

Withdrawal from Grammar – Transition to TPR: A Personal Testimony

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TPR, the Total Physical Response teaching strategy, has been mentioned in language learning circles enough for instructors to know that is not a mind-altering drug; however, it is mind altering. It has caused a radical change in how I teach beginning Spanish.

I started experimenting with TPR in my high school beginning Spanish classes in the spring of '86, after attending a workshop that inspired me. At times I am overwhelmed by the enthusiasm and motivation that it has ignited in my students, but I'm having difficulty in shedding all those years of grammar-translation training. I can't help but wonder if students are really learning enough when we're having so much fun. Letting go of some of the grammar-translation techniques has been difficult because, for example, present tense regular verbs have *always* been conjugated before Christmas, and I wonder if I'm lagging behind if I don't. Should the concerns of meeting the curriculum come before presenting meaningful, more productive instruction? Our first year curriculum has been rewritten because of the success of TPR in the classroom, and because of the feedback I get from students.

They understand before speaking, reading or writing

TPR is a teaching-learning strategy developed by Dr. James Asher, a professor of psychology at San Jose State University, where the students understand the new language first *before* they have to speak it, or write it, or read it - just as a child learns language the first time. As an example, instead of using a flashcard with apple written in English on one side with *la manzana* on the other to get the student to remember, you would hold up the real thing and say *la manzana*. At this point the students are watching only; their books, notes, papers, and pencils are under their desks to focus their attention on the instructor. This also inhibits writing out phonetic English spelling for Spanish.

Next, the instructor says a command using the object demonstrating what should be done to fulfill their quest. A volunteer is asked to do the action as instructed. Other students are called upon to act to the command. Soon students volunteer to give the commands as if they were the instructor.

Motivation is high as students watch and listen, knowing that they will have to perform some action soon. Many students claim they are subconsciously repeating the commands as they are being said.

As time goes on, the teacher models increasingly more complicated actions: using prepositions to put objects different places, using new verbs to do other actions with the objects, etc. Some students want to become the teacher right away to direct their classmates' behavior. Others do so only when called upon. Everyone understands that they have to participate in order to pass the class. The crazier the command, the more students seem to pay attention. Students listen intently to each other, and we always applaud actions even if Laughing at mistakes is not allowed. Laughing at ridiculous commands is. Sometimes that's a fine line, and I haven't figured out how to avoid it except by giving the "Everyone Makes Bloopers In A FL" speech (where you divulge your language bloopers) to prepare students that it will happen. I do not correct errors at this point. If the student, acting as teacher or doer of commands, forgets something, he or she has the option of turning to the class for help by shrugging and saying *Clase?* Somehow having the class help is less intimidating than having a teacher do it.

It's fun to sit back, watch, enjoy...

Once a practice session gets started, the teacher does very little. It's fun to sit back, watch, enjoy, and keep record of who has participated. Checking papers during this time, however, is impossible because high school minds work in strange and mischievous ways.

Last fall, about the third week into the school year, a male student commanded another male student to walk over to a female's desk and put his hand in her shirt. You do have to draw the line sometimes. No, I don't encourage lewd commands, and they aren't in this textbook, but we all roared in laughter after he said his creative command. There was evidence of learning taking place.

The text *Español con Impacto* by Contee Seely has become the backbone of our beginning level Spanish classes. The distributors, **Sky Oaks Productions, Inc. (P.O. Box 1102, Los Gatos, CA 95031)**, can send additional information about the text or about beginning, intermediate, and advanced level options for French, German, Spanish and ESL. A free catalog will be sent upon request.

The book stays under the desk most of the class time.

Granted the eye-appeal of this text leaves something to be desired. Its usefulness and practicality, however, make up for its dull image. The text is used as a resource for the students, as I see this as its intended purpose. The book stays under their desks for most of the class time. Usually it's only *after* I demonstrate an item from a lesson, and they act it out, that I let them look at the lesson and repeat it as they read it. At the beginning some students are extremely uncomfortable without the text in front of them. As if relieved to get them open, they want to write English in them or jot down notes. It is especially for those students that I wrote up a vocabulary list to be handed out after the lesson has been taught. I don't use it as a MEMORIZE OR DIE assignment. By the time the students get this list, they should know most all the words. If something has not been given enough attention in

class, I will be able to tell as I walk around as they're filling them in. More often they will just tell me out loud that we haven't gone over such and such.

