

**TPR Storytelling: The Teaching Method Most Consistent with the
Principles of Second Language Acquisition**

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October 2002

Chapter One

Introduction and Problem Statement

Most foreign language classes today, as they have been in the past, are taught with little regard for the findings of current research in applied linguistics and the field-tested theories of second language acquisition (Krashen, 1987). To the detriment of their students, teachers are using outdated or untested ideas as the basis of their pedagogy. This is a tragic situation in light of the fact that there does indeed exist a cohesive theory of second language acquisition that is supported by empirical studies, as well as a methodology of teaching that is consistent with the theory and whose effects have been shown to be superior to what most language teachers and students achieve with the current methods.

The rationale underlying the current widely accepted curriculum and practice in foreign language teaching comes from cognitive psychology, which may be useful in explaining some learning processes, but “has yet to be correlated with linguistic and social theories of language and acquisition and explored through second language acquisition research” (Met, 1992, p.866). Stephen Krashen’s theory of second language acquisition, however, comprised of five hypotheses about the way we learn and use a second language, has been tested and supported by a large body of research in a wide variety of contexts over the last 25 years. The teaching method most closely aligned with Krashen’s theory is called Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPRS), and was developed

by Blaine Ray in 1990 as an improvement upon the Total Physical Response method designed and studied extensively by James Asher in the 1960's and 70's.

Teachers, administrators, and curriculum developers need to be made more aware of the predominant second language acquisition theory and the studies that support it, and they need to be given access as well to training in the corresponding strategies and methods for optimal teaching. In this paper I will attempt to do both; first I will review the literature regarding second language acquisition and approaches to teaching, and then I will describe TPRS, which I believe is the optimal curricular program, given what we know about second language acquisition. I will include step-by-step instructions for the language teacher interested in improving the efficacy of his/her work and willing to try a proven method.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

Second-language Acquisition (SLA) Theory

The SLA theory developed by Dr. Stephen Krashen of the University of Southern California and articulated to different degrees in several of his works (1981, 1983, 1987, and 1992), consists of five central hypotheses which can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. The learning/acquisition dichotomy: There is an important distinction between *learning* and *acquisition* of a language. Learning refers to the conscious process of learning *about* a language, or knowing its structure and grammar rules and how to use them. Acquiring a language, on the other hand, is the unconscious process of getting a 'feel' for a language and being able to use it fluently. This is what happens with our first language; we quite unconsciously acquire the vocabulary, syntax, and grammar, and begin to speak it fluently, well before we consciously study its rules. An important corollary to this hypothesis is that learning does not lead to acquisition, nor does acquisition lead to learning; they are separate processes.
2. The Input Hypothesis: The single most important factor in acquiring language is receiving plenty of comprehensible input - accurate, meaningful language that is understandable to the student. Ideally this

input is at a level just above that which the student can produce. Krashen labels this ideal input level $i + 1$, where i is the level at which the student can produce.

3. The Monitor Hypothesis: Our formal knowledge *about* the language serves us as a mental editing device, or 'monitor', which can help produce grammatically correct utterances under certain circumstances, the most important circumstance being time. The monitor cannot help much with conversation because of the immediacy of a conversational situation. To be a competent, fluent communicator one must have *acquired* a good deal of language. But when time allows, such as with writing or planned speech, the monitor can aid in accuracy.
4. The Natural Order Hypothesis: Learners acquire grammatical structures in a certain predictable order. This "natural order" is not the same as the supposedly simple-to-complex order of grammar presented in most language texts. For optimal results, however, the comprehensible input should not follow any intentional grammar sequence, natural order or not, as this tends to shift the focus of the input away from natural language and towards a certain grammatical structure. Also, a sequenced grammar approach has to assume that every student is at the exact same level i , when it presents $i + 1$. If the input is natural and unconcerned with a grammar sequence, however, there will be some $i + 1$ for every level i in the room, provided there is enough overall input.

5. The Affective Filter Hypothesis: It is only possible to acquire language when the student is emotionally prepared to do so; if s/he is anxious, unselfconfident or contending with other negative emotions, the acquisition will not take place.

