

A Comparison of TPRS and Traditional Foreign Language Instruction at the High School Level

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Introduction

TPRS (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling) was developed by Blaine Ray in the early 1990's (Ray and Seely, 2008). It is the most recent comprehension-based method to emerge in the US, preceded by TPR (Total Physical Response, Asher, 2000) and the Natural Approach (Krashen and Terrell, 1983). It is similar to previous methods in emphasizing comprehensible input, not forcing students to speak at levels beyond their current competence, and not engaging in heavy grammar instruction or error correction. TPRS goes beyond previous methods by emphasizing stories, a powerful means of developing language and literacy (e.g. Trelease, 2006).

A number of studies have shown that students in comprehension-based methods typically outperform traditional students on measures of communication and do as well or better on tests of grammar (Krashen, 1982, 2003). TPRS, however, has not yet been put to the empirical test. That is the goal of this study.

Method

Two methods were compared. The TPRS class was typical of what is described in Ray and Seely (2008), with a focus on stimulating language acquisition by providing comprehensible input through storytelling. The version of TPRS used in this study is what Krashen (personal communication) calls "modified TPRS/natural approach," with each story containing a certain amount of target vocabulary and grammar, in this case three to four new words and one point of grammar.

The focus of the traditional class was on conscious learning, with a great deal of the instructional time dedicated to helping students understand grammatical concepts through explanations in English. Other techniques were also used such as short interviews, student-to-student question and answer exercises and the flyswatter game to identify and review vocabulary. This teacher also incorporated technology into lessons and had students work on photo or video projects. Technology was also used to present information and to explain grammar. Questioning techniques and personalized questions were used, but TPR Storytelling® was not used in class.

Both groups read every week and had reading assignments outside of class. The traditional class read *Pobre Ana* by Blaine Ray. The TPRS class read both *Pobre Ana* and *Patricia va a California* by Blaine Ray as class readers.

To determine the fidelity of the treatment, four sessions of each kind of instruction were audio-taped. The tapes were analyzed to probe the use of questioning techniques, vocabulary repetition, the amount of group work done, and the teacher's language when doing whole-group teaching. One class period that was considered the most representative of that teacher's typical teaching style was analyzed in detail.

Subjects

Subjects were seventy-three high school students enrolled in first year Spanish in 2007-2008. Twenty-three were enrolled in the traditionally taught class, and fifty were enrolled in two sections of a TPRS class. The same teacher taught both TPRS classes, and a different teacher taught the traditional class. All classes were in a high-income area school, with only 3.2% of the students classified as low-income, compared to the state average of 40.9%.

Only 4% of the students in the TPRS classes spoke Spanish at home or used Spanish frequently outside of school. Fifteen percent of the traditional students spoke Spanish at home or used Spanish frequently outside of school.

Measures

Two measures were given at the end of the school year, a final exam and an oral examination.

The final exam consisted of the following sections: Listening: Students viewed and listened to a video and indicated whether statements based on the content were true or false and chose answers to statements based on the video.

Vocabulary and Grammar: Students were required to fill in the blank in sentences, choosing from several options.

Reading: Students were asked to read ten sentences and decide whether the statements were probable or improbable. They were also asked to read two passages and answer comprehension questions.

The reliability of the final exam using the KR-21 formula was a modest .67. This test, the only one that could be used with this data, typically underestimates reliability (Brigham Young University, 1997).

The oral assessment was the same as the measure used district-wide. For the oral examination, students were asked to randomly choose a card with an English word (object or activity) and explain it in two minutes.

Students were allowed to pass on cards up to three times if they felt they could not explain the word.

Students were rated on a scale of zero to three on overall communication efficacy, including vocabulary, fluency and comprehension, on a zero to two scale on “strategic competence” (use of verbal and non-verbal strategies to negotiate meaning), and on a zero to two scale for sociolinguistic competence (e.g, appropriate use of informal tu/formal usted). The students’ overall score was then used to arrive at an overall rating ranging from zero to three (native speaker level).

All students in each class were tested by the same rater, and different raters were used for each class. No student was rated by his or her own teacher.

No measure of inter-rater reliability was possible because each student was rated by only one rater, but all raters had attended training sessions on the use of the scoring rubric and had agreed on the criteria used.

Students were also asked to estimate how much homework they did for their Spanish class on a questionnaire administered with the final examination.

Results

Fidelity of Treatment

Analysis of the audiotapes confirmed that the traditional and TPRS classes were very different.

The TPRS teacher asked 141 questions throughout the analyzed class period. The traditional teacher asked eighteen questions during the first ten minutes of the class session and did not ask questions for the remainder of the period.

The TPRS class was teacher-fronted 68% of the time, with input nearly entirely in the second language. The traditional class was teacher-fronted 29% of the time, with the language of instruction a mix of Spanish and English.

The frequency of questions, as well as the consistent level of comprehensible input throughout the class period by the teacher are characteristic of a TPRS class, as described in *Fluency through TPR Storytelling* (Ray and Seely, 2008).

Language Proficiency

The two TPRS groups performed nearly identically on both the final and oral tests, so their scores were combined for statistical analysis. Table one presents sample sizes and table two presents the results.

Table one: Sample Size

	Final test	Oral test
Traditional	23	23
TPRS	49	50
Total	72	73

Table two: Result

	Final Test	Oral test
Traditional	58.2 (7.9)	1.26 (.54)
TPRS	63.9 (4.03)	1.84 (.55)
t	4.06	4.21
df	70	71
p (2 tails)	0.0001	0.00007
effect size	1.04	1.08

As presented in table two, the TPRS students outperformed the comparison students, scoring about one standard deviation higher (see effect size in table two).

Homework

Students estimated how much homework they did for Spanish class choosing one of the following: 1 = less than one hour per week; 2 = one to one and a half hours per week; 3 = more than one and half hours to

two hours a week; 4 = more than two hours a week.

Responses of TPRS and traditional students were nearly identical (TPRS = 3.67, sd = .72; traditional = 3.52, sd = .68) and not significantly different ($t = .74$, $df = 69$, $p = .46$, two-tail).

This result eliminates homework time as a potential confound.

Discussion

The results show that the TPRS students outperformed the traditional students on both the final and oral examinations.

There were no obvious reasons for the superiority of the TPRS group other than the treatment. Although few students in either class had any exposure to Spanish outside of class, a larger percentage were enrolled in the traditional class, which suggests that the TPRS superiority was actually larger than what was reported here.

There was no reason to hypothesize any difference in attitude or motivation between the groups. Such difference might have been present, however. The sample size was modest, but the results were significantly different. Nevertheless, additional studies of this kind are called for to confirm the reliability of these results.

The finding that TPRS students outperformed traditional students is consistent with previous reports of the superiority of other comprehensible-input based methods (Krashen, 1982, 2003). Whether TPRS, with its additional emphasis on stories, is superior to other comprehensible input methods remains to be seen, but this study shows that TPRS has passed a very important empirical test of its effectiveness.

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