

Twenty years of successful experience applying Dr. James J. Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) in many languages

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A journey from unsuccessful to successful language learning.

Well, I was invited to be here in Turkey to address an audience of academic colleagues and military officers who specialize in training Turkish soldiers in learning languages. I was asked to say something knowledgeable about language learning. Let me share my linguistic journey for clues to successful language learning.

For years, I worked at learning French in elementary school. It was book learning mostly with the traditional grammar-translation. This includes "Listen and repeat after me!" I must share this story about the familiar request of students, "Listen and repeat after me!" Dr. Robert Gauthier was a French-Canadian educator who discovered an interesting instructional strategy for language learning called, Tan-Gau. The unique feature is, the teacher asks questions in French, but students are allowed to respond in their native language. Gradually, the students make a transition to answering in French. When Dr. Gauthier started school, he did not speak a word of English. For months in the first grade he heard the teacher say in English, "Altogether now, repeat after me!" He thought the teacher's name was, "All together now."

(To obtain a DVD demonstration of Tan-Gau (which will amaze you!), see the end of this article.)

Now on to high school where I was a hard-working, diligent student I did all the homework assigned. For every hour in class I did an average of one-hour of homework. In later years, I read French books. When I was 18 years old, I went to France. I practiced sentences in French like how to get to places, but I was shocked when people actually answered me in French I had entered the handicapped zone that calls for interaction in the target language. After 1600 hours of school instruction, I was not prepared for people to answer me in French.

There is more you should know about me

I also "learned "

- a. Latin: Six hours a week (I learned that Latin is indeed a dead language.
At first it killed the Romans and now it was killing me)

b. German for five years; 3 to 4 hours a week. Here again the teacher from day one gave us grammar and more grammar; “throwing the instructional ball so high,” as Asher would say, “that no one could catch it.” However, I can read German fairly well. Technically.

c. English for 6 years--- 3 hours a week. I was not satisfied with my performance.

Little did I know that I would need English more than any other language later in life.

Is there any one still with me? Did you count the number of hours I dedicated to language instruction? So many of instructional hours wasted! The harmful side effect of that experience was the message: “I have such difficulty learning languages. I must not have any talent learning languages!”

In all those years, although I had excellent school marks writing French and German, there was almost no interaction with French or German speakers. You may think this is back in time and you may say, “Elena you are old and outdated.” You are right; I am. However, I see the same thing happening today in schools at all levels and everywhere. My grandson, for example, enrolled in French classes and he performed well on tests, but he can hardly speak a word of French. Today, most students in adult education dropout in the first year of language learning, are disappointed, and conclude that they are “poor language learners.”

Recently (half a year ago), I tried to learn Japanese with a young, qualified university instructor. She did her very best with a nice textbook and nice computer clips. I was very motivated since I had to work in Tokyo. All I remember is a few words and how to bow down and how to eat with chopsticks.

Back to TPR

I was offered a job as a college instructor. My students were refugees. They were well- educated Muslim men who wanted to work in Belgium. I thought, “Since I did not speak their language, how can I communicate with them?”

Since I was the tallest person in the room, the first thing I did, was to sit down. The men were smart and wanted a job in Belgium but they needed to learn the Dutch language. We had a translator for the first class meeting only. Now what? I had a traditional textbook and moved slowly word-by-word. They were patient, pleasant, and trusting that something productive would result from all this tedious work.

One day a friend gave me a book she thought might be helpful to me. Some weeks later, I started to read. It was an early edition of James J. Asher’s book, *Learning Another Language Through Actions* (now in the 7th edition). If you have a copy of the first edition published in the 1970ies, it is worth a fortune on ebay. As I read, I thought, “Why did we not do this in school? This makes so much sense!” I only stopped reading when my children said. “Mommy, we are so hungry.”

What did I read that impressed me so much?

As I read, I realized that teachers and students were on the wrong track. Infants, including those with a lower IQ, learn a language perfectly. Why so? Because of a different strategy than we use in school. In real life, for more than a year, infants are silent, except for babbling, but during this important silent period they are decoding how the native language works. They do it this way: The

caretaker utters something and the infant responds with a physical movement. For example, “Smile for grandpa!” and the child smiles. “Take my hand while we go for a walk!” “Don’t spit up on your blouse.” Asher calls these interactions, “language-body” conversations. During the silent period, there are thousands of language-body conversations with children. And then something quite magical happens.

