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TPRS: Evolution or Creation?

By Carol Gaab

TPRS, an acronym that once stood for Total Physical Response Storytelling, is now known as and is more accurately described as **T**eaching **P**roficiency through **R**eading and **S**torytelling. Some view the transformation of TPRS as an *evolutionary* process. However, the modifications that have been made represent much more than mere evolution or random advancement; they are based on proven results after 10+ years of planning, collective research, classroom experimentation and collaboration from countless educators around the globe. They are based on proven results from **real** teachers, **real** classrooms and **real** situations.

Once considered a highly effective, but *unconventional* methodology, TPRS is now regarded by many to be a **mainstream**, tremendously successful method which promotes unrivaled fluency, listening and reading comprehension skills, and writing fluency. What makes TPRS so successful is its common sense, pedagogically sound and scientifically supported approach to teaching and learning languages. TPRS is **not** built on *new* techniques, *offbeat* strategies or *unconventional* activities. Ironically, it is based on time-tested, proven techniques and combines the best of a variety of well-respected methodologies.

TPRS is hybrid of sorts. The original TPRS invented by Blaine Ray of Bakersfield, CA, although successful, was a complete accident, and by *chance* was based on effective techniques, much like Post-it notes and penicillin. Nevertheless, throughout the last decade, TPRS collaborators have tested established strategies and techniques, combining them in different ways, prioritizing them and organizing them in order to streamline effective L2 instruction. Unlike the original TPRS, *hybrid* TPRS is **not** an accident! Hybrid TPRS prioritizes activities and organizes lessons, which are based only activities and techniques that will lead to proficiency in the Target Language. The irony is that one of the most frequently-asked questions is “Should teachers do TPRS **every day**?”

The answer is really a series of questions: Should teachers use their time wisely and maximize the limited instructional time they have? Should teachers facilitate activities that are proven to lead to language proficiency? Should teachers provide comprehensible input? Should teachers use the TL in context, while making it understandable and interesting to students? Should teachers help students develop reading comprehension skills and provide students with level-appropriate reading materials in the TL? Should teachers teach grammar in context? Should teachers go beyond teaching culture and help students *experience* it? Should teachers teach according to the National Standards? (Communication, Culture, Communities, Comparisons, Connections) If teachers **should** do these things, then yes, teachers should do TPRS activities every day!

Hybrid TPRS is easier to implement and much more effective than the original version of the method. One reason it is easier is because the steps have been simplified and the number of vocabulary items reduced. There are 3 basic steps based on 3 new vocabulary

structures: 1.) Show, 2.) Tell and 3.) Read. **Show** students what the new vocabulary structures mean via visuals and verbal explanations. Once meaning is conveyed and there is no confusion, move on to step 2, **Tell**. Tell refers to the step in which teachers provide students with an inordinate amount of **C**ontextualized **C**omprehensible **I**ntput (CCI) that is focused primarily on the day's new vocabulary. This is done through **P**ersonalized **Q**uestion and **A**nswer (PQA), natural conversation and short stories, referred to as **P**ersonalized **M**ini-**S**ituations (PMS). Through personalized questioning techniques, students become engaged in a cooperative story-building process, in which the **T**arget **L**anguage **S**tructures (TLS) are used to create an original story or part of a sequence to a factual story or piece. During this period, the goal is to provide as much *concentrated* CCI as possible, often times taking the class beyond conversation and stories. There are a number of other activities and sources that can provide effective CCI, such as music, the Internet, video, etc. Once the TLS have been presented a number of times (50-100) and your story is complete, it is time for step 3, Read. Students read a *specific*, age- and level-appropriate piece that revolves around the TLS! This whole process can take anywhere from 50 to 120 minutes, depending on the age and level of the learner and the complexity of the TLS. Until one has experienced the process firsthand, it is difficult to envision the method and understand how it works.

On the other hand, it is obvious to most what does **not** work– worksheets, memorizing grammar rules, memorizing conjugation charts, etc. Then what **does** work and why? To begin with, TPRS works because it is brain-friendly. The method promotes techniques and activities that appeal to the right hemisphere of the brain, the area of the brain that dominates during early stages of language acquisition. The right hemisphere processes body language, intonation, speech melody, visual imagery, etc. These stimuli, which are inherent in TPRS, help the language learner decipher and make meaning of messages, resulting in rapid internalization, acquisition, and fluency. Brain-friendly TPRS techniques focus on providing a tremendous amount of **CCI**, along side gestures, visual imagery, spatial imagery, spatial memory aids, body language and voice inflection. All of these techniques support the viewpoint that for most students, language acquisition is a *psychological* process, not a logical one. All of these natural communicative aids make messages more comprehensible and students more **comfortable**.

