

HOW TO BECOME A PRIZE-WINNING LANGUAGE INSTRUCTOR

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Winner of the Outstanding Professor Award from San Jose State University,
founded before the Civil War in 1857 as the oldest public university in California.
SJSU has 30,000 students and a faculty of 1,800 Ph.Ds.

Methods, methods, methods...

With apologies to my dedicated and hard working colleagues, I must say that one of the most debilitating mind sets in education is to offer college students a methods course in second language learning. The reason: "Method" implies a formula, and a formula implies a science.

All a myth!

Teaching is an art, not a science. Teachers are artists, not scientists. And "teaching" may be the highest form of art because it is a one-person Broadway show on a stark stage with only one prop, a chalkboard. No music. No orchestra. No special lighting. No backup singers. No show girls. No comics. No writers. No producers. No directors. No stage crew.

The audience is your students, and all by yourself, you will attempt to hold their attention for one or two or three hours. That's an eternity in any other art form such as "live" theater, movies, television, or radio. Most celebrities would not have the courage to stand up and hold your attention all by themselves for an hour or more.

The highest form of art

Everyone thinks they can teach. All you have to do is stand up and talk, right? I can do that! Anyone can do that! Politicians often say, "when I retire, I'll do something light—like teach in a college."

It is like being a therapist. All you do is listen and nod your head. I can do that! Anyone can do that!

It is like being a manager. Everyone thinks they can be a manager. All you do is boss people around. I can do that! Incidentally, the first woman to become an admiral in the United States Navy was interviewed on 60 Minutes and made this observation: "You manage things. You don't manage people; you lead people."

Leadership can be a lot of small details such as this: In the infantry during the Korean War, a first lieutenant was giving instructions to soldiers who were so cold, their teeth were chattering. Casually, without missing a beat, the officer removed his leather gloves one finger at a time, and put the gloves in his pocket and then folded his hands in front of him. A subtle gesture, but what a powerful message: "I'm with you. If I can endure the cold, so can you."

If you think back on instructors who inspired you or managers who motivated you — you can count them on one hand. Both activities require talent like playing a musical instrument or singing an aria or excelling in a sport.

My recommendation: Don't call it "methods" because there is no mechanical procedure that will shoo anyone along to success in teaching. Although teaching is not a science, science offers us many powerful tools of which TPR is one.

Now, it is important to remember that one tool will not work for all tasks. Ask any fine woodworker. A power router will not drill holes, saw wood, pound nails or strip off layers of paint. A power router will only make patterns in wood.

Instead of "methods," call it...

Instead of "methods," call it what it is - a "box of tools." My model here is Dr. Richard P. Feynman, the Noble prize-winning physicist who explained his secret of success in solving problems this way: "I simply reached in and rummaged through my box of mathematical tools to find something that might work to solve a specific problem." The good news is that every technique and trick you learned in that "Methods" class can be placed in your box of tools. The secret of success is to decide which tool to select at a particular moment in the learning experience. Here is a hint: The first step is to identify which tool plays to either the left brain or the right brain.

My next recommendation: Doodling

"Doodling" is a strange idea! My inspiration is the clarinetist, Benny Goodman.

I played the clarinet in our high school orchestra and when I listened to Benny recently on a CD, I was thunderstruck by the purity of every note. It was as if God was inside Benny guiding his fingers over the keys.

When Benny Goodman was once asked, "Benny, we notice that you doodle on the instrument everywhere you go, even to the rest room. Why do you do that?" Goodman answered, "Doodling is the difference between being 'good' and being 'great.'"

I mentioned the Nobel laureate in physics, Dr. Richard P. Feynman. He was a doodler. He messed around with concepts that most people would consider too sacred to tinker with — such as trigonometry. Using a book borrowed from the library, Feynman studied trig on his own as a teenager because he wanted to be a scientist someday. But the names of trig functions printed in the textbook did not make sense to him. So he created his own names! It worked beautifully until he earned a doctorate in physics and began working with other physicists who did not know what he was talking about. Whoa! Time to go back and memorize the textbook labels — which he did in a flash.

My recommendation: Encourage your students to doodle with the language. Working the daily assignments is not enough. Students need to play with the language like a toy. My model here is Dr. Sam Slick, former chairman of the Foreign Language Department at Southern Mississippi State University where I was invited to speak a few years ago.

At lunch, I asked Sam: "You are one of the few people who acquired your fluency in the Spanish language at school rather than home. How did you do it? What is your secret?" Here is what he confided: "I played with Spanish rather than merely worked at it. For example, when I drove to or from school, I would make up imaginary conversations in Spanish with imaginary friends. People passing me must have thought I was crazy muttering to myself, but it worked. Suddenly the entire language opened up to me. Before, the language was out there in front of me, and then one day, bang! It was suddenly inside me!"

I understand that you want your students to sound like you, but...

If we want students to play with the language, then interrupting them to correct pronunciation is counterproductive, especially for beginning students. We need to be as tolerant of mistakes as we are of infants acquiring their first language. Gradually, student pronunciation will shape itself in the direction of the native speaker.

However, the evidence* is clear-cut on this point: Students have the best chance of acquiring a near-native accent if the language experience starts early, before puberty. After puberty, almost everyone will have some accent, even if they live for fifty years in a country where the target language is spoken.

Definitely, Comprehension comes first before speaking, reading or writing

Comprehension first is a simple idea that is not widely understood. People think they get it, but few really do. There are three excellent reasons why it is critical that comprehension be the first skill acquired by language students:

- **Throughout recorded history**

In any language and in any culture, there is no record of infants speaking before they comprehend a huge chunk of the target language. Infants are silent for at least one year while they internalize a map of the target language.

