

## A VIEW FROM THE CLASSROOM . . . .

### HOW TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE CAN BE MADE MORE ATTRACTIVE: A 36-HOUR TPR COURSE IN GERMAN AT THE GOETHE-INSTITUTE, TOKYO

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#### *Abstract*

Total Physical Response (TPR) is ideal to initiate beginners in the study of a new language. It is also a very powerful method to make a fresh start with students who have received instruction previously in the language but who are conditioned in a negative sense by the institutional framework and traditional language teaching methods. Whereas it is sometimes claimed by critics of TPR that it may become monotonous if applied for a prolonged period, or that eventually the students will learn nothing else but understanding and giving commands, this paper refutes such criticisms. Indeed a wealth of new features are presented which can easily be incorporated into a TPR course, thus adding to the variety of classroom activities.

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The Goethe-Institute in Tokyo invited me to give a TPR course in order to introduce the method to their teachers. It was decided to have a 5-week program with classes on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. with a 10- to 15-minute break. In the third week, there was an extra session on Saturday that lasted from 2 to 6 p.m. The number of students was limited to 20.

On the first day, the students were briefed in Japanese by a Japanese colleague of mine to familiarize them with the method and to explain to them what they were supposed to do and what they could expect from the course. After that, Japanese was completely shut out from the course. The actual class started with the students picking their German names. This was done for three reasons: to establish an early link between spoken and written language, to allow the students to slip into a different identity and to allow me to use both the polite (*Sie*) and the plain forms of address (*du*, *ihr*). I had prepared name cards that contained just a first name and others that had *Herr*, *Frau* or *Frl.* plus a last name written on them. A student who chose a first name was addressed in the *du*-form, and a student who chose a last name was addressed in the *Sie*-form for the rest of the course. Another side effect of this name picking is that the names help to develop group dynamics right from the beginning and quite often the name becomes a lasting nickname.

The way TPR courses are generally conducted is well known<sup>1</sup>, so I will limit this report to the parts that are new and different. I should like to emphasize that my teaching is not a random mixture of various methods, but rather an incorporation of carefully adapted features of other methods that are compatible with the basic principles of TPR. These features add to the variety of classroom activities and thus reduce the danger of the course becoming monotonous.

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### **Introduction of new material**

According to Asher, new vocabulary should mainly be introduced by the teacher acting it out. I prefer to introduce as much as possible by simple natural gestures which I continue to use when giving the respective commands. Over time, however, I gradually reduce use of gesture. For instance when telling someone to stand up in the first lesson I make an upward movement with both hands. Later on, the same “stand up” will be accompanied by the upward movement of one hand and even later the movement might be indicated only by two fingers. But even then the gesture is clear enough to reinforce the peripheral perception of the students. Only when I think that the respective vocabulary item has been well absorbed do I stop making an appropriate gesture, and at a later stage I even break off eye contact with the student who is performing. An interesting observation is that most of the students use similar gestures when they start speaking later on in the course. Apparently the gestures make it easier for them to overcome their shyness.

Gestures are very suitable when introducing new verbs or certain adjectives. For nouns I often use a different technique. Suppose there are five objects on the table that the students already know. A bit dramatically I add a sixth object which is new. But instead of starting with the new object, I have them manipulate some of the objects they already know before I ask them to point to or take the new object, which, by the way, I do without putting any emphasis on the new word. This makes it a bit more interesting for the students, and at the same time, helps them to distinguish new words from old material.

### **Limitation of vocabulary**

In my first TPR course, which I taught in 1981, the material

I had developed, and which, by the way, was not a German translation of Asher (1977), contained about 450 vocabulary items. The course was developed for 30 hours of teaching (1 hour = 60 minutes). On later occasions I reduced the amount of vocabulary little by little. The latest course I gave at the Goethe-Institute contained only some 200 words. There are several reasons for this. One of them is that I came to appreciate Gattegno's philosophy of not introducing too many "luxury words" in the beginning but to emphasize structure instead. Another reason was that in my early courses I had students with previous exposure to German whereas in this latest course two-thirds of the students were complete beginners. I think that the amount and even the type of vocabulary taught should be adjusted to the needs of the students: With the emphasis on vocabulary, 400 – 500 words are quite feasible in a 30-hour course, but when the emphasis is put on structure, the vocabulary should be much more limited. Actually the amount of vocabulary the students came in contact with was much greater than 200 words, but these 200 were the words they actually absorbed and worked with.

