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Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling

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ABSTRACT

Human beings are wired for stories. Throughout our existence, stories have been an integral part of our meaning making, and informational transportation. Stories are embedded in our biology. We do not just tell stories and hear stories, we experience stories emotionally and cognitively, and we feel stories physically in the body. Stories have been used in every aspect of human life, and have always been part of language teaching as well. Researches have shown that narrative films and readings help to develop empathy, perspective taking, understanding ourselves and others and increase literacy. TPRS is a fun and effective method in teaching foreign languages in a classroom setting. It takes advantage of the power of story in comprehensible input-oriented method. This paper describes what is TPRS and how it works.

Keywords: Stories, TPRS, Comprehensible Input oriented method, language teaching

INTRODUCTION

Come, read an Ernest Hemingway's short story with me: For Sale: Baby shoes, never worn. How did you like it? How do you feel after reading it?

The first time I read it, I felt a punch in the gut, and then a rush of cortisol took over my body and my heart started to pump faster. At the same time, due to my mothering instinct to protect the vulnerable and my survival instinct for problem-solving, my mind kicked into a high gear of speculation about what could have possibly happened to the baby: Unborn? Not even conceived? Died at birth, or after birth? Died of illness, neglect, or worse... torture? What was I doing? Why was I doing that? How could these simple six words trigger so much of a physical, emotional and cognitive response in me?

It is all because I just read a story, a good one. Human beings are wired for stories (Brown, 2018). Throughout our existence, stories have been an integral part of our meaning making (Burton, 2013), and informational transportation. Stories are embedded in our biology. We do not just tell stories and hear stories, we experience stories emotionally and cognitively (Unkovich, 2011), and we feel stories physically in the body (Smith, 2016). Out of human evolutionary experience, our brain has learned to seek novelty for stimulus and growth, it has also learned how to constantly search for patterns in order to survive.

Stories have been used in every aspect of human life, and have always been part of language teaching as well. There are variety ways to take advantage of the power of story in comprehensible input-oriented methods. I will discuss one way here, the use of story in Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS).

HISTORY OF TPRS

TPRS was invented by Blaine Ray in 1990s. He was a Spanish teacher in California. After being fired once due to his non-engaging teaching methodology, Ray was called into his

new principal's office and was informed that if he did not try to do something differently to engage his students, he would be fired again. Out of his survival needs, Ray started researching and implementing new ways in his Spanish classes. Fortunately, he came across Stephen Krashen's (1992) Comprehensible Input hypothesis and Asher's (2009) Total Physical Response (TPR) method. Ray started to incorporate actions and gestures in his teaching and student engagement went through the roof. A few weeks later, inevitably, when all actable words had been exhausted, Ray went back to traditional grammar teaching. Complaints rose again. Out of desperation, he started adding stories on top of TPR, which helped include non-actable vocabulary in the lesson, and also could better capture students' attention and imagination (Bashford, 2014), and foster better relationship (Leffler, 2005). This is why, initially, TPRS was called TPR + Story.

STEPS OF TPRS

After decades of refinement, thanks to hundreds of classroom teachers' implementations and tweaks, today, TPRS has become a fun and effective method in teaching foreign languages in a classroom setting. It has also been simplified into 3 steps: establish meaning, ask a story, read and discuss. On the surface, these steps look simple; however, each step requires many sophisticated teaching skills. It usually takes years for a TPRS practitioner to hone these skills. In this paper, I will mainly explain the first two steps of TPRS: Establish Meaning and Ask a Story. The reason of not getting into the third step of TPRS, "read and discuss", in much detail, is because reading is not unique to TPRS, although TPRSers often design their activities based on the Comprehensible Input principle.

Step I: Establishing meaning

Establish Meaning is the baseline of providing comprehension. Mason (2019) accomplishes this goal by using several forms of "Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation", such as (1) visual supplementation, which includes drawings, facial expressions (e.g., surprise, sleepy, angry, happy, etc.), and physical movements (walk, run, sit, crouch, hide, etc.). (2) linguistic supplementation, such as writing the words on the board, rephrasing using simpler words (synonyms), and providing occasional translations, and (3) taking advantage of the students' knowledge of everyday life.

