UNDERSTANDING TPRS®

By Bryce Hedstrom

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(Yellow highlighting = Highly useful sections for new TPRS teachers)

"TPRS is a method to train teachers how to do repetitive, interesting comprehensible input by asking stories.If teachers make their lessons repetitive, interesting and comprehensible they are definitely doing the basics of TPRS."

—Blaine Ray, the creator of TPRS (on the Yahoo moretprs listserve, May, 2012)

Teaching Proficiency through **Reading** and **Storytelling** (TPRS®) was developed by Blaine Ray in 1990. Development of the method continues today. Ray began with James Asher's *Total Physical Response* (TPR), but now classical TPR is a relatively small part of it. The class story is the most recognized aspect of TPRS. Stories are the heart of the method and a good story is one of the most valuable tools to deliver compelling comprehensible input to your students, but the story is only a part of it. To really understand TPRS we need to be clear on the theory that supports it. These definitions may help:

• **Approach**   A set of theoretical principles or basic assumptions that are the foundation of a method

• **Method**   A procedural plan for presenting and teaching language, based on the approach adopted

• **Technique**   A particular strategy - one of many - for implementing a method

(from *Teacher's Handbook,* 3rd edited by Shrum & Glisan, p. 444)

So…TPRS is a method that meshes seamlessly with *The Natural Approach*, particularly the idea of Comprehensible Input.

In this paper we will explore the theory behind TPRS, the basic method and specific techniques for implementing TPRS effectively.

I. SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Using TPRS means teaching with an awareness of Stephen Krashen's Natural Approach, particularly the *Comprehension Hypothesis* (formerly the Input Hypothesis: http://sdkrashen.com/articles/ManyHypothesis.pdf), which among other things, highlights the differences between **acquisition** and **learning**. Here are some elements of the acquisition andlearning models:

ACQUISITION	vs.	LEARNING
(Via Comprehensible Input)		(Via Rules and Output)
	Theory	
Comprehension Hypothesis		*Skill Building Hypothesis*
Subconscious "picking up" of language		*Conscious study of language*
Focus on meaning		*Focus on form*
Implicit		*Explicit*
Acoustical		*Intellectual*
Focus on input		*Focus on output*
Spontaneous meaningful output		*Forced output above the level of acquisition*
Social		*Cognitive*

ACQUISITION   vs.   LEARNING
Implementation from the Teacher's Point of View

ACQUISITION	LEARNING
Provide comprehensible input	*Explain grammar rules*
Provide interesting input	*Provide rules and practice*
Compelling input	*Forced output above the level of acquisition*
Informal (but planned)	*Formal*
Circling delivery (planned, but flexible)	*Linear delivery*
Repetitions in the TL	*Long explanations in English*
Listening-based	*Writing-based*
Grammar as aid to immediate communication	*Grammar as subject matter*
Send comprehensible messages	*Drill rules*
L2 is used to talk about content	*English is used to talk about L2 rules*
Contextualized language use	*Context-free examples*
Little-to-no error correction	*Frequent error correction*
Emergent speech	*Forced speech*
Hard to get them to STOP talking in TL	*Have to think of ways to GET them to talk in TL*
Easily differentiated—one story, various levels	*Hard to differentiate— sequential rules*
Self-motivating	*Students often need motivation*
Early production and practice are not required	*Continual forced speech and error correction*

ACQUISITION   vs.   LEARNING
Implementation from the Student's Point of View

Can understand and respond now	*Delayed gratification—can use it later*
Using the language	*Studying about the language*
Student is mostly unaware of the process	*Student is highly aware of the process*
They want to listen	*They have to respond*
Can use it now	*Can use years from now, once you learn enough*
Developing a feeling of correctness	*Memorizing and following grammar rules*
Feels easy	*Feels difficult*
Speaking the language	*Practicing the language*
Repeated input	*Repeated output*
Automatic utterances	*Planned utterances*
Spontaneous speech	*Practiced speech / Forced speech*
Non-rehearsed utterances	*Premeditated utterances*
Short reactive answers	*Long planned answers*
Attention is on the message	*Attention is on the structures*
Meaning-based utterances	*Often uses near-meaningless recall*
Teacher speaks TL	*Students forced to speak TL*
Student acquires actual language	*Teachers show they know the language*
Dependent upon meaningful interaction	*Can be independent of interaction*
Attitude is crucial	*Aptitude is crucial*
Works with attending and involved students	*Works with "smart" students*
Works for all students	*Works for some students*
Digesting the language	*Regurgitating the language*

Two very different ideas about language teaching are at odds here:

1) **Input leads to output.** Comprehensible input based teaching
2) **Output leads to output.** Rules and output based teaching

Language teacherswant output. We want students to be able to confidently and spontaneously produce the language. How that happens is the question. The conceptions about "learning" a second language go deeper than we might think. When we are focused on output we do not believe that "acquisition" is very important. Memorized output is manageable and measurable, but acquisition is neither of those. We may be able to manage some of the input, but managing spontaneous and unrehearsed output is more difficult. It is messy and impossible to corral in the traditional way. With an input-based focus we want students to produce too, but acquisition theory helps us to realize that if the students are not producing it is because they have not received enough comprehensible input.

