

# TPRS in a Year!

by Ben Slavic



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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](http://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.

## Step One Skills: Establishing Meaning and Personalizing

*Skills #1 through #15 are basic skills required to do Step One of TPRS, establishing meaning. Most of them also directly address personalization.*

### Skill #1: Signing/Gesturing

After you have written and explained the words for the story on the board with their translations but without expansion or pontification, and with no comments about grammar, you have the option of moving into signing and gesturing.

Signing or gesturing the words “pumps up” the students. Much more than merely teaching meaning, it immediately builds a sense of trust through fun.

Imagine that it is the beginning of class and you have just written *a dansé/danced*. Students agree on a sign for *danced* and then sign or gesture it when you say it.

Next structure: *n’avait pas de chaussures/didn’t have any shoes*. Students agree on a sign for *didn’t have* and *shoes*, and then sign it when you say it.

Next, simply say the expressions with lots of quick repetitions as they sign. Have a grin on your face. Enjoy yourself. Play a memory game with your students. Monitor the barometer student, the slower one who tries (see skill 9).

First sign one structure, then two together, then do the same *with students’ eyes closed* to check for acquisition. If students can sign the words with their eyes closed, they know it. If they can’t, they don’t know it, and they need more practice.

Many TPRS teachers don’t use this skill, finding that they are able to establish meaning quickly and directly without it. However, when done as described above, this skill brings to the mix of a TPRS class some wonderful things:

1. Meaning is put into the students’ *bodies* via the TPR involved, and not just their minds. As such, it is more deeply acquired and thus easier to access later in class during the contextual flow of the story.
2. Gesturing is a fun memory game, and it creates an upbeat mood in the classroom right away. The classes start with laughter and interest, since it is a game.
3. With the “eyes closed” aspect of signing and gesturing, the message is sent that *every student* is going to have to show knowledge of the structures:

*“That’s great, class! Almost all of us have it, but there are still a few who need a little more practice with eyes closed!”* The message is:

*“We will all learn in this class.”*

Cynthia Payton once posted on the moretpers list serve from an article in *Science Daily* (July 28, 2007) about the work of Susan Wagner Cook in using hand gestures to teach new concepts. The research indicated that using hand gestures dramatically improves the ability to retain that concept. (Credit: Richard Baker, University of Rochester) It turned out to have “a more dramatic effect than Cook expected.

In her study, 90 percent of students who had learned algebraic concepts using gestures remembered them three weeks later. Only 33 percent of speech-only students who had learned the concept during instruction later retained the lesson. And perhaps most astonishing of all, 90 percent of students who had learned by gesture alone - no speech at all - recalled what they'd been taught."

The link to that article and one that is similar is provided here:

<http://www.futurepundit.com/archives/004434.html>

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/11/071104191551.htm>

Signing and gesturing:

- ✓ employs proven ways of increasing memory
- ✓ gives auditory practice on the structures
- ✓ establishes that the class will be fun
- ✓ sends the message that the teacher is fully in charge of the classroom.

All the other skills become easier and the class becomes easier to teach simply because of the mood, the overall effect, that signing and gesturing creates.

Avoid telling the students what you think the sign should be. Ask them to come up with their own offerings. Attention is drawn to certain kids as we look at what they offer (which can approach slapstick), and invariably we laugh, and camaraderie is created instantly.

At that point, if you feel that the students are ready to go into the story, you can do so. Or, if you prefer, you can continue to “work” the structures with some PQA or extended PQA activities. Remember to keep signing and gesturing short.

**Skill #1:** Are you signing the words? Your comments on how this works for you:

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## **Skill #2: PQA**

PQA stands for “Personalized Questions and Answers”. The choice to use PQA depends entirely on the personality of the teacher. Many teachers skip it. Some thrive on it, often to the exclusion of the story.

PQA normally follows the explanation of the words on the board unless you gesture the words, in which case it follows that activity. Note that even if you sign the words, you have used up only a few minutes of the class period at this point. PQA, on the other hand, can take longer. If it picks up energy, it can take up the entire class period. If it loses energy, the instructor moves right into a story.

From the structures presented above, one would ask in this case in the present tense, “Who dances?” and when you find out that “Jessie dances!” you express that you are very happy to learn this important information.

Immediately, this personalizes the class. Without personalization classes tend to drag. Students are always most interested in things that directly concern them, with the added bonus that personalization makes it *much easier to establish comprehensible input*.

Many gifted TPRS teachers don’t even care if they ever get to a story. They focus on providing comprehensible, interesting, and repetitive input via PQA. They engage the kids in talk about themselves. At this stage, finding out about the students is the primary goal, and so it is expected that the structures be put on the back burner in the interest of connecting with the kids.

These little conversations in PQA can really be helpful to the novice teacher because they don’t involve the pressure of trying to make a full-blown story happen. For some, PQA is frustrating and difficult. For others, it is at the heart of TPRS.

Blaine has said this about personalizing the class:

I believe people who are the most effective at TPRS don't tell stories. They ask questions, pause, and listen for cute answers from the students. The magic is in the interaction between the student and teacher. TPRS is searching for something interesting to talk about. That is done by questioning. Interesting comprehensible input is the goal of every class. If we are there to tell a story, we will probably not make the class interesting. We will be so focused on getting the story out that we won't let the input from the kids happen.

Thus, if someone in the class dances, or is dancing in the talent show next week, etc. the teacher makes this a discovery of supreme importance! Remembering that the structure must be repeated as many times as possible for the planned story to work well, the instructor would want to know when the talent show is, how long the person has danced, what color their dancing shoes are, if the person dances often, etc.

The repetition of words that have to do with dancing is comprehensible input. They make the words of the actual story, told later, easy to understand. Remember, doing comprehensible input and personalizing the class are the only two requirements for acquisition to occur, and you are doing both when you do PQA.

One of the added benefits of doing PQA is that it gives students practice in first and second person singular verb forms, whereas stories are largely told in the third person.

Once each student in the class has his or her identity as an equestrian, a wrestler, an accordion player, a runner, etc. you can compare them to each other. You can come back to their identities over and over during stories, comparing your students to characters in stories, popular celebrities, sports stars, musicians, etc.

To have an identity, to be known by others in the class for activities they do in life, is a great thing for kids. Just make sure you excitedly ‘discover’ each student’s identity. Ignore no one and keep things appropriate and equal.

A neat trick is to always add into the discussion that you also do that activity but that the student is of course *better at it than you*, and in fact they are *the best in the world at it*.

Establishing identities in class is one of the biggest keys to successful PQA. The personalization between you and the student naturally creates plenty of comprehensible input. Since the discussion is focused on the students’ activities, students quickly develop a strong grasp of many verbs – the hearts of sentences.

It is no wonder that some of the most gifted TPRS teachers do little else than PQA. The trick in PQA is to flow with what you find out from the students and not to impose anything. You respond to what you learn as if it is the most interesting information you have ever heard. You get details while at the same time laughing and having fun.

That is all that PQA is – enjoying the kids and speaking the target language. The process is one of enjoyment – what has been called the ‘game’. You focus on the student and you go slowly. Joe Neilson says,

I think that the essential three elements are: comprehension, interest and involvement, and meaningful repetition. As long as any activities have these elements, the students are learning.

Here is an example of how to use PQA to begin the school year. First, share something about yourself. Write on the board or overhead:

J’écris de la poésie – I write poetry

And then circle (see skill 5) the information:

Class, I write poetry! (Ohh!) Class, do I write poetry? (yes) Class, do I write poetry or do I write novels? (write ‘romans – novels’ on the board – they answer ‘poetry’) That’s right, class, I write