

TPR: After forty years, still a very good idea

BY JAMES J. ASHER February 5, 2007

Dr. James J. Asher is the originator of the Total Physical Response (TPR). Dr. Asher has demonstrated how to apply TPR for best results at more than 500 elementary, secondary schools and universities around the world, including a 1983 lecture tour in Japan sponsored by JALT. He is the recipient of many awards for excellence in teaching and research. He is an emeritus professor of psychology and former associate dean at San Jose State University in San Jose, California.

Way back in 1965, I demonstrated a powerful linguistic tool in a pioneer experiment using the Japanese language with my research associate, Dr. Shirou Kunihiro. That tool is the Total Physical Response, now known worldwide as simply, TPR. Since that time, scores of language classes using TPR in countries around the world have enjoyed successful results for students acquiring European, Asian, Indian and Semitic languages.

Why comprehension is important

TPR research opened up the concept that for children and adults acquiring another language in school, success can be assured if comprehension is developed before speaking. One important reason: Everywhere on earth in all languages throughout history, there is no instance of infants acquiring speaking before comprehension. Comprehension always comes first with speaking following perhaps a year later.

A second reason is that talking and comprehension are located in different parts of the brain. Talking comes from Broca's area located in the frontal lobe of the left brain. If there is damage in Broca's area, one may understand what people are saying but the person is unable to speak. Understanding or comprehension takes place in Wernicke's area located in the temporal lobe. If there is damage to Wernicke's area, one can speak but has difficulty understanding what others are saying. This has significance for language instruction, which I will explain next.

Beware of "brain overload"

When the instructor in traditional classes asks students to "Listen and repeat after me!" this may be brain overload because both the frontal lobe and the temporal lobe in the brain light up at the same time resulting in slow-motion learning with short-term retention. (Noted educator, Leslie Hart, calls "brain overload" a type of brain antagonistic instruction.)

Well then, if comprehension is important, how about using translation to help students comprehend?

Unfortunately, translation does not help most students because there is no long-term understanding. When students translate, there is short-term comprehension which is erased the moment the student leaves the classroom, if not sooner. The problem with translation is that the instructor has made an assertion, which the critical left-brain of the student perceives as a "lie."

For example, to claim that this is a "desk" and this is a "chair" and this is a "window" is absurd in the student's brain. The student, along with all other students in the classroom, have thousands of life experiences that validate this as "tsukue" and this as "isu" and this as "mado." Students simply do not believe the assertions by the instructor.

What is the alternative to translation?

TPR is a powerful alternative to translation because we create experiences in the classroom that are "believable." If we ask students to be silent, listen to a direction and do exactly what the instructor does, we have created a "fact" which cannot be dismissed by the critical side of the student's brain.

Here is an example of how the student's brain is processing information at lightning speed: If "stand" does not mean to rise up from my chair, why did my body actually go from sitting to standing when I heard the instructor say, "Stand"? If "walk" does not mean to move forward, why did my body walk forward when the instructor said, "Walk"? These strange utterances must be valid.

TPR creates facts, which make for long-term comprehension. At lightning velocity, the student's brain processes

Interview questions for Dr. Asher:

1. What are the most important things a language teacher needs to know about TPR?

They need to know the benefits of TPR: a. Rapid understanding of English regardless of academic aptitude. This means that any child, teen or adult in the normal range of intelligence will enjoy the thrill of understanding the target language in a few trials, often in the first trial. b. Long-term retention that lasts days, months, even years. c. This linguistic tool is stress-free both for the teacher and students.

2. There is a belief that TPR only applies to children. Is this a myth?

Absolutely a myth! The evidence is clear-cut that this linguistic tool, if applied with skill, will enable everyone, children, teens and adults, to enjoy instant understanding.

3. How can TPR be applied in mixed-level classes?

I asked Ramiro Garcia for his experience with mixed groups. He is the recipient of these prestigious awards: "Most Remembered Teacher" and "The Outstanding Teacher." Ramiro says, "My groups ranged from students with zero training in the target language to several years. The latter group welcomed a refreshing switch from textbook learning to the excitement of TPR. These "advanced" students were a valuable resource who acted as my assistants in introducing new vocabulary and in mentoring beginning students. As you know, the best way to learn anything is to play the role of

information like this: "I actually stood up when the instructor uttered the alien direction: 'Stand.' It is a fact. It is true. It actually happened; therefore, I can store this in long-term memory." The result is TPR can achieve long-term retention in a few trials, often in one- trial.

