixed camera on a scene for a long period of time. Three minutes is an eternity in motion pictures. In the next movie that you see, notice the camera angle changing moment to moment. Notice the scene changing minute to minute.

I was invited to present a workshop recently and the host requested permission to film the event. The host asked, "Do you mind if we have a student with a camera record the workshop?"

My answer was, "I'm sorry, but the answer is no."

"May I ask why?"

"The reason is: From my experience producing documentary films, I know that filming three hours with one camera will result in a product that is unwatchable. Why waste your time and the student's time in an activity that nobody will sit down and look at?"

"If you hire a professional camera crew working with two cameras, I will agree, providing you allow me to edit the raw footage to produce a polished end-product."

### **Film making is another art form**

Most people do not realize that film-making is another art form. It is not as simple as holding up a camera and pointing it at a subject. The end-product of a professional production looks simple because it is fast-moving and tells an interesting, engaging story. But, making the movie is hard work that is time consuming. For every twenty feet of film shot, only one foot will appear in the final product. As Cary Grant once remarked in an interview, "Watching movies is fun, but making movies is hard, hard work."

### **Back to what works in foreign language learning**

Some elements in each "method" listed in Karen's article are valuable in learning a foreign language. But, no one "method" by itself, including Rosetta Stone, will work for most students trying to learn another language.

### **The elements that work in each "method"**

For beginning students, you have a grace period of five minutes---only five minutes to convince the students that they can actually learn this alien language. If you cannot do it in five minutes, they will not be convinced if they stay with you for a year.

As a hint, you will not convince your students if you begin with, "Learning Chinese is simple. All you have to do is listen to what I am going to say and repeat after me." The reason this does not work: You are now locked into the student's left brain, the hemisphere that looks at any input and evaluates it. The left brain is a gatekeeper, giving permission for some input to come in and rejecting other input.

The mission of the left brain is to keep the student safe and sane. The optimal way to accomplish this is to encourage the student to keep doing what they are doing with no alteration in the routine. "Better to be safe than sorry!" "Look before you leap!" "Stick with what you know!"

School is threatening to the left side of the student's brain because the agents of the school try to change behavior in an activity called "learning" and that is a risk. Any change is a risk to the student's sense of well-being and comfort. Hence, every teacher's nemesis is the left brain of the student whispering sabotaging messages such, "You don't believe that! That isn't true! This is all nonsense. You could be out of here making some money working at Target. This is a waste of time."

The only chance an instructor has of convincing students they can learn Chinese or Arabic or German is to quiet the left hemisphere of the brain by playing to the right hemisphere which does not evaluate input. Since the right brain does not evaluate, it cannot reject the input.

## **My personal recommendation**

I have demonstrated in many carefully controlled experimental studies and in thousands of classrooms around the world that a powerful tool you can use to convince your students in five minutes that they can actually learn Chinese, Arabic or German is my **Total Physical Response**, known worldwide as TPR.

The mistake that instructors make is like the mistake that Ramiro's colleague made with the slide projectors. Instructors are excited that within minutes students understand what they are saying in the target language. Now you have a fine tool. How will you use it?

Many instructors immediately jump to the conclusion that this is a marvelous all-purpose tool that will accomplish all tasks in learning a foreign language. Wrong! There is no all-purpose tool. TPR is a valuable tool, perhaps your primary tool for helping your students internalize new vocabulary and grammar fast on the right side of the brain. Once that happens, switch to other tools, which I call secondary tools such as role reversal, storytelling, games, skits that students create and act out, and more, perhaps the Rosetta Stone. To keep students moving and interested, use different tools continually to switch your student from one side of the brain to the other. With practice, you become more skillful in this brain switching. You become skillful in knowing at all times which side of the brain you are playing to.

I mentioned that there are no all-purpose tools in foreign language learning or learning anything including mathematics. That's why I ask foreign language instructors to delete the word "method" from their vocabulary because "method" implies an all-purpose tool that can do everything. No such animal exists. It is a myth.

## **Why brain switching is important**

There are hundreds of brain lateralization studies. When I review these articles, I look for implications for learning, especially mathematics and foreign language learning. I want to share one interesting study in particular reported by Gazzaniga (1967, 1977).

Remember, we are technologically able to project words, images, or sentences into either side of the brain, right or left. A split-brain subject was told, "I am going to flash something on the screen at 1/10th of a second. If you know what it is, please do it."