Message:
Acquisition Trumps Learning.

Students pick up useable language more quickly
and are more comfortable with comprehensible input.
TPRS is a way of delivering interesting comprehensible input.

WHAT ACQUISITION LOOKS LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM

Since you chose to become a language teacher you are probably good at "learning language." You imagine that everyone else must be too. But they aren't. They are not lazy, unfocused or apathetic. Their brains just don't work like yours does.

YOU are the odd one. YOU are the abnormal one. You get grammar, but 95% of your students do not.

Note to college students:

> If you do not realize that you think differently about language than most of your students your default setting for teaching will tend to be to the right side of the charts above. Since you were most likely taught with the Grammatical Explanation / Skill Building / Forced Output Model you will swerve from the acquisition mode to the learning mode when you are under pressure. You will teach the way you were taught when you get in a tight spot—which is almost all of the time during your first year of teaching—and by then it may be too late, the die will have been cast and it will be extremely difficult to break the output based teaching habit, so focus on what acquisition looks like and what it feels like to teach with C.I. now before you get into the pressure cooker of the classroom!

Not all human brains are wired to *learn* language (that is, learning as in traditional language classes: taught with vocabulary lists, conjugations and an emphasis on grammar), but all normal brains can *acquire* language. Failure to acquire a first language is extremely rare. Every human of normal cognitive ability picks up language. Comprehensible Input-based methods like TPRS® simply take advantage of this natural ability to acquire language.

A TPRS / Teaching with Comprehensible Input (TCI) class is different than a traditional foreign language class. Students have to attend and they have to pay attention. Even bright students cannot just show up occasionally. They cannot just fill out worksheets and memorize word lists. Acquisition is built bit by bit. They cannot miss class often and then cram for the test anymore than in a physical conditioning class they could not come to class and then try to lift a lot of weights at the end to catch up right before a physical fitness test.

A TCI / TPRS classroom can be characterized by:

> Lots of comprehensible input (CI)
> Meaningful interaction
> Personalized questions and answers (PQA)
> Stories created with student input
> Interviewing students
> Teaching content in the TL (Sheltered subject matter teaching)
> C.I.-based games

ON OUTPUT

Please do not misunderstand. Output is not bad. There is a place for output in a language class. Output is one way to measure the amount of acquisition that has taken place. Output can help to gain approval from stakeholders. Output can help to:

- **Build confidence in students** (Makes them realize that they can actually use it.)
- **Foster a sense of belonging** (Students feel more like they are part of the special club.)
- **Create good will in the community** ("Those kids can really speak the language!")
- **Garner support by administrators** ("Look at our students' test scores!")
- **Ignite enthusiasm in parents** ("Listen to what my kid can do!")

But output does not help learners to acquire language. Students do not become proficient in a language by being asked to produce more output. Output does not cause proficiency, input does.

This puts the pressure on the teacher. If students are not getting fluent, it is not because they are stupid and lazy. It is because they are not getting enough comprehensible input. This can be threatening to us teachers.

II. THE THREE STEPS OF TPRS

The class story is what TPRS® often brings to mind, and the ability to create a story is a crucial teaching skill to develop, but the story is actually the second step of the method.

Each lesson involves three or so target grammatical structures. These structures are the core of each lesson. A target structure is usually more than a word and less than a sentence. A structure almost always has a verb phrase at its core. Examples of structures are: "**gives him**", "**is afraid**", "**couldn't find it**" and "**wanted her to go**".

Step #1: ***Establish Meaning***   Pick useful grammatical structures (usually three) and establish meaning with written translation and TPR gestures for a few minutes. This is not "listen and repeat." Students are showing they understand with gestures.

Begin to get itdeeper into students' memories with novel commands, very short "mini-stories" and comprehension checks.

Once students have the vocabulary and structures in short term memory, begin askingpersonalized questions (PQA) and then play with their answers—this phase can last much longer—you can spend a *lot* of time here. Hours. Days.

Step #2: ***Tell a Class Story***   The class story is uniquely built by asking questions using the target structures. It is sometimes described as "asking"

the story. The goal of the story is to provide compelling comprehensible input. The story is short, simple and interesting—it contextualizes the target structures and provides repetitions. It is told slowly with constant comprehension checks and ideas from the students.

Step #3: **Read**

Reading is based on the material in the two previous steps—it reinforces the content in a different format. Reading can be at a slightly higher level than the spoken language in the classroom because students can comprehend more vocabulary and more grammar forms since the input is more under the reader's control.

III. A BASIC TPRS STORY OUTLINE

The ability to build a story with your class is a skill that can be developed. Here is one simple way of creating a basic story modeled on the work of Blaine Ray, creator of TPRS®.

Blaine Ray's classic way of creating a simple story follows a simple quest story format with three locations. For this type of story, all you need are a *CHARACTER*, an *OBJECT* (can be tangible or intangible) that the character needs, and *THREE LOCATIONS* (can return to the original location). With three locations every story becomes a mini three act play—each location is the setting for each act. The movement around the classroom by student actors as they go from one location to another serves as an anchor for the vocabulary and structures you are teaching with the story.