The goal of TPRS is language use for meaning and understanding. Therefore, all language (vocabulary) is taught in **context** via interesting and engaging stories. The result is that students focus on listening to and reading memorable, entertaining stories, rather than on consciously trying to learn or memorize vocabulary and rigid grammar rules. The story premise follows and supports James Oller's Episode Hypothesis (1983): Language will be more memorable if it is presented in the framework of beginning, middle, end, and if it contains a plot and climax. In a TPRS classroom, the language learner is continually exposed to planned, sequential and repetitive language structures by listening to and *cooperatively* creating interesting and engaging stories. The TLS are then presented in written form via a simple reading, which is strategically designed to provide more repetition in a contextualized, comprehensible format.

TPRS offers other brain-friendly advantages as well. Because it is a multi-sensory methodology, it meets the needs of various learning styles. Gestures and acting, for example, meet the needs of kinesthetic learners; visual images (illustrations, props,

puppets, live actors, etc.) satisfy the needs of visual learners; the tremendous amount of contextualized, comprehensible input appeals to visual and auditory learners. Students develop a real “ear for the language,” learning to listen and respond to what sounds right.

A common-sense approach to learning and teaching language, TPRS facilitates a natural order of acquisition in all aspects: developmental, lexical morphemes and grammatical morphemes. (Words or parts of words that have minimal meaning.) First, while many methods focus prematurely on activities, which require output (production in the form of writing or speaking), TPRS focuses on input by providing a myriad of “input-based activities” **before** students are required or expected to speak and/or write. In terms of morphemic awareness, numerous studies have shed light on the order in which speakers acquire grammatical and lexical morphemes. Early morphemic acquisition research provided evidence to support the idea of a ‘consistent order’ in which one acquires language. Various research studies demonstrated that L2 acquisition is similar to L1 acquisition. (Dulay & Burt, 1973; Krashen, Butler, Bimbaum & Robertson, 1978) In this regard, TPRS practitioners facilitate an L2 acquisition process that mimics L1 acquisition, by first focusing on high-frequency language structures. Naturally, these language structures are the most useful, most repeated and consequently, the first acquired in L1 and (via TPRS acquisition) in L2 as well.

Morpheme order studies became the basis for Krashen’s Natural Order Hypothesis. (Dulay & Burt, 1974; Fathman, 1975; Makino, 1980, cited in Krashen, 1987). The Natural Order Hypothesis suggests that the acquisition of grammatical structures follows a ‘natural order,’ which is predictable, but **not** static or dependent upon one’s age, background or L1 experience. Students and language acquirers in general will first acquire that which has the most meaning/structures to which they have been repeatedly and consistently exposed. Consider the large number of native English speaking students, who are exposed to less-than-perfect grammar in their everyday lives, while at the same time being taught English grammar rules. It is apparent that those grammar rules have little or no meaning to students, as they pertain to specific grammatical structures. This is demonstrated by common grammatical errors that native English speakers make even into adulthood. (ie.: I seen that movie? Where you at? Suzy and him are going to the movie. Me and John are going huntin’. He had drank. He had went. Yeah, this is her. If I was him... Etc.) These simple examples serve as evidence that consistent exposure to good grammar is more effective than trying to apply memorized grammar rules.