How to present a believable sample of the target language

Now I must refer you to these books: My first book: Learning Another Language Through Actions (in the 6th edition) and Ramiro Garcia's Instructor's Notebook: How to apply TPR for best results (in the 4th edition). I recommend that you follow the advice of Jim Martinez who successfully taught English in a private school in Argentina: "Read each book six times and each time you will discover something you did not know before about TPR."

Once students actually understand, then what?

Once they understand, you can then use this skill to move over into Broca's area of the left brain with traditional exercises in speaking, reading, and writing. Then return to the right brain with more TPR to understand another sample. Then use that understanding to switch to speaking, reading, and writing.

The first order of business

The first objective in any excellent language program is enabling students to be comfortable and confident with the sounds, the grammatical patterns, and semantics of the new language. That can be accomplished with students of all ages including adults using concrete nouns, adjectives, verbs, prepositions, and adverbs.

Do not underestimate the power of the concrete in acquiring another language. Every one of us did it with our native language. One can acquire true fluency at a concrete level.

How about abstractions

Abstractions will come later, not necessarily by direct instruction but in the context of discourse. Traditional textbooks, in my opinion, are notorious for trying unsuccessfully to force understanding of abstractions before students are ready.

Notice that when children acquire their first language, they become fluent native speakers at a concrete level of discourse; then gradually acquire abstractions in context or by asking direct questions such as: "Mother, what does 'government' mean?" Mother then explains using simple language that the child understands.

To break language apart into artificial categories such as phonology, vocabulary, grammar and semantics is of keen interest to teachers, but of no concern to students — because in the process of achieving fluency with TPR, they internalize everything simultaneously with no analysis, in the same way that children acquire their first language. Analysis into artificial categories is fine to "polish" the target language for advanced students who are already fluent, but not for beginners or even intermediate students.

I do recommend, however, that five or ten minutes at the end of a session be open to curious students who prefer to ask questions about pronunciation or grammar.

Does TPR really help students with grammar?

It does. Eric Schessler's English Grammar through Actions is a fine little book showing how to TPR 50 grammatical features in English. We recommend that you use this as a supplement as you go along for pinpoint instruction of specific grammatical features.

With TPR, students understand grammar in the right brain but cannot tell you how grammar works. If your intent is getting specific points of grammar into the left brain for analysis, then Schessler's book can help.

Remember, the right brain internalizes without analysis for high- speed learning. The critical left-brain must analyze everything, which makes for agonizingly slow-motion learning. Excellent guidelines to keep in mind for teaching any subject come from Leslie Hart who calls left brain learning "brain antagonistic" instruction while right brain learning is "brain compatible" instruction. (For more on right-left brain research discoveries in more than 4,000 studies, read my books: Brainswitching: Learning on the Right Side of the Brain and The Super School: Teaching on the Right Side of the

teacher." English teachers in Japan may be interested to know that TPR works even better when the "mixed" group is composed of adults, teens and children.

4. Do you have any tips for getting reluctant teens to buy into learning through TPR?

Ramiro offered this helpful insight: "If some teens are reluctant to participate, I leave them alone because I know that eventually the excitement of the class will draw them into the action like a needle to a magnet. It works every time but it does require patience from the instructor. Wait, wait, wait...those uncooperative teens will become your most enthusiastic participants."

5. TPR sounds great but I don't think it would work with my group of students.

Again, I called upon Ramiro Garcia for an answer. He said, "First, I would want to know why any instructor would feel that way. If you are satisfied with the results you are getting, then TPR is not for you. Just keep doing what you're doing. All I can tell you is that my experience for more than 30 years with groups of children, teens, and adults has been success, success, success with TPR."

6. Do you encourage students to ask for repetition or ask about meaning during TPR exercises?

No, because that results in "brain overload." Students are encouraged to relax, listen to the instructor and do what the instructor does. I recommend that five or ten minutes at the end of a session is open for any questions students may have about pronunciation, grammar or meaning.