Cognitive theory, on the other hand, is a broad, psychology-based theory of learning rather than a specific language acquisition theory, and as noted earlier, its application to second language acquisition has not been sufficiently studied. Cognitive theory stands in opposition to Krashen's hypotheses because it views language as a complex set of skills that can be consciously learned through drill and practice. "The purpose of a cognitive exercise is the comprehension of forms, the conscious learning of forms, and the conscious selection of forms to fit the context" (Chastain, 1976, p.151). Cognitive theorists distinguish between *controlled processing* and *automatic processing*, and claim that fluency, or "communicative competence", results when processing of the second language becomes automatic. New linguistic constructs are controlled for some time, requiring active attention on the part of the learner to produce them correctly. With enough practice, controlled processes should become automatic (Met, 1992). One of the few studies made of the cognitive method compared cognitive teaching approaches with the audio-lingual method, and showed no significant differences in student performance except in reading (Krashen, 1983).

Approaches to Teaching Second Language

The most common approaches to teaching second languages in the United States have been Grammar-translation, Audio-lingualism, Cognitive-code, and the Direct Method, with Total Physical Response gaining popularity in the 1970's and serving as the basis for the development of TPR Storytelling (TPRS) in 1990.

Grammar-translation was the predominant method during the first half of the twentieth century, when the goal of most foreign language classes was the ability to read and translate literature (Met, 1992). Speaking and listening proficiency were not emphasized; rather, students were presented a grammar rule accompanied by a vocabulary list, a reading selection, and exercises for practice. Often such classes were conducted in the students' first language.

Audio-lingualism was a very popular method in the fifties, sixties, and early seventies (Met, 1992). It is a behaviorist approach, also very concerned with grammar, but with the ability to use it correctly in conversation being a more important objective than the ability to analyze it. The methodology consists of repeating and memorizing dialogues, with the goal of developing habits that could later be utilized in actual conversation with native speakers.

The cognitive-code method is the most widely used approach today. Based on the cognitive theory of learning, it embodies the position that a good

understanding of grammar is essential and that practice will lead to automaticity, which for practitioners of the cognitive-code method is the goal of language learning. When one can employ the constructs of the language automatically, without conscious effort, one has learned the language. To this end, grammar points are explained and then practiced with drills, activities, and games intended to foster fluency.

Finally, the direct method is a teaching strategy wherein all classroom dialogue and instruction takes place in the target language. Some language teachers call this 'immersion' (not to be confused, however, with a program in which all of the student's content courses are taught in the second language). With the direct method, grammar is a major focus, but it is often taught inductively, through conversational question and answer and modeling (Krashen, 1987).

James Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) is a completely different approach. With virtually no emphasis on grammar, the central components of TPR are an abundance of comprehensible input and the use of the student's body (and therefore the whole brain as opposed to just the left hemisphere). TPR consists of the teacher giving commands in the target language while modeling the commanded action. Students act out the commands, first following the model and later on their own, beginning with simple commands and leading to more and more complex sequences as the vocabulary is internalized. Students are allowed an initial silent period of up to several weeks, in an effort to

allow language production to emerge naturally when the student is ready. Asher believes that just as infants silently acquire a great deal of receptive knowledge of their first language before they speak, students learning second languages should not be forced into too-early production. When students decide they are ready to speak in the target language, there will certainly be errors. But because communication, not grammatical accuracy, is the main goal of beginning language instruction through TPR, errors are only corrected when they impede communication. Asher (1993) advocates "extinguish[ing] all critical responses" to students in the classroom, as these serve to increase their stress (affective filter) but not to improve their language production (p.3-7).

How and Why TPR Works

Asher and other researchers have tested TPR methods extensively during the last quarter century, with findings that demonstrate the superiority of TPR over traditional methods. One study showed that 11-year-old girls learned as much in two months of twice-weekly after school German TPR classes as adults did in two months of intensive (30 hours per week) German via the audio-lingual method; another showed that college students who had completed one semester of TPR scored as well on listening and reading assessments as students who had completed two semesters of the audio-lingual method; a third showed college students with 45 hours of TPR instruction surpassing those with 150 hours in traditional instruction (Asher, 1993).

