

# Introduction to TPR Storytelling

by Lisa Barnes with Carol Gaab

## SCHOOL

*A little girl had just finished her first week of school.*

*'I'm just wasting my time,' she said to her mother.*

*'I can't read, I can't write and they won't let me talk!'*

As teachers, we are always looking for that one special formula which will not only help our students acquire a new language, but which will give them the opportunity to use it to communicate. TPR Storytelling may be that formula.

## What is TPRS?

Most of us are already familiar with Total Physical Response (TPR), an effective teaching approach introduced by Dr. James J. Asher in the sixties. Foreign language teachers everywhere have used TPR in games of 'Simon Says' (Touch your head. Touch your nose). This approach uses the association between the brain and the muscles to help students learn. Although simple commands are useful in teaching vocabulary, after a few weeks of TPR, most teachers and students tire of commands. Blaine Ray, a High School Spanish teacher in California, has found a way to go beyond TPR with TPR Storytelling (TPRS). TPRS takes the vocabulary learned through TPR and puts the words into the context of stories. Seeing the stories acted out with words that they have already learned, makes the stories immediately comprehensible to students.

A variety of methods, techniques and strategies help students truly acquire a new language in the TPRS classroom, but what makes TPRS different is its strong focus on language acquisition rather than on learning 'about' the language. Most important is the role of comprehensible input in promoting success in the foreign lan-

guage classroom. 'Students acquire the language through constant exposure to grammatically-correct language, which the teacher uses when presenting the stories. This allows students to develop an 'ear' for the language' (TPRS Publishing). When it comes time for the students to use the language acquired through the stories, they are able to express themselves correctly. The low level of stress in the TPRS classroom encourages fluency and increases the motivation to participate.

*'When I hear, I forget.*

*When I see, I remember.*

*When I do, I learn.'*

-Chinese Proverb

## TPRS Basics

In a typical TPRS classroom, the first few weeks are spent learning vocabulary with traditional TPR. During this time, students pass through a 'silent period' when they do not speak at all. Actions and gestures (hand TPR) allow the students to show their understanding of the new words without having to speak. This is very different from the typical 'listen and repeat' drills that are common in most foreign language classes, but is the 'golden key to fluency.' The class starts with simple commands (Touch your ear) then moves on to novel commands (Touch the floor with your ear), chain commands (Stand up, jump three times, touch your toes and sit down), as well as single-sentence commands and play commands. These are often silly and sometimes a laugh is all that is needed to show that the students understand what has been said.

Once students have learned these words well and are comfortable with them, they are then able to produce them in their own speech. In the beginning, this may be limited to answering simple questions about

themselves and giving commands to other students.

After a significant amount of vocabulary has been acquired in the initial TPR period, new vocabulary is taught (usually 3-4 new words) and is put into the context of mini-stories, which the teacher narrates and students perform in front of their classmates. These mini-stories are interesting to the students because their own classmates are the main characters. Blaine likes to have his students meet famous movie stars and singers in these situations. The more ridiculous the story line is, the easier it is to remember.

After a story has been performed, the teacher retells it. Then, yes/no questions are asked and students are invited to 'fill in the blank.' Students especially like it when the teacher blows the story line so that they can correct him/her (for example, T- 'Doraemon leaves Daisuke's house.' Ss- 'No! He enters!').

When the teacher is sure that the students know the story well, he/she might have different students act out the story in front of the class or in groups as the teacher retells the story again. As a class, the students can create a new version of the story, which can then be acted out. When 10-12 new words have been learned with mini-stories, a larger main story is acted out incorporating all of the new words. The mini and main stories are the keys to the success of the TPRS program.

Stories give meaning to what the students are learning. When retrieving words from memory, students have only to 'see' the story line in their minds to remember. The strong brain-muscle association involved with TPR is an excellent memory aid. When students forget a word, the teacher can gesture the word to help them remember.

