

## Total Physical Response for the Deaf a Totally Inspiring Experience Interviews with Berty Segal Cook and Peggy Blevins

by *Karen Rowan*

*Sábana Perdida, República Dominicana*

*In 2010 at iFLT (The International Forum on Language Teaching) in Southern California, Peggy Blevins saw Berty Segal Cook present on Total Physical Response. She had an idea that “[Cued Spanish](#)”, the method she was using at her school for the deaf in the Dominican Republic, might work hand-in-hand with TPR and wanted to start a pilot program at their school for deaf children, [El Centro Cristiano de Educación para los sordos](#). In subsequent email conversations, Berty asked if she could visit on her way back from Puerto Rico. The school welcomed Berty’s visit and the teachers were hopeful she would bring new insights to the pilot program.*



Berty Segal Cook is an expert in Total Physical Response, a prolific author and a long-time presenter, who worked closely with James Asher, the inventor of TPR.

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Berty Segal Cook passes through hills of cardboard shacks on a 30-minute drive from the Santo Domingo airport in the Dominican Republic to arrive at El Centro Cristiano de Educación para los Sordos. The school is located in a very large, extremely poor part of the city called “Sábana Perdida.”

Sábana Perdida (Lost Sheet) is the poorest part of the Dominican Republic. Electricity is out for hours every day. Water is scarce. The children at this school don’t have families, per se. They are generally from single parent families. Their mothers generally work on the streets selling something like newspapers. The majority live with a single parent in a very humble home.

Peggy Blevins, co-founder of the school says, “Last year we had students who were actually fainting from hunger. This year they began a lunch program so now they never want to miss a day of school because they know they’ll get to eat that day. We had kids who had come in and they hadn’t eaten dinner the night before and they hadn’t eaten breakfast either.” Some of the ninety-seven children who currently attend the school initially arrived totally starved.

The school staff does not know if students have any access to food over the weekends, but the school does provide them with a uniform and food during the week. The food is provided by a church working through Vision Trust, an aide organization. (In the course of researching for this article, we stumbled upon another [Vision Trust](#) project that concerns water purification at this school.)

“Every now and then an upper class student enrolls at the school, simply because we are the only school that will take them in. The other schools won’t take multiply handicapped students. We’ll take any deaf child that is teachable” clarifies Blevins.

The school uses a method they call “Cued Spanish.” After Blevins attended the [International Forum on Language Teaching](#), a teacher-run language teaching conference, she began using Berty Segal Cook’s book *Enseñando el español por medio de acción* as the curriculum. The book was well-received by the

teachers and the pilot program began in earnest this school year.

Berty Segal Cook has arrived to observe. The challenge for these teachers is that these students have no language at all when they first arrive at the school. By this time in the year they have limited language skills. They have little comprehension or ability to communicate. The teachers teach Sign Language first and then begin teaching Spanish for literacy purposes and for communication with hearing people. Blevins says that this is where the TPR comes in.

“You know when you’re at a football game and you’re standing up waving your arms?” she asks, describing the children at the school who have lived in a world of not understanding their entire lives. Deaf and many of them also with visual impairments or autistic or handicapped, they were not raised in families that knew how to communicate with them in any language at all,” says Segal.

“The joy of understanding when they had lived in a world of not understanding...I’ve seen enthusiasm in my life, but I’ve never seen anything like this.”  
“You can’t do it with TPR alone... it has to be with this other method, Cued Spanish. [They use] finger movements and exaggerated mouth movements because since their ears don’t function, the eyes have become the ears and the fingers have become the mouth. The more abstract concepts they get through dramatization.”

“The rooms of the school are very, very small. Sometimes I was practically on top of the kids. Those teachers are incredibly good. She [Blevins] really trained them well. From just one iFLT conference she has trained them very well.”

Blevins is a missionary who is now living in Florida. She lived in the Dominican Republic for close to 15 years and also goes to Honduras and Guatemala. “It’s the combination of Cued Spanish and TPR [that is working]. They are using the levels of questioning. She’s just barely started with TPR Storytelling. She calls it “drama.” That’s how they get the abstract

notions... guilt, sorrow, joy.... well, joy they know how to express that. It’s amazing to me that they have such a capacity for joy.”

“But when you combine those hand movements and those mouth movements with the TPR, those kids are learning in a few weeks what they should be learning in a year.”

“Those teachers are doing way more than we have to do,” she says, describing Cued Spanish. “They’re doing the finger work (ILU), and they’re doing very exaggerated mouth movements and sometimes the hands are waving.”

Berty says she has never experienced anything like this before. “The language that they are learning is Spanish because they never even learned their native language. They are in effect kids without a language.” “When their fingers become their speaking and they’ve never heard sound... they do laugh and they do cry and they do kind of scream. And I have pictures of them dancing...”

“Can you imagine being deaf and autistic or deaf and blind?” Berty muses. “Children with absolutely no ability to communicate suddenly understand for the first time.”

The description conjures images of Helen Keller’s understanding of her first word, water, which was the gateway to all of her future understanding.

“I observed a new teacher. The first day she was inhibited and careful while being observed. On the



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second day, after I encouraged her to venture beyond the lesson plans, she was animated and was delivering one novel, crazy command after another. The students were responding quickly, correctly and laughing and jumping up and down at their understanding...they were waving their arms... they were so joyful.”

Berty Segal Cook, who describes herself as a Secular Jew, has been nicknamed “Santa Berty” by the staff. To them, the book of lesson plans is a “blessing”; the combined methods “a miracle.”

“For me,” Berty concludes, “as well as for the students, it was an ecstatic experience.”

#### **About the school**

Maria Gutierrez, a Dominican teacher of the deaf and Peggy Blevins collaborated in 2005 to found the school. They started out with just 7 students. These days the school has 80-90 students each year.

My most important role Blevins has always had has been one of training others--sometimes by example, and sometimes by giving workshops. She also developed curriculum since it is still basically non-existent for deaf Hispanic students in most developing countries.

The goal has always been for the school to be completely Dominican run. These days the director will consult with Blevins if she has concerns, and she sometimes helps as a cultural/language interpreter with groups or individuals who visit the school from other countries, but all of the workers are Dominican, and three of them are deaf themselves.

They had been using Cued Speech, but without a curriculum. They began using Berty Segal Cook’s



book *Enseñando el español por medio de acción* after iFLT in the summer of 2010 in a pilot program. To learn more about Cued Speech, please go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9emmTMsWkE> and [http://www.cuedspeech.com/what\\_is\\_cued\\_speech.asp](http://www.cuedspeech.com/what_is_cued_speech.asp)

#### **What are the needs of the school? (from Peggy Blevins)**

There are all kinds of needs, of course, but one of the biggest needs is always books for the students to read. They are all still beginners in Spanish, so they need from picture books on up to simple books with lots of repeated language--probably not past third grade. Very few children’s books are even sold in the DR. An LCD projector could be useful in literacy using PowerPoints, because deaf children cannot read with the class like the hearing kids, with everyone looking at their book.

Thanks for much, on their behalf. I know the director will be very happy to hear it. Her budget for equipment is pretty much zero, so it is always wonderful when someone offers to help out with that. ---- Peggy Blevins

To learn more about the *El Centro Cristiano de Educación para los sordos*, please go to: [<http://centrodesordos.blogspot.com/>].





**All donations to IJFLT received on Friday, July 13, 2012 will be donated to El Centro Cristiano para los Sordos for children's books and a projector. Donate [here](#).**