Suddenly, the child begins to speak. Notice that speaking cannot be rushed. It cannot be forced. It appears when each child is “ready,” meaning their brain has decoded enough of the target language to trigger speaking. Some children speak early and some later such as Albert Einstein who did not speak until he was five years old. *Readiness to talk is an interesting concept*: because it contradicts the notion that one person can directly teach someone else to talk. As Asher says, “As children’s develop, their speaking skills are always far behind their listening skills.”

When children begin to speak, their utterances will be distorted. And what do we do? Do we correct them? No. We are so charmed at their attempts to talk that we respond with ‘baby talk’ such as “Does Darling want a pee-punch?” As the baby matures, we do offer gentle corrections. What was charming at two years is abrasive at five years old.

I kept on reading and I was inspired to try this new strategy in school. Asher promised that when you bring “language-body” conversations into school, children and adults, are excited that they can understand everything the instructor is saying in the target language. Nobody is struggling to comprehend. Asher made this stunning statement, “A teacher of any language has only five minutes to convince students that they can actually learn Arabic or Chinese or Italian. If you can’t do it in five minutes, students will not believe this is possible even if they stay in your class for a year or two.” He calls these language-body conversations in the classroom, the Total Physical Response or TPR. In only a few minutes of the first class meeting, students of all ages enjoy remarkable self-confidence as you will witness with remarks such as, “I understand everything she is saying! I thought this language class would be difficult, but it isn’t. I am really enjoying this.”

Another amazing revelation from Asher’s book

“Children and adults can achieve understanding of a second language, through the imperative, faster than an infant acquires its first language. The reason is that the infant’s repertoire of responses is limited to a few primitive behaviors such as looking reaching, grasping, pointing, touching, smiling, and eating. By contrast, the student has a vast network of complex behaviors that can be evoked in response to directions uttered in the target language. Hence, the understanding of language that the infant achieved in thousands of hours can be condensed into a few hundred hours of training for a student acquiring a new language” It is so logical to me; why did I not think of it myself? Asher explains what is happening in the student’s brain as “brainswitching.” To discover more, I refer you to his inspiring books listed at the end of this article.

I placed the traditional textbook I had struggled with into a drawer at my desk and started with the tool of TPR. My highly educated left-brain students loved it. However, they did not want to postpone the writing. They wanted to write all the words they had learned immediately after class. Writing words is the ultimate prove to them that they had learned. Other teachers came to look and

were impressed. I was not even good at it, far from it. But I loved it! It was a lot of preparation, but it was pure fun for me and the students.

Back home I was determined to change language learning and the opportunity came when a pedagogy centre called me and said they had refugee children from twenty countries who needed language skills. I was asked to start a new school for these refugee children. Teachers were desperate because children who cannot understand each other start to fight.

From that time on I had to train every new teacher in how to apply TPR. I was so touched to see how teachers and students were inspired as they used this very effective tool called TPR. Even the superintendent came to watch me, and said, "Your approach is a peacemaker everywhere." Well, they were wrong and right. It is a peacemaking yes, and no it was not mine. People started to imitate TPR everywhere and giving it different names. As you know, success has many fathers.

I will share only some of all the other the things I did

Even second and even third generation immigrant children came to school without any Dutch, only Turkish. And their Turkish was very limited because if you do not maintain a language, your vocabulary will decrease rather drastically over the years. Your native language might be somewhere in your warehouse of memories, but no one knows where to find it.

Previous to my arrival, Dutch teachers had a strict program for immigrant children No one could speak anything but Dutch in school; so there was a lot of silence. When school was over and the children started talking in Turkish, they were punished. I developed a program for all those teachers to encourage more tolerance. I recruited two male teachers who were from Turkey and we collaborated on a series of TPR lessons in Turkish. I then invited 45 Dutch teachers to come to school on Saturday where they internalized a huge chunk of Turkish with those TPR lessons. They enjoyed the experience. It gave them a new understanding of the children. They learned to use over a thousand words and understood grammar without ever having had one grammar lesson in Turkish

Why did it work so well all the time?