TPRS uses these techniques this step is to get meaning of certain targeted items, and then provide repetitions in contextualized situations, through the collaborative story-asking process with students. That takes us directly to the second step in TPRS: Ask a story.

Step II: Asking a story

The second step of asking a story (collaborative storyasking) is the most challenging and most sophisticated part of TPRS. I will address four planning principles and five important skills/strategies for story asking in this section.

1. Planning Principles

Planning Principle 1: TPRS Story Structure

A signature TPRS story follows a basic structure. The main character has a want or need, he/she embarks on a journey to fulfill this want or need, he/she makes at least two attempts, eventually reaches a resolution, most of the time in an unconventional, or even bizarre way.

Planning Principle 2: Three Phrases/Structures

In order to carry out this basic story structure from the beginning to the end: A seasoned TPRS teacher selects 3 phrases which could propel the story forward. As TCI expert, Laurie Clarcq often puts it, the effectiveness of these three phrases could be evaluated when they are placed on the spectrum of a good story, whether or not these three phrases could trigger some actions, reactions, feelings and emotions within the characters and readers. Therefore, whether or not a story could fly depends on the selection of these three phrases as well as a TPRS teacher's skill level. Here are a few examples of three phrases/structures:

A. Would like to have	lonely	go to
B. Has/have	want	desperately
C. likes apples	eat strawberries	no hotdogs

In groups A and B, the choices to complete each phrase is open; there is an endless possibility for whatever students might suggest. If you are bound to teach thematic units, these choices could be food, clothes, transportation, or school supplies...It is also easier to create many parallel stories by repeating the same structures. If you have autonomy in your teaching, then you have the freedom of interwoven targeted and non-targeted comprehensible input in your instruction. Your lesson could be even more optimal and compelling. Now, let's examine the elements of story further. Group A is ready to send the main character on a quest, while group B tells us that something bad that is going to happen. Group C gives the teacher tight control of which vocabulary to use in the lesson, but it lacks natural chemistry to create interest. Many teachers new to TPRS, because it is difficult to shake off the influence of teaching with thematic units, tend to choose group C, but then they get stuck in the story asking process.

Planning Principle 3: Storylines and Variables

After these three phrases/structures have been selected, an experienced TPRS teacher drafts a loose storyline on paper or just in her head. She has a basic sense of where she might want to take her students through this collaboration process, but she does not map out every detail. I purposefully use the word "loose" here to emphasize that an experienced TPRS teacher is not afraid of giving students a voice and choice. Rather, it is a sincere gesture to empower students to take on the ownership of learning together. It is like driving a truck with your students together on a journey; while you steer the wheel and keep your eyes on the destination (language acquisition), you allow yourself and students to enjoy the process of driving by inviting them to constantly inform you on what they see on the journey, rather than strictly limiting them to only tell you what you want to hear on the journey.

Let's use group A as an example again. A loose storyline could be:

Kylo Ren would like to have a friend, he is lonely, he goes to Ray and says....

Or

Kylo Ren would like to have more power, he is lonely, he goes to Ray and says....

The underlined words that can be replaced in a TPRS story are called variables. Do you see that by manipulating these variables, one could effortlessly have a totally different outcome of a story? More intriguingly, an experienced TPRS teacher often prepares 2 or 3 storylines in her head containing the same essential phrases for repetition, comparison, contrast and personalized questions and answers (PQA), for optimal acquisition. I used famous movie characters in the above storyline. Primarily, it is because of the new Star Wars movie has just been released. Kylo Ren and Ray are pretty much on viewers' minds now. If this movie is not current, I might use something totally different. In addition, providing variables such as "friend" or "more power" will definitely set the main character on a very different quest. Therefore, feelings, thinking, sayings, actions and reactions which follow would differ as a result.

