

TPRS in a Year!

Written by Ben Slavic
in association with Susan Gross



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“For those of you who don't know Ben Slavic, his *middle school* students placed 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 in the state of Colorado *high school* National French Contest. His top kid was second in the nation. Those top five kids were all national placers.”

“I got your book today. Great job! This is all about doing what is best for teachers. I think your book is marvelous and will be a great help. I believe...that it can have a great influence for good.”

- Blaine Ray

“Your detailed description of how to teach using Blaine Ray's materials is absolutely fantastic. We have needed something like this for ages. You really show us how to do it! I love the way you explain the thought process, how to stay focused, and how to decide when to stop circling.”

- Susan Gross

“Ben, you made her [an observing teacher] look through the telescope and she will never be the same. You are a star! Thank you.”

- Dale Crum

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INTRODUCTION

This text has been developed for teachers who wish to sharpen their skills in teaching with TPRS - Teaching Proficiency Through Reading and Stories®.

TPRS requires work on the part of the teacher. It requires an emotional as well as an intellectual commitment. Breaking old habits is never easy. It takes courage. Yet the rewards for those who make the effort are considerable. Teaching well with TPRS makes teaching the rewarding experience it is meant to be.

TPRS brings a sense of play into the classroom. Chris Mercogliano, writing in "Paths of Learning" (Issue #17, p. 12, 2004), states that there is considerable evidence for "a classical link between education and play." He points out that the ancient Greek words for education/culture (paideia), play (paidia), and children (paides) all have the same root.

Chris asks us to consider the following remarkable conversation in Plato's Republic between Socrates and Plato's brother, Glaucon:

"Well, then," Socrates begins, "the study of calculation and geometry, and all the preparatory education required for dialectic, must be put before them as children and the instruction must not be given the aspect of a compulsion to learn."

"Why not?" asks Glaucon.

"Because the free man ought not to learn any study slavishly. Forced labors performed by the body don't make the body any worse, but no forced study abides in the soul."

"True."

"Therefore, you best of men, don't use force in training the children in the subjects, but rather play. In that way can you better discern toward what each is naturally directed."

Some teachers don't see themselves as playful. Yet TPRS is so strong and supple that it easily accommodates individual teacher preferences. It can be adapted to anyone and anything, even the textbook. The waters of TPRS are so deep that individuals will always "land the fish" they want. When applied to traditional methods, TPRS always strengthens them.

The ideas herein represent TPRS as perceived by the author. They are not intended to be exhaustive. Yet every effort was made to articulate and stay within currently accepted TPRS ideas at the time of this writing (2007). The goal of this book is to help get TPRS working as fast as possible for anyone new to the method.

To truly learn the method quickly, however, and not over a period of years, there is no better option than to get a mentor and become an apprentice. Meg Villanueva has said this about coaching:

No matter how many years, how many sessions, how many conferences you have been to, you need to be coached. Even those of us with many years under our belt [need] coaching. We can always get better.

Certainly, the most successful TPRS teachers are those who have other TPRS teachers around them and who observe and coach each other regularly. Research has shown that when athletes, artists, surgeons and professionals in many other fields coach each other, they become much better at what they do.

In this writer's struggle to learn the method, watching Jason Fritze teach Spanish in a Fluency Fast workshop for four to five hours each day for a week was invaluable. To develop your TPRS skills, you may want to go to www.fluencyfast.com and find a workshop in a language other than the one you teach. Experiencing first hand what you want your students to experience is a great way to learn TPRS.

This book, then, can be adjunctive, but not primary, to your learning the method, because TPRS is something that must be experienced physically to be learned.

Doing TPRS well resembles juggling a number of balls in the air. As soon as each ball, or TPRS skill, is 'up in the air,' the attention must then go to another ball. Thus, in this book, only one TPRS skill is presented per week. *You are advised to focus on and use only those skills that work for you.* This approach allows the skills you have chosen to be integrated fairly quickly into a natural TPRS teaching style that is unique to you.

On the topic of skill development, Nikki McDonald in Omaha recently wrote on the TPRS listserv (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/moretprs>):

Many others have commented on how useful your reminder about [this technique] was - I used it today in class with success similar to yours. But what struck me about your post was the implication that you have a weekly teaching goal that you share with the students. By selecting and stating a goal and working towards it by asking for the support of your students, you are sending the message that everyone is a work in progress and that we can all improve. What more important message is there to send?

You will find that this openness with your students, this statement of your intention to learn a difficult but rewarding way of teaching, will be met with good will. Teachers who attempt to use TPRS from a place of control and power will find that the method is much more elusive than when it is used from a place of shared endeavor, of working together toward a common goal.

That is what you do with the students when you create a story anyway. If you ask students to participate with you, instead of competing with you, they will do so. *When the students know that they are a part of something new and exciting in education, they respond in kind.* The process becomes you *and* the class and not you

versus the class. True learning is not only playful; it is reciprocal and participatory. This is most especially true in languages.

It is strongly suggested that you make a conscious effort to write down how each step is working for you at the end of each week. Do this in the spaces provided at the end of each skill description, using the back of the sheet, or use a journal. There is something very powerful about self-evaluative writing. This book has been designed to speed up the process of learning TPRS, and writing is a big part of that.

Do not let fear of not being good enough at TPRS in your first year prevent you from acting on these suggestions. TPRS is not for the faint-hearted, but then neither is teaching. The fact that you are trying means you will succeed, because, like learning a foreign language, TPRS is really just about repetition, like learning to ride a bike. Suddenly one day you are doing it! Those breakthrough days are great days. They even have a name – homerun days!