Act 1 / Location 1: Define the Problem
There is a *CHARACTER* at *LOCATION #1*. But there is a problem. *CHARACTER* wants an *OBJECT* (or wants to get rid of an *OBJECT*).   So *CHARACTER* goes to *LOCATION #2*.

Act 2 / Location 2: Struggle to Solve the Problem
The *OBJECT* is not there. *CHARACTER* is sad (disappointed/frustrated/angry/upset/confused depending on class vocabulary depth). So *CHARACTER* goes to *LOCATION #3*.

Act 3 / Location 3: Solve the Problem
The *OBJECT* is there! *CHARACTER* has the *OBJECT* now. *CHARACTER* is happy!

Once you have begun to develop your storytelling skills, you can stray from this rigid format, but this is a good place to start, and it is a good place to come back to from time to time, because of its elegant simplicity and flexibility. And this is indeed a great formula for a story. The best professional storytellers in our culture use this exact formula, take movies, for example. Almost

every Hollywood film uses the *Problem/Struggle/Solution* formula. Think of the movies and books that have used it:

The Lord of the Rings *(over nine hours in three movies!)*

Problem:	There is a carefree hobbit named Frodo. But there is a problem. He has an evil ring.
Struggle:	Frodo goes to Elrond in Rivendell, but he can't get rid of it.
	He goes to Galadriel in Lothlórien, but he can't get rid of it.
Solution:	He finally goes to Mount Doom in Mordor and gets rid of the ring!

Titanic

Problem:	There is a girl named Rose. She wants true love.
Struggle:	She goes on a ship and she meets a poor boy named Jack. She finds true love for a short time.
	But the ship sinks and she loses Jack.
Solution:	Rose goes on living. Rose eventually returns to the sea and is reunited with Jack.

Gladiator

Problem:	There is a Roman general named Maximus. He wants to see his family.
Struggle:	He fights to free himself from his responsibilities.
	He rides all the way to Spain, but he can't see them.
	He fights as a gladiator and becomes more and more successful, but he still can't see them.
Solution:	He goes to Rome and dies honorably in the coliseum. He finally gets to see them.

Once you have a problem defined for your character or actor, the rest of the story is about done. You simply have to look for ways to solve the problem. Once the problem is solved, the story is over.

Get these three parts of a story firmly in your mind and communicate them to your students. Using this formula will turn the questioning and interaction with your class into a story. These three steps will give you and your students a purpose. It will give a direction to the random ideas that your students and turn them into a satisfying, finished product. It will give you a reason to be using the language in class every day.

IV. ASKING QUESTIONS, THE HEART OF TPRS

We don't know if our students actually understand us unless we ask questions. We ask individuals questions and we ask the whole class questions. Individuals respond and we follow up with them. At other times we ask questions to the entire class (Class!...) and the class responds chorally. The class MUST respond together and aloud so the teacher can get a sense of what they know. A fast and loud choral response means that they get it.

Questions = Details = Interest =

They pay attention long enough to learn something!

We add interest and make the story unique to the class by adding details. We add details by asking questions. Students compete to give us cute, innovative, memorable answers. You train

your students to do this by reacting to bright ideas and ignoring dumb ones. Once you hear a good idea, begin to explore it:

We keep asking questions and getting more details. We train the students to compete to give good ideas. As we continue to ask questions, the high frequency verbs start showing up.

Here are some examples of questions using high frequency verbs
(wants, sees, goes, has, does, arrives, gives, knows):

LOCATION #1
There is a CHARACTER that needs an OBJECT
• How big is the OBJECT?
• What color is it?
• Why does the CHARACTER want the OBJECT?
• Does she want it or does she need it?
• Should she want the OBJECT?
• Should she have the OBJECT?
• Does she know where LOCATION #2 is?
• Who does she see?
• What does "New Character"say to her?
• Can she go to LOCATION #2 right away?
• How does she go to LOCATION #2?

• When she arrives at LOCATION #2, is someone there?
• Who does she see?
• What does she do?
• What does "New Character #2" say to her?
• Does she know where LOCATION #3 is?
• Does she know how to go to LOCATION #3?

• When she arrives at LOCATION #3, what does she do?
• When she arrives at LOCATION #3, is there Another Character?
• Who gives the OBJECT to her?

What we are always striving for is ***interesting comprehensible input***. We are using all of these verbs in context, pre-conjugated and "ready-to-wear" in a format that is more than interesting, it is compelling to students:

--They **want to pay attention** because the content is engaging and…
--They **keep paying attention** because they can understand and…
--They **are invested in the story** because they help to create it.

TPRS **is a teacher-directed, but student-centered method** (Here is a link to a teacher evaluation form to gently guide administrators that may get the wrong idea about TPRS because the teacher is doing a lot of talking: http://www.brycehedstrom.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Checklist-for-Observing-a-FL-Classroom.pdf). The teacher drives the

grammatical structures and some of the vocabulary, but <u>the students in each class determine the pace and direction of the story</u> by coming up with interesting answers to the teacher's constant questioning. You can start with the same formula and end up with a very different end product each time because <u>the students are influencing the outcome of each story</u>. This makes each story unique and gives students a feeling of control. This sense of self-determination helps to make the students buy in to the class and helps with classroom management. To the students it feels like a long, interesting conversation.

