

A New Note About TPR by James J. Asher, PhD, Originator of the Total Physical Response, known worldwide as TPR

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I am pleased that a group of teachers is assisting other teachers in the successful application of tools for implementing the comprehensive-first principle of language learning. I would like to share with you eight laws to consider for the 21st century.

Asher's Law #1 (Multiple Languages)

The noble goal of the 20th century was to acquire a second language. The effort was not a stunning success since less than five percent of students actually achieved fluency in another language. Given the explosion of valuable information in the last decade or two about the right hemisphere of the brain, a realistic goal in the 21st century is fluency in multiple languages. For example, one discovery is that language instruction was “dragged underwater” in the 20th century by the myth that fluency begins with speaking. Actually, the reverse is true: When speaking appears, language learning has already taken place.

Asher's Law #2 (Start before puberty)

All of the evidence suggests that high school is too late for students to enjoy a native pronunciation of any target language. Children have the unique, perhaps biological, advantage of acquiring a native pronunciation of any target language.

Asher's Law #3 (Get it in the first exposure)

There is no way students of all ages can acquire multiple languages if we continue playing to the left hemisphere of the brain with exercises such as “Listen and repeat after me!” or “Memorize this dialog” or “Conjugate this verb.” Each repetition indicates that the left brain is resisting the intake of the information. The left brain is erasing the information as fast as it comes in. You may have experienced this in “cramming for a test.” This is a “sledge-hammer” strategy with repetition, repetition, repetition until your brain says, “OK. I give up! I can't take it anymore. I'm tired. I'll retain the information until this test is over and then I will erase it.”

Asher's Law #4 (You only have a grace period of five minutes)

I often tell language educators that they only have five minutes to convince students that they can actually learn the target language—only five minutes. If you cannot do it in five minutes, you will not convince them if they stay with you for a year. That's why my tool, the Total Physical Response, should be the primary tool in every instructor's linguistic toolbox. Within five minutes, your students should be excited as they say to themselves, “Wow. I understand everything she is saying in Chinese! You know what? - - - I think I can actually learn this language.” Now, it is important to realize that the Total Physical Response, known worldwide as TPR, is not the only tool in your toolbox. You have a batch of secondary tools such as storytelling, games, and other techniques you have acquired over the years. Knowing which tool to use and when to use it is the art of teaching which depends upon the talent of the individual instructor.

Asher's Law #5 (Words to delete from your vocabulary)

The first word to delete is “methods.” The reason: Method implies a formula and formula implies science. Teaching is an art—the highest art form, not a science. Science can provide some valuable tool for your linguistic toolbox, but how you apply each tool depends upon your talent and skill as an instructor. Another word to delete is “memorize.” When you ask them to

memorize vocabulary or dialogues or verb conjugations, you switched them into slow-motion learning of the left brain.

Asher's Law #6 (Organize around student goals)

Teacher goals are of keen interest to instructors, but not necessarily students. Examples of teacher goals: Cover Chapter 1, then cover Chapter 2 until I get to the end of the book. A different grammar point will be features in each lesson. The students' reward:

They get to start a new textbook next year when I cover Chapter 1, then Chapter 2, etc.

I find the word "cover" interesting. An alternate meaning is "hide." Certainly the target language is hidden somewhere in those chapters. And why should covering chapters in one book followed by covering chapters in another book be fascinating to students? Why should grammar be fascinating to students? Grammar is like one's body; it works best when we are unaware it is working. Student goals come from your students. Keep the goals simple and something that your students can achieve in a short time; for examples, how to have a conversation with the opposite sex.

Asher's Law #7 (Encourage doodling with the language)

Doodling means to mess around or to play with the target language. Students should be encouraged to experiment outside of class with novel sentences. Encourage them to talk to each other, to joke with each other, and to make up crazy conversations in the target language. There is nothing sacred about the target language. Use it to laugh and have fun.

Asher's Law #8 (Wrap it up in a few sentences)

Start with a short-term student goal (understanding and speaking). Use TPR, the primary tool in your linguistic toolbox, for convincing your students in less than five minutes that they can acquire any language on earth. Then use the primary tool of TPR to introduce any new vocabulary or new grammatical feature in the target language. Follow up with secondary tools in your toolbox. That's it! That is my blueprint for success. Keep it simple! Have fun yourself! If you have fun, so will your students. Best wishes for continued success,

James J. Asher, Ph.D

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