**There must be something to this**

I was first introduced to TPRS a few years ago in California. A friend who was using TPRS in her classes invited me to attend a Blaine Ray workshop with her. I was struck by how much fun all the volunteers were having and by how quickly they learned new language. I had been teaching for two months and my students were mostly parroting from the book. I decided that it was worth a try. A few days later, using a TPRS Halloween story that the same friend had given me, I began using TPRS with my classes.

On the first day, I taught the vocabulary needed for the story. Each word was taught using a gesture. Towards the end of the class, I had students make their own 'dictionary' with pictures of the words they had just learned.

The next day, I taught the mini-story. I narrated the story as three 'actors' performed it. I did it again, using different actors. I asked some basic questions. The students all answered without hesitation. I had the whole class perform the story in groups. I asked more questions and the students all answered easily. When I pointed out to my students that we, after 2 months of 'studying' the language, had just done the whole class in the target language they were both surprised and motivated to do more.

On the following day the students, using the 'guide words' learned on the first day, made their own original version of the story in groups. When they were ready, they performed their stories for their classmates. All the stories were easy to understand and the students had a great time.

The next day, I returned to using the textbook. At first, I tried to TPR the vocabulary and make up stories using words from the text. As time went on, I began to feel overwhelmed by the amount of material that needed to be taught. As a new teacher trying to 'get through the book' before my students went on to high school, I felt pressured to teach to the text. I eventu-



ally returned to traditional methods. Both teacher and students noticed the lack of energy in the classroom compared to in the TPRS classes. At the end of the year, my students took their final exam. What did they all remember? What they had learned from the stories eight months earlier. Do I think that I failed them by returning to traditional methods? Yes, I do. I think that I would have better prepared them for high school had I stuck with TPRS.

Now in Japan, I am using TPRS all the time with my students. While still fairly new to TPRS myself, I see many positive effects. I am seeing my students correct mistakes that they made consistently through junior high school. I am seeing them remember what they have learned and use it correctly to communicate. I am seeing smiles on all of our faces and I am hearing laughter. This to me, is success.

TPRS focuses on all language skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and cultural understanding. The steps used in TPRS accommodate a variety of learning styles while also using one or more of the multiple intelligences. In national language tests done in the United States, stu-

dents from TPRS programs have been scoring higher than the national average, even with fewer years of study. In addition, students who study with TPRS are more likely to continue their foreign language studies than students who learn using traditional methods (TPRS Publishing). TPRS programs are becoming very popular and in the beginning many teachers produced their own TPRS texts to meet their needs. In the last few years, more and more textbook companies are also coming out with TPRS versions of their own foreign language textbooks.

**Tips for using TPRS with children:**

(As I have primarily used TPRS with junior high and high school students, I have consulted with Carol Gaab of TPRS Publishing on using TPRS with young learners.)

**L:** Although I have done stories with children, I have only used TPRS with adolescents. I am curious how you have adapted TPRS for use with young children.

**C:** First, at the elementary level,

my pace is much slower. Contrary to public opinion/belief, young children do not learn/acquire language faster or better than older learners. They acquire more slowly, but they do acquire near-native pronunciation and accent if they are pre-pubescent learners.

Second, I spend a great deal of time on gestures. Blaine only likes to spend 2 minutes on gestures with high school students, but young students can spend a lot more time on them. They will gesture for 15 solid minutes—no problem, as long as the commands are fun, entertaining and comprehensible.

Third, although I sing with older students a great deal, I sing even more with younger learners. Children are natural rhythm makers, and music is a very powerful tool for providing comprehensible input and facilitating language acquisition.

Fourth, I present shorter stories. Stories for wee ones are never more than three to four sentences (This is before we 'milk' the story).

Fifth, we spend less class time on student retells and more time on teacher retells/'milking.' Young students generally do not begin production as quickly as older students. Although they have acquired/remembered a story, it takes them much more effort to retell it on their own. Rather than focus on retelling, I focus on more comprehensible input (CI), so that they will naturally be able to tell the story later on, when they are ready. I 'milk' stories as much as I can and facilitate (partial) retells by having students fill in the blanks, correct errors, give quick explanations, etc. My personal opinion is that it is more important to provide more CI, rather than focus on forced output, even if that means the younger learner is never able to retell the story completely on his/her own, as long as s/he completely understands the story and can answer simple questions about it.