No matter how it turns out, every time a story is developed in class, the students will be hearing and acquiring the basic verbs. The students continue to get repetitions of the focus structures because the teacher keeps inserting them through questioning.

We milk the story for as many details as we can, getting as many details and as much interest as we can out of it. This can be done even with beginning level I students. To facilitate interest and understanding we can use names, products, celebrities and stores that the students know and easily recognize. In some languages, we can also use cognates.

The Encouraging, Human Side of the TPRS Story. This story formula works on many levels, but the life-lesson level may be the most important one for students. It teaches them to stick with it, even though everything does not go their way. So many kids just give up when faced with adversity and this story formula always gives hope:

> • There is a person that is doing OK, but then there is a problem.
> • They try to solve the problem and fail.
> • They go somewhere else and fail.
> • They go somewhere else and they finally succeed.

They always succeed in the end. Even when faced with ridiculous and exaggerated problems, they will always somehow come out on top. They will be a winner. Kids need to hear this. I need to hear this.

<mark>**Seven Levels of Questioning in the TL during a Story**</mark>
Questioning your way through a TPRS story roughly follows the *New Bloom's Taxonomy*:
http://www.brycehedstrom.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/The-New-Blooms-Taxonomy-and-FL-Teaching.pdf

We ask these questions in the TL constantly during the telling of the story. The simplest levels of questions are first. If a student does not understand a question or cannot answer quickly, drop to a simpler question level. They are hesitating because they do not understand the words you are using. Clarify the meaning with simpler questions and build back up to your original question.

1. **Yes / No**
   Does the girl have a cat? "Yes."
   Does the girl have a pizza? "No."
   (Students show they REMEMBER details with a simple recognition response here.)

2. **Either / Or**

> *Does the girl have a cat or a dog? "A cat."*
> *Is it a big cat or is it a small cat? "Small" or "A small cat"*

(Students show they UNDERSTAND differences by producing a short answer)

3. **Say it Wrong** (Also known as 3-for-1)

> *So, the girl has a dog…"No!"*
> *That's right, class. The girl does not have a dog. She has a cat.*
>> Students just say "No". Teacher gives more comprehensible input by using the structure 3 times—twice positively, once negatively.

(Students show they can ANALYZE whether the language use fits the facts in the story.)

4. **Fill in the Blank**

> *The girl has a _____."Cat!"*

(Students produce a one word answer in the target language.)

5. **Who? / What? / Where? / When? / How many?** (Simple information questions)

> *Who has a cat? "The girl."*
> *What does she have? "A cat."*
> *Where is the cat?"With the girl.""In the girl's arms."*Or they just point.
> *How many cats does she have?"One."*

(Students give short answers that are a bit more specific, depending on the question word.)

6. **How? / Why?**

> *Why does the girl have a cat? "She likes it." "It is her friend."*
> *How does she feel about the cat? "She likes the cat."*
>> Students provide motivation, description, and conjecture. There are many possibilities here.

(Students can EVALUATE based on criteria in the story.)

7. **What Now? / What is going to happen?**

> *What is going to happen to the cat?*
> *What will the girl do?*
> *What will the bad boy do?*
>> Students predict or create a conclusion.

(Students can DESIGN a continuation of the story by using the elements to create something new.)

• More sophisticated thinking and language use is required at each question level.
• Questions are asked to the whole class and also to individual students.
• We use the same story to ask questions at the level of the student:

—Same story, different levels of thinking about it.
—Different expectations for different students as we get to know their abilities.

—Students with higher levels of understanding get asked higher level questions.

• If the class does not understand the question, cannot answer adequately or cannot answer quickly, we drop back to a simpler question level to guarantee success.

V. WORD FREQUENCY

TPRS® could be thought of asa contextualized, verb-driven methodology. This is a different mindset from the skills-based approach that focuses on verb conjugations and vocabulary lists—the approach that is still found in so many foreign language classrooms, even 20 years after the proficiency movement began!It is also far different from the noun-based language teaching that happens in many elementary programs. TPRS meshes much better with the proficiency-based ACTFL national standards than the grammar-translation approach.

In a typical story,the most common verbs drive the action: **is, has, wants,** and **goes**. We keep using the most common verbs to get the students fluent in all their forms—just as language is used in real life.

Knowing how to confidently and accurately use the most common words, especially the verbs, is arguably the most important component in fluency because in many languages. According to Mark Davies (*A Frequency Dictionary of Spanish*):

The **100** most common words make up **50%** of all speech.
The **1,000** most common words make up **80%** of all speech.
The **2,000** most common words account for approximately **95%** of all speech.

Other figures for Spanish are available here:
http://howlearnspanish.com/2010/08/how-many-words-do-you-need-to-know/

If we stick to the most common words, students will be able to understand more of what they hear. They will also be able to say much of what they need to say.

