

Maximize Your Language Learning through TPR

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Acknowledgements

Any time I speak or write about language learning my indebtedness to Greg Thomson, Stephen Krashen, and James Asher shines through. While the following article contains my words from my thoughts, my thoughts have been enthralled by these “greats”, and now I’m not always sure where their thoughts end and mine begin. Those of you familiar with their work will see it throughout this article, but processed by me, filtered and developed through my own experiences and training.

Introduction

A friend of mine recently learned to recognize and respond to over 500 words in Arabic after only nine two-hour sessions with his tutor. He spent less than three weeks doing this. He hadn’t studied Arabic before, had no significant previous experience in language learning, and is a successful entrepreneur, not a linguist.

He did it using Total Physical Response, usually referred to as TPR.

While usually thought of as a powerful language learning approach for beginning students, TPR actually has great potential for learners at any level of ability. And if you have not been using it in your language learning program, incorporating it now, at whatever stage you are at, will bring a surge to your language learning progress – guaranteed.

The Basic Principles of TPR

The success of TPR is built upon these foundational principles of second language acquisition theory:

- Languages are best learned when the learner receives lots of comprehensible (understandable) input. In other words, for a true beginner, listening to a radio

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broadcast in the language is not nearly as effective as listening to simple “here and now” talk directed at the learner.

- Beginning language learners can benefit greatly from a “silent period” in which they learn to understand and respond to parts of the language without attempting to speak it. This is also referred to as “delayed production,” and of course reflects that path that children follow when learning their first language.

The basic idea behind Total Physical Response is that a language learner learns to hear something in the language and then physically respond to it. That is, in TPR, a beginning – or more advanced – language learner learns to comprehend things said in the language by a teacher, tutor, or friend. Often at first these “things” are commands such as “stand up”, “sit down”, “walk”, “touch your nose”, and so on. However, as discussed in a section below, TPR is easily extended to other verb tenses and more complicated sentence patterns. By using gestures and props, the tutor is able to add enough non-linguistic context to his speech to convey meaning to the learner.

For example, suppose that you want to begin learning Turkish, and you have a Turkish friend who wants to trade an hour of Turkish for an hour of English a couple times a week. During your first hour of Turkish, your Turkish friend could say “stand up” as he stands up and gestures for you to stand up. Then he could say “sit down” as he sits and gestures for you to sit, and then he could go through “stand up” and “sit down” a couple more times while modeling it for you.

At some point fairly soon, your friend just says “stand up” without himself standing up, but you now know to stand up when you hear that, so you do. Congratulations! You just responded to your first word of Turkish for which you didn’t have to have help. (Of course you will have to review it to remember it, and of course you probably can’t say it, but those things will come in the future.) After this your tutor says “sit down”; you do it and are now on a roll. Your friend has you stand up while he stands up too, and then he says “walk” while he begins to walk. Then you learn “stop”, “turn around”, and so on. Ideally your friend is able to monitor your progress and introduce new words one at a time at a rate that is optimal for you.

By the end of your first hour, you will likely be able to respond to between 30 and 45 new words in Turkish! You should tape record your session, and then by reviewing it several times before your next language session and either physically responding to the commands or just imagining doing it you should be able to fly through a review with your friend the next time you get together. If you are dedicated to this approach and committed to not begin speaking too soon, you will very quickly grow in their ability to understand and respond to Turkish. Trying to speak too quickly

- may distract you from rapid vocabulary development

- will likely cause your anxiety level to rise which could lessen the “stickiness” of the words you are learning
- could harm long-term pronunciation if you develop bad habits before having heard lots of language.

Variations of TPR: TPR-B, TPR-O, TPR-P, TPRS

So the basic idea of TPR is that a language learner hears something in the language and physically responds to it.

However, TPR is not just limited to whole body commands such as walking, turning around, and pointing to your nose. In fact, there are four major types of activities that can be done using the TPR mindset. I like to refer to them as TPR-B, TPR-O, TPR-P, and TPRS. (TPRS is the only one of these expressions that is widely known, the others are terms I’ve made up.)

I refer to **TPR-B** for “TPR with body”, which includes everything that can be done with general body movement: stand up, sit down, turn around, turn right, turn left, lift up your arm, touch your nose, etc. This is best done in a room with some space to move around.

TPR-O stands for “TPR with objects”. This is best done sitting a table that has some objects on it. For example, one day you could raid the produce stand and then sit down with your Turkish friend to a table of fruit. That day you could not only learn the words for “apple”, “banana”, “orange”, and so on, but also, “give me”, “take”, “put”, “smell”, “bite”, “roll”, “peel”, and “show me”.

