

*Dear colleague,*

If you go upstairs to your dusty attic and rummage through your grandparent's trunk that creaks when you open it, you may discover some exciting treasures. That's what made the *Antique Road Show* such a runaway hit on public television.

Well, that's what I have been doing with stacks of old manuscripts. Here is a hidden treasure written and unpublished in the 1970s by Professor James R. Nord of Michigan State University. I hope you enjoy it! It gives a fresh perspective of why listening skill in another language is so valuable. I have condensed and updated Dr. Nord's original article. Get ready for a surprise ending with a novel idea for shaping pronunciation to erase accents!

*Best wishes for continued success,*



JAMES J. ASHER

tprworld@aol.com • www.tpr-world.com

## WHY CAN'T I JUST LEARN TO LISTEN?

PROFESSOR JAMES R. NORD  
Michigan State University  
East Lansing, MI 48824

All I want to learn in a foreign language course is how to understand the language when it is spoken. Can I learn to listen? The answer is almost always an emphatic "No!"

However, if I want reading comprehension in a foreign language without the burden of other skills such as speaking, I can find a course that specializes in reading only. But if I want to learn only to understand what people are saying in another language, I'm told I can't. Now I ask you, "Why can't I? Why can't I just learn to listen."

I have traveled a great deal and visited many countries. I have learned at least one language beyond English quite well--that is Japanese. I have lived in Japan and my wife is Japanese. I have learned as a result of my travels that I can make my simple needs understood in any country. I can obtain all the necessities of life, without a great deal of effort by a mixture of gestures, pointing, key words in the native tongue, and slow English. I have learned that to survive, I do not have to know how to speak the language of the country I am visiting. *But I have also learned that I lose a great deal by not understanding the answer to my inquiries and the responses to my pointing and gesturing.*

I know that I miss a great deal by not understanding the comments passed between the natives after my attempts to communicate. Indeed, I miss a great deal of the country and the culture by not being able to understand the conversations in the subways, the shops, in the streets, by people who did not even know I existed.

When I travel to those countries where Japanese is spoken, I enjoyed the advantages of speaking---that's true. But I also gain a great deal from the ability to understand the discussion about me, the full response to my inquiries, the radio and television news, the arguments on the street and the explanations made about people, politics, and history.

After my return to the States, when I could no longer express my desires or demands in the second language, I still enjoy listening to news broadcasts in that language and listening to

records both of popular songs and some of the classical plays. I still enjoy telephone exchanges with some of my friends. Since many of these friends want to practice their English, I usually speak in English and let them respond in their native tongue. It keeps both our ears in tune.

I intend to travel more and I would like to learn to understand the language as it is spoken in other countries. But when I ask for a course which will enable me to achieve listening comprehension, I am frustrated. I am told I cannot have such a course. I must also first learn how to *speak* the language.

Why can't I just learn to listen? Why must I listen and repeat, mimic and speak? Why isn't there some course designed solely to teach listening comprehension? Whenever I ask that question, I usually hear two different responses. The first is that I am unique. I am the only student they have ever encountered who does not want to acquire speaking. I question that. The second response is that "It just isn't done that way."

### **They tell me I am unusual**

They tell me I am unusual, but I have never seen a survey asking students if they would like to listen only. *Students are seldom asked what they want.* They are told what is "best for them." If you think about it, we receive more information through listening than reading and writing and speaking. And foreign language instructors fail to realize that listening dominates speaking in about a 2 to 1 ratio. That may be why we have two ears and one mouth. Given the limited times students have in a language class, listening is the skill that has maximum positive transfer to other skills such as speaking, reading, and writing.

Here is another fact to consider: Person-to-person talking with someone in another language is extremely limited, but there are many opportunities to listen with radio, television, film, and records. Listening can enable us to acquire other skills. Listening enables us, for example, to use foreign films in science, social studies, and literature.

### **Forcing students to speak**

There is a dramatic difference between *allowing students to speak* and *forcing them to speak*. In a course designed for listening, students decide whether they want to speak, rather than being forced to produce utterances on cue before they are ready. Speaking on cue can be extremely stressful for most students.

