

TPR Storytelling: Hypotheses waiting to be tested

(Dedicated to graduate students worldwide.)

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Many graduate students have written to me asking for guidance in developing a research project to explore the effectiveness of storytelling in acquiring other languages. Storytelling is an exciting virgin area for research.

You will hear many different opinions from “experts” who travel from city to city, selling books that proclaim storytelling is the panacea, the magic formula that will guarantee student success in learning any language. However, there is no solid, systematic research showing the effectiveness of storytelling in training time, short and long-term retention, and transfer-of-learning.

Consider this hypothesis

Here is an important hypothesis waiting for you to test: What is the effectiveness of storytelling with and without TPR?

There is abundant evidence that TPR is a powerful linguistic tool to “jump start” students of all ages with immediate success in understanding any language on earth. This rapid understanding of any target language is the foundation for a smooth transition to speaking, reading, and writing. (Read James Asher’s *Learning Another Language Through Actions* and Ramiro Garcia’s *Instructor’s Notebook: How to apply TPR for best results*. To order see the end of this article.)

Some itinerant “experts” piggyback on the success of TPR to deceive their audience. They use the label TPR Storytelling to draw in the audience, then let them in on a secret, “Confidentially,” they whisper, “TPR is not necessary. Just ‘teach’ them the vocabulary any way you can, then zip into storytelling.” This claim is “cut from whole cloth.” There is absolutely no research to back this up. This claim begs to be tested with some carefully designed research projects.

Consider this design for your thesis or doctoral dissertation:

Stories

For simplicity, let’s use Story 1a, 1b, 1c, and 1d in Todd McKay’s *TPR Storytelling*. Each story is only 4 or 5 sentences.

The Subjects

Start with several classes of beginners at the same age and grade level in school. One class, the **Experimental Group**, internalizes the vocabulary of each story with TPR.

Another class, **Comparison Group 1**, learns the vocabulary with translation (i.e., *corre* means to run, *mañana* is morning, and *mira* means look, etc.) **Comparison Group 2** learns the vocabulary by pointing to pictures (i.e., Show a boy running and say “*corre*”; show a picture of morning and say, “*mañana*”, and another picture of a person looking and say, “*mira*”). **Comparison Group 3** learns vocabulary with gestures (see Todd McKay's *Teacher's Guidebook* for a list of gestures).

Orientation for the subjects

I think it is unethical to present anything that makes students feel a sense of failure. To avoid this, I think the directions should be like this: *We need your help. We are exploring four different ways to learn a foreign language. We want to find out the best way. Randomly, we have assigned you to one of the four groups. Some groups will find the learning easy and other groups will find the learning harder. That's what we want to find out.*

Here is how it will work: *It is simple. I will present some words to you in Spanish and then tell you a short story using those words. We want to find out how well you understand the story. When the study is over, I will share the results with you. Please try your best and let's see what happens. Any questions?* (If someone asks what the other groups will be doing, say, “I'm sorry. I can't discuss that. It would ruin the study.”)

Trials to learn

This is tricky. I suggest you try this with a few people to see what is reasonable. The idea here is to give each group the same number of exposures to the vocabulary.

Short-and-long-term retention

After listening to you tell each story in the target language, then ask, in the target language, a set of ten true-false questions about the story. Subjects simply circle true or false on their answer sheet. (Perhaps the students should listen to you tell the story on tape followed by the ten true-false questions so that everyone hears exactly the same thing.)

Data analysis

Apply simple *t*-tests for independent samples as follows:

	Experimental	Comparison 2	Comparison 3
Comparison 1	X	X	X
Comparison 2	X		X
Comparison 3	X		

For each *t* that is “statistically significant,” find the effect size. (For step-by-step guidance, see my book, ***A simplified guide to statistics for non-mathematicians***. To order, see the end of this article.)

For **long-term retention**, repeat each test one week or perhaps one month later.

Transfer-of-learning

Transfer-of learning is, in my opinion, the most important measurement in any language learning research. The reason: If students can only say or do exactly what they learned, the language training program has low efficiency. A successful linguistic program enables students to understand sentences *they have never heard before* in the target language. This is the secret of “fluency”.

To measure transfer-of-learning, students hear you slowly tell the story on tape from Page 9 of Todd McKay's *TPR Storytelling Student Book Year 1*, which the subjects *have never heard before*, followed by the ten true-false questions. Note: the subjects have heard the individual vocabulary items in four very short stories but not in a novel arrangement that tells a new story. This is a crucial test of “comprehension fluency”.

Another option: storytelling with and without pictures

Another option: Does it make a difference if you tell the story while pointing to pictures (from Todd McKay's Student Book Year 1) projected on a screen from transparencies? What is the impact when one tells a story with and without pictures?

Have fun! There is nothing more exciting than discovering something no one else in the world knows. Let me know how I can assist you in developing a successful research project that any academic journal would be pleased to publish.

R E F E R E N C E S

Order the Asher books online at www.tpr-world.com

Asher, James J., *Learning Another Language Through Actions (6th edition)*.
Los Gatos, CA., Sky Oaks Productions, Inc.

Asher, James J., *Brainswitching: Learning on the right side of the brain*.
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Cohen, Jacob, *Statistical Power Analysis in the Behavioral Sciences*,
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McKay, Todd, *TPR Storytelling (available in English, Spanish or French)*.
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