### **Early speaking**

According to my experience, students in a TPR course feel quite comfortable and relaxed from the second or third class onwards, but when they are given a chance to speak for the first time, all the anxiety and tension that prevails in a normal language class is back again. In order to make transition from listening to speaking easier I gave the students the opportunity to speak in true communicative situations, but on a very limited scale, from a rather early stage onwards. This was mainly done when playing games which absorbed the students so much that they were not really aware that they were

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speaking German. For instance, the first game was played on the third day after the numbers from 1 to 19 had been introduced and practiced. The students were divided into three groups. Each group, sitting around a table, was given dice, first one, then two and later three. One in each group wrote the names of the group members on a sheet of paper and sat back so he could not see what was going on on the table. The students took turns and called out the number they had got, which was written down by the student who kept the records.

On the sixth day, the numbers from 1 – 999,999 were practiced in a Silent Way fashion. That is, I had one student write subsequent numbers on the board until we got the following pattern:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	11	12
10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90		
100										
1000										

Once this pattern is on the board, any number between 1 and 999,999 can be elicited with a pointer<sup>2</sup>. The students read in chorus or individually. This kind of practice is much more challenging than manipulating number cards, and at the same time, the students have a chance to hear their own voices.

One of the games I adopted is “Indian Poker.” In the original version the players take a card each which they hold above their heads. They start betting without knowing their own card. In my version I use cards of different colors instead of playing cards. The students work in pairs, sitting at a table and facing each other. They pick a card with their eyes closed. They hold it above their heads, then open their eyes and try to guess their own color. This game seems to be a good indicator to see if the students are ready to switch roles from listening to speaking. When they really enjoy the game and

formed groups in front of a chart that had already been on the wall for a week or so and started discussing it. This seems to prove that it takes a certain lapse of time before new structure is really understood.

### **Visual aids**

A new feature in this course was that I wrote some of the important new structures on large charts at the end of each class. These charts were hung up on the walls of the room and left there for the rest of the course. Usually the students did not ask any questions about this new structure when it was put up for the first time, but quite often during the break they speak at natural speed with a natural intonation, they are ready to speak.

### **Translation from listening to speaking**

After having made sure that the class was ready to speak, I began the next class with a short review of the material from lesson one and two. This was the tenth time that the class met, that is, at the beginning of the 19th hour. Then I divided the students into three groups and gave each group an appropriate number of props. I told them that they would have a chance to practice for themselves for ten minutes and that I would leave the room for this period<sup>3</sup>. Although I left the room the students could be observed from a small window that is usually used for film projection. They seemed to be completely relaxed, and there was much action going on because they were eager to try the commands they had been listening to for so long. When I entered the room after 15 minutes, the students did not take any notice of me but just continued until I announced the break.

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### **Cognitive digestion**

In my first TPR courses I just handed out vocabulary lists from time to time which were used to reconfirm the meaning of the words presented up to that point. Later I added some important sentence patterns to these vocabulary lists. For this course I prepared weekly handouts (2 – 3 pages long) that had the new vocabulary in a column on the left side and a corresponding text on the right side. This text contained for the most part only sentences in the imperative, and I used the names of the students, so they could identify themselves more easily with the text. In short, it was nothing other than what the students were used to hearing in class. The students read these handouts first only to themselves. Then I encouraged them to discuss the parts they understood, as well as those they did not understand. For these discussions I used a Community Language Learning (CLL) set up.