### **Most students will never achieve fluency**

Most student in traditional courses will never achieve fluency in speaking, reading or writing the language. Few will even achieve listening fluency since it is not a goal in the instructional program. Most will be stressed out and then drop out with the conclusion, "I guess I am no good at foreign languages." Only about 5 percent will continue on, for reasons still a mystery, to become fluent speakers. Those who "give up" will be viewed as people who have "low aptitude for language learning" or are "not motivated."

### **The low aptitude myth**

I know this is a myth because everyone with few exceptions regardless of intelligence acquires their native language. So, aptitude must be an artifact of what Asher calls "brain antagonistic" instruction---playing to half of the brain, usually the wrong half." Aptitude is an illusion.

### **The students are not motivated myth**

The truth is that everyone would like to acquire more languages. There is a natural, perhaps instinctive, urge to master other languages--to connect with other people. Student motivation is

not the problem. Clearly, we are pitching the instructional ball out of the reach for most students. The secret is to find a way to make the linguistic ball catchable. There is a way and I will share it with you in a moment.

The vast number of second language teachers just don't know any alternatives. The attitudes blocking progress: "It can't be done." "We've always done it this way." "You will have to learn to speak in order to understand." Instructors are often constricted to only two fundamental approaches: audio-lingual or the traditional reading-grammar translation. Both approaches insure high attrition, high stress, and success for only a few students.

### **How to pitch the linguistic ball so that it is catchable for most students**

James J. Asher at San Jose State University in San Jose, California has been setting up demonstrations showcasing that speaking is a by-product of understanding rather than the usual assumption that understanding follows speaking. In fact, it may not be possible for one human being to "teach" another human being to speak. Asher's research demonstrates that consistent with the way babies acquire their first language, there should be a "silent period" of weeks while students internalize a map of how the target language works. Asher points out that there is no recorded case in the history of the human race in which an infant acquired speaking before a year or so of listening comprehension.

### **Some unique features of Asher's "listening comprehension"**

Infants do not just "listen." They are not a six pound sponge parked in a crib soaking up the target language. Amazingly enough, infants are actively involved in the process of understanding. For example, Infants are continually interacting with caretakers in what Asher calls, "language-body" conversations. It starts after birth when someone says, "Look at Daddy!" "Look at Daddy!" The baby's head turns in the direction of the voice and the voice exclaims, "She's looking at me! She's looking at me!"

*Later in development, the infant hears this:*

"Smile for auntie!"

"Take uncle's hand."

"Walk to me!"

*Still later in development:*

"Pick up your toy and put it on your bed."

"Don't make a fist when I'm trying to put on your coat."

The child can barely utter "Mommy" or "Daddy" with clarity, but can execute complicated directions showing perfect understanding of the phonology, grammar and syntax of the target language. Notice, too, that there is no attempt to "teach" speaking. In fact, adults often enjoy "baby talk" in which they playfully utter distortions in speech. ("Does sweetheart want a pee-punch?")

When the infant is ready, after months of "language-body conversations," speech appears spontaneously at different times for individual children. Albert Einstein, you may recall, did not speak until the age of 3 or 4 years.

And when speech appears, it will not be perfect. There will be many, many distortions, but gradually speech will shape itself in the direction of the native speaker. Asher calls these intimate "language-body" conversations, the **Total Physical Response**, which is now known worldwide as **TPR**.

## Where to find the “low down” about TPR

In the references at the end of this article you will find an updated list of books, games, and video demonstrations that will enable any instructor to acquire skill in the successful application of TPR. For instant success starting with the first meeting with your class, I recommend 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*. To order online, please go to: [www.tpr-world.com](http://www.tpr-world.com)

### My own contribution to listening skill in another language

Although Asher’s TPR is perhaps the most powerful tool in your linguistic box of tools, I would like to add a few more tools that seem to be helpful. The first tool I call **Sen-Sit**. It works like this: Students hear a sentence in the target language (**Sen** for sentence) and select the meaning from alternate situations (**Sit** for situation).

#### Phase 1 is the initial process of understanding.

In the **Figure 1** illustration, your student hears the sentence, “It is now two o’clock.” and makes a decision as to which picture represents what was heard.