Here are some of the most high frequency verbs in Spanish according to Mark Davies in *A Frequency Dictionary of Spanish* (number in parentheses indicates word frequency in Spanish)*:*

1.	**ser**	*(#8)*	*to be*
2.	**haber**	*(#11)*	*to have (helping verb)*
3.	**estar**	*(#17)*	*to be*
4.	**tener**	*(#18)*	*to have*
5.	**hacer**	*(#25)*	*to do, make*
6.	**poder**	*(#27)*	*to be able to, can*
7.	**decir**	*(#28)*	*to say, to tell*
8.	**ir**	*(#30)*	*to go*
9.	**ver**	*(#37)*	*to see*

10.	**dar**	*(#39)*	*to give*
11.	**saber**	*(#46)*	*to know (a fact)*
12.	**querer**	*(#57)*	*to want*
13.	**llegar**	*(#66)*	*to arrive*
14.	**pasar**	*(#67)*	*to pass, spend (time)*
15.	**deber**	*(#75)*	*should, ought to, to owe*
16.	**poner**	*(#77)*	*to put*
17.	**parecer**	*(#81)*	*to seem, look like*
18.	**quedar**	*(#89)*	*to remain, stay*
19.	**creer**	*(#91)*	*to believe, think*
20.	**hablar**	*(#92)*	*to speak, talk*
21.	**llevar**	*(#93)*	*to take, carry*
22.	**dejar**	*(#94)*	*to let, leave*
23.	**seguir**	*(#97)*	*to follow, keep on*
24.	**encontrar**	*(#100)*	*to find*

(Number in parentheses is frequency of total word use. Lower number = more often used)

By this analysis, 24 of the top 100 Spanish words are verbs! That is a lot of verbs in the top 100 words. And you can do A LOT with these high frequency verbs. You can say much of what you every will need to say with these verbs alone. And if you need to say more, you can talk around it, also a valuable skill. Teacher modeling of circumlocutions will teach students how to circumlocute—a crucial skill for novices and intermediates.

Sources for Frequency Lists:

• **A Frequency Dictionary of Spanish: Core Vocabualry for Learners** by Mark Davies, pub. Routledge 2006, ISBN 0-415-33429-2. *You can order it online. Lists the top 5,000words both numerically and alphabetically.Great resource.Davies also has a detailed and interactive website:* http://davies-linguistics.byu.edu/personal/.*Routledge publishes similar dictionaries for other languages.*

• **Wiktionary Word Frequency Lists**:
http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Wiktionary:Frequency_lists
This is online and free. There are lists for all major languages. Differently organized than Davies' book, these lists are compiled from a multi-million word corpus of movie and television subtitles. They show the actual word frequency (i.e., conjugations, plurals, gender forms) rather than just the lemma form of the word (i.e., infinitives).

Here is an analysis of the verbs on the Spanish Wiktionary list:
http://www.brycehedstrom.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/VERBS-IN-THE-TOP-505-SPANISH-WORDS.pdf

VI. <u>READING</u>

(This section is still under construction)

Academic Reading *(Students are assigned reading, but need a bit of help to understand it)*
>Reader's theater
>Read in English

Light Reading *(Students read on their own and read what they choose)*
>Aka FVR, SSR

Kindergarten Reading *(Teacher reads to students just like kindergarten teachers do)*
>Student favorite

VII. <u>CORE PRECEPTS of C.I. BASED TEACHING</u>

A. **Comprehensible Input is the Goal of Everything We Say in Class**
>*We teach the target language.*
>>• We use the TL.
>>• We talk about interesting things in the TL.
>>• We teach content in the TL.
>>• We do not spend a lot of time teaching ABOUT the TL.

>*Most of class time (90% or more) is spent in the target language.*
>>• This aligns with the 2011 ACTFL position statement.
>>>(http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=4368#langlearn)
>>• Both teacher and students are using the language at least 90% of the time.
>>• Limited use of English to establish meaning and for caretaker talk at the beginning and end of class.

>*Teaching with C.I. is not immersion* *(see below)*
>>• We code switch occasionally to establish meaning.
>>• Students are not guessing the meaning of words.

>*As we use L2, we have to keep these in mind:*
>>• If it is not in L2, it is worthless for acquisition.
>>*Using English does not help them acquire Spanish.*

>>• If we use L2 that they do not understand,it is also worthless for acquisition.
>>*Using Spanish they cannot comprehend does not help them acquire Spanish.*

>>• If we keep using simple L2 that they already know, they will not acquire more.
>>*Using overly simple Spanish does not help them to acquire more Spanish.*

>*We aim for the sweet spot,* $i + 1$
>(Student's current level of acquisition plus just a little bit more)

- Messages in L2 that studentscan understand as we slowly add new vocabulary and structures.

- Also called the "Goldilocks" level:
  Not too easy, not too hard, just slightly above their head so that the context will help them with unknown vocabulary and grammar.

- We have to "stay in bounds."
  Teacher cannot use words that students do not know.
  Do not venture outside of that circle of understanding too often.

