

A Comparison of TPRS and Traditional Instruction, both with SSR.

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Abstract

This study compares the effects of two different instructional methods in four secondary level 1 Spanish classes: comprehensible input-based teaching and traditional instruction. At the end of the year the comprehensible input-based classes outperformed the traditional classes in writing, and speaking and there was no significant difference in listening and reading.

Introduction

The relative effectiveness of two pedagogical approaches, comprehensible input-based methods and traditional instruction, are frequently debated by language teachers and researchers. Are both effective? Is one more effective than the other? Does one or do both depend on the talent of the teacher? Is it even possible to compare the results of TPRS teachers and traditional teachers when there are so many other factors that might influence effective teaching?

Traditional instruction here is defined as grammar-based instruction that focuses on student output through cognitive exercises by breaking down the language and reproducing it in a structured setting. Traditional instruction focuses on teaching grammar rules and teaching basic vocabulary in a particular order, based on a progression from simple to complex.

Instructors who adhere to the traditional view treat language as an object, or an “entity to be scrutinized, analyzed, and broken down into its smallest components” (Tedick & Walker, 1994, p. 305) in order to then be built back into accurate communication. Adherence to this philosophy often manifests itself in

lessons that teach not with the language but about it (Tedick & Walker, 1994, p. 306).

Comprehensible input-based methods are based on the Comprehension Hypothesis, the hypothesis that we acquire language when we understand it (Krashen, 1981). The Comprehension Hypothesis is the basis for several language teaching methods for beginning language learners, such as Total Physical Response® (Asher, 1969) and TPR Storytelling® (Ray and Seely, 2002). Within Denver Public Schools, comprehension-based methods are referred to as Teaching with Comprehensible Input (TCI) and incorporate a variety of methods including TPR®, TPR Storytelling® and Sustained Silent Reading. TCI focuses on providing comprehensible input during 90% of class time.

Of particular interest in this study is TPRS, Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling. In the typical TPRS classroom, the focus is on storytelling, reading and the personalization of class topics to the members of the class. Grammar explanations are typically very short and content is narrowed to the most useful phrases and structures for real communication. The Affective Filter is low because the target language is consistently understandable.

The purpose of this study is to compare the effects of two types of instruction on secondary school level 1 Spanish classes.

Procedure

The author of this paper was the instructor in all classes involved in this study. I taught four secondary level 1 Spanish classes in the 2009/2010 school year. I taught periods 1 and 4 using comprehension-based methods (TPR, TPRS) and periods 2 and 7 using traditional instruction with a textbook. Using only one teacher eliminates all potential inconsistencies between different teachers.

In the traditional class we used the textbook, *Buen Viaje*, and covered chapters 1 through 8. The class also read chapters 1-4 in *Pobre Ana*, a level 1 reader by Blaine Ray. Some of the activities used on a daily basis

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were: warm-ups, rehearsed conversation, grammar explanation, and vocabulary repetition. Sustained Silent Reading was done every day from January through March (the second semester) during the first 10 minutes of class. The students had 150 children's books from which to choose that ranged from novice-low to intermediate-mid. The warm-ups were done from August through December and consisted of three to four questions, typically reviewing grammar and vocabulary from the previous day. The rehearsed conversations focused on a grammar point and the vocabulary from the chapter.

The comprehensible input-based classes were taught using TPRS. The class was taught using comprehensible input in reading and listening, during which time the target language was used 85-90% of the time. I taught chapters 1 through 7 in Blaine Ray's book of stories, *Look I Can Talk*. The students also read two readers, *Pobre Ana* (Ray) and *Piratas* (Canion and Gaab). As was the case with the traditional class, Sustained Silent Reading was done every day from January through March during the first 10 minutes of class. The students had 150 children's books from which to choose that ranged from novice-low to intermediate-mid.

Experienced instructors in TPRS and traditional instruction observed classes: Patricia Shikes, Spanish teacher for 30 years, traditional method; Karen Rowan, Diana Noonan, and Donna Tatum-Johns, all three experienced in teaching with comprehension-based methods, including TPR®, TPR Storytelling® and SSR (also called Free Voluntary Reading).

Measures

The Denver Public Schools Proficiency Assessment was administered at the end of the academic year. According to the Department of Accountability, Research and Evaluation of Denver Public Schools, the reliability of the Proficiency Assessment has been estimated to be .82 (fall, 2009) and .84 (spring, 2010), indicating that the test is "stable." That is, a re-administration of the test with similar students would produce similar results. (Reliability measures vary from zero to 1.0: .9 is considered high reliability, .8 is

considered modest, and .7 is considered low).

The test measures proficiency in the four skill areas: listening, reading, speaking, and writing:

Listening: Students listened to short dialogues or narratives read by the teacher. Questions and answers were in English for some listening passages and in the target language for other passages.

Reading: Students read short texts in the target language. Questions and answers were in English for some reading samples and in the target language for others.

Writing: Students wrote 10 or more sentences based on a scene of pictures.

Speaking: Students produced 4-6 sentences about a series of pictures.

Subjects

Only 65 students were tested because others in the class had been exposed to Spanish in middle school through an exploratory course or had taken a middle school class but did not score high enough to place into Spanish 2. 51.8% of students at this high school are on free or reduced lunch. It is located in an urban area in the southeast part of Denver, Colorado. It was not possible to determine if there were significant socio-economic differences between traditional and TPRS classes, but there was no reason to believe that there were any obvious differences among the classes.

Results

There was no pre-test given because the students tested were level one and had never studied Spanish in the past. The test scores of students who had had previous exposure to Spanish were not included in these results.

As shown in Table One, there was no significant difference between the groups on the Listening and Reading tests. TPRS students however, were significantly better than the Traditional students on Writing and Speaking, and the effect, as revealed by the effect sizes, was substantial.

Table One: Results after one academic year

	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking
TPRS	11.63 (3.02)	12.89 (3.52)	8.25 (1.39)	3.5 (.66)
Traditional	11.82 (2.77)	12.12 (3.95)	6.77 (2.31)	2.8 (.78)
T	0.5889	0.023	3.08	3.82
Df	56	52	60	60
P	.558 ns	.82 ns	0.0031	0.0003
Effect size	-0.16	0.0064	0.79	0.99

Standard deviations in parentheses

Sample size:

Listening: TPRS = 30; Traditional = 28

Reading: TPRS = 28; Traditional = 26

Writing: TPRS = 32; Traditional = 30

Speaking: TPRS = 32; Traditional = 30

Conclusion

Students in the comprehensible-input based classes scored significantly higher on tests of output, speaking and writing, and were equivalent to traditional students on tests of input, reading and listening.

The results of the output-oriented tests are consistent with results of previous studies comparing TPRS students and traditional students (Varguez, 2009; Watson, 2009) as well as studies of comprehensible input-based methods in general: Students in comprehensible-input based classes typically outperform comparison students on measures of communication (Krashen, 2003).

The finding of no difference on the input-oriented tests, listening and reading, is not a typical result, however. This anomaly underscores the need for continuing studies of the effect of comprehensible-input based methodology. It should be determined whether adding SSR to traditional methodology produces smaller differences between groups or a different pattern of test scores, as seen here.

It must, nevertheless, be emphasized that TPRS students still did as well or better than traditional students.

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