

# Body Language: The Effectiveness of Total Physical Response Storytelling in Secondary Foreign Language Instruction

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to share the results of an action research project that focused on Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPRS), a newer methodology of foreign language instruction. The intention of the study was to discover the effect of utilizing TPRS on students' ability to become familiarized with conjugating reflexive verbs in Spanish. Although there were no immediate gains in written performance, it was found that there were increased engagement levels when utilizing TPRS and that students enjoy TPRS lessons more than explicit grammar lessons.

## **Area of Focus Statement**

The purpose of this study was to describe the effects of a newer methodology of language teaching called Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPRS) on students' ability to become familiarized with key vocabulary and grammatical structures and on their ability to free write in Spanish.

## **Review of Related Literature**

There is little literature available on the TPRS method of teaching foreign languages. This is likely because it is a relatively new methodology that is slowly gaining popularity through workshops and teacher collaboration. However, the two articles reviewed that do not directly reference TPRS do reference its predecessor, Total Physical Response (TPR), and the general use of story-telling as an effective method of teaching a foreign language, which is why they are useful to this action research investigation. Adair-Hauck (2002), Davidheiser (2002), and Long (1999) all conclude that while some explicit teaching of grammar is likely necessary, utilizing story-telling as a way to give the grammatical lessons a meaningful context result in a greater ability to comprehend and produce grammar. The mere teaching of rules and repetition through meaningless exercises has been shown to result in a lower comprehension and ability to produce the language. However, there is little to no research on the effect of repetition within the context of a meaningful story in order to aid in grammar learning, which is arguably the most fundamental aspect of TPRS. As such, it is clear that this method needs to be tested in critical settings to truly evaluate its effectiveness in the foreign language classroom.

## **Variables**

The variables that were measured are:

- The students' ability to successfully conjugate reflexive verbs in Spanish.
- The students' levels of engagement throughout two types of lessons: an explicit grammar lesson and a TPRS lesson.
- The students' preference for either explicit grammar lessons or TPRS lessons.

### **Research Questions**

- What is the effect of repetition on the students' familiarity with the desired vocabulary and grammatical structures?
- What is the effect of limiting vocabulary intake on the learning of the vocabulary?
- How do students more effectively process grammar learning—through learning grammatical rules or through repeated exposure to the grammatical structure?
- Do students prefer lessons that contain explicit grammar teaching or implicit grammar learning by means of story-telling?
- In which type of lesson are students more actively engaged with the material?

### **Intervention/Innovation**

I taught a lesson utilizing the TPRS method and evaluated its effectiveness by comparing it to a conventional, explicitly taught grammar lesson in one period of a Spanish III class that has 26 students. The explicit grammar lesson involved going over a packet that details the formation of regular reflexive verbs and has fill-in-the-blank exercises for the students to have completed. The TPRS lesson involved telling a short story that contained several reflexive verbs and asking several repetitive questions for the students to answer after each line of the story, ensuring that they orally hear and then verbally repeat the conjugated reflexive verbs multiple times (see Appendix A).

## **Data Collection Methods**

### *Assessment*

I evaluated quiz scores on a quiz given the day following the explicit grammar lesson on reflexive verbs. The quiz was direct English to Spanish translation of both verbs in the infinitive form and short sentences that required conjugation. I then noted the seven lowest-scoring students, who had all received less than 80%. I compared their scores to a written assessment given immediately after the TPRS lesson in order to evaluate the students' improvement on their ability to conjugate reflexive verbs. For the written assessment, I asked the students to free write everything they could remember about the story that had been told and looked for correct conjugation, subject/verb agreement, and variety of vocabulary used.

### *Engagement Levels*

I observed the students' engagement throughout each lesson. Level of engagement was judged on a variety of factors: obvious interest shown in the lesson through body language, amount and quality of participation, and amount of disruption throughout the lesson.

### *Surveys*

I distributed an anonymous survey immediately following the lesson in order to gather students' opinions on which method they enjoy more and which they believe helps them learn best (see Appendix B).

## **Considerations**

No ethical considerations needed to be taken into account for this project. However, there were certain limitations on the study due to time constraints. The two lessons were not able to be taught by the same person; my supervising teacher and the students' usual teacher, Anne Marie Plante, taught the explicit grammar lesson, while I taught the TPRS lesson. This

disruption in the students' normal routine could have affected their engagement levels or their opinions on either lesson taught. This also could have had an effect on my ability to observe their engagement levels; I was able to make a more detailed observation when I was not also teaching the lesson. Another consideration is that the students were aware the written assessment after the TPRS lesson was not being counted for a grade, while they knew that the quiz they had was being counted for a grade. This could have affected the effort they put forth in answering correctly.