B. Comprehensible Input is NOT Immersion
  The TL is spoken 90% of the time, but not exclusively.

  Students are not guessing at meaning.
  - Students can ask if they don't understand.
  - The teacher occasionally translates words into L1.
  - The teacher frequently checks for understanding with L1 by asking for translations

  We make unknown L2 words clear with quick L1 translations.
  - This is heretical to immersion aficionados, but more comprehensible L2 happens when we teach this way
  - We take advantage of the fact that the teacher and the students can already communicate in L1 as they learn a second L2.

  Involuntary immersion is also called waterboarding

  INCOMPREHENSIBLE INPUT AND TRANSLATION
  (From Conversational Spanish*, by Bryce Hedstrom, p. 69)*

Teaching with comprehensible input and occasional translation makes sense because students don't learn anything from incomprehensible input. Many foreign language instructors are attracted to input-based teaching and try to provide experiences in class that are similar to the way children learn by using only the target language (TL) in class. But this is ineffective because although children are exposed to some incomprehensible input in their native language they have thousands of hours to help them learn figure it out. Children can slowly pick up the meanings of words through context and repetition, but instructors simply do not have time to let students guess word meanings with gestures or experience. Instructors that use only the TL think that students will learn through immersion, but without establishing meaning it is more like what Jason Fritz has called "submersion" –being held under water and not allowed up for a breath.

Guessing at word meanings is slow and inefficient. Instructors have to establish meaning more quickly than that, which is why simply translating into English—both to initially introduce the word and to periodically check for meaning—is so much more effective. Quick translations is seen as "code-switching" by many instructors, a deviation from the pure usage of the language in class, but using ONLY the TL in class can quickly become a problem. The problem with playing the immersion game of using nothing but the TL and trying to get students to guess the meanings of words is that meanings can be unclear.

A good example of this problem comes from the teen novel **Speak** by Laurie Anderson. In one memorable passage, the author describes a high school Spanish class. She says that it was easy to ignore the teacher because she never translated anything into English:

> My Spanish teacher is going to try to get through the entire year without speaking English to us. This is both amusing and useful--makes it easier to ignore her. She communicates through exaggerated gestures and play acting. It's like taking a class in charades. She says a sentence in Spanish and puts the back of her hand to her forehead. "You have a fever!" someone from the class calls out. "You feel faint!" No. She goes out to the hall, then bursts through the door, looking busy and distracted. She turns to us, acts surprised to see us, and then does the bit with the back of the hand on the forehead. "You're lost!" "You're angry!" "You're in the wrong school!" "You're in the wrong country!" "You're on the wrong planet!"
>
> She tries one more time and smacks herself so hard on the forehead she staggers a bit. Her forehead is as pink as her lipstick. The guesses continue. "You can't believe how many kids are in this class!" "You forgot how to speak Spanish!" "You have a migraine!" "You're going to have a migraine if we don't figure it out!"
>
> In desperation, she writes a sentence in Spanish on the board: *Me sorprende que estoy tan cansada hoy.* No one knows what it says. We don't understand Spanish—that's why we're here. Finally, some brain gets out the Spanish-English dictionary. We spend the rest of the period trying to translate the sentence. When the bell rings, we have gotten as far as "To exhaust the day to surprise."

Pretending that students understand when a teacher is attempting immerse them in the language is delusional and all too common. If students do not understand, instructors are wasting everyone's time.

C. **We are Aware of the Natural Order of Acquisition**
  Students acquire elements of the language in a predictable order.
  The natural order of acquisition cannot be altered.
  You cannot force some things, they have to unfold.
  Students do not hear a lesson and then suddenly know it. They have to hear over and over.

The Net Hypothesis: Students will pick up what they can when they are ready if we provide enough comprehensible input.

D. Student Interest Trumps Teacher Brilliance
(or Lesson / Curriculum / Textbook / Video / Technological Brilliance)

What we do must engage our students.

If we love it but they don't, our attempts at input are almost worthless.

We are aiming for Compelling Input
- Compelling is content in the TL that cannot be ignored because it is so interesting.

- "Compelling means that the input is so interesting that you forget it is in another language."

- "When you get compelling input, you acquire whether you are interested in improving or not."

From *The Compelling (Not just Interesting) Input Hypothesis* by Stephen Krashen
http://www.sdkrashen.com/articles/The_Compelling_Input_Hypothesis.pdf

E. No Forced Speech beyond The Level of Acquisition.
Students speak when they are ready to speak.
- When they have acquired enough, they will speak.
- When they are comfortable enough, they will speak.
- You will know when that happens because you won't be able to shut them up.
- You will not have to try to get them to speak.
- You will wish that they would stop speaking in the TL so that you can make your brilliant point.

No listen and repeat.

No formal, memorized dialogues.
- There is plenty of dialogue in a TPRS class, but it is not the memorized variety.
- Dialogue is spontaneous and usually between the teacher and a student.
  (See PQA below)

Students speak when they are ready to speak.
- We can't emphasize this too much.
- Students are encouraged to speak through constant questioning in the TL by teacher.

• Students are constantly encouraged to express themselves in L2 because the teacher is using L2 so much.
• Students learn correct pronunciation by listening and watching the teacher's mouth form the words.
• The teacher is in the TL almost all of the time.