During this silent one year period, infants internalize a blueprint of phonology, grammar and semantics before they utter anything intelligible such as “Mommy” or “Daddy.” They achieve this stunning mapping that I call “language-body” conversations (which is the essence of TPR).

Notice that caretakers utter directions such as, “Look at me!” “Look at me!” and the baby turns her head in the direction of the voice. “She is looking at me!” “She is looking at me!” As the baby develops, the directions become more and more complex such as: “Pick up your spoon!” “Don’t spit up on your bib!” “Don’t make a fist when I’m trying to put on your coat!” “Take your toy and put it on the bed in your room!” The child is silent but responds with an appropriate physical action. The “silent period” is essential preparation for the appearance of speech.

- **Locations in the brain**

The second reason for Comprehension First is the brain. Comprehension and speaking are located in different parts of the brain. Comprehension is in Wernicke’s Area which is in the temporal lobe while speaking is in Broca’s Area located in the left frontal lobe.

If Wernicke’s Area is damaged, the patient can speak but may not be able to understand what people are saying. If Broca’s Area is injured, one may understand but be unable to speak. If still another area of the brain is injured, there is apraxia — a person forgets to do ordinary things such as how to brush one’s teeth.

- **If comprehension is important, then why not...**

If comprehension is important, then why not translate? Translation sounds good, but it does not work very well. The reason: The student’s brain perceives what the instructor is saying in the target language as lies, lies, lies. And the brain will not store lies in long-term memory. Remember Mark Twain’s comment, “If you tell the truth, you don’t have to have a good memory.”

Why is translation one lie after another? Here is how the brain interprets: Everyone in this room except one person has hundreds of valid experiences that this is a “chair,” this is a

*Evidence is reviewed in my book: **Learning Another Language Through Actions** (6th Ed.)

“table” and this is a “door.” Only one person, the instructor, asserts that this is a “kursi,” this is a “taula,” and this is a “bob.” Someone is crazy or lying, and it isn’t us. It must be the instructor! That’s why there is only momentary understanding with translation that disappears for most students before they walk out of the classroom.

Something else to keep in mind about the brain

Since Roger Sperry’s Nobel prize-winning experiment with cats showing that each hemisphere of the brain can think independently, 4,000 follow-up studies have been completed from researchers around the world. We have learned more about the brain in the past 50 years than we knew in last 5,000 years. Just a few findings:

First, the brain is the most sophisticated computer on earth. To create a new computer with the power of one human brain would call for an apparatus the size of the Transamerica building.

Second, our brain operates independent of us and knows the answer to a question one-half second or more before we do. Most of the brain’s trillion transactions every second are below the radar of our consciousness. (For more on this exciting phenomenon, see my books: **Brainswitching: Learning on the right side of the brain** and **The Super School: Teaching on the right side of the brain.**)

You get some appreciation for the power of the human brain when you call a company for information and a recorded voice tells you to press this button, then listen again and press that button and once more, listen and press and press — and when it is all over, your inquiry still has not been resolved. It is a thrill to make that business call and a “live” human answers the phone. Now you have the attention of the world’s most sophisticated computer.

Do we really need textbooks?

I abandoned textbooks years ago and discovered that the effectiveness of my instruction improved dramatically. The most persuasive case against textbooks (which are over-priced at \$60 to \$150) was made by Laura Zink de Dias, prize-winning instructor of Spanish, French, and Russian in the Western Washington schools. She also publishes a cutting-edge e-mail newsletter for language teachers (For a complimentary subscription, click on laura@prolinguistica.com).

Laura says, “Any time you rely on a textbook, you run the risk of students becoming stuck in the patterns taught in the text. Focusing exclusively on stories (which is the latest fad) can have the same result. In the end, texts don’t create good instruction. Texts may lead you down the ‘garden path.’

“With any textbook it’s easy for the teacher’s approach to become mechanical — dependent on the book, rather than on her creativity. A beginning class is precisely where one should never skip classical TPR because this is a tool that will give the instructor an opportunity to integrate variety into the language experience...”

Let’s put it all together

Simply, my message is that all instruction should not be an off-the-shelf product, but custom-made to fit comfortably for students and the instructor. Don’t buy off-the-rack. For an elegant fit, tailor the instructional experience especially for your students. They are worth it! Students give us their most precious possession, their time. They can replace money lost, but time can never be replaced. And above all, the language experience should not be work, but have all the pleasure of kindergarten children playing with toys. After all, if language is a gift to our species, then one should not have to work to get it.

Recommended follow-up reading

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How to organize a successful research project.
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Conversations with famous scientists and mathematicians.
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Los Gatos, CA: Sky Oaks Productions, Inc.
- Christopherson, Joan. (2005). **A Second Language Classroom That Works!**
Los Gatos, CA: Sky Oaks Productions, Inc.
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- Kunihira, Shirou and Asher, James J. *The strategy of the Total Physical Response:
An application to learning Japanese.*
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publication is a follow-up to the first documentary film showing three 12-year-old
American boys acquiring a sample of Japanese with TPR.
Video of the documentary may be ordered from Sky Oaks Productions, Inc.
- McKay, Todd. (2004). **TPR Storytelling: Especially for students in elementary and middle school.**
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Los Gatos, CA: Sky Oaks Productions, Inc.
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- Silver, Stephen. (2003). **Listen and Perform** series (Available in English, Spanish or French).
Los Gatos, CA: Sky Oaks Productions, Inc.
- Silver, Stephen. (1986). **The Command Book: How to TPR 2,000 vocabulary items in any language.**
Los Gatos, CA: Sky Oaks Productions, Inc.

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