## **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

### *Assessment*

First, I analyzed the quizzes given after the explicit grammar lesson in order to find the lowest-performing students, so I could look for their improvement in the next assessment. I decided to focus on seven students that had all scored under 80% on the quiz, with the lowest score being 60%. After this, I looked through the each quiz for the entire class and noted which verbs each student got wrong in order to see if there were patterns or verbs that were commonly incorrect. At this point, I had already planned a story for my TPRS lesson, but I decided to rewrite it based on the most frequent mistakes, which turned out to be the verbs *sentirse*, *sentarse*, and *peinarse*, in hopes that I would see more improvement after a TPRS lesson focused directly on these verbs.

Next, I analyzed the freewrite assessment I had given after the TPRS lesson, looking specifically at the six low-scoring students to see if they had been more readily able to conjugate reflexive verbs on their own (one of the students was absent that day, so I had to discard her data). I found, on the whole, no improvement. The only verbs that were consistently correctly conjugated had been written on the board, and the students failed to generalize their use to the

rest of the verbs in their freewrite. I also found that the total word count of the six low-scoring students was significantly lower than that of the rest of the class; they averaged 46 words, whereas the other twenty students averaged 83 words. Therefore, it must be concluded that the TPRS lesson did not have an immediate effect on the students' ability to correctly conjugate reflexive verbs in writing.

### *Engagement Levels*

Measuring engagement levels relied on purely qualitative observation. Based on the three factors I was looking for to measure engagement—amount and quality of participation, obvious interest shown in the lesson through body language, and amount of disruption throughout the lesson—the TPRS lesson clearly resulted in a higher level of engagement with the lesson and with the material. TPRS lessons are constructed to require high levels of participation from the entire class; students must be listening to each line of the story because everyone is expected to respond to every question asked. An overwhelming majority of the class responded to nearly every question throughout the lesson. Participation did not decline as the class went on. On the contrary, during the grammar lesson continuous participation was not an expectation; when going through the exercises, only one student answered per question and was called on by the teacher. Therefore, voluntary participation was not present. As for body language indicating interest, I noticed a much larger portion of the class was watching what was going on in the front of the classroom during the TPRS lesson, as opposed to a larger portion in the grammar lesson looking down at their desks or around the room. I believe this again has to do with the construction of the TPRS lesson, because student actors are placed at the front of the room to physically act out what is going on verbally, resulting in a visually stimulating and interesting exercise. Finally, I did not notice any significant difference between the levels of disruption of

the two classes. There were occasional whispered side conversations during both, but neither stood out as being a more disruptive period than the other. After analyzing my observations, I have come to the conclusion that based on these factors, students were in fact more engaged with the TPRS lesson than with the explicit grammar lesson.

*Surveys*

First, I organized the results of the surveys into four categories: those who most enjoyed the TPRS lesson; those who most enjoyed the grammar lesson; those who thought the TPRS lesson helped them learn more; and those who thought the grammar lesson helped them learn more. I threw out one survey which said that neither was enjoyable nor helpful. 64% of the students enjoyed the TPRS lesson more, while 24% enjoyed the grammar lesson and 12% enjoyed both. On the other hand, 48% said the grammar lesson helped them learn more, while 32% said the TPRS lesson did, and 20% said the two were equally helpful.

|                       | <b>Enjoyable</b>   | <b>Helpful</b>     |
|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| <b>TPRS Lesson</b>    | <b>64%</b> (16/25) | <b>32%</b> (8/25)  |
| <b>Grammar Lesson</b> | <b>24%</b> (6/25)  | <b>48%</b> (12/25) |

It is clear from these initial numbers that students believe both types of lessons have merit. After this, I analyzed the comments the students made about each lesson, looking specifically for their reasoning behind choosing one or the other. Several students mentioned that they found the grammar lesson helpful because being able to visually see the verb conjugations written out helps them to process them, and they like having these notes to be able to go back to. However, several students also mentioned that they more highly enjoyed the participatory and interactive nature of the TPRS lesson. The results of these surveys have led me to conclude that explicit

grammar lessons are important for establishing a base understanding of the formation of the verb, but that the TPRS lessons allow the students a chance to hear how this verb tense is used in context in a natural style of speech. It also gives them the chance to use the verb in speech as opposed to just writing it.

