

**TPR Storytelling with high school and college students:
Our personal experience**

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March 2006
With an Introduction to TPR

by

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Comprehension - First: A revolutionary idea

Forty years ago, I introduced the concept that comprehension of the target language prepares students to make a graceful stress-free transition into speaking, reading and writing. At that time, the conventional wisdom was that "the shortest distance between two points is a straight line." Hence, bang! Start right out with speaking, reading and writing a target language that is alien to students. The result is stressful, repetitious "by heart" learning that crawls along at such a slow pace that most students give up long before breaking through to fluency.

That mind set still dominates foreign language education today perhaps because the few students who achieve all "A"s in the traditional classes go on to become language instructors themselves. Their view: "Gee, it worked for me! Why won't it work for you? Just try a little harder." For other language instructors who acquired the target language at home, the language seems so transparent

that "If you just listen and repeat after me," you will get it. These instructors are truly baffled when students respond with glazed looks in their eyes.

America is in competition with the rest of the world

Thirty states no longer require a foreign language to graduate from high school. Parents would definitely like their children to acquire other languages, especially since America seems to be in competition with the rest of the world for jobs. The glitch: Parents feel, based on their own experience in school, that the massive effort in foreign language classes is a "waste of time." Better to invest time in something more productive such as small appliance repair or ballroom dancing.

The good News!

The good news is that thousands of instructors at all levels worldwide have discovered that the "royal road" to language acquisition is definitely "comprehension-first" rather than the traditional production-first. Supported by research grants from many federal and state agencies, I explored the parameters of a powerful tool to help students of all ages including adults enjoy instant understanding of any target language. That tool I call the Total Physical Response, known worldwide as TPR. The languages used in research by myself and colleagues were English, French, German, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish. You will find those studies reviewed in my first book, *Learning Another Language Through Actions*, now in the 6th edition.

Well, if comprehension is important, let's translate

Sounds like a good idea, but it does not work very well. Here's why: Everyone has hundreds of experiences that this is a chair, this is a table and that is a door. Only one person, the instructor, claims that this is a kursi, this is a taula and that is a bob. Someone is either crazy or lying and it is not us. The brain will not store lies in long-term retention. That's why the assertions by the instructor are erased from memory even before students stand up to leave the classroom. I like Mark Twain's observation: "If you tell the truth, you don't have to have a good memory."

Create facts rather than assertions

As instructors we are playing against the critical left hemisphere of the student's brain. That side of the brain scans incoming information for flaws. It is sceptical. Its mission is to keep us safe and sane. It does this by testing the "reality" of any new idea. The left brain is continually asking, "Is this true?" "Why should I believe it?"

At best, assertions by anyone including instructors are stored in short-term memory for as long as it takes to "pass a test." Hence, we are more apt to win in the brain's game, and by "win" I mean get storage in long-term memory, when we create facts for students rather than merely assertions. How do we do this?

How to create facts

In any instructor's box of tools one powerful tool is my Total Physical Response, known worldwide as TPR. The essence of TPR is "language-body" conversations in which the instructor integrates vocabulary into directions for the student to follow. For example, instead of asserting that this is a kursi, this is a taula and this is a bob, students say nothing but physically move when the instructor directs them to:

Imshii il kursi. (Walk to the chair.)

Ooid ala kursi. (Sit on the chair.)

Waif! Hut il kursi baid il bob. (Stand up! Put the chair next to the door.)

Eem il kurse min el bab wa (Take the chair from the door hut ha ala taula. and put it on the table.)

Here is why "language-body" conversations create facts

Your students are silent. They listen to a direction in the target language (without translation) and perform an action. They have just created a fact, and facts are more difficult for the left brain to reject than assertions. With lightning speed, the left brain reasons this way: If "waif" does not mean to "stand up," why did I stand up? If "imshi" does not mean to walk, why did I walk? "Waif" caused me to "stand" and "imshi" caused me to walk. These are cause-effect relationships. They must be true. It is OK to store those patterns in long-term retention. A bonus is that within the patterns, students also internalize a map of how the language works-- that is, the phonology, semantics, and grammar.

The highest form of art

In a presentation recently for 900 ESL instructors gathered at Myrtle Beach in South Carolina for the Southeast Conference, I asked everyone to erase a word from their vocabulary. That word was "methods" because there are no methods in foreign language instruction. Here is why: a method implies a formula and formula implies a science. Teaching is an art, not a science. There is no formula that will shoo anyone to success in teaching.

Teaching is perhaps the highest form of art because all by yourself on a stark stage with only one prop, a chalkboard--you will attempt to hold the attention of your audience for an hour or more. No music. No writers. No producers. No directors. No stage crew. No comics. No warm-up act. No show girls---just you and your students. I don't know of many celebrities who would have the courage to stand up and deliver a performance all by themselves for one or two hours--an eternity in radio, television, film, or Broadway.