This direction was flashed to the right brain: "Itch." The subject started to move, but the researcher standing behind pinned the subject's arms to his side. The researcher asked, "What was the word flashed on the screen?"

The subject said, "I don't know."

The subject was released and he reached up and itched his neck. He said, "Oh, the word was 'rub'."

Here is my interpretation: The word "itch" went into the right brain that started to execute the direction, but the subject was restrained. When he was released, he brought his hand up to the back of his neck and itched. Now, the left brain observed this behavior and made the interpretation that the subject was rubbing the back of his neck. The subject said, "Oh! the word on the screen was 'rub'."

In a follow-up study, the subject was told, "Please assume the position of" and the word "boxer" was flashed into his right brain, but before he could act, his arms were pinned to his side. The researcher asked, "What was the word we flashed on the screen?"

The subject said, "I don't know."

The subject was released and immediately assumed the position of a boxer." He said, "Oh! The word was 'boxer'."

### **My interpretation**

My conclusion is: Each side of the brain is monitoring the other. Exactly how, is still a mystery, but it is probably happening across that big bundle of fibers connecting both hemispheres called the corpus callosum. We flashed the word "itch" into the subject's right brain. Remember, the right brain is mute, but it can express itself in action, drawing, singing, dancing and other ways, but it cannot talk, except perhaps in a faint whisper. The left brain did not see the word flashed to the right brain, but observed the subject's hand going up to his neck and doing what looked to be rubbing. So, the left brain said, "Oh! The word was 'rub'."

You can observe this monitoring if you pay attention to people's body language as they talk. When people speak, their hands, arms and legs are often in motion. This is an attempt by the right brain, which is unable to talk, but can communicate with actions. The talking left brain looks at the body language for cues to prompt the next utterance. Here is an experiment for your master's thesis that will get you written up in *Psychology Today*: Stop twenty strangers on the street and ask directions to some location. Before each person speaks, have a co-researcher standing behind, holding the person's arms to their side. I predict the person will be unable to utter the directions. Of course, you will have to explain to the subject ahead of time what you are going to do. Else the strangers may call the police.

### **Implications for foreign language learning**

You start with beginners by playing to the right side of the brain using the **Total Physical Response** (TPR). It works beautifully! Your students are responding to every direction. Not only that, you discover you can rearrange the constituents into novel sentences the students have never heard before in Chinese, Arabic or German, for instance, and you are amazed that they understand sentences they are hearing for the first time. This is exactly what Norm Chomsky said is the essence of language fluency, understanding novel sentences.

This is magic! It is so thrilling that instructors want to continue forever. Don't. Adaptation will set in something like this: Remember the left brain is observing all this excitement being generated by the right brain. The left brain becomes jealous if you continue too long. After all, the left brain is accustomed to being the star. In school you always tried to learn on the left side of the brain. Now it has nothing to do but stand around as a bit player in the drama.

It starts to whisper sabotaging messages such as, "Yes, you were taking in that alien language in huge chunks to begin with, but nothing is happening now. It is going in so easy, I wonder whether you are learning anything. You are probably wasting your time. Tell the man that."

### **The key to success: How to know which tool to use**

Since there are millions, if not billions, of entry points into any language, where will you enter? If you use a textbook, this is decided for you. You start with Chapter 1, then Chapter 2 until you reach the end of the book. The student's reward? They get to start another textbook next year starting with Chapter 1, etc. Completing a textbook in X amount of time is a "teacher goal."

## Better to have “student goals”

Rather than teacher goals, I recommend you organize your effort around student goals that can be achieved in a short period of time, perhaps one or two meetings. Examples of student goals: How to order breakfast in Germany? How to direct a taxi driver to a restaurant in France? How to book a hotel room in Istanbul?

### Summary

For any new vocabulary or new grammatical feature in the target language, I recommend you always start by playing to the right hemisphere of the brain. A powerful tool to accomplish this is my **Total Physical Response (TPR)**. For ways to proceed after this, read two books: James J. Asher’s **Learning Another Language Through Actions** and Ramiro Garcia’s **Instructor’s Notebook: How to apply TPR for best results**.

I recommend you sample a few lessons with friends and neighbors before you go into your classroom so that

- (a) you have confidence the tool actually works, and
- (b) you smooth out your delivery.

As you develop confidence, increase your understanding of the right and left brain with my books:

**Brainswitching: Learning on the right side of the brain**

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  - **Brainswitching: Learning on the right side of the brain.** **(Order #202)**
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