### *Conclusions*

Based on the data from all three sources, I have come to conclude that both explicit grammar lessons and TPRS lessons are worthwhile in the classroom for varying reasons. The student surveys very convincingly argued for the continued use of explicit grammar lessons in that the students feel more comfortable being able to see how the verb is formed and getting practice writing it out. The surveys and the measured engagement levels also convinced me that TPRS is a fun and helpful activity that puts the use of the verb in context for the students. It also ensures a high level of participation and engagement and gives the students the opportunity to practice speaking. Since no significant improvement was shown in the written exercise after the TPRS lesson, it is still necessary to find out what is needed by the lower-performing students in order to master the verb tense conjugations.

### **Action Plan**

Based on the conclusions of my action research, I suggest using both explicit grammar teaching and TPRS lessons in a complementary manner for any foreign language unit. Both were shown to have merit and purpose for the students' understanding of reflexive verbs and I believe this could be generalized to the learning of all verb tenses. TPRS is important for engaging students with a more natural use of the language rather than disconnected, artificially constructed exercises, but it is still necessary for students to understand the formation of the verbs before they can fully benefit from TPRS. Therefore, introducing students to a verb tense

with an explicit grammar lesson and then putting it in context with a TPRS lesson seems to be an effective way to promote a deeper understanding of the language. However, more extensive action research on the implementation of TPRS within a curriculum would be useful in order to gain a greater understanding of the long-term effects it has on students' learning.

### **Final Thoughts**

The process of action research was interesting and challenging. Utilizing and critically evaluating a methodology of teaching I had never seen before this fall was difficult, because I had to familiarize myself very thoroughly with the process, but I think it was also rewarding. I came into the action research process with high hopes for TPRS based off of my supervising teacher's enthusiasm for it, and although it did not necessarily show improved written skills as I had hoped, I found that it was valuable for reasons other than raising scores, such as the full participation of the class that occurred on the day that I taught it. Even without immediate results, I believe that having students engaged, listening, and then speaking will ultimately result in higher comfort levels with the language and more ease of use. It was a good experience that forced me to look at all the reasons for using one type of teaching methodology or another and I think it will be very valuable to me in the future.

## References

- Adair-Hauck, B., and Donato, R. (2002). The PACE Model: A Story-Based Approach to Meaning and Form for Standards-Based Language Learning. *The French Review*, 76(2), 265-276.
- Davidheiser, J. (2002). Teaching German with TPRS (Total Physical Response Storytelling). *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German*, 35(1), 25-35.
- Long, D.R. (1999). Methodology and the Teaching of Spanish in the Twentieth Century: Retrospective and Bibliography. *Hispania*, 82(3), 383-396.

## Appendix A: TPRS Story and Example Questions

### Story:

Había una chica que se llamaba Marta. Marta se sentó en un banco. Mientras estaba sentada, se peinó el pelo. De repente, un ratón le robó el peine y desapareció. Marta se sentía muy triste. Iba a buscar el ratón. No estaba en Minnesota así que fue a Nicaragua. El ratón no estaba en Nicaragua y Marta se sentía enojada. No quería comprar otro peine; quería su peine. Entonces, fue a China para buscar el ratón. Lo encontró después de cuarenta y dos segundos. Le pidió al ratón el peine. Él le dio el peine a Marta. Marta se sentía feliz porque podía peinarse el pelo otra vez.

### Questions:

Marta se sentó en una silla?  
Marta se sentó en un banco?  
Marta se sentó en una silla o un banco?  
Se cepilló el pelo?  
Se peinó el pelo?  
Se cepilló o se peinó el pelo?  
Se peinó la cabeza?  
Se peinó la cabeza o el pelo?  
Un gato le robó el peine?  
Un ratón le robó el peine?  
Un gato o un ratón le robó el peine?  
Un ratón le robó el dinero?  
Un ratón le robó el peine?  
Un ratón le robó el dinero o el peine?  
Un ratón comió el peine?  
Qué le hizo el ratón?

## Appendix B: Survey

### Post-Instruction Survey

Please answer these questions as honestly and thoroughly as possible. Do NOT write your name on this sheet. Thanks for your opinions! 😊

1. Which type of lesson did you enjoy more: a mini-cuento like today, or a more traditional grammar lesson, like the packet you completed and went over in class last week? Why?
  
2. Out of these two types of lessons, which do you feel most helped in your understanding of reflexive verbs? Why?