The first step is comprehension

So, step one is comprehension. Once students have internalized a huge chunk of the target language, they are ready for step two-- speaking, reading, and writing. This transition from comprehension to other skills cannot be forced. Each student, of all ages including adults, will make the transition spontaneously when the individual is ready, which usually happens between 10 to 20 hours of classical TPR language-body conversations. Then, help your students make a successful transition from comprehension to production with storytelling along with other techniques such as role reversal, pattern drills and short dialogues (made up by your students).

TPR Storytelling with high school and college students: Our personal experience by Dr. James C. Davidheiser and Marilyn Davidheiser Authors of the new book, *Deutsch durch Maerchen: Beginning German with Fairy Tales through TPRS*

College students

On the first day of class I showed my students a video demonstration of TPR entitled, "Strategy for Second Language Learning." The video produced by James Asher and distributed by Sky Oaks Productions, Inc., shows students between ages 17 and 60 moving around the room rapidly acquiring an understanding of German in chunks rather than word-by-word.

I gave my students no further explanation, but immediately started with my first direction in German, "Stand up! (and I modeled by standing up and motioning them to stand up) and then "Sit down!" Following the pattern in James Asher's book, "Learning Another Language Through Actions," I continued with "Walk!," "Stop," "Turn." When I sensed that my students were responding with confidence, I expanded with: "Stand up. Point to the chair. Point to the table, and point to the chalkboard."

Gradually, I move from the familiar utterances to novel directions (ones they never heard before in German). For example, they are now familiar with Walk, Point to... and Touch... Will students understand a recombination such as, "Walk to the chair and sit down" or "Walk to the table and sit on the table" ? I am always amazed that their understanding of German is now so fluid, they can comprehend sentences in German that they never heard before. Understanding of novel sentences in the target language is a TPR bonus I never observed in traditional left-brain exercises such as, "Listen and repeat after me" or "Memorize this dialogue."

Students want to see the utterances in print

One caveat: My students begged me to see the commands in German. So, I prepared handouts with the German directions in print (without translations). It is important that students not see the German in print until the end of a class and I limited vocabulary to about two dozen lexical items per meeting.

Here is how my students respond

My students are enthusiastic, especially with the marvelous experience of understanding German instantly. They also like some follow-up innovative quizzes such as:

1. Three at a time

Three students at a time enter an empty room and they show their understanding of German when I direct their behavior. The benefit: Learning is multiplied since students get to observe classmates perform.

2. Dictations

The entire class is seated and write as I dictate familiar and novel directions in German.

My experience with TPRS (TPR Storytelling)

After three weeks of TPR, students are comfortable and confident in understanding, speaking, reading, and writing a huge sample of German. I express it this way: With TPR, I can pitch the instructional ball so that it is catchable. Students--all of my students-- get it! With the traditional textbook approach, a few students get it, and the rest stretch to catch it, but the ball flies way over their heads.

My students are so confident that they become playful with the German rather than fearing it. When we do role reversal and each gives me directions in German, they may direct me to "Stand on the table" or "Throw your tie out the window" or "Go to the door, open it and yell, "Anybody out there order pizza?" That good-will and humor spills over into "word of mouth" recommendations such as: "Hey, you gotta take German--Yes, I said German. It's more fun than a room full of video games."

Now I make a transition from TPR into TPRS (TPR Storytelling)

I have success with simple stories in Blaine Ray's Look, I Can Talk. The first is "The Cat Story," a simple tale of possession, loss, and repossession of a cat. The next is "The Cow and the Monkey," a comparison of a poor monkey with a rich cow who comes to the aid of the monkey. Then on to "The Date," a more complex narration with all the preparation that goes into the date, and a disaster which leads to an early departure for home. The brief vocabulary list does not discourage the students, as do those in most traditional language texts.

Hint: How to tell a story for best results

When students hear a story for the first time, it is a thrill for them if they understand everything you are saying. To achieve this, I help students internalize the vocabulary ahead of time with TPR (actions and gestures).

Ray has a manual with a gesture for each word and I used these initially, but soon discovered that I could make up my own gestures or better yet, let students make up gestures. All of these options seem to work.

Beware of over-modeling

A caveat: Beware of overmodeling which can exhaust everyone, the instructor as well as the students. Your goal: Minimum modeling. When they get it, stop modeling! I find that I only have to demonstrate once or twice and they get it! The more you play with modeling, the more skilled you will become as applying the principle of "less is more."

How about grammar?

Students will implicitly internalize grammar in the TPR and TPRS experience, and Asher suggests that this is a right brain understanding (under the radar of consciousness) similar to that of native speakers. Students and native speakers may not be able to tell you names of grammatical features, but they can communicate with sentences that are often grammatically correct.