The idea is to stretch single words into hundreds of interesting sentences and let students show listening comprehension by performing action. It is so important to apply the principle of first trial learning, which is to catch the ball the teacher pitches on the first throw. The more times the instructor must throw the ball before it is caught, the lower the chances for long-term retention. See Asher's books for more insight on this interesting phenomenon.

Did the Dutch teachers speak Turkish with a native pronunciation?

The answer is no. The reason: Puberty is crucial to a native pronunciation of a new language. The only advantage children have over adults is acquiring a native pronunciation. If you learn the new language after puberty, you will almost always have some accent, even if you live in the country for fifty years. With practice over the years, you may become a near-native speaker but one almost never loses an accent. For the scientific documentation, again see Asher's books.

Please note: TPR is not a method, but it is the most powerful tool in your educational toolbox. (Another well-kept secret: There are no “methods” in learning languages or any other subject. The reason is: A “method” implies a formula and formula implies science. Teaching is an art, not a science. Science can give us tools, but how the teacher applies the tools is the artistry of teaching.)

The TPR tool is valuable not only at the beginning of language instruction, but I recommend it to introduce any new vocabulary item or new grammatical item. First comes TPR for understanding, then other skills of speaking, reading and writing follow gracefully.

What else do I have in my toolbox

I have every item you have in your toolbox: A dictionary, dialogues, songs, stories, and DVDs, but I also have a collection of TPR books, TPR student kits, TPR games and many, many props. Classic TPR is the most important tool, with other tools used to follow up the TPR experience. If you can use all your tools skillfully, you will enlarge student vocabulary tremendously and move students along on the path to fluency.

I once had four students I taught daily, and after four months they were admitted to the university. When they were asked: “How is it you learn Dutch so fast?”, they answered: “Well we stood on the table with Elena for four months (meaning we were active). Although I later trained teachers only, I always had a group of students to work with such as older Americans who came to teach, and illiterate women who dropped out of school when they were told they cannot learn.

Illiterate women were an interesting challenge. Here is what I did: I went to their homes and asked the children if they were willing to help their mother be successful. They always were. So I applied TPR with the whole family including the mother and it worked very well. Once you have confidence that TPR works, and develop some skill, you become more and more creative.

Well, that’s my story. I hope it inspired you to explore this amazing educational tool called TPR!

Elena Bins-de Rue is a an expert in classic TPR
and she offers workshops throughout the world
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Books by Dr. James J. Asher and other TPR aficionados

(Order at tpr-world.com)

Asher, James J. Learning Another language Through Actions (7th edition)

TPR Student Kits (in English, German, French, Dutch, or Spanish)

Brainswitching: Learning on the right side of the brain.

Brainstorming Kit

The Super School of the 21st Century

Discoveries by Ordinary People that Changed the World.

Prize-Winning TPR Research on a CD by Dr. James J. Asher

Growing Up in Norman Rockwell's America (A memoir of James J. Asher)

can Let's Make Sense of Algebra (and, Plato's Algebra: So simple, a child understand)

The Weird and Wonderful World of Mathematical Mysteries

A Simplified Guide to Statistics

Fermat's Last Theorem Solved! (The answer was hiding in plain sight)

German, DVD Demonstrations of TPR (In English, Arabic, French, Japanese or Spanish)

DVD Demonstration of Tan-Gau.

Cabello, Francisco The Total Physical Response in First Year (English, French or Spanish)

Christopherson, Joan A Second Language Classroom that Works!

Garcia, Ramiro Instructor's Notebook: How to apply TPR for best results (4th Edition)

Instructor's Notebook: TPR Homework Exercises

The Graphics Book (In English, French, German or Spanish)

TPR Bingo (In English, French, German or Spanish)

McKay, Todd TPR Storytelling (in English, French or Spanish)

Marquez, Nancy Learning with Movements (in English French or Spanish)

Olliphant, Jo Ann Total Physical Fun

Ray, Blaine Look, I Can Talk (in English, French, German or Spanish)

Look, I Can Talk More (In English, French, German or Spanish)

Seely, Contee TPR is More than Commands at all Levels

Live Action (In English, French, German, Italian, Japanese or Spanish)

Silvers, Steven M Listen and Perform (In English, French, or Spanish)

Woodruff, Margaret S Comprehension Based Language Lessons (Winner of the Paul Pimsleur Award)

Favorite Games for FL/ESL Classes