For this activity, your friend could start off with: “This is an apple. This is an orange. This is an apple. This is an orange. Where is the apple? (You would point) Where is the orange?” Once again new words can be fairly quickly built up one at a time.

When doing **TPR-O**, always remember to learn verbs that are associated with the objects you are learning. For example, I once had a TPR-O session in Arabic using a tape player/radio jambox. I not only learned the parts of the jambox but I also learned to respond to verbs that can be done with a jambox: “turn it on”, “turn it off”, “turn up the volume”, “turn down the volume”, “switch from cassette to radio”, “change the station”, “rewind the tape”, “fast forward the tape”, “open up the battery case”, “take out the batteries”, and so on. (I learned a lot of new words that day!)

TPR-P is “TPR with pictures”. Pictures are extremely effective language learning tools. Let’s say that you’re actually living in Turkey and have gone around and taken 150 or so pictures of people doing different things and then arranged these pictures in an album. Your Turkish friend could go through and say “This is a man. This is a boy. This is a man. This is a boy. Where is the man? Where is the boy?” Gradually both background and foreground objects in the pictures could be learned, as well as

verbs: “The carpenter is hitting the nail with a hammer,” leading to requests such as “show me the man who is hitting something”. Even verb tenses can be incorporated by asking your friend (or tutor or teacher) to talk about all of the pictures as if they happened last week, or now, or next week. The actual physical response with pictures is fairly basic – pointing at something – but the opportunity for vocabulary acquisition is as broad as the types of pictures you can use.

In addition to taking your own pictures, you can probably find some children’s picture or story books that are also useful for this kind of learning. Newspaper and magazine pictures work well too.

TPR-S was developed by Blaine Ray and is being used in classrooms throughout the United States. It involves the teacher (and eventually the students) acting out simple stories as a means of understanding the story and internalizing vocabulary.

What about Speaking?

If you are just starting your language learning and are using TPR, at some point you are (hopefully!) going to feel the urge to start speaking. Don’t push it, but at some point you can begin saying things for your friend/tutor to do, from “stand up” to “turn the volume down” to “show me the man who ate fish yesterday”. You can also speak about a table of objects: “This is a ball. This is a key. This is a book. The pen is on the book.” And finally, you can describe pictures in any tense: “The man ate fish. The boy read a book.”

For More Advanced Learners

More advanced learners can still benefit greatly from the different types of TPR. I’m an intermediate speaker of Arabic, but I can easily walk around my house and find objects that I don’t know in Arabic as well as find pictures I would like to be able to describe. I have found it helpful to use TPR to learn as many new words as I can for a particular domain. For example, I could think of all of the things that I can do with a pen, and then work through them with a tutor: “take the cap off”, “write your name”, “sign your name”, “draw a straight line”, “draw a wavy line”, “write the word ‘dog’”, “underline the word ‘dog’”, “circle the word ‘dog’”, “draw a picture of a horse”, “put the cap back on”, and so on.

Training Your Tutor To Do TPR with You

The most common mistake that tutors who are new to TPR make is to introduce new words quickly or to not introduce them one at a time. If you begin to feel overwhelmed while doing TPR, just remind your tutor of the need for incredible amounts

of repetition. (During a one-hour session you may need to hear a word fifty times to get it down good. Most tutors innately think that two or three should be enough!)

You will most likely have to stress the need for repetition several times – in fact, each day will be different depending upon your mood, alertness, concentration, etc. Ideally your tutor will be able to learn to continually monitor and evaluate your progress and make minor adjustments as is needed.

If you speak a language that your tutor doesn't, modeling TPR for an hour by using it to teach your tutor a new language can be very effective in the tutor understanding what processes are at work.

If you are using an established tutor who is currently working or has worked in the past with other students, I'd bet almost anything that the tutor has "a system" for teaching the language that he is reluctant to give up. You may find it easier to train someone new to be a TPR tutor than to try to get an established tutor to switch, but either way you'll have to have patience and persistence. Don't give in to their appeals for a different approach, even find a new tutor if you have to. TPR is the way to go for beginning language students.

In Conclusion

The secret of TPR is to make it a regular, ongoing part of your language study program, with great emphasis at the beginning but continued use throughout your language learning days.

The ability to learn 30 new words any given hour is fun, but the cumulative effects of learning 30 new words each hour for many, many hours is where real language ability develops.