F. Shelter Vocabulary, not Grammar

Students have to understand the words we are using.

Stay in bounds! We cannot go outside of that circle of understanding.

No grammar is off limits if it helps to move along the story.

Teach vocabulary at the lowest level in the classroom and grammar at the highest level.

If the grammar makes sense, use it.

> For example, if they know "**quiere**" (wants) and "**tengo**" (I want), saying "**quiere que tenga**" (He wants her to have—present subjunctive mood) within the context of a story will be comprehensible because the sound and the meaning are so close to what students already know.

G. Repeat Many, Many, Many Times. In Varied Forms. In Interesting Ways. Repeat.

Superstars may be able to produce a word after hearing it clearly only 10-20 times.

Many students need to hear a new word in interesting, contextualized speech at least 100 times. These are not stupid and lazy students. These are normal students.

Slow processors may need to hear a word 200 or more times to get it. (!?)

You already know it, plus you are good at language, so you think that you do not need to repeat a new word that much—but you do.

> This is a particularly vexatious area for native speakers, who are often unaware of the register of their speech because it seems so easy and obvious to them.

Constantly recycle vocabulary and phrases.

We are teaching for more than just mastery. The aim here is *automaticity*:

> —Using the language without even thinking about it.
> —Getting to the point where it "just sounds right".
> —Unconscious reaction in the language.

H. Explain Grammar on an As-Needed Basis

Most students do not like or understand grammar.
> (Language teachers are the abnormal ones!)

In a TPRS class grammar is not used out of context—so there are no, or very few worksheets, conjugations, drills, or formulas.

Grammar is used to support comprehension and communication.

Grammar explanations are used to make our messages to one another clear.
> The meaning of the sentence we are using RIGHT NOWneeds to be clear.

Grammar in this sense becomes something useful, not theoretical.

Use 5-second "pop up" grammar lessons for the class—many times each class period

Occasionally give 10-20 second grammar lessons to the superstars.

Give extended explanations outside of class for the persistently curious superstars and budding grammarians—we are thrilled to help them, but we realize that this does not help the average student to acquire more language. We dare not lose 95% of the class to satisfy the curiosity of the one or two students that understand and desire more grammar, even though we may love and relate to the grammar geeks. Giving thorough grammatical explanations can help to feed our egos, but these explanations will not help the average student to become proficient in the language.

I. Constant Comprehension Checks
If students do not understand, it is not comprehensible input.
- We speak in L2 at least 90% of the time, but with understandable language.
- We check continually for understanding. 100's of times per class, via:
    - —Reaction time (See Mastery Learning below)
    - —Looking in students' eyes
    - —Asking general questions to the class
    - —Asking questions to specific individuals
    - —Asking questions about content in L2
    - —Asking occasional comprehension questions in L1

Differentiated Comprehension Check Questions:
We ask these three levels of questions in English frequently to be sure that students comprehend the language specific phrases and to find out if they understand the grammar in those phrases. Asking this series of questions every 2-3 minutes is not too much.

1) To the "barometer" student: ***"What did I just say?"*** (General comprehension of phrase)
    Ask this question a lot. The barometer student is one that needs your help. Probably a C-level student. You check with barometer students often to be sure they are keeping up. There is no place to hide when you ask it to an individual student—Either he gets it or he doesn't.

2) To the average student: ***"What does ____ mean?"***   (Specific word/phrase in a phrase)

3) To the faster student: ***"Why did I say ___ instead of ___?"*** (Contrasting grammar)

These three phrases are in ascending order of difficulty. They become more abstract as we keep asking up the line. It may seem odd, but the longer phrase that we ask the barometer student is actually EASIER to understand because of the context.

Example:

1) Teacher (to class): "El chico quiere ir a Alaska."
    Teacher to barometer student: *"What did I just say?"*
    Barometer student: *"The boy wants to go to Alaska."*

2) Teacher to average student: *"What does* quiere ir *mean?"*
    Average student: *"Wants to go"*

3) Teacher to faster student: *"Why did I say* quiere ir *instead of* quiere va*?"*
    Faster student: *"Because* quiere va *means "he wants he goes" and it wouldn't make sense.*

Students are responsible to do their 50%.
   • They must let teacher know if they do not get it.
   • Student must be engaged.

Teach to the eyes.
   • Look in their eyes to see if they are getting it.
   • You are not just spraying it, machine gun fashion, at the crowd.
   • You are not teaching to the back of the room.
   • You are peering into their souls through their eyes.
   • You are seeing if they get it through constant comprehension checks.

Everyone must get it.
   • That's why you are teaching, so that students get it.
   • When they do not get it bad things happen:
        Frustration → Checking out → Boredom → Behavior problems → Misery for you and no learning for them

J. Go Slow!
   Go sssssslllllllllooooooooooooooooowwwwwlllllyyyyy, and then slow down some more.
   • Slow down your speech
   • Slow down the pace of the lesson
   • Slow down the rate at which new vocabulary is introduced.

You almost cannot go slowly enough.
   • You almost cannot repeat it enough times.