We discuss grammar points after they have been learned as part of the language. In other words, the students understand the content of the language first. Then I might set up a situation where the students try to find the rhyme or reason to it all. The personal "a" in *Toca a una mujer* can easily be demonstrated in contrast to *Toca una Cosa* by providing plenty of action examples. If the class doesn't catch on, the teacher can stress the "a" when it is said out loud or a list could be written on the chalkboard until students come to some rationalization as to why it's there. It's always a challenge to me to figure out these presentations.

Grammar means NADA if...

Grammar means NADA if it is taught first. If students discover that they can figure things out by themselves or with their classmates, the learning will become more meaningful. Current research suggests that teachers resist being authoritative. Leading students to discover the intricacies of learning a language on their own should be one of our goals.

Reading and writing activities are up to the teacher. I start written assignments by asking students to write down ridiculous commands using what they know so far. Question and answer techniques soon evolve so that students can follow assignments from non-TPR resources. However ... whenever I make that switch, the spark and the motivation fall flat unless it is some sort of realistic activity.

To combat that fall, this year I'm trying a Spanish journal. Students will be assigned to ask me any (decent) question in Spanish. I won't check their grammar or spelling, but will respond in correct Spanish and ask them a question. I guess it's more or less a system of writing notes, but it's a real language situation. In second year Spanish I can start this right away, but in first year I'll probably wait until the second semester. Yes, it sounds like work, but it could take the place of those horrible worksheets that I hate to check. It would certainly make for more interesting reading. It is language in action; students are trying to communicate.

The dialogues in this book are a left over, as I see it, from the audio-language method. I set the scene by drawing on the board or using props. Then I act out all of the parts by myself. (Sometimes students remark about my sanity.) Yes, in the future I'd love to have upper level students videotape the skits for me. By asking questions in English I find that the students usually have the gist of the skit. We go over them ALM style: choral repetition, row repetition, one student works through it with me in front of the class, students do it themselves with and without the books.

Dialogues with a twist

It's argued that memorized dialogue is not an efficient method of teaching, but I argue that any method that has the students speaking Spanish while doing actions that explain the

Spanish will help the student remember. Maybe it places some stress on the students, but I think some students thrive on the attention they receive when presenting and acting out a dialogue. When things get more complicated spring quarter of first year, it seems that I always have students that give up on the reading and writing component, but go "whole hog" for the dialogues. They can do them in front of the class well, get applause, and appear just as smart as everyone else. It's after witnessing such an event that I wonder about the reading and writing, and wonder how much I should be using it in first years.

Should I be teaching a basic conversation course instead?

Should I teach a separate course for those people that want all the rigors of grammar, but no functional ability?

If I threw myself completely into TPR, would my students do better?

If I don't teach them to conjugate in the old way, won't they fail upper levels and college placement exams?

I decided I needed a way to measure the learning taking place in my class. For lack of any other easily accessible standardized exam, I elected to give the previous year's National Spanish Exam (NSE) at the end of the year. Keeping in mind that I gave every student this exam on the last or next-to-last day of school, and that I teach in a school where 40 to 50 percent are college bound, the results aren't too bad.

First, let me explain a little about the difficulty of the NSE. The exam consists of 80 multiple guess questions: 30 oral comprehension and 50 reading. The style in which the vocabulary, grammar, and reading passages are presented is dissimilar to anything I emphasize in class. In 1987, when the tests were given nationally, only two students in the United States got a perfect score of 80. Iowa's top score by students with no previous experience was 69.

The top score in my class last spring was 59. The average score was 38. The Bell curve would have put the middle point at 42. Maybe so far this doesn't sound impressive, but what got me excited was the bottom score. All 81 students that took the test scored 25 or better. That means even my D and F students learned something. They were able to use their limited Spanish to a certain degree of success.

85% signed up for 2nd year Spanish

Maybe that degree of success accounts for the 85 percent of last year's students that signed up for 2nd year Spanish this year.