It is now time for many teachers, experienced or inexperienced at TPRS, to take our rightful place in the profession of foreign language teaching. We are part of something big, something revolutionary. It is true that educators should feel free to choose what methods they want for their students, but *not at the expense of the students*. By choosing TPRS and making the commitment to master it, you are taking a major step forward to doing *what is best for students*.

To quote Antoine de Saint-Exupéry:

If you want someone to build a boat, don't tell them to gather wood, and assign them other tasks and work. Instead, teach them to long for the immensity of the sea.

It is the opinion of this writer that no method of foreign language instruction creates an environment that drives students to long for the “immensity of the sea” (authentic acquisition) as much as TPRS. The proof of this will be in the reactions of your students themselves once you have become proficient at the method. You will be pestered for “more stories” whenever you take a hiatus from them.

The following sentence, often heard in TPRS circles, sums it up: “Even *bad* TPRS is better than no TPRS!” May this book help you achieve *good* TPRS in your classroom in just one year!

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THE SKILLS

How you develop your own skills in TPRS is completely up to you. Some teachers who are adept at the method use very few of the skills listed below. Others use quite a few. We suggest that you simply try each one for a week or two, and keep the ones that enhance your students' learning.

The skills you keep will be the ones with which *you* resonate and the ones that make *you* comfortable. As Michael Thompson says about the TPRS skills, we should use only those which work for us as “individual teaching artists”. Perfectly said!

Some skills have been placed at the end of the list as fun skills. Their primary purpose is to help you to inject a sense of fun and laughter into the classroom, and you may resonate with some of them. As you practice each skill, of course, you will always be working from your base of the three steps of TPRS: establishing meaning, asking a story, and reading.

In Step One, establishing meaning, you do some or all of the following things:

1. At the beginning of each class you *write the words for the story* on the board with their translations. These are called structures. You explain these structures in English to the students without expansion or pontification, and with no comments about grammar, as tempted as you may be to do so. You start each class this way.
2. Next, you *sign and gesture* the structures. The purpose of signing and gesturing (described as skill 1 below), is to give the students some practice with the structures for the day. This can include TPR, word association games, both visual and auditory, and just about anything that helps the learner establish instant recall of the meaning of the word or structure.
3. Next, of course, comes the wonderful period referred to as PQA, or Personalized Questions and Answers (described as skill 2 below). PQA is the high road to success in TPRS. Not only does it embellish the structures via lively personal interaction with the students in the target language, it forms a bridge into stories, guaranteeing their personalization.

The Step One skills serve the important function of giving the students auditory practice with the words to which they were just introduced. When they are done, Step Two (the story) is a lot easier for students to understand. On any given day, you choose to employ as many or as few of the Step One skills as you wish. Establishing meaning can be done in many ways. It is your decision entirely.

The Step One skills of signing/gesturing and PQA are really nothing more than *optional practice activities* that are designed to activate the words for the day in the

minds of the students. They set up the telling of the story. They give the written words on the board a sort of “auditory life” before the story.

It makes sense! If you think about it, the structures *aren't easy for the kids*. They have never heard them before. They *just saw them* on the board, and they could probably use some practice *hearing them* a little before you start the story! So the first step of TPRS *activates* the structures for the day.

The second step of TPRS is asking the story. As you become more and more familiar with the method, you will develop a rapport with certain of the skills listed below. Over time, you will use those skills to create your own kind of storytelling, a version that reflects your own personality and interests.

There is no one right way to establish meaning (Step One) nor is there one right way to ask a story (Step Two). Both steps are interpreted by the individual teacher in their own way. The teacher accepts or rejects the various skills found in this book as relevant and useful or not.

When choosing from the skills suggested in this book, ask yourself one question: *Does this skill help me achieve comprehensible input (CI) and personalization (P)?* Comprehensible input and personalization are the two pillars on which all TPRS classes find an unshakable foundation.

In fact, according to some TPRS experts, CI and P are the *only requirements for acquisition to occur*. If a skill does not help you achieve comprehensible input and personalization, it is probably worth skipping, or examining later.

Trying to learn too many skills too fast is to not see the forest for the trees, and should be avoided. The forest (CI + P) is vast and rich enough by itself. Preoccupation with any one tree (skill) or group of trees is not that important.

What is the nature of this forest we are describing as comprehensible input plus personalization? It is simple. With comprehensible input we reach into our students' minds; with personalization we connect with their hearts. Both are necessary for success.

When we provide CI, but fail to assure that its content reflect the individual needs and personalities of the students, we fail. On the other hand, any classroom that does not include massive and daily amounts of comprehensible input will fail as well. Only with both CI and P can we achieve a mind/heart balance in our classrooms and supercharge our students capacity to authentically acquire the target language.

The skills in *TPRS in a Year!* are grouped into three areas, which offer a working blueprint for the novice TPRS instructor:

- Step One skills are those needed by the instructor to be effective in Step One of TPRS. They are basic skills that directly address how to do comprehensible input and personalization. They include skills #1 through #15.
- Step Two skills address the creation of a story. They include skills #16 through #25. It is suggested that the novice teacher first learn the Step One skills before moving on to the more advanced Step Two skills. Doing this keeps the TPRS learning curve simple and manageable.
- The Fun Skills, #26 through #49, are advanced, optional, skills, but are easy to learn. They can be added to the teacher's repertoire at a rate of speed that is comfortable, and only if the teacher resonates with them.

French will be used as the default language to explain skills, but the English will be provided as well.