• You almost cannot say it slowly enough.
• Stop constantly to check to see if they are still with you.

When you think they get it, they still don't get it like they need to get it.
• Even when THEY think they get it, they still don't get it like they need to get it.
• Students have been trained to merely pass vocabulary tests, but we want far deeper understanding than that

When it comes to going slow, teachers don't get it either.
• Neither do you.
• You just think you do.
• You think that just because you are readingthis, you get it.
• You don't. Nobody learns a skill that way.

To really get the idea of just how slow you need to go, take a TPRS class in a language that is completely foreign to you, like Chinese or Arabic. I had a few afternoons of Navajo a few years ago—talk about needing slowness!

Slow down!

K. PQA (Personalized Questions and Answers)

For experienced TPRS teachers, much of classroom time is spent with PQA

In my mind, PQA is classroom banter—back and forth between teacher and students in the TL, guided by the teacher, but personally engaging the students.

We ask for their opinion and feedback. We really want to know what they think and feel, and we use the TL to do it.

My students say that these PQA classroom conversations are how they learn Spanish best.

See Ben Slavic's excellent book on getting better at PQA, ***PQA in a Wink*** available here: http://www.brycehedstrom.com/products

L. Mastery Learning

TPRS emphasizes mastery.
This is mastery in understanding, which indicates that the input is comprehensible.
When students can answer questions confidently, accurately and without hesitation, they have learned at the mastery level. If not, they need more repetitions.
Output comes after students have received a lot of comprehensible input.

M. Other Advantages of TPRS®

TPRS is personalized and adaptable
- Not a canned program.
- It can fit with any group and any curriculum

TPRS is dependent on TEACHER SKILL, not technology or special materials
- You need a white board and some novels. Not much else.
  - Is this why big publishers don't like it? Limited profit?

- Technology can enhance it, but don't let the spinning lights distract you from good teaching methods. High tech can be useless without corresponding high skill: To highjack a biblical metaphor, it is like putting new tech in old wineskins.

- Hi-tech products often just repackage old methods with new gizmos.
  The current best selling computer-based language program is little more than mind-numbing, ineffective electronic flash cards (http://backseatlinguist.com/blog/?p=135)

- Good teaching principles, based on modern, researched-back methods must be behind the whiz-bang gadgets, "kewl" graphics and flashing lights.

- Just because it is new and high tech doesn't mean it is useful.

TPRS is not high prep.
- You can teach for an hour with just 1-3 new words or structures

TPRS provides quality repetitions.
- The important structures of the language can be repeated over and over in an interesting context.
- The language study does not get old because we are not focusing on language but on content.

TPRS provides a way to stay in the L2 for 90% of the class.
- You can be at 90% from almost the first day of level I.
- Using the TL so much, even at the beginning, provides a subliminal message that the TL is the primary mode of communication in class, which cuts down on behavioral issues.
- Students do not have to resort to English to accomplish tasks in the classroom.
- TPRS provides a structured way to stay in the TL.

N.   Getting Better at TPRS
Observe and get observed by other teachers.
  Observing a veteran TPRS teacher in a classroom setting can be invaluable.
  We can always pick up tips and techniques that we can adapt.

Being observed may be an even better way to improve.

When you have observers, be they parents, teachers, students or administrators, give them this *Checklist for Observing a Foreign Language Classroom* and ask for honest feedback: http://www.brycehedstrom.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Checklist-for-Observing-a-FL-Classroom.pdf

O. TPRS Techniques that Can Help ALL Teachers

All teachers would benefit from implementing core ideas of TPRS. These ideas do not apply only to language teachers. Here are some of the characteristics of TPRS which would help any teacher. Some are taught (consciously learned) and some are caught (unconsciously acquired):

1. **Respect the students.** Deep and fundamental respect for the students and genuine desire to see them learn is a core value of TPRS. An almost fanatical desire to understand how students learn and how to teach better infects many TPRS teachers.

2. **Teach to the eyes.** Demand student attention by constant interaction with each student. Look for students who do not understand

3. **Expect choral responses.** Teach teachers to get a choral response from the class. The whole class answers. We are all in this together.

4. **Teach for mastery.** Stick with what you are teaching until the student knows it. Be sure you have evidence that they understand it before going on.

5. **Teach with stories**, particularly dramatized and personalized stories

6. **Give unannounced tests.** Evidence of what students actually know; raises the level of concern.

P. TPRS Techniques that Can Specifically Help Language Arts & Social Studies Teachers:

1. **PQA.** Introduce new vocabulary with personalized questions and answers.

2. **Focus Vocabulary.** Limit the number of new words in each lesson.

3. **Word Frequency.** Focus on high-frequency vocabulary.

4. **Meaningful repetitions.** Offer many meaningful repetitions of vocabulary (50-300).

5. **Limited Grammatical Explanations.** Give frequent but brief grammatical explanations.

6. **Kinesthetic Strategies.** Use gestures to introduce new vocabulary and to check for understanding.

7. **Read chorally.**

8. **Scaffold literacy.**

We all get better when we work together.

More TPRS resources available at:
Brycehedstrom.com

Let me know how you are doing with TPRS:
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