Sixth, we spend more time playing games, but only games which provide CI.

I include visual imagery in every

lesson, whether it's a class activity or students drawing vocabulary or story illustrations.

Seventh, no matter what the age/level of my students, I always make sure I have tons of props, illustrations, costumes, etc. to enhance the visual effect of instruction/stories.

**L:** With children, how long do you suggest doing straight TPR before you start on the stories? Blaine recommends 5-6 weeks of TPR, or about 150 words.

**C:** It depends on how much background they have in the language and how often/long you meet. My basic premise is that students need to have a foundation in the language before I jump into storytelling. I teach the basics first - greetings, courtesies, colors, numbers, common adjectives and verbs, letter sounds, cultural tidbits, etc. I'd recommend a minimum of 12 to 15 hours of instruction in the basics. If this is a class that meets only once a week, you could teach, for example, greetings and then TPR a few verbs such as 'asks and says' then use all of them in a short story.

**L:** If someone is tied to a textbook, do you have any suggestions? I have a children's English text with a vocabulary list containing about 200 words. Would you suggest teaching all of the words first through TPR, followed by stories, then using the text and workbook as a final step to cement the vocabulary/grammar?

**C:** It depends on what type of words they are - whether they are words that can be taught through TPR. In other words, are they easy, easily-understood words? If not, you wouldn't pre-teach them all with TPR, then go back and do stories. The whole purpose of storytelling is to contextualize language. This gives the language sense and meaning for the learner and is necessary for vocabulary to be efficiently internalized/recalled. Just because it's not a TPRS book doesn't mean that you can't use TPRS with it.

TPRS can be used with any text as long as the materials are adapted and the steps are followed. •

*The following resources were used in the writing of this article. If you'd like to learn more about TPRS, feel free to browse through them.*

#### TPRS on the Web

Asher, James J., <http://www.tpr-world.com/> (Resource for many TPR and TPRS books and materials.)  
 Forward, Melinda, <http://www.texastprstorytelling.com/>  
 Placido, Kristy Sandin, Kristy Sandin Placido's TPR Storytelling Page, <http://www.msu.edu/~sandinkr/tprs.htm>  
 Ray, Blaine, <http://www.blaineraytprs.com/>  
 TPRS Publishing (Carol Gaab), <http://www.tprstorytelling.com>

#### Recommended Reading & Viewing

Asher, James J. (2000) *Learning Another Language Through Actions*. Sky Oaks Productions, Inc.  
 Garcia, Ramiro (1998) *Instructor's Notebook: How to apply TPR for best results*. Sky Oaks Productions, Inc.  
 Ray, Blaine *TPRS Workshop Video*. Blaine Ray Workshops  
 Seely, Contee and Blaine Ray (1998) *Fluency Through TPR Storytelling*. Command Performance Language Institute  
 Seely, Contee and Elizabeth Romijn (1995) *TPR is More Than Commands — At All Levels*. Command Performance Language Institute  
 Silvers, Stephen (1988) *The Command Book*. Sky Oaks Productions, Inc.

#### TPRS Textbooks

Gaab, Carol (1999) *Hola Niños! / Salut les enfants! : K-3 TPRS Curriculum*. TPRS Publishing  
 Marsh, Valeri and Christine Anderson (1994) *Tell Me!: TPR Storytelling: for Beginning Students*, 2nd ed. TPRS Publishing (For grades 4-6)  
 Marsh, Valeri and Christine Anderson (1994) *Tell Me More!: TPR Storytelling: for Beginning Students*, 2nd ed. TPRS Publishing (For grades 6-adult)  
 McKay, Todd (2000) *TPR Storytelling Especially for Elementary and Middle School*. Sky Oaks Productions  
 Ray, Blaine, *Look I Can Talk!* (series for grades 7-adult). Sky Oaks Productions