### **CLL set-up**

First, I formed three groups and had each group sit in a closed circle for this discussion. I myself stayed outside the circles, moving from group to group and giving minimal assistance in German whenever possible, or otherwise in Japanese. This division into three groups proved not to be very successful because the students with some knowledge of grammar tended to dominate their groups. On the next occasion I worked with two groups, which was a bit better than three but still not satisfactory. The third time I had the students form a single circle which was as close as possible. Although it seemed to be difficult to communicate with a person sitting right across on the other side, this set-up seemed to work best. So I adhered to it for the remainder of the course. The group dynamics that developed in this setting was

interesting to watch. For instance, a student who had forgotten the German word *Bein* would ask his neighbor. Instead of giving the Japanese translation, this neighbor would point to his own leg. Whenever a student asked me a question that I knew could be answered by another student, I put the two together to discuss the problem. Whenever the meaning could be derived from the context, I just drew attention to the context. As a matter of fact, TPR seems to make students more sensitive to paying attention to the context, because all their learning is done in the situational context here and now. I did not explain any grammar per se, but gave very short explanations whenever pertinent questions were asked. When there were no more questions on the part of the students, I would read the text and the students would act it out. When I worked with the third handout in the fourth week, the students took turns doing the reading. I would stand behind the student who was reading so I could help in a CLL fashion<sup>4</sup>. Only those parts that called for clarification were acted out. This kind of activity took much longer than I had planned, but judging by the reaction of the students, I saw that it was necessary. The speed in a TPR course is so fast that there is no time to think and digest. These CLL-like sessions seemed to satisfy the natural desire to understand things logically, without making it an ordinary grammar class.

### **Contact with a native speaker other than the teacher**

For the Saturday class in the third week I took my nine-year old son along. After having introduced him and done some warming up, I stepped back and had the students tell him what to do. They gave him commands for about 30 minutes, sending him all over the room. About three-fourths of the students participated and some of them even tried to



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get the shyer students involved by asking my son to take things like glasses away from them or to give them lots of things in order to elicit some kind of oral reaction. It has been my observation that students are much less self-conscious when talking to a child. If there is absolutely no native-speaker child available, the teacher can pretend to be a robot and act out the commands of the students with mechanical movements. He can even have a bell or a buzzer that rings whenever there is a mistake. All this helps to make speaking easier for the students.

### Creative activities

Since I have started using TPR, I have the students make their own cardboard clocks in order to practice telling the time. In my former TPR courses I used this as an opportunity to give as many detailed TPR commands as possible, so all the students would make identical clocks. This time I stopped giving commands as soon as they realized what they were making. Instead of the commands, I commented what individual students were doing. This allowed the students to be creative. At the end of the course about half of the students took their clocks home as a souvenir. By adding more of such creative activities TPR courses will become more "humanistic."

### Controlled Speech

In order to practice certain grammatical phenomena like verb conjugation, etc., I wrote sentence patterns like *Pfeif/ Pfeift/Pfeifen Sie, während ich/du/wir/. . ./ an die Tür gehe/ gehst/gehen/. . ./*. (Whistle, while I am/you are/we are/. . ./

walking to the door) on a chart. After having shown the students how it worked, they took turns in having someone whistle and walk to the door. Speech in this activity is controlled in the sense that the students must use a certain pattern, but they have to think up an appropriate context and make their sentence accordingly.

### Guided speech

In this activity the contents of a command or a question is presented to the students. To introduce this activity I need an aide, who can be a native speaker or an advanced student from another class. I tell the aide to tell so-and-so to do so-and-so, for instance: "*Sag Frau Muller, dass sie aufstehen soll!*" ("Tell Mrs. Muller to stand up!") The aide then turns to Frau Muller and says: "*Stehen Sie bitte auf!*" ("Stand up, please!") Five or six examples suffice to make the students understand what they are supposed to do. Once the students have understood the activity the aide can step back and I tell them directly: "A, tell B to do so-and-so!" This activity is very suitable for practicing, for example, the difference between definite and indefinite articles, the use of pronouns.