Planning Principle 4: Choose A Main Character

In many stories, TPRS teachers often use their students as the main characters who need to figure out some life challenges or explore the world together. If it is necessary, they use movie stars, well-known characters or celebrities, as antagonists. The purpose is to protect their students' images, identities and wellbeing, as well as building rapport and trust among each other. Let's put this into practice with another specific example. Let's say Sam and Charlie are two students in your own classroom. A loose storyline could be:

Sam would like to have a friend, he is lonely, he goes to Charlie and says: I am sorry...

Or

Sam would like to have Charlie at his house on Friday, he is lonely, he goes to Charlie and says: Are you busy this Friday....

If this storyline includes celebrities, then, the storyline could look like this:

Sam would like to have a friend, he is lonely, he goes to Hollywood and sees Johnny Depp, he says: Would you like to be my friend? But Johnny Depp is crazy. Sam does not like Johnny. Sam would NOT like to have Johnny Depp as a friend. Sam is lonely. Sam would like to have a friend. He goes to Charlie and says: Would you like to be my friend? Charlie is nice. Sam would like to be Charlie's friend; Charlie would like to be Sam's friend. Sam is happy.

2. Important skills/strategies

Now, equipped with a basic story structure, the three phrases, one or two loose storylines, several variables for each option, and some basic ideas of who the main characters might be, the planning stage of collaborative story-asking is complete. Next, I will dissect the actual story-asking process according to the following 5 important skills/strategies: circling, pause and point, go slow, pop-up grammar, and PQA. Please keep in mind, story asking skills/strategies are not limited only to these.

(1) Circling

Circling is the heart of TPRS. I personally believe it is Ray's biggest contribution to the field. By interweaving three types of questions, tens and even hundreds of repetitions could be easily made in one class period without losing students' engagement and interests. These three types of questions are: yes/no questions. Either/or questions and *wh*-questions.

Let's use group A's phrases and storyline as an example again:

A: would like to have lonely goes to

Sam would like to have a friend, he is lonely, he goes to Charlie and says: I am sorry...

Before I start circling, I would solicit a main character from my class. Once my students agree on the name, let's say it is a student named Sam from my class, I then write the first statement on the board.

Sam would like to have a friend.

Then, I start asking 3 different types of questions regarding this statement.

Class, would Sam like to have a friend?	(Yes question)
Class, would Sam like to have a car?	(No question)
Class, would Sam like to have a hotdog?	(No question)
Class, would Sam like to have a tattoo?	(No question)
Class, what would Sam like to have?	(Wh-question)
Class, who would like to have a friend?	(Wh-question)
Class, Sam or Ms. Lu like to have a friend?	(Either/or question)
Class, would Sam like to have a friend or a tattoo?	(Either/or question)
Class, would Same like to have or hit a friend?	(Either/or question)
Would Sam like to have a tatoo?	(No question)
Would Sam like to have a friend?	(Yes question)

I need to point out that there should NOT be a rigid order in which questions are asked. Otherwise, your circling would become mechanical. Early TPRS training followed a rigid circling pattern: yes/no question, either/or question then *wh*-question. As a result, it becomes predictable once students figure out the pattern. Circling becomes boring and kills the novelty that our brain seeks.

(2) *Pause and Point*

From the start of a lesson, whenever teachers repeat a phrase/structure, they pause in their speech in mid-sentence, point their finger at it, scan the room to assess who is following them and comprehending and who is not, and then continue on. If they utter a question word, a connector, a transitional word or an idiom, if these are listed on a poster, they will walk over to that poster, put their finger under that word, make sure all students see it, then move onward in their lesson.

Pause and point seems trivial, but it actually serves several purposes at the same time. (a) It makes sure that the input is comprehensible. (b) Provide supports for slow processing students, and thus lowers anxiety in the classroom. (c) When one pauses in a mid-sentence, it helps to focus the class. (d) It provides processing time for students. It also gives teachers a chance to think on their feet.

(3) *Go Slow*

Among the many TPRS skills, going slow definitely is challenging for many teachers, due to the fact that it is unnatural in conversation. If people repeat everything they say, the

conversation rarely goes anywhere; rumination is often viewed as a sign of mental illness. Circling is about providing effective and novel repetitions without becoming a boring drill. Understandably, it is painful if we slow down our speech and utter one word at a time in a conversation, unless we are enthusiastic caretakers speaking to a baby.