Researchers propose several reasons as to the effectiveness of TPR. One, as noted above, has to do with using the student's whole brain. Most instruction (in all academic subjects) is geared towards the left brain, from which most logical, sequential, and analytical processes as well as much of the brain's language function is thought to derive. The right hemisphere is the domain of spatial, global, and non-verbal thought. Asher (1993) cites studies that have shown that the right brain can comprehend language, but cannot express it other than through an appropriate behavior (performing an action, writing a word, or choosing the correct word or picture from a set), while the left brain can only express meaning verbally. From this comes the hypothesis that it is through the functions of the right brain that pre-verbal infants first experience language, while the left brain silently "observes" and over time internalizes the form and structure of the language enough to begin producing it. Therefore, if we assume that second language acquisition is very similar to first language acquisition, it follows that having students first experience the new language through the right brain is a more natural approach and will prove more successful. To experience the language through the left brain first, for example by studying early on the grammar of the language (an extremely analytical task), or by forcing verbal production before a solid base of comprehension is developed, would be to go about the challenge backwards. It is hard to imagine that such a backwards approach could be the most efficient way to acquire a second language. Additionally, and perhaps quite apart from the hemispherical

issue, when students pair certain body movements or hand signs with language, they create long-lasting brain-to-muscle associations that aid in long-term retention of meaning. This is evident from my own experience, in which I sometimes ask students to recall a vocabulary word acquired long ago but not used in quite some time; they often perform the gesture *first*, and only afterwards are able to recall the meaning of the word.

A second possible reason for the relative success of TPR is the lack of stress this learning method produces in students. According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, the less stress the student feels related to the process of acquisition, the more s/he can acquire and the better will be the retention. The fact that students enjoy learning language through TPR is evidenced by studies showing attrition rates in foreign language programs dropping after schools switch from traditional to TPR-based methods. Swaffar and Woodruff found that after a semester of TPR instruction at the University of Texas, the percentage of students going on to the next level of instruction jumped from 50% to 75%, and student ratings of the course went from 'average' to 'above average', while ratings of the professors went from 'slightly above average' to 'above average to excellent' (Asher, 1993). Informal feedback from my own students, as well as daily observations of them having fun in my class and achieving success with their second languages leads me to believe that students do, in fact, experience less stress and more fun in a TPR class.

In fact, TPR meets the requirements of all of Krashen's hypotheses: the emphasis is on natural acquisition through exposure to meaningful comprehensible input rather than the conscious learning of grammar; 100% of class time is devoted to comprehensible input; all input is in the form of natural language, with no requirement to sequence the grammar; the monitor is not called to use during spontaneous production, thereby disrupting fluency; and care is taken to keep students' affective filters as low as possible.

TPRS as an Improvement upon TPR

TPR is best suited for beginning language learners. It is used ideally to develop a comprehension base and to inspire confidence and motivation in students. Even though Asher maintains that for a well-trained and creative teacher, TPR is an effective method for teaching both concrete and abstract concepts, and all verb tenses, many teachers felt restricted by TPR once their students began to approach an intermediate level of proficiency. Some also felt that their students were experiencing *adaptation*, or the feeling of just not being excited by issuing and following commands anymore. Asher himself (1993) encourages combining TPR with other, left-brain activities for the higher levels. TPRS was developed in response to such feelings.

With TPRS, teachers tell short stories as a means of providing comprehensible input. New vocabulary words are always taught first through traditional TPR, and once students have internalized their meanings, stories full

of repetitions of the new words are told. The stories are silly, exaggerated, and personalized (students themselves are often characters in the stories) in order to increase students' motivation to understand and talk about the stories. Students then act out the stories, answer questions about them, revise them, retell them from various perspectives (thus necessitating verb changes), and make up their own stories, all in the second language. This is the perfect manifestation of Krashen's requirement that communication consist of meaningful messages that students want to hear. Most teachers with experience in both TPR and TPRS find that this narrative approach to comprehensible input allows for easier acquisition of verb tenses and complex language structures.

Comparisons of test scores between TPRS students and traditionally-taught students show encouraging results. Valeri Marsh (1997) cites the following data: In the spring of 1993, middle school students in a pilot pre-Spanish I introductory TPRS program at Phoenix Country Day School scored above the national average on the Level I National Spanish Exam (NSE), a discrete-point grammar test intended for high school students who have completed one year of Spanish I. In 1991, honors-level high school students at Salpointe Catholic High School in Tucson, Arizona outperformed the national average of 41% on the NSE by 21 percentage points, even though they had only had one semester of Spanish I. Overall scores on the Level I NSE at Salpointe improved by 12 points (from 33% to 45%) in the first year that all Spanish I teachers switched to TPRS. It is worth mentioning that these comparisons are

being made between TPRS and those methods that educators and curriculum writers *today* believe to be the best methods- we are not comparing TPRS to the outdated and already debunked grammar-translation or audio-lingual methods.

The next chapter will show how to teach a TPRS lesson, and propose a test-score comparison study of TPRS- taught and traditionally- taught students, in an attempt to replicate the results of the comparisons mentioned above.

