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How to TPR Abstractions:
The critical role of imagination

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In a short documentary film* produced in the 1970's, I coined the term Total Physical Response (which is now known worldwide as TPR). The film shows the complexity of spoken Japanese that three 12 year-old American boys could understand in only 20 minutes of training. Then, we located one of the boys a year later and after a few warm-up trials, his retention of Japanese was an extraordinary 90 percent.

Since that groundbreaking motion picture, I explored the parameters of TPR over a ten year period of time in a series of experiments supported by many agencies including the Office of Education, the Office of Naval Research, the Department of Defense, and the State of California. The research was published in academic journals *such as: The International Review of Applied Linguistics, Child Development, The Modern Language Journal, The Journal of Special Education, The Journal of General Psychology, The Journal of Humanistic Psychology, SPEAQ Journal, and in the Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences.*

For a review of this body of research and a complete bibliography, please see my **book, Learning Another Language Through Actions**, (6th edition).

TPR Research: The Bottom Line

The bottom line of my research can be summarized in one or two sentences: Acquiring any language from one's native language to other languages does not begin with production. It begins with a long period of silence, which for an infant, lasts for months. During this silent period, the child is decoding the noises coming from the mouths of caretakers. The decoding is not achieved with "translation" from one language into another but with what I call "language-body" conversations.

One of the very first language-body conversation goes like this: The newborn hears someone say: "Look at daddy! Look at Daddy!" and she turns her head in the direction of the voice. The caretaker exclaims: "She's looking at me! She's looking at me!"

Spoken directions continue with the caretakers speaking and the infant responding with body movements. The caretaker utters a stream of directions that become more and more complex and convoluted. The physical response of the child signals that a direction is *understood*.

Simple Directions:

Stand

Walk

Sit

Smile

Don't cry

Take my *hand*

Complex Directions:

Walk to Daddy!

Sit quietly in your chair.

Don't spit up on your shirt

Let's go for a ride in the car.

When I clap my hands, you clap your hands.

Where is your cap?

Go find your cap in your bedroom.

Before the infant is able to utter "Mommy" or "Daddy" with clarity, the child can easily give an appropriate response to a complex direction such as: "Pick up your truck and your doll and put them on the bed in your room."

At some point in the decoding process, when enough of the linguistic map, showing how the target language works, has been internalized, production is triggered. Of course, speaking will not be perfect. There will be many, many distortions, but gradually, the child's utterances will match the native speaker.

Classroom Experience

From hundreds of classrooms where second languages are taught around the world, we now know that most students of all ages including adults can rapidly acquire understanding of a huge chunk of any target language if the instruction begins with language-body conversations called TPR. Since older children and adults are able to respond to directions in the target language with physical movements in a range that vastly outnumbers the infant's limited repertoire, decoding that requires months for the infant can be accelerated to only days.

Caution: Watch out for adaptation!

TPR is a powerful linguistic tool that results in instant success for students and the teacher. That is a heady experience that can become addictive. The instructor is so

thrilled by the excitement of students learning in chunks rather than word-by-word that TPR becomes an all-purpose tool that is used continually day after day.

Students become exhausted and mutiny with comments such as: "Please, don't ask me to do anything today!" and "Can't we do something else today—please, please, please...!"

To neutralize adaptation, switch activities frequently.

The powerful tool of TPR is best applied to introduce new vocabulary and new grammatical *features at any level*. Then make a switch by using the new items in a different activity such as storytelling, dialogues, games, or a pattern drill. Again, start by playing to each student's **right brain** using language-body conversations. Then switch to **the left brain** with activities involving speaking, reading or writing. For more on this, read Contee Seely's book: **TPR Is More Than Commands At All Levels** and Ramiro Garcia's book: **Instructor's Notebook: How to apply TPR for best results.**

Yes, TPR works for concrete words but how about abstractions?

First, I believe the linguists are on the right track when they affirm that the 4 or 5 year-old child is a fluent speaker of the native language, even though the child's vocabulary is not rich in abstractions. One can achieve "fluency" at a concrete level of communication.

