

New Developments in the Evolution of TPRS

by *Blaine Ray*

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History of TPRS

Language teaching has evolved considerably over the years. There are new techniques that have been added to TPRS in the past few years as we have continued to foster the development of TPRS for the benefit of language students.

Much of the origin of TPRS can be attributed to the ideas of Dr. James Asher (TPR inventor) and the theories of language acquisition developed by Dr. Stephen Krashen. I started teaching with TPR® in 1980 and had great success with it, but found that it didn't give my students the fluency I was hoping could be achieved learning a language in a classroom.

I started teaching with stories, but since I wanted to teach with comprehensible input, I felt I needed to pre-teach vocabulary. The only way I knew how to do that was with TPR®. Yet TPR® only worked for me with words that could be modeled with one interpretation, otherwise it wasn't comprehensible. Students spent the time trying to figure out meaning instead of already understanding. Next I tried teaching with gestures and then gestures plus translation. It turned out that getting across meaning proved to be a tougher challenge than I had anticipated.

Dramatizing the Story

The one thing that did work was dramatizing a story using student actors. The story taught the language unconsciously and the actors made the class time always interesting and fun. Asking questions about what was going on allowed me to see if comprehension was actually happening.

Repetition and Translation

Over time, I stopped pre-teaching the words with gestures and just translated the words. Translation was clear and fast. Words were always in the context of a sentence. This caused processing problems and added a whole new element to TPRS®. The teacher had to speak slowly enough so the students could process.

I could see that students needed much more repetition to learn something than I could have ever imagined. Other teachers saw that and developed ways to help. TPRS® soon developed by getting teachers to stay on one sentence through repetitive questions. (circling)

Teaching the Present and the Past Simultaneously

We found that students did better if they learned both the past and present tenses at the same time. It was surprising to see TPRS® students having an easy time separating the imperfect and the preterite, while mixing up the present and the past. Since we are translating to increase comprehension, what might have been considered grammar, is really just processed as a vocabulary word.

Structure Instead of Vocabulary

One of the biggest changes in TPRS® came from the idea of teaching structure instead of vocabulary. That meant

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that there were no longer word lists since all vocabulary was taught in context. It changed the concept from practicing words to practicing sentences. Students were taught to feel how words fit together in a sentence so they sound right to a native speaker.

Teaching the Present and the Past by Talking to the Actors

One of the biggest challenges was to get a teacher to stay on a sentence for a long period of time. The first way to do this was through circling. Later, though, we found we could train teachers to take a sentence, teach it to the class and then ask the class questions about the sentence in the past tense. We then had the teacher turn to the student actor and do the same process with the student actor. The student actor was required to answer in a complete sentence. (If the student didn't have the ability to answer correctly, he/she read the correct answer written on the board.) The teacher then verified the answer with both the student actor (in the present) and with the class in the past.

Talking to the student actors in this way has really helped the student internalize language. It also helps the teacher teach a sentence for mastery. Seeing hesitancy or errors in the students' speech lets the teacher know more practice is needed. The teacher continues to teach the sentence until the actors answer with confidence, accuracy and without hesitation. Hesitation shows the teacher more practice is needed.

Increasing Repetitions through Conversation with Actors

The greatest benefit to talking with student actors is that it allows the teacher to stay on one sentence for many more repetitions. Therefore the one sentence gets much more practice (comprehensible input). This also provides the student input with the sentence changes that happen in normal conversation. This happens constantly during the class. When I teach, I talk to my student actors once or twice a minute.

Making Input Compelling Through Conversation with Actors

There is also an added emphasis on dialogue in the stories. It is the teacher's story but in telling the students what is happening, the teacher will often have student actors talk to each other. This adds tremendous interest to the stories as students use their personalities and language to convey meaning. In workshops we train teachers to take a sentence and instead of telling the students the sentence, we have them illustrate the sentence through dialogue.

Instead of saying the boy has a cat, we have him talk to someone. The boy goes to the girl and says, "Do you have a cat?" The girl says, "Yes, I have a cat. Do you want it?" The boy says, "Yes, I want your cat." The girl gives him the cat. This dialogue is so much more interesting than the statement, "The boy has a cat."

Going Back in Time to Explain a Detail

We also train teachers to take a sentence in the story and go back in time and show why the sentence is the way it is. For example, "the boy has a blue cat." We dramatize the boy who was in Las Vegas playing bingo. He won a lot of money but he wasn't happy because he didn't win a blue cat. He saw a famous person ten minutes later. The famous person had a blue cat. The person gave the boy the blue cat and he gave him all of his money. Both were very happy. Dramatizing this event is much more interesting than making a statement like, "the boy has a blue cat."

Continuing to Foster the Evolution of TPRS

All of these changes have had the effect of making TPRS more engaging, more repetitive and more interesting. I expect that we will continue to see more changes in the future. As TPRS teachers experiment with more techniques and strategies that work and continue to share them, I am sure we will continue to see TPRS evolve.