Chapter 3a: A TPRS Guide

The following is a summary of my application of Blaine Ray's TPRS method, which is detailed in his book, *Fluency Through TPR Storytelling* (Ray, 1997). My knowledge comes from this book, a two-day TPRS workshop presented by Ray in June of 2001, my own experience as a TPRS teacher, as well as the suggestions and experiences of fellow TPRS teachers around the country, who communicate through an online forum.

First-year TPRS lessons

Start with 3-5 new vocabulary words. Early in the year, these will be concrete nouns and actions only; as students progress, you will begin to add some abstract words). Give the English meaning and teach an action, gesture, facial expression, or hand sign for each word. An American Sign Language dictionary can be a useful resource, but the gestures do not have to carry meaning outside of your class. Often, if you ask for their input, your students will come up with gestures that are more meaningful to them. Practice the new words until all of the students can produce the correct gesture when they hear the word in the target language. Practice first with the whole class, then call on small groups and then individuals to show you the signs. Combine the new words with old ones in novel sentences or commands. Check frequently with 'barometer students' (those that tend to catch on more slowly than the rest). When the barometer student knows the new words, you can move on to the next step, the Personalized Mini-Situation.

Using *only* the new words and old vocabulary that the students have already mastered, make up a Personalized Mini-Situation (PMS). This is a very short scenario that involves one or more of your students, and the sillier the better! It should be bizarre and exaggerated to hold the students' interest and provide plenty of visual associations that will ease recall. The new vocabulary words should be repeated as often as possible in this short story. Have some volunteers act it out while you tell it. Retell it a couple of times with different actors. Then retell it without actors, but move through the space of the story yourself as you tell it. This time, ask questions as you go through it, and let the class shout out the answers. Start with yes/no and either/or questions, then move to fill-in-the-blank and open-ended questions.

If your students are ready to produce orally in the target language, have them take turns telling the story. Encourage them to embellish it when they are ready. However, it is very important not to rush the oral production. The period of silent processing before a student is ready to speak differs with each student. As long as the quiet ones are truly understanding what is going on in the class and can prove it (by making the correct sign sequences, translating into English, giving simple one-word answers to questions, or by drawing pictures that illustrate the story), this is enough. They are learning the language receptively,

and to push them further than they are ready to go would be to cause them anxiety and strengthen their affective filter.

Once a week, tell a longer story that includes all the new vocabulary from the week's PMS's. Depending on your schedule and the speed of your students, you may be able to tell three or four PMS's per week, but don't rush to keep up with any contrived schedule. It's more important that your students really internalize the vocabulary and grammar structures they encounter than it is to "cover" a certain number of vocabulary words in the school year. With TPRS, you are teaching depth, not breadth. It's also important not to go too slowly by spending too much time on each story. The students will get bored this way. It's not necessary that each student memorize each PMS and each story, rather that they can recognize and use in future contexts the vocabulary and grammar they learned via those stories.

After most of your students have mastered a given PMS or story, have them tell it from a new perspective, beginning with the first person singular (I). For example, if the story involves a boy and a girl, you will then tell it from the girl's perspective. Instead of "she rides her horse to the store and buys a lampshade", they would say, "I ride my horse to the store and buy a lampshade". On the board, write down any words that will change due to the new perspective (usually verbs and pronouns) and let students refer to these so-called "guide words" until they have internalized them. After students master the changes in narrative that the first person perspective requires, move on to

second person singular (you), third person plural (they), first person plural (we), and second person plural (you all). Michael Miller, an experienced teacher of German through TPRS, calls this method of teaching verb agreement “horizontal conjugation” (Miller, n.d.). Horizontal conjugation in the context of a story is more meaningful than the decontextualized “vertical conjugation” usually taught in language classes and which consists of students memorizing charts like this one:

I go
You go
He/she/it goes
We go
You (all) go
They go

The second, third, and fourth years

The teaching method for the advanced years is virtually the same as for the beginning year, only with more advanced concepts. For example, instead of changing the point of view from which a story is told to teach subject-verb agreement, you will tell the stories from different perspectives in time to teach verb tenses. You will also expect more oral and written production from the students.

Grading in the TPRS class

Participation is vital to this method, and therefore makes up a large part of each student’s grade (in my class it’s a third). They start the semester with a

100% (A+) in participation, and this grade goes down in increments of 5 points if they are caught not participating, disrupting a lesson, or displaying negative social behavior. This is made very clear to students on the first day of class. Lost participation points can always be earned back, however. This may be done by writing something in the target language (a letter to the teacher, a story, or a short essay, for example), or researching and presenting cultural information.