However, as the student progresses, one needs more abstractions to communicate. So how do we accomplish this with TPR? We will demonstrate next that with imagination, almost any abstraction can be communicated without "**translating.**"

Some examples from Stephen M. Silvers

After twenty-five years of successfully teaching English with TPR to children and adults in the Amazon, Professor Silvers has **written: The Command Book: How to TPR 2,000 vocabulary items**. I asked him to TPR some abstractions to illustrate how the creative process **works:**

How to TPR the abstraction "later"

Abstract terms always present a small problem. It is one thing to say "Touch your nose" and demonstrate this and another thing to try to put the meaning across for a term like "later". The first is readily understandable, or at least not so likely to cause confusion. But a term like "later" is much more difficult to present. So, in the first place I would probably not use it until the students have internalized a lot of the "easily presentable vocabulary." I might want to use a little more verbal context, to make sure that the students really get the concept of "later" like this:

Teacher: ER is on TV tonight. What time?

Student: 9 p.m.

Teacher: What time is it now?

Student: 3 p.m.

Teacher: Is ER on TV now?

Student: No.

Teacher: So, it's on TV later tonight, not now. If you are going to watch TV later, raise your hand.

In this case my suggestion used a little more teacher talking time before putting the term in a **TPR command**.

Another suggestion:

Teacher: Everybody, stand up. Wait don't do it now. Do it later. Wait a few seconds. (pause) OK, Now do it.

I would then ask the students in English: "How do you say LATER in Portuguese? "

I used to be totally against any translation, but now I view it as an excellent tool when used properly. In my example, I asked the question in English (How do you say...?) Even though the students used a translation, they did it within an English-speaking context, and it involved just a **single word**.

More options

The abstraction can then be used in different TPR commands such as: If you are going to go to a movie later, raise your hand. Shake hands with the student who says that he is going to go bowling later today.

How to TPR the abstraction: "from time to time"

I presume that the students are not beginners. So I will explain in the target language of English like this:

Teacher: There are some things I do regularly. For example, I take a shower every day. I go to class every day. There are some things I do not do regularly. I do them "from time to time". I do them occasionally. For example: I go to the movies from time to time.

Notice that not only have I explained the new vocabulary item "from time to time" but, as an instructional bonus, I have included the synonym of "**occasionally**."

Now let's practice the new vocabulary using classic TPR

Teacher: During this class from time to time I am going to stop and clap three times. Now I want you all to work in pairs for five minutes and choose an action that you will do from time to **time during this** class.

Another option

Ask each student to write on a card something that he or she does from time to time. The students hold up their cards and the teacher can utter directions in English such as this:

Teacher: Juan, Shake hands with the student who plays tennis from time to time.

Teacher: Maria, pinch the student who goes to a disco **from time to time**.

Still another option

Instead of asking students to write on a card, ask a number of students to state in English what they do from time to time. Then say in English:

Eduardo, wave at the person who likes to go dancing from time to time.

Elaine, pass a note to the person who likes to cook from time to time. Notice that we are not using TPR to convey meaning of the new vocabulary. Rather, we are using TPR to add excitement to the class with a change of pace that doesn't take up much time, and encourages a group interaction that breaks down inhibitions that students often experience in their fear of speaking in front of their classmates.

How to TPR the abstractions "likes," "loves" and "hates"

The first step is to convey the meaning of the words. This can be done quite easily using a combination of simple drawings, symbols, gestures and facial expressions.

First divide the board into three sections.

In the first section, draw some carrots; in the middle section, some bananas; and in the third section, some apples.

Under the bananas, draw a happy face, and label it "Tom." Then smile, face the class, say: "Tom likes bananas," and write the sentence on the board under the drawing. (As another option, you can ask your students to repeat the sentence.)

Under the carrots, draw a sad face with a conversational balloon from its mouth saying "Ugh!" Label the drawing "Bill," make a facial gesture showing disgust, say: "Bill hates carrots," and write the sentence on the board.