### How to deal with errors

Errors should be treated as something natural – nothing to worry about. During the first stage of the course there are only two possible errors: no reaction at all or a wrong reaction. In the case of the latter, I tell the student what he did and contrast it with what I said. Whenever possible I underline a repeated command with slightly exaggerated gestures. Usually the students get it right on the second trial. If there is

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hesitation, I have another student perform the action. The other error is no reaction at all, which shows that the student has difficulty in understanding or that he is not sure if he understood correctly. In that case I move up to the student and repeat the command in a rather soft voice as if I were just speaking only to him personally. On purpose I speak a little faster than usually and I accompany my command with an inviting gesture to help him to perform. If a student shows signs of getting nervous, I first show him by gesture to calm down and then I tell him to step back and watch. Then I call on another student to perform the action. If at that moment the face of the first student brightens up because all of a sudden he understood, I stop the second student and have the first student perform, because help is not necessary any more.

When the students have reached the stage where they speak themselves, there is a larger variety of possible errors. I do not correct all errors that are made in speaking. The decision whether to correct or not is a very subtle one. For instance, if a student is struggling very hard just to get the words in the right order, I do not correct any mistakes in pronunciation. If on the other hand he has no difficulty with the structure, I feel that he is ready to accept some correction in pronunciation. The way I correct also depends on the kind of activity the students are doing. If it is a controlled speech activity, I try to step in quickly from the side and when I am close to the student I give him assistance in a low voice. This gives the student more the impression that he is being helped rather than being corrected. Quite often a student who is saying something in front of the class seeks eye contact with me when he gets uncertain of his German. In that case I give him an approving nod. In guided speech, my technique of correcting is completely different. Suppose I said to a student to tell his neighbor to take a certain object and this student uses the wrong article when making his command. In that case I

shake my head in slight disapproval but keep smiling. I then have this student and/or other students nearby manipulate the object in question; that is, I give several commands to allow the student who made a mistake a chance to hear the correct form several times. Usually two or three commands on my part are enough to bring forth a eureka effect. I then repeat the original request and most of the time the student gets it right now. If he happens to repeat the error or to make a different one, I repeat the procedure but ask a different student to give the command. I try to keep track of the errors and give the students who had difficulty another chance later on, which might even be in a subsequent lesson.

### **The use of music in class**

As a new feature I used music in this course. The main reason for this was to help the students to relax and to create a more pleasant atmosphere. On the second day of class the students told me during the break that they had to make an enormous effort to concentrate, which they all agreed was a new but rather positive experience for most of them. As a matter of fact, many students said they had not realized that they could concentrate so easily for such long periods. As a teacher I was not pleased seeing them concentrate too hard and too intentionally, because it is known from the literature that self-conscious concentration is detrimental to language acquisition. In the following class I started with a review of previously learned material and played classical music as a background. All of the students except one commented positively on this new feature. I continued to use music like this occasionally but was careful not to overdo it.

Towards the end of the last class of the second week I introduced a new activity which was also connected with music.

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After having done some breathing exercises, I told the class to sit down, just relax and close their eyes. I then played them a Bach chorale<sup>5</sup>. I sat in front of the class and kept my eyes closed. After the music had finished, I remained silent for about half a minute. Then I told the class to open their eyes because I was going to read a story to them. I read Leo Lionni's *Let's make rabbits*, which I had translated from the English. While reading, I used a lot of gestures and referred to the pictures in the book occasionally to help the students to understand key words. The whole reading lasted for about four minutes. Then I asked the students to close their eyes again and repeated the story. When I had finished reading, I kept silent for a minute to allow the students to go over in their minds what they had heard. I did not ask any questions about the story. Later I learned from personal comments that about half of the students had understood the first half of the story. But even those who did not understand commented favorably on this experience and said they wanted to have more of this in the future. So it became a standard practice for the rest of the course to read a story at the end of the Thursday lesson. Sometimes, when there was enough time, I repeated a story that had been read before to give the students a chance to measure their own progress. I tried to select stories that were thematically related to what the students had learned during the week.