Frequent pop quizzes are given to assess how much of the vocabulary students are internalizing. Unannounced quizzes are preferable to announced quizzes because the goal is to find out how much the student has truly acquired, not how much remains in her short-term memory after a study session the previous night. TPRS teachers try to have at least 80% of their students scoring 80% or higher on all quizzes. Some teachers will strike from the quiz and re-teach words that cause classes to fall below this mark, with the assumption that there hasn't been enough input and practice with such words. Once students have a good language base to draw from (often not before the second year), essays are assigned occasionally. When scoring the essays, teachers focus much more on whether the student is able to communicate effectively than on whether the language is perfectly accurate. Basic mistakes that impede communication (for example, noun-verb agreement), therefore, are weighed more heavily than those that don't impede communication (gender of nouns, for example, or word order). Some teachers don't count off at all for errors that don't impede communication. The philosophy is that accurate language is acquired over a

long period of time and to expect it too soon is to discourage real communication.

Chapter 3b: Research proposal

To compare the quantity and quality of the language acquired by students in a TPRS program with those in a non-TPRS program (I will call the latter program "traditional"), I would like to administer a widely accepted, standardized test of Spanish proficiency to a class from each group after three years of instruction at the middle-school level. My own school site is the ideal setting for this study, as there are two middle-school Spanish teachers; one teacher (myself) uses exclusively the TPRS method, and the other teacher follows our school's project-based curriculum, with class time divided between comprehensible input, grammar lessons, drill practice, and project work. During the academic year 2003-2004, we will each have an 8th grade class whom we've taught since the 6th grade. I would like to administer in the spring of 2004 either the New York State Spanish Exam or the National Spanish Exam (Level One, since they are high school-level exams and our 3-year middle school program aims to match the curriculum of a first-year high school class) to those students in each of these classes who have been in the class since the 6th grade, and compare the students' scores to determine if there is a significant difference in score between students of TPRS and those taught in the (relatively) traditional way.

This research project would be a static-group comparison design, as I will not randomly assign students to the treatment and control groups; the students

are already in these groups based on which teacher they have. I have not administered a pre-test; nor do I plan to. Most students entering our 6th grade have had minimal or no Spanish instruction previously, so I assume that both groups of students began with virtually no prior knowledge of Spanish. We do not have native speakers in our classes. As the students are quite randomly assigned to one teacher or the other when they enter the 6th grade, I also assume that our respective populations do not differ to a statistically significant degree in age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, cognitive ability, or percentage of students with disabilities. Since the test won't be given for over a year from now, I will have time to research and document this data, so that when I am analyzing the results, I'll have more than assumptions to stand on. With experimental and control groups of similar population, the study shouldn't be adversely affected by history or maturation (events that occur at school or changes taking place in individual students), as such should affect both groups equally.

Nor do I expect either the Hawthorne or John Henry effect to threaten the validity of this study. The students do not know that they will be compared, so there will be no "working extra hard" either simply because they are being studied or in the hopes of outperforming the control group. Likewise, the resentful demoralization of the control group will not present a problem, as they do not know that they are the control group and do not resent not being in a TPRS class. Not knowing that they are part of a study will also negate the

possibility of experimental treatment diffusion. Students will not be especially motivated to discuss with each other the different teaching styles of their Spanish teachers, but even if they did have such discussions, this would not be enough to contaminate the effects of each teaching strategy. I also do not expect to see any effect on this study due to novelty or disruption; the classes who will be tested have experienced a consistent teaching method since they began second language instruction at our school, and the testing will take place after three years of these methods.

Any testing or instrumentation threats will be neutralized by virtue of not giving a pre-test and by giving both groups the same post-test. The threat posed by statistical regression will not be a factor since I will include all students of two given classes, and the classes are not tracked; that is, each includes students from both lower and higher ends of the cognitive and academic spectra. Finally, as the TPRS teacher myself, I won't be relying on someone else to carry out the methodology I wish to assess.

There is one threat to internal validity that I can foresee, however, and that is experimental mortality. Without having given a pre-test, it may be difficult to compare students who drop out of the study to determine if their absence adversely affects their group's test results. However, as teachers we do keep records on all students with regard to proficiency as measured by different types of in-class assessments throughout the year; I may be able to use such records to help inform decisions regarding the effect of mortality on this study.

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