TPRS grammar instruction is implemented according to what research tells us: The relationship between formal grammar instruction and performance on measures of writing ability is very consistent: **There is NO relationship** between grammar study and writing (Krashen, 1984). After a three-year study comparing the effects of traditional grammar, transformational grammar and no grammar on high school students in New Zealand, researchers concluded that, “English grammar, whether traditional or transformational, **has virtually no influence** on the language growth of typical secondary students.” (Elley, Barham, Lamb and Whyllie, pp. 17-18, (1976)). With that in mind, TPRS delays (not eliminates) the introduction of *discrete* grammar. Rather, from day one, grammar is taught in meaningful context via natural conversation and engaging stories. The focus is first and foremost on the message, with realistic expectations for

(level-appropriate) grammatical accuracy. The TPRS philosophy is that of John DeMado: “Linguistic accuracy is a **destination**, not a point of departure.” TPRS expert, Joe Nielson, of Salpointe Catholic High School in Tucson, is living proof of this philosophy, boasting AP scores of 3 or better by 25 out of 25 student test takers! (2004 results: Three 5’s, twelve 4’s, ten 3’s) Even more impressive, there were **no** native-speaker test takers, **and** the amount of homework was well below that of a typical AP language course, averaging just 70 to 90 minutes a WEEK!

Although research supports a ‘natural order’ for acquisition of grammatical structures, Krashen rejects the notion that FL instruction should be based on grammatical sequencing when the goal is **language acquisition**. Grammar taught through TPRS is based on usefulness, frequency of use and level appropriateness. Thus, one of the latest trends in the method is to begin teaching past tense(s), even before present tense is taught. Students listen to and cooperatively create stories in the past tense(s) and then read stories based on the same TLS in the present tense. TPRS practitioners report tremendous success with this approach, albeit “*out of order*,” according to most grammar syllabi.

The search for more efficient and effective ways to provide meaningful repetitions of TLS has brought TPRS full circle. (No pun intended.) Although ***circling*** is not a new technique in the general sense, it has uniqueness in TPRS as it is used as a very specific and systematic questioning strategy in the story-building process. The circle actually begins with a statement, for which the teacher is looking for confirmation. Some statements are outlandish and fun, while others are culturally based. The pattern should be similar to the following: *yes, either-or, no*, followed by an interrogative question. The following are two examples:

<p>Peruvians eat guinea pig.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Peruvians eat guinea pig, right?2. Do Peruvians eat guinea pig or do Americans eat guinea pig?3. Do Americans eat guinea pig?4. WHO eat guinea pig?
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<p>Peruvians eat guinea pig.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Peruvians eat guinea pig, right?2. Do Peruvians eat guinea pig or do Peruvians race guinea pig?3. Do Peruvians race guinea pig?4. WHAT do Peruvians do (with guinea pig)?

The idea behind circling is to get as many “reps” out of one statement and one question as possible. In terms of teacher responses, the goal is to repeat the TLS as many times as is possible, natural and tolerable. To that end, Susan Gross, a TPRS expert in CO, refers to a “3 for 1 technique,” in which negative statements are repeated and followed by a correct statement. (Ex.: **Q:** Do Peruvians eat guinea pigs or do Peruvians eat rats? **A:** Guinea pigs. **Teacher response:** *Yes, Peruvians **eat guinea pigs**. Peruvians **don’t eat RATS!** They eat...**GUINEA PIGS!***) Circling, in addition to other strategies, has helped to bring TPRS instruction to a new level of achievement.

However, the modification to TPRS that has had the most dramatic impact is reflected in the name itself: Teaching Proficiency through **READING** and storytelling. In addition to

accelerating the rate of SLA, reading has become a major component of the method for other obvious reasons. In his book, *The Power of Reading: Insights into the Research, 2nd edition*, (p. 37) Stephen Krashen states, “Studies showing that reading enhances literacy development lead to what should be an uncontroversial conclusion: Reading is good for you. The research, however, supports a stronger conclusion: Reading is the only way we become good readers, develop good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammatical competence, and the only way we become good spellers.” According to Krashen, the optimal conditions for a good reading program are obvious, but rarely present. They include: 1.) A great deal of interesting, comprehensible reading material; 2.) A time (and comfortable place) to read; 3.) Minimum accountability (e.g. no required summaries or book reports). Also, to show effects, a program should also last for more than a few months. Armed with this knowledge, TPRS practitioners are achieving amazing results by including reading as major component of the method and as part of their daily instruction.

In addition to lowering attrition rates across the country, TPRS has helped to eradicate the traditionally prejudiced view of foreign language study– That only *certain* people can ‘do’ languages; only smart students can achieve in FL and only the **really** smart can move on to advanced levels of language study. TPRS has demonstrated that the vast **majority** of students **can** achieve high levels of success at all levels of FL study, and that acquiring a second language isn’t nearly as difficult as we teachers sometimes make it.

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