7. Any other suggestions for teachers?

Yes. Remember that TPR is not a panacea for solving all problems. It is not a method. It is not an approach. But it is the most powerful linguistic

Brain.)

How to make the transition to speaking, reading, and writing

After ten to twenty hours of TPR instruction, role reversal is one way to make the transition (students assume the role of instructor to direct you and other students). Student-created skits, which they write and act out, are another way.

Storytelling is a third option along with traditional pattern drills, and dialogues.

The books I mentioned will show you step-by-step how to be successful with role reversal and skit creation. Some new books by Blaine Ray (for high school and adults) and Todd McKay (for elementary and middle school) (see references below) show how to make the transition from classical TPR to TPR Storytelling (TPRS).

How to get started with TPR

Once you have read the books I recommend and you find TPR an attractive option, how should you begin? First, make no dramatic changes in what you are now doing. Sample a lesson or two from my book or Garcia's book with your own children or your neighbor's children. If neither is available, then try a lesson or two with your students. This will accomplish three things:

- 1 You become convinced that the approach really works;
- 2 You build your self-confidence because you can do it successfully; and
- 3 You smooth out your delivery.

Remember, the more you play with TPR— yes, I said “play,” the more insight you will gain about how this phenomenon really works.

Try TPR with your students for only five or ten minutes to introduce new material. If you and your students are pleased with the result, try again in the next class meeting with another five or ten minutes.

Here are two more tips on using TPR:

- 1 To escape cerebral overload, students should be silent when they experience TPR. Don't ruin the experience by demanding that they repeat every direction you have uttered.
- 2 Use TPR only for new material that students have never experienced before. Of course, keep the sample at a concrete level rather than abstractions, which should be delayed until students are further along in the program.

TPR Issues for Teachers in Japan

For instructors who have limited skill in spoken English, the key, I think, is intelligibility. If the instructor's English is not perfect but intelligible, students will benefit from TPR experiences. They will have something to work with which can be “polished” later by interacting with native speakers. This is my opinion, which is open to further research.

Student Pronunciation

Most studies converge on this conclusion: If you start a second language program before puberty, children have a high probability of achieving a near-native or even native accent. After puberty, students can still acquire another language but most all will have some accent even if they live for fifty years in another country where the language is spoken.

There is another intriguing fact about the right side of the brain: The right brain can process information coming in on parallel tracks while the left brain is limited to one track. This has profound implications for acquiring other languages in school. If we use the powerful tool of TPR for understanding on the right side of the brain, then it makes sense to start students in elementary school with several languages, which the right brain can easily handle without interference.

If elementary school teachers apply TPR skillfully, students can graduate from the 8th grade understanding with two, three, or four languages, which can be further “polished” in high school bringing students to fluency. Remember, the earlier we start internalizing other languages, the higher the chances of acquiring a near native or even a native accent in each of those languages.

Working with mandated textbooks

tool in your educational toolbox if applied skillfully. And the key to successful application is an understanding of brain lateralization-- knowing when to play to the left-brain and when to play to the right brain. For more information on brain research, see the books in the reference section of this article.

You are directed to use a traditional textbook selected by the Japanese Ministry of Education. Now what? You and your students can still benefit from TPR. The following suggestion comes from Dr. David Wolfe who was successful as supervisor of Foreign Language Instruction in the Philadelphia School System and professor of Languages at Temple University. Dr. Wolfe recommends: Comb the book to list all adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and nouns that students can internalize with TPR. Do this before your students even open the book. Then when students open the book for the first time, they encounter only “friendly creatures.” This strategy transforms a “fearful” textbook into an attractive book that is an exciting challenge to students.

Here is a secret I will share with you: If I were the Japanese Minister of Education I would select Stephen Silver’s Listen and Perform book for elementary and middle school children learning English, and follow up with Todd McKay’s TPRS Storytelling books. For high school and adults, I would select Dr. Francisco Cabello’s TPR in First Year English followed by Blaine Ray’s Look, I Can Talk series of TPR storytelling books. That plan would insure extraordinary success for at least 95 percent of students. For additional insurance that the plan will be successful nationwide, I would offer sophisticated TPR and TPRS workshops for language teachers.

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Comments or questions about this article?

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