I was somewhat relieved when I read in Scott Foresman's "Foreign Language News Notes" that Dr. Valdman, a French and Italian professor at Indiana University thought that spending more time on "communicative activities to practice oral language . . . may mean postponing some grammar topics to a later level and cutting down on non-functional

grammar. We [need to] look at grammar content from a new perspective as we seek to increase students' communicative ability while not neglecting accurate and fluent use of language."

A drawback to TPR

A drawback in using TPR, I find, is that currently our second year program which uses *Spanish for Mastery II* from D. C. Heath almost totally ignores the real language that the TPR students have learned to use. Many of *Spanish for Mastery's* activities are more passive than active, and the command forms they've learned aren't introduced until late in the book. Each year I'm trying to incorporate more and more TPR activities into the second year class because the students respond to them so well. They know they need the book stuff for college, but the vast majority want to learn to communicate in Spanish. Once they've had a taste of using the language, many want more.... It's like the difference between learning Spanish from a family in Mexico compared with learning Spanish from a Berlitz tape. Which would you rather do?

It's student feedback that has given me the impression that something is lacking in my second year class. Students have told me point blank that they liked first year better. When I first heard this, the little teacher voice inside me said, "They 're just saying that because they don't like the book work in second year." So last year I added more written work to the first year curriculum. I thought to myself, maybe it was because they were having so much fun in first year that they hadn't learned enough about being a language student.

Au contraire!

They had learned enough about being a language student to tell me what worked better for them. I could not dismiss their attitude and opinions anymore. It finally hit home this spring on the last day of second year Spanish. A high IQ senior, who I respected greatly for his ability to synthesize material in a very short time, shuffled his papers and belongings long enough to be the last person to leave the room. "Mrs. Harris," he began, "I really learned a lot in your class, both years. (hesitant pause) But I think I liked the way you taught first year better. I don't know why that is, but I did." I thanked him and mumbled something about different teaching methods employed, elated from the praise but embarrassed from his insight. His honest opinion opened my eyes.

Dr. Asher tells how experiments have proven that TPR students will rate their teacher's effectiveness much higher than teachers using traditional methods [in his book *Learning Another Language Through Actions: The Complete Teacher's Guidebook.*] Another benefit, he claims, is that students will show more interest in the target language. Perhaps this is another reason why the percentage of students continuing on to second year was so high.

Why should I allow what students tell me to determine how I teach?

When stated like that, I have to reply, "If they WANT to LEARN, by all means GIVE IT TO THEM because how often do we hear students ask to learn? Those little teacher voices are still inside me, though, saying things like:

This isn't the way it's done. It doesn't follow the rules. It doesn't give them enough college prep grammar. They aren't learning in the traditional accepted ways. How come the major publishing companies don't stock this stuff? They have problems adjusting to the upper levels. They can use the structure, but they can't explain it. The textbook doesn't have written exercises, tapes, or workbooks. It's too much work to change. It's unteachable.

I find it very teachable. Enjoyable even! If I stuck with the TPR format more, I'd probably have less work to do.

It's not new. It's radical, but it's not new. It's been around for 25 years.

TPR in the future

Maybe in the future TPR will be more of an accepted method, and it will be implemented in classrooms K 16 with complete teaching guides if that's possible. As for now, I will continue with the TPR text *Español con Impacto*, and I will strive to put more TPR into *Spanish for Mastery II* because my students have told me they learn more that way.

BUT MOST OF ALL....

I will continue using TPR because of the good "press" I get from students, parents, and the town.

I will continue because of the motivation I see on the students' faces trying to anticipate, analyze, or mimic language habits. I will continue because it gives all students a chance to take the risk of using a foreign language and still receive applause just for trying.

I will continue because my administration evaluates time on task in my classroom, and TPR helps keep it at a high level even with 32 students in a classroom. I will continue because I like to watch the students have fun, and I like laughter in the classroom. I will continue because I like using the realia "junk" and watching the role playing that we do.

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Editor's note: The term, Total Physical Response was coined by James J. Asher in a 1963 documentary film entitled Demonstration of a New Strategy for Language Learning. In print, the term was first used by Asher in an article entitled Toward a Neo-Field Theory of Behavior published in 1964 by the Journal of Humanistic Psychology.

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