Usually language teachers primarily embrace the identity of being a teacher in the classroom. During my training sessions, I normally urge trainees to extend their identity from being a language teacher to a coach, mentor, role model, cheerleader ... and, most importantly, a language parent. We often forget when students walk into a new language classroom, regardless how old they are, 4 years old or 75 years young, starting a new language requires their brain to go through the same language acquisition process that a baby does. Medina (2014) has written extensively on how a caretaker talks “parentese” to a baby: stretches out vowels, uses higher pitch, simplifies the spoken language, uses gestures, pauses and points, exaggerates facial expressions, and repeats. In my training sessions, quite often, I would ask trainees to close their eyes, hold their palms up in front of them, imagine a baby sitting in their palms, then give them a topic to talk about with this imaginary baby. A topic such as what to have for lunch or what they might see on a trip to the zoo always generates at least some enthusiasm regardless of whether or not one has a child. If I redirect them to talk to the imaginary baby about the trade war between China and America, at first, there is silence, then I hear groans and protest: how do you talk to a baby about this topic? The truth is: you don’t. Your imaginary infant has neither the cognitive nor the linguistic ability to understand this topic, (and neither do many of the students). Even if they had the cognitive ability, their linguistic competency is so low, if you spoke the target language to them in a natural and abstract way, all would be lost.

This reminds me an experience I had with *West Wing*, one of the best rated TV series in America TV history. The complex characters and fascinating storylines kept me on my toes episode after episode. I loved how my mind got stimulated and intrigued while I learned so much about American politics and communication. However, when I was watching the show, I had just arrived, my English proficiency level was not competent enough for me to follow this show effortlessly. The fast pace and rapid dialogue made it quite challenging for me to grasp the whole story, if I didn’t pause the show, look up the subtitles and hear someone paraphrase or explain it slowly to me. In the end, it was the “going slow” during the watching which made the fast pace show captivating for me.

After using TCI in my classroom for more than a decade, I have found that going slow is much needed for novice level students during the first three months. Once their listening comprehension improves, a TCI teacher can pretty much speak in a natural speed. Slowing down is needed only whenever a student needs a clarification, or you observe that some students are not following along.

(4) Popup Grammar

Another unique phenomena in TCI/TPRS instruction is the way teachers shelter vocabulary, but not grammar. A seasoned TCI/TPRS teacher can skillfully simplify the language they use without losing the deep meaning. However, most of them rarely miss an opportunity to explain grammar. The difference is this: instead of explicit grammar teaching commonly done with a grammar sheet, they treat a grammar point as vocabulary or structure, it is taught in context. if they run into a grammar point, they can explain it quickly, then move on. This way of teaching grammar in a highly contextualized way is called “popup grammar”. For example, in Chinese, “le” has many different usages. Instead of making a list and going over the

examples one by one, I only treat it as a part of meaning-making when it is necessary or is of potential interest. When we walk into a class, the first thing we typically do is take attendance. In a novice level class, I write down “zài – being present” and “bùzài – not being present” on the board to demonstrate how students could answer me appropriately in Chinese beginning with day one. A week later, I might casually add “le” onto “bùzài”, then write down “bùzàile – died/passed away” to explain to students one of “le’s” functions in Chinese. I make the point, then move onward with my lesson. My students rarely stop me and say: can you tell me more about “le”?

(5) PQA

Knowing which phrases to use and what types of questions to ask in a TPRS lesson is just the beginning. Good TPRS teachers use every opportunity to learn more about their students, foster relationship, and build a community. Therefore, they do not merely teach for the sake of accomplishing a curriculum, their eyes focus on a much bigger goal: teaching the students. If one calls “circling” as the heart of TPRS, PQA should be the soul of teaching in every classroom, regardless the subject or the method one uses. When a teacher personalizes her lessons, questions and answers, and hopes to involve all students in the room, and makes whatever she does relevant to students, the impact of personalization is beyond any curriculum. To simplify PQA, I’m going to use Lucy as a real student’s name this time. Now, let me show you how to infuse PQA in the lesson.