Asher advises that learners (especially adults) seem to be comfortable with some explicit left brain explanations of grammar. One way to do this gracefully is to use the last 5 or 10 minutes of a class for a Q and A session about grammatical points of interest to students.

Another way to handle explicit grammar instruction

After my students are comfortable hearing and telling a story, I hand out a sheet with a brief explanation of each grammatical detail that appeared in the story. For example, I write next to certain sentences that a particular word is feminine, masculine, or neuter. I may state that a word is plural and for comparison, give the singular, too. My explanations are so brief, they do not impede the flow of rapid communication.

Notice that you are playing first to the right brain with storytelling and later switching to the left brain with an explanation. Flowing back and forth from one hemisphere to the other seems to satisfy students. There is a kind of balance that is pleasing.

Another trick: I prepare grammar sheets for homework. For instance, after the first four stories in *Look, I Can Talk!*, I use vocabulary from the stories to practice dative pronouns, verbs and the genitive case. The value of familiar vocabulary is that students perceive grammar not as an end in itself, but rather a powerful aid to listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Advancing beyond Level 1

You have many options. You can continue with more storytelling in Level 2 with Look, I Can Talk More and into Level 3 with Look, I'm Still Talking. For elementary and middle school students, take a look at Todd McKay's TPR Storytelling books in English, Spanish and French.

I think the secret of continued success is (a) finding goals that are attractive to students (How would they actually like to use the language?), and (b) a rich variety of activities.

How to adapt TPR and TPRS to any textbook

Many secondary teachers are stuck with a mandated text that has been selected by others. That is exactly the situation that my wife, Marilyn, encountered. She teaches German and Spanish at the Franklin County High School in Winchester, Tennessee.

One solution

Dr. David Wolfe, who was supervisor of all foreign language instruction at the Moorestown School District in New Jersey has this advice: " Open the textbook and pull out every noun, adjective, verb, adverb and preposition that can be inserted into a TPR direction. Then, before your students ever see the textbook, move them around and keep moving them until they have internalized each vocabulary item.

The payoff: When your students open the book for the first time, they are excited to see familiar friends instead of alien monsters that produce fear. You know the typical response in a traditional class when they open the book for the first time, "I can't do it!" and "This is an impossible task! I will never understand this language."

Another solution discovered by Marilyn

Using the vocabulary in each chapter of the text she asked her students to help her create simple stories with illustrations on transparencies. The results are phenomenal. Students thoroughly enjoy seeing their drawings on transparencies and hearing their classmates tell the stories to accompany their drawings.

Moving beyond storytelling

Beware of the exclusive use of any procedure

Asher and Garcia caution against being too predictable. For example, the exclusive use of one procedure such as storytelling has a noxious side effect of "adaptation." One way to neutralize adaptation is a frequent change of pace with "surprise" activities from your box of tools.

Remember, In the beginning, a procedure is a novelty that attracts student interest and holds their attention. But, continued use day after day results in non-responsiveness. A one-trick pony will not hold the attention of a circus audience. It takes many acts to stage a successful show.

Another caveat: Beware of the "hamster on an exercise wheel"

When students finish one book, their reward is another book and when they finish that book, there is still another book. There seems to be no end. Students often feel like a pet hamster spinning an exercise wheel round and round. It's like driving around a parking lot in circles. When will we reach our destination?

One way to neutralize the "exercise wheel" is short- term goals that are attractive to students such as:

- How to buy a bus ticket
- How to order breakfast
- How to find the bathroom in a public place
- How to get a hotel room
- How to direct a taxi cab driver to a location
- How to read a bus schedule
- How to read a lunch menu

Play with this idea: Start your students off with a list of possible goals and ask them to expand the list. To add some fun to the exercise, ask your students to brainstorm in pairs. Then, combine all ideas into one grand list and ask each student to rank with "1" as their first choice, then "2," etc.

Now your students are in control of their destiny. They are going where they want to go. One of my colleagues once told me, "You can't learn to program a computer unless you have something you want to program." Well, perhaps you can't zoom ahead in a foreign language unless you have a purpose, a goal--something you truly want to communicate to someone else.

Use the present tense

Use the future tense

Use the past tense

Use the conditional

Compare the student goals above with typical teacher goals such as:

Cover Chapter 1 in the text

Cover Chapter 2 in the text

Teacher goals are "hot" items for instructors, but of incidental interest to students. Student goals should be the focus of attention with teacher goals in the background.

A personal note

Marilyn and I have co-authored a new book, *Deutsch durch Maerchen: Beginning German with Fairy Tales Through TPRS*. It includes seven fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm with drawings and alternate versions of each so that students can enjoy telling the tales themselves. In pilot tests of the book in beginning German at the University of the South, students rated the book as, "...an exciting way to move from comprehending German to speaking." Yes, we are available to demonstrate TPR and answer your questions.

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