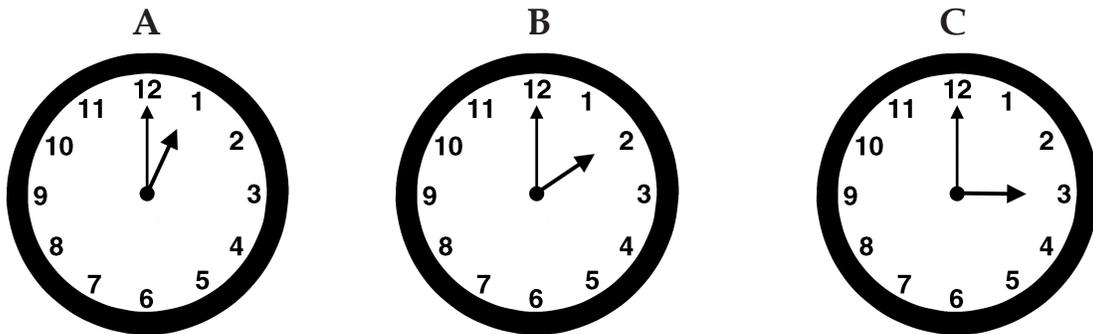


Figure 1

#### Phase 2 reverses the process of understanding

In Figure 2, your student observes a single clock and then hears three sentences:

- (a) It is one o’clock.
- (b) It is two o’clock.
- (c) It is three o’clock.

The student makes a decision as which of the utterances is appropriate.

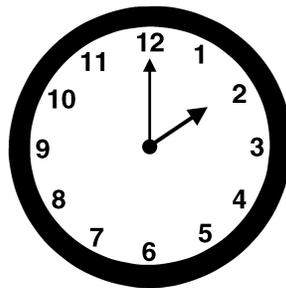


Figure 2

### Phase 3: Self-monitoring

The intent in this advanced stage is to develop critical listening ability so that your students can monitor their own speech to fine-tune pronunciation. As you may know, pronunciation is a major issue for companies training employees to communicate on the telephone with customers and clients. One of the most often heard complaints is that a technician on the phone is speaking “near-English” which is incomprehensible to a native speaker.

Here is how my tool works: I record new students repeating back phrases, usually with a “heavy accent.” Then at the 5th week, 9th week, 11th week, 15th week and 20th week I record the same students repeating the same phrases, except each time there is less of an accent. Students listen to themselves at different stages and seem to “pick up” differences between the first week and the following weeks. They can “hear” the subtle differences. It would be exciting to see more systematic research with the Sen-Sit tool.

### References

- Asher, James J. *Learning Another Language Through Actions (6th Edition)*  
Sky Oaks Productions, Inc.,  
P.O. Box 1102, Los Gatos, CA 95031  
(To order online, click on [www.tpr-world.com](http://www.tpr-world.com))
- Asher, James J. *Brainswitching: Learning on the Right Side of the Brain.*  
As above.
- Asher, James J. *A Simplified Guide to Statistics for Non-Mathematicians.*  
As above.
- Asher, James J. *Brainstorming Kit.* (booklet and transparencies),  
As above.
- Asher, James J. *Original Prize-Winning TPR Research Articles* (booklet and CD),  
As above.
- Asher, James J. *The Super School: Teaching on the Right Side of the Brain.*  
As above.
- Asher, James J. *The Weird and Wonderful World of Mathematical Mysteries:  
Conversations with famous scientists and mathematicians.*  
As above.
- Garcia, Ramiro *Instructor's Notebook: How to Apply TPR for Best Results* (4th edition).  
As above.
- Christopherson, Joan. *Organizing a Language Classroom that Works.*  
As above.
- Schessler, Eric. *English Grammar Through Actions: How to TPR 50 Grammatical Features.*  
(also available in Spanish and French).  
As above.
- Seely, Contee and Elizabeth Romijn *TPR is More than Commands—At All Levels.*  
As above.
- Silvers, Stephen. *The Command Book: How to TPR 2,000 Vocabulary Items in Any Language*  
As above.
- Woodruff, Margaret S. *Comprehension Based Language Lessons (Level 1)*  
(Winner of the Paul Pimsleur Award).  
As above.