

An experiment in Accelerated Language Acquisition methodology:

TPRS and The Summer Language Institute at Middle Tennessee State University

Mr. Blaine Ray, author of Fluency Through TPR Storytelling, was invited to teach an experimental class for five days at Middle Tennessee State University in the summer of 2003.

Dr. Shelley Thomas, Associate Professor of French in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at MTSU, received grant money to provide a forum where accelerated foreign language methodologies like TPRS could be tested.

French teachers were targeted for this experiment, but ESL (English as a second language) and others were permitted to participate. Although 27 people took part in the week-long institute, only 23 people were able to take either the National Spanish Test or the Brigham Young Placement test. These 23 were composed of 9 French teachers, 10 ESL teachers, 1 teacher of Maori, 1 teacher of Cherokee, 1 philosophy teacher, and 1 business teacher from India. Out of the 23, there were 11 people who had had an average of 2 college semesters. Due to the fact that most of the participants were middle-aged teachers, the average time lapse between the Spanish college courses and the TPRS course was 30 years. Although much could have been forgotten in that time span, much could also have been retrieved by the new TPRS course.

In order to give a fair assessment of TPRS, the scores of those who had never had Spanish before are recorded separately from those who did. There were 12 people who had never taken Spanish before. They will henceforth be referred to in this article as “true beginners.” Of these true beginners, two had a native language which was non-western and two were teachers of non-western languages.

Participants had approximately 28 hours or less of contact time in class. It should be noted when looking at the scores that 2 of the true beginners missed a significant number of hours: the equivalent of 1 day for one person and the equivalent of 2 days for another person

Mr. Ray told the participants that he would conduct the class as if they had already had the equivalent of 1 year of high school Spanish. He taught a year two curriculum for the next 5 days. His daily procedure was the following: 3 or 4 new vocabulary words or phrases were put up on the overhead, and he would then proceed to tell a story using those words and two volunteers to act it out. As he told the story he would invite others to contribute to the continuation of the story. During the creative process Mr. Ray would intersperse the story with simple questions about the scene that had just been acted, thus enabling the students to hear the new vocabulary words anywhere from 50-100 times in varying contexts. He used the past tense immediately, moving quickly back and forth between Spanish and English, translating whenever anyone indicated they did not understand.

Mr. Ray subscribes to Stephen Krashen's comprehensible input theory which suggests that acquisition cannot occur unless the message is understood. In class no dictionaries were used and no grammar text was used. Mr. Ray avoided grammatical explanations or terminology, and restricted himself to a few seconds of focusing on the meaning of the target language whenever there was a question.

The content of the stories was always bizarre, exaggerated, and unexpected. For example, while Mr. Ray might start by saying in the target language that Tiger Woods was playing golf with ducks, he would then invite details from the participants as to where, why, and how long this golf game occurred. A bizarre story line warrants a bizarre continuation. Participants were delighted with this unexpected use of the comic and were motivated to respond in kind when invited to add details.

If their suggestions were too logical (Tiger and the ducks were playing at Palm Springs?) Mr. Ray would simply say "Es Ridiculo" (that's ridiculous). If the suggestions were as absurd

as his own idea, (they were playing miniature putt-putt?) he would act like it was the most well-known fact in the world “Es Obvio” (it’s obvious!). Occasionally, he would push for more exaggeration (They played golf for 23 years?) “Almost,” he would say, “23 years and 2 micro-seconds!”

As he got to know the people in the class, Mr. Ray would pull facts about their lives into the story too. Participants focused on getting the cutest answer rather than on the fact that they were using a language that is foreign to them. This procedure is in keeping with what we now know about how the brain acquires anything. 99% of all acquisition is unconscious or non-focused.

After the completion of the student-teacher story, the class turned to an extended reading that was about 1 page in length, and which incorporated the same 3 or 4 new vocabulary items. Together, students and teacher translated the extended reading. Usually there were a few more new words that could easily be understood through context.

Finally, the students would open one of the 8 novellas Mr. Ray has published, translate a small portion, and answer Mr. Ray’s questions about it in the target language. Then, using the new vocabulary, Mr. Ray would guide the question/answer format into a conversation about the culture in the story. After that, he could turn the focus on students’ personal experiences having to do with the story or the new vocabulary, constantly continuing in the target language.

For homework, students were expected to read 2 of these novellas per night. Each novella was short enough that it could be read within 2 hours. Of the 8 novellas, the first 4 were made into movies in the foreign country by semi-professional native speaker actors and were made available to the participants for viewing. The average number of novels completed by participants at home was 3.5 and the average number of videos watched was 2.17.

At the end of 4 days, Mr. Ray had students do a timed writing in the target language on their families. Dealing with quantity alone, the average number of words for true beginners after 5 minutes was 75. The average number for those having had Spanish before was 95 words. At

the end of day 5, students took the National Spanish Test. The true beginners scored 27.8. The national average for students who had completed 2 years of Spanish was 26.79. On the Brigham Young Placement Test, true beginners scored. 27.8. A score between 24-28 normally places students out of 2nd semester college Spanish into 3rd semester. Three of the beginners scored 40 or better. This would have placed them into a 5th semester literature course.

The results of this study are impressive: an average score of two years or better of high school Spanish was achieved on two national, standardized tests after only 28 hours of instruction. The question remains as to whether these same results obtained by middle-aged language teachers can be obtained by a group of high school and college students. According data being gathered from TPRS teachers around the country, linguist Stephen Krashen says similar results, have already been obtained on AP exams by high school students.

One of the participants of the MTSU Summer Language Institute was David Lewis, director of the most extensive language training institute for Maori in the world located in New Zealand. His institute sent him on a research project to investigate models of accelerated learning around the globe. After observing methodologies in several countries in Europe, his final stop was MTSU. Following his experience in the MTSU Summer Language Institute, he concluded that TPRS was a “powerful methodology” which he hoped to bring to his institute in New Zealand to add to their kaiako resources.

MTSU Summer Language Institute 2003, Participants

	<u>NST</u> Listen/ read	<u>MTSU placement</u>	<u>writing 1</u> (# of words)	<u>writing 2</u> (# of words)
Blose	19/21	28	0	82 (French)
Droppleman	22/ 17		0	91 (French)
Duke /Bobby	11/9		0	50 (ESL)
Duke/John	13/11		46	124(ESL)
Geible	15/16....20/18		46	124(French)
Homaifar	10/8	19	4	42(ESL)
Johnston	15/9	22	6	56(ESL)
Jones	11/18		0	86(ESL)
Kelly	22/25	44	120	128(French)
Lewis	14/9	23	0	72 (Maori)
Mack-Ward	25/19	47	61	86(ESL)
McCall	18/20...21/18	23	71	80(ESL)
McCrary	4/3...14/11	20	37	56(ESL)
Madorin	14 20 (2 nd part only)		82	121(French)
Miller	17/13...16/13	17	49	68(ESL)
Moran	23/21	46	3	96(French)
Pasqualetti	18/25	29	81	84(French)
Purcell	18/9	28	0	59(philosophy)

Stokes	13/19		13	83 (ESL)
Tatum	23/17	(3 days of class)		(French)
Taylor	11/10	12	5	44 (Cherokee)
Thomas	16/13	27	6	120 (French)