Reading stories seems to be quite compatible with the method, since one of the main objectives of TPR is to develop listening comprehension. Stories give the students a chance to develop listening skills to understand longer stretches of language which are not in the imperative. In the case of German, story reading is about the only chance to introduce the narrative past, i.e., the *Präteritum*, which can hardly be put into the subordinate clause of a sentence in the imperative.

### **Talking about personal experiences of the teacher or current topics**

This is another means of introducing language other than the imperative. For instance, on a day when it snowed I talked about a minor traffic accident which I pretended to have seen. To facilitate comprehension I made use of algebricks<sup>6</sup> to represent the position of the vehicles and persons involved.

### **Introducing questions at an early stage**

Still another means of using language other than the imperative is to ask questions whenever the situational need arises. It happens quite often that I am looking for one of my props. In that case I ask myself: "Where's this or that?" Very soon, the students begin to understand and help me to find the object in question. I also ask for volunteers to come to the blackboard or to the table in the center. So the students get used to a variety of questions and when they start speaking they can handle more than just the imperative.

### **The use of Silent Way charts**

After the transition from listening to speaking, I used on two occasions charts similar to those that are used in the Silent Way; that is, I pointed out words on a chart and made the students form the sentences, which were in the imperative most of the time<sup>7</sup>. This was the only new feature in the course that met with some negative reaction on the part of the students. Some students felt that this kind of exercise was alien to the method, and others were confused by the colors and complained that the charts were difficult to read. There

are several possible reasons for this negative reaction. One may be that I started to work with the charts too abruptly without the students being ready for this type of work. Another reason may be that I have too little practice in the Silent Way because quite often I do not find the word I am looking for. Still another reason may be that the layout of the charts was really poor, even though I had tried to make them more legible from a distance than Gattegno's charts are. Yet another reason might be that my color scheme was not clear, as I had tried to distinguish between long and short vowels and between voiced and unvoiced consonants by different shades of the same color. Nevertheless, although there was some negative reaction, I think it would be worthwhile to repeat the experiment, because working with the charts can give the students a feeling for inflection.

### Reports

Because there were so many new features in this course, I was eager to know the students' reactions. So at the end of every class I asked three volunteers to write a report. It would go far beyond the scope of this article to quote from these reports, but the general tenor was very positive. All students mentioned how much joy it was to be in that class. One student wrote that, before coming to the four-hour Saturday class, she thought how ever could she go through such a long period, but once the class had started, time passed just as if it were flying. As a matter of fact, on that day the students were so much involved in their group activities that they did not take any notice when I announced the end of the lesson at 6 p.m. For every class I had prepared a variety of activities and I tried to change the focus every twenty minutes to hold the interest of the students. The most moving comment

came from a teacher in elementary school. She wrote: "I used to reproach my pupils by saying: 'How come you can't do it? We just had this yesterday!' But being a student myself in this course has made me think a lot about education in general and my own teaching in particular. Having experienced myself how I feel when I have forgotten something which I am supposed to know because I have learned it before, and then feeling the great relief when the teacher helps me to learn it again without reproaching me in the slightest, I can now no longer reproach my own pupils."

### Notes

1. Readers not familiar with the method are advised to read Asher 1982.
2. For a detailed description see Gattegno 1976, P.28 f.
3. This is advice I got from Tom and Sakiko Pendergast, who had tried this out before.
4. One of the best introductions to CLL (Community Language Learning) I know, can be found in Stevick 1980.
5. Note, however, that many people find Bach too stimulating to help them relax. For a list of appropriate music for the language classroom see Ferguson 1983.
6. Readers not familiar with algebricks, also called Cuisenaire rods after the inventor, should read chapter II in Stevick 1980 or chapter 6 in Gattegno 1976.
7. The use of colored charts is an integral part of the Silent Way. For more details see Gattegno 1976.

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