Sam would like to have a friend.**

Class, would Sam like to have a friend? Yes? Yes! Sam would like to have a friend! Lucy, what about you? Would you like to have a friend? Oh, no? You HAVE lots of friends. Class, would Sam or Lucy like to have a friend? Sam! Sam would like to have a friend. Lucy doesn’t want a friend because she has lots of friends. Class, would Sam like to have a friend or a tattoo? Sam would NOT like to have a tattoo. Class, who would like to have a tattoo? Oh, by the way, who has a tattoo? Do I have a tattoo?

I bet this question is going to open a flood gate of student participation immediately. Make sure you have trained your students how to participate: one person speaks, the rest listen. One must raise their hand in order to gain permission to speak. No more than two words are permitted in the native language when a student offers a suggestion or provides information, etc. Sometimes, the power of PQA keeps the whole class in the target language through the entire class period. When the bell rings, students notice that they have not gotten to the story at all. That leaves a nice hook for the next class’ eagerness. A successful PQA session often is married with compelling comprehensible input for optimal acquisition. If the tattoo question is really raised, you might find out what kind of tattoos they want, how big, and where, and who is afraid of pain, who is not... Some might have a really interesting story related to getting a tattoo. Again, the goal for every class is to “teach the student, not the curriculum.” As Krashen (2015) says, “Comprehensible Input” is most potent when it is highly interesting. Everybody enjoys talking about themselves. PQA helps teachers and students become connected and bonded together. It is an effective way to build a community and develop multi-perspectives.

CONCLUSION

During a lesson, many TPRS teachers move around the room, gesture wildly, use their body language, and vary their voices from a whisper to a thunder. They also use props, realia and student actors to aid in the fun and comprehension. Some employ classroom jobs, such as phrase counter, story writer, marker handler, or tech support.... A TPRS teacher is like a conductor with an orchestra on stage. Every student has an instrument to play.

DISCUSSION

Over the past three decades, hundreds of TPRS practitioners have contributed their own ideas in evolving the method. Almost each year, new techniques/strategies are added into TPRS practice, such as One Word Image, Embedded Reading and Movie Talk. These all grew out of different classroom teachers' efforts.

One critical criticism of TPRS is Ray's typical style of story asking. Ray is dexterous at using wild imagination to create novelty. A blue flying elephant wants a small pair of pink slippers often leaves a vivid image in many readers' mind. However, critics think that Ray's stories often lack depth or a commonly shared human experience. Also, his stories normally focus on a "want" rather than a "need". Most of the time, this "want" tends to be superficial, e.g. someone desires to have lots of money, power, fancy car, or luxury goods... Then they go somewhere and do something, and they always get their way. Ray's main characters incline to be handsome, rich and sexy, their inner value is seldom evident. Therefore, they don't represent the diverse student body we normally teach. Equity is absent.

It is a common knowledge that when a good story has a main character we care about, and the author drives the characters into difficulties which they must overcome, our need to know about the problems and how to solve them immerse us in the quest till the end (Oatley, 2005; Smith 2016). After a while, as a typical Ray TPRS story meets some basic human needs for novelty and stimulus quickly, many conscientious educators fear that the superficial characters can mislead our students in their own identity and value development. In 2016, at the 16th NTPRS annual conference in Reno, Nevada, Adams and Gilcher (2016) co-presented a session titled *Building Diversity-Positive Characters in TPRS Stories*. Many thoughtful TPRS teachers agreed with this goal and become avid advocates and practitioners for diverse-positive characters, definitely a step forward in cultivating empathy and multiple perspectives in students while they acquire their second or third languages.

Under the big TCI umbrella, TPRS is only one of the many ways to use stories. In the next series, I will introduce Story Listening and Effective Interaction in everyday life as two other additional ways to utilize stories.

Some critiques are concerned that stories do not provide the kind of knowledge or academic language students need to succeed in school or in workplace, researches have shown that narrative films and readings help to develop empathy (Jacobs, 2015), perspective taking, understanding ourselves and others (Oatley, 2005) and increase literacy (Krashen, 2004).

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