Under the apples, draw a face in the shape of a heart with curly hair and label it "Mary." Face the class with a wide smile, say: "Mary loves apples," and write the sentence **on the board**.

Next, practice new vocabulary with classic TPR

Put up a wall chart with pictures or drawings of different fruits and vegetables. Call two students to the front of the class and ask them "to point to" or "touch" the pictures by following the sequence of the chart. Do it again except in random order to be sure that they have made the connection between the spoken forms and the visual representations. Here are some examples:

Rosa, point to the onions.

Marcos, touch the beans.

Ideally the students at their seats would also perform these actions on worksheets with pictures.

Further TPR commands:

Everyone who likes carrots, stand up.
Everyone who hates onions, walk to the door.
If you love apples, raise your hand.
Go to the chalkboard and draw a vegetable you hate.
If Anita hates beans, you (either an individual or the whole class) will point to the ceiling.
If not, you will **touch the floor**.

Personalize the exercise for your students

Each student completes in writing the following sentence stems with fruits or vegetables, which can be from those taught or any other words they know or would like to learn.

I hate
I like
I love

The students then read their sentences to the class. After several students have read their sentence, ask the class (or individuals) questions such as the following about what the students heard.

Who likes apples? Who loves oranges? Who hates spinach?
What (fruit) does Carla love?
What (vegetable) does Roberto hate?
Does Anita like cabbage?
Does Carlos hate strawberries?

You are not limited to simple questions. Since comprehension precedes production, you can and should use more complex structures which the students will easily understand, but will not be able to produce immediately. This exposure to linguistic forms is important as it helps the students internalize a cognitive map of the language which will trigger future production when each student is ready. Here are some examples of more complex forms:

Can anyone tell me who likes apples?
Can anyone tell me who said that she likes apples?
Does anyone remember the name of the person who likes apples?
Does anyone remember if Susana hates grapes or mushrooms?
Does anyone remember **what Ricardo hates?**

Encourage your students to have fun socializing in the target language with a "TPR mixer"

The object of this activity is for the students to form pairs by finding someone who loves the same fruit or vegetable. Each student writes on a slip of paper the name of a fruit or vegetable that he or she loves. The students then stand up and walk around the room trying to find another person who loves the same fruit or vegetable, using the following simple interchange.

A: I love bananas. What about you?

B: Me too. I love bananas, too. or... Not me, I love strawberries.

When most of the students have found a partner and are seated, the teacher stops the activity and brings the class together. The pairs then tell the class what they love, for example:

Pedro and Jorge: "We both love peaches."

Roberto and Maria: "**We** both love grapes."

Summary

Understanding abstractions (without translating) is a fascinating challenge. We recommend several strategies that will work to help your students internalize abstractions for long-term retention using TPR. First, delay the introduction of the abstraction (and idioms, too) until your students are further downstream in their language training. The advantage: You can explain the abstraction in the target language using words students already know. We do this all the time with children who are acquiring their native language. Examples:

Student: "What does it mean, 'He hit the roof?'"

Instructor: "It means, he was angry."

Student: "What does it mean when someone asks a hotel clerk, 'What are the rooms running for?'"

Instructor: "It means, What do the rooms cost?"

Another strategy is to use your imagination to TPR the abstractions which we illustrated in this article. There are also books available with ready-made TPR **exercises for abstractions** (**The Command Book: How to TPR 2,000 vocabulary items** in any language by Stephen M. Silvers.). For grammar, you will find **ready-made TPR exercises in English Grammar Through Actions: How to TPR 50 grammatical features** by Eric Schessler (also available in Spanish or French). Almost any abstraction (including idioms), can be presented to students using TPR. It does, however, require creative thinking from the instructor, but there are huge rewards: Student understanding is internalized for long-term retention which prepares your students for self-confident speaking, reading and writing.

***Documentary video entitled, "Demonstration of a New Strategy in Second Language Learning"**. Shows complexity of understanding for spoken Japanese acquired by three American children in only 20 minutes of TPR instruction (available through **Sky Oaks Productions, Inc.**)

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